

BLOOD AND BURNING

The Short Fiction of Algis Budrys

Introduction

I HAVE BEEN a professional writer some twenty-five years, now. This fact sometimes comes as a bit of a shock to the rather naive face that peers back at me from my shaving mirror. So does the thought that, after years as an editor, a print production consultant, an advertising and public relations man, a bicycle hobbyist with one repair manual to his credit and an anecdotal book on bicycles due to be published, a political speechwriter and campaign advisor, a biographer of Harry S Truman, a motor vehicle tester and columnist, a soccer organizer, a complexly middleclass householder and retired poultry farmer, I am nevertheless always introduced as "a science fiction writer." And rightly so. The nonwriting is done for the liking of it, or the occasional need of a paycheck. The writing is done because I cannot help but do it. And it is usually in some of the many forms recognized as "science fiction," though far from always.

"Science fiction" – or SF, as I learned to call it from Judith Merrill – takes up where unreality leaves off. It is a superb tool for exploring what is real about people and about the nature of the universe in general. Most fiction is devoted to perpetuating easy, comforting ideas that make life softer for us. Some science fiction does the same, sometimes with more ingenuity. All science fiction, like any other human expression, is full of hidden flaws of self-delusion. But in some cases it has at least no deliberate flaws of that sort. I leave it to you to decide how well I hew to that ideal. But I can tell you I try, very hard.

The publishers of this volume have asked me to tell you something about each of the stories here. I have done so, in a shortish blurb

preceding each one. I hope you do not find me immodest, and I hope you are not dismayed by some of my motivations and the sources of my inspiration. To the best of my ability to determine, they are different only in detail from those of any other writer I know, or have reliably read about. But any given story springs from my general background as a human being who is unreservedly bound to express reactions to what he notes around him... that is, who is an artist.

It so happens I write more successfully than I draw, sculp, sing, or act. And so I tell stories, within which it is usually not too difficult to see what has been of particular interest to me this time. But what is of general interest, and why? It's a big world, with much happiness and charm to be found in it. Why do I, for instance, choose to write stories – not all of them "science fiction," or even "SF," but obviously all from the same worldview – which can be aptly collected under the descriptive title, Blood & Burning? People have said I write about maniacs. Why do I like maniacs so much?

Well, few of them are maniacs to me. They are people whose motivations are focussed on some single object, so that I can show them to you better. In real life, such people would give the impression of mania. But many of my characters have other thoughts, and do other deeds at other times; it's that they're not doing them right this minute. Some of them are only just entering upon whatever singleminded activity confronts their consciousness as the story opens. Others are going to abandon their immediate drama as soon as the story ends, though they will certainly not be the same as they once were.

None of them does anything I don't believe is possible to a driven but logical person. Although, of course, some of them are doomed by their actions in the story. I like them. None of them – certainly not the crippled ex-officer with his Dobermans, or the overwrought architect in Panorama Towers, or the man who called his neighbors chicken punks – is villainous to me. I love them. I do not love Dusty Haverman, but, then, where is he to be found, that someone might love him? I feel for him as much as he could feel for you or me. I love Austin Gelvarry.

Nevertheless, I am a writer because when I was very young I laid eyes on the great maniac. I stood in the window of an apartment in what was then Königsberg, East Prussia, and watched Adolf Hitler go by in the back of his open black Mercedes. I watched the onlookers – my neighbors, their friends, my kindergarten playmates, the adolescent boys and girls who lived in that city where Immanuel Kant lies buried in a cathedral, the impeccable poliziers who directed traffic and were always so helpful – lose

all control of themselves. They ran for the bushes in the park and on our front lawn, tugging at their clothes, clutching at each other, fainting, soiling themselves, and making an indescribable sound. For someone who has just been given his first book of instructive Dore-illustrated tales from the New Testament, who has just emerged from a fascination with matters of the toilet, and who at other times had been coddled and fawned over by some of those same confident and knowledgeable inhabitants of a rational and essentially conformable world, this sort of thing comes as a revelation. In short, when I was four, the thunderclap fell upon me that I was come to consciousness in a world of werewolves.

I would not put it so strongly now. And it wasn't all that much longer before I discovered that I had no business holding myself out to myself as an aloof – and blameless – observer who need have no fear of the full moon. You give me the right reason, and I will be as hairy as the next lycanthrope, in an instant. Or something as close to it – as foolish, as hopeful, as essentially optimistic. They really thought he was making them better, you know. He could do it to them not because he promised conquest and material comfort – those were means and products. What he promised them, I really think, was that they would no longer be constrained by circumstance from being able to do the noble and right thing every time. No matter what.

And that is hope. All my people have hope.

Algis Budrys

Evanston, Illinois, 1978

A.I.D.

AID: Anti-Interrogation Device. Organic servomechanism. Standard equipment, all personnel, all branches, Terrestrial Union Armed Services. Current Mark: IX

UESS Starraker broke away from the oncoming elements of the ravaged

TSN ship's destroyer screen and hurried into Hyperspace. With all Terrestrial prisoners on board, secured in an empty compartment, the ship turned her course for Eglis, and began the journey homeward.

In his compartment, Sub-captain Deven looked past Captain Kein's shoulder at the pile of data sheets on his desk. As he stood there, more sheets spilled out of the messenger box to the left of the pile.

"All right, Deven, what have we got so far?" Kein asked, his voice, as always, unconcerned with anything but the solution of the problem at hand.

"Nothing very much, sir. I won't have, until the technicians finish connecting the surveillance equipment in the prison compartment. So far, their course data confirms our original supposition that this is the ship that broke out of the net at Achernar. Since we have previous information that the same ship is the one that succeeded in penetrating the Home System in the first place, it follows that whatever those three prisoners know, particularly since one of them is an officer, will probably contain the information that would have made it possible for the Terrestrials to coordinate their actions with those of the Dissolutionists."

"Eh? What do you know about the Dissolutionists?" Kein's voice was digging.

Deven grimaced slightly with involuntary annoyance before he composed his face into a more suitable expression. "As Counterespionage and Intelligence Officer of this ship, I am frequently in possession of information which would not ordinarily be released to an officer of my rank and grade. I have known for some time that there is an insurrection on the other side of the Home System. I have not transmitted this information to anyone else, nor do I intend to. This is no more than was expected of me when I was trained for this commission."

He could not help feeling a certain satisfaction as Kein grudgingly accepted the fact.

There's little enough to brighten up this berth, he reflected, his somber, carefully schooled face betraying none of this. Kein was a combat officer by nature and inclination. Within the framework of his orders as he received them, the man operated efficiently and resourcefully, without thought to ultimate principles or larger issues. Perhaps he was not so organized when away from his duty. Deven had no way of knowing or guessing. He had never seen him under such circumstances, and doubted if he ever would.

The other ship's officers were cut to more or less the same pattern.

Some bordered on the fanatical, others were more deliberate and calculated in their thoughts and actions. There was Emer, but the PsychoWar Officer was as remote in his thinking, in his own specialized way, as the others.

"Nothing else?" Kein broke in on his reflection.

"Not for the present, sir. Once the surveillance equipment has been wired in to my analyzers, and I've gotten enough preliminary data, I'll attempt to interrogate the prisoners."

Kein frowned, his heavy brows drawing together. "Can't be done," he grunted.

Deven nodded, but shrugged. "No harm in trying," he said.

"As you wish," Kein said. "Nothing better to do, I suppose."

"No, sir," Deven said with a hidden half-smile. Kein walked away, his heels striking loudly on the deck composition.

Deven went to his desk and his data sheets, a clamp-light shining down from beside him, his forehead drawn. The Terrestrial ship had been carrying information which, if received by the TSN, would have meant a decided shift in the way the war was going. The progress of that information now had been cut off – so it was up to him to try and extract as much as he could from the three captured Terrans. Their ship, by raiding the transport routes into the Home System, had chanced across the news about the Dissolutionist Secession, which was drawing ships and men from the war. One of the Terrans was an officer. Perhaps, locked away somewhere in his brain, there was information which might be just as valuable to Eglis.

His frown deepened as he integrated more and more of the information plucked from the Terrestrial ship and embodied in the various separate reports. But, even as he frowned with concentration, another part of him was ready to bring forth an anticipatory smile.

Kein had been right. On the face of it, it was impossible to interrogate Terrestrials. No one had ever done it. But Deven was a brilliant man – the youngest of his rank in the United Eglis Spatial Fleet. He genuinely liked matching his wits against someone who knew something that UESF, too, wanted to know. It did not, in the final analysis, matter in the slightest what that secret might be or even that UESF would know it after it had come through him. To Deven, the game itself was what counted. It was his function in the war.

What about after the war? he thought as he worked. What then, when the lucky chronological chance that gave him this opportunity had passed? Occupation duty in the remains of the Terrestrial Union? Would it still be the same, when the stakes were so much smaller, when, for every opponent of genuine intelligence, he would face a thousand hole-and-corner wineshop conspirators?

Occupation duty? Was he so sure the war would end with Eglin victory? Not for the first time, he realized that there was no deep-seated emotional response to the question. There was the matter of personal inconvenience, certainly. But he did not, as Kein would have, react indignantly, even within himself, nor, as Emer would have done – had he perceived the attitude in someone else – did he proceed to analyze the workings of his psyche.

A technician's call on the phone interrupted his thinking. The audiovisual pickups and other detectors had been wired into the compartment where the prisoners were held, and were now connected to the leads in his desk. He acknowledged the information, reflecting once again on the fact that very few circumstantial obstacles to the performance of his duty were actually annoying to him. The Starraker, for instance, had never been equipped with full-dress facilities for prisoner interrogation. No one had ever expected her to need them. Very well, he had been able to operate without them, and now had been content to wait until a jury-rigged approximation could be provided.

He cut in the audiovisual.

There were three prisoners, as he had known. Of the two crewmen, one was lying face-down in a corner, his back badly burned. Deven's face twisted with annoyance. The man's spinal cord and kidneys might be injured. If so, then he had better be questioned soon, if at all.

The other crewman was propped up against a bulkhead, smoking a cigarette. One of his calves had been burned, but he was otherwise unharmed. Deven picked up a microphone.

"Prisoners will refrain from smoking except during normal rest periods. Smoking overloads the atmospheric purifiers. We must remind the prisoners that Eglin oxygenation systems were not designed with foreign vices in mind."

The crewman displayed a definitely belligerent attitude. He took several defiant puffs before he ground the butt into the deck.

Deven's lips fell into a slight smile. There would be none of the "Come, now, you and I are just pawns in a game of interstellar chess" approach here.

The officer was a different matter. He lay on his blanket, his face up to the ceiling. Deven cut to a camera over his head, and saw that the man had been blinded by an otherwise superficial burn across his face. Deven's own face twitched.

But, there was the key. The officer was not even attempting to exercise any authority over the crewman – who should have been reprimanded, if only for the benefit of the obvious watcher. So far as it was possible to tell, no attempt had been made to organize the three prisoners into a cohesive unit. Therefore, the officer, for one reason or the other, was unable to take the initiative.

Deven considered the problem for a moment, then pulled the wall phone from its bracket.

"C and I. Get me PsychoWar," he said, meanwhile leafing through the stack of sheets on his desk.

"PsychoWar."

"Emer? Deven. What's the latest line of guff the Terries've been feeding their people? Are they still fighting Interstellar Aggression, or has it been shifted to a personalized hatred for Eglins and Eglis?"

"Still using the 'principles and human rights must be upheld' business, as far as I know. One approach is as realistic as the other, I guess. Why?"

Deven hesitated. "I don't know,' exactly – not enough data yet. How hostile to my presence would one of the captured Terries be?"

"Hm-m-m. For interrogation, eh? Officer or crew?"

"Either."

"You'd get farther with the officer, I think." This time, it was the PsychoWar officer who hesitated. "I don't see much point to it, frankly. If you're interested in... what is it, baseball?... schedules, or gossip about their various home towns, fine, but you're not. And you're certainly not going to get anything else. They've got this gimmick – "

"I know all about the gimmick," Deven said. "It operates exactly like the kind of thing I'd have designed myself, if I thought we could build one. Those Terries! They're quick with their sciences. But I think I can crack this one. If I'm wrong – well, we haven't lost anything."

"No, I suppose not," Emer said. "You know, this sounds like PsychoWar

ought to cut itself a slice."

"No!" Deven said quickly. "This one's all mine. It ought to be fun."

"All right," Emer said. His voice held the restrained note it always carried when he was trying not to give away too much of his personal reactions. "I wish you'd stop regarding this war as a fascinating contest between yourself and some phantom opposite number on the Terrie side, though."

Deven chuckled. "As far as I'm concerned, that's exactly what it is. Larger issues? I'm aware of them – but they're far too complex for accurate analysis. Whoever heard of an accurate contemporary evaluation of an historical trend? Maybe the Terries are destined to rule the galaxy in our place – and maybe they're not. That's for some deity to become ulcerous about. Patriotism? Atrocity stories? Interstellar Vengeance? I've read too many books, Emer, and gone too far inside the petty motivations that make men do the fundamentally useless things they do. Instill the fighting spirit in the crewmen, Emer. An efficient officer adopts the attitude best suited to his work. He's an officer because he can function on brains, not some emotional drive."

Emer sighed and hung up. Deven put his own phone back on the bracket, smiling as he did so. He enjoyed digging his heels into the PsychoWar officer occasionally. Emer was very vulnerable. Being just as capable in his line as Deven was in his, he knew, but couldn't admit, that the C&I Officer was right.

He cut back into the analysis circuits on the prisoners, and found what he had expected. They were behaving exactly as three similarly situated Eglins would have been – except that their respiration, blood pressure, heartbeat, and body temperatures were strictly normal for the physical conditions prevailing. The Terrans showed not the slightest sign of tension, apprehension, or fear.

Wilben, the Terrestrial officer, sat in his chair opposite Deven's desk. His ravaged face had been treated by a medical technician who had worked silently while Deven gave directions in a calm, but audibly concerned, voice. In fact, Deven had seen to it – conspicuously, perhaps, but seen to it nevertheless – that Wilben was comfortable, and, for the first time since the lifecraft fished him out of space, had some assurance of the fact that there were hands to help him, eyes to guide his future course.

Wilben was not good officer material. Deven had found out soon enough

that he had been the TSN ship's Mess Officer. He liked to talk. His bewilderment increased his natural propensities along this line. His past was an open book to Deven – along with his hopes, fears, and aspirations.

But his name was Charles Wilben, Lieutenant (JG) TSNR, BUSPAC 02651-T-29, and as far as military information was concerned, that was all.

Deven stifled a sigh and opened a drawer. "Cigarette, Chuck?"

"Thanks," the officer said, and puffed on it gratefully. "They say smoking's no good if you don't see the smoke," he observed after a moment. "Psychological, or something." He chuckled bravely. "Seems all right to me, though. Guess I'm a real slave to nicotine, yes sir!"

"Guess so," Deven agreed, laughing comfortably. In his perverse way, he was enjoying even this frustration. "Funny habit, smoking," he said casually. "No parallel on Eglis. Odd how two races can be so similar, even in general psychological make-up, and still be so different in details. I understand that Eglis and Earth even look generally alike – about the same landwater ratio, and everything else. I've seen maps and models of Earth, of course, but I've never been there. What's it like – from an Earthman's point of view? What's the country like, where you were born? Rural, metropolitan, suburban, what? What do you remember best about Earth?"

"I – " There was a halt. Then Wilben murmured in a monotone. "Was about to say something which would have involved information I subconsciously decided to be of military importance." He stopped again. "Sorry," he added in his normally inflected voice.

Deven shook his head sharply in exasperation – and smiled simultaneously at the fact that the rules of this particular game allowed him this usually repressed outward expression.

He leaned back, shifting his weight enough so that the chair's inclining ratchet slipped a notch, and let him assume a more relaxed position.

Well, what did I expect? he said to himself ruefully. A device which prevented the interrogation of captured personnel would naturally:

(A) Not prevent the subject from furnishing any nonconsequential information.

(B) Would be one hundred per cent effective in cutting off the flow of information before even vague hints of any other nature could be elicited from the subject under interrogation.

The specifications were his own. It struck a responsive spark in him to

see that the Terrestrials had paralleled them exactly. More's the luck, he thought, they actually found out how to do it. He'd seen the laconic official catalogue entry. Organic servomechanism, eh? And what was that supposed to mean? Some kind of impression on the brain-paths, most likely. A complicated and interlaced pattern, with high discriminatory powers borrowed, no doubt, from the subject's own subconscious. Hypnosis of some kind?. And what about that discrimination? How did the device distinguish between foe and a friend qualified to have the information passed to him?

Well, he'd have to try the hypnosis angle.

Four hours later, Deven had established that "organic servomechanism" either meant something other than a posthypnotic suggestion, or else a hypnosis so firmly – in fact, almost viciously – implanted that his own best efforts were useless.

He stopped and caught his lower lip between his teeth. What now? The sodiae? He shook his head. Under specification (B) came subspecification:

(1) Would remain operative even, and especially, when the subject was not otherwise conscious; i.e., asleep, in shock, or under sedation, anesthesia, or other drugging.

The phone buzzed and he took it, somewhat grateful for the interruption. He listened for a moment, then permitted himself a sharply hurled curse. He caught himself rapidly. Wilben was conscious, and had heard his reaction. Deven put even that to use.

Audibly simmering, he let a mutter about stupidity escape him. Then, his voice apologetic, he turned to the bewildered officer.

"I'm sorry – very sorry. I've just been informed that the badly injured crewman died – and that the other one was killed when he resisted a detail that was sent to remove the body."

Pressure, he thought. He's the only one left. It's going to be a lonely and miserable life. Blind. So far away from home and help. If he could strike deeper into the subconscious than the device –

He pictured the processes of the TSN officer's mind. There was no hope, now. No chance of escape – and not even the comfort of companionship. Already, the multiplied fear of the dark and of helplessness were striking deep at the roots of the man's thinking. Now there was loneliness, as well. The basics. Attack along the basics. Strike at his childhood fears. Get to him before the device was put into his mind.

"I... I don't know – " the officer said helplessly.

That's it! His mind pounced ruthlessly, but his voice showed none of that. "If there's anything I could do – You understand that the man in charge of the detail had no orders. The action was unpremeditated– " He mouthed a series of apologies. Then:

"You understand, of course, that this ship is manned by a crew geared to thinking of Earthmen as deadly enemies. There's only so much I can personally do. But if you were to cooperate, why then– " Crude. Crude, and probably purposeless. What cosmic secrets could be held in that brain? But the game – to break the Terran device. Crude – but good enough for this frightened man.

He watched the sweat break out in the officer's palms with satisfaction. The man's posture and nervous squirming were as indicative as signboards. Any conditioning the TSN might have given him could not circumvent this overwhelming appeal to basics that had been irrevocably established before he was out of his crib.

Wilben cracked. There was no special additional outward sign, but Deven's infallible instincts told him the barriers were down. He leaned forward.

Wilben slumped sideward, dead.

Deven straightened up, slapping his open palm against his knee.

(C) This device would not be injurious to personnel, up to a point. Provision would have to be made for the stage at which death might be the only means to continue the evasion of questioning.

Abruptly, Deven spun on his heel and picked up the telephone again. "C and I. Get your burial detail down here," he snapped into it, then marched out of the compartment and strode up to the bridge.

Captain Kein had no warning. Deven burned him down, and the crewmen on watch as well. Moving swiftly, he set the ship's automatics and then ran out of the control room, getting to the lifecraft cradle just as the ship snapped out into Space Prime. He was out and well clear of the plunging ship when the automatics flicked her back into Hyperspace again.

The lifecraft was stocked with food and water for fifteen men for thirty days. There were the usual boredom-interrupting devices. He set a course he knew would be intercepted by a TSN ship, put the proper recognition signal on the peripheral field, and waited.

He was plagued by no self-accusations of treachery. War was a chess

game, containing within its macrocosm the microscopic games played by its participants. He had resigned, for good and logical reason. If a war could be initiated for the cold-blooded purpose of establishing spheres of influence, of gaining control of mineral resources or trade routes, or whatever the reason had been – even if this politicoeconomic motivation was concealed behind impressive slogans and stirring propaganda – then, ultimately, he was certainly justified in just as cold-bloodedly taking whatever decisive steps he saw fit.

He said as much to the TSN Intelligence Officer. He sat in a comfortable chair on the opposite side of the officer's desk – where Wilben had sat, aboard the Starraker, he remembered. He smiled inwardly at the parallel.

And here is my phantom opposite number, he thought, studying the TSN Intelligence man. The officer was older than he was. Short bristles of gray stood out in the black hair above his ears. His lips were framed by deeply etched lines on his cheeks, and his gray eyes were brooding, and somehow cold.

Poor technique, Deven thought. Negates any other overtures of friendship.

"You mentioned an insurrection, I think," the TSN man said.

Deven nodded amiably. "Yes," he said. "I should estimate that, at its height, the rebellion will draw off at least twenty per cent of the forces currently being employed against you. This peak will be reached in about one hundred GST days. At this time, a properly directed attack here " – he pointed out sectors and co-ordinates on the star map with incisive slashes of his hand – "should enable you to split the fleet into four isolated fragments. After that, of course, you can probably demand a treaty. Or, if you prefer, you can cut up the individual segments at your leisure."

He stopped, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Anything else?" the officer asked.

Too cold. The voice should be warmer, Deven criticized to himself. These Earthmen, though – all alike. All machinelike – or, rather, like men dealing with a mechanism.

I am still a personification of the enemy to them, he realized. The fact that he had given them the key to victory counted for nothing in his favor. He shrugged.

"Tell me," the TSN man said, "as one professional to another" – Ah,

that's better, Deven thought – "what was your experience with the Mark IX AID ? You were unsuccessful in circumventing it."

"Most effective," Deven said. "Within its present limitations, of course."

"Oh?" The TSN officer's eyebrows were up.

"Certainly." Deven smiled. "Of course, even Earthmen can't be expected to pull a perfected device out of the hat every time. I imagine you'll improve on the current design. But, as it stands, the device fights only half the battle. The concealment of information is important, true – I might say, paramount under most circumstances. But, in a case such as we had here, where the subject was in the possession of previously unknown information, that information would ordinarily never have reached Earth. As a last resort, the device kills – and the information is lost."

The TSN officer's composure broke. "Then you're still under the impression that you deserted of your own volition? Excellent!" His voice was first incredulous, then exultant. "I've argued the hypothetical case many times!"

Deven felt his forehead and the skin around his eyes wrinkling as he stared intently at the officer.

"WHAT?"

"Of course, man!" The officer's expression as he looked at Deven was that of one professional for another he has just defeated. "You said yourself you'd specified your own version of the AID. Obviously, specification (D) must be:

In an emergency, or on the point of the subject's death, it might also be possible to record newly-acquired and significant information, or to transmit it by some means. In addition, it will be necessary to transmit all normal classified information to the subject's successor. Therefore, the ideal form for this device would be that of a semi-individualistic, discriminatory entity, in motile symbiotic link with the subject and succeeding subject(s)."

Deven kicked his chair back. Somewhere within him, he felt the words of professional admiration beginning to form at the verbal level. But he was, at bottom, a humanoid being. Snarling, he died fighting.

And Then She Found Him...

THE SPECIAL MEETING of the Merchants, Protective Association was held on the second floor of the Caspar Building, above Teller's Emporium on Broad Street. Around seven o'clock, before anybody'd had a chance to more than half settle his supper, members began coming up the narrow stairs beside Teller's display window. Unsmiling, they sat down on folding chairs that lost their straight-rowed orderliness as small groups bunched together to talk in low, upset voices. In a short time the air was thick with cigar smoke, and the splintered old board floor was black with scuffled ashes. There was more than a touch of panic in the atmosphere.

Todd Deerbush sat alone and unnoticed in the back row, his bony ankles hooked over the crossbar of the seat in front of him. He looked tiredly out from under the brim of his khaki rainhat, and from time to time he pinched the bridge of his narrow nose. He and Stannard had rolled over four hundred miles today, and more than fourteen hundred in the past three days, to be in time for this meeting. Deerbush had driven all the way, while Stannard analyzed and re-analyzed the slim sheaf of newspaper clippings that had brought them here. Now Stannard was in a hotel room, sleeping. Tomorrow they'd rendezvous, Deerbush would give his report on this meeting, and the executive half of the team would begin work.

Deerbush was dog-tired. Because he could leave it to second nature, his mind worked on alertly, but his face fell into weary, unguarded lines. He was somewhere near forty, with features that could look either younger or much older. Most important were his eyes. They were set among radiating folds in his gray skin. Shadowed by pinched eyebrows, his eyes gave him the look of long-accustomed solitude – of a loneliness walled off and carefully, methodically sealed away.

In the front of the room, the chairman was calling the meeting to order. The minutes were approved as read and Old Business was tabled by acclamation. There was a dignified clinging to orderliness in the way the chairman ran faithfully through the parliamentary procedures. There was impatience in the nervous creak of the folding chairs. Men hunched forward, shuffled their feet, caught themselves and sat still, and then

crouched again. Only Deerbush sat motionless, by himself in the back of the room.

"New Business?" the chairman asked, and immediately recognized a short, spare, balding man who'd gotten his hand in the air first. The man stood up quickly.

"I guess – " he began. "I suppose," he substituted self- consciously, "we all know why we're here. So there's no use talking about that. What we're here for tonight is to try and do something about it."

"If we can," another man broke in.

The first man waved a hand in sharp impatience. "If we can. O.K. But – what I was saying – We all know each other. I guess we've all checked with each other. It looks like my store's been hit the worst. Our inventory's short about a hundred dollars a week for the last two months."

Other men broke in now. The short man snapped: "Well, maybe my place isn't the worst. But, by golly, what's the difference in the end? Somebody's walkin' out with stuff from every one of our places, he's been coin' it for months, we're goin' crazy, and we can't even say how he's been doin' it. And what's more, I guess there ain't a merchant here can stand that kind of stuff very long. 'Bout the only thing this feller ain't done yet is rob the bank – and maybe he's gettin' set to do that, too. The police ain't findin' anything out, the insurance detectives ain't no better, and neither's my store cop. If we don't do somethin' soon, this town – yessir, this whole town – is gonna be flat on its back and bankrupt! Now, what're we gonna do about it?"

Deerbush grunted to himself. He reached three fingers into the open package in his shirt pocket, took out a pinch of loose tobacco, and began chewing it thoughtfully.

Other men were standing up now. "All right, Henry. I'm going crazy over at my place, too. You say we ought to do something. But what? Things just disappear. In broad daylight – No one comes near them. Stock can't just float out the door – but one minute it's there and the next it isn't. I can't think of anything to do about that."

"An' by the way," another man put in, "I figure we'd be six weeks closer t'an answer if all you didn't keep shut t'each other about it that long. What's the good of this 'Sociation if we got t'read about these things in "paper?"

"I didn't notice you standin' up and sayin' anythin' Sam Frazer," the spare man answered testily. "I don't mind admittin' I wasn't in a hurry to

look foolish. Then I found out it wasn't just my place. But I guess after that I didn't try to make out I'm so smart, callin' down my fellow merchants in this community. You just sit down, Sam, and let the rest of us work this out. Before it gets to be more'n we can handle."

"We can't handle it now." The man who spoke hadn't said anything up to now. Deerbush had noticed him earlier hunched forward in the first row, a scorching cigarette held gingerly between his fingertips. He went on doggedly, in spite of his obvious embarrassment. "This isn't shoplifting as anyone has ever heard of it before. I've checked this with the men from my insurance company, and I've talked to Chief Christensen. I'm – I'm almost inclined to believe it's humanly impossible to be robbed in this particular way."

Deerbush fingered his nose again, and sat up straight. But nothing was made of that half-idea, and the man who'd brought it up had nothing more to say.

It ended with the Association's deciding on offering a reward. It was a patently useless move, but it was something to put on the record. The meeting broke up lingeringly, with men snapping at each other and at nothing.

By then, Deerbush had a fair picture of things. More and more it became obvious that he'd been right in calling the newspaper stories to Stannard's attention.

The last man to leave the hall put the lights out and locked the door behind him. Deerbush stood up and shucked out of his trench-coat. Rolling it into a pillow, he took off his hat, stretched out on the floor, and went to sleep.

It was almost noon when he woke up. He got to his feet, ran his fingers through the thin, gray-brown hair left on his shiny scalp, and brushed off his suit with a few swipes of his palms. He looked out through the windows.

Outside, he saw Broad Street in the light of a brightly sunny day, with cars moving up and down the street and shoppers going into stores. But there were policemen on duty at every corner, and they neglected the traffic in favor of stealthily watching the people on the sidewalks. People-like, the shoppers evidently had not yet let a few stories in the weekly paper really sink in. But Deerbush could see one or two pedestrians looking at the police with sudden realization. It was a small town. Once started, it wouldn't be many days, or hours, before the panic he'd seen in

this hall last night would osmose out from behind the store counters, puddle up, and begin to choke the whole town.

He settled his hat on his long, narrow skull, folded the trenchcoat over his arm and left the hall. He was thinking Stannard had better clean this up today if he could.

Stannard was waiting for him on the corner of Broad and Fauquier streets. They walked slowly along together, hugging the edge of the sidewalk, while Deerbush gave his report. Occasionally people bumped into them, and always moved on without apologizing. Whenever it happened, Stannard would grimace. Deerbush paid it no attention.

Stannard nodded slowly when the report was finished. "I think that confirms it," he said in his patient voice. "You agree, don't you, Todd?"

"We never had one of us turn out to be a criminal up to now," Deerbush answered, intending it to be no more than a comment.

Stannard turned to him patiently. "I'm surprised it hasn't happened before, Todd. You must remember the pressures and strains that arise in us from being as we are. Bear in mind that it's incredible that any of us, let alone most of us, grow up to be mature personalities."

"Sure, Frank. I didn't mean to say anything special by it. It's just that this kind of thing hasn't happened up to now."

"Of course, Todd. And I appreciate your getting help from someone else, instead of trying to handle it by yourself."

Deerbush shrugged uncomfortably. He knew very well that Stannard and the other people of his kind, back in Chicago, were all of them brainier than he was. The people at the top of the organization, like Stannard, were almost as much different from Deerbush as he was from most people. Maybe more. They seemed to live a different kind of life, inside – restless, tense; like people trying to climb out of a cage. Deerbush had thought about it for a long time, and decided it was because they could always spare a part of their brains for remembering the spot they were in.

He and Stannard walked along, and toward one o'clock they stopped at a diner next to the city hall. They finally got seats at the crowded counter after missing their turn twice, and then they waited a long time for the waitress to get their order. Stannard toyed with his fork. Deerbush was accustomed to this kind of thing, being among other people much more often: he called out their order as the waitress passed by, trusting to her training to leave it stuck in her mind. In time she came back along the

counter, carrying two plates and looking up and down the row of customers.

"Hot roast beef and a ham on white?"

"Right here, Miss," Deerbush said in a deliberately loud, firm voice. She set the plates down in front of them automatically, without looking at them. She was an attractive woman, near Deerbush's own age, with laughter lines at the corners of her mouth. Deerbush looked at her with almost naked hope in his eyes. But there was no disappointment in him when she turned away without ever having looked at the man behind this one of a row of faces.

Stannard looked at him, shaking his head. "Isn't your own kind good enough for you?" he said with gentle pointedness.

Deerbush shrugged uncomfortably. He ate quickly, deft an oversized tip, went out, and waited for Stannard on the sidewalk.

They set a rendezvous, divided the town between them, and separated. Deerbush began walking along the streets south of Fauquier, turning casually into each store for a minute or two. Each time, he could smell the mute panic, thick as sour honey, clogging the air. Every place was the same; full of pale clerks who forced smiles at their customers and jerked their heads every time the door opened. But no one ever noticed him – no one stopped him to ask what he was doing. He moved along, stepping out of everyone's way, gathering urgency from the look of the people he saw.

Two o'clock found him walking quickly. By now he knew which stores had been hardest hit, and he thought he saw the pattern in the shoplifter's work. He wondered if Stannard mightn't have seen it some time ago, and possibly finished their job already... .

He walked into The Maryland Company – "The Complete Department Store" – and began moving back and forth along the aisles.

It was worse here than anywhere else in his half of town. The clerks were worked up to an edge of desperation that made them dig their pencil-points into their sales receipts and fumble at change-making until the customers caught the infection too. No one talked in a normal tone of voice.

He saw how many people there were who stood motionless and went over everybody with their eyes, and that told him how frightened the insurance companies were. And there was a stock-taking crew, moving hurriedly from counter to counter, making spot-checks – not quite at random.

They'd seen the pattern, too. Deerbush nodded to himself at the efficiency of the system, even though it couldn't ever catch this special thief.

He went to the Misses, Dress Department. There were more tensely idle people concentrated around it than anywhere else in the store. Deerbush stopped, leaned against a pillar, and waited, ignored. And eventually, almost at closing time, he saw her.

She walked into the department with a number of packages already under her arm; a tall, pale, thinnish woman. Her brown eyes were large, her nose was short and upturned. Her lips were pursed in a cupid's bow. Her hair was short and black, carefully dressed, with just the faintest dusting of silver at the tips. She moved lightly – not gracefully, as grace is taught, but with quick, unsettled movements that reminded Deerbush of a small young bird. Her gown was pale pink and summery, with bows at the shoulders and a ruffle of thick petticoats at the hem. Except for the deep creases in her forehead and the sharp definition of her lips, it might have been easy to mistake her age.

Her glance swept the dress racks and adjoining accessory counters. She looked at handbags, her lower lip caught between her teeth, and shook her head. She pivoted on one heel. The detectives all looked past her, preoccupied.

Deerbush was sure.

He watched her approach the dress racks and begin lifting things out. After a moment, she went over to the saleswoman, who was picking nervously at a floss of lint on her skirt.

"Hello," she said softly.

The saleswoman came to life. Her face lit in a warm smile that was all the more strange for the abstracted look in her eyes. Deerbush grunted explosively.

"Why, hello there, miss!" she beamed fondly. "My, that's a pretty frock!" And still, there was something vague in her expression.

The girl dimpled. "Why, thank you!" she smiled. And the detectives continued to ignore her, just as they ignored Deerbush.

Now the girl twined her fingers behind her back and bowed her head, blushing. "But you have so many other pretty ones here," she whispered shyly.

"Why, bless you, dear, do you mean you'd like to have some of them?" The saleswoman looked contrite for not having thought of it sooner. But

Deerbush could see something trapped in the saleswoman's eyes. Something that knew there was a wrong thing going on, but couldn't get its knowledge through.

"Oh! Could I?" the girl in the summery dress exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "They're so beautiful!"

"Of course, dear," the saleswoman soothed. "Here – come with me – here's where the really nice ones are. You just pick out the ones you like."

Deerbush watched wonderingly. The girl lifted dress after dress off the racks, holding each against herself and turning in front of the big floor-length mirrors. She never looked directly at her own face – only at the dresses. Deerbush had the feeling she was too self-conscious to be caught admiring herself.

Finally, she and the saleswoman had chosen a group of dresses.

"Thank you very much!" the girl breathed.

"I'm glad you like them, my dear," the saleswoman said, smiling warmly. "Please come back again." And still there was something lost and trapped in her expression, but it was very faint.

The detectives stayed watchful, but all of them seemed to have found something – a curled edge in the carpeting, or a turning overhead fan – that kept attracting their attention.

"I'll come back," the girl said. "I promise." She turned to go, holding the dresses. "Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, dear," the salesgirl said. She smiled fondly, if vaguely, and drifted back behind her counter. She looked down at her skirt, began scraping harshly at the fabric.

The girl in the summery dress moved slowly toward the doors, browsing as she went, stopping at an occasional counter to look over the merchandise. Once she waited while a floorwalker stepped abstractedly out of her way.

Deerbush moved after her. He heard a sound behind him and felt it raise the hackles of his neck. He spun his head around. The stock-taking crew was in the Misses' Dress Department and the saleswoman was doubled over her counter, sobbing hysterically. "No – no," she was saying, "there wasn't anybody here."

A man held the front doors open for the girl in the summery dress. Deerbush was on the street only yards behind her, brushing by the store detective who unobtrusively blocked the exit. He followed her as she

turned off the main street away from the shopping areas, and he couldn't make sense out of what he'd seen.

But that didn't matter so much – the important thing was that he'd found her.

He could tell she'd never had anyone follow her before in her life. She never looked about her. When she turned off into a tree-lined side street, Deerbush stepped up beside her.

He walked there for perhaps twenty steps before she turned her head and looked at him, frowning a little. She peered at him with puzzled eyes. "You're different," she said.

"It's all right," Deerbush said, trying not to frighten her. "My name's Todd Deerbush and I'm not going to hurt you. I'd like to walk along with you for a while."

She stopped still. "You're different," she repeated. "You're like me."

Maybe, Deerbush thought. "I don't know," he said.

She began walking again, finally, the dresses forgotten in her arms, puzzling over it. "You noticed me," she said after a while, he; mind made up. "All by yourself. Nobody else ever did. You must be real too."

"I don't know what you mean by that," Deerbush said gently. "But people don't notice me, either."

She nodded firmly. "Unless you make them. You're real... I never thought anybody else but me was real."

"I guess there's quite a few," Deerbush answered, thinking that there were none exactly like her. "But it's hard to tell. Might be some in every town. Far's I know, I'm with the only bunch that's gotten together."

"Are there that many of us?"

"Well," he said, "there's more than fifty in this bunch I'm in."

They walked a little farther. They were in a very good neighborhood now, with big houses and wide lawns. She turned toward him again, and looking at her he realized she'd been preoccupied all the while. "What makes us real, Todd?"

He still didn't know what she might mean by that. He tried to answer her as best he could. "Stannard – that's one of our real smart people; you better ask him for the answers – Stannard says we broadcast – like a TV station, he says – something like that; it's out of my league – that makes us not be noticed. It works inside people's heads." He felt he was making himself sound confused and stupid. He couldn't help it, and he was used to

it.

"That's not what I asked you, Todd. That's what happens first. But after a while you can make people notice you and be nice to you. But they can't do it to you. That proves you're real and they're just... something else. But what does it?"

"The same kind of thing, I guess," he answered lamely. He was trying to find out more from her than she could from him, and he didn't know what to do about it. Stannard might – but for some reason Deerbush found himself not wanting Stannard in this right now. "Stannard says it's protection. He says Mother Nature's working out a new kind of creature in us, and doesn't want us to get hurt. But she kind of overdid it."

His voice was gentle. He thought of her growing up in this town, with the broadcast growing stronger and stronger as she grew; wondering why the boys didn't have any interest in her, wondering why everyone acted so strange. He could see the puzzled little child with the tear-streaked face, and the hurt teenager who came later, having to separate from her family if she was to live at all... and then the woman, blooming somehow in spite of everything, and beginning to fade... Only she'd found something.

A warm and exciting thing was happening to Deerbush. He felt he was really coming to understand her. He'd been no different, before he had the idea of setting himself up in this kind of work. Twenty years of living a settled life had let him strike a balance with himself and get along with what he was. But when he looked at the girl; thin, pale, worn and terribly lonesome, he could understand how it would be for her.

Except that it wasn't the same, he reminded himself. She had something else.

But, looking at her, he couldn't see it. He could only see, under her eyes, the hollows that makeup couldn't quite take out.

"Where're you from, Todd?"

"Chicago, now."

"I've always wanted to see places like that. I suppose I could." She touched her upper teeth to her lower lip. "But I knew I was real as long as I stayed here."

They reached a trimmed hedge with a white picket gate set in the middle of it, and a walk going up to a white house with window boxes and ruffled white curtains in the windows.

"My name is Viola Andrews," she said. "I live here. Would you like to come inside and visit with me?"

She showed him through the house. The living room was full of beautifully carved, heavy walnut furniture, with over stuffed divans and easy chairs. There were standing lamps with beautifully decorated shades, and delicate end-tables with china figurines on them. The kitchen had an electric mixer, a toaster, a rotisserie, an electric frying pan, a dishwasher, big refrigerator, and freezer.

As she showed him from room to room, she held his arm. Her grip grew tighter, and her voice more excited. "I can't get over it, Todd. Someone else like me! Aren't these chairs pretty? I had some others, but then I saw these, and I had them sent over right away. I've done that with most of my furnishings – there are so many nice things in the stores. But tell me some more about yourself, Todd, please. I'm dying to know all about you. How were you when you were a little boy? Was it as terrible for you as it was for me?"

"I don't know, Vi." He felt more and more awkward as she clung to his arm and led him from room to room. Her bedroom had gilded antique furniture, with delicate French dolls propped up on satin pillows over the pink bedspread. The dining room had cupboards full of fragile china and sculptured silver cutlery.

"Isn't it all beautiful? Oh, Todd, I'm getting more and more excited by the minute! I can't get over you!"

Suddenly she stopped. Her fingers dug into his arm. "It was awful, Todd," she said intently. "After I left my parents, I still tried so hard to be like other girls. I had to... not pay... for my food all of the time, but I tried in everything else. And then, one day not long ago, I was twenty-five." She touched an embroidered handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. "I suddenly realized I was going to be alone forever, for as long as I lived. Other girls were married, they had families, they had all the things a girl needs – and I was never, never going to have them. It was like a deep black closet with myself crouched in the very far corner, and no way out.

"I – I didn't know what to do. I had to make somebody notice me. I was ready to die if somebody didn't. And – and – " her voice suddenly rose, "and one day, I could! I didn't know how, but I just could! I didn't have to be a thief any longer. I didn't just have to get along on as little as I could. I could make people like me, and pay attention to me, and give me presents."

Just as suddenly, she bowed her head. "But they're just pretending, and

I know it," she whispered. "They're not real. They don't really see me or like me. They forget me just as soon as I go away."

She straightened and took her hand from his arm. She touched an embroidered handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. "I'm so glad you came to help me that I can't even put it into words; but I am glad, Todd."

Deerbush shook his head. He'd been pretty badly worried when he first read the newspaper stories. But it wasn't that one of his own kind of people had turned out bad, which was what he'd been afraid of at first. It was just this girl, scared, trying to fill in what she'd been missing. He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Listen, Vi," he said, "best thing to do's get you out of here as quick as we can, and get you with your own kind of people."

"Thank you, Todd," she said in her breathless voice. "You're very nice to me." She hugged him impulsively.

"Listen – " he said, trying to think of how to tell her what he wanted to. "Vi – see, what I am, is a marriage broker."

"A marriage broker?"

"Uh – yes – see, what it says I am in the Chicago Classified is a private investigator. People never see me. They just call up the AA Agency on the phone, and I mail 'em reports on the people they want to find out about. That's how I make my living. But what I really do, for this bunch of our people, is go around the country looking for more. And when I find one, I try and fit them to somebody else that hasn't got a husband or wife. It's a thing I figured out to do, so I could be somebody useful."

That had been the easy part. Now he was stopped again.

He wished he was smarter, so he could know what was wrong with Vi. He knew there was something wrong, something that somebody like Stannard could put his finger on in a minute. But he knew too that it didn't matter. Underneath it, she wasn't bad, or vicious. She didn't do these things because she was mean. She was gentle, and hurt, and lost. If a man had time, he could bring out the good things in her. A man who understood her, and took care of her, and was patient with her, could do it.

"Vi – what I mean is, I've found plenty of women for other men. I liked a lot of them – I'm not trying to fool you about that – but I never... What I mean is, these women all had a lot on the ball. And the other men in this bunch're a lot more deserving. They sort of belonged together, and I knew it." He stopped to listen to what he'd said, and went red. "I don't mean,"

he blurted, "you don't stack up to 'em. I don't mean that at all, Vi. You're a lot smarter than me, and I know it. I'm not much. But what I mean is, I've always taken these women back to Chicago with a man in mind for them. But – " He reached out for her hands. "Not this time." He didn't sound like himself.

"Vi – I'm not much, and I don't have much. I do work that's bound to keep me away from home a lot, and with people like us that's going to be extra hard on you, but – "

"Oh, Todd," she said, coloring, "I'm the happiest girl in the world!"

He couldn't believe it. He stood looking at her, holding her hands, and for a long moment he couldn't get it through his head. Then he felt warmth all through him, and he had to close his eyes for a minute because he was smiling as hard as she was.

"We better get going as soon as we can," he said, "try and get a start while it's still daylight. We've still got to pick up Stannard, and my car. So I'll ask you to pack fast. Better just take one suitcase."

She pulled sharply away from him. "One suitcase? You mean – leave all my nice things?"

He'd known it couldn't last. "Well – sure, Vi. They don't belong to you... "

She stamped her foot in anger. "Leave all my presents? I won't! I won't do it!"

"Vi," he said patiently, "you've got to."

"No!"

"Look, Vi, feeling that way doesn't make sense. You took that stuff. Somebody's stuck for the money somewhere. But it's not just that. You've got this town scared; you've got it scared so bad these people're going to stampede and hurt themselves. They're ready for it – it's plain as day, all over town. You want something like that on your conscience?"

"If you leave the stuff here, that'll take care of it. They'll find it after a while, and they'll decide it was a smart crook. It'll be a puzzle for them, but it won't be building up anymore. They'll have their stuff back and after a while they'll forget about it – if it never happens anywhere again.

"And even if you don't think they're real anyhow – the stuff still doesn't belong to you. You didn't earn it."

"You're awful!" she shouted at him. "You're mean and awful. I don't like

you at all. You hate me. Get out of here!"

"Vi – "

"I hate you! I hate you!" She pulled her hands back awkwardly and hit him with the heels of her fists. "I won't give you up my nice presents! I won't! I like getting presents – I want lots of nice things to have! I want lots of nice things – I want a lot more than I have! And I don't like you! Get away from me! Go away! Go away!"

Deerbush sighed. "All right, Vi."

"I'm going to go downtown and get more nice things – lots more. And don't you try and stop me!"

"I'm sorry, Vi," he said in a voice that had no life in it, "but it looks like I better come back in a hurry."

Walking quickly toward his rendezvous with Stannard, he saw police cars cruising the streets. The men inside them drove slowly, their heads turning as they looked at every pedestrian except Deerbush. He noticed they were paying special attention to the women, and he wasn't too surprised. But they'd never find her. They might come and knock on her door, and maybe even talk to her, but they'd never find her. It would just get worse and worse.

He wondered how bad it could get. After the first stores had to close – or if Vi began going into people's houses – what would these people living here in this town do? Would they be wearing guns here in this town, looking back over their shoulders all the time, locking everything up? And still losing things? And if it came to the militia and martial law, or the state police or F.B.I., and they still lost things – what then?

A car up the street jammed on its brakes. The doors flew open, and the detectives inside jumped out on the sidewalk. They ran up to a startled plump woman and surrounded her. One of them flashed a badge for an instant. The others had already grabbed the packages out of her arms and were tearing them open. The woman looked from one to another of them, her face white, her mouth twisted by shock.

There was nothing Deerbush could do to help her. He stood watching it, cursing in a voice so low he didn't hear it. But he couldn't help feeling a little jolt of relief as he thought nothing like that could ever happen to Viola.

"I wish I'd found her," Stannard sighed as they drove toward Viola's house.

"I shouldn't have said I wanted her to come to Chicago." Deerbush said.

What hadn't worked out between him and Vi was a personal thing, and a private hurt, but what he'd done was make trouble for everybody.

"You couldn't know that, Todd," Stannard was telling him. "You had no way of guessing. She was something brand new to you – brand new to anyone, for that matter, in this variation. You're quite right – they'd never find her. Between the curiosity-damping field, and this new ability that seems to spring directly from her arrested emotional development, it's – well, it's more than fortunate that I came here with you." He stared out at the dark street for a moment. "It's a horrible shame she's so completely crippled, has so little moral stamina in her makeup. But what an ability! Intelligently, maturely used – you realize, don't you, Todd, that this could easily be the answer to the problem of the damping field? I'm afraid she's past hope, but if we could learn it from her... Well, that makes no difference. We can always raise her children apart from her, so they'll have her heredity but not her hysteria."

"I guess we could," Deerbush said.

"She didn't tell you what it is she does?"

Deerbush shook his head. "Sounded like she doesn't know, herself. She just does it. People – people give her presents."

"She simply wishes people would obey her, and that's all? She walked up to this saleswoman, you say, and caused the woman to give her the dresses."

"I know. But the woman wanted to."

"And had hysterics afterward, claiming she knew nothing about it. Well, that part's the damping field, taking hold again after whatever else it was had done its work. Would you describe to me, again, this expression you say you saw on the clerk's face? It sounds to me as though there might be something valuable in that... "

They were in front of Viola's house. "No lights," Deerbush said, feeling almost glad. "She's gone. We'll have to look for her." Now Stannard would have to keep quiet, and leave him alone.

Stannard was peering at the dark house. "Do you think she'll come back here? We have to find her quickly. I want her in Chicago as fast as we can bring her, and I want her isolated from human beings before she has half the world giving her things and the other half howling for her blood."

"We'll find her. We just have to go down along the shopping street." I wish I was the richest man in the world, he thought.

They drove back toward the main street, both of them quiet. They

passed a police car, its spotlight fingering the sidewalks.

"The stores aren't open late tonight," Stannard said.

"I don't think that's going to make any difference." They turned onto the main street. It lay empty but guarded, most of the storefronts lit by night lights, the parking spaces bare along the curbs except for places where occasional men – insurance detectives, Deerbush guessed – sat in plain cars reading newspapers. Foot patrolmen walked silently from door to door, each with only one block for his beat, trying locks. A radio car rolled up the street to the intersection that marked the end of the double row of stores, made a U turn, came down to the intersection of Broad Street and Riverside Avenue, made another U turn, and rolled up the street again.

At the corner of Broad and Fauquier, where The Milady Shop was located, Viola stood waiting while a middle-aged man fumbled at the shop door with his keys.

"Is that she?" Stannard asked.

Deerbush nodded. "That's her." He eased the car to a stop at the curb.

"I'll talk to her," Stannard whispered.

Viola was intent on the man opening the shop door, but she turned her head as Deerbush and Stannard hurriedly crossed the sidewalk toward her.

The shopkeeper was paying neither of them any attention. He had the door open now, and he spoke to Viola. "There you are, little honey. Now, I told you it wouldn't take but a minute or two, didn't I?"

Viola took an indecisive step toward the door. Her face was clouded up angrily, and when they were close, she said in a low, angry voice, "You get away from me, you!"

Stannard whispered to Deerbush: "My God, she's acting like a five-year-old!"

Deerbush thought of how sensitive and delicate she was, and how helpless she'd be without this extra something she could do.

"Something wrong, little honey?" the shopkeeper asked Viola, his voice full of concern.

"Make them go away!" Viola cried, stamping her foot.

"Make who go away, little honey?"

"Can't you see them? You see them. See them and make them go away!"

"Miss Andrews – " Stannard began.

Deerbush was looking at the shopkeeper. He had never seen anyone try so hard to do something that ought to be so easy. He and Stannard weren't invisible. But the shopkeeper advanced uncertainly, brushing his hands in front of him like a man going into a long hall full of cobwebs. Then his fingertips touched Stannard. For just a second, he almost did the impossible because Viola had asked him to. His eyes looked into Stannard's face and Deerbush could see them almost begin to focus. But then the shopkeeper's head lolled forward on his chest and he stumbled back against his window. He leaned on the glass, his lips slack, looking at nothing. His breathing became shallow and monotonous.

"I hate you!" Viola spat at him. "You don't like me!"

"Miss Andrews – " Stannard said again. He was pale as he looked at the shopkeeper.

Viola pointed at Deerbush. "You help me," she said to Stannard. "Make him leave me alone!"

A foot patrolman passed by them, turned to the door of the next shop, tested the lock, and went on. Stannard was motionless, staring at her.

Then Stannard said to her: "Don't worry, dear – everything's fine. Everything's all right. I'll take care of you. You don't have to worry." His voice was soothing, and only someone who knew Stannard as well as Deerbush did could have noticed the peculiar note it struck, as if somewhere, too deep in his throat to win the fight, something was trying to choke off the words.

He turned suddenly and tried to hit Deerbush.

"Oh, thank you!" Viola exclaimed. "You're nice. You'll get rid of the nasty man for me."

Deerbush felt the blow on his shoulder. He tried to get a hand on Vi's arm before she could run away, but he couldn't with Stannard between them. He elbowed Stannard back, but he had to drop his shoulder to do it. Stannard swung again, and this time he split Deerbush's cheek.

Deerbush shook his head sharply.

"Get away from her," Stannard panted. "Stop bothering her!" Viola took two quick steps forward and pushed her hands against Deerbush's chest.

"You stay away from my presents," she mumbled angrily.

"I'm sorry, Frank," Deerbush said. He stepped back, holding one of Vi's wrists now, and with the other hand he hit Stannard hard on the jaw. As

Stannard fell down, Vi began to scream.

Deerbush held her wrists for a long moment while she kicked and kicked at his legs. He looked at Stannard, lying on the sidewalk, and saw the man's eyes start to flutter open.

He let go of Vi's wrists and reached with his hands, drawing up his shoulders and lowering his face to protect it from her fingernails. "I'm sorry, Vi."

Deerbush waited until the police car had rolled by. Then he pulled his old sedan away from the curb, and pointed the car toward the edge of town, driving with both hands on the wheel and only vaguely feeling the hurt places in the skin of his face.

Stannard was sitting hunched in the seat beside him. He rubbed his jaw. "It was incredible," he mumbled. "I never for a moment considered that she might be able to use her ability on one of us."

"All right," Deerbush said.

"I'll never forget it. I knew what she was. I didn't change my judgment of her by one iota before she spoke to me. And then, suddenly, she was the most wonderful person in the world. She deserved everything anyone could offer her. It was right that she be made happy. It was unthinkable that anything should be permitted to interfere with her wishes. I would have laid down my life for her."

"All right, Stannard," Deerbush said. He was blinking, and searching the sides of the road with his eyes. He wished Stannard would be still.

"No – no, it's not all right." Stannard shook his head. "Can you imagine what would have happened? If she could make me obey her, she could make any of us obey her. God! Suppose we'd succeeded in getting her to Chicago! Fifty of us, all her slaves. You never could have stopped it. We'd all have been against you." Stannard twisted around to stare fascinated into the back seat, where Deerbush had gently laid Vi down. "You were right to do that, Todd. You were never more right in anything in your life."

Deerbush was more tired than he had ever been. He felt haunted, and he knew that that was something he would never lose.

He saw the church beside the road, its spire and walls a flat bulking shape in the darkness, solid only where the edge of his headlight beam touched the weathered brown shingles. He stopped the car and got out. He opened the trunk and then walked over to the rusted pipe railing that ran around the churchyard. He stood there for a little while, and then he went

back to the opened trunk of the car. He came around to Stannard carrying a hubcap he'd pried loose with the big screwdriver from the tool box, and the flat steel top of the box itself.

"Here," he said. "We can use these to dig with."

Stannard got unsteadily out of the car. "She was like a petulant child," he said. "It was love she demanded. Absolute, complete love."

Deerbush thrust the hubcap into his hands. "Here," he said. "We'd better get this done. And quit harping on it."

"Yes," Stannard said vaguely. "Of course. Deerbush – what could stave off a demand like that? Why couldn't she get to you?"

Deerbush leaned over into the back seat and lifted Vi out, holding her with all the gentleness he had. He cradled her in his arms.

"All her life she looked for it – " he said, "for just one person who could really love her... And then she found him."

© 1957, Fantasy House, Inc.

Aspirin Won't Help It

Working behind a sandwich counter is like nothing else in the world. It's one of those jobs where you run like mad for an hour at a time, and, in between, you sit around and think you'll go nuts if you don't see another human face pretty soon. I figured out once that the best kind of counterman would be something like a werewolf; he'd be an octopus on roller skates during rush hours and a Martian intelligent vegetable the rest of the time.

But that's not what happened to me. What happened to me was like this:

It was a day about six months ago, with the weather pretty cold and dreary. Most of my customers had sniffles of one kind or another, and Doc, over in the drug half of the store, was doing a good business in all kinds of anti-cold gunk.

Now, half of a counterman's income comes from tips. So, even if you

don't get your pay docked for being sick, you drag yourself in to work if you can possibly make it. But, round about right after coffee-break time, I had to admit I was really down with something. My ears were popping, my eyes were watery, my face felt hot, and my throat felt pretty sore. I finished washing up the last of the coffee-break crockery and leaned against the counter, looking across the store at the display cards tacked up all over Doc's counters. There must have been nearly a hundred brands of guaranteed cold cures.

Like most people, I guess I've tried just about everything, at one time or another. I used to depend on hot tea with lots of lemon. I found out lemon juice is an acid, which does your throat no good, so I switched to honey. I found out honey just provides a nice sugar base for bacteria to multiply in, so I switched to strong tea, plain – figuring on tannic acid, you know – but that didn't do any good, either. Then I ran through the drugstore gamut. I've had my kidneys jolted, my histamine suppressed, my heartbeat accelerated and my ears jangled with quinine. I've had my stomach acids neutralized, my alkalis washed out, and once, I've gotten serious burns under a sunlamp. I've gotten roaring drunk.

But, somehow, every time it hits you, you try again. So I went over to Doc, picked up a couple of packages of tissues for when my nose started to run, and sighed as well as I could with my respiratory system as clogged as it was.

"What's good this week, Doc?" I asked.

Doc looked at me hopelessly, made sure there weren't any customers around to hear him, and pointed at the tissues.

"I'm afraid you've already got it, Charley," he said. "Two dozen hankies is about the best. That and a few days in bed. Plenty of liquids, and several good books."

I nodded. "Pretty much what I was afraid of," I said. "You sure there isn't anything else?"

"Well, there are various kinds of alleviants which will cut down your misery. But no cures. Besides, it looks to me that what you've got is one of these virus things. Catch them early enough, and you're all right. But I'm afraid it's a little too late for that, in your case. You're due for twenty-four hours of moderately high fever. I'd advise you to go home and go to bed."

I didn't like that idea at all. So I thanked him for his advice and went back to work.

Which was a mistake.

Noon rush was a nightmare. It felt like I was walking through glue, and my eyes didn't seem to be focused right. I'd reach for white and bring up rye, I poured coffee all over my hand instead of into cups and I swear I dropped a dozen glasses of water, thinking I had them down on the counter and missing by inches. Luckily, they fell over towards the inside, instead of at the customers.

It was one of those days, too, when lots of little things go wrong at once. The duckboards kept slithering around underfoot, and the refrigerator door kept popping open; and the knife was never where I left it.

By the time that was over, I had one steady customer less and no really satisfied ones. I had maybe a buck in tips, as against my usual three or four, and there were grease burns and cuts all over me, to say nothing of the scalds and the big splotches of spilled stuff all over my apron. I was running perspiration, and my voice sounded weird.

I'm stubborn, but not suicidal. I made a pass at cleaning up after the rush, decided even that wasn't worth it, and called the union for a replacement. The minute he came in the door, I had my apron off, and five minutes later I was on my way home, huddled up in a corner seat on the subway, counting stops, wishing miserably that I was already home. As a matter of fact, I did make it in what seemed like an unusual hurry, even for an off-hour train, but I wasn't in much of a mood for excessive gratitude. I just figured Lady Luck was making it up to me, and let it go at that.

I dragged myself up the stairs, opened the apartment door, and headed straight for the bedroom. Arlene looked up from the TV, saw the shape I was in, and headed for the kitchen to squeeze oranges and make tea. I sort of raised one hand and said "H'lo," but that was the best I was up to in the way of conversation.

I got inside the bedroom on willpower alone. The spots in front of my eyes were clotting together in big clouds, and every time I moved my head, it felt like I was falling.

I had it. Oh, I had it, and I was pretty darned grateful when I felt those crisp sheets all around me and a good soft pillow under my head. I pulled the blankets up around my neck and just lay there with my eyes closed, breathing.

When Arlene came into the room, carrying a tray, she made a surprised

sound.

"Gee!" she said, "you got that bed made in a hurry. I didn't even see you going in the linen closet."

"Huh?"

"Well, today's laundry day. I stripped the bed, and I didn't make it yet. Don't you remember?"

I shook my head. Not that it made any difference. I'd been moving in a fog all afternoon – if she told me I'd come home following a blue giraffe, it wouldn't have surprised me.

"Hm-m-m. Well," she said, setting the tray down and looking a little worried, "maybe I'd better call Dr. Marten."

And what was he going to do for me? I shook my head again. "No sense to that," I croaked. "I'll be all right tomorrow."

She felt my head. "I wouldn't be so sure. You're running a fever."

This was not news to me. My arms and legs felt they were floating a quarter-inch off the bed.

She felt my head again. "You're pretty sick. It won't hurt to have the doctor come in and look at you."

Well, maybe... At least, he might be able to knock the fever down. So I said all right, and Arlene bent over to kiss me on the forehead before she went out to the phone.

I came up to meet her.

This is tricky, and I'd better be specific. I didn't push myself up, or bend forward, or raise my head. I just sort of... rose. That is, her lips touched my forehead sooner than they should have.

She jumped a little, but she didn't really notice anything. For one thing, she had her eyes closed.

As for me, all this just proved how delirious I was. After all, I hadn't moved, and I didn't notice myself moving. It's just that, without anything in particular being done by me or to me, my head was three inches higher above the pillow than it had been.

So I just took advantage of things to kiss the tip of her nose, too, and then I was back down on the pillow. Like I've said, Arlene didn't seem to notice anything, either, but she stopped just inside the door and gave me a very puzzled look just before she went out to call the doctor.

The doctor couldn't make it for another hour or so, and Arlene had to go out and do the marketing, so I was all alone for a while. I lay in bed, not thinking of anything in particular. I wondered about how soon it would be before I could get back to work, and whether I could possibly get the Workingmen's Compensation Board to see this my way, but nothing important happened.

Except that, just before the doctor came in, I remembered drinking the tea and orange juice – yeah, I know that's an acid, too, but Arlene believes in it – and, when I looked, the cup and the glass were empty, but I didn't remember reaching over to pick either of them up.

So, Dr. Marten took my temperature and pulse, thumped my chest, looked down my throat and in my ears, and shrugged.

"Some kind of virus, Charley," he said. "Looks like one of those twenty-four-hour jobs. Lots of liquids, plenty of bed rest, and I can promise you a fairly miserable night. You'll probably come out of it sometime tomorrow night, be weak as a kitten the day after, and feel fine the day after that. Hold out your arm."

He had a hypodermic full of some kind of antibiotic, and he swabbed my arm with a hunk of cotton soaked in alcohol.

Now, understand me, I'm no sissy. I was night counterman in a little one-man hamburger tower near St Nicholas Park for a year and a half, and before that I worked down near the docks, in one of the loneliest diners in Manhattan. I've been in a fight or two, and there isn't a counterman alive that hasn't cut and burned himself pretty badly, at one time or another, and known it was going to happen again.

But I don't like hypodermics. I darned near fainted when Arlene and I went down for our blood test before we got married.

I did not want that needle in me.

Never ask me what happened, because I don't exactly know. All of a sudden, it seemed like my fever was worse – much worse – a lot worse. I grayed out completely. I wasn't unconscious, but I couldn't seem to get my eyes working at all, and I was thrashing pretty badly on the bed.

I heard glass break, and Doc Marten cursed a blue streak that ended in a kind of frightened yelp. That was when I heard what sounded like something tearing. My bed began to roll, and there was a sound like running feet. The doctor, I guess. Then I heard plaster fall, a door slam, and my bed rammed up against something.

My eyes cleared.

The room looked like a war had been fought in it. Plaster had fallen, in patches off the ceiling in a trail that led from beside where my bed had been to the door. The doctor's bag was upside down in a corner, at the end of another trail of vials, bottles, pillboxes, a stethoscope, a couple of hypodermics, and miscellaneous impedimenta. The orange juice glass and the teacup had apparently been flung at the wall – right past the doctor's head, I'd say, if he'd been running for the door just ahead of that cascade of plaster, and the tray was on the floor right beside the door. As far as I could tell, he'd made it outside before it hit.

But the most interesting part was my bed, which was up against the door and holding fast, in spite of its casters, against the doctor's thumping from the other side.

I felt awful weak.

Dr. Marten was banging on the door pretty hard. I was starting to climb out and pull the bed back when I heard Arlene's voice. It sounded pretty frightened, and pretty worried, too.

"Charley? Charley, what happened? Are you all right?"

I couldn't really answer either half of that. "I'm all right, I guess," I said back to her.

"Please let me in, Charley."

I started to tell her I was trying, but just then the bed began to roll all by itself. I yelled and got my legs aboard, and we rolled back to where the bed belonged, and stopped. I sat there, not too sure whether I dared to try getting out of it, with the blankets up around my shoulders, wondering what the devil had happened.

The door opened cautiously, and Arlene stuck her head in the room. She looked around and gasped at the shape it was in, but she was mostly worried about me.

"Charley! What did you do to Dr. Marten?" She came across the room and started to get too close to the bed. I didn't think that was such a good idea, but, on the other hand, what could I say? So I just waved her back, and I guess I looked pretty mysterious about it.

"Charley? What is it, dear?"

I shook my head and put my finger up to my lips. The thought had occurred to me that the bed might do something if I talked about it.

"Charley?" Arlene wasn't trying to get near me any more. She was

backing away a little. I could see Dr. Marten standing uncertainly in the doorway behind her, looking at me with his head cocked. His jacket was rumpled, and his tie was off at an angle. His shirt was gone.

The bed seemed to make a threatening motion toward him, and he stepped back quickly. Arlene jumped.

I huddled on the bed, feeling miserable. I could see Arlene was pretty scared, and it had to be my fault. I didn't know how – I hadn't done anything – but that was the way it figured.

"I'm... look, honey, I'm sorry," I said. "Don't be scared."

She was looking at the bed with a very peculiar expression on her face.

"You didn't do that," she said.

"Do what?"

"Make the bed move. I was watching you. You didn't jump or anything. Wait a minute."

She got on her hands and knees across the room and looked under the bed. "Pull the covers up," she said. "They're in the way."

I tugged at them, and they pulled clear. Arlene grunted and stood up. "No motor." She looked at me thoughtfully.

I didn't quite get it.

Dr. Marten was back in the doorway. "Mrs. Holloway, I think it might be best if you came back here," he said, looking at me significantly.

Arlene shook her head impatiently.

"Mrs. Holloway, I'm afraid I've got to insist."

She waved a hand at him and muttered, "Sure, doctor, sure."

"Honey," I said hesitantly, "you mad at me?"

She shook her head. "I wonder what kind of bug you caught," she muttered.

"Mrs. Holloway! I appreciate the fact that you love your husband, but he's potentially dangerous. Any man in sufficient delirium to hurl glasses and... and other things... at another individual, and then attempt to run him down with a bed... tear his shirt off – " he finished up with a mutter.

I did all that?

Marten looked like he was getting mad. Arlene looked at me. "You stay in bed, Charley," she said. "I'll be in to see you after a while. I want to talk to the doctor."

"All right, honey," I said, feeling kind of low. But the bed seemed to have settled down, and I was pretty sick.

I remember, in between going off to sleep because of the fever, Dr. Marten's voice coming pretty loud through the closed door.

"Mrs. Holloway, what you're suggesting is ridiculous! I'll admit there are many types of unclassified virus, but a parapsychogenetic infection is absolute nonsense!"

Arlene said something back – I couldn't catch it, because she was using her low voice, but it's her low voice that's the grim and practical one.

A couple of times, Marten mentioned Bellevue, but he didn't mention it much.

Though I do seem to remember the room going wild again when a couple of strange men in white coats tried to get to me.

I don't know, for sure. The fever kept getting worse, and I kept going to sleep or passing out. I kept waking up, all through the night, sometimes because Arlene was sitting on the bed and stroking my forehead, but mostly because there was so much noise out in the street and all through the neighborhood. I kept tossing and turning, and outside there'd be noises like high winds.

I'm certain I heard glass break lots of times, and I knew Dr. Marten tried to get in the room once to pick up his bag and stuff, because they chased him out through the apartment, down the hall and down the stairs, and all the way out into the street. At least, I think I recognized the voice yelling for help, down in the street.

When I woke up, the fever was gone. The bed was soaked with perspiration, and I felt limp, as though something had cut my tendons. But that was just weakness, because, by mid-afternoon, I could walk around a little. I looked out the window, and all the television antennas were down.

The neighborhood looked good, too – as if every speck of dirt that had been accumulating for a hundred years had disappeared. The streets were clean, and the air was crystal clear. Down on the corner, the pool hall that I knew was just a front for a lot of other things was being boarded up. It looked like a bulldozer had gone through it.

I looked at Arlene, who was cleaning up the room, and she looked at me

"You're going to have to let Dr. Marten examine you," she said. "Just to prove you're o. K."

"Uh-huh." I knew what she meant by that, too. All the traces of the delirium would have to be gone.

"Charley – "

"Yeah, honey ?"

"I'd like to move the piano. Sort of change the living room around a little. I'm tired of the way it is."

Damn! I hate moving furniture. Say "piano" to me, and I duck instinctively.

Then I realized what she was doing, and I looked out in the living room.

I don't use it. I've got it, but I don't think Dr. Marten would describe it as anything but a chronic, systematic delusion. If he had to, he'd in all probability fall back on "mass hypnosis. "

So I don't use it, except around the house to help Arlene, and maybe keep the neighborhood touched up a bit. It's no good to me at all, when I'm working, because I've got anywhere from one to twenty people sitting in a row, watching me. About the best I can do is, during a really bad rush, when everybody's yelling for service and everybody's intent on their own order, I can, if I'm careful let the toast butter itself.

© 1955 Algis Budrys

Be Merry

Some of my story scenarios assemble themselves over the years. This is one of them. First – when I was just beginning to list ideas I might write as SF professionally – I noted that eating an intelligent alien might not, under some circumstances, fall under the taboo of cannibalism. Then, years later, my family and I lived in a coastal Atlantic community – among good people, who were kind to us – which serves as the physical model for the locale of this story. Finally, one day in Illinois I

had a need to think about immunology, and I thought about all this, instead.

You might say this story is a hell of a way to repay hospitality, and you might be right. But none of the people in this story are drawn from among our many friends in New Jersey, although they are equally human. The operatic scene is from my aunt, Vladislava Grigaitiene, prima donna of the Lithuanian State Opera, and from Delilah, a neglected novel by Noah Goodrich.

I.

OUR OLD MAN is a good Old Man. His name is Colston McCall and I don't know what he used to do before. Now he's Chief of Policing for the Western District of Greater New York, and he knows what's important and what isn't.

I was sitting under a big pine tree, feeling weak and dizzy. I had taken a load of aspirin, and my stomach wasn't feeling right. But it was a nice sunny day. I could feel the soft, lumpy bark giving in to the weight of my back. The branches made a sweet, shady canopy.

The ground was soft under the spongy pine needles, too, and it felt good sitting there, looking out over the meadows. There were wild flowers growing.

We might have had that ground plowed up, and people planting things. But there weren't enough people to plow up everything, and we had as many fields going as we had machinery for. We were doing our best. It still took a lot of people who had to go into the warehouses for packaged food that hadn't spoiled. There just wasn't any way we could have been organized better. We all had something useful to do, all of us who weren't in beds. I shouldn't have been sitting under any tree.

But it was a beautiful day, and I had been hurting bad all night and morning. The doctors in the hospital had given me a piece of paper saying I only had to work when I wanted to. I guess that means I only had to work when I could stand it, but if they had written it out that way it would have made a sadist out of anybody who asked me if I would do something for him. We've gotten very careful. Very considerate, in nice practical ways. Our manners are lousy, because there's no time to be polite, but it's true

what people used to say – the fewer people are, the more important people become. I remember what it was like back before the Klarri had their accident, but I can't believe how mean people used to be to each other. I remember specific things they did to each other, and it gets me boiling mad because that's how I'd feel if somebody tried to do that kind of thing to me these days. It's how we'd all feel.

I think some of the things that used to make us sick, before, came from living like that. I think that if I was fifteen years younger and just coming to make my own way in the world we have now, I wouldn't have my trouble, and I wouldn't have to sit here thinking. I mean, a man like me who had come so well through the Klarri sicknesses should have had a lot to do in this world, and instead I was shutting off because of something the old world had done to me.

I wished I wasn't sitting under the tree. I wished I wasn't trying to soak it all in. I knew that if I could, I would soak in all the sun and pine trees and wild flowers in the world, just for me.

I had thrown away the note the doctor had given me on the back of a page torn off a calendar pad. Well, you don't keep a note like that. Not when it's been written with a pencil stub by the light of a gasoline lantern in a big tent. Not when the doctor's so tired, and the people in the tent are so bad off from sicknesses nobody knows. I mean you don't walk around with something like that in your pocket. I would rather just sit here for a while and feel guilty.

But, you know, you can't keep that up very long. You know all you're doing is playing with yourself, because any time you feel guilty for having something simple and clearcut like cancer, you're really just pretending you can afford luxuries. I didn't have to feel guilty about anything, not one blessed thing. But it's human to feel guilty, and the thing about any kind of pain isn't the pain. It's that it turns you back to that wet, helpless thing you were when you were born. You know the sky and the earth have gone soft and could smother you or swallow you any time. You know it's not that way for anybody else. Other people are still doing things in a world that will still be there and be dependable tomorrow. But you're not. You've poled your raft to a one-man island of jelly. So you enjoy the chance to put splinters into yourself. And that's playing.

I was just starting to get up when Artel, my partner, came walking to me from the Old Man's house. "Ed," he said. "Mr. McCall wants to talk to us."

"Right," I said, and the two of us walked back. Facing this way, I could

see all the tents, and the houses that had been turned into offices, and the tracks of trucks and people curving back and forth across what used to be the front and back lawns of the development. The whole thing was turning into a plain of mud, but at least there was a decent amount of space between the houses and a decent amount of open ground to put up tents and prefabs on, instead of everything jammed together the way it was in the cities and towns.

It was rotten in the cities and towns. Not just the fires, or the other kinds of trouble you get when a bunch of close-packed people get awfully sick and lose their heads. We were over that, but still when you went into some place where the buildings were like walls along the street and everything should have been alive and working, selling shoes and groceries, the feeling of death would come over you and you couldn't do anything useful.

They used to talk about how people were all moving out of the cities, before. Maybe because they already had something like that kind of feeling. Anyway, this place where the Old Man had set up was a development out along Route 46, and back in there up in the hills, there were lakes and wild animals, and you had a better feeling. You had better contact with the permanent things of the world.

"Is he sending us out on something?" I asked Artel.

"Yes."

Artel didn't ever talk much. The Old Man had teamed us up about a year ago, and it worked well. Klarri are a lot like us. Their arms and legs are longer in proportion to their bodies, and their shoulders are wider. They have long, narrow skulls, with all the cerebral cortex formed over what would be the back of the brain in a human, so if you're a highbrow among the Klarri, you're a bigdome. When they haven't washed for a few hours, there's a light, rusty deposit that forms on their skins and turns them that color. And nobody likes the way their teeth look. If a human being had teeth like that, he had some bad vitamin deficiency when he was a kid. But they're decent people. When they look at a hospital, I think they feel exactly the way we would if spaceships of ours had brought pestilence to a whole world of theirs.

There's one other thing about Klarri. Their kids all walk bent forward, and so do some of their adults, because that's the way their spines are. But they have a lot of trouble with that. It's like appendicitis with humans, and there isn't a Klarr who isn't aware that he could have severe back trouble almost any time. So there's a lot of them have had a fusing operation on

the lower spinal column, either because they became crippled, or they started to feel little twinges and they got worried and had it done right away. It's just like people. Only instead of appendicitis scars, the ones who've had the fusing operation have this funny way of walking and standing as if they were about to fall over backwards. Artel was like that, but he also had to wear a back brace because he'd been hurt in the lifeboat crash that killed his wife and children. Back braces are faster than re-fusing operations.

You see, there can't be any doubt about it any longer. You do the best you can. We don't much believe in theory any more. You can be as civilized as the Klarri, and know you shouldn't go around contaminating other people's worlds, but when your faster-than-light ship breaks down and you've got to ditch, you pile into the lifeboats and you ditch. If you're really lucky you've had your FTL breakdown within reaching-distance of a solar system, and the solar system's got a planet you can live on; you come down any way you can, and you don't put decontamination high on your priority list. Life is hard; it's hard for Klarri, it's hard for humans. You spend each day living with whatever happened the day before, and that's it – that's how it is in all Creation, for everything with brains enough.

II.

Colston McCall was a big man – there must have been a time when he weighed close to two-hundred-fifty pounds. He was way over six feet tall, and now he was all muscle and bones except for a little bit of a belly. He was about fifty or fifty-five, I guess, and he would lean back in his chair and look at a problem and solve it in a voice that must have been hell on his help in the days when he was running some kind of company. Whenever he raised his voice and called out a man's name, that man would get there quickly.

We went through into his office, and he looked up and waved us toward a couple of folding metal chairs. "Sit down, men." We did, with Artel straddling his chair backwards the way cowboys did in movie saloons.

"How are you feeling, Ed?"

"All right."

The Old Man looked straight at me for just a second. "Can you go twenty miles to someplace where there might not be any doctors?"

Well, the only other answer to that is, "No sir, I'm ready to lie down and die," so I didn't say that.

"All right. There's a town down the coast where nobody's sick."

Artel sat up straight. "I beg your pardon?"

The Old Man laid his hand down flat on a small stack of papers. "These people have never asked for any medicines. Now, I don't know what that means. We first contacted them about two and a half years ago. One of our scouts found a party from their town foraging through the highway discount houses down along Route 35, there."

I nodded. That was the usual pattern in those days. The towns were all gutted on the inside, and any survivors had to start spreading out and looking for supplies outside. But that was a mug's game. You burned up what fuel you had, running emptier and emptier trucks farther and farther, coming back with less and less. What happened after that was they'd pool their remaining fuel, load everybody into the trucks and come busting up north, because everybody had the idea the big city had to be different.

The Old Man went on: "Well, it turned out that, for once in a great while, these were the kind of people who'd stay put if we'd promise to send food down. So that's how it's been ever since."

And pretty grateful we were, too, I thought.

"Well, that was all right," the Old Man said, "but it's getting to be too much of a good thing, maybe. They're not complaining at all. You've got to figure any medical supplies they might have had left would be pretty much down to basics by now. Your antibiotics and your other fancy drugs either don't exist any more or have turned to mush. Well, hell, you know that."

We knew. It was the biggest problem we had; things were tightening up pretty badly. And it wasn't any use being able to grow penicillin or any of those fermentation drugs you don't need much of a plant for. All that stuff was just so much extra peanut butter on the sandwich for the strains of bug we had now.

"But these people don't seem to have noticed that. They don't even complain about their food; they take whatever the trucks bring, they never ask for more, they never ask for anything different from what they get. I don't like it when people don't gripe about what we can deliver. And these people just take it and go away with it and never say a word."

"How many people?" I asked.

"A hundred and eighty-odd. I cut down their ration by three percent

just to see what would happen. They haven't reacted at all. About the medicine, I had one of the drivers ask them if they needed a doctor, and they said no. They didn't say they had a doctor, and they didn't say they were all healthy. They just said 'No' and walked away."

"They're either very lucky or very generous," Artel said.

The Old Man gave him a quick look. "I'm always ready to believe in those things up to a point. But now I'd like to know if maybe there's something they haven't told anybody about."

Artel nodded.

I wanted to know about the food part. "What kind of a town is it?" I asked. "What kind of people are they? Could they be fishing or farming?"

"Not in that country," the Old Man said. "They're just property owners – squatters, some of them, but it's a community. All friends and relatives, all townies. Real estate agents, storekeepers, tree surgeons; all they know is how to sell cars and salt water taffy to each other." He sounded angry. The same thing angered us all: it had turned out farming was more than scratching the ground and dropping seeds into it. And it's slow, besides being hard to ream. He'd tell you just the opposite, but your hungry townsman would rather die than farm.

It sounds good, to just wave a hand and say, "Let there be light again." But that's the kind of thing that drives you wild. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are ducks, and they nibble you to death.

"No, I don't believe it," the Old Man said, slapping the inventory control forms again. "Go down there and find out about it. Come back and tell me about it. Quietly."

"Of course," Artel said. "It wouldn't do to raise false hopes."

"Or even real ones." That was what made him a leader and me and Artel troopers. Our Old Man likes to go softly. He might not have been a top man before, when you had to move bing, bing, bing because the competition was clicking along right behind you. But he was good for us now.

You want to keep it soft. You want to take it slow and easy, and you have to know what to let slide. Cancer, they say, used to hit twenty-five per cent of the population in one of its forms or another. They had been pretty close to cures, before. They weren't any closer now, because you can afford to ignore something like that when you've had diseases that each kill sixty, seventy per cent in one summer.

You don't even care whether it was all the Klarri's fault or not. They

were in awful trouble, too, cast away on an uncharted shoal, with our diseases beating the hell out of their survivors, and them with fewer biochemists than we had. I mean – what are you going to do? You could have some kind of lurching war and string them all up to lampposts, but there were better things to do with the energy, especially now that the first impact had passed and most of us that were going to die of each other were pretty much dead. If somebody was to put me in a time machine and send me back, the people then ought to shoot me down like a mad dog in the streets; I was carrying more kinds of death in me than anybody ever dreamed of, before. And if it wasn't for this home-grown thing of my own, I'd count as a healthy man by today's way of judging. So you don't worry about yesterday. You take what you have, and you work with it today.

"All right," the Old Man said. "Go down there, the two of you. Maybe we've got a miracle." That was as close as any one of the three of us got to laughing and clapping each other on the back and crying hallelujah.

I went down to the hospital while Artel waited for me. I walked through to the back, to where the dispensary was. The idea was, if you were well enough to walk in and ask for medicine, you had better be sick enough to walk by all those beds and still want medicine. I saw them all; the ones with the sores, and the ones with the twisted limbs, the ones with the blind eyes, and the ones with the hemorrhages. I heard them and I smelled them, human and Klarri.

These were survivors. The losers were dead. These were the ones you could expect still had a chance to live, if they could be kept strong enough to avoid things like pneumonia and the other killers of the weakened. I still had some kind of low-grade lymph node trouble. My arms would go to sleep, and I couldn't squeeze anything very hard without having my fingers go numb for hours afterward. While they were trying to do something about whatever bug it was that made my lymphatic system react, they found this other thing that had been living in me for quite some time already.

It didn't matter. I was around yet to walk down between the beds. Now, my Mary had drowned in her own blood. And I'd had this kid, about six, with his own little two-wheeler. A sidewalk bike, with solid rubber wheels, that was supposed to be for just diddling around in front of the house. Kind of a first step after graduating from a trike. There was an ice cream store that was open on Sundays fourteen blocks away from where we lived, and about ten days before the Klarri lifeboats came showering in from the sky, this kid and I had gone to that ice cream store, with me on my Sears, Roebuck three-speed and him on that boneshaker of his. Six years old, and

pumping away like mad with just a little four-inch crank sprocket that gave him no speed at all, and me reminding him to slow down and pace himself, and him grinning over at me as he went bouncing over the potholes in the alleys. Good little kid.

The dispenser nodded when he saw me coming. He was a young Klarr, usually with his head bent over a medical dictionary; the wall had human and Klarr anatomical charts, and there was a human clerk putting together the mimeographed pages of a new medical text. We were beginning to shape up. For a long time, now, the Old Man hadn't been letting them put Klarr and human patients at separate ends of the tents. The idea was, if you were a doctor in the ward, by now you ought to be able to work most of the problems you saw no matter who had them. You'd have maybe one or two Klarr patients in the hospital at any time. It meant something that you'd always have more Klarr than that on the staff, or studying to join it.

Anyway, I showed the dispenser my Special Branch requisition permit, and he punched another notch on the edge of it and gave me a plastic bottle with twenty-five aspirins, and I said thank you and went back out through the tent. There was a supply truck running down to Trenton that would come within twenty or twenty-five miles of this place we were going to. Artel had drawn a couple of bikes from the transport pool for us on his permit and was just lashing them on to the side of the truck. We got in and we rode in the back, on top of a bunch of cases and bags. Artel made a kind of a hump-back pad out of bean sacks for himself and lay down on his stomach. I wedged myself into a nice tight fit where I wouldn't be bounced around too much, and after a while we took off.

III.

The name of the town was Ocean Heights. After the truck dropped us, we moved toward it through some very pretty country, using the Garden State Parkway for a while. We had good gear; Artel's bike was a Peugeot and mine was a Raleigh, both of them fifteen-speed lightweights with high pressure tires and strapped pedals; they weren't specially comfortable, but they were very fast on any kind of decent surface, and with all that gearing to choose from, hill-and-dale touring was a snap.

We each had a .22 hunting rifle – the Old Man would have had our hearts if we'd carried anything to kill more people with – and some food, some tools and a water bottle apiece. We looked very technological, and

you feel pretty good when you've got good gear. So we were both pretty well off in our own minds as we went zipping along, through the pine woods and along that smooth asphalt track. When we cut off and got onto Route 35, of course, we started running into signs of taffy salesman life – lots of roadside stands and one saloon painted DaGlo orange, and a lot of garden tool and outboard motor shops, along with great big discount centers. All of it looked shabby, beat up, and just a shell. There was nothing left in the discount houses but phonograph records, and little plastic pots to raise rubber plants in, and games made by the Wham-O Manufacturing Company. The wind was in off the ocean, and that was all right too.

It started to get dark while we were still five miles away from Ocean Heights. That was the way we wanted it.

We took ourselves a couple of miles farther, and then we cut out up a side road, into the woods. We found a good place to leave the bikes and made a little bit of a camp. It was good getting off the bike. Artel was walking very slowly, and he was leaning farther over backwards than ever. I didn't remark on it; I guess I've already said that in our own eyes from ten or fifteen years before, we'd all seemed like very rude people. Artel sighed when we were finally able to sit down and lean against something. So did I, I guess.

We sat down close together. Artel had one of those squeeze type flashlights that generates its own power. We put my windbreaker over our heads to muffle the light and we studied the map, laying out a heading for Ocean Heights from where we were. We'd be able to walk it in not much more than a couple of hours. We got our compass headings straight in our heads, and then we were able to come out from under the windbreaker, which was all right with me. One of the reasons Artel and I could work as a team was because I didn't mind his smell. (That was what I said; actually, I liked it). But not in big doses like this. It was like eating a pound of milk chocolate.

We'd done this kind of thing before; we knew what we were doing. A couple of hours from now, when it was still dark and we could expect most people to be thinking of sleep, we'd get moving, so that by the time we hit the place it would be tight-fast in dreamland. We'd post around and find out what we could. Get the lay of the land, figure an escape route and boltholes if we needed them. It sounds like playing Indians, but it's the kind of technique you work out when you're dealing with unknown people these days. You can't even tell in advance sometimes whether they're humans or Klarri; that was originally why a Special Branch team had to

have at least one of each.

We sat in the woods and waited until it was time to move. We didn't talk much as a rule. For one thing what had happened to Artel's respiratory system gave him a lot of trouble with breath control. For another thing, life's too simple to need a lot of conversation. But it was lonely out there, and nightfall bothers me. "Listen," I asked Artel, "do you think your people will ever find you?"

"Pretty unlikely," he said after a while. "The volume they'd have to search is mighty big." After a while he added: "It'd be better if they didn't. We'd be as deadly now to our home as we were to you." I could see him smile a little. "We Klarri here have traded too much back and forth with Earth. We've become much more like you than like our people."

He folded his arms with his hands over his shoulders, the way they do. "I don't see much difference between us, in anything, really. Our machinery may be a little better. But most of us don't understand it any better than you understand yours. We lose ships, once in a while. We don't find them any more often than you'd expect. We have to pretend this isn't so, because otherwise we couldn't sell tickets to each other."

"Travel agents about the same any place, I guess," I said.

He shrugged. "Civilization's about the same any place. You take a ship from one star to another, and you say to yourself, 'Here's something my father couldn't do.' It's true. My father couldn't infect a world with a population of six billion, either. Nor lose an interstellar passenger ship. And end with only a few thousand survivors from it. And have a whole future to solve."

He pushed himself down and lay on his back for a minute, with his hands behind his head, looking up. "I'm glad I don't have to imagine how they're going to do it." He didn't sound particularly worried; well, it wasn't our problem. I'd heard humans and Klarri talk about things like what'll happen when we build spaceships again. It's a cinch they won't be rockets; they'll be a lot like the Klarr ships, I guess. But where will they go? Looking for planets where Klarri and humans from Earth could start the same business of living together, or contacting the Klarr worlds, or what? What would happen if we met Klarri from some political faction that didn't like our Klarri? Well, there are damn fools everywhere, I guess. When the real problems really came, they'd more than likely have some shape of their own, and they'd either be solved or flubbed in some way that was possible to their own time.

"You heard about this new idea?" Artel said cautiously. "There's some

biochemist with a hypothesis. He says that with two or three generations of gene-manipulation, it might be possible to have Klarr- and human-descended compromise people who could breed true with each other. Think there's anything to that?"

"I've heard that. What do I know?" It shouldn't have, but the idea made my stomach turn. I guess Artel felt the same way.

"It's an idea," Artel said, and I could see he didn't like it any better than I did. But that was one of those things the two of us didn't have to worry about. And I appreciated what he was trying to do. You try to make as much contact as you can. Probably the Old Man had put us together originally because we were both lonely in the same way. Everybody wants to see a team as good as possible. Just for its own sake; not just because so many of the Klarr ships had happened to hit the Western Hemisphere. Other places, there'd been so few Klarr, I think they killed them all during the pestilence feelings. There were people who talked about national pride being involved; they said a lot of things like that, maybe getting ready to hand the next generation something they could go to war about.

Talk's all right in its place. Now we'd done some, Artel and I just waited in the woods.

IV.

At about ten o'clock we started to slide into the outskirts of Ocean Heights. These Jersey coast towns are all a lot alike. There's always a highway paralleling the ocean, leaving a strip maybe three miles wide with feeder roads running down to the Atlantic. Follow the feeder road and you find you're on the main street of some town that saw its heyday in 1880. Right up near the water there'll be a strip of big Steamboat Gothic summer homes; frame and shingle construction, three, four storeys high, with lots of cupolas, and gingerbread, and maybe even an imitation widow's walk. Big verandas, hollow wooden columns and lots of etched glass in the ground-floor windows. Some people think that's a sign of gracious living. I think it just proves how much we wanted mass production.

Closer in toward town there'll be a lot of stores. Some of them will have bright new cast stone or aluminum fronts, but the buildings are all fifty years old behind them. There'll be a couple of yellow fire-brick structures, with almost anything in on their ground floors now, that used to be the A

& P and the Woolworth's. Those moved out to the shopping center back in the 1950's. There'll be a couple of movie theaters, and one of them was closed long before the trouble hit the town itself. There's a Masonic Temple, churches of various Christian denominations, a hotel for little old ladies and salesmen. Used car lots full of stuff carrying ten dollars' worth of paint over the salt rust. A railroad track. A couple of television repair stores, and a weekly four-page newspaper dedicated to getting people to shop at home.

On the ocean there are some seafood restaurants, a miniature golf course and a building that looks like a horse barn but in the summertime houses a wheel of fortune and a couple of dart-toss games, with most of the stalls standing empty even in the height of the season. The parking lot for the oceanfront amusements is where the dog track used to be. The boardwalk is falling down everywhere. There are piles and sheets of rusty iron sticking up out of the beaches farther along, where the boardwalk used to reach. The people say it's the Republican legislators from the inland counties, with their blue laws, that killed these towns. If you approach from the beach, the first thing you notice is the plastic-coated paper from the frozen custard stands. It doesn't mash up and wash into the ground at all; it just turns gray.

We slid on in through the outskirts. Artel said: "It was bad here."

Looked like it. There were a lot of burnt pits full of bricks and pieces of charred timber, with dead trees standing around them, where there had been fires. There was all sorts of trash in the gutters, swept in from the fires and the general scraps that blow around and pile up when nobody collects them. The gutters were clogged with odd pieces of wood, tarpaper, sand and gravel. The sewer grates were all choked, and the streets were broken down. Rain water and frost had broken up the asphalt and undermined the cement. Some of the streets had been laid in brick, and they now looked as if long walls had collapsed onto the ground. It wasn't unless you looked hard, toward the ocean, that you could see the occasional lantern burning and could believe that anyone lived on beyond this mess.

We found only one street that was really open. It had truck ruts in it, with trash smashed down into them, and unmarked sand washed into pools in other places. The last supply run had been a couple of weeks ago, and it looked as if our trucks were the only things that came and went. Once we had found the main drag this way, we moved off away from it and worked our way along the back streets. We came across dead cars, and the weathered tumble-down of barricades. Once I tripped over a

shotgun with a broken stock; the wood grainy from rainwater and sunlight, the barrels just tubes of rust. "You'd think they'd have cleaned up the useful things," Artel said.

"It's broken."

"But it could have been fixed."

"No, not here," I said. The soil was sand, just one great big bar that the Atlantic had raised over thousands of years of pounding itself up against the rock coast of what were now the northern counties, and you couldn't raise anything on it but scrub pine. West of the line running from New York down to Camden you were off the interstate highways and main railroads. The only thing you could do with this part of the world was sleep in it and play in it, and sell taffy to each other. We'd passed a horse-racing track coming in. Big looming plant, standing dirty in the darkness. Its parking lots had been full of cars, and there was a smell, originally trapped in all that wet upholstery, that hung in the air. That was as far as they'd gotten – the people trying to get out of the city. They were turned back by the local cops, cursing and sweating, and thanking God there was some place to point to where all those people could go to die.

Farther in toward the town we passed the Women's Club building – a big place with a phony Grecian front, that the local people had probably tried to make into a supplementary hospital at this end of town. We padded on up the steps, and there were three-year-old bodies right up against the doors, inside. We backed off.

"We won't find anyone living right around here," Artel said. Twenty years from now, the Women's Club building and the cinderblock walls of the bowling alley down the street would be all that stuck up out of the second growth. There'd be trees growing out of the sewers.

We crossed the railroad tracks, and we stood there as if we'd just sat straight up in bed in the middle of the night. The first thing I noticed was the smell of fresh paint. But there was plenty of other stuff to hit you, all at once.

It must have been one of the best parts of the town to begin with. The houses were brick, two and three storeys high. They were all set in the middle of very nice lots; and most of them had those Georgian fronts that spell class. In daylight, we might have seen soot and patches in some of the brickwork, but we didn't see it now. All the outlines were crisp and sharp; there wasn't a warped board or a sagging roof anywhere here. There were neat, well-located privies in the backyards, we found as we started to move around. The fronts of them were made out of brick and had shrubs

planted around them.

It was all like that. The hedges were trimmed. The lawns were like velvet. There wasn't a chipped place in any sidewalk, nor litter on the grass, or anything.

There were lanterns burning upstairs in two or three of the houses. "What the hell?" I said. There were eight or ten solid blocks of this stuff. All it needed was a wall around it.

"This is 'way off the supply route," Artel said. "To see this part, you'd have to do what we did. You notice the trees – how thick they are? I think they even had airplanes in mind when they picked this spot."

"Listen," I said. From one of the houses, through a window open to the soft night air, you could hear it: "Bella figlia del amore... "

"What is that?" Artel asked.

"Opera. Somebody's got a windup phonograph."

"Or a generator."

"But no bulldozer to bury his dead with."

Artel looked back over his shoulder toward the other side of the railroad tracks. "That is different."

We kept moving, with faint music. There was no other living sound. No night birds, no cats in love, no dogs. There wasn't any sound of people sneaking through yards. This town didn't have teenagers who liked to visit each other. All these people were locked up tight in their little clean town-within-a-town, most of them sleeping the sleep of the innocent. The innocent and the healthy.

We worked our way closer toward the ocean. We were only a block away from it. The waves were rolling in to the shore regularly and gently, making the only steady sound we could hear, now that we were out of range of the phonograph. I looked back over my shoulder, and I could see nothing but those few upstairs lights, some of which had been put out since we had gone by. Solid citizens turning in. I thought they were lantern lights. They might have been lightbulbs on low voltage. We were getting more questions than answers out of this town.

We got down to the beach, and we found another dirty fringe – a motel with its windows broken out, a playground with scrub bushes growing up among the teeter-totters and the monkey bars, a flight of wooden steps tumbled down the stone jumble of the sea wall. If you had been going by in a boat you would have never known about that neat little clean patch with

its edged flower beds and its uncluttered streets.

There was a big, dark building just inland of the playground. Flat-sided and square, it was two storeys high, and the ground floor windows were well over the height of a man's head, long and very narrow. If this was a war, and the building was at a crossroads, I would have reported it for a bunker. The sign over the doorway said "Ocean Heights Professional Bldg." The double doors were at the head of a flight of stairs set back and flanked by solid masonry. I could have defended it from the inside with one machine-gun. There was a padlock hanging on the doors, closing a chain looped through the handles.

"There was a gambling casino in Ocean Heights for a while," Artel said. He was the one who'd gone through the Old Man's background file on the town. "It was closed by state investigators in 197."

"We've found it." Going by the delicately scalloped, once white-painted directory board bolted to the wall beside the stairs, an architect and a real estate agent had set up offices in it after the space became available. There was no sound in it now, and no lights. But I noticed something, and it made me wonder. I pulled in a deep breath through my nose.

"It's not empty." I said.

"I agree," Artel said. "I have that feeling. And yet I can't say why." In the starlight, I could see him shake his head quickly. "It bothers me. It was built to be a hiding place. They might be doing almost anything in there."

"Let's look around some more," I said.

"If you say so," Artel said hesitantly.

The other thing we found was down at the beach. It was something looming, most of it under the water, the waves phosphorescing weakly against the one side that we could see. It stretched away into the darkness, and its curved sides went up like the biggest dead whale in the world. I could see a long strut extending out over the water at a shallow angle, and the round circle of a landing pad hanging at a crazy angle from the end of it. It was a crashed Klarri lifeboat.

"What happened to the people in it, I wonder," Artel said.

"They're in that building back there. Locked up and kept out of sight," I said. I had smelled them, the scent seeping out weakly through the double doors and God knew how many other barriers inside. "What do you want to do about it?"

It was up to him. They were his people. If he wanted us to go in there and break them out now, I didn't see any way for me not to help him.

Maybe we could get away with it; I wasn't crazy about the idea of trying to do all that without making any noise, but it was up to him. "Anything you say."

"Come off it, Ed. We don't know anywhere near enough about the situation in this place. We haven't found what we were sent for." Artel sounded a little mad. He had a right to be. I'd as good as said he wasn't a team man. I felt bad about having been rude. "Come on – let's go back to camp," he said. "We had a plan and let's follow it." Artel slipped off into the darkness.

I followed him. We didn't say anything more to each other that night. We got back to our camp and sacked out.

A team is a little bit like a marriage. I don't care what anybody says, sometimes it's better not to talk it out. It makes you feel like hell for a while, but you've got an even chance the next morning one or the other of you will say some thing in a friendly way and then the other one will feel relieved and it will be all over.

V.

In the morning we went in straight. There's no point to horsing around. If we'd had things like phone taps, snoopers microphones and truth serum to work with, we might have decided on something different. But life's too simple these days for any of that kind of stuff to be worth a damn. We'd just ask them questions, and then see what their lies added up to.

Coming down the main drag on our bikes, we went through the dead shopping district of the town and then cut right on a concrete street a couple of blocks in from the ocean. I figured we'd be coming up to signs of life soon.

What we heard first was the sound of a ball bat from some field two or three blocks away and off to our right, somewhere near where the clean patch of houses was. We couldn't see anything, but we could hear kids yell; it was the kind of noise you get from a schoolyard at recess time.

We made another half a block, still going by houses that were all abandoned, and then we heard some little kid yelling "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" The sound of fast little feet on the floor of a veranda went clattering in echoes along the street, and then a screen door slammed shut. We'd finally been spotted. We stopped and began walking our bikes

up the middle of the street.

About a hundred-fifty-yards ahead there was a traffic light hanging from guy wires over an intersection. There were a couple of gas stations there, and the drive-in apron of an ice cream stand. It made a kind of open place where you might expect people to gather when you unloaded your supply truck. Between there and us there were a couple of houses that might be lived in. They didn't have any broken glass in their windows, and there were light-colored streaks of unpainted putty in places along the sash. They didn't look neat, but they looked livable. They looked about the way you might expect houses to look in a town, if it wasn't a town on its feet enough to have that nice little residential section tucked away back there.

A screen door slammed again, and this time we caught the direction of the sound. It was coming from a couple of houses down and to our right. It was a big green three-storey house, and we could see faces at the windows, but the glass was dirty, and we couldn't tell much about them. What we could see was the man coming out from the veranda and walking down the front steps. He stood there for a minute as we came closer.

He was a tall, thin, oldish-looking man with a checked shirt and suit pants, wearing glasses and carrying a pipe in his hand. He looked seedy and comfortable, with the pants hanging down flat and bum-sprung behind, and the knees baggy in front. He waved a hand at us in a nice neighborly way, and then he walked around the side of the house. There was a sudden hammering of metal on metal – a wild, carrying sound – and all the other noises we'd been hearing stopped. The only things to listen to were the steady wash of the ocean off to our left and the grit of our tires on the street. The man came back from around the house just as we reached his front walk. He had bushy salt-and-pepper hair growing out of the sides and back of his head, and a streak of it growing back from his forehead; his hairline was shaped like a thick-tined pitchfork, and he reminded me of all the retired men who might come around to your place in the summertime and help you build a rose arbor for a few dollars.

"Howdy!" he said. "Didn't hear you coming." He was looking closely at Artel. I had the feeling he was having trouble making up his mind whether Artel could possibly be a Klarr.

"Howdy," I said. "My name's Ed Dorsey. This is my partner, Loovan Artel. Artel's his first name. What was all that racket?"

The man came forward and stuck out his hand. "My name's Walter Sherman. Got one of those iron fire-alarm rings set up next to the house. I

kinda let people know when we've got company. Pleased to meet you." He shook my hand, and then he gave Artel another look, very fast. He thought it over and shook Artel's hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"My pleasure," Artel said, grinning a little.

Sherman blinked once. He was trying to act right. He was doing pretty well, I thought, considering he hadn't ever before seen a Klarr wearing human clothes and riding a bicycle. Sherman looked all right, too. He was getting old, but there was a nice glint in his eye and good color in his face. His hair wasn't dead and dull, and the whites of his eyes were clear. He didn't move or talk like a man who was anywhere near sitting down and waiting to get older. He looked like an upstanding gent, and you don't get to see very many of those any more.

I took a quick look around.

There were people beginning to show up. One or two of them were coming out of nearby houses, but most of them were beginning to gather down at the intersection under the traffic light, coming up side streets and back from where the clean houses were. Just looking down that way, if you were a supply truck driver, say, you'd guess that they had all come out of the houses down there. "We're from Philadelphia," I said to Sherman. "Survey team." Artel and I got cards out of our shirt pockets and showed them to him. They were signed "F. X. Daley, United States Commissioner, Philadelphia District."

"We're just starting to check this part of the country," I said as Sherman took the cards in his hand and studied them, peering and blinking with the pipe in his mouth. The pipe was cold and empty – had been for years, probably. "We'd just like to find out a little bit about this community – how many people, what kind of social organization... that kind of thing."

"That's right, sir," Artel said. "We'd appreciate your cooperation. Or if you'd rather direct us right away to your mayor or whoever's in charge, why, we'll get out of your front yard and let you go back to what you were doing."

"Oh, no – that's all right," Sherman said, handing us back the cards. "I imagine there'll be some people from our Town Council here in a minute. Glad to help."

There wasn't any doubt we were bothering him. He was talking off the top of his head and thinking very hard about something else. I wondered for a minute if these people had some way of knowing there wasn't anything in Philadelphia – not a blessed thing – but it didn't seem likely.

One of the hardest things to be sure of in this world is nothing.

"Well, come in and – " He waved with his pipe toward the steps of his veranda. "Ah, why don't you sit down?" He was looking at the touring saddles on our bikes. "I imagine it might be nice to rest yourselves on something flat."

He tried to chuckle. He was trying to be pleasant, he really was. But we had caught him off base very bad by not coming into town with a truck engine roaring ahead of us, and by not both of us being human.

We sat down on his front steps. We left our bikes up on their kick-stands, with the .22's strapped down to the carriers, just like any survey team would have.

"You – ah – people look bushed," Sherman said. "You come all the way from Philadelphia on those bikes?"

I nodded. "Easy stages, yeah," I told him. "There's a lot to check out." He looked a lot healthier than either one of us, that was for sure.

"We ought to explain," Artel said. "It's the people who can't do a regular day's work they can spare for things like surveys." Like me, he was watching the bunch of people coming toward us. They were walking fast. Not running; just coming on at a good pace. There were young and old, and a few kids, a good mixed human crowd coming to the railroad station to watch the streamliner go by. A good, healthy crowd. Even not running, they were moving faster than any bunch of people I'd seen in years. They looked good; clean, eager. They looked the way people ought to look when something exciting is happening. You could see the front ones slow down and frown as they made out what Artel was.

A freckled man in suntans and a rainhat, with squint-wrinkles around his blue eyes, came through them as they began to gather into a clump on Sherman's front lawn. "Hi, Walt!" he said as he came up to us. "I see you got company."

"Couple of government men from Philadelphia," Sherman said.

"Philadelphia, eh?" he said, shaking hands with us as we stood up. "My name's Luther Koning. Pleased to meet you both."

"Luther's sort of like our mayor," Sherman explained.

Whatever he was, he was the man we'd come to see. I guessed he was about fifty; all long, flat muscle under that weather-tight skin, and able to act as if it was nothing unusual to see a Klarr walking around instead of being in that big, silent building out behind the abandoned playground. He had fast reactions, Koning did, and where other people had slowed to a

walk and stopped, he had come on forward.

"Glad to meet you," I said. I told him my name, and I told him: "This is Artel, my partner."

"Mm-hmm," Koning said. "Well, I can see that," he said in an agreeable enough voice, looking over at the bicycles and the two rifles. "Two equally intelligent races in the same jam, after all. They waste their strength in fighting, there's no hope at all. So they work together. It makes sense." He looked at me and then at Artel. "You look tired – both of you. Things still aren't so good in the big city, huh?"

"Things aren't so good anywhere, Mr. Koning," Artel said. "But we're trying to make them better. That's why we're here."

"Why are you here?" Koning grinned again. "We're standing here talking, and for all I know you two are anxious to get something done right away."

Walter Sherman had gotten a chance to settle down some, and his voice was easier. But he was really fast in getting something across to Koning, even though he said it in a careless voice. "Gave me a turn, coming in that way. On bicycles." He chuckled: "Real fancy machines, those are. Smart idea. Saves on gasoline." I think the point he was trying to make was that we were dissimilar from the people who came in trucks, and that we might not even know about any other organization.

"We're just trying to find out if you people need anything," I said harmlessly to Koning. I was watching the crowd. There were thirty or forty of them, and it seemed to me that any time you can collect twenty percent of the total population at the drop of a hat, you're dealing with an excitable population. But they didn't look jumpy the way a crowd of sick-nervous people might. You don't see the kind of shuffling and fevery face-jerking you get sometimes. These people weren't looking for excitement. Sick people need excitement because it interrupts their misery. When they get it, they lose their dignity; it's a dose of the stuff they crave, and when you pour it out in front of them they can't hide how much they need it. These people weren't like that. They didn't need to be a mob. But they were very, very interested. Like members of the same club, and a famous guest-lecturer. There wasn't a Klarr among them. That would have struck me even if I hadn't known about the special building.

I couldn't make this crowd out. I kept looking at them; men of all ages, housewife-types in cotton print dresses, some of them with water-spotted aprons around their middles where they'd been washing up the breakfast dishes. There were young men in T-shirts, who looked as if they'd been

working around the yard, and older men who were like Sherman and Koning in looking like they'd lived useful, cheerful lives, and had a lot of useful time in them. It was the kind of crowd that gives you the feeling life is comfortable and pleasant all the time. There wasn't another one like it in the whole world.

It bothered the hell out of me. Some of the kids had brought their gloves and started a game of catch out beyond the fringes of the crowd. Other kids were circulating back and forth; you couldn't get their attention with a conversation on a veranda, but they were either going to be where the attraction was, whatever it was, or they were going to spread the news. Some of them had been up to Sherman's house and back down to the intersection several times already. Now one of them on the edges of the crowd yelled: "Here comes Tully!" Koning turned around as if he'd been shot, but he recovered nicely.

"Hey! Let's keep it down; we're trying to talk here," he said. But he kept looking sideways over at a man ambling along the sidewalk, so Artel and I did too.

VI.

Tully was like one of those men you'll see sitting on a beachfront bench staring out over the water. Nobody can do anything for or to them. They're past the big tussle. He had given up trying to look as if God never made pot bellies, and was wearing loose weave light pants with a big, comfortable waistline and baggy legs. He had rubber-soled cloth shoes on and bright socks that you could see showing under the flipping cuffs of his pants. He had broad-strap suspenders holding up his pants, and he was wearing a short-sleeved, bright shirt. His bare arms were thin and knobby, tanned an even darker and shinier brown than Koning's face was under his freckles. He was wearing a headband with a transparent green eyeshade. There was a fringe of white hair around his stuck-out ears, and the top of his skull was tanned and glistening. He had a big, amiable grin. He walked along as if he had all the time in the world, knowing that he was a center of interest, too, and the rest of the show would wait for him.

Neither Koning nor Sherman said a word. People will do that. People think that if they stop, time stops.

Tully ambled into the crowd, still grinning, and the crowd drifted out of his way. There wasn't anything obtrusive about it; it wasn't like the Red

Sea parting for Moses into two straightedged and shiny walls. It was just that they drifted out of his way, easily and naturally as if everybody in town knew from a baby that you didn't stand close to Tully. Tully walked forward, still grinning.

He cocked his undersized, round-chinned, round face up at the veranda. He looked at Artel, and then he looked past Koning and me at Sherman. When he spoke, his voice was high, like the cackle of a chicken with the biggest egg in the yard. "Ah-heh, Doc. Heard you had one of them Hammerheads visiting on your porch." He looked Artel up and down. "Looks like a prime example, considerin' how puny critters are these days."

He looked at me now. His eyes under the shade were small and black, and smart. "His partner don't look so good either, does he?" He stood there with his little squirrel-paw hands hooked into the front of his trousers, and when he began to laugh, first his cheeks quivered, and then the loose skin in his neck, and then his belly under the shirt, and then he was bouncing on the balls of his feet. But he didn't make any noise. He flapped with laughter as he ran his eyes around from Sherman and quickly across Artel and me to Koning, and then he began to turn very slowly and his glance didn't miss one of the people around him. And then he walked away. He went back down the sidewalk the way he'd come, his hands still hooked in the waistband of his pants, his back shaking a little bit, the suspenders tight across his wizened shoulders, and a reflection of sunlight bouncing off the curved sheen of his eyeshade.

"Well," Artel said in an amused and careless voice, "I see every town has its character."

Koning rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, where the skin was seamed and granulated from years of exposure to sunlight. His jaw was out; I could see his lower teeth. They were wet and brown, and snagged by oncoming age. The breath was pushing out steadily through his nostrils, making a very thin whistle. He took off his khaki rain hat and ran his hand over his scalp. He put the hat back on, all without taking his eyes off Tully. The crowd was looking up at us expectantly, and I believe half of them were holding their breaths.

"I didn't know you were a doctor," I said to Sherman, as if this were interesting but not vital. Of all the things that had been happening to us since Sherman had given the alarm, this was the one that I couldn't make out to have not noticed. "Want to make a note of that, Artel?" I went on. "It's good news. It means we won't have to send one of our own in." Artel nodded and took a pad of mimeographed form sheets out of his pocket. He

got out a pencil, licked the tip and made an X-mark in a box.

"Doctor present. Right," he mumbled boredly.

"By the way, Doctor, congratulations," I said to Sherman. "You must be doing a fine job here. These people look fine."

Sherman said quickly: "Now, wait – you're getting the wrong idea. I'm no doctor. We don't have any doctor. That's just something that crazy old coot calls everybody." His glance flickered over to Koning.

"I ought to lock – no, God damn it, I... can't..." Koning wasn't talking to me. He was talking directly to Sherman.

Whatever it was, it had them completely shaken up. I can imagine how they must have planned for snoopers in advance, sitting around a kitchen table and nerving each other. "Well, listen, Luther – what'll we do if somebody comes around asking questions?" "We'll handle it, Walt. After all, it's our town, we live here. The important things are all kept out of sight, and how would they know what questions to ask? Don't you worry about it, Walt. You just always let me do most of the talking, and I'll make sure they don't find out anything but what we want them to know." That was exactly how it had gone between them; it's the kind of conversation smart, decent men with a secret have held between themselves since time knows when. And it had worked, back when things were looser.

They were looking at each other like two men tied to opposite ends of a rope, and the middle of the rope hooked over a spur of rock on the side of a twenty thousand foot mountain.

"Oh. Sorry, Mr. Sherman," I said. "Artel, looks like you're going to have to start a new form."

"Yeah. Before I do that – Mr. Sherman, do you have very many seniles in your population? Will you require any special supplies – tranquilizers or that sort of thing?" Artel asked.

"Well, I wouldn't know," Sherman, said doggedly. "And Tully don't seem to do any harm, as long as you don't pay him any mind."

"We've been very lucky here," Koning said. He was beginning to get back to himself. He was talking a little fast, and the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes weren't completely relaxed. But he was doing a good job of recovering. "We're all healthy people here. Oh, once in a while somebody mashes his thumb with a hammer or something. But that's not anything that can't be taken care of. We live nice and quiet. It's good. When I look back on how it was in the old days, I've got to say we live better. That's a terrible thing, when you think of how this town used to have twenty-five

thousand people in it and mighty few of them ready to be dead. But now we've got through the bad time, things are pretty good. For the live ones. Meaning no insult, maybe a lot better than they are for you outside."

He was looking steadily at Sherman. And he had come to something in his mind. He wasn't back on his heels any more. He was nervous, and he didn't like to trust his own improvisations any better than anybody else would. But he was going to go with it, whatever it was. He wasn't looking to Artel and me for his cues any longer. You could see that happening in him; you could hear it in his voice. "Look, gentlemen," he said, stepping back and smiling. "I got taken up here in a hurry, and there's a couple of little things that I'd like to finish up, if that's all right with the two of you. I mean, this isn't any kind of an emergency. It's a surprise, but it isn't an emergency. So if you could excuse me for about a half hour, I could come back then and I'd have the rest of the day clear to talk to you. I'm sure Mr. Sherman can keep you entertained, and maybe fill you in on some of the background. Just the general stuff; I'll be back in time to give you the specifics. How would that be?" He grinned at Sherman with everything but his eyes. "Why don't you take them inside, Walt? Millie could maybe give them a little refreshment."

"Well, I don't know – " Sherman looked at Koning as if he had gone just as wild as Tully. "I mean, the house is a mess... "

It was sad, watching a man turn into a nervous housewife right in front of my eyes.

"No, you go ahead and take them inside," Koning said. "Don't worry about the house." He grinned again. "Relax, Walt! You're just not used to company," he chuckled.

Sherman nodded slowly. "All right," he said, "take your word on that."

His face went through a spasm; I think he started to grin back, and then realized immediately he couldn't make it stick. I didn't dare look over at Artel myself, for fear we'd lay ourselves open in the same way.

The crowd was livening up again; Koning's starting some kind of action was taking the dismay of Tully out of them. The kids, of course, hadn't stayed quiet for more than a minute. Some of them were back to playing catch, and some of the others had drifted on down the street after Tully – I didn't know whether on purpose after Tully or just happening to be headed in the same direction. I noticed nobody had tried giving Tully any catcalls or joshing, not even the kids.

It was a nice town; they were polite to their sick ones.

"It sounds like a practical idea," I said. "And I sure could use a cool drink, Mr. Sherman. How about you, Artel?"

Artel nodded. "Yes."

"Oh, well, sure," Sherman said. "No problem about that. Got a good well down by where the Nike site used to be. Deep, Government-dug well. Lucky that way, too, we were. Lots of good water."

"Well, that would be fine!" I said.

I could hear Koning sigh just a little bit. "Okay! So it's all settled – Doc here'll take care of you two fellows 'til I get back, and everything'll work out just fine." Koning turned and trotted down the steps. "Be seeing you!"

I waved a hand cheerfully after him. So did Artel. "Well," Sherman said. "Let's – let's go inside." So we did.

VII.

A blonde young woman of maybe twenty-five was waiting in the hall, carrying a baby over her shoulder, one arm around it and the spread fingers of her other hand supporting it over the fresh, clean diaper. There were a couple of other kids clustered around her; a girl maybe a year older than the baby, and a boy in a T-shirt and corduroy rompers who was just under school age. He had little leather shoes on, scuffed up around the toes since the time this morning his mother had coated them with some of that polish that comes in a bottle with a dabber. The little girl had her arms around her mother's knee and her face buried in the side of her skirt. Sherman said: "This is my wife, Millie. And my kids. That's LaVonne, and Walt, and the baby's name is Lucille. Millie, this is Mr. – " He looked over at me.

"Dorsey. I'm very pleased to meet you. This is my partner–"

"Loovan Artel. Loovan's his family name," Sherman said.

Millie Sherman nodded, looking at Artel. Her eyes were very big, and the comers of her mouth kept twitching. Finally she said, "Oh."

"It's all right, Millie," Sherman soothed.

"We just need a place to sit, Mrs. Sherman," Artel said gently. "Until Mr. Koning gets back."

"That's right, honey," Sherman said, throwing Artel a grateful glance. "Luther just asked me to give these men some refreshment until he gets

back. He asked me to bring 'em in."

Putting the seal of authority on it seemed to buck her up, some. "Oh." She wet her lips. "Well, won't you come in?" She pulled the boy Walter out of the way and stood back against the wall. We were in one of those narrow foyer things, that runs through toward the back of the house and has doors opening off it into the main rooms, and a flight of stairs going up.

"Let's go straight on through to the kitchen. I'm sure you fellows don't mind," Sherman said.

"Not at all," Artel said, and we followed him toward the back of the house. I threw a glance into the living room as we went by. There were couches and a lot of chairs up against the walls, with a coffee table in front of each couch. There were books on the tables, bound in bright-colored cheap cloth. Novels.

The kitchen was big, with a chrome-legged table, wooden cabinets and a lot of chrome-legged chairs with padded plastic seats and backs. Next to the capped stub of a gaspipe coming up through the floor was a cast iron wood range, and in the sink was a big, galvanized iron pan with the washing water in it. The drinking water was in a regular office-type water cooler with a big glass bottle held upside-down in it. And in one corner, standing spindly legged, was a kerosene refrigerator. "Well, now, that's something," I said, nodding toward it. "You people are really starting to get straightened around here." Sherman's eyes followed mine. He looked at the refrigerator as if all hope were lost.

"I have to have it," he said.

"Oh? Are you a diabetic?" I said.

What happened to his face now was like nothing I could recognize, but if he had been made out of strings, I could have heard them snap. The look he gave me was damn near unbearable; I might have been a cobra.

Without taking his eyes off me, he said to his wife: "Millie, I'm sure you and the kids have things to do elsewhere. I can take care of these gentlemen by myself. You go on, Millie. You go on, now."

Millie nodded and backed out of the room, taking the kids with her. The kitchen had a swinging door on it, and it swung shut.

"What do you mean, am I a diabetic? All the diabetics are dead."

"It's just that refrigerators and insulin go together in this house, Doctor," I said. "And before you tell me again you're not a doctor, any fool can see Koning doesn't care any more whether we find out or not. Artel,

you figure his office is across the hall from that waiting room?"

"Uh-huh. I could smell the antiseptics. "

"Look, Dr. Sherman, why don't you relax?" I said. "Koning told you that, and I'm telling you that. So you're getting it from both sides, and you might as well believe it. Let's sit down and just wait. We can talk if you like. Koning's obviously gone to do something."

"Town Council meeting, I guess," Sherman said desperately.

"I figured something like that. Take it easy. Doc – it's us that may have our heads in a noose. Artel, drift out there and see what his office looks like, will you?" Artel nodded and went out. I could hear Millie Sherman gasping out in the hall and Artel murmuring something reassuring that ended in "'scuse me, Ma'am, kids... "

Sherman sank down in one of the kitchen chairs. He held his head in his hands with his elbows on his knees. "You had to bring one of them in with you," he mumbled.

I pulled another chair away from the kitchen table and sat down. "Well sure, Doctor. He's a United States citizen. At least where we come from he is, and he's got just as much right to walk these streets as I have."

"You don't realize what you're doing to us."

"No, I don't, except I know guilt when I see it. But it's a pretty good question who's doing what to whom."

Sherman's head came up fast. "What do you mean? What do you know?"

"Whatever we know, we'll know a lot more, and if we never go back to tell our Old Man about it, why that'll tell him something, too."

I started to talk very fast. I had him on the ropes, and win, lose or even, I was going to press that as long as Koning would let me. "What do you people think you're doing here, Sherman? Living in some little world of your own? You may think so, all fenced off behind a bunch of skeletons and burnt-out houses, but there's a whole goddamned world out there, and in the middle of the night sometimes you know it. This is just one town. One town, in a whole country. On a continent. On a world. We're not just dying out there – we're living and breathing, too. You think it's fun for me and Artel to come down here and play patsy with you people? There's no time for that."

He was white and sweating. He was shaking his head back and forth. "No. No, this is a good town. You're not the only people we've seen. We've

seen other people from outside. You're all sick – all of you. You're weak, and you're in pain. I've been watching the way you move, Dorsey. You treat your bones like glass. I can imagine what it's like out there. You lived through it – you were the lucky ones, and look at you! Your livers and your kidneys must be like old pieces of sponge. Your lungs are in rags. And maybe, maybe if you get halfway decent food, and enough rest, and enough time, you'll slowly get back toward what you were. But most of you will never make it. Your kids might – for those of you who've got the energy for parenthood, and those of you who can successfully transmit immunities to your offspring. What's your infant mortality rate, Dorsey? What's your live birth rate? Who takes care of your kids? Who educates them? Who keeps up the public sanitation? How many psychotics have you got?"

Artel came back into the kitchen. "All he's got in his layout is surgical stuff. He's a bonesetter. Just about the only medicines he has are aspirin, iodine and vaseline. Funniest doctor's office I've ever seen. Well, Koning told us. But it's no surprise they thought they ought to hide it." Artel got a chair for himself and sat down watching Dr. Sherman with a sleepy, unwavering expression. "I'm sorry your wife and children are so upset by me," he said. Sherman nodded blindly, not looking up from the floor.

"Boy's by my first wife," he said. "I married late. Always figured it would be too big a change in my life. Got older, changed my mind."

"You've been very fortunate," Artel said.

"I know it. There isn't another family in town with two survivors. You think I didn't know the odds, when I finally realized what we had on our hands? What do you think I wouldn't have done to save Mary and the boy both? It was hopeless in the hospital by then. I voted to dynamite the place, it was so bad. Didn't matter – if they'd all voted with me, there wasn't time nor sense or strength to do it. Man, you can know how to swim, but when the wave hits you the next thing you know you're smashed up against the shells on the shore. I came home and I barricaded this place. Had big pans full of carbolic acid, soaked rags in it and stuffed them in the windows. Had spray guns full of disinfectant. You could barely breathe in here. What good was it? I wasn't even thinking. We were all out of our heads. We were sick, and we were using it all up. When it started, we were using up the antibiotics as if we could always order another truckload in the morning. Had lab technicians – technicians – working up slides, and had all the doctors out on the floor. We did everything backwards. We couldn't believe – " Sherman held his head and laughed. "We couldn't believe what was going to happen. We couldn't act like we

believed what was going to happen. I mean, if we'd let ourselves think about what was going to happen – "

He stood up quickly. "I never got you your water." He went to a cabinet over the sink and got out some glasses.

"We kept listening to the radios, telling ourselves somebody somewhere would announce treatments. I had a radio with me everywhere I went, in my shirt pocket. I listened to that radio night and day, had my pockets full of batteries. When I couldn't get stations any more, I kept it on anyhow – kept it on wanting to know if WRKO would get back on the air." He pushed the glasses clunking under the spigot of the water fountain.

"I wasn't listening for any announcement. I was just listening to the cities die. Every time a station went off the air, I'd say to myself 'There, you smart people at Massachusetts General. There, you fancy labs down at Johns Hopkins. There, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center – you couldn't find it either.' That's how we were – you remember how you were?" He came over to us and pushed the glasses into our hands. "Here. Here." Water slopped on my wrist.

Sherman went back to his chair. He sat there looking at us. His hands turned the pipe over and over, and the ferocity had taken hold of him. "Luther wanted me to give you the background. All right, I'll give you the background. What do you think happens to the organization of a place like this? The water mains lead from a reservoir that belongs to a town fifteen miles away. What happens when they close the valves up there because they're scared they'll need it all to themselves? What happens to your food storage when your refrigeration goes? How much do you think we had stored around here, when we could always bring everything down from Newark in a couple of hours? What happens when you realize that's all there is, hah, and you're not going to bring any more from any place else, 'cause nobody's producing any more, nobody's packing it, nobody's putting it on trains? By God, they fought for it in the dark! They broke into houses where fat people lived, sometimes before and sometimes after they set fire to a block on account of pestilence.

"It's dead, it's dead out there," he said, pointing. "You came in through it. You saw it. You lived through it where you were, but you were in a goddamned metropolis with the rivers to scoop water out of and the warehouses jammed up. Do you know what we had to do to clear the site for that well you're drinking from now? They were dead! They were all dead, and we'd come crawling through the gutters, we'd come through three-hour journeys that took a block. We didn't clear them out. We – we as good as burrowed through them. We were twisted around them like

snakes." He looked up. "Of course, it's all clean and neat now," he smiled. "Everything's clean and neat. This is a model community." He wiped out his eye sockets with the backs of his hands. There was sweat drenching his shirt under the arms.

"Drink your water," he said.

"Thank you," I said. I took a hearty swallow. "I gather you didn't save your Mary."

"No," he said bitterly, outraged at my manners. "I didn't save my Mary."

Well, I hadn't even intended for him to get some of my point. But it would have been nice if he'd been able to realize you couldn't buy anything with that story these days. They were always like that, when you contacted them. The loners – the ones we pick up in open countryside because they used to be farmers – would run around our town for days, telling their particular story over and over again.

It always took them a while to understand that nobody was listening. The communities we'd contact couldn't believe that the rest of the world was just like them. They all had this vision that theirs was the only town blighted, even though nothing that used power or fuel or the cooperation of large groups of people could be seen in the world any longer. We had all run screaming. We had all spent everything we had, trying to run, trying to learn an answer, trying to hide, trying to wipe out. You could only be glad the world's military was still shocked from what the air defense missiles had done to the incoming Klarr lifeboats, because if they'd been full of their usual spirit we would have found some excuse for unloading that stockpile on ourselves, too. The only special grief Ocean Heights might have would be from having that lifeboat land on their doorstep and provide them with five hundred-odd immediate centers of cross-infection instead of their having to wait their turn from the winds and the refugees. But I figured that silent building farther down canceled that excuse, too. And besides, Mary is a common name.

VIII.

"Look, Doctor," I said, "we've got cards from the United States government. You remember the United States. We obviously represent the return of some kind of social organization to the world. You see us – you see what kind of shape we're in. You say you've seen other people. What's

more, you can't tell me somebody in town doesn't know how to build a crystal set. There isn't much to pick up, but there's something. You're trying to tell me you're cut off, but you're not – you know what kind of shape the world's in, even if what you know is only little bits and pieces. We're sitting right here in your kitchen working on the little bits and pieces we know, and it adds up bad. It adds up real bad, Doctor, just from what you've given us. What's going on in this town?"

Sherman shook his head miserably. "I can't tell you," he whispered.

"You've been trying to," Artel said. "You're doing everything but putting it into words." Sherman's glance jerked over toward him and saw pity. I don't know whether he could tell that's what it was on a Klarr face or not. "Doctor, you have a great secret in this town. But you are its only sentry. It's possible to get as far as your house without being detected. And then you call attention to yourself by hammering on a gong. When you and Koning talk to each other in front of us, you make sure we notice every lie. You think Tully told us about you? We didn't need Tully for that. But it was you and Koning who told us Tully is important – you and Koning, and all your other neighbors and friends. When you tell us how things were in this town, you're apologizing in advance for what we'll know when we put all the pieces together." Sherman was going whiter and whiter. The wood of the pipe was creaking in his hands as he squeezed them and the skin slipped damply over it. "You couldn't fool anybody who's the least bit interested," Artel finished up, still gently. "You know that. You've always known that."

I put down my water glass and walked over to the refrigerator. "He marched us by the waiting room because it was smart not to let us sit there and figure out he was a doctor, so we wouldn't ask him any medical questions. He walked us right in here into the kitchen. Where the refrigerator is." I opened it.

Sherman cried out: "We couldn't get two! We could only find one, and it made sense to keep it in the kitchen!"

I nodded. "And there was a fuel problem, too," I said. I could afford to be understanding. I didn't have the foggiest notion yet what the hell he meant. "It's a hard world; we've got to economize."

I was looking through the refrigerator, and it was dark enough in there so that I was having trouble. There were a couple of heads of lettuce, wrapped in cellophane with the New York seal on them, and some leftovers in plastic-covered dishes, half a sausage... and, up close to the weak cooling coils, a half-pint cream bottle with a homemade rubber

diaphragm stretched over its mouth.

I took it out and held it up to the light. It was three-quarters full of a just faintly yellow liquid with white clouds stirring around the bottom.

Sherman stared at it and me and Artel. Then he jumped up and made a lunge for it. He had his hand open, and he was trying to slap it away and smash it. His eyes were bulging. His face looked like it was a foot wide and made of chalk. "No, let me!" he panted as I ducked it out of his reach. "Please!"

First, I stepped back from him, so that he fell clumsily against the standing cabinet, and then as he put his hands down to catch his balance, I said: "All right," quietly, and held the bottle out. He straightened up, and I carefully put it into his hands. He stood looking down at it, and just as suddenly as he'd jumped up, tears began to fall on his shirtsleeves. Woebegone, he carefully put it back in the refrigerator and closed the door. He turned around and leaned his back against it. He took a long, gasping breath, and then he sniffed sharply. Well, anyone will when they're crying.

I looked over at Artel.

"That's the kind of setup they use when they want to measure out doses for injections."

Artel nodded. "He'd do his sterilization in here, on the stove." He began opening cabinet doors, and on the second try he found the leatherette-covered tin case with the syringes and the needles carefully nested. I turned to Sherman. "We've been in this town what – forty-five minutes? That's how long it took you folks to lead us straight to the wonder drug. Sure this is a good town." Sherman kept his eyes on the floor. He had shrunk inside his clothes. He was shuddering, and he was still weeping. I looked over at Artel. Artel shook his head – he couldn't tell what that stuff was either.

"That's it, huh, Doctor?" I asked. "The stuff in that bottle replaces all other kinds of medicines. You come into Dr. Sherman's office with, say, liver flukes, a bad heart and a broken arm. He sets your arm, and he goes back into the kitchen and comes back with a syringe full of this stuff and squirts it into you, and you walk out smiling, all cured. You come in with spots in front of your eyes, a roaring in your ears and a swelling in your armpit. Doctor gives you the needle, and six hours later you're dancing with your best girl. Doc, is that the way it is?"

"Don't make fun of it," Sherman whispered.

He was down to that. It was all he had left. We had broken him – well, no; the three of us together, and this town, and this world had broken him. That'll happen, if you let it, every time. Sherman was saying: "It's specific against Klarr-transmitted infectious diseases and allergic reactions. And it has broad spectrum applications in treating the older forms of infectious disease. It won't repair a damaged heart, no. But it reduces that heart's burden."

He looked at Artel and winced the way he would have if he were hit with a gust of windy rain. "It may be a panacea," he explained. "In a matter of hours after a three-cubic-centimeter injection, the subject is completely free of everything that can possibly be destroyed by an antibody. I'm – I'm trying to make myself clear to you. The human body reacts to the stuff by manufacturing counteragents which not only destroy it, but every other invading organism. At least, I've never seen the infectious disease that one dose isn't effective for. I – " He waved his hand in the air. "The population's too small for me to have seen examples of all the sicknesses that humans could get. But it's never failed me yet. And the reaction's nearly permanent. The only people we routinely need it for is the new babies. There's no disease in this town, Mr. Loovan." The tears were starting in his eyes again; not the big, steady running wetness on his face he'd shown before, but he had to keep blinking. "You see, the human body has its defense mechanisms. And this stuff stimulates them. Fantastically." He shook his head violently and turned to me, because Artel had kept looking at him deadpan.

"You can see it, Dorsey! You must know that the normal human being's body is constantly engaged in staving off all sorts of potential illnesses. At any time, a great deal of the human mechanism's functioning is directed toward the destruction of invading micro-organisms and the filtering and disposal of the resultant wastes. And I'm sure I don't have to tell you how vulnerable the organism is if it has been exhausted. And I don't have to tell you how debilitating even simple illnesses are; at some time in your life you must have had a common cold, or a reaction to an infected tooth, or a cut. Can you imagine how much energy was constantly being drained from your system by things as commonplace as that? Energy that could have gone to doing work or maintaining the growth and repair functions of your body?" He was shifting back and forth between the two of us now. We kept looking at him blankly because there wasn't any need to encourage him and we weren't planning to interrupt him. And he kept trying to get through to us – trying to get us to smile, or pat his hand and say. "It's all right."

"Can you imagine what the population of this town is like? It's free to devote full energy to life. There's none of that gray, dragging stuff they used to come in to me with in the old days, that I couldn't diagnose, and made them miserable, and I'd write tonics for. Do you realize how much tension has been wiped out of their lives? They're not nagged by a hundred little illnesses. They're not terrified by sudden stomach-twinges and mysterious rashes or coughing spells. They don't find themselves spitting or passing blood. They don't worry themselves into stomach ulcers, and they don't come down with nervous diseases. When you add that to the fact that they no longer have many of the old social tensions... Don't you see? It's like a miracle for them! It's like perpetual springtime – they're alive – they're vital. They don't tire as fast, they don't mope – "

"And they laugh all the time," I said. "Artel and I could see that; running and dancing and singing and clapping their hands when they saw us. Like a bunch of happy South Sea islanders in a book. Nature's Children."

Sherman ducked his head again. "They were pretty well off until you showed up," he muttered.

"No arthritis, Doctor?" Artel said. "No athlete's foot, no kidney stones?"

"I didn't say that," the doctor said. "If you had something like that before the Klarri came, there's nothing that can be done for you except to make you generally healthier. That helps." His head came up a little farther, "There is something interesting about that, though. I don't see any new cases starting. You can't tell with a sample this size, but it just may be we won't have any of that after this generation.

"There's a lot I don't know about it. What I've got does the job it has to. But I'm not going to pretend to you that my extraction methods are exact. I haven't got the time or equipment to isolate the precise effective fraction, whatever it is. I've got a bundle of stuff there, and some part of it does the job. The rest doesn't do any harm." He was starting to gather the little pieces of himself back together again. Talking shop was doing him good. Well, that had to be one of his reasons for talking shop.

"What does it do for cancer, Doc?" I asked.

"I think it prevents it. I know it doesn't cure it."

"That's fine, Doctor." I looked at him from a long way away. I had an idea I was about to smash him again.

I looked over at Artel. He had caught it in the doctor's choices of words. It was sad to see his face. "Doctor – where do you get this stuff?"

He had nearly made himself forget it. He had been talking, and talking, and all the time his mind had been putting the screens back up. He stared at me as if I'd belched in church, and then he took a little half step away from Artel; a little, sidling, sheepish step I'm sure he didn't know he was performing. "Extract it from human-infected Klarr blood," he said, his mouth blowing each word in its own bubble. Artel sighed and bowed his head.

I'd had my next question ready, and I was pretty sure of the answer to that one, too, but I had to stop and study him for a minute. Then I said. "And everybody in town knows where it comes from?"

Sherman nodded, two or three times, slowly. "All the adults. I wish you hadn't brought in Mr. Loovan."

"I think we'd better move, Artel."

He wasn't keeping all his mind on the spot we were in, but he nodded. "Yo." We pushed open the swinging door.

"Wait!" Sherman cried behind us. "If you try to run for it, they're bound to kill you."

Artel was moving quickly up the foyer. "We know that," I said over my shoulder. That kind of talk annoys me. I didn't need him to teach me my business. Sherman's wife and his kids were hanging over the bannister three-quarters of the way up the stairs, staring down at us. Artel hit the front door as hard as he could, slamming it back against the wall, and then kneed the screen door open so that it spanged against the outside wall. The people standing around out there jumped. Well, that was the effect that he wanted.

"Good-by, Mister Boogeyman!" the little girl piped as Artel hit the veranda with his boots clattering. I went just as fast behind him, slamming both doors shut. Artel didn't slow; you never want to do that. I jumped the steps and picked up speed, so that we reached the crowd side by side. We went right by our bikes, picked the biggest man in the group, and stood with our toes practically on his. "Where do we find Luther Koning?" I barked in his face. The rest of the people were falling back. Artel and I were both glowering and obviously beside ourselves with rage. The man took a step back, and we took a step forward. Artel reached down and grabbed his belt. "Come on, you! You're fooling with the Government!" The man waved vaguely down the street toward the intersection.

"Right!" I said. "Let's go, buddy." Artel pushed the man back firmly, letting go of his belt, and the two of us swung down the sidewalk,

marching side by side, our feet coming down regular as heartbeats, our faces grim, our arms swinging. Kids and housewives scattered out of our way. "You can't – !" somebody protested.

"Well, then, you run tell him," I said, and we kept going.

IX.

"Dorsey! Loovan!" Sherman shouted, coming down his veranda steps, his feet thudding across the lawn as he cut over to us. We kept marching. He came panting up to us. He was trying to keep up, but he lost speed as he turned to try to talk to us. I kept my eyes on the people down at the intersection; there were a fair number of them down there, and I saw one of them notice us coming and freeze.

"Dorsey!" Sherman panted. "You don't understand. It's not just – " He tripped over the cover of a water meter, stumbled, and lost pace. He came running up even with us again. "Loovan– " Then he realized he'd picked the wrong one to tell the rest of it to. "Dorsey! We were dying. We were too weak to move. We hadn't eaten in days. We hadn't eaten enough in weeks, and all that time we'd been burning with fever. My wife was lying dead upstairs. For three days. And I couldn't get up there. I had the boy in my office; on the examining table. I was lying on the floor. I couldn't reach him. I had him strapped down. He was crying. I couldn't reach him. We were all like that."

"So were we," I said. I had run out of patience with him entirely.

But Sherman wanted to make his point. I had been waiting for him to tell me where their captive Klarrs were, and it seemed to me at the time that would be the only other interesting thing he could have left to tell us. Instead, he kept babbling on: "You weren't lost and cut off from the rest of the world! Do you know how bad the human animal wants to live? Do you know what it will do to keep alive? Do you know what it will keep trying to do, right up to the last minute? As long as it has its teeth and claws?"

I was listening for any footsteps coming up fast and determined behind us. I was paying most of my attention to that. There weren't any. We'd left them standing there. Now we were almost up to the intersection. The fourth corner was a big saloon-hotel thing, and I guess it was a town hall now, because I could see Koning and a bunch of other men come out quickly through the doors and stop dead, watching us. There was a grinning, jumping figure with them, pointing at us coming on and

slapping his broomstick thigh, making the flapping cloth of his pants billow as if he had no bones at all.

"It was Tully!" Sherman puffed out. "There was a lot of Klarr-killing going on for a while. Then we got too weak, and we gave it up. But Tully wounded one someplace where they'd both crawled to die, I guess. Starving to death, both of them. Tully must have been just as far out of his head – just as far back to being a dying animal as you can get. You know what I mean?" he pleaded. "You know how Tully was? It was just him and this dying Klarr. It was Tully. It was Tully that was the animal. But it was Tully then that had sense enough to come and save me – and save little Walt – after he was back to being a man again." He barely got it out. "It was Tully who found out. I just refined his discovery. Made it nice and medical and sanitary. But you see how it is – they can't let the two of you go!"

Artel had stopped dead. He had turned to salt in the blink of an eye. "Move. Move." I said to him, "You've got to move," still looking straight ahead, stopping dead with him. Whatever we did, we had to do it together. "If you don't move, none of this gets back." We moved.

Now there were about fifteen or twenty people at the intersection. They were all men. They were wound up tight, moving their feet and hands back and forth. They stood on the corner in front of the hotel as we marched off the end of the sidewalk and across the street toward them.

Tully was bouncing and grinning at the crowd's left. He had a lot of energy; a lot of drive. You had to figure him for spunk. For him to be the historical personage he was, he had to have had the persistence to have haggled hot raw meat with loose teeth in a mouth full of open sores.

You won't often find that kind of grit, even in your really desperate person. Even so, the nearest man to him was drawn a little away from him. Like the others in the crowd, he was watching Artel and me, but he kept darting side-glances at Tully, too.

We walked up to Koning, who was trying to keep his face blank and was keeping it tense instead. I looked only at him; straight into his eyes. It was important to hit him before he could say or do anything. I said casually: "Well, it worked out the way you were hoping. Sherman cracked wide open and told us all about it. So you didn't do it. It's all out of your hands and off your mind."

Koning started to frown. "What do you mean by that?"

Artel said, "Look, Mr. Koning," with his voice patient, "if you really didn't want it taken off you, you would have made sure to ask the supply

trucks for some drugs now and then. Whether Doc wanted to deprive the poor sick outside world or not."

"Now you can just be mayor," I said. "That'll be a lot easier, won't it?"

"Well, we've got things to do, Mr. Koning." Artel said. "Let's go, Ed. That building's four blocks down and over to our right."

Sherman had been trying to catch his breath over to my right for the last few moments. He said: "I never – "

I gave him something that might pass for a smile. "We know where the lifeboat is, too, Dr. Sherman. And those over there." I waved my hand in the direction of the neat houses, off beyond the bulk of the hotel. "Well, you can see we have to open that casino building, Mr. Koning. Care to come along?"

Koning's jaw flexed a couple of times. He looked around, and once you do that, of course, you've lost it.

He took a deep breath. And then nodded hastily, looking back at the crowd. "All right. Okay."

Artel and I stepped out. We walked down the middle of the street, with Koning walking along beside us, and having to compromise between a casual walk and a trot, until he finally settled for keeping in step with us. Doc Sherman tagged along. One or two other people started to follow, and then the rest of them, and with the group that had slowly followed us down from Sherman's house, it made a respectable bunch. Tully had set out down the sidewalk. He was keeping pace with us the best he could. He kept trying to attract the attention of people who passed near him. I could hear him saying: "Where do you think you're going, you chicken punk?" He said it to young and old, irrespective of sex. "Where do you think you're going, you chicken punk?" I could hear it as a fading mutter in the background. People were looking at him and then looking away. They were dodging around him, and twitching their feet nearer the center of the street. Except for him, nobody was talking.

X.

In daylight, the building was painted green. Not new – from before. Artel and I trotted up the steps. Koning pushed himself ahead and unlocked the doors into the lobby. The crowd waited out in the street.

The lobby was dark and musty. It was floored in a checkerboard pattern

of red and brown vinyl tiles with a black rubber runner laid down over them. There were office doors opening on the lobby, but Koning went ahead toward a flight of stairs leading to the left. "Lantern around here somewhere," he said.

"Never mind," Artel said, taking his flashlight out of his windbreaker. We went up the stairs with it whirring. At the top of the stairs there was another set of double doors. Koning unlocked those. The smell kept getting stronger.

There was some light coming in from one window near us. They had bricked up the rest from the inside. The entire second floor was one big room from here on back, and the open window was on this side of the row of bars and cyclone fencing they had put in from one wall to the other. Artel shone his light in through the bars.

We could see six iron cots with mattresses on them. There were two Klarr lying on two of them. The mattresses were turned back and rolled over on three others. There was another Klarr sitting on the edge of the remaining bed. He was wearing what was left of his shipboard clothes, I guess.

"All right, unlock that," I told Koning, pointing to the pipe-and-cyclone-mesh gate that went from floor to ceiling. Some master craftsman had worked hard and expertly, custom-building that. Koning nodded, went over to it and trembled the key into the lock. He pushed in on the gate, and it swung back. He turned around and looked at Artel and me expectantly.

"I don't think anything much is going to happen to you, Koning," I said. "We don't mess with communities if we can possibly help it. We all had to live through a bad time, and we all found out things about ourselves."

Koning nodded.

"We didn't find out what you found out. I'll give you that," I said.

"But that was just luck," Artel said; he took a deep breath before each phrase. "Just your luck. Instead of somebody else's, somewhere else."

Koning shook his head. "Listen – that Tully –

"I'm sure Artel understands," I said. "After all, you couldn't do anything to Tully."

Koning said bitterly: "The son of a bitch kept reminding us and mocking us. He'd ask us if our arms were sore from Doc's needle."

"I wish you'd go away," Artel told him.

Koning nodded again and went around us to go back down the stairs. He went down quickly, and then we could hear his footsteps in the lobby, and the sound of him going out through the double doors outside. He was not a bad man. Not the sort who would eat the flesh of a Klarr, no matter how hungry. Just the sort who would take a Klarr's blood to make medicine out of it. And take. And take.

As soon as it was all quiet, Artel began to tremble. He shook like a leaf. He put one hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Oh, Ed."

"Easy, easy, easy."

"Chicken punks," Artel muttered.

The Klarr who'd been sitting on his bed had gotten up. He came shuffling forward, peering ahead.

"Artel, I don't see any reason why it might not work the other way. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't see why Klarr-infected human blood fractions wouldn't do it for your people."

"They didn't try that, though, did they?" Artel said with his eyes shut.

"Well, they couldn't," I said. "They needed these Klarri to stay infected."

Artel nodded. "I understand that "

The other two Klarri had noticed something was different and had turned over on their beds. I speak a pretty good version of Klarr. "Hey," I said to them. "We're policemen. You can come out."

"What are we going to do with them, Ed?" Artel said.

"Move 'em into one of the houses. I'll stay with them until you send a truck down to pick them up. If you take a bike out to the Camden route, you'll probably be up at the Old Man's maybe late tonight, tomorrow morning for sure."

Artel nodded. "All right." He put his hand back on my shoulder as the white-haired Klarr came closer, got to the gate, and stood in it with one hand on each upright, leaning forward and looking out at us.

"I am Eredin Mek, Sub-Assistant Navigating Officer. My companions here are very weak and may be frightened. Could one of you go in and speak to them, please?" He came closer.

"Go ahead, Artel," I said, and he ducked through the gate and walked quickly toward the back of the cell.

"Is it possible to go outside?" Eredin asked me.

"Certainly," I said.

"I'd like that."

We walked together to the stairs, and then, with him putting one hand on the bannister and the other over my shoulders, we got down the stairs and out into the lobby. I could see the crowd milling around outside, and for a minute I thought we were in trouble again, but their backs were to the glass doors. Then we got out through those, and stood at the head of the steps. Tully was across the street. He was standing on the sidewalk, and he was saying something to the people. They were ducking their heads away from him.

Tully saw Eredin and me. He pointed over at us. "Hey, critter!"

That made them raise their heads. They all turned, and when they saw Eredin leaning against me, they sighed like an extra wave. Sherman and Koning were in the middle of them, pale. They could all see what it meant, the Klarr up there on the steps with me, stinking and sick, but out. Only Tully didn't see what it meant to him. He thought he still had something going for him.

He laughed. "Hey, critter! I believe you're even scrawnier than me! What's the matter – ain't we been feedin' you right?" He looked around for his effect.

"Who is that man?" Eredin muttered, peering, groping like any sensible person will when he's weak and is in a world he doesn't understand; like somebody senile. "What's he saying?"

Klarr is a language that made my answer come out: "He is the savior of their tribe."

"Yah!" Tully was crying out. "Yah, ya bunch of needlepushing arm-wipers–"

"Ah, God!" Sherman groaned and turned and rammed back through the crowd toward Tully.

Then they were all as if they were being yanked on strings. They clustered suddenly around the squirrel-checked man in the green sunshade.

I could see Koning's face. The veins were standing out; his mouth was wide open, and what was coming out of him and all of them was what you might hear if all the lovers in the world were inside one big megaphone. The people at the back of the crowd tried to push in. The whole mass of them fell against a tall hedge.

Eredin looked up at me, squinting, his eyes watering; there had to be a lot of things he couldn't know the reasons for.

"They – they kept taking our blood," he complained.

"I know," I said. I patted him on the shoulder.

© Algis Budrys, 1998

Between the Dark and the Daylight

A curved section of the dome, twenty feet thick with the stubs of reinforcing rod rusty and protruding through the dampmarked concrete, formed the ceiling and back wall of Brendan's office. There was a constant drip of seepage and condensation. Near the mildew-spotted floor, a thin white mist drifted in torn swirls while the heating coils buried in the concrete fought back against the cold. There was one lamp in the windowless dark, a glowing red coil on Brendan's desk, well below the eye level of the half-dozen men in the room. The heavy office door was swung shut, the locking bars pushed home. If it had not been, there would have been some additional light from the coils in the corridor ceiling, outside the office. Brendan would have had to face into it, and the men in the front of him would have been looming shadows to him.

But the door was shut, as Brendan insisted it must be, as all doors to every room and every twenty-foot length of corridor were always shut as much of the time as possible – at Brendan's insistence – as though the dome were a sinking ship.

Conducted by the substance of the dome, there was a constant chip, chip, chip coming from somewhere, together with a heartless gnawing sound that filled everyone's head as though they were all biting on sandpaper.

Brendan growled from behind his desk: "I'm in charge."

The five men on the opposite side of the desk had tacitly chosen Falconer for their spokesman. He said: "But we've all got something to say about it, Brendan. You're in charge, but nothing gives you the power to be an autocrat."

"No?"

"Nothing. The Expedition Charter, in fact, refers to a Board of

Officers—"

"The Expedition Charter was written four hundred years ago, a thousand lightyears away. The men who drew it up are dust. The men who signed it are dust."

"You're in the direct line of descent from the first Captain."

"Then you're recognizing me as a hereditary monarch, Falconer. I don't see the basis of your complaint."

Falconer – lean as a whip from the waist down, naked, thick-torsoed, covered with crisp, heavy fur – set his clawed feet a little apart and thrust out his heavy underjaw, clearing his sharp canine tusks away from his flat lips. He lifted his enormous forearms out from his sides and curved his fingers. "Don't pare cheese with us, Brendan. The rest of the dome might be willing to let it go, as long as things're so near completion. But not us. We won't stand for it." The men with him were suddenly a tense pack, waiting, ready.

Brendan stood up, a member of Falconer's generation, no more evolved than any of them. But he was taller than Falconer or any other man in the room. He was bigger, his cruelly-shaped jaw broader, his tusks sharper, his forearm muscles out of all proportion to the length of the bone, like clubs. His eyes burned out from under his shaggy brows, lambent with the captive glow of the lighting coil, set far back under the protection of heavy bone. The slitted nostrils of his flat nose were suddenly flared wide.

"You don't dare," he rumbled. His feet scraped on the floor. "I'll disembowel the first man to reach me." He lashed out and sent the massive bronze desk lurching aside, clearing the way between himself and Falconer's party. And he waited, while the other men sent sidelong glances at Falconer and Falconer's eyes slowly fell. Then Brendan grunted. "This is why I'm in charge. Charters and successions don't mean a thing after four hundred years. Not if a good man goes against them. You'll keep on taking my orders."

"What kind of paranoiac's world do you live in?" Falconer said bitterly. "Imposing your will on all of us. Doing everything your way and no other. We're not saying your methods are absolutely going to wreck the project, but—"

"What?"

"We've all got a stake in this. We've all got children in the nursery, the same way you do."

"I don't favor my son over any of the others. Get that idea out of your

head."

"How do we know? Do we have anything to do with the nursery? Are we allowed inside?"

"I'm this generation's biotechnician and pedagogical specialist. That's the Captain's particular job. That's the way it's been since the crash – by the same tradition you were quoting – and that's the way it has to be. This is a delicate business. One amateur meddling in it can destroy everything we're doing and everything that was done in the past. And we'll never have another chance."

"All right. But where's the harm in looking in on them? What's your point in not letting us at the cameras?"

"They're being overhauled. We're going to need to have them in perfect working order tomorrow, when we open the nursery gates to the outside. That's when it'll be important to look in on the children and make sure everything's all right."

"And meanwhile only you can get into the nursery and see them."

"That's my job."

"Now, listen, Brendan, we all went through the nursery, too. And your father had the same job you do. We weren't sealed off from everybody but him. We saw other people. You know that just as well as we do."

Brendan snorted. "There's no parallel. We weren't the end product. We were just one more link in the chain, and we had to be taught all about the dome, because the hundredodd of us were going to constitute its next population. We had to be taught about the air control system, the food distribution, the power plant – and the things it takes to keep this place functioning as well as it can. We had to each learn our job from the specialist who had it before us.

"But the next generation isn't going to need that. That's obvious. This is what we've all been working for. To free them. Ten generations ago, the first of us set out to free them.

"And that's what I'm going to do, Falconer. That's my job, and nobody here could do it, but me, in my way."

"They're our children too!"

"All right, then, be proud of them. Tomorrow they go outside, and there'll be men out on the face of this world at last. Your flesh, your blood, and they'll take this world away from the storms and the animals. That's what we've spent all this time for. That's what generations of us have

huddled in here for, hanging on for this day. What more do you want?"

"Some of the kids are going to die," one of the other men growled. "No matter how well they're equipped to handle things outside, no matter how much has been done to get them ready. We don't expect miracles from you, Brendan. But we want to make sure you've done the best possible. We can't just twiddle our thumbs."

"You want work to do? There's plenty. Shut up and listen to what's going on outside."

The gnawing filled their heads. Brendan grinned coldly. And the chipping sound, which had slowed a little, began a rapid pace again.

"They just changed shifts," Brendan said. "One of them got tired and a fresh one took over."

"They'll never get through to us in the time they've got left," Falconer said.

"No?" Brendan turned on him in rage. "How do you know? Maybe they've stopped using flint. Maybe they've got hold of something like diamonds. What about the ones that just use their teeth? Maybe they're breeding for tusks that concrete won't wear down. Think we've got a patent on that idea? Think because we do it in a semi-automatic nursery, blind evolution can't do it out in that wet hell outside?"

Lusic – the oldest of them there, with sparse fur and lighter jaws, with a round skull that lacked both a sagittal crest and a bone shelf over the eyes – spoke for the first time.

"None of those things seem likely," he said in a voice muffled by the air filter his generation had to wear in this generation's ecology. "They are possibilities, of course, but only that. These are not purposeful intelligences like ourselves. These are only immensely powerful animals – brilliant, for animals, in a world lacking a higher race to cow them – but they do not lay plans. No, Brendan, I don't think your attempt to distract us has much logic in it. The children will be out, and will have destroyed them, before there can be any real danger to the dome's integrity. I can understand your desire to keep us busy, because we are all tense as our efforts approach a climax. But I do think your policy is wrong. I think we should long ago have been permitted a share in supervising the nursery. I think your attempt to retain dictatorial powers in an unhealthy sign. I think you're afraid of no longer being the most powerful human being in our society. Whether you know it or not, I think that's what's behind your attitude. And I think something ought to be done about it, even now."

"Distract!" Brendan's roar made them all retreat. He marched slowly toward Lusic, and the other man began to back away. "When I need advice from a sophist like you, that'll be the time when we all need distraction!" He stopped when Lusic was pressed against the wall, and he pointed at the wall.

"There is nothing in this world that loves us. There is nothing in this world that can even tolerate us. Generations of us have lived in this stone trap because not one of us – not even I – could live in the ecology of this planet. It was never made for men. Men could not have evolved on it. It would have killed them when they crawled from the sea, killed them when they tried to breathe its atmosphere, killed them when they tried to walk on its surface, and when they tried to take a share of food away from the animals that could evolve here. We are a blot and an abomination upon it. We are weak, loathesome grubs on its iron face. And the animals know us for what we are. They may even guess what we have spent generations in becoming, but it doesn't matter whether they do or not – they hate us, and they won't stop trying to kill us.

"When the expedition crashed here, they were met by storms and savagery. They had guns and their kind of air regenerators and a steel hull for shelter, and still almost all of them died. But if they had been met by what crowds around this dome today, they would never have lived at all, or begun this place.

"You're right, Lusic – there are only animals out there. Animals that hate us so much, some of them have learned to hold stones in their paws and use them for tools. They hate us so much they chip, chip, chip away at the dome all day, and gnaw at it, and howl in the night for us to come out, because they hate us so.

"We only hope they won't break through. We can only hope the children will drive them away in time. We don't know. But you'd rather be comfortable in your hope. You'd rather come in here and quibble at my methods. But I'm not your kind. Because if I don't know, I don't hope. I act. And because I act, and you don't, and because I'm in charge, you'll do what I tell you."

He went back to his desk and shoved it back to its place. "That's all. I've heard your complaint, and rejected it. Get back to work re-inforcing the dome walls. I want that done."

They looked at him, and at each other. He could see the indecision on their faces. He ignored it, and after a moment they decided for retreat. They could have killed him, acting together, and they could have acted

together against any other man in the dome. But not against him. They began going out.

Lusic was the last through the door. As he reached to pull it shut, he said, "We may kill you if we can get enough help."

Brendan looked at his watch and said quietly: "Lusic – it's the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, on Chaim Weber's calendar. Stop off at his place and tell him it's sunset, will you?"

He waited until Lusic finally nodded, and then ignored him again until the man was gone.

When his office door was locked, he went to the television screen buried in the wall behind him, switched it on, and looked out at the world outside.

Rain – rain at a temperature of 1° Centigrade – blurred the camera lenses, sluicing over them, blown up through the protective baffles, giving him not much more than glutinous light and shadow to see. But Brendan knew what was out there, as surely as a caged wolf knows the face of his keeper. Near the top of the screen was a lichinous graygreen mass, looming through the bleakness, that he knew for a line of beaten slumped mountains. Between the mountains and the dome was a plain, running with water, sodden with the runoff from the spineless hills, and in the water, the animals. They were the color of rocks at the bottom of an ocean – great, mud-plastered masses, wallowing toward each other in combat or in passion, rolling, lurching, their features gross, heavy, licking out a sudden paw with unbelievable speed, as though giant hippopotami, swollen beyond all seeming ability to move, still somehow had managed to endow themselves with the reflexes of cats. They crowded the plain, a carpet of obscenity, and for all they fed on each other, and mated, and sometimes slept with their unblinking eyes open and swiveling, they all faced toward the dome and never stopped throwing themselves against its flanks, there to hang scrabbling at the curve of the concrete, or doing more purposeful things.

Brendan looked out at them with his chest rising in deep swells. "I'd like to get out among you," he growled. "You'd kill me, but I'd like to get out among you." He took a long breath.

He triggered one of the dome's old batteries, and watched the shells howl into the heaving plain. Red fire flared, and the earth trembled, erupting. Wherever the shells struck, the animals were hurled aside... to lie stunned, to shake themselves with the shock of the explosions, and to stagger to their feet again.

"You wait," Brendan hissed, stopping the useless fire. "You wait 'til my Donel gets at you. You wait."

He shut the screen off, and crossed his office toward a door set into the bulkhead at his right. Behind it were the nursery controls, and, beyond those, behind yet another door which he did not touch, was the quarter-portion of the dome that housed the children, sealed off, more massively walled than any other part, and, in the center of its share of the dome surface, pierced by the only full-sized gateway to the world. It was an autonomous shelter-within-a-shelter, and even its interior walls were fantastically thick in case the dome itself were broken.

The controls covered one wall of their cubicle. He ignored the shrouded camera screens and the locked switch that would activate the gate. He passed on to the monitoring instruments, and read off the temperature and pressure, the percentages of the atmospheric components, and all the other things that had to be maintained at levels lethal to him so that the children could be comfortable. He put the old headphones awkwardly to his ears and listened to the sounds he heard in the nursery.

He opened one of the traps in the dome wall, and almost instantly there was an animal in it. He closed the outer end of the trap, opened the access into the nursery, and let the animal in. Then, for a few more moments, he listened to the children as they killed and ate it.

Later, as he made his way down the corridor, going home for the night, he passed Chaim Weber's doorway. He stopped and listened, and coming through the foot-thick steel and the concrete wall, he heard the Channukah prayer:

"Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheynu Melech Haolam, shehichiyanu vikiymanu, vihigianu lazman hazeh... "

"Blessed be The Lord," Brendan repeated softly to himself, "Our God, Lord of the Universe. Who has given us life, and is our strength, and has brought us this day."

He stopped and whispered, "this day," again, and went on.

His wife was waiting for him, just inside the door, and he grunted a greeting to her while he carefully worked the bolts. She said nothing until he had turned around again, and he looked at her inquiringly.

"Sally?"

"You did it again," she said.

He nodded without special expression. "I did."

"Falconer's got the whole dome buzzing against you."

"All right."

She sighed angrily. "Did you have to threaten Lusic? He's only the representative of the previous generation. The one group inside the dome detached enough to be persuaded to back you up."

"One, I didn't threaten him. If he felt that way, it was only because he knew he was pushing me into a corner where I might turn dangerous. Two, anything he represents can't be worth much, if he can accuse me of bringing in a red herring and then can back down when I bring that selfsame herring back in a louder tone of voice. Three, it doesn't matter if anybody supports me. I'm in charge."

She set her mouth in a disgusted line. "You don't think much of yourself, do you?"

Brendan crossed the room. He sat down on the edge of the stone block that fitted into the join of floor and wall, and was his bed. Sitting that way, bent forward, with his shoulders against the curve of the overhead, he said, softly: "We've been married a long time, Sally. That can't be a fresh discovery you're making."

"It isn't."

"All right."

"You don't even care what I think of you, do you?"

"I care. I can't afford to pay any attention."

"You don't care. You don't care for one living soul besides yourself, and the only voice you'll listen to is that power-chant in your head. You married me because I was good breeding stock. You married me because, if you can't lead us outside, at least your son will be the biggest and best of his generation."

"Funny," Brendan said. "Lusic thinks I've been motivated by a fear of losing my pre-eminence. I wonder if your positions can be reconciled. And do you realize you're admitting I'm exactly what I say I am?"

She spat: "I hate you. I really do. I hope they pull you down before the nursery gate opens to the outside."

"If they pull me down, that'll be a sure bet. I changed over all the controls, several years ago. I'm the only man in this dome who can possibly work them."

"You what!"

"You heard me."

"They'll kill you when I tell them."

"You can think better than that, Sally. You're just saying something for the sake of making a belligerent noise. They don't dare kill me, and they'd be taking a very long chance in torturing me to a point where I'd tell them how the controls work. Longer than long, because there'd be no logic in my telling them and so passing my own death sentence. But I expected you to say something like that, because people do, when they're angry. That's why I never get angry. I've got a purpose in life. I'm going to see it attained. So you're not going to catch me in any mistakes."

"You're a monster."

"So I am. So are we all. Monsters with a purpose. And I'm the best monster of us all."

"They'll kill you the moment after you open that gate."

"No," he said slowly, "I don't think so. All the tension will be over then, and the kids will be doing their job."

"I'll kill you. I promise."

"I don't think you mean that. I think you're in love with me."

"You think I love you?"

"Yes, I do."

She looked at him uncertainly. "Why do I?"

"I don't know. Love takes odd forms, under pressure. But it's still love. Though, of course, I don't know anything about it."

"You bastard, I hate you more than any man alive."

"You do."

"I— no... !" She began to cry. "Why do you have to be like this? Why can't you be what I want — what you can be?"

"I can't. Even though you love me." He sat in his dark corner, and his eyes brooded at her.

"And what do you feel?"

"I love you," he said. "What does that change?"

"Nothing," she said bitterly. "Absolutely nothing."

"All right, then."

She turned away in unbearable frustration, and her eyes rested on the dinner table, where the animal haunch waited. "Eat your supper."

He got up, washed at the sink, went over to the table and broke open the joint on the roast. He gave her half, and they began to eat.

"Do you know about the slaughtering detail?" he asked her.

"What about it?"

"Do you know that two days ago, one of the animals deliberately came into the trap in the dome? That it had help?"

"How?"

"Another animal purposely stayed in the doorway, to jam it. I think they thought that if they did that, the killing block couldn't fall. I think they watched outside – perhaps for months – and thought it out. And it might have worked, but the killing block was built to fall regardless, and it killed them both. The slaughtering detail dragged the other one in through the doorway before any more could reach them. But suppose there'd been a third one, waiting directly outside? They'd have killed four men. And suppose, next time, they try to wedge the block? And then chip through the sides of the trap, which are only a few feet thick? Or suppose they invent tools with handles, for leverage, and begin cutting through in earnest?"

"The children will be out there before that happens."

Brendan nodded. "Yes. But we're running it narrow. Very narrow. This place would never hold up through another generation."

"What difference does it make? We've beaten them. Generation by generation, we've changed to meet them, while all they've done is learn a little. We've bred back, and mutated, and trained. We've got a science of genetics, we've got controlled radioactivity, gene selection, chromosome manipulation – all they've got is hate."

"Yes. And listen to it."

Grinding through the dome, the gnaw and chip came to them clearly.

They began to eat again, after one long moment.

Then she asked: "Is Donel all right?"

He looked up sharply. They had had this out a long time ago. "He's all right as far as I know." He was responsible for all of the children in the nursery, not just one in particular. He could not afford to get into the habit of discussing one any more than another. He could not afford to get into the habit of discussing any of them at all.

"You don't care about him, either, do you?" she said. "Or have you got some complicated excuse for that, too?"

He shook his head. "It's not complicated." He listened to the sound coming through the dome.

She looked at him with tears brimming in her eyes. He thought for an instant of the tragedy inherent in the fact that they all of them knew how ugly they were – and that the tragedy did not exist, because somehow love did not know – and he was full of this thought when she said, like someone dying suddenly. "Why? Why, Sean?"

"Why?" She'd got a little way past his guard. "Because I'm the Captain, and because I'm the best, and there's no escaping the duty of being that. Because some things plainly must be done – not because there is anything sacred in plans made by people who are past, and gone, but because there is no other reason why we should have been born with the intelligence to discipline our emotions."

"How cut-and-dried you make it sound!"

"I told you it wasn't complicated. Only difficult."

The common rooms were in the center of the dome, full of relics: lighting systems designed for eyes different from theirs; ventilation ducts capped over, uncapped again, modified; furniture re-built times over; stuff that had once been stout enough to stand the wear of human use – too fragile to trust, now, against the unconscious brush of a hurried hip or the kick of a stumbling foot; doorways too narrow, aisles too cramped in the auditorium; everything not quite right.

Brendan called them there in the morning, and every man and woman in the dome came into the auditorium. They growled and talked restlessly – Falconer and Lusic and the rest were moving purposefully among them – and when Brendan came out on the stage, they rumbled in the red-lit gloom, the condensation mist swirling up about them. Brendan waited, his arms folded, until they were all there.

"Sit down," he said. He looked across the room, and saw Falconer and the others watching him carefully, gauging their moment. "Fools," Brendan muttered to himself. "If you were going to challenge me at all, you should have done it long ago." But they had let him cow them too long – they remembered how, as children, they had all been beaten by him – how he could rise to his feet with six or seven of them clinging to his back and arms, to pluck them off and throw them away from him. And how, for all their cleverness, they had never out-thought him. They had promised themselves this day – perhaps years ago, even then, they had planned his

ripping-apart – but they had not dared to interfere with him until the dome's work was done. In spite of hate, and envy, and the fear that turns to murder. They knew who their best man was, and Brendan could see that most of them still had that well in mind. He searched the faces of the people, and where Falconer should have been able to put pure rage, he saw caution lurking with it, like a divided counsel.

He was not surprised. He had expected that – if there had been no hesitation in any man he looked at, it would have been for the first time in his life. But he had never pressed them as hard as he meant to do this morning. He would need every bit of a cautious thought, every slow response that lived among these people, or everything would go smash, and he with it.

He turned his head fleetingly, and even that, he knew, was dangerous. But he had to see if Sally was still there, poised to one side of the stage, looking at him blankly. He turned back to the crowd.

"All right. Today's the day. The kids're going out as soon as I'm through here."

Sally had told him this morning not to call them together – to just go and do it. But they would have been out in the corridors, waiting. He would have had to brush by them. One touch – one contact of flesh to flesh, and one of them might have tried to prove the mortality he found in Sean Brendan.

"I want you in your homes. I want your doors shut. I want the corridor compartments closed tight." He looked at them, and in spite of the death he saw rising among them like a tide, he could not let it go at that. "I want you to do that," he said in a softer voice than any of them had ever heard from him. "Please."

It was the hint of weakness they needed. He knew that when he gave it to them.

"Sean!" Sally cried.

And the auditorium reverberated to the formless roar that drowned her voice with its cough. They came toward him with their hands high, baying, and Sally clapped her hands to her ears.

Brendan stood, wiped his hand over his eyes, turned, and jumped. He was across the stage in two springs, his toenails gashing the floor, and he spun Sally around with a hand that held its iron clutch on her arm. He swept a row of seats into the feet of the closest ones, and pushed Sally through the side door to the main corridor. He snatched up the welding

gun he had left there, and slashed across door and frame with it, but they were barely started in their run toward his office before he heard the hasty weld snap open and the corridor boom with the sound of the rebounding door. Claws clicked and scratched on the floor behind him, and bodies thudded from the far wall, flung by momentum and the weight of the pack behind them. There would be trampled corpses in the auditorium, he knew, in the path between the door and the mob's main body.

Sally tugged at the locked door to the next section of corridor. Brendan turned and played the welder's name in the distorted faces nearest him. Sally got the door open, and he threw her beyond it. They forced it shut again behind them, and this time his weld was more careful but that was broken, too, before they were through the next compartment, and now there would be people in the parallel corridors, racing to cut them off – racing, and howling. The animals outside must be hearing it... must be wondering...

He turned the two of them into a side corridor, and did not stop to use the welder. The mob might bypass an open door... and they would need to be able to get to their homes...

They were running along the dome's inside curve, now, in a section where the dome should have been braced – it hadn't been done – and he cursed Falconer for a spiteful ass while their feet scattered the slimy puddles and they tripped over the concrete forms that had been thrown down carelessly.

"All right," Brendan growled to himself and to Falconer, "all right, you'll think about that when the time comes."

They reached the corridor section that fronted on his office, and there were teeth and claws to meet them. Brendan hewed through the knot of people, and now it was too late to worry whether he killed them or not. Sally was running blood down her shoulder and back, and his own cheek had been ripped back by a throat-slash that missed. He swallowed gulps of his own blood, and spat it out as he worked toward his door, and with murder and mutilation he cleared the way for himself and the mother of his boy, until he had her safe inside, and the edge of the door sealed all around. Then he could stop, and see the terrible wound in Sally's side, and realize the bones of his leg were dripping and jagged as they thrust out through the flesh.

"Didn't I tell you?" he reproached her as he went to his knees beside her where she lay on the floor. "I told you to go straight here, instead of to the auditorium." He pressed his hands to her side, and sobbed at the thick

well of her blood over his gnarled fingers with the tufts of sopping fur caught in their claws. "Damn you for loving me!"

She twitched her lips in a rueful smile, and shook her head slightly. "Go let Donel out," she whispered.

They were hammering on the office door. And there were cutting torches available, just as much as welders. He turned and made his way to the control cubicle, half-dragging himself. He pulled the lever that would open the gates, once the gate motors were started, and, pulling aside the panels on cabinets that should have had nothing to do with it, he went through the complicated series of switchings that diverted power from the dome pile into those motors.

The plain's mud had piled against the base of the gate, and the hinges were old. The motors strained to push it aside, and the dome thrummed with their effort. The lighting coils dimmed, and outside his office door, Brendan could hear a great sigh. He pulled the listening earphones to his skull, and heard the children shout. Then he smiled with his ruined mouth, and pulled himself back into his office, to the outside viewscreen, and turned it on. He got Sally and propped her up. "Look," he mumbled. "Look at our son."

There was blurred combat on the plain, and death on that morning, and no pity for the animals. He watched, and it was quicker than he could ever have imagined.

"Which one is Donel?" Sally whispered.

"I don't know," he said. "Not since the children almost killed me when they were four; you should have heard Donel shouting when he tore my respirator away by accident – he was playing with me, Sally – and saw me flop like a fish for air I could breathe, and saw my blood when another one touched my throat. I got away from them that time, but I never dared go back in after they searched out the camera lenses and smashed them. They knew, then – they knew we were in here, and they knew we didn't belong on their world."

And Falconer's kind would have gassed them, or simply re-mixed their air... they would have, after a while, no matter what... I know how many times I almost did...

There was a new sound echoing through the dome. "Now they don't need us to let them out, anymore." There was a quick, sharp, deep hammering from outside – mechanical, purposeful, tireless. "That... that may be Donel now."

© 1958 Royal Publications

The Burning World

They walked past rows of abandoned offices in the last government office building in the world – two men who looked vastly different, but who had crucial similarities.

Josef Kimmensen had full lips trained to set in a tight, thin line, and live, intelligent eyes. He was tall and looked thin, though he was not. He was almost sixty years old, and his youth and childhood had been such that now his body was both old for its years and still a compact, tightly-wound mechanism of bone and muscle fiber.

Or had been, until an hour ago. Then it had failed him; and his one thought now was to keep Jem Bendix from finding out how close he was to death.

Jem Bendix was a young man, about twenty-eight, with a broad, friendly grin and a spring to his step. His voice, when he spoke, was low and controlled. He was the man Josef Kimmensen had chosen to replace him as president of the Freeman's League.

The building itself was left over from the old regime. It was perhaps unfortunate – Kimmensen had often debated the question with himself – to risk the associations that clung to this building. But a building is only a building, and the dust of years chokes the past to death. It was better to work here than to build a new set of offices. It might seem a waste to leave a still-new building, and that might tend to make people linger after their jobs had finished themselves. The pile of cracking bricks and peeled marble facings would be falling in a heap soon, and the small staff that still worked here couldn't help but be conscious of it. It was probably a very useful influence.

They walked through the domed rotunda, with its columns, echoing alcoves, and the jag-topped pedestals where the old regime's statues had been sledge-hammered away. The rotunda was gloomy, its skylight buried under rain-borne dust and drifted leaves from the trees on the mountainside. There was water puddled on the rotten marble floor under

a place where the skylight's leading was gone.

Kimmensen had a few words with the mail clerk, and then he and Bendix walked out to the plaza, where his plane was parked. Around the plaza, the undergrowth was creeping closer every year, and vine runners were obscuring the hard precision of the concrete's edge. On all sides, the mountains towered up toward the pale sun, their steep flanks cloaked in snow and thick stands of bluish evergreen. There was a light breeze in the crystalline air, and a tang of fir sap.

Kimmensen breathed in deeply. He loved these mountains. He had been born in the warm lowlands, where a man's blood did not stir so easily nor surge so strongly through his veins. Even the air here was freedom's air.

As they climbed into his plane, he asked: "Did anything important come up in your work today, Jem?"

Jem shrugged uncertainly. "I don't know. Nothing that's urgent at the moment. But it might develop into something. I meant to speak to you about it after dinner. Did Salmaggi tell you one of our families was burned out up near the northwest border?"

Kimmensen shook his head and pressed his lips together. "No, he didn't. I didn't have time to see him today." Perhaps he should have. But Salmaggi was the inevitable misfit who somehow creeps into every administrative body. He was a small, fat, tense, shrilly argumentative man who fed on alarms like a sparrow. Somehow, through election after election, he had managed to be returned as Land Use Advisor. Supposedly, his duties were restricted to helping the old agricultural districts convert to synthetic diets. But that limitation had never restrained his busybody nature. Consultations with him were full of sidetracks into politics, alarmisms, and piping declamations about things like the occasional family found burned out.

Kimmensen despaired of ever making the old-fashioned politician types like Salmaggi understand the new society. Kimmensen, too, could feel sorrow at the thought of homesteads razed, of people dead in the midst of what they had worked to build. It was hard – terribly hard – to think of; too easy to imagine each might be his own home. Too easy to come upon the charred embers and feel that a horrible thing had been done, without taking time to think that perhaps this family had abused its freedom. Sentiment was the easy thing. But logic reminded a man that some people were quarrelsome, that some people insisted on living their neighbors' lives, that some people were offensive.

There were people with moral codes they clung to and lived by, people

who worshiped in what they held to be the only orthodox way, people who clung to some idea – some rock on which their lives rested. Well and good. But if they tried to inflict these reforms on their neighbors, patience could only go so far, and the tolerance of fanaticism last just so long.

Kimmensen sighed as he fumbled with his seat belt buckle, closed the power contacts, and engaged the vanes. "We're haunted by the past, Jem," he said tiredly. "Salmaggi can't keep himself from thinking like a supervisor. He can't learn that quarrels between families are the families' business." He nodded to himself. "It's a hard thing to learn, sometimes. But if Salmaggi doesn't, one of these days he may not come back from his hoppings around the area."

"I wouldn't be worrying, Joe," Jem said with a nod of agreement. "But Salmaggi tells me there's a fellow who wants to get a group of men together and take an army into the northwest. This fellow – Anse Messerschmidt's his name – is saying these things are raids by the Northwesters."

"Is he getting much support?" Kimmensen asked quickly.

"I don't know. It doesn't seem likely. After all, the Northwesters're people just like us."

Kimmensen frowned, and for one bad moment he was frightened. He remembered, in his youth – it was only twenty-eight years ago – Bausch strutting before his cheering crowds, bellowing hysterically about the enemies surrounding them – the lurking armies of the people to the south, to the east, the northwest; every compass point held enemies for Bausch. Against those enemies, there must be mighty armies raised. Against those enemies, there must be Leadership – firm Leadership: Bausch.

"Armies!" he burst out. "The day Freemen organize to invade another area is the day they stop being Freemen. They become soldiers, loyal to the army and their generals. They lose their identification with their homes and families. They become a separate class – an armed, organized class of military specialists no one family can stand against. And on that day, freedom dies for everybody.

"You understand me, don't you, Jem? You understand how dangerous talk like this Messerschmidt's can be?" Kimmensen knew Bendix did. But it was doubly important to be doubly assured, just now.

Bendix nodded, his quick, easy smile growing on his face. "I feel the same way, Joe." And Kimmensen, looking at him, saw that Jem meant it. He had watched Jem grow up – had worked with him for the past ten years. They thought alike; their logic followed the same, inevitable paths.

Kimmensen couldn't remember one instance of their disagreeing on anything.

The plane was high in the air. Below them, green forests filled the valleys, and the snow on the mountaintops was red with the light of sunset. On the east sides of the slopes, twilight cast its shadows. Kimmensen looked down at the plots of open ground, some still in crops, others light green with grass against the dark green of the trees. Off in the far west, the sun was half in the distant ocean, and the last slanting rays of direct light reflected from the snug roofs of houses nestled under trees.

Here is the world, Kimmensen thought. Here is the world we saw in the times before we fought out our freedom. Here is the world Dubrovic gave us, working in the cold of his cellar, looking like a maniac gnome, with his beard and his long hair, putting circuits together by candle-light, coughing blood and starving. Here is the world Anna and I saw together.

That was a long time ago. I was thirty-two, and Anna a worn thirty, with silver in her fine black hair, before we were free to build the house and marry. In the end, we weren't as lucky as we thought, to have come through the fighting years. The doctors honestly believed they'd gotten all the toxins out of her body, but in the end, she died.

Still, here it is, or almost. It isn't given to very many men to have their dreams come true in their lifetimes.

Kimmensen's house stood on the side of a mountain, with its back to the north and glass walls to catch the sun. There was a patio, and a lawn. Kimmensen had been the first to break away from the old agricultural life in this area. There was no reason why a man couldn't like synthetic foods just as well as the natural varieties. Like so many other things, the clinging to particular combinations of the few basic flavors was a matter of education and nothing else. With Direct Power to transmute chemicals for him, a man was not tied to cows and a plow.

The plane settled down to its stand beside the house, and they got out and crossed the patio. The carefully tended dwarf pines and cedars in their planters were purple silhouettes against the sky. Kimmensen opened the way into the living room, then slid the glass panel back into place behind them.

The living room was shadowy and almost dark, despite the glass. Kimmensen crossed the softly whispering rug. "Apparently Susanne hasn't come home yet. She told me she was going to a party this afternoon." He took a deep, unhappy breath. "Sit down, Jem – I'll get you a drink while we're waiting." He touched the base of a lamp on an end table, and the

room came to life under a soft glow of light. The patio went pitch-black by comparison.

"Scotch and water, Jem?"

Bendix held up a thumb and forefinger pressed together. "Just a pinch, Joe. A little goes a long way with me, you know."

Kimmensen nodded and went into the kitchen.

The cookers were glowing in the dark, pilot lights glinting. He touched the wall switch. The light panels came on, and he took glasses out of the cupboard. Splashing water from the ice-water tap, he shook his head with resigned impatience.

Susanne should have been home. Putting the dinner in the cookers and setting the timers was not enough, no matter how good the meal might be – and Susanne was an excellent meal planner. She ought to have been home, waiting to greet them. He wouldn't have minded so much, but she'd known Jem was going to be here. If she had to go to the Ennerth girl's party, she could have come home early. She was insulting Jem.

Kimmensen opened the freezer and dropped ice cubes into the glasses. She never enjoyed herself at parties. She always came home downcast and quiet. Yet she went, grim-faced, determined.

He shook his head again, and started to leave the kitchen. He stopped to look inside the cookers, each with its Direct Power unit humming softly, each doing its automatic work perfectly. Once the prepared dishes had been tucked inside and the controls set, they could be left to supervise themselves. One operation followed perfectly upon another, with feedback monitors varying temperatures as a dish began to brown, with thermo-couples and humidity detectors always on guard, built into an exactly balanced system and everything done just right.

He touched the temperature controls, resetting them just a trifle to make sure, and went back out into the living room. He took the bottle of carefully compounded Scotch out of the sideboard, filled two shot glasses, and went over to Bendix.

"Here you are, Jem." He sat down jerkily, dropping rather than sinking into the chair.

Dying angered him. He felt no slowdown in his mind – his brain, he was sure, could still chew a fact the way it always had. He felt no drying out in his brain cells, no mental sinews turning into brittle cords.

He'd been lucky, yes. Not many men had come whole out of the fighting years. Now his luck had run out, and that was the end of it. There were

plenty of good men long in the ground. Now he'd join them, not having done badly. Nothing to be ashamed of, and a number of grounds for quiet pride, if truth be told. Still, it made him angry.

"Susanne ought to be home any moment," he growled.

Jem smiled. "Take it easy, Joe. You know how these kids are. She probably has to wait 'til somebody else's ready to leave so she can get a lift home."

Kimmensen grunted. "She could have found a way to get home in time. I offered to let her take the plane if she wanted to. But, no, she said she'd get a ride over."

The puzzled anger he always felt toward Susanne was making his head wag. She'd annoyed him for years about the plane, ever since she was eighteen. Then, when he offered her its occasional use after she'd reached twenty-five, she had made a point of not taking it. He couldn't make head or tail of the girl. She was quick, intelligent, educated – she was potentially everything he'd tried to teach her to be. But she was willful – stubborn. She refused to listen to his advice. The growing coldness between them left them constantly at swords' points. He wondered sometimes if there hadn't been something hidden in Anna's blood – some faint strain that had come to the surface in Susanne and warped her character.

No matter – she was still his daughter. He'd do his duty toward her.

"This is really very good, Joe," Jem remarked, sipping his drink. "Excellent."

"Thank you," Kimmensen replied absently. He was glaringly conscious of the break in what should have been a smooth evening's social flow. "Please accept my apologies for Susanne's thoughtlessness."

Jem smiled. "There's nothing to apologize for, Joe. When the time comes for her to settle down, she'll do it."

"Tell me, Jem—" Kimmensen started awkwardly. But he had to ask. "Do you like Susanne? I think you do, but tell me anyhow."

Jem nodded quietly. "Very much. She's moody and she's headstrong. But that'll change. When it does, I'll ask her."

Kimmensen nodded to himself. Once again, his judgment of Bendix was confirmed. Most young people were full of action. Everything had to be done now. They hadn't lived long enough to understand how many tomorrows there were in even the shortest life.

But Jem was different. He was always willing to wait and let things unfold themselves. He was cautious and solemn beyond his years. He'd make Susanne the best possible husband, and an excellent president for the League.

"It's just as well we've got a little time," Jem was saying. "I was wondering how much you knew about Anse Messerschmidt."

Kimmensen frowned. "Messerschmidt? Nothing. And everything. His kind're all cut out of the same pattern."

Jem frowned with him. "I've seen him once or twice. He's about my age, and we've bumped into each other at friends' houses. He's one of those swaggering fellows, always ready to start an argument."

"He'll start one too many, one day."

"I hope so."

Kimmensen grunted, and they relapsed into silence. Nevertheless, he felt a peculiar uneasiness. When he heard the other plane settling down outside his house, he gripped his glass tighter. He locked his eyes on the figure of Susanne walking quickly up to the living room wall, and the lean shadow behind her. Then the panel opened, and Susanne and her escort stepped out of the night and into the living room. Kimmensen took a sudden breath. He knew Susanne, and he knew that whatever she did was somehow always the worst possible thing. A deep, pain-ridden shadow crossed his face.

Susanne turned her face to look up at the man standing as quietly as one of Death's outriders beside her.

"Hello, Father," she said calmly. "Hello, Jem. I'd like you both to meet Anse Messerschmidt."

II.

It had happened at almost exactly four o'clock that afternoon.

As he did at least once each day, Kimmensen had been checking his Direct Power sidearm. The weapon lay on the desk blotter in front of him. The calloused heel of his right palm held it pressed against the blotter while his forefinger pushed the buttplate aside. He moved the safety slide, pulling the focus grid out of the way, and depressed the squeeze triggers with his index and little fingers, holding the weapon securely in his

folded-over palm. Inside the butt, the coil began taking power from the mysterious somewhere it was aligned on. Old Dubrovic, with his sheaves of notations and encoded symbology, could have told him. But Dubrovic had been killed in one spiteful last gasp of the old regime, for giving the world as much as he had.

A switch closed. Kimmensen released the triggers, slid the buttplate back, and pushed the safety slide down. The sidearm was working – as capable of leveling a mountain as of burning a thread-thin hole in a man. He put the sidearm back in its holster. Such was the incarnation of freedom. The sidearm did not need to be machined out of metal, or handgripped in oil-finished walnut. These were luxuries. It needed only a few pieces of wire, twisted just so – it was an easy thing to learn – and a few transistors out of an old radio. And from the moment you had one, you were a free man. You were an army to defend your rights. And when everybody had one – when Direct Power accumulators lighted your house, drove your plane, let you create building materials, food, clothing out of any cheap, plentiful substance; when you needed no Ministry of Supply, no Board of Welfare Supervision, no Bureau of Employment Allocation, no Ministry of the Interior, no National Police – when all these things were as they were, then the world was free.

He smiled to himself. Not very many people thought of it in those technical terms, but it made no difference. They knew how it felt. He remembered talking to an old man, a year after the League was founded.

"Mr. Kimmensen, don't talk no Silas McKinley to me. I ain't never read a book in my life. I remember young fellers comin' around to court my daughter. Every once in a while, they'd get to talkin' politics with me – I gotta admit, my daughter wasn't so much. They'd try and explain about Fascism and Bureaucracy and stuff like that, and they used to get pretty worked up, throwin' those big words around. All I knew was, the government fellers used to come around and take half of my stuff for taxes. One of 'em finally come around and took my daughter. And I couldn't do nothin about it. I used to have to work sixteen hours a day just to eat.

"O.K., so now you come around and try and use your kind of big words on me. All I know is, I got me a house, I got me some land, and I got me a wife and some new daughters. And I got me a gun, and ain't nobody gonna take any of 'em away from me." The old man grinned and patted the weapon at his waist. "So, if it's all the same to you, I'll just say anything you say is O.K. by me long's it adds up to me bein' my own boss."

That had been a generation ago. But Kimmensen still remembered it as the best possible proof of the freedom he believed in. He had paid great

prices for it in the past. Now that the old regime was as dead as most of the men who remembered it, he would still have been instantly ready to pay them again.

But no one demanded those sacrifices. Twenty-eight years had passed, as uneventful and unbrokenly routine as the first thirty years of his life had been desperate and dangerous. Even the last few traces of administration he represented would soon have withered away, and then his world would be complete. He reached for the next paper in his IN basket.

He felt the thready flutter in his chest and stiffened with surprise. He gripped the edge of his desk, shocked at the way this thing was suddenly upon him. A bubble effervesced wildly in the cavity under his ribs, like a liquid turned hot in a flash.

He stared blindly. Here it was, in his fifty-ninth year. The knock on the door. He'd never guessed how it would finally come. It hadn't had to take the form of this terrible bubble. It might as easily have been a sudden sharp burst behind his eyes or a slower, subtler gnawing at his vitals. But he'd known it was coming, as every man knows and tries to forget it is coming.

The searing turbulence mounted into his throat. He opened his mouth, strangling. Sudden cords knotted around his chest and, even strangling, he groaned. Angina pectoris – pain in the chest – the second-worst pain a man can feel.

The bubble burst and his jaws snapped shut, his teeth mashing together in his lower lip. He swayed in his chair and thought:

That's it. Now I'm an old man.

After a time, he carefully mopped his lips and chin with a handkerchief and pushed the bloodied piece of cloth into the bottom of his wastebasket, under the crumpled disposal of his day's work. He kept his lips compressed until he was sure the cuts had clotted, and decided that, with care, he could speak and perhaps even eat without their being noticed.

Suddenly, there were many things for him to decide quickly. He glanced at the clock on his desk. In an hour, Jem Bendix would be dropping by from his office down the hall. It'd be time to go home, and tonight Jem was invited to come to dinner.

Kimmensen shook his head. He wished he'd invited Jem for some other day. Then he shrugged, thinking: I'm acting as though the world's changed. It hasn't; I have. Some arrangements will have to change, but

they will change for the quicker.

He nodded to himself. He'd wanted Susanne and Jem to meet more often. Just as well he'd made the invitation for tonight. Now, more than ever, that might be the solution to one problem. Susanne was twenty-five now; she couldn't help but be losing some of her callow ideas. Give her a husband's firm hand and steadying influence, a baby or two to occupy her time, and she'd be all right. She'd never be what he'd hoped for in a daughter, but it was too late for any more efforts toward changing that. At least she'd be all right.

He looked at his clock again. Fifty-five minutes. Time slipped away each moment your back was turned.

He hooked his mouth, forgetting the cuts, and winced. He held his palm pressed against his lips and smiled wryly in his mind. Five minutes here, five there, and suddenly twenty-eight years were gone. Twenty-eight years here in this office. He'd never thought it'd take so long to work himself out of a job, and here he wasn't quite finished even yet. When he'd accepted the League presidency, he thought he only needed a few years – two or three – before the medical and educational facilities were established well enough to function automatically. Well, they had been. Any League member could go to a hospital or a school and find another League member who'd decided to become a doctor or a teacher.

That much had been easy. In some areas, people had learned to expect cooperation from other people, and had stopped expecting some all-powerful Authority to step in and give orders. But then, medicine and education had not quite gotten under the thumb of the State in this part of the world.

The remainder had been hard. He'd expected, in a sort of naive haze, that everyone could instantly make the transition from the old regime to the new freedom. If he'd had any doubts at all, he'd dismissed them with the thought that this was, after all, mountainous country, and mountaineers were always quick to assert their personal independence. Well, they were. Except for a lingering taint from what was left of the old generation, the youngsters would be taking to freedom as naturally as they drew breath. But it had taken a whole generation. The oldsters still thought of a Leader when they thought of their president. They were accustomed to having an Authority think for them, and they confused the League with a government.

Kimmensen shuffled through the papers on his desk. There they were; requests for food from areas unused to a world where no one issued

Agricultural Allocations, letters from people styling themselves Mayors of towns... . The old fictions died hard. Crazy old Dubrovic had given men everywhere the weapon of freedom, but only time and patience would give them full understanding of what freedom was.

Well, after all, this area had been drowned for centuries in the blood of rebellious men. It was the ones who gave in easily who'd had the leisure to breed children. He imagined things were different in the Western Hemisphere, where history had not had its tyrannous centuries to grind away the spirited men. But even here, more and more families were becoming self-contained units, learning to synthesize food and turn farms into parks, abandoning the marketplace towns that should have died with the first MGB man found burned in an alley.

It was coming – the day when all men would be as free of their past as of their fellow men. It seemed, now, that he would never completely see it. That was too bad. He'd hoped for at least some quiet years at home. But that choice had been made twenty-eight years ago.

Sometimes a man had to be a prisoner of his own conscience. He could have stayed home and let someone else do it, but freedom was too precious to consign to someone he didn't fully trust.

Now he'd have to call a League election as soon as possible. Actually, the snowball was well on its way downhill, and all that remained for the next president was the tying up of some loose ends. The business in the outlying districts – the insistence on mistaking inter-family disputes for raids from the northwest – would blow over. A society of armed Freeman families had to go through such a period. Once mutual respect was established – once the penalty for anti-sociability became quite dear – then the society would function smoothly.

And as for who would succeed him, there wasn't a better candidate than Jem Bendix. Jem had always thought the way he did, and Jem was intelligent. Furthermore, everyone liked Jem – there'd be no trouble about the election.

So that was settled. He looked at his clock again and saw that he had a half hour more. He pushed his work out of the way, reached into a drawer, and took out a few sheets of paper. He frowned with impatience at himself as his hands fumbled. For a moment, he brooded down at the seamed stumps where the old regime's police wires had cut through his thumbs. Then, holding his pen clamped firmly between his middle and index knuckles, he began writing:

"I, Joseph Ferassi Kimmensen, being of sound mind and mature years,

do make the following Will... "

III.

Messerschmidt was tall and bony as a wolfhound. His long face was pale, and his ears were large and prominent. Of his features, the ears were the first to attract a casual glance. Then attention shifted to his mouth, hooked in a permanent sardonic grimace under his blade of a nose. Then his eyes caught, and held. They were dark and set close together, under shaggy black eyebrows. There was something in them that made Kimmensen's hackles rise.

He tried to analyze it as Messerschmidt bowed slightly from the hips, his hands down at the sides of his dark clothes.

"Mr. President, I'm honored."

"Messerschmidt." Kimmensen acknowledge, out of courtesy. The man turned slightly and bowed to Bendix. "Mr. Secretary."

And now Kimmensen caught it. Toward him, Messerschmidt had been a bit restrained. But his bow to Jem was a shade too deep, and his voice as he delivered Jem's title was too smooth.

It was mockery. Deep, ineradicable, and unveiled, it lurked in the backs of Messerschmidt's eyes. Mockery – and the most colossal ego Kimmensen had ever encountered.

Good God! Kimmensen thought, I believed we'd killed all your kind!

"Father, I invited – " Susanne had begun, her face animated for once. Now she looked from Jem to Kimmensen and her face fell and set into a mask. "Never mind," she said flatly. She looked at Kimmensen again, and turned to Messerschmidt. "I'm sorry, Anse. You'll excuse me. I have to see to the dinner."

"Of course, Susanne," Messerschmidt said. "I hope to see you again."

Susanne nodded – a quick, sharp jerk of her head – and went quickly into the kitchen. Messerschmidt, Jem, and Kimmensen faced each other.

"An awkward situation," Messerschmidt said quietly.

"You made it," Kimmensen answered.

Messerschmidt shrugged. "I'll take the blame. I think we'd best say good night."

"Good night."

"Good night, Mr. President... Mr. Secretary."

Messerschmidt bowed to each of them and stepped out of the living room, carefully closing the panel behind him. He walked through the pool of light from the living room and disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the patio. In a minute, Kimmensen heard his plane beat its way into the air, and then he sat down again, clutching his glass. He saw that Bendix was white-lipped and shaking.

"So now I've met him," Kimmensen said, conscious of the strain of his voice.

"That man can't be allowed to stay alive!" Bendix burst out. "If all the things I hate were ever personified, they're in him."

"Yes," Kimmensen said, nodding slowly. "You're right – he's dangerous." But Kimmensen was less ready to let his emotions carry him away. The days of political killings were over – finished forever. "But I think we can trust the society to pull his teeth."

Kimmensen hunched forward in thought. "We'll talk about it tomorrow, at work. Our personal feelings are unimportant, compared to the steps we have to take as League officers."

That closed the matter for tonight, as he'd hoped it would. He still hoped that somehow tonight's purpose could be salvaged.

In that, he was disappointed. It was an awkward, forced meal, with the three of them silent and pretending nothing had happened, denying the existence of another human being. They were three people attempting to live in a sharply restricted private universe, their conversation limited to comments on the food. At the end of the evening, all their nerves were screaming. Susanne's face was pinched and drawn together, her temples white. When Kimmensen blotted his lips, he found fresh blood on the napkin.

Jem stood up awkwardly. "Well... thank you very much for inviting me, Joe." He looked toward Susanne and hesitated. "It was a delicious meal, Sue. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Well... I'd better be getting home... "

Kimmensen nodded, terribly disappointed. He'd planned to let Susanne fly Jem home.

"Take the plane, Jem," he said finally. "You can pick me up in the

morning."

"All right. Thank you... . Good night, Sue."

"Good night"

"Joe."

"Good night, Jem." He wanted to somehow restore Bendix's spirits. "We'll have a long talk about that other business in the morning," he reminded him.

"Yes, sir." It did seem to raise his chin a little.

After Jem had left, Kimmensen turned slowly toward Susanne. She sat quietly, her eyes on her empty coffee cup.

Waiting, Kimmensen thought.

She knew, of course, that she'd hurt him badly again. She expected his anger. Well, how could he help but be angry? Hadn't any of the things he'd told her ever made any impression on her?

"Susanne."

She raised her head and he saw the stubborn, angry set to her mouth. "Father, please don't lecture me again." Every word was low, tight, and controlled.

Kimmensen clenched his hands. He'd never been able to understand this kind of defiance. Where did she get that terribly misplaced hardness in her fiber? What made her so unwilling to listen when someone older and wiser tried to teach her?

If I didn't love her, he thought, this wouldn't matter to me. But in spite of everything, I do love her. So I go on, every day, trying to make her see.

"I can't understand you," he said. "What makes you act this way? Where did it come from? You're nothing like your mother," – though, just perhaps, even if the thought twisted his heart, she was – "and you're nothing like me."

"I am," she said in a low voice, looking down again. "I'm exactly like you."

When she spoke nonsense like that, it annoyed him more than anything else could have. And where anger could be kept in check, annoyance could not.

"Listen to me," he said.

"Don't lecture me again."

"Susanne! You will keep quiet and listen. Do you realize what you're doing, flirting with a man like Messerschmidt? Do you realize – has anything I've told you ever made an impression on you? – do you realize that except for an accident in time, that man could be one of the butchers who killed your mother?"

"Father, I've heard you say these things before. We've all heard you say them."

Now he'd begun, it was no longer any use not to go on. "Do you realize they oppressed and murdered and shipped to labor camps all the people I loved, all the people who were worthwhile in the world, until we rose up and wiped them out?" His hands folded down whitely on the arms of his chair. "Where are your grandparents buried? Do you know? Do I? Where is my brother? Where are my sisters?"

"I don't know. I never knew them."

"Listen – I was born in a world too terrible for you to believe. I was born to cower. I was born to die in a filthy cell under a police station. Do you know what a police station is, eh? Have I described one often enough? Your mother was born to work from dawn to night, hauling stones to repair the roads the army tanks had ruined. And if she made a mistake – if she raised her head, if she talked about the wrong things, if she thought the wrong thoughts – then she was born to go to a labor camp and strip tree bark for the army's medicines while she stood up to her waist in freezing water.

"I was born in a world where half a billion human beings lived for a generation in worship – in worship – of a man. I was born in a world where that one twisted man could tell a lie and send gigantic armies charging into death, screaming that lie. I was born to huddle, to be a cipher in a crowd, to be spied on, to be regulated, to be hammered to meet the standard so the standard lie would fit me. I was born to be nothing."

Slowly, Kimmensen's fingers uncurled. "But now I have freedom. Stepan Dubrovic managed to find freedom for all of us. I remember how the word spread – how it whispered all over the world, almost in one night, it seemed. Take a wire – twist it, so. Take some transistors – the army has radios, there are stores the civil servants use, there are old radios, hidden – make the weapon... and you are free. And we rose up, each man like an angel with a sword of fire.

"But if we thought Paradise would come overnight, we were wrong. The armies did not dissolve of themselves. The Systems did not break down.

"You take a child from the age of five; you teach it to love the State, to

revere the Leader; you inform it that it is the wave of the future, much cleverer than the decadent past but not quite intelligent enough to rule itself. You teach it that there must be specialists in government – Experts in Economy, Directors of Internal Resources, Ministers of Labor Utilization. What can you do with a child like that, by the time it is sixteen? By the time it is marching down the road with a pack on its back, with the Leader's song on its lips? With the song written so its phrases correspond to the ideal breathing cycle for the average superman marching into the Future at one hundred centimeters to the pace?"

"Stop it, Father."

"You burn him down. How else can you change him? You burn him down where he marches, you burn his Leaders, you burn the System, you root out – everything!"

Kimmensen sighed. "And then you begin to be free." He looked urgently at Susanne. "Now do you understand what Messerschmidt is? If you can't trust my advice, can you at least understand that much? Has what I've always told you finally made some impression?"

Susanne pushed her chair back. "No. I understood it the first time and I saw how important it was. I still understood it the tenth time. But now I've heard it a thousand times. I don't care what the world was like – I don't care what you went through. I never saw it. You. You sit in your office and write the same letters day after day, and you play with your weapon, and you preach your social theory as though it was a religion and you were its high priest – special, dedicated, above us all, above the flesh. You tell me how to live my life. You try to arrange it to fit your ideas. You even try to cram Jem Bendix down my throat.

"But I won't have you treating me that way. When Anse talks to me, it's about him and me, not about people I never met. I have things I want. I want Anse. I'm telling you and you can tell Bendix. And if you don't stop trying to order me around, I'll move out. That's all."

Clutching his chair, not quite able to believe what he'd heard, knowing that in a moment pain and anger would crush him down, Kimmensen listened to her quick footsteps going away into her room.

IV.

He was waiting out on the patio, in the bright cold of the morning,

when Jem Bendix brought the plane down and picked him up. Bendix was pale this morning, and puffy-eyed, as though he'd been a long time getting to sleep and still had not shaken himself completely awake.

"Good morning, Joe," he said heavily as Kimmensen climbed in beside him.

"Good morning, Jem." Kimmensen, too, had stayed awake a long time. This morning, he had washed and dressed and drunk his coffee with Susanne's bedroom door closed and silent, and then he had come out on the patio to wait for Jem, not listening for sounds in the house. "I'm – I'm very sorry for the way things turned out last night." He left it at that. There was no point in telling Jem about Susanne's hysterical outburst.

Jem shook his head as he lifted the plane into the air. "No, Joe. It wasn't your fault. You couldn't help that."

"She's my daughter. I'm responsible for her."

Jem shrugged. "She's headstrong. Messerschmidt paid her some attention, and he became a symbol of rebellion to her. She sees him as someone who isn't bound by your way of life. He's a glamorous figure. But she'll get over it. I spent a long time last night thinking about it. You were right, Joe. At the moment, he's something new and exciting. But he'll wear off. The society'll see through him, and so will Susanne. All we have to do is wait."

Kimmensen brooded over the valleys far below, pale under the early morning mist. "I'm not sure, Jem," he answered slowly. He had spent hours last night in his chair, hunched over, not so much thinking as steeping his mind in all the things that had happened so suddenly. Finally, he had gotten up and gone into his bedroom, where he lay on his bed until a plan of action slowly formed in his mind and he could, at last, go to sleep.

"It's not the matter of Messerschmidt and Susanne," he explained quickly. "I hope you understand that I'm speaking now as someone responsible to all the families in this area, rather than as the head of any particular one. What concerns me now is that Messerschmidt is bound to have some sort of following among the immature. He's come at a bad time. He's in a good position to exploit this business in the Northwest."

And I'm going to die. Kimmensen had to pause before he went on.

"Yes, in time his bubble will burst. But it's a question of how long that might take. Meanwhile, he is a focus of unrest. If nothing happens to check him now, some people might decide he was right."

Bendix chewed his lower lip. "I see what you mean, Joe. It'll get worse before it gets better. He'll attract more followers. And the ones he has now will believe in him more than ever."

"Yes," Kimmensen said slowly, "that could easily happen."

They flew in silence for a few moments, the plane jouncing in the bumpy air, and then as Bendix slowed the vanes and they began to settle down into the valley where the office building was, Jem asked "Do you have anything in mind?"

Kimmensen nodded. "Yes. It's got to be shown that he doesn't have the population behind him. His followers will be shocked to discover how few of them there are. And the people wavering toward him will realize how little he represents. I'm going to call for an immediate election."

"Do you think that's the answer? Will he run against you?"

"If he refuses to run in an election, that's proof enough he knows he couldn't possibly win. If he runs, he'll lose. It's the best possible move. And, Jem... there's another reason." Kimmensen had thought it all out. And it seemed to him that he could resolve all his convergent problems with this one move. He would stop Messerschmidt, he would pass his work on to Jem, and – perhaps this was a trifle more on his mind than he'd been willing to admit – once Messerschmidt had been deflated, Susanne would be bound to see her tragic error, and the three of them could settle down, and he could finish his life quietly.

"Jem, I'm getting old."

Bendix's face turned paler. He licked his lips. "Joe – "

"No, Jem, we've got to face it. Don't try to be polite about it. No matter how much you protest, the fact is I'm almost worn out, and I know it. I'm going to resign."

Bendix's hands jerked on the control wheel. Kimmensen pretended not to see it. For all his maturity, Jem was still a young man. It was only natural that the thought of stepping up so soon would be a great thrill to him. "I'll nominate you as my successor, and I'll campaign for you. By winning the election, you'll have stopped Messerschmidt, and then everything can go on the way we've always planned." Yes, he thought as the plane bumped down on the weathered plaza. That'll solve everything.

As Kimmensen stepped into his office, he saw Salmaggi sitting beside the desk, waiting for him. The man's broad back was toward him, and Kimmensen could not quite restrain the flicker of distaste that always came at the thought of talking to him. Of all mornings, this was a

particularly bad one on which to listen to the man pour out his hysterias.

"Good morning, Tullio," he said as he crossed to his desk.

Salmaggi turned quickly in his chair. "Good morning, Josef." He jumped to his feet and pumped Kimmensen's hand. "How are you?" His bright eyes darted quickly over Kimmensen's face.

"Well, thank you. And you?"

Salmaggi dropped back into his chair. "Worried, Josef. I've been trying to see you about something very important."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry I've been so busy."

"Yes. So I thought if you weren't too busy this morning, you might be able to spare ten minutes."

Kimmensen glanced at him sharply. But Salmaggi's moon of a face was completely clear of sarcasm or any other insinuation. There were only the worried wrinkles over the bridge of his nose and at the corners of his eyes. Kimmensen could not help thinking that Salmaggi looked like a baby confronted by the insuperable problem of deciding whether or not it wanted to go to the bathroom. "I've got a number of important things to attend to this morning, Tullio."

"Ten minutes, Josef."

Kimmensen sighed. "All right." He settled himself patiently in his chair.

"I was up in the northwest part of the area again on this last trip."

"Um-hmm." Kimmensen, sacrificing the ten minutes, busied himself with thinking about Jem's reaction to his decision. Bendix had seemed totally overwhelmed, not saying another word as they walked from the plane into the office building.

"There's been another family burned out."

"So I understand, Tullio." Kimmensen smiled faintly to himself, understanding how Jem must feel today. It had been something of the same with himself when, just before the end of the fighting years, the realization had slowly come to him that it would be he who would have to take the responsibility of stabilizing this area.

"That makes seven in all, Josef. Seven in the past eight months."

"It takes time, Tullio. The country toward the northwest is quite rugged. No regime was ever able to send its police up there with any great success. They're individualistic people. It's only natural they'd have an unusual number of feuds." Kimmensen glanced at his clock.

It was a great responsibility, he was thinking to himself. I remember how confused everything was. How surprised we were to discover, after the old regime was smashed, that many of us had been fighting for utterly different things.

That had been the most important thing he'd had to learn; that almost everyone was willing to fight and die to end the old regime, but that once the revolution was won, there were a score of new regimes that had waited, buried in the hearts of suppressed men, to flower out and fill the vacuum. That was when men who had been his friends were suddenly his enemies, and when men whose lives he had saved now tried to burn him down. In many ways, that had been the very worst period of the fighting years.

"Josef, have you gone up there recently?"

Kimmensen shook his head. "I've been very occupied here." His responsibility was to all the families in the area, not to just those in one small section. He could never do his work while dashing from one corner of the area to another.

"Josef, you're not listening!" Kimmensen looked up and was shocked to see that there were actually glints of frustrated moisture in the corners of Salmaggi's eyes.

"Of course I'm listening, Tullio," he said gently.

Salmaggi shook his head angrily, like a man trying to reach his objective in the midst of a thick fog. "Josef, if you don't do something, Messerschmidt's going to take an army up into the Northwesters' area. And I'm not sure he isn't right. I don't like him – but I'm not sure he isn't right."

Kimmensen smiled. "Tullio, if that's what's on your mind, you can rest easy. I am going to do something. This afternoon, I'm going to make a general broadcast. I'm going to call an election. I'm resigning, and Jem Bendix will run against Messerschmidt. That will be the end of him."

Salmaggi looked at him. "Of who?"

"Of Messerschmidt, of course," Kimmensen answered in annoyance. "Now if you'll excuse me, Tullio, I have to draft my statement."

That night, when he came home, he found Susanne waiting for him in the living room. She looked at him peculiarly as he closed the panel behind him.

"Hello, Father."

"Hello, Susanne." He had been hoping that the passage of a day would dull her emotional state, and at least let the two of them speak to each other like civilized people. But, looking at her, he saw how tense her face was and how red the nervous blotches were in the pale skin at the base of her neck.

What happened between us? he thought sadly. Where did it start? I raised you alone from the time you were six months old. I stayed up with you at night when your teeth came. I changed your diapers and put powder on your little bottom, and when you were sick I woke up every hour all night for weeks to give you your medicine. I held you and gave you your bottles, and you were warm and soft, and when I tickled you under the chin you laughed up at me. Why can't you smile with me now? Why do you do what you do to me?

"I heard your broadcast, of course," she said tightly.

"I thought you would."

"Just remember something, Father."

"What, Susanne?"

"There are a lot of us old enough to vote, this time."

V.

Kimmensen shifted in his chair, blinking in the sunshine of the plaza. Messerschmidt sat a few feet away, looking up over the heads of the live audience at the mountains. The crowd was waiting patiently and quietly. It was the quiet that unsettled him a little bit. He hadn't said anything to Jem, but he'd half expected some kind of demonstration against Messerschmidt.

Still, this was only a fraction of the League membership. There were cameras flying at each corner of the platform, and the bulk of the electorate were watching from their homes. There was no telling what their reaction was, but Kimmensen, on thinking it over, decided that the older, more settled proportion of the League – the people in the comfort of their homes, enjoying the products of their own free labor – would be as outraged at this man as he was.

He turned his head back over his shoulder and looked at Jem.

"We'll be starting in a moment. How do you feel?"

Jem's smile was a dry-lipped grimace. "A little nervous. How about you, Joe?"

Kimmensen smiled back at him. "This is an old story to me, Jem. Besides, I'm not running." He clasped his hands in his lap and faced front again, forcing his fingers to keep still.

The surprisingly heavy crowd here in the plaza was all young people.

In a moment, the light flashed on above the microphone, and Kimmensen stood up and crossed the platform. There was a good amount of applause from the crowd, and Kimmensen smiled down at them. Then he lifted his eyes to the camera that had flown into position in front of and above him. "Fellow citizens," he began, "as you know, I'm not running in this election." There was silence from the crowd. He'd half expected some sort of demonstration of disappointment – at least a perfunctory one. There was none. Well, he'd about conceded this crowd of youngsters to Messerschmidt. It was the people at home who mattered.

"I'm here to introduce the candidate I think should be our next League President – Secretary Jem Bendix."

This time the crowd reacted. As Jem got up and bowed, and the other cameras focussed on him, there was a stir in the plaza, and one young voice broke in: "Why introduce him? Everybody knows him."

"Sure," somebody else replied. "He's a nice guy."

Messerschmidt sat quietly in his chair, his eyes still on the mountains. He made a spare figure in his dark clothes, with his pale face under the shock of black hair.

Kimmensen started to go on as Jem sat down. But then, timed precisely for the second when he was firmly back in his chair, the voice that had shouted the first time added: "But who wants him for President?"

A chorus of laughter exploded out of the crowd. Kimmensen felt his stomach turn icy. That had been pre-arranged. Messerschmidt had the crowd packed. He'd have to make the greatest possible effort to offset this. He began speaking again, ignoring the outburst.

"We're here today to decide whom we want for our next president. But in a greater sense, we are here to decide whether we shall keep our freedom or whether we shall fall back into a tyranny as odious as any, as evil as any that crushed us to the ground for so long."

As he spoke, the crowd quieted. He made an impressive appearance on a platform, he knew. This was an old story to him, and now he made use of all the experience gathered through the years.

"We are here to decide our future. This is not just an ordinary election. We are here to decide whether we are going to remain as we are, or whether we are going to sink back into the bloody past."

As always, he felt the warmth of expressing himself – of reaffirming the principles by which he lived. "We are here to choose between a life of peace and harmony, a life in which no man is oppressed in any way by any other, a life of fellowship, a life of peaceful trade, a life of shared talents and ideals – or a life of rigid organization, of slavery to a high-sounding phrase and a remorseless system of government that fits its subjects to itself rather than pattern itself to meet their greatest good."

He spoke to them of freedom – of what life had been like before they were born, of how bitter the struggle had been, and of how Freemen ought to live.

They followed every word attentively, and when he finished he sat down to applause.

He sat back in his chair. Jem, behind him, whispered:

"Joe, that was wonderful! I've never heard it better said. Joe, I... I've got to admit that before I heard you today, I was scared – plain scared. I didn't think I was ready. It – it seemed like such a big job, all alone... . But now I know you're with me, forever... "

Messerschmidt got up. It seemed to Kimmensen as though the entire crowd inhaled simultaneously.

"Fellow citizens." Messerschmidt delivered the opening flatly, standing easily erect, and then stood waiting. The attention of the crowd fastened on him, and the cameras dipped closer.

"First," Messerschmidt said, "I'd like to pay my respects to President Kimmensen. I can truthfully say I've never heard him deliver that speech more fluently." A ripple of laughter ran around the crowd. "Then, I'd like to simply ask a few questions." Messerschmidt had gone on without waiting for the laughter to die out. It stopped as though cut by a knife. "I would have liked to hear Candidate Bendix make his own speech, but I'm afraid he did." Messerschmidt turned slightly toward Bendix's chair. In Kimmensen's judgment, he was not using the best tone of voice for a rabble-rouser.

"Yes, Jem Bendix is a nice guy. No one has a bad word for him. Why should they? What's he ever done on any impulse of his own – what's he ever said except 'me, too'?"

Kimmensen's jaws clamped together in incredulous rage. He'd expected

Messerschmidt to hit low. But this was worse than low. This was a deliberate, muddy-handed perversion of the campaign speech's purpose.

"I wonder," Messerschmidt went on, "whether Jem Kimmensen – excuse me; Jem Bendix – would be here on this platform today if Josef Kimmensen hadn't realized it was time to put a shield between himself and the citizens he calls his fellows. Let's look at the record."

Kimmensen's hands crushed his thighs, and he stared grimly at Messerschmidt's back.

"Let's look at the record. You and I are citizens of the Freeman's League. Which is a voluntary organization. Now – who founded the League? Josef Kimmensen. Who's been the only League President we've ever had? Who is the League, by the grace of considerable spellbinding powers and an electorate which – by the very act of belonging to the League – is kept so split up that it's rare when a man gets a chance to talk things out with his neighbor?"

"I know – we've all got communicators and we've all got planes. But you don't get down to earth over a communicator, and you don't realize the other fellow's got the same gripes you do while you're both flapping around up in the air. When you don't meet your neighbor face to face, and talk with him, and see that he's got your problems, you never realize that maybe things aren't the way Josef Kimmensen says they are. You never get together and decide that all of Josef Kimmensen's fine words don't amount to anything.

"But the League's a voluntary organization. We're all in it, and, God help me, I'm running for President of it. Why do we stick with it? Why did we all join up?"

"Well, most of us are in it because our fathers were in it. And it was a good thing, then. It still can be. Lord knows, in those days they needed something to hold things steady, and I guess the habit of belonging grew into us. But why don't we pull out of this voluntary organization now, if we're unhappy about it for some reason? I'll tell you why – because if we do, our kids don't go to school and when they're sick they can't get into the hospital. And do you think Joe Kimmensen didn't think of that?"

The crowd broke into the most sullen roar Kimmensen had heard in twenty-eight years. He blanched, and then raged crashed through him. Messerschmidt was deliberately whipping them up. These youngsters out here didn't have children to worry about. But Messerschmidt was using the contagion of their hysteria to infect the watchers at home.

He saw that suddenly and plainly, and he cursed himself for ever having

put this opportunity in Messerschmidt's hands, But who would have believed that Freemen would be fools enough – stupid enough – to listen to this man?

Of course, perhaps those at home weren't listening.

"And what about the Northwesters' raids? Josef Kimmensen says there aren't any raids. He says we're settling our unimportant little feuds." This time, Messerschmidt waited for the baying laughter to fade. "Well, maybe he believes it. Maybe. But suppose you were a man who held this area in the palm of your hand? Suppose you had the people split up into little families, where they couldn't organize to get at you. And now, suppose somebody said, 'We need an army.' What would you do about that? What would you think about having an organized body of fighting men ready to step on you if you got too big for people to stand? Would you say, if you were that man – would you say, 'O.K., we'll have an army or would you say, 'It's all a hoax. There aren't any raids. Stay home. Stay split up?' Would you say that, while we were getting killed?"

The savage roar exploded from the crowd, and in the middle of it Messerschmidt walked quietly back to his chair and sat down.

Jem's fist was hammering down on the back of Kimmensen's chair.

"We should never have let him get on this platform! A man like that can't be treated like a civilized human being! He has to be destroyed, like an animal!"

Heartsick and enraged, Kimmensen stared across the platform at the blade-nosed man.

"Not like an animal," he whispered to himself. "Not like an animal. Like a disease."

Still shaken, still sick, Kimmensen sat in his office and stared down at his hands. Twenty-eight years of selfless dedication had brought him to this day.

He looked up at the knock on his open door, and felt himself turn rigid.

"May I come in?" Messerschmidt asked quietly, unmoving, waiting for Kimmensen's permission.

Kimmensen tightened his hands. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to apologize for my performance this afternoon." The voice was still quiet, and still steady. The mouth, with its deep line etched at one corner, was grave and a little bit sad.

"Come in," Kimmensen said, wondering what new tactic Messerschmidt

would use.

"Thank you." He crossed the office. "May I sit down?"

Kimmensen nodded toward the chair, and Messerschmidt took it. "Mr. President, the way I slanted my speech this afternoon was unjust in many respects. I did it that way knowingly, and I know it must have upset you a great deal." His mouth hooked into its quirk, but his eyes remained grave.

"Then why did you do it?" Kimmensen snapped. He watched Messerschmidt's face carefully, waiting for the trap he knew the man must be spinning.

"I did it because I want to be President. I only hope I did it well enough to win. I didn't have time to lay the groundwork for a careful campaign. I would have used the same facts against you in any case, but I would have preferred not to cloak them in hysterical terms. But there wasn't time. There isn't time – I've got to destroy this society you've created as soon as I can. After tonight's election, I will."

"You egomaniac!" Kimmensen whispered incredulously, "You're so convinced of your superiority that you'll even come here – to me – and boast about your twisted plans. You've got the gall to come here and tell me what you're going to do – given the chance."

"I came here to apologize, Mr. Kimmensen. And then I answered your question."

Kimmensen heard his voice rising and didn't care. "We'll see who wins the election! We'll see whether a man can ride roughshod over other men because he believes he has a mission to perform!"

"Mr. President," Messerschmidt said in his steady voice, "I have no idea of whether I am supplied with a mission to lead. I doubt it. I don't particularly feel it. But when I speak my opinions, people agree with me. It isn't a question of my wanting to or not wanting to. People follow me."

"No Freeman in his right mind will follow you!"

"But they will. What it comes down to is that I speak for more of them than you. There's no Utopia with room for men like you and me, and yet we're here. We're constantly being born. So there's a choice – kill us, burn us down, or smash your Utopia. And you can't kill more than one generation of us."

Messerschmidt's eyes were brooding. His mouth twisted deeper into sadness. "I don't like doing this to you, Mr. President, because I understand you. I think you're wrong, but I understand you. So I came here to apologize.

"I'm a leader. People follow me. If they follow me, I have to lead them. It's a closed circle. What else can I do? Kill myself and leave them leaderless? Someday, when I'm in your position and another man's in mine, events may very well move in that direction. But until the man who'll displace me is born and matures, I have to be what I am, just as you do. I have to do something about the Northwesters. I have to get these people back together again so they're a whole, instead of an aggregate of isolated pockets. I have to give them places to live together. Not all of us, Mr. President, were born to live in eagle rooks on mountain tops. So I've got to hurt you, because that's what the people need."

Kimmensen shook in reaction to the man's consummate arrogance. He remembered Bausch, when they finally burst into his office, and the way the great fat hulk of the man had protested: "Why are you doing this? I was working for your good – for the good of this nation – why are you doing this?"

Kimmenson had had too much. "That's enough of you and your kind's hypocrisy, Messerschmidt!" he choked out. "I've got nothing further I want to hear from you. You're everything I despise and everything I fought to destroy. I've killed men like you. After the election tonight, you'll see just how few followers you have. I trust you'll understand it as a clear warning to get out of this area before we kill one more."

Messerschmidt stood up quietly. "I doubt if you'll find the election coming out in quite that way," he said, his voice still as calm as it had been throughout. "It might have been different if you hadn't so long persisted in fighting for the last generation's revolution."

Kimmensen sat stiffly in Jem Bendix's office.

"Where's he now?" Bendix demanded, seething.

"I don't know. He'll have left the building."

Bendix looked at Kimmensen worriedly. "Joe – can he win the election?"

Kimmensen looked at Jem for a long time. All his rage was trickling away like sand pouring through the bottom of a rotted sack. "I think so." There was only a sick, chilling fear left in him.

Bendix slapped his desk with his hand. "But he can't! He just can't! He's bulldozed the electorate, he hasn't promised one single thing except an army, he doesn't have a constructive platform at all – no, by God, he can't take that away from me, too! – Joe, what're we going to do?" He turned his pale and frightened face toward Kimmensen. "Joe – tonight, when the

returns come in – let's be here in this building. Let's be right there in the room with the tabulating recorder. We've got to make sure it's an honest count."

VI.

There was only one bare overhead bulb in the tabulator room. Bendix had brought in two plain chairs from the offices upstairs, and now Kimmensen sat side by side with him, looking at the gray bulk of the machine. The room was far down under the building. The walls and floor were cement, and white rime bloomed dankly in the impressions left by form panels that had been set there long ago.

The tabulating recorder was keyed into every League communicator, and every key was cross-indexed into the census files. It would accept one vote from each mature member of every League family. It flashed running totals on the general broadcast wavelength.

"It seems odd," Bendix said in a husky voice. "An election without Salmaggi running."

Kimmensen nodded. The flat walls distorted voices until they sounded like the whispers of grave-robbers in a tomb.

"Did you ask him why he wasn't?" he asked because silence was worse.

"He said he didn't know whose ticket to run on."

Kimmensen absorbed it as one more fact and let it go.

"The first votes ought to be coming in." Bendix was looking at his watch. "It's time."

Kimmensen nodded.

"It's ironic," Bendix said. "We have a society that trusts itself enough to leave this machine unguarded, and now the machine's recording an election that's a meaningless farce. Give the electorate one more day and it'd have time to think about Messerschmidt's hate-mongering. As it is, half the people'll be voting for him with their emotions instead of their intelligence."

"It'll be a close election," Kimmensen said. He was past pretending.

"It won't be an election!" Bendix burst out, slamming his hand on his knee. "One vote for Bendix. Two votes for Mob Stupidity." He looked down at the floor. "It couldn't be worse if Messerschmidt were down here himself, tampering with the tabulator circuits."

Kimmensen asked in a dry voice: "Is it that easy?"

"Throwing the machine off? Yes, once you have access to it. Each candidate has an assigned storage circuit where his votes accumulate. A counter electrode switches back and forth from circuit to circuit as the votes come in. With a piece of insulation to keep it from making contact, and a jumper wire to throw the charge over into the opposing memory cells, a vote for one candidate can be registered for the other. A screwdriver'll give you access to the assembly involved. I studied up on it – to make sure Messerschmidt didn't try it."

"I see," Kimmensen said.

They sat in silence for a time. Then the machine began to click. "Votes, coming in," Bendix said. He reached in his blouse pocket. "I brought a communications receiver to listen on."

They sat without speaking again for almost a half hour, listening. Then Kimmensen looked at Bendix. "Those'll be his immediate followers, voting early," he said. "It'll even out, probably, when most of the families finish supper." His voice sounded unreal to himself.

Bendix paced back and forth, perspiration shining wetly on his face in the light from the overhead bulb. "It's not fair," he said huskily. "It's not a true election. It doesn't represent anything." He looked at Kimmensen desperately. "It's not fair, Joe!"

Kimmensen sighed. "All right, Jem. I assume you brought the necessary equipment – the screwdriver, the insulation, and so forth?"

After another half hour, Bendix looked across the room at Kimmensen. The removed panel lay on the floor at his feet, its screws rocking back and forth inside its curvature. "Joe, it's still not enough."

Kimmensen nodded, listening to the totals on the receiver.

"How many are you switching now?" he asked.

"One out of every three Messerschmidt votes is registering for me."

"Make it one out of two," Kimmensen said harshly.

They barely caught up with Messerschmidt's total. It was a close election. Closer than any Kimmensen had ever been in before. Bendix replaced the panel. They put out the room light and climbed back up to the ground level offices, bringing the chairs with them.

"Well, Joe, it's done." Bendix whispered though there was no one listening.

"Yes, it is."

"A thing like this creeps over you," Jem said in a wondering voice. "You begin by telling yourself you're only rectifying a mistake people would never make if they had time to think. You set a figure – one out of five. One person out of five, you say to yourself, would switch his own vote, given the chance. Then you wonder if it might not be one out of four – and then three... . Joe, I swear when I first suggested we go down there tonight, I hadn't a thought of doing – what we did. Even when I put the insulation and wire in my pocket, I never thought I'd–"

"Didn't you?" Kimmensen said. He felt disinterested. They'd had to do it, and they'd done it. Now the thing was to forget about it. "Good night, Bendix."

He left him and walked slowly through the corridors left over from another time. He went down the front steps and out into the plaza.

He found Messerschmidt waiting for him. He was standing in the shadow of the plane's cabin, and the plaza lights barely showed his face. Kimmensen stopped still.

Messerschmidt's features were a pale ghost of himself in the darkness. "Didn't you think I'd make spot-checks?" he asked with pity in his voice. "I had people voting at timed intervals, with witnesses, while I checked the running total."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Messerschmidt nodded slowly. "Mr. Kimmensen, if I'd thought for a minute you'd do something like that, I'd have had some of my men in that building with you." His hands moved in the only unsure gesture Kimmensen had ever seen him make. "I had a good idea of how the vote would go. When it started right, and suddenly began petering out, I had to start checking. Mr. Kimmensen, did you really think you could get away with it?"

"Get away with what? Are you going to claim fraud – repudiate the election? Is that it?"

"Wait – wait, now – Mr. Kimmensen, didn't you rig the vote?"

"Are you insane?"

Messerschmidt's voice changed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kimmensen. Once more, I have to apologize. I ought to have known better. Bendix must have done it by himself. I should have known – "

"No. No," Kimmensen sighed, "forget it, Messerschmidt. We did it together."

Messerschmidt waited a long moment. "I see." His voice was dead. "Well. You asked me if I was going to repudiate the election."

"Are you?"

"I don't know, yet. I'll have to think. I'll have to do something, won't I?"

Kimmensen nodded in the darkness. "Somehow, you've won and I've lost." Suddenly, it was all welling up inside him. "Somehow, you've arranged to win no matter what decent men do!"

"All right, Mr. Kimmensen. Have it your way."

"Whatever you plan to do now, I'll be home. If you should need me for a firing squad or some similar purpose."

Messerschmidt made an annoyed sound. "Mr. Kimmensen, you're notorious for your dramatics, but I think that's going too far." He walked away into the darkness.

Kimmensen climbed into his plane, sick at the night that covered him, and furious at Messerschmidt's ruthlessly sharp mind.

There was no one at home. He walked methodically through the house, doggedly opening Susanne's empty closets. Then he sat down in the living room with the lights off, staring out into the starlit, moonless night. He nodded sharply to himself.

"Of course," he said in the dark. "She'd be one of his timed voters." Then he sat for a long time, eyes straight ahead and focussed on nothing, every fold of his clothing rigidly in place, as though he were his own statue.

VII.

Until, hours later, orange flowers burst in the valley below. He came erect, not understanding them for a moment, and then he ran out to the patio, leaning over the parapet. On the faint wind, he heard the distant sound of earth and houses bursting into vapor. In the valleys, fire swirled in flashes through the dark, and against the glare of burning trees he saw bobbing silhouettes of planes. Men were far too small to be seen at this distance, but as firing stabbed down from the planes other weapons answered from the ground.

Suddenly, he heard the flogging of a plane in the air directly overhead. He jumped back, reaching for his weapon, before he recognized Jem

Bendix's sportster. It careened down to his landing stage, landing with a violent jar, and Bendix thrust his head out of the cabin. "Joe!"

"What's happening?"

"Messerschmidt – he's taking over, in spite of the election! I was home when I saw it start up. He and his followers're cutting down everybody who won't stand for it. Come on!"

"What are you going to do?"

Bendix's face was red with rage. "I'm going to go down there and kill him! I should have done it long ago. Are you coming with me?"

Why not? Kimmensen grimaced. Why wait to die here?

He clambered into the plane and buckled his seat belt. Bendix flung them up into the air. His hands on the wheel were white and shaking as he pointed the plane along the mountain slope and sent them screaming downward. "They're concentrated around the office building, from the looks of it," he shouted over the whine of air. "I should have known he'd do this! Well, I'm League President, by God, and I'm going to settle for him right now!"

If you don't kill us first, Kimmensen thought, trying to check over his weapon. Bendix was bent over the wheel, crouched forward as though he wanted to crash directly into the plaza where Kimmensen could see running men.

They pulled out of the dive almost too late. The plane smashed down through the undergrowth behind the office building. Bendix flung his door open and jumped out while the plane rocked violently.

Kimmensen climbed out more carefully. Even here, in the building's shadow, the fires around the plaza were bright enough to let him see. He pushed through the tangled shrubbery, hearing Bendix breaking forward ahead of him. Ben cleared the corner of the building. "I see him, Joe!"

Kimmensen turned the corner, holding his weapon ready. He could see Messerschmidt standing in a knot of men behind the wreckage of a crashed plane. They were looking toward the opposite slope, where gouts of fire were winking up and down the mountainside. Kimmensen could faintly hear a snatch of what Messerschmidt was shouting: "Damn it, Toni, we'll pull back when I – " but he lost the rest. Then he saw Bendix lurch out of the bushes ten feet behind them.

"You! Messerschmidt! Turn around!"

Messerschmidt whirled away from the rest of the men, instinctively, like

a great cat, before he saw who it was. Then he lowered the weapon in his hand, his mouth jerking in disgust. "Oh – it's you. Put that thing down, or point it somewhere else. Maybe you can do some good around here."

"Never mind that! I've had enough of you."

Messerschmidt moved toward him in quick strides. "Listen, I haven't got time to play games." He cuffed the weapon out of Bendix's hand, rammed him back with an impatient push against his chest, and turned back to his men. "Hey, Toni, can you tell if those Northwesters're moving down here yet?"

Kimmensen's cheeks sucked in. He stepped out into the plaza, noticing Bendix out of the corners of his eyes, standing frozen where Messerschmidt had pushed him. Kimmensen came up to Messerschmidt and the man turned again. His eyes widened. "Well, Mr. Kimmensen?"

"What's going on?"

Messerschmidt grunted. He pointed up the mountain. "There they are. I suppose they knew they had to move fast once I repudiated the election. They began airdropping men about a half hour ago. They're thick as flies up there, and they'll be coming down here as soon as they're through mopping up. That ought to be in a few minutes."

"Northwesters."

"That's right, Mr. Kimmensen."

"Well."

Messerschmidt smiled thinly. "I suppose you've guessed Susie's at my house?"

"Will she be all right?"

Messerschmidt nodded. "It's fortified. That's our next holding point when we fall back from here." His face was grave.

"Isn't there any chance of stopping them?"

Messerschmidt shook his head. "None. They're military specialists, Mr. Kimmensen. We don't have any trained men."

"I see."

Messerschmidt looked at him without any perceptible triumph in his eyes. "It seems, Mr. Kimmensen, that they have men like us in the Northwest, too. Unfortunately, theirs seem to have moved faster."

"What're you going to do?"

Messerschmidt looked up the mountain and shrugged. "Nothing. We got some of them in the air, but the rest are down. We may have weapons as good as theirs, but they know how to use them in units. It's quite simple. We'll try to hold and kill as many as we can when they come at us. We'll keep retreating and holding as long as we can, and when we reach the sea, if we get that far, we'll drown."

Kimmensen frowned. "Their men are concentrated on that mountain?"

"Yes."

"And you're just going to stand still and let the League be wiped out?"

"Just what, Mr. Kimmensen, would you like me to do?" Messerschmidt looked at him in fury. "I don't have time to train an army of our own. They've got us cold."

"Messerschmidt, I see eight men here with weapons."

"As far as anything we can accomplish goes, we might as well use them to toast sandwiches."

"We can scour that mountainside. Down to bare rock."

Messerschmidt blanched. "You're joking."

"I am not!"

"There are people of ours up there."

"There are people of ours all through this area. When the Northwesters are finished up there, they'll fan out and burn them all down, a little bit at a time."

Messerschmidt looked at Kimmensen incredulously. "I can't do it. There's a chance some of our people up there'll be able to slip out."

"By that time, the Northwesters'll be down here and dispersed."

Messerschmidt started to answer, and stopped.

"Messerschmidt, if you're going to do anything, you'd best do it immediately."

Messerschmidt was shaking his head. "I can't do it. It's murder."

"Something much more important than human life is being murdered on that mountain at this moment."

"All right, Kimmensen," Messerschmidt exploded, "if you're so hot for it, you give the order! There're something like a hundred League families up there. Half of them're still alive, I'd say. If the election's void, you're still president. You take the responsibility, if you can."

"I can."

"Just like that."

"Messerschmidt, the defense of freedom is instantaneous and automatic."

"All right, Mr. Kimmensen," Messerschmidt sighed. He turned to his men. "You heard him. It's his order. Aim at the mountain." He bared his teeth in a distorted laugh. "In freedom's name – fire!"

Kimmensen watched it happen. He kept his face motionless, and he thought that, in a way, it was just as well he hadn't long to live. But it was done, and, in a way, his old dream was still alive. In a way, Messerschmidt's hands were tied now, for in the end the Freeman defeated the trained armies and no one could forget the lesson in this generation.

He looked down at the ground. And in a way, Messerschmidt had won, because Kimmensen was dying and Messerschmidt had years. That seemed to be the way of it. And Messerschmidt would someday die, and other revolutions would come, as surely as the Earth turned on its axis and drifted around the sun. But no Messerschmidt – and no Kimmensen – ever quite shook free of the past, and no revolution could help but borrow from the one before.

Well, Bausch, Kimmensen thought to himself as the face of the mountain slowly cooled and lost color, I wonder what we'll have to say to each other?

© 1957 Royal Publications

Contact Between Equals

ALICIA CAME OVER to my daybed with a rustle of cotton and a whisper of silk, and bent over me with a breath of perfume. "Will? It's time. Are you awake, Will?"

Awake? Because I'd been lying there motionless, it hadn't occurred to her that I might be counting the chimes from the clock in its hand-rubbed wooden case on the mantel.

"Dr. Champley's here, Will."

"I know. I heard him drive up." I opened my eyes with a brush of lashes against the loosely-wound gauze that swathed my head, and let in the light.

The light was white. Alicia'd taught me during the past week – she'd played colored lights on the gauze, and taught me the names of the colors. We had also talked about perspective, and about the perception of shape and texture from a distance; I'm sure Dr. Champley had outlined a program of education, to get me a little re-oriented ahead of time.

Alicia had been surprised how easily it had gone. She ought not to have been. I'd listened to talking books all my life, and there was radio, of course. And forty years of hearing people in conversation around me. I was a graduate of Harvard Business School. I was a millionaire – five and six times the millionaire my father had been. That did not happen by accident. It could not have happened to a man who did not think intelligently, analytically, and systematically. I had an exact picture of the world, in one-to-one correspondence with the world perceived by the sighted. My reorientation would consist of no more than simple transposition from one system to the other.

Champley had gotten out of his car, parked on the gravel road fronting the cottage. He came up the flagstone steps to the porch, opened the screen door, crossed the porch, knocked briefly, opened the front door, and stepped briskly into the room. The screen door of the porch sighed shut on its air spring, and latched.

"Hello, Doctor," Alicia said.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Schaeffer. Is Mr. Schaeffer awake?"

It was a long speech for him. I put it away in my mind, to flesh out what little I knew about him.

Up to now, he'd been little more than someone Alicia'd talked about a great deal; the famous, brilliant young surgeon who'd become interested in William Schaeffer's case, and who thought he could do something about it. I'd taken considerable thought on all the factors involved. But Champley had been all business during the brief examination in his office – a few gentle touches around the face, a lifting of my lids, a click of the unseen flashlight, a thoughtful grunt or two, and one muttered word: "Maybe."

No buttering up, no bedside manner. I'd liked that. All the other verdicts had come from men who went through elaborate lectures to hide their inability. And it was always definite: "Yes," or "No." The second had

at least been right. The first had been humbug.

Well, Champley'd brought it off, as far as we could tell at the moment. Alicia said it had only taken an hour's operating time. I'd come out of anesthesia in the ambulance, leaving Champley's clinic, and the most difficult part of the whole business had been remembering not to move my eyes at all for thirty-six hours. The ambulance had brought Alicia and me to this lake cottage of Champley's, because it was nearer his clinic than any of my lodges. Alicia and I had spent the week here alone, without distractions, working toward this time.

Well, I thought, I'm here, and he's here, and I'm getting impatient. "Doctor?"

"Yes, Mr. Schaeffer. Right here." He came across the raffia rug in crepe-soled shoes. He was wearing a tweed suit – a nubby tweed, that rubbed as he moved his arms and legs – and he smelled of aftershave lotion.

"You smelled like iodoform in your office." And he had not met me at his clinic. An anesthetist had put me under. I knew damnably little about him. Except, of course, for what Alicia had told me.

"Yes," he said. "Well, now, let's see what I look like." Bandage shears clicked in his hand. Alicia put her cool fingers on my shoulder.

There was a cold, greasy feeling of metal sliding along my cheek. The gauze pulled slightly. Then it lay limp across the bridge of my nose.

"Try to keep your eyes closed, Mr. Schaeffer. Just for the moment. Let the light come through the lids before you open them."

"All right." He lifted the gauze, and the light was pink. I lay quietly, gathering myself. I did not feel grossly excited. But all week I had been extremely restless and ill-at-ease. Perhaps I would not let myself feel excitement. Perhaps this was excitement. Now, of course, the feeling was strongest of all, with things approaching their climaxes.

I did not open my eyes until Champley asked me to. I opened them slowly, and all I saw at first were blurred colors. That was all right. All that was familiar. But there was the new business of focusing to be done, and that took some time. Binocular vision was something I understood in theory – though I had some rather distorted images of what: a lens might be – but I had to teach myself control of the necessary muscles.

After that, I had to make for myself all the discoveries a baby makes – what human beings looked like, where my hands and feet were; all the momentous things. I made them. I made them slowly and carefully. Alicia

and Champley were patient. Finally I felt sure of myself.

Alicia, it seemed, had yellow hair, and was wearing a green dress. Champley was rather taller than she. He had black hair, and his suit was brown. It was all rather strange, seeing things which had previously only occupied relative positions. But we got through it all, and easily enough.

I went outside with them, finally, wearing smoked glasses I stood like a child with an open primer. "Mountains. Forest. Sky. Clouds. Lake. Cottage. Cliff."

The cottage was built out from the side of the steep slope, with only the front porch touching earth at the edge of the narrow road that led down to the lake. The remainder was supported on pilings. I was made uneasy by all these things, but I shuffled my feet on the gravel of the road and turned my head so the breeze crossed my cheek, and then I was comfortable.

We went back into the cottage, and I sat down on the edge of the daybed. I suppose I was feeling a certain bravado at my new skill. I searched over the room. Daybed here. Fireplace there, with clock. Chairs, table, another small table with a slick-faced box on it. "That would be a television set, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but that's for another day," Champley said quickly. "We don't want too much strain." He opened a fresh package of gauze, and brought out two eyepads. Alicia stood in the center of the room, her legs bathed by a bar of sunlight exactly as I had heard a similar scene described in a book. The impression generated by the author had been one of youth and warmth. Alicia... Well, Alicia.

"Wait," I said. "I want to talk to you both."

"Of course," Champley said. "But you can do that just as well with your eyes bandaged."

"No. I want to watch your faces move. Sit down together in front of me."

Alicia raised her eyebrows toward Champley. Champley did not change expression in response. He made a faint wet sound when he moved his tongue away from the roof of his mouth. He moved to one of the two chairs in front of the fireplace and swung it around. He moved the other for Alicia, and both of them sat down.

I looked from one to the other, and fastened my glance on Champley.

"Well, you delivered," I said. "That excuses a great deal. But I won't give you Alicia and a fee in addition. You'll have to be satisfied with just her."

I had, for the first time, the opportunity to see that situation in which a writer inevitably says: "A look of consternation passed between them, and they burst into furious bickering. They began denying their guilt vehemently, and, in the end, fell to blaming each other for having been careless."

Alicia disappointed me. She merely turned to Champley and said: "I told you he was smarter than either one of us." Champley shrugged as though it hardly mattered, though it took me a moment's thought to understand what it was he had done with his shoulders. He said nothing, and continued to watch me with his face in repose. I took that for a sign of confidence, and did not like it.

"Very well," I said, "we understand each other. I'm grateful for your skill, Champley. I trust your other patients will enable you to support Alicia. But I can't understand why you and she went to all this trouble. Or where it all profits her. Does she think a sighted man will live to a riper old age than a blind one? And if so – I repeat – where has all this profited her?"

I did not like their reaction pattern. Not at all. I stood up and began prowling about the room.

"Sit down, Will!" Alicia said nervously.

That was more like it. But, why now? "Why?"

"You're making me nervous."

"Why now? Why must I sit still? Why must my eyes be bandaged immediately? What will I see? Why does this cottage seem a great deal bigger from the outside than the living room, bedroom, bath and kitchen I know?"

A look passed between them. It might have been consternation. Apparently, it had paid me to watch my feet as I walked and so learn the visual length of my average stride. "What's behind the kitchen?" I walked toward it, and Champley was up facing me, his schooled control deteriorating far enough to let me see it was a panic move.

"There's nothing back there," he said.

And that, of course, was patently ridiculous. I pushed by him and strode into the kitchen. There was a clear space along the wall, between a white box that was the refrigerator and the sink with its dripping faucet. There were arcing scuff marks on the floor. There was a door there, without a handle, hidden in the butted planks of the paneling. I ran my hands over

it. I found no way of opening it. Something on the other side, quite large, and breathing, rolled up and nudged against it. The planking creaked.

I turned quickly and went back into the living room. Alicia was tugging at the baseboard plug of the television set.

"Now, why," I said, "would that be the most important action you could take to keep me in ignorance?"

"It was loose, Will! I was pushing it back in!" she cried. She was practically out of control.

I shook my head. "Alicia."

Champley tried to stop me from going to the television set. He was impelled by urgency, but I was William Schaeffer. I brushed him aside and clicked the left-hand switch. Alicia stepped back.

The screen blazed up. It was flat, uncolored, and I could not adjust to that immediately. I scarcely heard what noise the set might be making. There was something pictured on it that I had never seen before, naturally enough, moving something like a mouth. Once I had absorbed that, I could listen. "... going to get you," it – or, rather, another component of the set said. The delivery was calm, without much intonation.

Alicia turned the set off sharply. "That's enough, Will. You'll – you'll hurt your eyes."

I almost laughed. But I was also curious. "What was that thing, anyway?"

"A children's program," Champley said.

"Well, all right, but what, specifically, was that thing?"

"A monster," Alice said irritably. "Please let Dr. Champley bandage your eyes now."

"A monster, eh?" An entire body of literature had suddenly come clear to me. "Fascinating." I turned the set on again.

"Champley," the monster promised in its unhurried tone, "I'm going to get you soon." Then the screen went blank.

I turned the set off and turned around.

"What a fantastic coincidence!" Champley said.

"Oh, it couldn't have said 'Champley'" Alicia exclaimed. "It must have been another name like it."

"It said 'Champley'" I told her. I went back to the daybed and sat down.

"All this is very interesting."

"Oh, Will!" Alicia snapped. "Don't be ridiculous! It was some kind of a coincidence. You happened to tune in some children's program at just the right instant."

"And the monster was pronouncing just the right name? Odd. How many Champleys do you suppose there are?" I was not feeling much elation. Cats may enjoy cat-and-mouse. I am not a cat. What I wanted was information.

Champley said nothing. Alicia continued to pay out her pathetic rope:

"This whole thing is... insane! You know very well there aren't any real monsters, and, if there were, what would they be doing on television?"

"Communicating," I said. "Now. Doctor Champley. Why would a monster want to get you?"

"Nothing's going to get me," Champley said.

"No doubt you think so," I said. "But you have already been proven a less effective human being than myself. I have no doubt there are other things in the Universe, as well, that could best you. The question is, where do I fit into your escape plan?"

And where did he meet this monster, and what had he done to incur its enmity? And so forth. But, first of all, why did he need me, why did he need me completely functional, and what did it profit Alicia?

I went quickly into the bedroom, and located the bureau by touch, with my eyes shut. I had no time to waste. With my hands, I found her purse. I opened my eyes, and opened the purse. It was full of gimcracks and written information in the form of a stuffed wallet. All I learned was that she carried a great deal of money, but it was her reaction to my search that I wanted most.

"He's in my wallet!" she cried in the living room. She was at the bedroom door immediately. "Stay out of my personal possessions!" she blazed.

I nodded gratefully. "Thank you very much, dear. You've been an unfailing help. Now – what's in your wallet that could give you away?" I thumbed through the leaves of a ring-bound insert. "Ah. These would be photographs." Like the television picture, they were flat and colorless under their protective celluloid.

She tried to snatch them, and I slapped her hand. Carefully I studied the pictures.

Alicia and Champley on the steps of an elaborate home. Alicia and Champley in a car, she at the wheel. Nothing else of interest, unless one counted a dozen poses of Alicia in her beauty-contest winning days.

I pursed my lips, and turned toward her. Something caught the corner of my eye. It was a glassy color picture, almost life-sized, of a dark, narrow-faced man. It hung from the back of the bedroom door, and moved.

"Who's that?" I asked sharply.

"That?" She laughed. "Why, that's a mirror. That's you, Will!"

"The Devil it is!" I snapped. Why do they think the blind don't know what they look like? Those pathetic scenes in the novels – the blinking eyes, fresh out from under the bandages; the upheld hand mirror; the wondering gasp: 'Is – is that me?' Claptrap. Move the muscles of a face for forty years – feel the flesh twist – shave it, touch it... what, in Heaven, name, do they think a blind man would have most immediately available for his study of the world, if not his own body? Color, no. Texture, shape, diagrammatic configuration, yes. At the very least, no one could ever foist a total stranger on...

I stopped dead still and touched my face. And it wasn't mine. I thought of the photographs. Alicia and Champley?

"Champley!" I flung the wallet into the living room. I thrust Alicia out of the way. Champley was standing just inside the living room, a hypodermic syringe waiting in his hand. I knocked it aside and closed my hands on his throat. "What did you do?" I asked calmly, calmly increasing the pressure. "How did we trade bodies?"

He could not answer, and pawed feebly at my arms. After a little while, I found myself able to let him go. I pushed him into a chair.

"Well," I said, "now I know what it profits Alicia." Alicia, dabbing at her eyes, slumped on the arm of his chair and stroked his neck.

I marched back and forth across the room, taking stock. "All right. The monster comes out from behind that secret door. He has no other escape, unless it's down a drop great enough to kill or seriously injure him. I say escape because he has an urgent desire but cannot as yet fulfill it. Q.E.D., you've got him caged in there. But he's working loose, and you don't dare go near him to secure him once more. All right. He comes out, he rolls into this room. What does he find? Does he find a blind stranger? No he finds Doctor Champley. He eats me, and you and Alicia live happily ever after. Good. So far, there's logic.

"More logic: you need a perfectly functioning Doctor Champley. You want Alicia. Both of you want my money. Ergo: You switch bodies with me, while ostensibly restoring my sight. You do restore my sight, because you're having no trouble seeing out of my eyes. Very good. Everybody's problem is solved. You perform these two complicated operations inside of an hour. Hold. Alicia says you do it inside an hour. No matter. You perform these complicated operations. That's marvelous enough, considering you had to be operating on yourself part of the time. How'd you do it – brain transplant? Good trick. Transmigration of souls? Just as good, but more complicated. Settle for brain transplant. Dandy trick. Impossible. How did you operate on yourself? You trusted another doctor? Faugh! You wouldn't trust your own mother.

"All right. You can do two impossible things before breakfast. I don't believe a word of it. No. You've got an automatic surgical machine, or machines. No such thing exists. No operative technique exists which would leave you and me walking around normally inside of a week, without a scar or a twinge. You're the one with the new eyes, and you're holding up perfectly. You've got hold of some fantastic medical techniques Johns Hopkins never heard of. Where'd you get 'em? What about you is different from every other living soul? You've met and offended a monster. Monster. Backtrack that. Alien. Alien being from some other world. Some other world with superior science. All right.

"All right, that's the source of your skill. Why does the monster hate you? Why did he give you medical skills? How did you get him caged in here?"

I stopped and drove my fist into my open palm. "Done!" I swung toward Champley and pointed my finger between his eyes. "The alien was sick. He probably crashed. He was injured, and told you how to help him. You agreed to patch him up, but you ran out on him instead, and started in on becoming a Park Avenue surgeon. Now you're fat and frightened. The monster's going to get you. What to do? You find a substitute for yourself – and I'm the patsy. Prove me wrong."

Champley's mouth opened. "I – "

"Prove me wrong!"

Champley shook his head. "No... ." he said huskily. "Y'r right."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Alicia demanded triumphantly. "Are you going to force Louis to re-transplant?" She laughed. "You can't do it. You can kill him, you can beat him – nothing you can do to him can possibly be as bad as what a loathsome thing like

that beast would do to him. You can't even buy your way out. You can't think your way out. No one but Louis can set up the surgical machine, and he would sooner die. But – kill him and what have you gained?"

"Kill him? Kill my own body? That wouldn't be my kind of thinking, Alicia. Let's try another tack."

"You can try all you want to. You're boxed in, Will."

"I doubt it. No part of this plan has gone right for you. I see no reason why the rest of it should."

"None of the other parts were important."

"I was referring to the general level of intelligence displayed."

"I hope you don't wonder why I'd be glad to get rid of you."

"In the most horrible way you could conjure up. Yes." I smiled. "I never wonder about anything, Alicia. I find out."

There was a perceptible creaking from the back of the cottage. Something quite large was pressing against the kitchen wall.

"What happens if I run for it?" I said thoughtfully. "No. That's no good. One, I'd be on foot and ignorant. You'd have a car to head me off. Two, it would take me some time to establish my identity, and some time longer before I dared tell anyone I had a monster locked up in a summer cottage. Three, Champley might be able to pass for me, with your coaching. Most important, that's a sloppy approach to the problem. The problem's here, and we're all here. Let's get at it."

"Never make it," Champley said, rubbing his throat. "You're good as dead. And you're welcome."

I sat down. "You two don't count. Only the situation gives you your power. All right, change the situation. Disarm you. Make friends with the alien."

"Wish you luck," Champley said. "He's been back there for eight years. He was in agony when he crawled in, and he's been in agony ever since. He hasn't eaten. He hasn't rested. He's been in there, while I waited for him to die, and I wouldn't be surprised if the only thing that keeps him alive is hate."

His voice went up in trembling hysteria, badly controlled. "He won't die! I waited. I waited, and he didn't die. He only grew more desperate. You can hear him. He doesn't care anymore how much he hurts himself. He won't die until he gets to me." Then he remembered what he'd done to me, and bared his teeth in joy. It must have been an especially virulent degree

of fear that had been haunting him.

"Let's think about this monster," I said. "Monster's what you call him. Let's try calling him an alien. Stranger in a strange land. Hurt. Lost his transportation – his spaceship, his whatd'youcallit, whatever he uses – or he'd limp home. All right. He's trapped, and hurt. Eight years? He's tough. But he can't function well. Along comes a native. What were you, Champley – medical student? Mail-order college quack? Somebody who might help. He establishes communication.

"Ah. How, Champley? How did you talk to each other?"

"Why don't you try torturing me to find out?"

"Umn. Might. Later. Let's see if I can work around you... It wasn't television. That's one-way. Does he ordinarily talk in electromagnetic frequencies? When he's among his own kind? Interesting. All I need is a microphone and a transmitter, then. None available. Out. All right. How did you talk to him. What kind of wig-wag system'd you use? Telepathy? No. Or this plan of yours would have collapsed a-borning."

I looked up at Champley. "No – it couldn't be: plain English speech? This whole substitution would never stand up... or, wait, yes it would. Monster comes out, propelled by years of hatred. Sees Champley – sees me. Champley says: 'Wait! I'm really William Schaeffer.' Does the monster listen? Does it stop? Would I?

"Plain English speech does it, Champley. All I have to do is go in the kitchen and talk to it while it's still trapped."

Champley reached into his pocket and brought out a flat, glittering blued thing. "All right, Schaeffer. That did it," he said. He pointed it at my knee, and I realized it was a gun. When he fired it, there was a loud noise, and my thigh wrenched as though a swinging girder had jabbed it. I cupped it in my hands and stared at it, grinding my lips between my teeth.

"Does it hurt, Will?" Alicia murmured.

"Don't worry," Champley told her. "It hurts. Now – Schaeffer; are you going to sit still and do what I tell you, or are you going to try to talk to the monster? I can cripple your other leg. And then your arms. I can leave you helpless on that bed. I suppose I could even break your spine. All I have to do is bandage you up, put new clothes on you over the bandages, and I don't think the monster'll stop to inspect you too closely."

There was a wet look to his and Alicia's faces. That would be perspiration, I thought.

Champley said: "I don't like you, Schaeffer. You're too slippery. Too quick. I'm not as smart as you are. The only thing I can do is be completely ruthless."

"That's not reserved for the exclusive use of the stupid," I said.

He licked his lips. "I don't want to break you up, Schaeffer. If possible, I want you moving when the monster comes out." He looked at me with a narrow-eyed smile. "I'd think you'd prefer to have a chance to run for it."

"Hobble for it," Alicia said.

"Crawl for it. Yes," I said, "no doubt that would be the ordinary man's preference. Perhaps it's mine."

"Quit it!" Champley cried. "I'm the man with the gun. Quit trying to take the initiative away from me! Now – be reasonable, damn you! You sit quiet and stop trying to wiggle out of this, and maybe you'll be in shape to get away from it when it comes out."

"I will make no further moves toward contacting the alien," I said.

He relaxed. "Good. Now – roll up the leg of your pants. Alicia, get a compress out of my bag. We can't have him bleeding to death."

"He'll grab me if I go over to him!" Alicia cried.

"I'll have the gun on him!" Champley said angrily. "He won't try anything!"

"He'll try anything!" Alicia answered back.

"Maybe he will and maybe he won't," Champley cried. "Would you rather have the monster grab me? Now, do what you're told!"

"Don't shout at me!"

"All right," Champley said in a hard voice, seething with temper. "I'll just point the gun at you. That's better than shouting."

Something massive rolled against the kitchen wall, and the house trembled.

"Just you remember something!" Alicia shouted at Champley. "Just you remember this plan of yours doesn't work out at all without me! Even if you get away from the monster, you're nothing without me!"

"By God, I might just try it and see if you're right about that or not!"

"Champley. Alicia," I said. I took my hands away from my thigh and watched the blood spurt. It was pumping out with considerable force.

That would be an arterial flow, I thought, raising my eyes and looking at them calmly.

"My God!" Alicia whispered.

"Get that compress," Champley said. "Get it quick! He's doing that deliberately!"

They hurried through the business of compressing my leg. It would have been absolutely stupid to take physical action against them. They weren't my antagonists.

The house shook again. Something broke in the kitchen wall with a loud crack.

Champley wiped his face. Alicia jumped up and stood erect. "I'm getting out of here. I'm going to wait out in the car."

"You stay here and finish tying up that compress! And when you're through with that, you're going to wipe up the rug and get new pants on Schaeffer."

"Shut up, the two of you," I said. I reached down and tied the bandage. Getting to my feet, I started across the room.

"Sit down, Schaeffer!" Champley shouted.

"I'm going into the bedroom to change my trousers. I'm not going to try to contact the alien. You and Alicia had better get busy at getting the blood off the floor." I made my clumsy way into the bedroom, hoping I had not overestimated the amount of blood I could spare and still continue to function normally. If they were going to keep on quarreling, I needed a quiet place to think. They were irritating me with their pettiness.

The monster had cut into the television circuits. He hadn't done it with apparatus. If he'd had any sort of machinery in there with him, he would long ago have converted it into a cutting tool. He would not be smashing himself bodily against that wall. Not in his condition. No matter how wrought-up he was. All right, he could use electromagnetics without apparatus. That was an extra-normal ability he had. One. If it was his only one, why did he waste that one possible trump card on a melodramatic gesture? Was he a fool? If he was a fool, I could either handle him on the spur of the moment or else no logical plan would work against him. Stop planning?

No. Assume he knows what he's doing. Assume more than one difference between him and a human being. Keep planning.

What kind of difference? Where's a pipeline into his brain? What do I

use to get a hold on him?

Why was he breaking out exactly now? His fury was reaching a climax, but how had he known Champley was in the cottage at just this time?

Had he heard Champley's – my – voice? I'd been in the cottage a week. Why was he moving now, and only now. I hadn't heard him before today. Were his ears sharper than mine?

Was my voice Champley's?

No. No, by God. My brain used vocal cords in a different way from Champley's. Champley and I were about of a size, and our voices roughly in the same range, but Champley's vocal cords couldn't possibly be identical in length and thickness with mine.

"Alicia!"

"What?" she asked shrilly from the other room.

"Nothing." I fastened the belt of the fresh pair of trousers. It was much more my voice than it was Champley's. It wasn't mine, but close enough to it to fool me through gauze wrapped carefully over my eyes and ears.

The alien couldn't have recognized it. He had some other way of knowing... .

The cottage shook. I stepped quickly out into the living room.

The kitchen wall broke down. There was a lurch, a tearing of nails out of wood, and something remorseless came rolling into the living room.

Alicia screamed, and Champley cried: "There he is – over there – that's Champley."

The alien made straight for Champley, took him, reached out, and took Alicia. They hung in the air.

"I have a business proposition to make," I said to the alien.

From somewhere on itself, the alien said: "Let's hear it."

Alicia drove the car, with Champley lolling beside her, his mouth slack and wet. The alien sat on the back seat beside me, covered by a blanket like a bundle of old clothes. From time to time, the alien reached out with part of itself and stroked Champley's neck. Whenever he did, Champley burst into tears.

"Oh, God," Alicia mumbled to herself all the way into New York. "Oh, God, it's all edges and angles and thorns. All black and all slick and all rolling."

"We're agreed, then," I said to the alien. "As soon as Champley and I have re-exchanged bodies, I will use the machine to heal you. Then my subsidiary corporations will begin construction of a new interstellar vessel for you. In return, you will pass to us as much scientific knowledge as we are capable of encompassing."

"Agreed," the alien said from under his covering. "You're much more satisfying to deal with than that other one."

"I should have known you'd recognize Champley no matter what disguise he was wearing."

"Recognize? Champley? I thought all you people were named Champley."

"No," I said slowly, "I, for instance, am William Schaeffer."

"Interesting," the alien said. "Well. Now I have to revise my warning. I like you, but that's beside the point. We're engaged in business. I have to say that if you betray me, I will get you, William Schaeffer. You understand that?"

"It's the best practical basis for doing business. Clear-cut."

"Yes. We're both practical men," the alien said. "I thought Champley was the best I could do, and took the chance. It's a shame I can't read minds, or I wouldn't have made the mistake. But I can literally see the presence of practicality, like a glow shining around a man's mind."

"You can," I said.

"Certainly," the alien told me. "I'm amazed at the difference in degree between you and Champley. It's the only worthwhile measure of intelligence. And as you said, practicality is the only worthwhile rule of conduct. In any environment, it's mandatory always to deal with the most practical creature and discard the others before they can muddle the picture. The ability to sense practicality directly is an invaluable survival trait. It has raised my people to the heights. It is what separates us from the animals. It is the test of humanity."

The alien touched me gently with part of himself. I felt nothing that would make me laugh or cry. It was simply a contact between two equals. He said, "That's why I took steps to remove Champley and that other person from any effective interference between us. I could instantly sense a brother in you."

And so we rode into New York City. So I became William Schaeffer, again. And now there is an alien race in the stars which is today a friend of Mankind.

© 1958, Mercury Press, Inc.

The Distant Sound of Engines

"Len? Lenny?" The unearthly man in the next bed was trying to wake me up.

I lay in the dark, my hands behind my head, listening to the traffic going by the hospital. Even late at night – and it was late whenever the man in the next bed dared to talk to me – the traffic outside was fairly heavy because the highway ran straight through town. That had been a lucky thing for me, because the ambulance attendant never had been able to stop the flow of blood out of my legs. Another half mile, another two minutes, and I would have been as dry as a castoff snakeskin.

But I was all right, now, except that the jackknifing truck had taken my legs off under the dashboard. I was alive, and I could hear the trucks going by all night. The long, long rigs; semi-trailers, tandems, reefers... coming up the seaboard from Charleston and Norfolk, going on to New York... coming down from Boston, from Providence... Men I knew, driving them. Jack Biggs. Sam Lasovic. Tiny Morris, with the ring finger of his right hand missing at the first joint. I was one up on Tiny, for sure.

Job in the dispatcher's office waiting for you, Lenny, I said to myself. No sweat. No more bad coffee, cold nights, sandpaper eyes. Getting a little old for the road, anyhow. Thirty-eight. Sure.

"Lenny... "

The best the man in the next bed would do was whisper. I wondered if he wasn't just afraid. He was afraid to talk at all in the daytime, because the nurses simply stuck a new needle in him every time he made a sound. Stuck it through a thin place in the bandages, they did, and walked away in a hurry. Sometimes they missed, and sometimes only some of the drug got under his skin, so that only his arm went numb. The man in the next bed bragged about the times that happened. He tried to make them miss, moving his arms a little. Sometimes they noticed, but more often they didn't.

He didn't want the needle, the man in the next bed didn't. The needle took away the pain, and without the pain, with bandaging all over his face, he didn't have any proof he was alive. He was a stubborn, smart man, fighting back that way, because he'd developed a craving for the stuff, even not being like you and me. I mean, from some different place.

"Lenny... "

"Hunh?" I said, fogging my voice. I always made him wait. I didn't want him to know I stayed awake all night.

"Awake?"

"Now."

"I'm sorry, Len."

"Okay," I said quickly. I didn't want him feeling obligated to me. "It's all right. I get plenty of sleep daytimes."

"Len. The formula for exceeding the velocity of light is... " And he began giving me the figures and letters.

Last night it had been the exact proportions of the metals in a high-temperature resistant alloy; the melting and pouring techniques for it; the hardening process. The night before, hull specifications. I listened until he was through.

"Have you got that, Lenny?"

"Sure."

"Read it back to me."

I worked in a diner three years, once. I could remember anything anybody told me – I didn't care how complicated – and rattle it off right back to him. It's a trick; you wipe your mind clean, open your ears, and in it comes: "Two grilled cheese to go; bacon and tomato, white toast, no mayonnaise. Three coffees; one black, no sugar; one light and sweet; one regular." You open your mouth, turn toward the sandwich man, and out it comes: "G.A.C. on two, seaboard. B.T. down, hold the mayo." You turn toward the coffee cups and put out your hands. Your fingers grab the cups, and you move to the spigot on the urn. You tap the milk jug handle three times over one cup, twice over the other. The third cup slides by automatically. The important part of your mind is a million miles away. You put the coffees down, and your mind wipes out that part of the order. The sandwich man hands you two wrapped squares and a plate with the B.T. on it. You give them to the customers, and your mind wipes out the

rest of it. It's gone, used up, and all the time the important part of your mind is a million miles away.

I listened to the rigs going up a hill in compound. Pittsburgh, Scranton, Philadelphia... Washington, Baltimore, Camden, Newark... A diesel went by – a flatbed, with I beams for a load – while I was reading back the last part of what he'd told me.

"That's right, Lenny. That's right!"

I suppose it was. In a diner, you eat the orders you foul up.

"Any more tonight?" I asked him.

"No. No, that's enough. I'm going to get some rest, now. Go back to sleep now. Thanks."

"Sure."

"No, don't be so casual. You're doing a big thing for me. It's important to me to pass these things on to you people. I'm not going to last much longer."

"Sure, you are."

"No, Lennie."

"Come on."

"No. I was burning as I fell. Remember the alternate radical in the equation I gave you the first night? The field was distorted by the Sun, and the generator restructured the... " He went on, but I don't remember it. I would have had to remember the original equation for it to make any sense to me, and even if I remembered it I would have had to understand it. This business of reading his equations back to him, see... that was a trick. Who wants to remember how many grilled cheese sandwiches to go did you sell during the day? I had a wise guy order in double talk, once. I read it back to him like a man running a strip of tape through a recorder, and I wasn't even listening.

"... So, you see, Lenny, I'm not going to live. A man in my condition wouldn't survive even in my time and place."

"You're wrong, Buddy. They'll pull you through. They know their business in this place."

"Do you really think so, Lenny?" He whispered it with a sad laugh, if you know what I mean.

"Sure," I said. I was listening to a tanker going by from the north. I could hear the clink of the static chain.

They had brought the man in the next bed in from what they figured was a real bad private plane fire. They said some farmer had seen him falling free, as if he'd jumped without a parachute. They hadn't been able to identify him yet, or find his plane, and he wouldn't give a name. The first two nights he hadn't said a word, until suddenly he said: "Is anybody listening? Is there someone there?"

I had spoken up, and he had asked me about myself – what my name was, what my trouble was. He wanted to know the name of the town, and the nation, and the date – day, month, and year. I told him. I'd seen him in his bandages, during the day, and a man in shape like that, you don't argue about his questions. You answer them. You're glad for the chance to do him a kindness.

He was a smart man, too. He spoke a mess of languages besides English. He tried me in Hungarian for a while, but he knew it a lot better than I did. It's been a long time since I left the folks in Chicago.

I told the nurse, the next day, that he'd been talking to me. The doctors tried to find out who he was and where from, but he didn't talk to them. He convinced them, I think, that he was back in a coma again; they hadn't much believed me when I said he'd talked sensibly at all. After that, I knew better than to tell anybody anything. If he wanted it his way, he was entitled. Except he found out, like I've said, that if he made a sound during the day, they'd give him another needle. You couldn't blame them. It was their way of doing him a kindness.

I lay back, and watched the ceiling begin getting light from the first touch of day outside the windows. Traffic was picking up outside, now. The rigs went by one after another. Farm produce, most likely, catching the market. Lettuce and potatoes, oranges and onions – I could hear the crates shifting on top of each other on the big stake bodies, and the creak of the tie ropes.

"Lenny!"

I answered right away.

"Lenny, the equation for coordinating spacetime is... " He was in a hurry.

"Yeah." I let it soak into the trick sponge in my mind, and when he asked me to read it back, I squeezed it dry again.

"Thank you, Lenny," he said. I could barely hear him – I began thumbing the night-call bell on the cord draped over the head of my bed.

The next day, there was a new man in the next bed. He was a hunter – a young fellow, from New York – and he'd put a load of birdshot all through his right thigh. It was a couple of days before he wanted to talk, and I didn't get to know him, much.

I guess it was the second or third afternoon after the new man had come in, when my doctor straightened up and pulled the sheet back over my stumps. He looked at me in a peculiar way, and said, offhandedly: "Tell you what, Lenny – suppose we send you down to surgery and take a little bit more off each of those, hmm?"

"Nuts, Doc, I can smell it, too. Why bother?"

We didn't have much more to say to each other. I lay thinking about Peoria, Illinois, which used to be more fun than it has been lately – for truckers, I mean – and St. Louis, and Corpus Christi. I wasn't satisfied with just the Eastern Seaboard anymore. Sacramento, Seattle, Fairbanks and that miserable long run over the Alcan Highway...

In the middle of the night, I was still remembering. I could hear the rigs out on the street, but I was really listening to the sound a Cummins makes going into one of those long switchback grades over the Rockies, and suddenly I turned my head and whispered: "Fellow! Hey, fellow – you awake?" to the new man in the next bed.

I heard him grunt. "What?" He sounded annoyed. But he was listening.

"You ever do any driving? I mean, you ever go down through New Jersey in your car? Well, look, if you ever need a break on tires or a battery, you stop by Jeffrey's Friendly Gas and Oil, on Route 22 in Darlington, and tell 'em Lenny Kovacs sent you. Only watch out – there's a speed trap right outside town, in the summer... And if you want a good meal, try the Strand Restaurant, down the street there. Or if you're going the other way, up into New England, you take the Boston Post Road and stop by... Fellow? You listening?"

© 1959 Mercury Press

The End of Summer

I

Americaport hadn't changed since he'd last seen it, two hundred years before. It was set as far away from any other civilized area as possible, so that no plane, no matter how badly strayed, could possibly miss its landing and crash into a dwelling. Except for the straight-edge swath of the highway leading south, it was completely isolated if you forgot the almost deserted tube station. Its edge was dotted by hangars and a few offices, but the terminal building itself was small, and severely functional. Massive with bare concrete, aseptic with steel and aluminum, it was a gray, bleak place in the wilderness.

Kester Fay was so glad to see it that he jumped impatiently from the big jet's passenger lift. He knew he was getting curious looks from the ground crew clustered around the stainless steel ship, but he would have been stared at in any case, and he had seen the sports car parked and waiting for him beside the Administration Building. He hurried across the field at a pace that attracted still more attention, eager to get his clearance and be off.

He swung his memory vault impatiently by the chain from his wristlet while the Landing Clearance officer checked his passport, but the man was obviously too glad to see someone outside the small circle of airlines personnel. He stalled interminably, and while Fay had no doubt that his life out here bored him to tears, it was becoming harder and harder to submit patiently.

"Christopher Jordan Fay," the man read off, searching for a fresh conversational opening. "Well, Mr. Fay, we haven't seen you here since '753. Enjoy your stay?"

"Yes," he answered as shortly as possible. Enjoyed it? Well, yes, he supposed he had, but it was hard to feel that way since he'd played his old American memories at augmented volume all through the flight across the Atlantic. Lord, but he was tired of Europe at this moment; weary of winding grassy lanes that meandered with classic patience among brooks and along creeks, under old stately trees! "It's good to be back where a man can stretch his legs, though."

The official chuckled politely, stamping forms. "I'll bet it is at that. Planning to stay long?"

Forever, if I can help it, Fay thought. But then he chuckled to himself. Nothing was forever. "I don't know," he said to the official in an offhand

tone.

"Shall I arrange for transportation to New York?"

Fay shook his head. "Not for me. But the man who drove my car up might be a customer."

The official's eyebrows rose, and Fay suddenly remembered that America, with its more liberal social attitudes, might tolerate him more than Europe had, but that there were still plenty of conservatives sheltered under the same banner.

As a matter of fact, he should have realized that the official was a Homebody; a Civil Service man, no doubt. Even with a dozen safe places to put it down within easy reach, he still kept his memory vault chained to his wrist. Fay's own eyebrows lifted, and amusement glittered in his eyes.

"Driving down?" The official looked at Fay with a mixture of respect, envy, and disapproval.

"It's only fifteen hundred miles," Fay said with careful nonchalance. Actually, he felt quite sure that he was going to throttle the man if he wasn't let out of here and behind the wheel soon. But it would never do to be anything but bored in front of a Homebody. "I expect to make it in about three days," he added, almost yawning.

"Yes, sir," the man said, instantly wrapping himself in a mantle of aloof politeness, but muttering "Dilly!" almost audibly.

Fay'd hit home with that one, all right! Probably, the man had never set foot in an automobile. Certainly, he considered it a barefaced lie that anyone would undertake to average fifty mph during a driving day. Safe, cushiony pneumocars were his speed – and he an airlines employee!

Fay caught himself hastily. Everybody had a right to live any way he wanted to, he reminded himself.

But he could not restrain an effervescent grin at the man's sudden injured shift to aloofness.

"All right, sir," the official said crisply, returning Fay's passport. "Here you are. No baggage, of course?"

"Of course," Fay said agreeably, and if that had been intended as a slur at people who traveled light and fast, it had fallen exceedingly flat. He waved his hand cheerfully as he turned away, while the official stared at him sourly. "I'll be seeing you again, I imagine."

"I'm afraid not, sir," the man answered with a trace of malevolence. "United States Lines is shutting down passenger service the first of next

dekeyear."

Momentarily nonplussed, Fay hesitated. "Oh? Too bad. No point to continuing, though, is there?"

"No, sir. I believe you were our first in a hectoyear and a half." Quite obviously, he considered that as much of a mark of Cain as necessary.

"Well, must be dull out here, eh?"

He cocked a satiric eye at the man and was gone, chuckling at that telling blow while the massive exit door swung ponderously shut behind him.

The car's driver was obviously a Worker who'd taken on the job because he needed money for some obscure, Workerish purpose. Fay settled the business in the shortest possible time; counting out hundred-dollar bills with a rapid shuffle. He threw in another for good measure, and waved the man aside, punching the starter vibrantly. He was back, he was home! He inhaled deeply, breathing the untrammelled air.

Curled around mountains and trailed gently through valleys, the road down through New York State was a joy. Fay drove it with a light, appreciative smile, guiding his car exuberantly, his muscles locked into communion with the automobile's grace and power as his body responded to each banked turn, each surge of acceleration below the downward crest of a hill. There was nothing like this in Europe – nothing. Over there, they left no room for his kind among their stately people.

He had almost forgotten what it was like to sit low behind the windscreen of a two-seater and listen to the dancing explosions of the unmuffled engine. It was good to be back, here on this open, magnificent road, with nothing before or behind but satin-smooth ferroconcrete, and heaped green mountains to either side.

He was alone on the road, but thought nothing of it. There were very few who lived his kind of life. Now that his first impatience had passed, he was sorry he hadn't been able to talk to the jet's pilot. But that, of course, had been out of the question. Even with all the safety interlocks, there was the chance that one moment's attention lost would allow an accident to happen.

So, Fay had spent the trip playing his memory on the plane's excellent equipment, alone in the comfortable but small compartment forward of the ship's big cargo cabin.

He shrugged as he nudged the car around a curve in the valley. It couldn't be helped. It was a lonely life, and that was all there was to it. He

wished there were more people who understood that it was the only life – the only solution to the problem which had fragmented them into so many social patterns. But there were not. And, he supposed, they were all equally lonely. The Homebodies, the Workers, the Students, and the Teachers. Even, he conceded, the Hoppers. He'd Hopped once himself, as an experiment. It had been a hollow, hysteric experience.

The road straightened, and, some distance ahead, he saw the white surface change to the dark macadam of an urban district. He slowed in response, considering the advisability of switching his safeties in, and decided it was unnecessary as yet. He disliked being no more than a pea in a safetied car's basket, powerless to do anything but sit with his hands and feet off the controls. No; for another moment, he wanted to be free to turn the car nearer the shoulder and drive through the shade of the thick shrubbery and overhanging trees. He breathed deeply of the faint fragrance in the air and once more told himself that this was the only way to live, the only way to find some measure of vitality. A Dilly? Only in the jealous vocabularies of the Homebodies, so long tied to their hutches and routines that the scope of mind and emotion had narrowed to fit their microcosm.

Then, without warning, still well on the white surface of open road, the brown shadow darted out of the bushes and flung itself at his wheels, barking shrilly.

He tried to snap the car out of the way, his face suddenly white, but the dog moved unpredictably, its abrupt yell of pain louder than the scream of Fay's brakes. He felt the soft bump, and then his foot jerked away from the clutch and the car stalled convulsively. Even with his engine dead and the car still, he heard no further sound from the dog.

Then he saw the Homebody boy running toward him up the road, and the expression of his face changed from shocked unpleasantness to remorseful regret. He sighed and climbed out of the car clumsily, trying to think of something to say. The boy came running up and stopped beside the car, looking up the road with his face drawn into tearful anger. "You ran over Brownie!"

Fay stared helplessly down at the boy. "I'm sorry, son," he said as gently as he could. He could think of nothing really meaningful to tell him. It was a hopeless situation. "I... I shouldn't have been driving so fast."

The boy ran to the huddled bundle at the shoulder of the road and picked it up in his arms, sobbing. Fay followed him, thinking that ten thousand years of experience were not enough – that a hundred centuries

of learning and acquiring superficial maturity were still insufficient to shield the emotions trapped in a young boy's body, at the mercy of his glandular system, under a shock like this.

"Couldn't you see him?" the boy pleaded.

Fay shook his head numbly. "He came out of the shrubs—"

"You shouldn't have been driving so fast. You should have—"

"I know." He looked uselessly back up the road, the trees bright green in the sunshine, the sky blue.

"I'm sorry," he told the boy again. He searched desperately for something, some way, to make recompense. "I wish it hadn't happened." He thought of something, finally. "I... I know it wouldn't be the same thing, but I've got a dog of my own – a basset hound. He's coming over from Europe on a cargo ship. When he gets here, would you like to have him?"

"Your own dog?" For a moment, the boy's eyes cleared, but then he shook his head hopelessly. "It wouldn't work out," he said simply, and then, as though conscious of guilt at even considering that any other dog could replace his, tightened his arms on the lifeless bundle.

No, it hadn't been such a good idea, Fay realized. If he weren't so snarled up in remorse and confusion, he'd have seen that. Ugly had been his dog and couldn't be separated from him, or he from Ugly. He realized even more strongly just precisely what he had done to the boy.

"Something wrong? Oh—", The Homebody man who had come up the road stopped beside them, his face turning grave. Fay looked at him in relief.

"I had my automatics off," he explained to the man. "I wouldn't have, if I'd known there was a house around here, but I didn't see anything. I'm terribly sorry about the... about Brownie."

The man looked again at the dog in the boy's arms, and winced. Then he sighed and shrugged helplessly. "Guess it was bound to happen sometime. Should have been on a leash. There's still a law of averages."

Fay's fist clenched behind his back, out of sight. The wellworn words bit deep at the very foundation of his vitality, and his mind bridled, but in another moment the spasm of reflexive fear was gone, and he was glad he'd had this harmless outlet for his emotions. Besides, the man was right, and at this moment Fay was forced to be honest enough with himself to admit it. There was still a law of averages, whether Fay and his Dilly kind liked it or not.

"Go on back to the house, son," the man said with another sigh. "There's nothing we can do for Brownie. We'll bury him later. Right now you ought to wash up. I'll be along in a minute."

It was the way he said it – the fatalistic acceptance that no matter what the honest folk did, some blundering, heedless dilettante was going to thwart them – that scored Fay's emotions.

The boy nodded wordlessly, still crying, and began to walk away without looking at Fay again.

But Fay couldn't let him go. Like a man who picks at a splinter, he could not let this pass so simply. "Wait!" he said urgently.

The boy stopped and looked at him woodenly.

"I... I know there's nothing – I mean," Fay stumbled, "Brownie was your dog, and there can't be another one like him. But I do a lot of traveling—" He stopped again, flushing at the Homebody man's knowing look, then pushed on regardless. "I see a lot of people," he went on. "I'll try to find you a dog that hasn't ever belonged to anybody. When I do, I'll bring him to you. I promise."

The boy's lip twitched, suddenly revealing what ten thousand years had taught him. "Thanks, mister," he said half-scornfully, and walked away, cradling his dog.

He hadn't believed him, of course. Fay suddenly realized that no one ever believed a Dilly, whether he was telling the truth or not. He realized, too, that he had done the best he could, and nevertheless failed. He looked regretfully after the boy.

"You didn't have to do that," the man said softly, and Fay noted that some of his reserve and half-contemptuous politeness were gone. "I don't know whether to believe you or not, but you didn't have to do that. Anyway, I'll edit the dog out of his memories tonight. My wife and I'll clean the place up, and he won't notice anything." He paused, reflecting, his eyes dark. "Guess Madge and I'll cut it out of our own minitapes, too."

Fay clenched his teeth in sudden annoyance. Nobody ever believed a Dilly. "No," he said. "I wish you wouldn't do that. I meant what I said." He shook his head again. "I don't like editing. There's always a slip somewhere, and then you know you've got a hole in your memory, but you can never remember what it was."

The man looked at him curiously. "Funny thing for one of you people to say. I always heard you went for editing in a big way."

Fay kept his face from showing his thoughts. There it was again – that

basic lack of understanding and a complete unwillingness to check secondhand tales. The very essence of his kind of life was that no memory, no experience, not be lived and preserved. Besides, he'd always heard that it was the Homebodies who had to edit whole hectoyears to keep from going mad with boredom.

"No," he contented himself with saying. "You're confusing us with the Hoppers. They'll try anything."

The man curled his lip at the mention, and Fay reflected that the introduction of a common outsider seemed helpful in circumstances like this.

"Well... maybe you're right," the man said, still not completely trustful, but willing to take the chance. He gave Fay his name, Arnold Riker, and his address. Fay put the slip of paper carefully in his memory vault.

"Anytime I lose that, I'll have lost my memory, too," he commented.

The man grinned wryly. "More likely, you'll remember to forget it tonight," he said, some of his distrust returning at the sight of the spooled tapes.

Fay took that without protest. He supposed Riker had a right to feel that way. "Can I drive you down to your house?"

The man flicked an expressive glance along the car's length and shook his head. "Thanks. I'll walk. There's still a law of averages."

And you can take that phrase and carve it on Humanity's headstone, Fay thought bitterly, but did not reply.

He climbed into the car, flicked on the automatics, and froze, completely immobile from sharply ingrained habit that was the only way to avoid the careless move that just might open the safety switch. He did not even turn his head to look at the man he left behind as the car started itself slowly away, nor did he catch more than a passing glimpse of the house where the boy and his dog had lived together for ten kiloyears. We guard our immortality so carefully, he thought. So very, very carefully. But there's still a law of averages.

II

Perversely, he drove more rapidly than normal for the rest of the trip. Perhaps he was trying to reaffirm his vitality. Perhaps he was running

away. Perhaps he was trying to cut down the elapsed time between towns, where his automatics threaded him through the light pedestrian traffic and sent him farther down the road, with each new danger-spot safely behind him. At any rate, he arrived at his Manhattan apartment while it was still daylight, stepping off the continuous impulse elevator with some satisfaction. But his eyes were discontented.

The apartment, of course, was just as he had left it two hectoyears ago. The semirobots had kept it sealed and germicidal until the arrival of his return message yesterday.

He could imagine the activity that had followed, as books and music tapes were broken out of their helium-flooded vaults, rugs and furnishings were stripped of their cocoons, aerated, and put in place. From somewhere, new plants had come and been set in the old containers, and fresh liquor put in the cabinet. There would be food in the kitchen, clothes in the wardrobes – the latest styles, of course, purchased with credits against the left-behind apparel of two hectoyears before – and there were the same, old, familiar paintings on the walls. Really old, not just By-Product stuff.

He smiled warmly as he looked around him, enjoying the swell of emotion at the apartment's comfortable familiarity. He smiled once more, briefly, at the thought that he must some day devise a means of staying in a sealed apartment – wearing something like a fishing lung, perhaps – and watch the semirobots at their refurbishing process. It must be a fascinating spectacle.

But his glance had fallen on the memory vault which he had unchained and put on a coffee table. It faced him with the ageless, silent injunction painted on each of its faces: **PLAY ME**, and underneath this the block of smaller lettering that he, like everyone else, knew by heart:

If your surroundings seem unfamiliar, or you have any other reason to suspect that your environment and situation are not usual, request immediate assistance from any other individual. He is obligated by strict law to direct you to the nearest free public playback booth, where you will find further instructions. Do not be alarmed, and follow these directions without anxiety, even if they seem strange to you. In extreme situations, stand still and do not move. Hold this box in front of you with both hands. This is a universally recognized signal of distress. Do not let anyone take this box away from you, no matter what the excuse offered.

He wondered momentarily what had made him notice it; he knew it so well that the pattern of type had long ago become no more than a

half-seen design with a recognition value so high that it had lost all verbal significance.

Was it some sort of subconscious warning? He checked his memory hastily, but relaxed when he found none of the tell-tale vagueness of detail that meant it was time to let everything else wait and get to a playback as fast as possible. He had refreshed his memory early this morning, before starting the last leg of his trip, and it seemed to be good for several more hours, at least.

What was it, then?

He frowned and went to the liquor cabinet, wondering if some train of thought had been triggered off by the accident and was trying to call attention to himself. And when he dropped into an easy-chair a few minutes later, a drink in his hand and his eyes still brooding over the vault's legend, he realized that his second guess had been the right one. As usual, one level of his mind had been busy digesting while the surface churned in seeming confusion.

He smiled ruefully. Maybe he wasn't quite as much of a Dilly as he looked and would have liked to believe. Still, a man couldn't live ten thousand years and not put a few things together in his head. He took a sip of his drink and stared out over the city in the gathering twilight. Somewhere in the graceful furniture behind him, a photoelectric relay clicked, and his high-fidelity set began to play the Karinius Missa. The apartment had not forgotten his moods.

No, he thought, the machines never forgot. Only men forgot, and depended on machines to help them remember. He stared at the vault, and a familiar sophistry occurred to him. "Well," he asked the box labeled PLAY ME, "which is my brain – you or the gray lump in my head?"

The answer depended on his moods, and on his various audiences. Tonight, alone, in an uncertain mood, he had no answer.

He took another drink and sat back, frowning.

At best, he'd offered the boy a shoddy substitute. Even presuming that the passage of ten kiloyears had somehow still left room for a dog without a master, the animal would have to be re-familiarized with the boy at least once or twice a day.

Why? Why did dogs who had always had the same master remember him without any difficulty, even though they seemed to have to reinvestigate their surroundings periodically? Why would Ugly, for instance, remember him joyfully when his ship came? And why would

Ugly have to be refamiliarized with this apartment, in which he'd lived with Fay, off and on, for all this time?

The Kinnard dog, whose master insisted on building each new house in a carbon-copy of the previous, didn't have anywhere near as much trouble. Why?

He'd heard rumors that some people were recording canine memories on minitape, but that sort of story was generally classified along with the jokes about the old virgin who switched vaults with her nubile young niece.

Still and all, there might be something in that. He'd have to ask Monkreeve. Monkreeve was the Grand Old Man of the crowd. He had memories the rest of them hadn't even thought of yet.

Fay emptied his glass and got up to mix another drink. He was thinking harder than he had for a long time – and he could not help feeling that he was making a fool of himself. Nobody else had ever asked questions like this. Not where others could hear them, at any rate.

He sat back down in his chair, fingers laced around the glass while the Missa ended and the Lieutenant Kije suite caught up the tempo of the city as it quickened beneath showers of neon.

PLAY ME. Like a music tape, the memory vault held his life tightly knit in the nested spindles of bright, imperishable minitape.

What, he suddenly asked himself, would happen if he didn't play it tonight?

"If your surroundings seem unfamiliar, or you have any other reason to suspect your environment and situation are not usual...

"Obligated by strict law to direct you...

"Do not be alarmed... "

What? What was behind the whispered stories, the jokes:

"What did the girl in the playback booth say to the young man who walked in by mistake?

"Man, this has been the busiest Twenty-seventh of July!" (Laughter)

The thought struck him that there might be all sorts of information concealed in his fund of party conversation.

"If you wish to get to heaven,

Stay away from twenty-seven."

And there it was again. Twenty-seven. July Twenty-seventh, this time conglomerated with a hangover reference to religion. And that was interesting, too. Man had religions, of course – schismatic trace sects that offered no universally appealing reward to make them really popular. But they must have been really big once, judging by the stamp they'd left on oaths and idiomatic expressions. Why? What did they have? Why had two billion people integrated words like "Heaven," "Lord God," and "Christ" into the language so thoroughly that they had endured ten kiloyears?

July Twenty-seventh when? What year?

What would happen to him if he ignored PLAY ME just this once?

He had the feeling that he knew all this; that he had learned it at the same time that he had learned to comb his hair and cut his fingernails, take showers and brush his teeth. But he did all that more or less automatically now.

Maybe it was time he thought about it.

But nobody else did. Not even Monkreeve.

So what? Who was Monkreeve, really? Didn't the very fact that he had thought of it make it all right? That was the basis on which they judged everything else, wasn't it?

That boy and his dog had really started something.

He realized several things simultaneously, and set his glass down with a quick thump. He couldn't remember the dog's name. And he was definitely letting the simple problem of following his conscience – and his wounded pride – lead him into far deeper intellectual waters than any boy and his dog had a right.

His cheeks went cold as he tried to remember the name of this morning's hotel, and he shivered violently. He looked at the box labeled PLAY ME.

"Yes," he told it. "Yes, definitely."

III

Fay awoke to a bright, sunny morning. The date on his calendar clock was April 16, 11958, and he grinned at it while he removed the vault's contacts from the bare places on his scalp. He noted that all the memories he had brought back from Europe had been re-recorded for the

apartment's spare vault, and that the current minitape had advanced the shining notch necessary to record yesterday.

He looked at that notch and frowned. It looked like an editing scratch, and was. It was always there, every morning, but he knew it covered nothing more than the normal Traumatic Pause between recording and playback. He'd been told that it was the one memory nobody wanted to keep, and certainly he'd never missed editing it – or, of course, remembered doing it. It was a normal part of the hypnotic action pattern set by the recorder to guide him when he switched over from record to playback, his mind practically blank by that time.

He'd never seen a tape, no matter whose, that did not bear that one scratch to mark each day. He took pride in the fact that a good many tapes were so hashed out and romanticized as to be almost pure fiction. He hadn't been lying to the boy's father – and he noted the presence of that memory with the utmost satisfaction – he had a driving basic need to see everything, hear everything, sense each day and its events to their fullest, and to remember them with sharp perfect clarity.

He laughed at the vault as he kicked it shut on his way to the bathroom. "Not until tonight," he said to PLAY ME, and then teetered for a breathless moment as he struggled to regain his balance. He set his foot down with a laugh, his eyes sparkling.

"Who needs a car to live dangerously?" he asked himself. But that brought back the memory of the boy, and his lips straightened. Nevertheless, it was a beautiful day, and the basic depression of yesterday was gone. He thought of all the people he knew in the city, one of whom, at least, would be sure to have a contact somewhere or the other that would solve his problem for him.

He ate his breakfast heartily, soaking for an hour in the sensual grip of his bathtub's safety slinging while he spooned the vitalizing porridge, then shrugged into a violent bathrobe and began calling people on the telephone.

He hadn't realized how long he'd been gone, he reflected, after Vera, his welcome to her apartment finished, had left him with a drink while she changed. It was, of course, only natural that some of the old crowd had changed their habits or themselves gone traveling in his absence. Nevertheless, he still felt a little taken aback at the old phone numbers that were no longer valid, or the really astonishing amount of people who seemed to have edited him out of their memories. Kinnard, of all people! And Lorraine.

Somehow he'd never thought Lorraine would go editor.

"Ready, Kes?"

Vera was wearing a really amazing dress. Apparently, America had gone back toward conservatism, as he might have guessed from his own wardrobe.

Vera, too, had changed somehow – too subtly for him to detect, here in surroundings where he had never seen her before. Hadn't she always been resistant to the fad of completely doing apartments over every seventy years? He seemed to remember it that way, but even with minitapes, the evidence of the eye always took precedence over the nudge of memory. Still, she at least knew where Monkreeve was, which was something he hadn't been able to find out for himself.

"Uh-huh. Where're we going?"

She smiled and kissed the tip of his nose. "Relax, Kes. Let it happen."

Um.

"Grasshoppers as distinct from ants, people given to dancing and similar gay pursuits, or devotees to stimulants," Monkreeve babbled, gesturing extravagantly. "Take your pick of derivations." He washed down a pill of some sort and braced himself theatrically. "I've given up on the etymology. What'd you say your name was?"

Fay grimaced. He disliked Hoppers and Hopper parties – particularly in this instance. He wished heartily that Vera had told him what had happened to Monkreeve before she brought him here.

He caught a glimpse of her in the center of an hysterical knot of people, dancing with her seven petticoats held high.

"Whoee!" Monkreeve burst out, detecting the effects of the pill among the other explosions in his system. Fay gave him a searching look, and decided, from the size of his pupils, that he could probably convince himself into an identical state on bread pills, and more than likely was.

"Got a problem, hey, Lad?" Monkreeve asked wildly. "Got a dog problem." He put his finger in his mouth and burlesqued Thought. "Got a dog, got a problem, got a problem, got a dog," he chanted. "Hell!" he exploded, "go see old Williamson. Old Williamson knows everything. Ask him anything. Sure," he snickered, "ask him anything."

"Thanks, Monk," Fay said. "Glad to've met you," he added in the accepted polite form with editors, and moved toward Vera.

"Sure, sure, Kid. Ditto and check. Whatcha say your name was?"

Fay pretended to be out of earshot, brushed by a couple who were dancing in a tight circle to no music at all, and delved into the crowd around Vera.

"Hi, Kest," Vera exclaimed, looking up and laughing. "Did Monk give you any leads?"

"Monk has a monkey on his back, he thinks," Fay said shortly, a queasy feeling in his throat.

"Well, why not try that on the kid? He might like a change." Vera broke into fresh laughter. Suddenly an inspiration came to her, and she began to sing.

"Oh where, oh where, has my little dog gone? Oh where, oh where can he be?"

The rest of the crowd picked it up. Vera must have told them about his search, for they sang it with uproarious gusto.

Fay turned on his heel and walked out.

The halls of the University library were dim gray, padded with plastic sponge, curving gently with no sharp corners. Doorways slid into walls, the sponge muffled sound, and he wore issued clothes into which he had been allowed to transfer only those personal items which could not possibly cut or pry. Even his vault had been encased in a ball of cellular sponge plastic, and his guide stayed carefully away from him, in case he should fall or stumble. The guide carried a first-aid kit, and like all the library staff, was a certified Doctor of Theoretical Medicine.

"This is Dr. Williamson's interview chamber," the guide told him softly, and pressed a button concealed under the sponge. The door slid back, and Fay stepped into the padded interior of the chamber, divided down the middle by a sheet of clear, thick plastic. There was no furniture to bump into, of course. The guide made sure he was safely in, out of the door's track, and closed it carefully after he had stepped out.

Fay sat down on the soft floor and waited. He started wondering what had happened to the old crowd, but he had barely found time to begin when the door on the other side of the partition opened and Dr. Williamson came in. Oddly enough, his physiological age was less than Fay's, but he carried himself like an old man, and his entire manner radiated the same feeling.

He looked at Fay distastefully. "Hopper, isn't it? What're you doing here?"

Fay got to his feet. "No, sir. Dilly, if you will, but not a Hopper." Coming so soon after the party, Williamson's remark bit deep.

"Six of one, half a dozen of the other, in time," Williamson said curtly. "Sit down." He lowered himself slowly, testing each new adjustment of his muscles and bones before he made the next. He winced faintly when Fay dropped to the floor with defiant overcarelessness. "Well – go on. You wouldn't be here if the front desk didn't think your research was at least interesting."

Fay surveyed him carefully before he answered. Then he sighed, shrugged mentally, and began. "I want to find a dog for a little boy," he said, feeling more than foolish.

Williamson snorted: "What leads you to believe this is the ASPCA?"

"ASPCA, sir?"

Williamson threw his hands carefully up to heaven and snorted again. Apparently, everything Fay said served to confirm some judgment of mankind on his part.

He did not explain, and Fay finally decided he was waiting. There was a minute's pause, and then Fay said awkwardly: "I assume that's some kind of animal shelter. But that wouldn't serve my purpose. I need a dog that... that remembers."

Williamson put the tips of his fingers together and pursed his lips. "So. A dog that remembers, eh?" He looked at Fay with considerably more interest, the look in his eyes sharpening.

"You look like any other brainless jackanapes," he mused, "but apparently there's some gray matter left in your artfully coiffed skull after all." Williamson was partially bald.

"What would you say," Williamson continued, "if I offered to let you enroll here as an Apprentice Liberator?"

"Would I find out how to get that kind of dog?"

A flicker of impatience crossed Williamson's face. "In time, in time. But that's beside the point."

"I... I haven't got much time, sir," Fay said haltingly. Obviously, Williamson had the answer to his question. But would he part with it, and if he was going to, why this rigmarole?

Williamson gestured with careful impatience. "Time is unimportant. And especially here, where we avoid the law of averages almost entirely. But there are various uses for time, and I have better ones than this. Will

you enroll? Quick, man!"

"I – Dr. Williamson, I'm grateful for your offer, but right now all I'd like to know is how to get a dog." Fay was conscious of a mounting impatience of his own.

Williamson got carefully to his feet and looked at Fay with barely suppressed anger.

"Young man, you're living proof that our basic policy is right. I wouldn't trust an ignoramus like you with the information required to cut his throat.

"Do you realize where you are?" He gestured at the walls. "In this building is the world's greatest repository of knowledge. For ten thousand years we have been accumulating opinion and further theoretical data on every known scientific and artistic theory extant in 2013. We have data that will enable Man to go to the stars, travel ocean bottoms, and explore Jupiter. We have here the raw material of symphonies and sonatas that make your current addictions sound like a tincup beggar's fiddle. We have the seed of paintings that would make you spatter whitewash over the daubs you treasure, and verse that would drive you mad. And you want me to find you a dog!"

Fay had gotten to his own feet. Williamson's anger washed over him in battering waves, but one thing remained clear, and he kept to it stubbornly.

"Then you won't tell me."

"No, I will not tell you! I thought for a moment that you had actually managed to perceive something of your environment, but you have demonstrated my error. You are dismissed." Williamson turned and stamped carefully out of his half of the interview chamber, and the door slid open behind Fay.

Still and all, he had learned something. He had learned that there was something important about dogs not remembering, and he had a date: 2013.

He sat in his apartment, his eyes once more fixed on PLAY ME, and tried a thought on for size: July 27, 2013.

It made more sense that way than it did when the two parts were separated – which could mean nothing, of course. Dates were like the jigsaw puzzles that were manufactured for physiological four-year-olds: they fit together no matter how the pieces were matched.

When had the human race stopped having children?

The thought smashed him bolt upright in his chair, spilling his drink.

He had never thought of that. Never once had he questioned the fact that everyone was frozen at some apparently arbitrary physiological age. He had learned that such-and-such combined anatomical and psychological configuration was indicative of one physiological age, that a different configuration indicated another. Or had he? Couldn't he tell instinctively – or, rather, couldn't he tell as though the word "age" were applicable to humans as well as inanimate objects?

A lesser thought followed close on the heels of the first: exactly the same thing could be said of dogs, or canaries or parakeets, as well as the occasional cat that hadn't gone wild.

"Gone wild? " Hadn't most cats always been wild?

Just exactly what memories were buried in his mind, in hiding – or rather, since he was basically honest with himself, what memories had he taught himself to ignore? And why?

His skin crawled. Suddenly, his careful, flower-to-flower world was tinged with frost around him, and brown, bare and sharply ragged stumps were left standing. The boy and his dog had been deep water indeed – for his tentative toe had baited a monster of continuous and expanding questions to fang him with rows of dangerous answers.

He shook himself and took another drink. He looked at PLAY ME, and knew where the worst answers must be.

IV

He awoke, and there were things stuck to his temples. He pulled them loose and sat up, staring at the furnishings and the machine that sat beside his bed, trailing wires.

The lights were on, but the illumination was so thoroughly diffused that he could not find its source. The furniture was just short of the radical in design, and he had certainly never worn pajamas to bed. He looked down at them and grunted. He looked at the machine again, and felt his temples where the contacts had rested. His fingers came away sticky, and he frowned. Was it some sort of encephalograph? Why?

He looked around again. There was a faint possibility that he was recovering from psychiatric treatment, but this was certainly no sanatorium room.

There was a white placard across the room, with some sort of printing on it. Since it offered the only possible source of information, he got off the bed cautiously and, when he encountered no dizziness or weakness, crossed over to it. He stood looking at it, lips pursed and brow furrowed, while he picked his way through the rather simplified orthography.

Christopher Jordan Fay:

If your surroundings seem unfamiliar, or you have any other reason to suspect that your environment and situation are unusual, do not be alarmed, and follow these directions without anxiety, even if they seem strange to you. If you find yourself unable to do so, for any reason whatsoever, please return to the bed and read the instructions printed on the machine beside it. In this case, the nearest "free public playback booth" is the supplementary cabinet you see built into the head of the bed. Open the doors and read the supplementary instructions printed inside. In any case, do not be alarmed, and if you are unable or unwilling to perform any of the actions requested above, simply dial "O" on the telephone you see across the room.

Fay looked around once more, identified the various objects, and read on.

The operator, like all citizens, is required by strict law to furnish you with assistance.

If, on the other hand, you feel sufficiently calm or are commensurately curious, please follow these directions:

Return to the bed and restore the contacts to the places where they were attached. Switch the dial marked "Record-Playback-Auxiliary Record" to the "Auxiliary Record" position. You will then have three minutes to place your right forearm on the grooved portion atop the machine. Make certain your arm fits snugly – the groove is custom-molded to accept your arm perfectly in one position only.

Finally, lie back and relax. All other actions are automatic.

For your information, you have suffered from loss of memory, and this device will restore it to you.

Should you be willing to follow the above directions, please accept our thanks.

Fay's tongue bulged his left cheek, and he restrained a grin. Apparently, his generator had been an unqualified success. He looked at the printing again, just to be certain, and confirmed the suspicion that it had been done by his own hand. Then, as a conclusive check, he prowled the

apartment in search of a calendar. He finally located the calendar-clock, inexpertly concealed in a bureau drawer, and looked at the date.

That was his only true surprise. He whistled shrilly at the date, but finally shrugged and put the clock back. He sat down in a convenient chair, and pondered.

The generator was working just as he'd expected, the signal bouncing off the Heaviside layer without perceptible loss of strength, covering the Earth. As to what could happen when it exhausted its radioactive fuel in another five thousand years, he had no idea, but he suspected that he would simply refuel it. Apparently, he still had plenty of money, or whatever medium of exchange existed now. Well, he'd provided for it.

Interesting, how his mind kept insisting it was July 27, 2013. This tendency to think of the actual date as "the future" could be confusing if he didn't allow for it.

Actually, he was some ten-thousand-and-thirty-eight years old, rather than the thirty-seven his mind insisted on. But his memories carried him only to 2013, while, he strongly suspected, the Kester Fay who had written that naive message had memories that began shortly thereafter.

The generator broadcast a signal which enabled body cells to repair themselves with one hundred per cent perfection, rather than the usual less-than-perfect of living organisms. The result was that none of the higher organisms aged, in any respect. Just the higher ones, fortunately, or there wouldn't even be yeast derivatives to eat.

But, of course, that included brain cells, too. Memory was a process of damaging brain cells much as a phonograph recording head damaged a blank record disk. In order to relive the memory, the organism had only to play it back, as a record is played. Except that, so long as the generator continued to put out the signal brain cells, too, repaired themselves completely. Not immediately, of course, for the body took a little time to act. But no one could possibly sleep through a night and remember anything about the day before. Amnesia was the price of immortality.

He stood up, went to the liquor cabinet he'd located in his search, and mixed himself a drink, noticing again how little, actually, the world had progressed in ten thousand years. Cultural paralysis, more than likely, under the impact of six billion individuals each trying to make his compromise with the essential boredom of eternal life.

The drink was very good, the whiskey better than any he was used to. He envied himself.

They'd finally beaten amnesia, as he suspected the human race would. Probably by writing notes to themselves at first, while panic and hysteria cloaked the world and July 27th marched down through the seasons and astronomers went mad.

The stimulated cells, of course, did not repair the damage done to them before the generator went into operation. They took what they already had as a model, and clung to it fiercely.

He grimaced. Their improved encephalograph probably rammed in so much information so fast that their artificial memories blanketed the comparatively small amount of information which they had acquired up to the 27th. Or, somewhat more likely, the period of panic had been so bad that they refused to probe beyond it. If that was a tape-recording encephalograph, editing should be easily possible.

"I suspect," he said aloud, "that what I am remembering now is part of a large suppressed area in my own memory." He chuckled at the thought that his entire life had been a blank to himself, and finished the drink.

And what he was experiencing now was an attempt on his own part to get that blank period on tape, circumventing the censors that kept him from doing it when he had his entire memory.

And that took courage. He mixed another drink and toasted himself. "Here's to you, Kester Fay. I'm glad to learn I've got guts."

The whiskey was extremely good.

And the fact that Kester Fay had survived the traumatic hiatus between the Twenty-seventh and the time when he had his artificial memory was proof that They hadn't gotten to him before the smash-up.

Paranoid, was he?

He'd stopped the accelerating race toward Tee-Total War, hadn't he?

They hadn't been able to stop him, that was certain. He'd preserved the race of Man, hadn't he?

Psychotic? He finished the drink and chuckled. Intellectually, he had to admit that anyone who imposed immortality on all his fellow beings without asking their permission was begging for the label.

But, of course, he knew he wasn't psychotic. If he were, he wouldn't be so insistent on the English "Kester" for a nickname rather than the American "Chris."

He put the glass down regretfully. Ah, well – time to give himself all his memories back. Why was his right arm so strong?

He lay down on the bed, replaced the contacts, and felt the needle slip out of its recess in the forearm trough and slide into a vein.

Scopolamine derivative of some sort, he decided. Machinery hummed and clicked in the cabinets at the head of the bed, and a blank tape spindle popped into position in the vault, which rested on a specially-built stand beside the bed.

Complicated, he thought dimly as he felt the drug pumping into his system. I could probably streamline it down considerably.

He found time to think once more of his basic courage. Kester Fay must still be a rampant individual, even in his stagnant, conservative, ten-thousand-year-weighty civilization.

Apparently, nothing could change his fundamental character.

He sank into a coma with a faint smile.

The vault's volume control in the playback cycle was set to "Emergency Overload." Memories hammered at him ruthlessly, ravaging brain tissue, carving new channels through the packed silt of repair, foaming, bubbling, hissing with voracious energy and shattering impetus.

His face ran through agonized changes in his sleep. He pawed uncertainly and feebly at the contacts on his scalp, but the vital conditioning held. He never reached them, though he tried, and, failing, tried, and tried through the long night, while sweat poured down his face and soaked into his pillow, and he moaned, while the minitapes clicked and spun, one after the other, and gave him back the past.

It was July 27, 2013, and he shivered with cold, uncomprehendingly staring at the frost on the windows, with the note dated 7/27/13 in his hand.

It was July 27, 2013, and he was faint with hunger as he tried to get the lights to work. Apparently, the power was off. He struck a match and stared down at the series of notes, some of them smudged with much unremembered handling, all dated July 27, 2013.

It was July 27, 2013, and the men who tried to tell him it was really Fall in 2019, clustered around his bed in the crowded hospital ward, were lying. But they told him his basic patents on controlled artificial radioactivity had made it possible to power the complicated machinery they were teaching him to use. And though, for some reason, money as an interest-gathering medium was no longer valid, they told him that in his special case, in gratitude, they'd arranged things so there'd be a series of royalties and licensing fees, which would be paid into his accounts

automatically. He wouldn't even have to check on them, or know specifically where they came from. But the important part came when they assured him that the machinery – the "vault," and the "minitapes," whatever they were, would cure his trouble.

He was grateful for that, because he'd been afraid for a long time that he was going insane. Now he could forget his troubles.

Kester Fay pulled the vault contacts off his forehead and sat up to see if there was an editing scratch on the tape.

But, of course, there wasn't. He knew it before he'd raised his head an inch, and he almost collapsed, sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands.

He was his own monster. He had no idea of what most of the words he'd used in those memories had meant, but even as he sat there, he could feel his mind hesitatingly making the linkages and assigning tags to the jumbled concepts and frightening rationalizations he'd already remembered.

He got up gingerly, and wandered about the apartment, straightening out the drawers he'd upset during his amnesiac period. He came to the empty glass, frowned at it, shrugged, and mixed a drink.

He felt better afterwards, the glow of 100 proof working itself into his system. The effects wouldn't last, of course – intoxication was a result of damage to the brain cells – but the first kick was real enough. Moreover, it was all he'd gotten accustomed to, during the past ten kiloyears, just as the Hoppers could drug themselves eternally.

Ten thousand years of having a new personality seemed to have cured the psychosis he'd had with his old one. He felt absolutely no desire to change the world singlehanded.

Had it, now? Had it? Wasn't being a dilettante the result of an inner conviction that you were too good for routine living?

And didn't he want to turn the generator off, now that he knew what it did and where it was?

He finished the drink and bounced the glass in his palm. There was nothing that said he had to reach a decision right this minute. He'd had ten kiloyears. It could wait a little longer.

He bathed to the accompaniment of thoughts he'd always ignored before – thoughts about things that weren't his problem, then. Like incubators full of babies ten kiloyears old, and pregnant women, and paralytics.

He balanced that against hydrogen bombs, and still the scales did not tip.

Then he added something he had never known before, but that he had now, and understood why no one ever ventured to cross Twenty-seven, or to remember it if he had. For one instant, he, too, stopped still at his bath and considered ripping the memory out of his minitapes.

He added Death.

But he knew he was lost, now. For better or worse, the water had closed over his head, and if he edited the memory now, he would seek it out again some day. For a moment, he wondered if that was precisely what he had done, countless times before.

He gave it up. It could wait – if he stayed sane. At any rate, he knew how to get the little boy his dog, now.

He built a signal generator to cancel out the effect of the big one, purring implacably in its mountain shaft, sending out its eternal, unshieldable signal. He blanketed one room of his apartment with the canceling wave, and added six months to his age by staying in it for hours during the eighteen months it took to mate Ugly and raise the best pup, for the stimulating wave was the answer to sterility, too; fetuses could not develop.

He cut himself off from the Dilly crowd, what was left of it, and raised the pup. And it was more than six months he added to his age, for all that time he debated and weighed, and remembered.

And by the time he was ready, he still did not know what he was going to do about the greater problem. Still and all, he had a new dog for the boy.

He packed the canceling generator and the dog in his car, and drove back up the road he had come.

Finally, he knocked on Riker's door, the dog under one arm, the generator under the other.

Riker answered his knock and looked at him curiously.

"I'm... I'm Kester Fay, Mr. Riker," he said hesitating. "I've bought your boy that dog I promised."

Riker looked at the dog and the bulky generator under his arm, and Fay shifted his load awkwardly, the dangling vault interfering with his movements. Light as it was, the vault was a bulky thing. "Don't you remember me?"

Riker blinked thoughtfully, his forehead knotting. Then he shook his head. "No... no, I guess not, Mr. Fay."

He looked suspiciously at Fay's clothes, which hadn't been changed in three days. Then he nodded.

"Uh... I'm sorry, mister, but I guess I must have edited it." He smiled in embarrassment. "Come to think of it, I've wondered if we didn't have a dog sometime. I hope it wasn't too important to you."

Fay looked at him. He found it impossible to think of any thing to say. Finally, he shrugged.

"Well," he said, "your boy doesn't have a dog now, does he?"

Riker shook his head. "Nope. You know – it's a funny thing, what with the editing and everything, but he knows a kid with a dog, and sometimes he pesters the life out of me to get him one." Riker shrugged. "You know how kids are."

"Will you take this one?" He held out the squirming animal.

"Sure. Mighty grateful. But I guess we both know this won't work out too well." He reached out and took the dog.

"This one will," Fay said. He gave Riker the generator. "Just turn this on for a while in the same room with your son and the dog. It won't hurt anything, but the dog'll remember."

Riker looked at him skeptically.

"Try it," Fay said, but Riker's eyes were narrowing, and he gave Fay both the dog and the generator back.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'm not trying anything like that from a guy that comes out of nowhere in the middle of the night."

"Please, Mr. Riker. I promise – "

"Buddy, you're trespassing. I won't draw more than half a hectoyear if I slug you."

Fay's shoulders slumped. "All right," he sighed, and turned around. He heard Riker slam the heavy door behind him.

But as he trudged down the walk, his shoulders lifted, and his lips set in a line.

There has to be an end somewhere, he thought. Each thing has to end, or there will never be any room for beginnings.

He turned around to be sure no one in the house was watching, and

released the dog.

He'd be found in the morning, and things might be different by then.

He climbed into the car and drove quickly away, leaving the dog behind. Somewhere outside of town, he threw the canceling generator outside, onto the concrete highway, and heard it smash. He unchained his memory vault, and threw it out, too.

There had to be an end. Even an end to starlit nights and the sound of a powerful motor. An end to the memory of sunset in the Piazza San Marco, and the sight of snow on Chamonix. An end to good whiskey.

For him, there had to be an end – so that others could come after. He pointed the car toward the generator's location, and reflected that he had twenty or thirty years left, anyway.

He flexed his curiously light arm.

© 1954, Street & Smith Publications.

The Executioner

There's a peculiar fact about this story. It appeared in an Astounding with a van Dongen cover about Christmas. It had superb interior illustrations by Kelly Freas. Simultaneously, the old If had a Christmas issue that featured a story called "The Executioner," by Frank Riley, I think. The If executioner had a Freas cover, showing a man in a suit of lights checking his pistol, and the story had superb interior illustrations by Kelly Freas.

The answer is that I had written "The Executioner," around a Kelly Freas cover painting, for If, and they had bounced it. John Campbell promptly bought it, for more money. Jim Quinn, the editor and publisher of If, had immediately paid Frank Riley to write a new "The Executioner." So the two magazines came out simultaneously, both featuring a lead story called "The Executioner." Jim Quinn was livid – how did I dare to sell a

story he'd rejected? John Campbell laughed his head off. Kelly kept his mouth shut.

Late in the morning, just before noon, Samson Joyce sat in a folding chair placed behind the high, granite judges' bench which faced the plaza. In a few minutes, he would be climbing up the steps of the bench to its top, where he would stand behind the solid parapet and look down at the Accused's box in the plaza. Now he was checking his gun.

He worked the slide, watching the breech open and the extractor reach with its metal fingertip. The bolt drew back; hesitated; jumped forward. He took out a silk rag and wiped off the excess oil, spreading it in a thin, uniform film over the metal. He thumbed the cartridges out of the clip, oiled the clip action, and reloaded. He did all this with patient care and long practice.

The sun had been breaking in and out of clouds all morning, and there was a fitful wind. The pennants and family standards around the plaza were twisting restlessly. It was an uncertain day.

The gun was his old favorite; a gas-operated 10-millimeter Grennell that had been with him since his old days as Associate Justice of Utica. It fitted comfortably into his hand, as well it might after all these years. It was not the jeweled, plated and engraved antique they expected him to use at the big trials in New York City or Buffalo. It was just a gun; it did what it was meant for, cleanly and efficiently, and he used it whenever he could. It didn't pretend to be more than it was. It never failed.

He scowled, looking down at it. He scowled at feelings he knew were foolish and wished he did not have.

Once he'd been in his twenties, looking forward. Now he was a shade past fifty, and what he looked back on was subtly less satisfactory than what he had looked forward to.

He raised his head and looked at the three men who were his Associate Justices today, as they walked toward him from the hotel. Blanding, with his brief case, Pedersen, with his brief case, and Kallimer with his frown.

Joyce's heavy lower lip tightened in a fleeting touch of amusement that slackened and was gone without a trace. All of them were younger than he'd been at Utica, and all three were farther along. Blanding was the Associate Justice here in Nyack, which meant his next appointment would take him out of the suburbs and into the city proper. Pedersen was

waiting for the results of the Manhattan by-election to be officially confirmed. When they were, he'd take his seat in the Legislature. And Kallimer was Special Associate Justice to the Chief Justice of Sovereign New York, Mr. Justice Samson Ezra Joyce. Perhaps it was the strain of remembering his full title that gave him the permanent frown, drawing his thin eyebrows closer together and pinching the bridge of his bony nose. Or perhaps he was rehearsing the sound of "Chief Justice of Sovereign New York, Mr. Justice Ethan Benoni Kallimer."

All three of them were fortunate young men, in the early flower of their careers. But, being young men, they were not quite capable of enjoying their good fortune. Joyce could guess what they must be feeling as they walked toward him.

They'd be thinking Joyce was a crusty old fool who was hopelessly conservative in his administration of justice – that younger men were more capable.

They'd be thinking he wanted to live forever, without giving someone else a chance. They were sure he thought he was the only one fit to wear a Chief Justice's Trial Suit.

And they called him Old Knock-Knees whenever they saw him in his Suit tights.

Every trial saw them with their brief cases, each with its gun inside. Each of them waited for the day The Messire reversed Joyce's human and, therefore, fallible verdict. There'd be a new Chief Justice needed for the next trial, and promotions all along the line.

He worked the Grennell's slide again, nodded with satisfaction, and replaced the clip. In the thirty years since he'd began, The Messire had not reversed his verdicts. He had come close – Joyce had scars enough – but, in the end, he'd done no more than raise a formal objection, as it were, before substantiating Joyce's decisions.

Blanding, Pedersen, and Kallimer, in their plain, unfigured black vests, the stark white lace frothing at their wrists, stopped in front of him.

Somber men. Jealous men – even Pedersen, who was leaving the bench. Impatient men.

Joyce put away his gun. Young men, who failed to realize their good fortune in still having a goal to attain, and a dream to fulfill. Who did not foresee that it was the men at the top – the men who had reached the goal – who had to dedicate themselves unceasingly to the preservation of the ideal; who, with The Messire's help, labored each minute of their lives to

keep the purpose of their lives untarnished. The young men never knew, until they reached the top, that the joy was in the struggle, and the drudgery in the maintenance of the victory. The young men served the ideal, without a thought to wondering what kept the ideal high and firm in its purpose.

Some day, they might learn.

"Good morning, Justice," almost in chorus.

"Good morning, Just ices. I imagine you slept well?"

From the sound of the spectators, he judged that the Accused had just been brought into the plaza. It was interesting to note the change in crowd voices over the years. Lately, it had been easy to differentiate between the sound from the family boxes and the noise of the people, which was a full octave lower.

Joyce looked up at the plaza tower clock. A few moments remained.

Dissatisfaction? Was that what he felt?

He imagined himself trying to explain what he felt to one of these youngsters, and – yes – "dissatisfaction" was the word he would use.

But that wouldn't ever happen. Blanding was too young to do anything but sneer at the knock-kneed old fool with his swollen ankles. Pedersen was out of it. And Kallimer, of course, whose intelligence he respected, was too intelligent to listen. He had his own ideas.

Joyce stood up. Touched the figure of The Messire buried under his neckpiece, straightened the hang of his vest, adjusted his wig, and turned toward his Associates. In so doing, he allowed his glance to quickly sweep over the Accused for the first time. She was standing in her box, waiting. Just one glance, before she could realize he'd compromised his dignity by looking at her.

"Well, Justices, it's time."

He waited to follow them up the steps which would be hard on his ankles.

First, Blanding had to relinquish his right to try the case, since it was in his jurisdiction.

Joyce, standing by himself on the higher central section of the platform, leaned forward slightly until his thighs were pressed against the cool stone of the bench's back. It took some of the weight off his ankles.

No one would notice it from the plaza below. Looking up at the bluff gray wall of the bench's face, all anyone could see were the torsos of four

men; two in black, then one standing somewhat taller in his brilliant Suit, and then another in black. That last was Blanding, and now he stepped around the end of the bench, forward onto the overhanging slab that was the bailiffs rostrum at ordinary trials, and stopped, slim, motionless, and black, standing out over the plaza below.

Joyce was grateful for the breeze. The Suit was heavy with its embroidered encrustations, and the thick collar, together with his neckpiece, was already making him perspire. Still and all, he did not regret coming here to Nyack. In New York and Buffalo, his trials were ostentatious ceremonials, overrun with minor functionaries and elaborate protocol toward the First Families. Here in Nyack, there were no functionaries. The ceremony of trial could be stripped down to its simple but beautiful essentials. Blanding would handle the statements of charges, Pedersen would keep track, and Kallimer...

Kallimer would wait to see whether The Messire approved.

Joyce looked down at the crowd. Scarlet, gold, and azure blue struck his eyes from the family boxes. He saw the flash of light on rings and earrings, the soft, warm color of the ladies' wimples.

The people were a dun mass, dressed in the dark, subdued colors they had been affecting lately. Joyce reflected that, without their contrast, the family members might not appear so brilliant in their boxes. But that was only a hasty digression, fluttering across his mind like an uneasy bird at sunset. He understood from Blanding that the people had some unusual interest in this trial. Looking down, he could see the crowd was large.

Joyce plainly heard Blanding draw breath before he began to speak. When he did, he spoke slowly, and the acoustic amplifiers inside the stone bench made his voice grave and sonorous.

"People of Nyack – "

The crowd became absolutely still, all of them watching the straight, motionless black figure standing above them.

This was justice, Joyce thought as he always did when a trial began, the mood slipping over him. This was the personification of the ideal. The straight, unbending figure; the grave voice.

"The Nyack Court of Common Justice, of Sovereign New York, is now in Session."

He disliked Blanding, Joyce reflected, watching the Associate half-turn and extend an arm toward him. He disliked Pedersen, and Kallimer made him uneasy. But they were together in this. This was above personality,

and above humanity. The Messire, the four of them, the families and the people; together, what they did here today was their bond-and heritage. This was their bulwark against savagery.

Blanding had held the gesture just long enough. "Mr. Justice Joyce, Chief Justice of Sovereign New York, Presiding."

There was a burst of excited applause from the families. They'd expected him to preside at a trial of this nature, of course, but they were excited now, nevertheless. This was the official stamp. This was the recognition of their importance, and of the importance of this case. Joyce bowed his head in acknowledgment.

"Mr. Justice Kallimer, Chief Associate Justice."

Joyce noted that Kallimer's applause was much more sparse. But then, he had almost no reputation here. He'd originally come from Waverly, which was far across the nation at the Pennsylvania border. He'd been noticed by the Bar Association, but until he'd presided at some trials in the Hudson area, very few people would recognize his name.

"Mr. Justice Pedersen, Recording Justice."

Pedersen drew a better hand than Kallimer. That was because he was a New York City judge.

Joyce did not permit his thin smile to touch his face. For all of that, it was Kallimer who would succeed him, even if Pedersen had stayed on the bench. Kallimer was not a crowdpleaser, but he had been efficient in Waverly, and he could be efficient here, too, if he had to.

Joyce waited for the proper amount of expectant silence to accumulate. Then he raised his head.

"Let trial begin."

There was a fresh burst of applause. When it subsided, he turned to Blanding. "Justice Blanding will state the ease." Joyce's tone, too, was deep and majestic. Part of that was the amplifiers, doing their invisible work within the bench, but part of it was in him, and he found himself submerging in the mood of the trial, his back stiffening and his ankles taking his full weight. His head was erect, and he felt his slow pulse moving regularly through his veins, beating with the gratification of the act of trial.

Blanding looked down at the Accused's box.

"The case of John Doe in complaint against Clarissa Jones. The concurrent case of the People of Sovereign New York against Clarissa

Jones."

Joyce could now look at the Accused. She was obviously in poor control of herself, gripping the railing before her with tight hands. Then he turned toward Pedersen.

"Justice Pedersen, what has been the progress of this case?"

"Mr. Justice, the complaint of John Doe has been withdrawn in cognizance of the superior claim of the People."

That was ritual, too. Once the attention of Justice had been drawn to the crime, the original complainant withdrew. Otherwise, the name of the complaining family member would have had to be revealed in open court.

Joyce turned back toward Blanding.

"Justice Blanding will proceed with the statement of the People's case."

Blanding paused for another breath. "We, the People of Sovereign New York, accuse Clarissa Jones of attempting to usurp a place not her own; of deliberately and maliciously using the wiles of her sex to claim recognition from a member of a family, said family member being of minor age and hereinafter designated as "John Doe." We further accuse Clarissa Jones, People's woman, of fomenting anarchy—"

The indictment continued. Joyce watched the Accused's face, noting that despite her emotional strain, she at least retained sufficient propriety not to interrupt with useless exclamations or gestures. The girl had some steel in her, somewhere. He was pleased at her restraint; interruptions destroyed the rhythm of Trial. She'd have her chance to appeal.

He turned to Pedersen with an inquiring lift of his eyebrows. Pedersen moved closer, keeping his mouth carefully out of the pickup area.

"The girl was young Normandy's mistress. He's got a summer lodge on the river, here," he whispered.

"Joshua Normandy's boy?" Joyce asked in some surprise.

"That's right." Pedersen grimaced. "He might have been more astute, and investigated her a little. She's got a number of relatives in the local craft guilds and whatnot."

Joyce frowned. "Illegitimate relationships don't mean anything."

Pedersen shrugged the shoulder away from the crowd. "Legally, no. But in practice the People have taken to recognizing these things among themselves. I understand their couples refer to each other as husband and wife when among groups of their own kind. I know that's of no weight in court," he went on hastily, "but the girl's apparently an aristocrat among

them. It could be natural for her to assume certain privileges. Normandy's specific complaint was that she came up to him on a public street and addressed him by his first name. Well, there she was going a little too far."

Pedersen hooked his mouth into a knowing smile.

"Yes," Joyce answered sharply, his cheeks flattening with rage, as he looked down at the Accused. "She was."

The youngsters didn't yet understand. They could smile at it. Joyce couldn't. The fact that this was just a thoughtless girl in love made no difference. What had to be judged here was the legal situation, not the human emotions involved.

Centuries ago, The Messire had established this society, speaking through His prophets, and it was that society which Joyce defended here, just as hundreds of Justices defended it every day throughout the land.

There were those worthy of marriage, and those who were not. Those with the mental capacity to rule, administer, judge, and choose the sick to be healed, and those without it. The notion had long ago been exploded that all human beings were equal.

The blunt facts of life were that talent and mental capacity were hereditary. Some human beings were better equipped than others to judge what was best for the human race as a whole, but, with unrestricted marriage, these superior qualities were in grave danger of dilution.

To have attempted to breed the ordinary people out of existence would have been impossible. The sea is not dried up with blotting paper. But the building of dikes was possible.

Out of the rubble and flame of the Twenty-first Century, The Messire had handed down the answer, and the Law. The Law was the dike that penned the sea of ordinary people away from the wellsprings of the families.

Through His prophets, The Messire had ordained his First Families, and they, in turn, had chosen others. To all of these were given the sacrament of marriage and the heritage of name and property for their children. For centuries, the families had been preserved, their members choosing wives and husbands only out of their own kind.

It was unnecessary to enforce childlessness on the remaining people. Neither superior intelligence nor talent were required for the world's routine work.

Nor had "enforcement," as such, of The Messire's Law been required for

many years, now. It was not that the people were impious or heretical. Rather it was that, being human, they were prone to error. In their untutored minds, the purpose and meaning of the Law sometimes became unclear.

Despite that simple piety, if young Normandy had been even more of a fool, and let the incident pass, some members of the people might mistakenly have felt such behavior was permissible. The precedent would have been established. If, after that, some other error had been allowed to go uncorrected, yet another step away from the Law might be taken. And after that, another –

Anarchy. And the widening erosion in the dike.

Joyce scowled down at the Accused. He only wished it hadn't been a girl.

Blanding reached the end of his indictment and paused, with a gesture to Joyce.

Joyce looked down at the Accused again, partly because he wished to study her again and partly because it lent weight to his opinion.

The girl's trembling confirmed his previous tentative decision. There was no purpose in dragging this on. The quickest conclusion was the best.

"Thank you, Justice," he said to Blanding. He addressed the Accused.

"Young woman, we have heard your indictment. Justice Blanding will now repeat the etiquette of Trial, in order that there may be no doubt in your mind of your rights."

"The Messire is your judge," Blanding told her gravely. "The verdict we deliver here is not conclusive. If you wish to appeal, make your appeal to Him."

There was a stir and rustle in the crowd, as there always was. Joyce saw a number of people touch the images at their throats.

"We shall deliberate on this verdict, each separately determining the degree of your guilt. When we have reached a verdict, our separate opinions shall determine the degree of mundane appeal granted you."

Joyce threw a quick glance at the girl. She was looking up at Blanding with her hands on the rail of her box, her arms stiffly extended.

"If your case has been misrepresented to this Court, The Messire will intervene in your behalf. If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear."

Having completed the recital, he stopped and looked out over the heads of the crowd.

Joyce stepped back, and saw that Kallimer and Pedersen were looking down at his hands, hidden from the crowd. He signaled for a verdict of "Completely Guilty." Giving the girl a weapon to defend herself would be ridiculous. If she succeeded in firing at all, she was sure to miss him and injure someone in the crowd. It was best to get this case out of the way quickly and efficiently. The thing had to be squashed right here.

To his surprise, he saw Kallimer signal back "reconsider."

Joyce looked at the Associate. He might have expected something of the sort from Blanding, but a man of Kallimer's intelligence should have arrived at the proper conclusion.

Perhaps the Bar Association had been very wise to give him this trial, instead of letting some lesser Justice handle it. He'd had his doubts, but this wiped them out.

Without looking at Kallimer, but letting him plainly see the angry swell of the set jaw muscle that tightened his cheek, Joyce signaled "imperative!"

Kallimer sighed inaudibly, and his "acquiesce" was limpfingered, as though he were trying to convey resignation, as well.

Joyce faced front, still furious, but with his voice under control.

"Justice Blanding, have you reached a verdict?" He moved his left shoulder slightly.

Blanding, from his position on the rostrum, turned and saw the signal.

"I find the Accused completely guilty, Mr. Justice," he said.

Joyce turned to Pedersen in the absolute silence that always fell over a plaza during the rendering of the verdict.

"Completely guilty, Mr. Justice."

Joyce turned to Kallimer.

The man's lips twitched in a faint, sardonic smile. "Completely guilty, Mr. Justice."

Joyce looked down at the Accused. "I also find you completely guilty as charged," he said. "You will not be allowed a weapon with which to make mundane appeal. Your only recourse is to The Messire's mercy. I pray that our verdict is correct."

He stepped back to a new outburst of applause from the family boxes, satisfied that he had done his best. So far, it was a good trial. Even Kallimer's rebelliousness had been evident only here on the bench. The

majesty and unanimity of Justice had been preserved as far as the crowd could tell.

He turned and walked slowly down the platform steps, through the deep hush that locked the plaza.

It had been a good trial. The Bar Association would detail it and its significance in the Closed Archives, and, generations from now, the older Justices would be reading about it, seeing how his action today had choked off the incipient attack on this culture and this civilization.

But that was not uppermost in Joyce's mind. What men a hundred years from now would say could not have much personal significance to him. What made his pulse beat more and more strongly as he descended the steps, turned the corner of the bench, and walked out into the plaza, was the knowledge that his contemporaries – the other Justices of the Bar Association – the men who had also come to the top, and who understood what the burden was – would know he had not failed the ideal.

He stopped just short of the Ground of Trial and gestured to the attendants around the Accused. They removed the Accused's clothing to guard against armor or concealed weapons, and stepped aside.

Joyce took the final stride that placed him on the Justice's Square, where other amplifiers once more took up his voice.

"The Accused will come forward to make her appeal."

The girl stumbled a bit coming out of the box, and he heard a slight sound of disappointment from the family boxes. It was not a good Entrance. But that could be forgotten.

He reached down, and the gun slipped out of its holster in one smooth sweep of his arm that was pure line of motion as he simultaneously half-turned, his vest standing out in a perfect straight-up-and-down cylindrical fall from his neck to its hem. He came up slightly on his toes, and there was a scattering of "bravo!" from the family boxes as well as the more reserved "excellent" which was really all a lame man deserved for his draw, no matter how perfect his arm motion.

The Accused was standing, pale of face, in the Square of Appeal.

Holding his draw, Joyce waited to speak the ultimate sentence.

He was growing old. The number of trials remaining to him was low. Some day soon, on a verdict of "probably guilty," perhaps, when the Accused had a fully loaded weapon, The Messire would reverse the verdict.

Not because of his physical slowness. The lameness and hitch in the draw would be merely symptomatic of his advancing slowness of mind. He would not have interpreted the case correctly.

He knew that, expected it, and felt only acceptance for it. A Justice who rendered an incorrect verdict deserved the penalty just as much as a guilty member of the people.

Meanwhile, this was the upheld ideal.

"You have been adjudged completely guilty as charged," he said, listening to the old words roll out over the plaza. "You have not been granted pardon by this Court. Make your appeal to The Messire."

The Accused looked at him wide-eyed out of her pallor. There was no certainty she was praying, but Joyce presumed she was.

Justice rested in The Messire. He knew the guilty and the innocent; punished the one and protected the other. Joyce was only His instrument, and Trial was only the opportunity for His judgment to become apparent. Men could judge each other, and pass sentence. But men could be wise or foolish in their decisions. That was the fallible nature of Man.

Here was where the test came; here where the Accused prayed to The Messire for the ultimate, infallible judgment. This was Trial.

His finger tightened on the trigger while his arm came slowly down and forward. This, too, was where Joyce prayed to the Ultimate Judge, asking whether he had done wisely, whether he had once more done well. Each trial was his Trial, too. This was his contact with The Messire. This was Truth.

Something whirled out of the silent crowd of people and landed at the girl's feet. It was a gun, and the girl scrambled for it.

As soon as she picked it up, Joyce knew he'd lost his advantage. His reflexes were too slow, and he'd lost two decisive seconds by stopping, paralyzed, and staring at it.

He shook his head to clear away the momentary shock. He gave up paying attention to the confused noise and blind milling of the crowd. He narrowed his concentration down to the girl and her gun. As far as he could permit himself to be concerned, he and she were alone in a private universe, each trying to overcome panic long enough to act.

He'd lost his aim, and his arm had dropped below the line of fire. He brought it up, deliberately slowing his impulse to fling it into position. If he missed, the odds would be all against a second shot.

It was a better aim than the conventional method, in any case. It permitted no elaboration; it had no grace or beauty, but it was a steadier method of aiming.

Her shot struck his forearm, and his hand slapped up into the air from the shock. His fingers almost lost their grip on the butt, and he clenched them convulsively.

The girl was tugging at her weapon, doing something with the buttplate.

His gun discharged into the air, and his arm shook with fresh pain from the recoil.

He could see the Accused was as wrought up as he was. He clutched his forearm with his left hand and steadied down. Before she could fire again, his gun burst into life, throwing her backward and down to the ground. She was obviously dead.

He took a deep, shuddering breath. The gun started to fall out of his weak fingers, but he caught it with his left hand and dropped it into its holster.

The world around him slowly filtered back into his senses. He became aware of angry shouts in the crowd of people, and of attendants struggling to hold them in check. There was a knot of people clustered around a family box, but before he could investigate that, he felt Kallimer put an arm around his waist and hold him up. He hadn't even realized he was swaying.

"We can't worry about the crowd," Kallimer said in a peculiar voice. It was urgent, but he sounded calm under it. There was no hysteria in him, and Joyce noted that to his credit.

"Did you see who threw the gun?" Joyce demanded.

Kallimer shook his head. "No. Doesn't matter. We've got to get back to New York."

Joyce looked up at the bench. Blanding wasn't in sight, but Pedersen was hanging by his hands, dangling down over its face, and dropping to the plaza. He bent, picked up the brief case he'd thrown down ahead of him, ripped it open, and pulled out his gun.

That was idiotic. What did he think he was doing?

"Joyce!" Kallimer was pulling at him.

"All right!" Joyce snapped in annoyance. He began to run toward Pedersen before the fool could disgrace himself. As he ran, he realized

Kallimer was right. The three of them had to get back to New York as quickly as possible. The Bar Association had to know.

Pedersen sat far back in his corner of the train compartment, his eyes closed and his head against the paneling as though he was listening to the sound of the trolley running along the overhead cable. The Messire only knew what he was really listening to. His face was pale.

Joyce turned stiffly toward Kallimer, hampered by the sling and cast on his arm. The Associate was staring out the window, and neither he nor Pedersen had said a word since they'd boarded the train, fifteen minutes ago. At that time, there had still been noise coming from the plaza.

There'd been a twenty-minute wait for the train. That meant more than three-quarters of an hour had passed since the start of it all, and Joyce still did not understand exactly what had happened. He had only disconnected impressions of the entire incident, and, for the life of him, he could find no basic significance behind it, although he knew there had to be one.

"Kallimer."

The Associate turned away from the window. "What?"

Joyce gestured, conscious of his sudden inability to find the proper phrasing.

"You want to know what touched it off. Is that it?"

Joyce nodded, relieved at not having to say it after all.

Kallimer shook his head. "I don't know, exactly. Somebody in the crowd felt strongly enough to throw her the gun. One of her relatives, I suppose."

"But – " Joyce gestured inarticulately. "It... it was a legal execution! Who would interfere with justice? Who'd take the risk of eternal damnation by interfering with The Messire's obvious will?"

Pedersen, in his corner, made a very peculiar sound. Kallimer shot him a cryptic glare. He turned back to Joyce and seemed to be searching for words.

"Joyce," he said finally, "how do you imagine The Messire would reverse a verdict of 'Completely Guilty?'"

Joyce frowned. "Well... I don't know. My gun might jam. Or I might fire and unaccountably miss."

"You don't know for certain, because it's never happened. Am I

correct?"

"Substantially."

"Now. How many reversals have there been on verdicts of 'Apparently Guilty?' When the Accused was given a gun with one cartridge in the chamber."

"A few."

"But it's never happened to any Justice you know, has it?"

Joyce shook his head. "No, but there are recorded cases. A few, as I said."

"Very well. What about 'Possibly Guilty?' Many reversals on those verdicts?"

"An appreciable number."

"Almost had a few of those yourself, didn't you?"

"A few."

"Very well." Kallimer held up his hand, bending one finger for each point. "Now – first we have the case in which the Accused is weaponless. No reversals. Next we have the case in which the Accused has one shot to fire. A few reversals. And finally we have the case in which the Accused has as much of a weapon as the Presiding Justice. An appreciable number of reversals."

"Does it not seem to you, Justice Joyce, that this series of statistics might well occur without the intervention of any Divine Will whatsoever?"

Joyce stared at him, but Kallimer gave him no chance to reply.

"Furthermore, Joyce; do the people have the right to bear arms? That is to say, can you imagine an Accused who was acquainted with the firing and aiming of an automatic pistol? The answer – you asked, now hear me out – the answer is No."

"More. Have you ever heard of The Messire reversing a verdict of 'Not Guilty?'"

Joyce bridled. "There aren't two of those a year!"

Kallimer's mouth hooked. "I know. But they do exist. Explain this, then; how do you reconcile Divine Will with the curious fact that verdicts of 'Not Guilty' and 'Completely Guilty' are never reversed, and never have been reversed, though Messire knows we came close this afternoon? Are you claiming that in those cases, every Justice who ever lived was right every time? Are you attempting to claim, for mortal men, the infallibility which

is The Messire's particular province?"

Kallimer's face was tense with emotion, and Joyce received a distinct impression that the Associate was speaking with excessive violence; actually his voice was still under control.

"Mr. Joyce, if you can't see the point I'm driving at, I am sorry. But, rest assured, somebody in that crowd of people finally realized it, after all these years. Somebody wasn't afraid of The Messire." Kallimer turned his head sharply and looked out the window at the Hudson, running silver far below as the train swung over to the east shore. "I'm not sure Pedersen wasn't right in drawing his gun. And, Mr. Joyce, if what I've said hasn't shaken you, it certainly should have."

Kallimer took a deep breath and seemed to calm down a little.

"Mr. Joyce," he said softly, "I believe there's something you haven't thought of. I imagine it'll make you unhappy when I tell you.

"Talking in your terms, now – you don't have to give an inch, Mr. Joyce; in fact, you have to hang on to your beliefs with absolute rigidity to appreciate the full impact – looking at it from your point of view: You can't imagine how The Messire would go about reversing an unjust verdict of 'Completely Guilty.' But The Messire is omniscient and omnipotent. His ways are complex and unknowable. Am I correct? Well, then, how do you know that what happened today wasn't a hint of how He'd manage it?"

The blood drained out of Joyce's face.

"Sam! But you never – " She stopped. "Come in, Sam. You surprised me."

Joyce kissed her cheek and strode nervously into her apartment. He knew what had startled her. He never called on nights following trials; in the fifteen years they'd been together, she would naturally have noticed that. He considered the problem while on his way over, and the only thing to do, he'd decided, was to act as though nothing unusual were taking place. He reasoned that a woman, being a woman, would shrug her shoulders over it after the first few minutes. Probably, after a short time, she'd even begin to doubt her memory.

"Sam, what's the matter with your arm?"

He spun around and saw her still standing by the door, wearing a dressing gown, with her hair in curlers.

"Trial," he bit off shortly. He paced across the room, took a pear out of a

bowl, and bit into it. "I'm hungry," he said with false vigor.

She seemed to collect herself. "Of course, Sam. I'll put something on the stove. It won't be more than a few moments. Excuse me." She went into the kitchen, leaving him standing alone in the semidarkness surrounding the one light she'd switched on near the door. Impatiently, he snapped the switches of the other lamps in the room and stood in the middle of it, chewing the pear and bouncing it in his palm between bites.

He heard Emily put a pan on a burner. He moved abruptly, and strode into the kitchen, stopping just inside the door and dropping the pear down the disposal chute.

"Finished it," he said, explaining his presence. He looked around. "Anything I can do?"

Emily looked up at him, a look of amused disbelief on her face, "Sam, what's gotten into you?"

Joyce scowled. "Anything wrong with coming up to see my girl?"

Saying it made the scowl disappear. He looked down at Emily, who was bent over the stove again. Fifteen years had touched her hair, and put little lines on her forehead and the corners of her mouth. They added a good bit to her hips and waist. But there was an earthly, commonsense comfort in her. He could put his key in the door at any time of night, and she'd hear the sound and be there to meet him.

He reached down and pulled her up. His arm twinged a bit, but that was unimportant at the moment. He folded his arms around her and cupped the back of her head in one palm. The warmth and security of her made his clutch tighter than he'd intended at the start. Suddenly he found himself wishing he'd never have to go back to his own ascetic flat.

Emily smiled faintly and kissed his chin. "Sam, what did happen? I heard the trial results over the radio this afternoon, and all they announced for Nyack was a successful conclusion to a verdict of 'Completely Guilty.' Was there some trouble they didn't want to talk about?"

His mood burst, and he dropped his arms.

"What kind of trouble?" he asked sharply.

Her eyes opened, and she looked at him in fresh surprise. "I didn't mean anything by it, Sam. Just ordinary trouble... you know, a lucky shot by the Accused – " She looked at the light cast on his arm. "But that couldn't be it, with an unarmed Accused – "

Joyce took an angry breath. "I thought we had that clear between us," he said in a voice he realized was too angry. "From the very beginning, I've made it plain that your province is yours and my province is mine. If I don't tell you about it, you can assume I don't feel you should know."

Emily stepped back and quickly bent over the stove again. "All right, Sam," she said in a low voice. "I'm sorry." She lifted the lid of a pan. "Supper'll be ready in a minute. It'll be pretty busy in here when all these pots come to a boil at the same time."

"I'll be waiting in the living room." Joyce turned and walked out.

He paced back and forth over the rug, his lips in a tight line, conscious now of the pain in his arm.

One more scar. One more objection from The Messire. All safe in the end, but one more objection, nevertheless, and what did it mean?

And the Bar Association.

"A hearing!" he muttered. "A full hearing tomorrow!" As though his report hadn't been adequate. He'd told them what happened. It should have been enough. But Kallimer, with his allegations that there was more to the incident –

Well, all right. Tomorrow he'd see about Kallimer.

Emily came into the living room. "Supper's ready, Sam." Her voice and expression were careful to be normal. She didn't want to provoke him again.

She was hurt, and he didn't like to see her that way. He laughed suddenly and put his arm around her shoulders, squeezing. "Well, let's eat, eh, girl?"

"Of course, Sam."

He frowned slightly, dissatisfied. But there was no point in trying to patch it up and only making it worse. He kept still as they went into the dining room.

They ate silently. Or rather, to be honest with himself, Joyce had to admit that he ate and Emily toyed with a small portion, keeping him company out of politeness.

The act of sitting still for twenty minutes quieted his nerves a bit. And he appreciated Emily's courtesy. As he pushed his coffee cup away, he looked up at her and smiled.

"That was very good. Thank you, Emily."

She smiled faintly. "Thank you, Sam. I'm glad you liked it. I'm afraid it wasn't much. I hadn't planned – " She broke off.

So, she had continued to wonder about his calling tonight. He smiled ruefully. And now she thought she'd offended him again. He'd been pretty grumpy tonight.

He reached out and took her hand. "That's all right, Emily."

After she'd washed the dishes, she came in and sat down beside him on the couch, where he was slumped with his feet on a hassock. His ankles and calves were aching. It was all right as long as he kept moving, but once he sat down the ache always began. He smiled at her wanly.

Smiling back, she bent wordlessly and began to massage his calves, working the muscles with her fingers.

"Emily – "

"Yes, Sam?"

"If... Nothing, Emily. There's not much point in talking about it." He found himself caught between the desire to speak to someone and the urgent sense that this afternoon was best forgotten. He stared down past his feet without looking at anything. Perhaps there was some way to maneuver her into telling him what he wanted to know, without his having to tell her about it.

Why was he reluctant to talk about this afternoon? He didn't know, exactly; but he couldn't bring himself to do it, no more than he could have discussed some character defect he might have accidentally observed in a lady or gentleman.

"What else did they say over the radio?" he asked without any special intonation. "About Nyack."

"Nothing, Sam, except for the bare results."

He grunted in disappointment.

Perhaps there was some better angle of approach. "Emily, suppose... suppose you knew of a case involving a people's girl and a family man. Suppose the girl had come up to the man on a public street and addressed him by his first name."

He stopped uncomfortably.

"Yes, Sam?"

"Uh... well, what would you think?"

Emily's hands became still for a moment, then began working on his

calves again.

"What would I think?" she asked in a low voice, looking down at the floor. "I'd think she was very foolish."

He grimaced. That wasn't what he wanted. But did he know what he wanted from her? What was the answer he was looking for? He tried again.

"Yes, of course. But, aside from that, what else?"

He saw Emily bite her lip. "I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean, Sam."

A tinge of his earlier anger put a bite in his voice. "You're not that unintelligent, Emily."

She took a deep breath and looked at him. "Sam, something drastic went wrong today, didn't it? Something very bad. You were terribly upset when you came in – "

"Upset? I don't think so," he interrupted quickly.

"Sam, I've been your mistress for fifteen years."

He knew his face was betraying him. In her flashes of shrewdness, she always did this to him. She'd put her finger exactly on the vulnerable truth, disarming his ability to cover up.

He sighed and spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. "All right, Emily. Yes, I am upset." The irritation welled up again. "That's why I want some help from you, instead of this evasiveness."

She straightened up, taking her hands off his aching legs, and half-turned on the couch, so that she was looking directly into his eyes. She held his gaze without hesitation.

"Maybe you're asking too much of me. Perhaps not. This is important, isn't it? I've never seen you quite as troubled as this."

She was tense, he realized. Tense, and apprehensive. But he saw, as well, that she had decided to go ahead, despite whatever her private doubts might be.

"Yes," he admitted, "it's important."

"Very well. You want to know what I think about that girl? Suppose you tell me what you think, first. Do you believe she did it out of spite, or malice, or impulse?"

He shook his head. "Of course not! She was in love with him, and forgot herself."

Emily's eyes welled up with a sudden trace of tears. Joyce stared at her, dumbfounded, for the few seconds before she wiped one hand across her eyes in annoyance.

"Well?" she asked in a low voice.

"I'm afraid it's my turn not to understand," he said after a moment. He frowned. What was she driving at?

"What distinguishes me from that girl, Sam? A few years? What do you expect me to think?"

"It's not the same thing at all, Emily!" he shot back in honest anger. "Why... why you're a mature woman. We're – "

He couldn't really point out the difference, but he knew it was there. She'd never said or done anything –

"Emily, you know very well you'd never do what that girl did!"

"Only because I'm more conscious of the rules," she answered in a low voice. "What real difference is there between her and myself? It is that it's you and I, rather than two other people; rather than any one of the scores of similar couples we know? What distinguishes us in your eyes? The fact that we're not a case for you to try?"

"Emily, this is ridiculous!"

She shook her head slowly. "That girl broke the law. I haven't. But I haven't only because I realized, from the very start, just what kind of tight-rope I'd be walking for the rest of our lives. I couldn't leave you and go back to the people, now; I've grown too used to living as I do. But I'll always be no more than I was born to.

"Suppose I were a People's man – a mechanic, or perhaps even an engineer if I'd bound myself to some family. I'd know that all my skill and training wouldn't be of any use if I were accused of some crime in a court of law. I'd know that addressing my patron in public by his first name would be a crime – a different kind of crime than if I were my patron's mistress, certainly, but a crime, nevertheless. Let's assume that, as my patron's engineer, I overrode his will on the specifications for whatever product my patron manufactured. Or that I attempted to redesign a product or develop a new one without first getting his approval and suggestions; that would be legally analogous to what the girl did, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, and properly so," Joyce retorted.

Emily looked at him and nodded slowly. She went on:

"If I were that engineer, and I had any common sense, I'd be constantly aware of the difference between myself and my patron. I would remind myself, every day, that my patron was born to a family, and that my patron would, in turn, be permitted the sacrament of marriage when he desired it with a lady. I would understand that engineers were members of the people, and that my patron was a member of one of the First Families, or a Legislator, or a Justice. Realizing all this, I would always be careful never to encroach on the difference between us, accepting my fate in having been born to the people, and his having been born to a family."

Joyce frowned. "That sounds a little bit as though you considered birth a blind accident."

Emily looked at him silently. She took a deep breath "Being an intelligent person, I, as that engineer, would attribute my station at birth to the direction of The Messire. You'll hear no heresies from me, Sam." She reached out and took his hand.

"That's why I'll say, again, that the girl in Nyack was foolish. That was the case in Nyack, wasn't it? She did what none of us, in our right minds, would consider doing. Certainly, she did what I'd never do, but then, I'm older than she. I was older when I came to you, or I at least assume so, since you called her a girl."

Suddenly, she bit her lip. "Young people in love are not necessarily in their right minds, just as people enraged are not acting logically. Who's to say what their punishment should be?"

"There is Someone," Joyce answered firmly.

Emily nodded, looking at him, her expression abstracted, Suddenly she said:

"Sam, have you ever really looked at yourself in a mirror? Not to see whether you'd shaved properly, or whether your wig was crooked on the morning before a trial, but just to look at yourself."

He couldn't understand this new tack.

"Do you know you have a very young face, Sam? Under that black beard-shadow, with the scowl gone, you've got the face of a troubled adolescent. You've taught yourself dignity, and put flesh on your body, but you're still a young boy, searching for the key that will wind the world up to run accurately forever. Perhaps you believe you've found it. You believe in what you're doing. You believe that justice is the most important thing in the world. What you do, you do as a crusade. There's no wanton malice or cruelty in you. I don't believe I've ever known you to do anything purely

for yourself.

"I love you for it, Sam. But, except sometimes with me, you've submerged yourself in your ideal, until you've learned to ignore Sam Joyce entirely. You're Mister Justice Joyce all the time."

She closed her hand on his. "Something happened this afternoon, and I suspect it was drastic. You've come to me after facing an unarmed Accused – a girl, young and unskilled – but there's a cast on your arm, and what must be a bullet hole under it. I don't know what happened. I do know there's a news blackout on Nyack.

"Sam, if the system's been finally challenged, then you're in terrible danger. Other men aren't like you. Other men – people's men and family men – act in rage, or fear, or love. If they tear down your world and your ideal – "

"Tear down – !"

"... If they tear down what you have given your life to, there will be nothing left of you. If the system goes, it takes Justice Joyce's lifeblood with it, and only I know where the little fragment of Sam Joyce lives. It won't be enough."

"Emily, you're exaggerating beyond all reason!"

Emily clutched his hand. He saw, to his complete amazement, that she'd shut her eyes against the tears, but that streaks of silent moisture were trickling down her cheeks.

"You've come to me for help, but I'm part of the world, too, and I have to live the way it lets me. After all these years, you want to know whether you've been right, and I'm supposed to tell you.

"I told you I thought the girl was foolish. Sam, I love you, but I don't dare give you your answer. I told you: you won't hear any heretical statements from me."

Joyce's eyes were burning, and the short stubble of his graying natural hair was thick with perspiration. The night had been sleepless for him.

His arm was much better this morning, but he still remembered the shock of the bullet.

If you believed, as you must believe, that The Messire saw every human deed, knew every human thought, and caused every human event, then what had He meant in Nyack?

If the sentence was correct, why did The Messire permit her that one

shot? Why hadn't whoever threw the gun been stopped before he could do it? If the sentence was unjust, why hadn't she killed him?

Was it that The Messire approved of him, but not of the basis of his judgment? But his basis was the Law, and The Messire had handed down the Law!

Was it, as Kallimer had said, that The Messire was not as Joyce conceived of him?

What did Emily think?

He reminded himself that what Emily thought was irrelevant, as he had hastily reminded himself many times during the past night. Her opinion did not govern the truth or falsehood of justice. Justice was an absolute; it was either right, no matter what the opinions of Mankind, or it was worthless.

Was it, as Kallimer had said viciously, that The Messire was trying to make him understand something?

What?

What had He meant in Nyack?

Joyce lay on the bed, exhausted. He knew he was thinking wildly. He'd gone over and over this ground, trying to find the proper logic, and accomplishing nothing. He was in no condition to reason correctly. He only hoped he could act wisely at the hearing this afternoon.

He slipped cautiously out of bed, hesitating at every rustle of the sheets. Once out, he dressed hastily, and left the apartment as quietly as he could. He didn't want Emily to wake up and see what condition he was in.

This, too, was part of the task, and the young, ambitious Associate Justice of Utica hadn't had the faintest inkling of it, just as, throughout his dedicated advancement through the ranks of his profession, he could not have dreamed how difficult it would some day be to walk steadily through a door when sleepless legs and aching ankles dragged at every step.

He saw the tension rampant in every Member. No one was sitting down quietly, waiting for the hearing to begin. Knots of men stood everywhere, talking sharply, and there was a continual movement from one group to another.

Joyce scowled in annoyance and nodded shortly as most of the faces in the room were turned toward him. He looked around for Joshua Normandy, but the Bar Association's Chairman had not yet come in. He

saw Kallimer, standing to one side, wearing his frown and talking alone to a whitefaced Pedersen.

Joyce went over to them. He hadn't decided yet what to do with Kallimer. The man was arrogant. He seemed to derive genuine pleasure from talking in terms Joyce was unable to understand. But the man was intelligent, and ambitious. His ambition would lead him to defend the same principles that Joyce defended, and his intelligence would make him a superlative Chief Justice, once Joyce was gone.

For the sake of that, Joyce was willing to let yesterday's questionable behavior go. Perhaps, after all, Kallimer had been right in asking for a reconsideration of the verdict.

Once again, Joyce was painfully conscious of his inability to arrive at any firm opinion on yesterday's events. He stopped in front of Kallimer and Pedersen with a shake of his head, and only then realized how peculiar the gesture must look to them.

"Good afternoon, Justice," Kallimer said dryly.

Joyce searched his face for some indication of his state of mind, but there was nothing beyond the omnipresent frown.

"Good afternoon, Justices," he said finally. "Or have the election results been confirmed, Legislator?" he asked Pedersen.

Pedersen's face was strained. "Yes, sir. The results were confirmed. But I resigned."

Joyce's eyebrows shot up. Recovering, he tried to smile pleasantly. "Then you're returning to the Bar?"

Pedersen shook his head. "No... uh – " he husked in a dry voice, "I'm here simply as a witness to... uh... yesterday." He was deathly pale.

Kallimer smiled coldly. "Mr. Pedersen has decided to retire from public life, Justice Joyce. He now considers that his first attempt to dissociate himself from the Bar was inadequate."

Joyce looked from Kallimer back to Pedersen. The younger man, he suddenly realized, was terrified.

"Blanding's dead, you know," Kallimer said without inflection. "A paving block was thrown at his head yesterday afternoon. It's uncertain just what the circumstances were, but a member of the Civil Guard brought the word out." Kallimer smiled at Pedersen. "And now our former Associate, his earlier presentiments proven correct, is shortly taking a trip abroad – the Lakes Confederation, I believe?"

"I have distant relations in St. Paul," Pedersen confirmed huskily. "And there is an Ontario branch of the family in Toronto. I plan to be away for some time. A tour."

Kallimer still smiled. "The key word in that statement would be 'distant,' would it not, Mr. Pedersen?"

Pedersen flushed angrily, but Joyce seized on Kallimer's attitude as a reassuring sign. At least, Pedersen's cowardice wasn't general. For the moment, that seemed more important than the news of Blanding's death.

His lack of astonishment made him look at himself in wonder. Was he that much upset, that a Justice's murder failed to shock him? Was he really that far gone in his acceptance of the incredible?

He knew, with a calmly logical part of his mind, that before yesterday he would have considered himself insane to even think of anyone's attacking the Law. Today, he could pass over it. Not lightly, but, nevertheless, pass over it.

"You're sure of your information, Kallimer?" he asked.

Kallimer nodded, looking at him curiously. "The witness is reliable. And he brought out the gun, too. That's an astonishing item in itself. You'll be interested."

Joyce raised his eyebrows politely. "Really?" He saw Joshua Normandy come into the hearing room, and nodded in the Chairman's direction. "The hearing's about to begin. It'll be brought up, of course?"

Kallimer was frankly puzzled by his attitude. Joyce's head was erect, and his shoulders had abruptly straightened out of their unconscious slump.

"Yes, of course."

"Good. Shall we take our places? Good afternoon, Mr. Pedersen. It was a pleasure having you on my bench." He took Kallimer's arm, and, together, they strolled up to the long table facing the chairs of the lesser Justices.

Joyce knew what was happening to him, and the calm, judicial part of his mind, at last given something it understood to work with, approved.

He had been in a panic. At noon, yesterday, the foundations of his logic had been destroyed. The integrity of justice and Justices had been attacked, and his belief in the universal acceptance of The Messire's Law had been proved false. He had discovered, in one climactic instant, that there were people willing to deliberately attack the Law.

He had been beyond his depth. He had no precedent for such a crime;

no basis on which to judge the situation. Someone else, perhaps, such as Kallimer or Justice Normandy, might have the reach of mind to encompass it. But Joyce knew he was not a brilliant man. He was only an honest man, and he knew what was beyond him. In the instant that he had stopped, staring dumfounded at the gun lying on the plaza stones, with the Accused reaching for it eagerly, he had stopped being capable of evaluating the legal situation and taking steps to rectify it. Panic could warp a man's judgment completely.

That was what The Messire had been trying to make him realize. The world was changing, and the Chief Justice was not equipped to deal with the change.

As an honest man; as a man sincere in his beliefs, he was ready to give up his responsibilities and let the better suited men take them up.

He nodded to Justice Normandy and the other Bar Association officers. Then he sat down calmly, with Kallimer beside him, and waited to see what the more intelligent men had made of the situation.

Kallimer was holding up the gun brought out of Nyack. Joyce looked at it curiously. It was late in the afternoon, and a good deal of testimony had already been recorded. Pedersen stated that he was aware of angry movement in the crowd as Joyce made his draw, but that the gun had been thrown by an unidentified man before anything could be done. After the shooting, the man and a surrounding group of other men had been lost in the crowd. The crowd itself had been bewildered at first, and then divided in its reactions. That early in the riot, there had been no signs of unanimous effort.

The Civil Guardsman had testified that, as far as he knew, he was the only survivor of the squad detailed to keep order during the trial. He had seized the gun after the executed Accused dropped it, and run to Guard headquarters for help. It was his impression that the immediate deaths among family members at the trial were the result of spontaneous riot in the crowd, and not of any organized plan of assassination.

Justice Kallimer had commented that this was also his impression. The only traces of intelligent planning, he stated, had shown themselves in the cutting of the train cables out of Nyack and the attack on the radio station, where the supervising family man had smashed the transmitter before it could be captured. Note was made of the loyalty of the station engineering staff.

Now, Kallimer said: "Hearing previous testimony in mind, I'd like to call this hearing's attention to the construction and design of this illegal

weapon."

Joyce bent closer. There were a number of peculiarities in the gun, and they interested him.

"First," Kallimer went on, "the weapon is obviously handmade. Its frame consists of a solid metal piece – steel, I'm told by a competent engineer – which bears obvious file marks. Moreover, it is of almost primitive design. It has a smoothbore barrel, drilled through from muzzle to breech, and is mortised at the breech to accommodate one hand-inserted cartridge and a spring-loaded hammer. Additional cartridges are stored in the butt, covered by a friction plate. It is fired by thumbing back the hammer and releasing it, after which the fired cartridge case must be removed by hand before it can be reloaded.

"A hasty weapon. A weapon of desperation, thrown together by someone with only a few hours to work in."

Kallimer put the gun down. "A hopelessly inefficient and inadequate weapon. I am informed that the barrel was not even drilled parallel to the frame's long axis, and that the crude sights were also askew, further complicating the error in aiming. It is remarkable that Mr. Justice Joyce was struck at all, and it is no wonder at all that the Accused was never able to fire a second shot."

Joyce shook his head slightly. It was perfectly obvious how the girl had managed to hit him. But then, Kallimer, with his slightly eccentric viewpoint, would not be likely to take The Messire into account.

Kallimer was speaking again.

"The point, however, isn't relevant here. It is the nature of this weapon which concerns us. Obviously, it was not constructed by anyone particularly skilled in the craft, and its design is hopelessly unimaginative. It is unlikely that any others exist. It follows, then, that the rebellion, if I may call it such for the moment, is largely confined to the Accused's immediate... ah... relations. No actual large-scale, organized effort exists.

"We have the testimony of Mr. Pedersen and the Guardsman. It seems obvious that the gun-throwers' plans culminated in the delivery of the weapon to the Accused. What followed was a spontaneous demonstration. This, together with some other relevant data already mentioned in testimony, is the basis on which we have formulated our program of rectification."

Kallimer turned toward the center of the table. "Justice Normandy."

Normandy was an aged, gray-headed man whose heavy brows hung low

over his eyes. He rose out of his chair and supported his weight on his hands, leaning out over the table and looking toward the lesser Justices in their seats.

Joyce looked at him curiously.

Normandy had never been Chief Justice. He'd risen to Chief Associate under Kemple, the Chief Justice before the one Joyce had replaced. The oldest son of one of the First Families, Normandy had then retired from active work, becoming first Recorder and then Chairman of the Bar Association. He'd held the position longer than Joyce had been Chief Justice, and he was at least seventy.

Joyce wondered what he and Kallimer had decided to do.

Normandy's voice was harsh with age. He forced each word out of his throat.

"Justice Kallimer has summed up very well. A purely personal rebellion against the Law in Nyack has touched off a spontaneous demonstration. You've noticed the lack of evidence implicating any ringleaders except the Accused's relations. They're nothing but woodworkers. There was some later participation by engineers, because it took training to see the importance of cutting off communications. But that wasn't until this emotional upheaval had a chance to get contagious.

"There's a certain rebellious feeling, yes. But it's hardly born yet. It won't spread unless we let it, and we won't. By tomorrow afternoon, we'll be back to normal.

"Thank you, Justices. This hearing's concluded, and Mr. Joyce, Mr. Kallimer, and I will stay behind for further discussion."

Joyce watched the lesser Justices file out of the hearing room, their manner much less nervous than it had been. Normandy had put some starch back into their spines.

Joyce, too, felt better. He'd been right in expecting Kallimer and Normandy to have a solution. He was leaving the Law in capable hands.

"Well, they believed it. I'd be happier if a few of them hadn't."

Kallimer shrugged. "There's no telling. If any of them saw through it, they'd be intelligent enough not to show it."

Normandy cocked an eyebrow, pursed his lips, and, after a moment, grinned. "That's a good point."

Joyce looked blankly at both of them. "I gather," he said finally, "that

the situation is more serious than was divulged." He felt a slight return of his old disquiet, but nothing near panic.

Normandy and Kallimer turned in their chairs. Both of them looked at him speculatively.

Normandy nodded. "By quite a good bit. It took the engineers a while to realize what was happening, but they took over the rebellion within the first hour. They're directing it now. We had to bomb the radio station and establish a false transmitter on the same wave length. It looks very much as though the engineers had a plan ready to use, but not quite this soon. They were caught a little short."

Normandy grimaced. "Not short enough, though. We anticipated a little trouble down there, but we were unprepared for the discovery of anything like that. The Guard can't handle it. I sent in the Army this morning."

Kallimer grunted. "You know," he told Normandy, 'I asked Joyce to reconsider his verdict."

Normandy's eyes snapped open. "You did? Why?"

"We didn't need any tests, after all. I could smell the trouble in that crowd. It was that thick. They didn't know it themselves, but they were spoiling for a riot." He shrugged. "Joyce overruled me, of course. It's a good thing, too, or we'd never have found out in time just how deep the trouble had dug."

Normandy stared thoughtfully off into distance, his head barely moving as he nodded to himself. "Yes," he whispered under his breath.

He looked sharply at Joyce. "How much of this shocks you, Justice?"

Joyce was looking at the expression on Kallimer's face. It had become coldly sardonic.

"I – " He broke off and shrugged in reply to Normandy's question. "I don't really know. But I'm sure you're aware of what you're doing." Nevertheless, he was bewildered. He couldn't quite make out what Kallimer had meant.

Normandy looked at him steadily, his black eyes watchful. "I've always been of two minds about you," he said in a thoughtful voice. "I believe I chose wisely, but there's no certainty, with individuals like you." He grinned in his abrupt way. "But sometimes a calculated risk is justified. Sometimes, only an honest man will do."

Joyce's bewilderment was growing. He understood that Normandy was

being much more candid with him than he had ever been before. Vaguely, he was aware that the situation had forced Normandy into it.

But if Normandy was being forced into drastic steps, then what did that say about Sam Joyce's ability to do the proper thing in this crisis?

"There's something I believe I should tell you," he said quickly, conscious of a return to his earlier panic. He had to state his position as early in this discussion as possible, before Normandy and Kallimer assumed he could be counted on. "I'm... not sure of exactly what you mean about me," he went on as Normandy and Kallimer looked at him curiously. "But there's something you should know."

He stopped to choose his words carefully. He had to convince these men that he wasn't acting on impulse; that he'd thought this out. They deserved an explanation, after having assumed he'd help them. And, too, it was important to him personally. Possibly this was the most important decision of his life.

"I've been Chief Justice for a comparatively long time," he began. He had; he'd always felt The Messire had a good servant in him, and, up until yesterday, The Messire had seemed to agree.

He looked down at his hands. "I have a good record. I've done my best.

"You know my history. I began years ago, on a minor bench, and I rose step by step. No one has the skill with his gun or is better in the ritual of Trial than I was in my prime." He looked up at Normandy and Kallimer, trying to see whether they understood him. "I feel that I've been a good Justice; that I've served The Messire's Law as He desired it. But I've always known I wasn't the most brilliant man on the bench. I haven't delivered many famous opinions, and I'm no lawyer's lawyer. I've simply" – he gestured indecisively – "been a Justice for a long time." He paused momentarily.

"But this," he went on in a low voice, "is beyond my capabilities." He looked down again. "I know I haven't the capacity to do my duty properly in this situation. I'd like to resign in Justice Kallimer's favor."

There was a long silence. Joyce did not look up, but sat thinking of the foolish things he'd done and thought during the past two days.

He looked up, finally, and saw Normandy's quizzical expression. Kallimer's face was a nonplussed blank.

Normandy tented his fingers and blew out a breath over them. "I see." He looked cryptically at Kallimer, and Kallimer seemed to exchange some silent message with him.

Kallimer spoke slowly. "Mr. Joyce, I know you well enough to realize this hasn't been a hasty decision. Would you mind telling me what led you to it?"

Joyce shook his head. "Not at all. I've decided that this is the only possible interpretation of yesterday's events in the plaza. It seems clear to me that The Messire's intent was to have me do what I've just done."

Normandy jerked his head violently, and stared at Joyce. "I'll be damned!" he exploded.

Kallimer's mouth twisted. "This is hardly what I expected to result from our talk yesterday," he muttered. He looked at Joyce with perverse admiration. Then he spoke to Normandy. "Well, Justice, there's your honest man."

Normandy shot Kallimer one sour look before he turned back to Joyce. His voice grated harshly.

"That's all well and good, but you're not resigning. Not now, at least, and never in Kallimer's favor. You've still got one Trial to run, and Kallimer's after my job, not yours."

"Not until after you've retired, Justice," Kallimer interjected, turning his sardonic smile on Normandy. "I've made it clear I have no intention of competing with you. Furthermore, I'm your only natural heir in any case." He chuckled for the first time in Joyce's experience. "There aren't many like us born to each generation, are there, Justice?"

Joyce sat numbly, unable to decide what he thought of Normandy's outburst.

"Justice Normandy – " he said finally.

"What?"

"You say I've still got one Trial."

"Yes!"

"But, if The Messire has indicated that He no longer considers me competent, the Trial will be prejudiced – "

Normandy thrust himself out of his chair and away from the table. His eyes were blazing, and his hands trembled. "Damn your Messire! He didn't meddle with your last trial, did he?"

"Sir?"

Normandy cursed again and turned away. "Kallimer, talk to this moron! I've had enough." He stalked out of the hearing room, and the door

crashed behind him.

Kallimer was looking after him with a faint look of exasperation tingeing the amusement of his mouth.

"He's getting old, Joyce." Kallimer sighed. "Well, I suppose the day will come when I'll have no more patience, either. It's a shaky pedestal he sits on."

Joyce was in a turmoil. He knew his face was pale.

Kallimer turned back to him. "There's been an insertion made in your court calendar," he told him. "Tomorrow, you'll hold a special mass trial for the engineers the Army will be dragging out of Nyack. They'll be indicted as 'members of the people.' Their origin won't be specified – no use alarming the nation. Is there? And I suppose there'll be a variety of charges. I'll set them up tonight. But the verdict'll be 'Completely Guilty' in every case. You and I and a couple of other Justices will handle the executions."

Joyce found himself unable to argue with more than the last few statements. Too much was happening.

"A mass trial? Here, in New York, you mean. For the Nyack rebels. But that's illegal!"

Kallimer nodded. "So are improper indictment and prejudged verdict. But so is rebellion.

"This folderol of Normandy's has a rather shrewd point. The rebels will be punished, but the general populace won't know what for. Only the other rebellious organizations scattered throughout the country will realize what's happened. It'll slow down their enthusiasm, giving us time to root them out."

Joyce looked down at the floor to hide the expression on his face. Kallimer seemed not at all concerned with breaking the spirit of the Law. Normandy was even more blunt than that.

It was a frightening step in his logic, but there was only one possible answer. Both of them were acting as though man made the Law, and men administered the final verdict; as though there were no Messire.

He looked up at Kallimer, wondering what his face was showing of the sudden emptiness in his stomach. He felt as though he was looking down at the Associate from a great height, or up from the bottom of a pit.

"What did Normandy mean about my last trial?" he asked in a low voice.

"First of all, Joyce, bear in mind that The Messire is omniscient. He knows of more crimes than we possibly can. Even if we judge a case incorrectly, it is possible our verdict is nevertheless justified by some other crime of the Accused's."

He looked at Joyce with a flicker of anxiety flashing subtly across his face, leaning even closer, and Joyce's first emptiness became a twinge of disgust and sickness.

"I accept that," Joyce said, the words tasting cottony in his mouth, but wanting to urge Kallimer on.

Kallimer twitched his shoulders. "Perhaps you do," he muttered. Joyce appreciated, with a deep, bitter amusement that never came to the surface, just how much Kallimer must hate Normandy for leaving him with this task to perform.

"In any case," Kallimer went on, "about the girl, yesterday; Normandy's son had heard some things from her. A lot of unrest in Nyack; talk; dissatisfaction; that sort of thing. He told his father.

"It wasn't the only place we'd heard that from, but it was our only real lead. It was decided that a trial, with a particularly controversial member of the people as the Accused, might bring enough of it to the surface for us to gauge its importance."

He stopped and shook his head. "It certainly did. We hadn't the faintest idea it was that strong, or that close to exploding. Sheer luck we found it out."

Joyce looked steadily at Kallimer, hoping his face was calm. "The girl wasn't guilty."

Kallimer's mouth twitched. "Not of the charge we tried her on, no. Normandy's son accused her on his father's orders. You were sent down to try the case because we could predict you'd give us the verdict we wanted. I went along to observe."

Joyce nodded slowly. "I think I understand, now," he said.

"Ready, Justice?" Kallimer asked him.

"Yes," Joyce answered. He replaced the ceremonial gun in its tooled holster.

Kallimer looked at him again and shook his head. "Justice, if we weren't in public, I'd offer you my hand. You hit bottom and you've come up swinging."

Joyce's lower lip tugged upward at the corners. "Thank you, Justice," he said, and prepared to walk up the steps on his aching legs.

Emily had been puzzled, too, as he prepared to leave her this morning.

"Sam, I can't understand you," she'd said worriedly, watching him scowl with pain as he stood up from putting on his boots.

He smiled at her, ignoring the ache in his legs. "Why?"

"You haven't slept in two nights, now. I know something new happened yesterday."

He bent and kissed her, still smiling.

"Sam, what is it?" she asked, the tears beginning to show at the corners of her eyes. "You're too calm. And you won't talk to me."

He shrugged. "Perhaps I'll tell you about it later."

The steps seemed almost inhumanly high today, though he'd walked up them often. He reached the center of the bench gratefully, and leaned against the parapet. Looking down, he saw the Accused standing in their box. They'd been given new clothing, and an attempt had been made to hide their bandages. They were a sullen, dun-colored knot of men and women.

He looked across the plaza at the First Family boxes, crowded with the family men and their ladies, and the lesser family boxes flanking them. There was the usual overflow crowd of people, too, and a doubled force of Civil Guards.

The Accused, the First Families, the lesser families, the people, and even some of the Civil Guards, were all watching him. For all that a number of Justices would go through the full ritual of Trial today, he was the only one who wore the Suit.

When he'd come home to Emily last night, she'd asked him what had happened, looking up at his calm face.

"I went to Chapel after the hearing," he'd told her, and now he seemed to stand there again.

Lowery, one of Manhattan's Associate Justices, began to read the indictments. It was only then that Joyce realized there'd been applause for him and his Associates, and that he'd automatically instructed Lowery to begin.

He listened to the solemn beat of the words in the plaza. This was Trial. Once again, men stood before The Messire, and, once again, the Justices endeavored to act as proper instruments of His justice.

Thirty years of trials had brought him here, in his Suit. In that time, The Messire had thought well of him.

But Kallimer and Normandy had planted the dirty seed of doubt in his mind, and though he knew them for what they were, still, the doubt was there. If the girl had been innocent, how had he been permitted to execute his unjust sentence upon her?

Kallimer had given him an answer for that, but Kallimer had given him too many answers already. It wasn't until he stood in Chapel, watching the candles flicker, that he understood where the test would lie.

If there was no Messire – the thought bewildered him, but he clung to it for argument's sake – then every particle of his life was false, and the ideal he served was dust.

If there was an Ultimate Judge – and how many noons, in thirty years, had brought him the feeling of communion with his Judge – then Joyce knew where to make his appeal.

He looked across the plaza at Joshua Normandy's box, and reflected that Normandy could not begin to guess the magnitude of what was undergoing Trial today.

He put his hand inside his vest and closed his fingers around the butt of his Grennell. It was his gun. It had served him as he had served The Messire; efficiently, without question.

Here was where the test came; here where men prayed to The Messire for the ultimate, infallible judgment.

The Messire knew the guilty, and the innocent; punished the one and protected the other. Joyce was only His instrument, and Trial the opportunity for His judgment to become apparent.

He whispered to himself: "I pray my verdict is correct, but if it is not, I pray that justice prevail at this trial." He took out the gun.

He turned quickly, and fired in Kallimer's direction. He fired across the plaza at Joshua Normandy. Then he began to fire at random into the First Family boxes, seeing Normandy collapse in his box, hearing Kallimer's body tumble backward off the bench, and knowing, whether he was right or wrong, that whatever happened now, The Messire had not, at least, reversed his verdict.

This was the Truth he'd lived for.

© 1954 Algis Budrys

First To Serve

thei ar teetcing mi to reed n ryt n i wil bee abel too do this beter then.
pimi

MAS 712, 820TH TDRC, COMASAMPS, APO IS,
September 28

Leonard Stein, Editor, INFINITY, 862 Union St., New York 24, N. Y.

Dear Len,

Surprise, et cetera

It looks like there will be some new H. E. Wood stories for Infy after all. By the time you get this, 820TH TDRC will have a new Project Engineer, COMASAMPS, and I will be back to the old Royal and the Perry Street lair.

Shed no tear for Junior Heywood, though. COMASAMPS and I have come to this parting with mutual eyes dry and multiple heads erect. There was no sadness in our parting – no bitterness, no weeping, no remorse. COMASAMPS – in one of its apparently limitless human personifications – simply patted me on my backside and told me to pick up my calipers and run along. I'll have to stay away from cybernetics for a while, of course, and I don't think I should write any robot stories in the interval, but, then, I never did like robot stories anyhow.

But all this is a long story about ten thousand words, at least, which means a \$300 net loss if I tell it now.

So go out and buy some fresh decks, I'll be in town next week, my love to the Associate and the kids, and first ace deals.

Vic Heywood

My name is really Prototype Mechanical Man I, but everybody calls me

Pimmy, or sometimes Pim. I was assembled at the eight-twentieth teedearcee on august 10, 1974. I don't know what man or teedearcee or august 10, 1974, means, but Heywood says I will, tomorrow. What's tomorrow?

Pimmy

August 12, 1974

I m still having trouble defining "man." Apparently, even the men can't do a very satisfactory job of that. The 820TDRC, of course, is the Eight Hundred and Twentieth Technical Development and Research Center of the Combined Armed Services Artificial and Mechanical Personnel Section. August 10, 1974, is the day before yesterday.

All this is very obvious, but it's good to record it.

I heard a very strange conversation between Heywood and Russell yesterday.

Russell is a small man, about thirty-eight, who's Heywood's top assistant. He wears glasses, and his chin is farther back than his mouth. It gives his head a symmetrical look. His voice is high, and he moves his hands rapidly. I think his reflexes are overtriggered.

Heywood is pretty big. He's almost as tall as I am. He moves smoothly – he's like me. You get the idea that all of his weight never touches the ground. Once in a while, though, he leaves a cigarette burning in an ashtray, and you can see where the end's been chewed to shreds.

Why is everybody at COMASAMPS so nervous?

Heywood was looking at the first entry in what I can now call my diary. He showed it to Russell.

"Guess you did a good job on the self-awareness tapes, Russ," Heywood said.

Russell frowned. "Too good, I think. He shouldn't have such a tremendous drive toward self-expression. We'll have to iron that out as soon as possible. Want me to set up a new tape?"

Heywood shook his head. "Don't see why. Matter of fact, with the intelligence we've given him, I think it's probably a normal concomitant." He looked up at me and winked.

Russell took his glasses off with a snatch of his hand and scrubbed them on his shirtsleeve. "I don't know. We'll have to watch him. We've got to remember he's a prototype – no different from an experimental

automobile design, or a new dishwasher model. We expected bugs to appear. I think we've found one, and I think it ought to be eliminated. I don't like this personification he's acquired in our minds, either. This business of calling him by a nickname is all wrong. We've got to remember he's not an individual. We've got every right to tinker with him." He slapped his glasses back on and ran his hands over the hair the earpieces had disturbed. "He's just another machine. We can't lose sight of that."

Heywood raised his hands. "Easy, boy. Aren't you going too far off the deep end? All he's done is bat out a few words on a typewriter. Relax, Russ." He walked over to me and slapped my hip. "How about it, Pimmy? D'you feel like scrubbing the floor?"

"No opinion. Is that an order?" I asked.

Heywood turned to Russell. "Behold the rampant individual," he said. "No, Pimmy, no order. Cancel."

Russell shrugged, but he folded the page from my diary carefully, and put it in his breast pocket. I didn't mind. I never forget anything.

August 15, 1974

They did something to me on the Thirteenth. I can't remember what. I've gone over my memory, but there's nothing. I can't remember.

Russell and Ligget were talking yesterday, though, when they inserted the autonomic cutoff, and ran me through on orders. I didn't mind that. I still don't. I can't.

Ligget is one of the small army of push-arounds that nobody knows for sure isn't CIC, but who solders wires while Heywood and Russell make up their minds about him.

I had just done four about-faces, shined their shoes, and struck a peculiar pose. I think there's something seriously wrong with Ligget.

Ligget said, "He responds well, doesn't he?"

"Mm-m – yes," Russell said abstractedly. He ran his glance down a column of figures on an Estimated Performance Spec chart. "Try walking on your hands, PMM One," he said.

I activated my gyroscope and reset my pedal locomotion circuits. I walked around the room on my hands.

Ligget frowned forcefully. "That looks good. How's it check with the spec's?"

"Better than," Russell said. "I'm surprised. We had a lot of trouble with him the last two days. Reacted like a zombie."

"Oh, yes? I wasn't in on that. What happened? I mean – what sort of control were you using?"

"Oh – " I could see that Russell wasn't too sure whether he should tell Ligget or not. I already had the feeling that the atmosphere of this project was loaded with dozens of crosscurrents and conflicting ambitions. I was going to learn a lot about COMASAMPS.

"Yes?" Ligget said.

"We had his individuality circuits cut out. Effectively, he was just a set of conditioned reflexes."

"You say he reacted like a zombie?"

"Definite automatism. Very slow reactions, and, of course, no initiative."

"You mean he'd be very slow in his response to orders under those conditions, right?" Ligget looked crafty behind Russell's back.

Russell whirled around. "He'd make a lousy soldier, if that's what CIC wants to know!"

Ligget smoothed out his face, and twitched his shoulders back. "I'm not a CIC snooper, if that's what you mean."

"You don't mind if I call you a liar, do you?" Russell said, his hands shaking.

"Not particularly," Ligget said, but he was angry behind his smooth face. It helps, having immobile features like mine. You get to understand the psychology of a man who tries for the same effect.

August 16, 1974

It bothers me, not having a diary entry for the fourteenth, either. Somebody's been working on me again.

I told Heywood about it. He shrugged. "Might as well get used to it, Pimmy. There'll be a lot of that going on. I don't imagine it's pleasant – I wouldn't like intermittent amnesia myself – but there's very little you can do about it. Put it down as one of the occupational hazards of being a prototype."

"But I don't like it," I said.

Heywood pulled the left side of his mouth into a straight line and sighed. "Like I said, Pimmy – I wouldn't either. On the other hand, you can't blame us if the new machine we're testing happens to know it's being tested, and resents it. We built the machine. Theoretically, it's our privilege to do anything we please with it, if that'll help us find out how the machine performs, and how to build better ones."

"But I'm not a machine" I said.

Heywood put his lower lip between his teeth and looked up at me from under a raised eyebrow. "Sorry, Pim. I'm kind of afraid you are."

But I'm not! I'M NOT!

August 17, 1974

Russell and Heywood were working late with me last night. They did a little talking back and forth. Russell was very nervous – and finally Heywood got a little impatient with him.

"All right," Heywood said, laying his charts down. "We're not getting anywhere, this way. You want to sit down and really talk about what's bothering you?"

Russell looked a little taken aback. He shook his head jerkily.

"No... no, I haven't got anything specific on my mind. Just talking. You know how it is." He tried to pretend he was very engrossed in one of the charts.

Heywood didn't let him off the hook, though. His eyes were cutting into Russell's face, peeling off layer after layer of misleading mannerism and baring the naked fear in the man.

"No, I don't know how it is." He put his hand on Russell's shoulder and turned him around to where the other man was facing him completely. "Now, look – if there's something chewing on you, let's have it. I'm not going to have this project gummed up by your secret troubles. Things are tough enough with everybody trying to pressure us into doing things their way, and none of them exactly sure of what that way is."

That last sentence must have touched something off in Russell, because he let his charts drop beside Heywood's and clawed at the pack of cigarettes in his breast pocket.

"That's exactly what the basic problem is," he said, his eyes a little too wide. He pushed one hand back and forth over the side of his face and walked back and forth aimlessly. Then a flood of words came out.

"We're working in the dark, Vic. In the dark, and somebody's in with us that's swinging clubs at our heads while we stumble around. We don't know who it is, we don't know if it's one or more than that, and we never know when the next swing is coming.

"Look – we're cybernetics engineers. Our job was to design a brain that would operate a self-propulsive unit designed to house it. That was the engineering problem, and we've got a tendency to continue looking at it in that light.

"But that's not the whole picture. We've got to keep in mind that the only reason we were ever given the opportunity and the facilities was because somebody thought it might be a nice idea to turn out soldiers on a production line, just like they do the rest of the paraphernalia of war. And the way COMASAMPS looks at it is not in terms of a brain housed in an independently movable shell, but in terms of a robot which now has to be fitted to the general idea of what a soldier should be.

"Only nobody knows what the ideal soldier is like.

"Some say he ought to respond to orders with perfect accuracy and superhuman reflexes. Others say he ought to be able to think his way out of trouble, or improvise in a situation where his orders no longer apply, just like a human soldier. The ones who want the perfect automaton don't want him to be smart enough to realize he is an automaton – probably because they're afraid of the idea; and the ones who want him to be capable of human discretion don't want him to be human enough to be rebellious in a hopeless situation.

"And that's just the beginning. COMASAMPS may be a combined project, but if you think the Navy isn't checking up on the Army, and vice versa, with both of them looking over the Air Force's shoulder – Oh, you know that squirrel cage as well as I do!"

Russell gestured hopelessly. Heywood, who had been taking calm puffs on his cigarette, shrugged. "So? All we have to do is tinker around until we can design a sample model to fit each definition. Then they can run as many comparative field tests as they want to. It's their problem. Why let it get you?"

Russell flung his cigarette to the floor and stepped on it with all his weight. "Because we can't do it and you ought to know it as well as I do!" He pointed over at me. "There's your prototype model. He's got all the features that everybody wants – and cutoffs intended to take out the features that interfere with any one definition. We can cut off his individuality, and leave him the automaton some people want. We can

leave him his individuality, cut off his volition, and give him general orders which he is then free to carry out by whatever means he thinks best. Or, we can treat him like a human being – educate him by means of tapes, train him, and turn him loose on a job, the way we'd do with a human being."

The uneven tone built up in his voice as he finished what he was saying.

"But, if we reduce him to a machine that responds to orders as though they were pushbuttons, he's slow. He's pitifully slow, Vic, and he'd be immobilized within thirty seconds of combat. There's nothing we can do about that, either. Until somebody learns how to push electricity through a circuit faster than the laws of physics say it should go, what we'll have will be a ponderous, mindless thing that's no better than the remote-control exhibition jobs built forty years ago.

"All right, so that's no good. We leave him individuality, but we restrict it until it cuts his personality down to that of a slave. That's better. Under those conditions, he would, theoretically, be a better soldier than the average human. An officer could tell him to take a patrol out into a certain sector, and he'd do the best possible job, picking the best way to handle each step of the job as he came to it. But what does he do if he comes back, and the officer who gave him the orders is no longer there? Or, worse yet, if there's been a retreat, and there's nobody there? Or an armistice? What about that armistice? Can you picture this slave robot, going into stasis because he's got no orders to cover a brand-new situation?

"He might just as well not have gone on that patrol at all – because he can't pass on whatever he's learned, and because his job is now over, as far as he's concerned. The enemy could overrun his position, and he wouldn't do anything about it. He'd operate from order to order. And if an armistice were signed, he'd sit right where he was until a technician could come out, remove the soldier-orientation tapes, and replace them with whatever was finally decided on.

"Oh, you could get around the limitation all right – by issuing a complex set of orders, such as: 'Go out on patrol and report back. If I'm not here, report to so-and-so. If there's nobody here, do this. If that doesn't work, try that. If such-and-such happens, proceed as follows. But don't confuse such-and-such with that or this.' Can you imagine fighting a war on that basis? And what about that reorientation problem? How long would all those robots sit there before they could all be serviced – and how many man-hours and how much material would it take to do the job? Frankly, I couldn't think of a more cumbersome way to run a war if I

tried.

"Or, we can build all our robots like streamlined Pimmys – like Pimmy when all his circuits are operating, without our test cutoffs. Only, then, we'd have artificial human beings. Human beings who don't wear out, that a hand-arm won't stop, and who don't need food or water as long as their power piles have a pebble- sized hunk of plutonium to chew on."

Russell laughed bitterly. "And Navy may be making sure Army doesn't get the jump on them, with Air Force doing its bit, but there's on. thing all three of them are as agreed upon as they are about nothing else – they'll test automaton zombies, and they'll test slaves, but one thing nobody wants us turning out is supermen. They've got undercover men under every lab bench, all keeping one eye on each other and one on us – and the whole thing comes down on our heads like a ton of cement if there's even the first whisper of an idea that we're going to build more Pimmys. The same thing happens if we don't give them the perfect soldier. And the only perfect soldier is a Pimmy. Pimmy could replace any man in any armed service – from a KP to a whole general staff, depending on what tapes he had. But he'd have to be a true individual to do it. And he'd be smarter than they are. They couldn't trust him. Not because he wouldn't work for the same objectives as they'd want, but because he'd probably do it in some way they couldn't understand.

"So they don't want any more Pimmys. This one test model is all they'll allow, because he can be turned into any kind of robot they want, but they won't take the whole Pimmy, with all his potentialities. They just want part of him."

The bitter laugh was louder. "We've got their perfect soldier, but they don't want him. They want something less – but that something less will never be the perfect soldier. So we work and work, weeks on end, testing, revising, redesigning. Why? We're marking time. We've got what they want, but they don't want it – but if we don't give it to them soon, they'll wipe out the project. And if we give them what they want, it won't really be what they want. Can't you see that? What's the matter with you, Heywood? Can't you see the blind alley we're in – only it's not a blind alley, because it has eyes, eyes under every bench, watching each other and watching us, always watching, never stopping, going on and never stopping, watching, eyes?"

Heywood had already picked up the telephone. As Russell collapsed completely, he began to speak into it, calling the Project hospital. Even as he talked, his eyes were coldly brooding, and his mouth was set in an expression I'd never seen before. His other hand was on Russell's twitching

shoulder, moving gently as the other man sobbed.

August 25, 1974

Ligget is Heywood's new assistant. It's been a week since Russell's been gone.

Russell wasn't replaced for three days, and Heywood worked alone with me. He's engineer of the whole project, and I'm almost certain there must have been other things he could have worked on while he was waiting for a new assistant, but he spent all of his time in this lab with me.

His face didn't show what he thought about Russell. He's not like Ligget, though. Heywood's thoughts are private. Ligget's are hidden. But, every once in a while, while Heywood was working, he'd start to turn around and reach out, or just say "Jack—" as if he wanted something, and then he'd catch himself, and his eyes would grow more thoughtful.

I only understood part of what Russell had said that night he was taken away, so I asked Heywood about it yesterday.

"What's the trouble, Pim?" he asked.

"Don't know, for sure. Too much I don't understand about this whole thing. If I knew what some of the words meant, I might not even have a problem."

"Shoot."

"Well, it's mostly what Russell was saying, that last night."

Heywood peeled a strip of skin from his upper lip by catching it between his teeth. "Yeah."

"What's a war, or what's war? Soldiers have something to do with it, but what's a soldier? I'm a robot – but why do they want to make more of me? Can I be a soldier and a robot at the same time? Russell kept talking about 'they,' and the Army, the Air Force, and the Navy. What're they? And are the CIC men the ones who are watching you and each other at the same time?"

Heywood scowled, and grinned ruefully at the same time. "That's quite a catalogue," he said. "And there's even more than that, isn't there, Pimmy?" He put his hand on my side and sort of patted me, the way I'd seen him do with a generator a few times. "O.K., I'll give you a tape on war and soldiering. That's the next step in the program anyway, and it'll take care of most of those questions."

"Thanks," I said. "But what about the rest of it?"

He leaned against a bench and looked down at the floor. "Well, 'they' are the people who instituted this program – the Secretary of Defense, and the people under him. They all agreed that robot personnel were just what the armed services needed, and they were right. The only trouble is, they couldn't agree among themselves as to what characteristics were desirable in the perfect soldier – or sailor, or airman. They decided that the best thing to do was to come up with a series of different models, and to run tests until they came up with the best one.

"Building you was my own idea. Instead of trying to build prototypes to fit each separate group of specifications, we built one all-purpose model who was, effectively speaking, identical with a human being in almost all respects, with one major difference. By means of cut-offs in every circuit, we can restrict as much of your abilities as we want to, thus being able to modify your general characteristics to fit any one of the various specification groups. We saved a lot of time by doing that, and avoided a terrific nest of difficulties.

"Trouble is, we're using up all the trouble and time we saved. Now that they've got you, they don't want you. Nobody's willing to admit that the only efficient robot soldier is one with all the discretionary powers and individuality of a human being. They can't admit it, because people are afraid of anything that looks like it might be better than they are. And they won't trust what they're afraid of. So, Russell and I had to piddle around with a stupid series of tests in a hopeless attempt to come up with something practical that was nevertheless within the limitations of the various sets of specifications – which is ridiculous, because there's nothing wrong with you, but there's plenty wrong with the specs. They were designed by people who don't know the first thing about robots or robot thought processes – or the sheer mechanics of thinking, for that matter."

He shrugged. "But, they're the people with the authority and the money that's paying for this project – so Jack and I kept puttering, because those were the orders. Knowing that we had the perfect answer all the time, and that nobody would accept it, was what finally got Jack."

"What about you?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "I'm just waiting," he said. "Eventually they'll either accept you or not. They'll either commend me or fire me, and they might or might not decide it's all my fault if they're not happy. But there's nothing I can do about it, is there? So, I'm waiting.

"Meanwhile, there's the CIC. Actually, that's just a handy label. It

happens to be the initials of one of the undercover agencies out of the whole group that infests this place. Every armed service has its own, and I imagine the government has its boys kicking around, too. We just picked one label to cover them all – it's simpler."

"Russell said they were always watching. But why are they watching each other, too? Why should one armed service be afraid that another's going to get an advantage over it?"

Heywood's mouth moved into a half-amused grin. "That's what is known as human psychology, Pimmy. It'll help you to understand it, but if you can't, why, just be glad you haven't got it."

"Ligget's CIC, you know," I said. "Russell accused him of it. He denied it, but if he isn't actually in the CIC, then he's in something like it."

Heywood nodded sourly. "I know. I wouldn't mind if he had brains enough, in addition, to know one end of a circuit from the other."

He slapped my side again. "Pimmy, boy," he said. "We're going to have a lot of fun around here in the next few weeks. Yes, sir, a lot of fun."

August 26, 1974

Ligget was fooling around with me again. He's all right when Heywood's in the lab with me, but when he's alone, he keeps running me through unauthorized tests. What he's doing, actually, is to repeat all the tests Heywood and Russell ran, just to make sure. As long as he doesn't cut out my individuality, I can remember it all, and I guess there was nothing different about the results on any of the tests, because I can tell from his face that he's not finding what he wants.

Well, I hope he tells his bosses that Heywood and Russell were right. Maybe they'll stop this fooling.

Ligget's pretty dumb. After every test, he looks me in the eye and tells me to forget the whole thing. What does he think I am – Trilby?

And I don't understand some of the test performances at all. There is something wrong with Ligget.

September 2, 1974

I hadn't realized, until now, that Heywood and Russell hadn't told anyone what they thought about this whole project, but, reviewing that tape on war and soldiering, and the way the military mind operates, I can see where nobody would have accepted their explanations.

Ligget caught on to the whole thing today. Heywood came in with a new series of test charts, Ligget took one look at them, and threw them on the table. He sneered at Heywood and said, "Who do you think you're kidding?"

Heywood looked annoyed and said, "All right, what's eating you?"

Ligget's face got this hidden crafty look on it. "How long did you think you could keep this up, Heywood? This test is no different from the ones you were running three weeks ago. There hasn't been any progress since then, and there's been no attempt to make any. What's your explanation?"

"Uh-huh." Heywood didn't look particularly worried. "I was wondering if you were ever going to stumble across it."

Ligget looked mad. "That attitude won't do you any good. Now, come on, quit stalling. Why were you and Russell sabotaging the project?"

"Oh, stop being such a pompous lamebrain, will you?" Heywood said disgustedly. "Russell and I weren't doing any sabotaging. We've been following our orders to the last letter. We built the prototype, and we've been testing the various modifications ever since. Anything wrong with that?"

"You've made absolutely no attempt to improve the various modifications. There hasn't been an ounce of progress in this project for the last twenty days.

"Now, look, Heywood" – Ligget's voice became wheedling – "I can understand that you might have what you'd consider a good reason for all this. What is it – political, or something? Maybe it's your conscience. Don't you want to work on something that's eventually going to be applied to war? I wish you'd tell me about it. If I could understand your reasons, it would be that much easier for you. Maybe it's too tough a problem. Is that it, Heywood?"

Heywood's face got red. "No, it's not. If you think—" He stopped, dug his fingers at the top of the table, and got control of himself again.

"No," he said in a quieter, but just as deadly, voice. "I'm as anxious to produce an artificial soldier as anybody else. And I'm not too stupid for the job, either. If you had any brains, you'd see that I already have."

That hit Ligget between the eyes. "You have? Where is it, and why haven't you reported your success? What is this thing?" He pointed at me. "Some kind of a decoy?"

Heywood grimaced. "No, you double-dyed jackass, that's your soldier."

"What?"

"Sure. Strip those fifteen pounds of cutoffs out of him, redesign his case for whatever kind of ground he's supposed to operate on, feed him the proper tapes, and that's it. The perfect soldier – as smart as any human ever produced, and a hundred times the training and toughness, overnight. Run them out by the thousands. Print your circuits, bed your transistors in silicone rubber, and pour the whole brew into his case. Production difficulties? Watchmaking's harder."

"No!" Ligget's eyes gleamed. "And I worked on this with you! Why haven't you reported this!" he repeated.

Heywood looked at him pityingly. "Haven't you got it through your head? Pimmy's the perfect soldier, all of him, with all his abilities. That includes individuality, curiosity, judgment – and intelligence. Cut one part of that, and he's no good. You've got to take the whole cake, or none at all. One way you starve – and the other way you choke."

Ligget had gone white. "You mean, we've got to take the superman – or we don't have anything."

"Yes, you fumbling jerk!"

Ligget looked thoughtful. He seemed to forget Heywood and me as he stared down at his shoetops. "They won't go for it," he muttered. "Suppose they decide they're better fit to run the world than we are?"

"That's the trouble," Heywood said. "They are. They've got everything a human being has, plus incredible toughness and the ability to learn instantaneously. You know what Pimmy did? The day he was assembled, he learned to read and write, after a fashion. How? By listening to me read a paragraph out of a report, recording the sounds, and looking at the report afterwards. He matched the sounds to the letters, recalled what sort of action on Russell's and my part the paragraph had elicited, and sat down behind a typewriter. That's all."

"They'd junk the whole project before they let something like that run around loose!" The crafty look was hovering at the edges of Ligget's mask again. "All right, so you've got an answer, but it's not an acceptable one. But why haven't you pushed any of the other lines of investigation?"

"Because there aren't any," Heywood said disgustedly. "Any other modification, when worked out to its inherent limits, is worse than useless. You've run enough tests to find out."

"All right!" Ligget's voice was high. "Why didn't you report failure, then, instead of keeping on with this shillyshallying?"

"Because I haven't failed, you moron!" Heywood exploded. "I've got the answer. I've got Pimmy. There's nothing wrong with him – the defect's in the way people are thinking. And I've been going crazy, trying to think of a way to change the people. To hell with modifying the robot! He's as perfect as you'll get within the next five years. It's the people who'll have to change!"

"Uh-huh." Ligget's voice was careful. "I see. You've gone as far as you can within the limits of your orders – and you were trying to find a way to exceed them, in order to force the armed services to accept robots like Pimmy." He pulled out his wallet, and flipped it open. There was a piece of metal fastened to one flap.

"Recognize this, Heywood?"

Heywood nodded.

"All right, then, let's go and talk to a few people."

Heywood's eyes were cold and brooding again. He shrugged.

The lab door opened, and there was another one of the lab technicians there. "Go easy, Ligget," he said. He walked across the lab in rapid strides. His wallet had a different badge in it. "Listening from next door," he explained. "All right, Heywood," he said, "I'm taking you in." He shouldered Ligget out of the way. "Why don't you guys learn to stay in your own jurisdiction," he told him.

Ligget's face turned red, and his fists clenched, but the other man must have had more weight behind him, because he didn't say anything.

Heywood looked over at me, and raised a hand. "So long, Pimmy," he said. He and the other man walked out of the lab, with Ligget trailing along behind them. As they got the door open, I saw some other men standing out in the hall. The man who had come into the lab cursed. "You guys!" he said savagely. "This is my prisoner, see, and if you think—"

The door closed, and I couldn't hear the rest of what they said, but there was a lot of arguing before I heard the sound of all their footsteps going down the hall in a body.

Well, that's about all, I guess. Except for this other thing. It's about Ligget, and I hear he's not around any more. But you might be interested.

September 4, 1974

I haven't seen Heywood, and I've been alone in the lab all day. But Ligget came in last night. I don't think I'll see Heywood again.

Ligget came in late at night. He looked as though he hadn't slept, and he was very nervous. But he was drunk, too – I don't know where he got the liquor.

He came across the lab floor, his footsteps very loud on the cement, and he put his hands on his hips and looked up at me.

"Well, superman," he said in a tight, edgy voice, "you've lost your buddy for good, the dirty traitor. And now you're next. You know what they're going to do to you?" He laughed. "You'll have lots of time to think it over."

He paced back and forth in front of me. Then he spun around suddenly and pointed his finger at me. "Thought you could beat the race of men, huh? Figured you were smarter than we were, didn't you? But we've got you now! You're going to learn that you can't try to fool around with the human animal, because he'll pull you down. He'll claw and kick you until you collapse. That's the way men are, robot. Not steel and circuits – flesh and blood and muscles. Flesh that fought its way out of the sea and out of the jungle, muscle that crushed everything that ever stood in his way, and blood that's spilled for a million years to keep the human race on top. That's the kind of an organism we are, robot."

He paced some more and spun again. "You never had a chance."

Well, I guess that is all. The rest of it, you know about. You can pull the transcriber plug out of here now, I guess. Would somebody say good-bye to Heywood for me – and Russell, too, if that's possible?

COVERING MEMORANDUM,

Blalock, Project Engineer,

to Hall, Director, 820TH TDRC, COMASAMPS

September 21, 1974

Enclosed are the transcriptions of the robot's readings from his memorybank "diary," as recorded this morning. The robot is now en route to the Patuxent River, the casting of the concrete block having been completed with the filling of the opening through which the transcription line was run.

As Victor Heywood's successor to the post of Project Engineer, I'd like to point out that the robot was incapable of deceit, and that this transcription, if read at Heywood's trial, will prove that his intentions were definitely not treasonous, and certainly motivated on an honest belief

that he was acting in the best interests of the original directive for the project's initiation.

In regard to your Memorandum 8-4792-H of yesterday, a damage report is in process of preparation and will be forwarded to you immediately on its completion.

I fully understand that Heywood's line of research is to be considered closed. Investigations into what Heywood termed the "zombie" and "slave" type of robot organization have already begun in an improvised laboratory, and I expect preliminary results within the next ten days.

Preliminary results on the general investigation of other possible types of robot orientation and organization are in, copies attached. I'd like to point out that they are extremely discouraging.

(Signed,)

H. E. Blalock, Project Engineer,
820TH TDRC, COMASAMPS

September 25, 1974

PERSONAL LETTER

FROM HALL, DIRECTOR, 820TH TDRC, COMASAMPS,
to SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

Dear Vinnie,

Well, things are finally starting to settle down out here. You were right, all this place needed was a housecleaning from top to bottom.

I think we're going to let this Heywood fellow go. We can't prove anything on him – frankly, I don't think there was anything to prove. Russell, of course, is a closed issue. His chance of ever getting out of the hospital is rated as ten percent.

You know, considering the mess that robot made of the lab, I'd almost be inclined to think that Heywood was right. Can you imagine what a fighter that fellow would have been, if his loyalty had been channeled to some abstract like Freedom, instead of to Heywood? But we can't take the chance. Look at the way the robot's gone amnesic about killing Ligget while he was wrecking the lab. It was something that happened

accidentally. It wasn't supposed to happen, so the robot forgot it. Might present difficulties in a war.

So, we've got this Blalock fellow down from M.I.T. He spends too much time talking about Weiner, but he's all right, otherwise.

I'll be down in a couple of days. Appropriations committee meeting. You know how it is. Everybody knows we need the money, but they want to argue about it, first.

Well, that's human nature, I guess.

See you, Ralph

SUPPLEMENT TO CHARTS:

Menace to Navigation.

Patuxent River, at a point forty-eight miles below Folsom, bearings as below.

Midchannel. Concrete block, 15x15x15. Not dangerous except at extreme low tide.

© 1954 Algis Budrys

Three Stories

I must lead a fascinating interior life. Although about half of my work comes from conscious thought, the other half simply erupts, complete with all the little details you could swear I spent days researching or polishing. The research in this story consisted of walking over to my album of the Verdi Requiem Mass and getting the right Latin spellings for "...nil inultum remanebit" and what precedes it. I may have been playing with a cigarette case; I can't remember. When I was done I had written a one-act, one-set play, and here it is.

Jim Blish, music buff, purchased it for the nonexistent second issue of Vanguard Science Fiction. It appeared, complete with his blurb, in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, but

without the free illustration I had foisted off on my old friend with it. Jim is dead, God damn it, and I have never sold an illustration to an SF magazine, and I never will.

In a way, the following three stories represent Doom and Gloom. But if you twist your mind just so, perhaps not.

The Price

THERE WERE THREE MEN; one fat, one thin, one very old. They sat together behind a long desk, with scratch pads and pencils before them, passing notes back and forth to each other while they questioned him. The very old one spoke most often, in a voice full of the anticipation of death.

"Your name?"

The ugly hunchback in the gray tunic glowered back at them from his uncomfortable wooden chair. "No name," he growled. His knotted fingers were spread to cup his knees. His thick jaw was prognathous even at rest. Now, with the muscles bunched under his ears and his thick neck jutting forward, his lower teeth were exposed.

"You must have a name."

"I must nothing. Give me a cigarette."

The fat man whispered gently: "We'll give you a cigarette if you tell us your name."

"Rumpelstiltskin," the hunchback hissed. He extended his hand. "The cigarette."

The thin man slid a silver case across the table. The hunchback snatched it up, bit the filter from the end of the cigarette he took, spat it out on the floor with a jerk of his head, and thrust the case into the front of his tunic. He glared at the thin man. "A match."

The thin man licked his lips, fumbled in a pocket, and brought out a silver lighter to match the case. The old man covered the thin man's hand with his own.

"I am in charge here," he said to the hunchback. "I am the President."

"You have been that too long. The match."

The President hopelessly released the thin man's hand. The lighter slid

across the table. The hunchback touched its flame to the frayed cigarette end. Then he slid it back, grinning without visible mirth. The thin man looked down at it without picking it up.

"I'm not as old as you," the President said. "No one is as old as you."

"You say."

"The records show. You were found in 1882, in Minskva Gubernya, and taken to the Czar. You told him no more than you will tell us, and you were put away in a cell without light or heat until you would talk. You were taken out of the cell in 1918, questioned, and treated similarly, for the same reason. In 1941, you were turned over to a research team for study. In 1956, you were placed in the Vorkuta labor camp. In 1963 you were again made the subject of study, this time in Berlin. The assembled records show you learned more from your examiners than they learned from you. They learned nothing."

The hunchback grinned again. "A equals pi r squared. Judex ergo cum sedebit, quidquid latet apparebit, nil inultum remanebit."

"Don't be so pleased with yourself," the fat man whispered, gently.

The President went on. "In 1987, you were taken to Geneva. In 2005, you were given shelter by the Benedictine monks in Berne, remaining with them through most of the Seven Decades' War. Now you're here. You've been here for the past eight months, and you have been treated well."

The hunchback ground his cigarette into the desk's polished mahogany.

"We need you," the thin man said. "You must help us."

"I must nothing." He pulled the case out of his tunic, took a fresh cigarette, spat out the end, and held the case in his hand. "A match."

The thin man slid the lighter across the desk. The hunchback lit his cigarette and returned the lighter. He ground out the cigarette and took another. "A match." The thin man pushed the lighter across the desk, and the hunchback cackled in glee.

There were heavy drapes on the windows behind the President, who gestured abruptly. The thin man yanked them aside.

"Look," the President said. Sputtering fires and swirling ropes of smoke cast their lights and shadows through the window and into the room. "It's all like that, everywhere. We can't put it out, but if we could learn what let you walk through it out of Europe...."

The hunchback grinned slyly and swallowed the glowing coal from the

end of his cigarette. He looked from one man to the other with great delight.

The fat man whispered: "I'll pull you apart with chains and hooks."

The hunchback said: "Once I was straight and tall."

"For God's sake!" the President cried out, "there are no more than a hundred of us left!"

"What do you want?" the thin man asked. "Money? Women?"

The hunchback took the cigarette case and crumpled it over between his hands. He threw it on the table before the thin man. Then he sat back and smiled, and smiled. "I will tell you how you may be saved."

"What do you want?" the thin man whispered breathily.

"Nothing! Nothing!" the hunchback cackled. "I will tell you from the mercy of my own good heart."

"Tell us," the fat man cried. "Tell us, then!"

"Wait – " It was the President stumbling over his own urgency. "Wait – this thing, this process – this treatment – will it turn us into something like you?"

The hunchback smiled, and grinned, and laughed. "Inside and out. Yes."

The President hid his face in his hands. Then he gestured importunately to the thin man. "Draw the curtains! Quickly!" His voice was hoarse with emotion.

But the fat man dragged the President from his chair and held him so that he was forced to face the open window. "Look out at it," he said harshly. "Look."

The President hung from the fat man's hands for a moment, and then he mumbled:

"All right. Tell us, hunchback."

And the hunchback leaped from his chair up onto the top of the table. He stamped his feet in joy and bayed his triumph from his open throat. He leaped and capered, his boots splintering the oil-rubbed veneer of the table and scattering the scratch pads. The pencils flew into the comers of the room, and the three men had to wait for him to finish.

This one is easy. My grandfather, the village tailor of Marijampole, Lithuania, was a wonderful man, replete with attributes a child could love. He was magnificent when he filed his mouth with water, sprayed a loud, joyous mist over the clothes on the board, and applied a flatiron from the wood-stove. He had a cow, a well with a sweep, a vegetable garden, a house with a tin roof, and I helped carry the pickets for the new white fence in front of his house. To honor him, I piddled in his galoshes. The Russians took many of his children.

This story is not about him; it is about another man, whom I would not have thought of.

Some Things are Forever.

The Ridge Around The World

STENN HUNCHED HIS shoulders and lifted the plow. With his back against the split-rail fence that marked the end of his field, he swung it around, dropped it, and wiped the back of his heavy wrist across his forehead. Squinting into the sun, he twitched the reins and began following his bony horse back across the cramped field.

As he walked, his bare feet set themselves doggedly in the turned earth. He had walked over every fist of dirt in this hectare, so many times that the earth was like cream. Every stone, every root, had been found and thrown aside long ago. He kept his head down and his eyes on the furrow. He could trust the horse to walk straight. Horses were dependable, though they died too often.

He heard an automobile stop on the crushed-stone road beside his field, and growled to himself. Automobiles meant somebody from outside the village.

"You, there!" a harsh voice called out. "Come here."

He growled to himself again and went on as though he hadn't heard. Sometimes that was good enough. The stranger, whoever he was and whatever he wanted, might simply curse him and then go away.

The automobile door slammed. "You – I said come here!"

Stenn yanked the reins, stopped the horse, wound the reins deliberately, in no hurry, wrapped them around the plow handles, and finally turned around. Scowling out from under his lowered eyebrows, he looked at the man standing impatiently on the other side of the fence.

He was wearing a uniform and boots, with a pistol in a holster at his waist. Stenn shuffled forward, taking off his hat in the way he'd learned from his father, long ago in other times when strangers in uniforms spoke to him. He reached the fence and stopped.

"Didn't you hear me?" the man demanded. His face was set in the hard, angry mask that Stenn expected of such men. Expecting it, he ignored it and grunted to show he was here now.

"What's your name?" the man barked.

Stenn gave it, and the man nodded. "All right. You're coming with me to see the Commissioner."

Stenn hunched his shoulders. Here was half a day wasted.

"Now!" the man rasped.

Stenn kept his face set, looking at the man woodenly. The man was powerful, with his uniform and his Commissioner behind him, so there was no question of not going. The half day was wasted, and that was that.

"I'll stall my horse," he grunted.

The man grinned. "The devil with your horse. You won't have to worry about him where you're going. Get in the car!"

Still expressionless, Stenn bent through the fence and shuffled to the automobile. There was only one seat. The uniformed man took a set of handcuffs out of his packet, pulled Stenn's right wrist across his body, and manacled it to the left-hand assist handle on the dashboard. Then the uniformed man started the automobile, turned it around, and drove them back the way he had come.

Stenn twisted his head to look back at the horse standing in the middle of the field. Then he faced front, his arm hanging by its wristlet, and said nothing all the way into the town on the far side of the village. He had never been in an automobile before. He didn't like riding in one.

In the Commissioner's office, he sat stiffly in the hard chair facing the light, his knotty fingers curled over his knees.

"What is your name?" the Commissioner asked.

Stenn gave it again, and the Commissioner grunted. "That's the name on your papers here. Now, what's your real name? Who sent you here?"

Stenn gave his name again. He didn't understand the second part of the question, so he didn't say anything beyond that.

"Who forged these records?" the Commissioner asked. "What is your assignment – sabotage?"

Stenn looked at him woodenly. He made no sense out of what the Commissioner was saying. This was often true of questions strangers asked. It did not upset him.

"Come, now," the Commissioner said softly, "these records are a ridiculous forgery. Did your masters think that even the former regime here could make such mistakes in its birth archives?"

Stenn had no answer for him.

The Commissioner's voice remained smooth. "Let's be sensible. Your masters obviously couldn't have cared much about your safety if they permitted themselves to be so clumsy. All I want you to tell me is when you were sent into this country, and who sent you. If you cooperate, nothing more will be made of the matter. It is even possible that the new regime might have a good offer for you. Now, despite your present appearance, you must be an intelligent man. I'm sure we can reach an agreement."

Stenn's expression remained the same. He stared uncomprehendingly and said nothing. Not one word of what the Commissioner had said was in any way understandable. He knew from experience that eventually all strangers grew tired of talking to him, and that sooner or later he would be able to go back to his farm.

"Listen, my friend, you'd better say something fairly soon," the Commissioner said.

Stenn shrugged.

The Commissioner called in another man, who was carrying a truncheon. The new man took a position beside Stenn and waited.

"Now," the Commissioner said, "What is your name?"

Stenn told him again. The Commissioner nodded to the new man, and Stenn was hit across the top of his left shoulder.

"How long have you lived in the village?"

Stenn told him, and the man with the truncheon hit him in the same place.

"Who are your associates?"

"I keep to myself. I live alone." He was hit on the left shoulder again.

The Commissioner was growing furious because Stenn showed no reaction.

"Where do you come from?"

"I was born in the village."

He was hit.

"Who were your parents?"

He gave his mother's and father's names, and was hit.

"Where are they?"

"Dead." He volunteered his first piece of information, since the Commissioner was now asking something he understood. "I have no brothers or sisters."

Instead of hitting him, the man with the truncheon felt his shoulder.

"Pardon, Commissioner, but there is something here I don't understand. This man's collarbone should be broken. It is not."

"To hell with his collarbone! If you don't know your business, learn it! NOW, you – again – where are you from?"

Stenn told him, and was hit harder.

Finally, the Commissioner said: "Very well. We're going to put you on a train."

He pulled a blank record card out of his desk and in a taut, savage hand scrawled a few sentences on it in his own language. "By the time you come back, my friend—" He looked at Stenn, who resumed his stare woodenly, just as expressionless now as he had been before he'd worn the stranger down. "By the time you come back, you will be as old again as these ridiculous papers make you out to be."

Stenn spent some years in the labor camp, keeping to himself, and shuffling wordlessly down into the shaft each day. He had noted that men here died even faster than his plowhorses did, but this did not concern him except that sometimes he was asked more questions to which he did not have answers. After a time, the men in charge of the camp had been replaced by crippled men in worn uniforms, and these men also shared his habit of silence, toward him and among themselves.

From time to time he looked up at the airplanes crossing overhead, especially when the camp siren gave the alarm, as it did more and more often. Finally, a day came when the few men remaining in charge of the

camp locked themselves in a blockhouse and stayed there. Soon afterward, the other men who worked in the camp got the gates open. One or two of them ventured outside the gate. When the men in the blockhouse showed no reaction, everyone in the camp went wild. Some spilled out onto the snowy plains, and others broke into the blockhouse. Stenn shuffled down the railroad track alone, going back the way he'd come.

In due time, he arrived back at his farm. The house was burned down, and the fence broken. Also, there was a new regime, but very few of these new strangers as yet were able to talk his language, and, in any case, they found a great deal of work to do. Stenn went down to the woods with an ax he'd found, cut down some trees, built new fences, and then a new house. The new regime gave him a plow and a horse. He was satisfied.

Stenn hunched his shoulders and lifted the plow. He put his back against his fence, swung the plow, and twitched the reins. His horse settled into the collar and began to move. It was a very old horse, and it plodded slowly. Stenn growled at it as his bare feet followed the furrow.

He came to the end of the field, pushing the plow stubbornly forward as the horse turned away from the fence. He had seen other men plow, wasting ground at each end of the field because they followed the horse as it turned. He did not, and he knew how much ground he'd gained; an extra half-meter a year for the whole width of the field. If one only considered the time since he'd gotten this old plow; which was now almost worn out, it was still a great gain.

He lifted the plow and turned it around, lifting his head to wipe his face, but not bothering to look past the borders of his field at the buildings that surrounded it. The buildings were no concern of his, since they were low enough on the south side so the sun could fall on his crops.

As he started forward again, he saw someone standing at the other end of the field, watching him. He growled and walked doggedly forward, his head down.

But the stranger had not gone away by the time he reached the opposite fence. Stenn ignored him and lifted the plow.

"May I talk to you a moment?" At least, that was what Stenn thought it must be the man had said. He spoke peculiarly, pronouncing his words in a different way from Stenn, and he spoke too fast. Stenn grunted and twitched the horse's reins.

The man persisted. "I'll come back later, if you're too busy now."

Stenn stopped the horse and hunched his shoulders. Better to get this over now, in that case. He wrapped the reins and turned around with a grunt.

The man was dressed in soft clothing, and though it was still early Spring and Stenn was wearing a coat, the man only wore that one garment, and a belt with little boxes attached to it.

"I was wondering if you needed anything," the man said. "New clothes, perhaps? You've had those a long time, haven't you?"

Stenn looked at the man. These people had bothered him earlier, when they wanted to buy this land and build buildings on it. He remembered they'd been quick to offer, before they went away and left him alone. For that reason, he distrusted them.

"What do you have to trade?" the man asked.

Stenn grunted. Now, that was better. He looked at the man narrowly. "I have cabbages. I have potatoes. I will have sugar beets."

The man nodded. "What do you need?"

"I need a new horse. And a plow."

"Anything else?"

Stenn shook his head.

The man looked thoughtful. "Well, we can give you a new plow. We can give you one that doesn't need a horse."

"I don't want a tractor." Stenn scowled at the man. The regime that had given him this plow had first tried to explain a tractor to him.

The man, who looked shrewd enough so Stenn could respect him, shook his head. "I don't mean a tractor. I mean a plow that moves by itself. It is very much like your plow. You only have to push and pull on the handles to work it, and that's all. I'm afraid that's the best I can do. There aren't very many horses at all, any more."

"I'll look at it," Stenn grunted. He wasn't surprised. Horses died too often. Furthermore, they ate and had to be cared for.

"All right," the man said. "I'll bring it over later."

"What do you want for it?"

"Potatoes and cabbages, I suppose," the man said. "Twenty bushels of each."

"Ten."

"Eighteen."

Stenn spat in a furrow and turned away.

"All right, fifteen," the man said.

"Eleven," Stenn said grudgingly.

The man seemed to consider for a moment. "All right," he said.

Stenn grunted to himself. The man was no bargainer, that was certain. "Remember," he said, "it's no bargain if I don't like the plow."

The man nodded. "I'll be over with it tonight." He started to turn away, and then he stopped. "Tell me – what do you eat? Do you eat your potatoes and cabbages and beets?"

"That and my pigs. What else would a man eat?"

"Well, why do you eat?"

Stenn looked at the man. Why did he eat? Why did any man eat? He turned away and unwrapped the horse's reins. Giving the reins a twitch, he started the new furrow. He ate because everybody ate. Hadn't his father eaten before him? It was true a man didn't have to, as he'd found out for himself. If food was short he could go without eating. But usually, a man ate. What else were his teeth for?

"I'll see you tonight," the man reminded him, turning to depart.

Stenn ignored him. The man was a fool, as he'd suspected at first. If he brought the plow, well and good. If he didn't, earth could always be spaded.

The man brought the plow. Stenn examined it carefully, and tried it out. There wasn't much to using it – a twist of the handle to the right, a twist to the left, a push for forward and a pull for backing up. The motor was inside the share, and didn't need gasoline. Also, it was obviously handmade, and that made the man an even greater fool for bargaining so poorly on such an expensive thing. Then, in addition, the man threw in some clothes – good, honest clothes – and these were also hand-woven. For his throw-in, the man asked for the horse, and Stenn nodded contemptuously. Now the fool was taking that useless mouth off his hands, and doubtless thinking he'd made a great gain.

The man left, and Stenn's mouth twisted into a grin. Now he had something better than a horse, and furthermore with this plow he could turn a furrow right up to the fences.

The long succession of days that followed were no different from those that had gone before. Sometimes he was left alone, and sometimes he was

not. Sometimes there were good regimes. Sometimes not. Several times, he was taken away from his farm, and there were certain times he spent in hospitals. There was also a time he lived in a cage. But he always wore the strangers down in the end.

Stenn stopped his plow at the bottom of the fence surrounding his field. He glared up at the dim sun, its light cut into two halves by the metal structure that sank its one pier into the lawn beyond his fence and then shot up at an angle, thickening out into a joint at a point some kilometers over his head and then fusing into one slender finger that disappeared over the horizon without touching ground.

As he looked up, he saw four of the silent firescythes go across the sky, trailing silver dust that vanished as they left it behind. They touched the four curving masts that rose out of the east and instantly shot back again the way they had come. In a few minutes, the clear chime from the masts came to him across the distance.

In the shrubbery a few meters beyond his field, a bird answered the chime. Stenn turned his plough and touched the handles. As he walked forward, he thought that probably now he would have quiet times all summer. It had been quiet for several years, and he was beginning to think that such quietness was now a permanent thing. For many years before that, quiet times and loud times had alternated unpredictably, and though it made no difference to the crops, it had annoyed him not to know whether to put the plugs in his ears or not.

Still, it wasn't so bad, even in loud times. The new regime left him entirely alone, though he could tell they disliked him. None of them had come near here in a long time, though he knew they had put a great deal of patience into planting the shrubs just so and tending the lawn. The gardener firescythes did that work now – machines, like his plow. He saw them often enough, darting back and forth over the lawn and parks that surrounded his field as far as he could see.

He looked up and growled as one of the cloudleaves passed its shadow across the field. They moved with the wind, rising and falling, flowing softly with all sorts of colors, and they never stayed still over his field long enough to hurt the crops. But still they angered him.

Then he saw one of the new regime come into being at the edge of his field. He stopped his plow and stood looking at it, his jaw pushed very sharply forward.

It swayed slightly in the breeze, and began talking to him. As always, it

had great difficulty speaking so a man could understand it.

"Listen – listen..." Its voice, as the new regime's voices had always lately been, was bitter and angry. "Listen – day – your day has finally come...."

Stenn grunted and looked at it.

"We knew – knew there was no – help for it. Had to come. We fought it – but had to come. I am here to tell you... We knew one – one of us someday must... But why did it have to be me? Listen – I am the last human being alive on Earth. There are no more... not you – certainly not you."

It bent in a ripple of agony. "I am killing the machines." It swam its head around at the horizons. "I am over. All this work – all this beauty – all our life, everything in this world I am leaving – yours!" It spat the word out, curling in contempt.

Stenn watched it go out of being. He grunted, started the plow, and moved forward.

At dusk, he looked back along the way he had come. One single dark furrow stretched through the shrubs and the old fence through which he had driven the plow. He would have liked to turn around and put another furrow beside it, but he hadn't yet come to the end of his field.

This was written around an illustration that leaned against the wall at Royal Publications, where I freelanced and illustrated for Car Speed and Style, Custom Rodder, Cars Magazine, Gunsport, Untamed, Lion Adventures, and Knave. (I am the author of "Love-Starved Arabs Raped Me Often," as well as "I Shot Down Castro's China-Commie Air Force.") I had the use of a typewriter, the publisher's patience, and the unfailing forbearance of Larry Shaw, the editor. Casting about for something else to sell Irwin Stein, the publisher, I noted the illustration, which he owned but had nothing to publish with, and provided same.

But the illustration, of soldiers in combat, it seems did not belong to Irwin. And he was not about to buy it simply so he could then buy my story. I was, incidentally, on diet pills I hadn't yet realized were Dexedrine. I didn't tell that to the people who eventually bought the story and published it unillustrated. The artist was Ed Emshwiller, who probably never knew.

The Girl in the Bottle

THE NEW MAN rolled over with a groan and woke up with his face jammed against the corner of a broken brick. He jerked himself upright in his end of the two-man foxhole, and looked at Folley. "Why?"

"Hello," Folley said. "My name's Zach Folley."

The man continued to look numbly up from under the brim of his helmet, which had been blackened and blistered by the countless times it had been used as a cooking pot. His eyes were puffy and threaded with blood. From the way in which he was twitching his lips tentatively, like a fish not sure of being in water, Folley could see the man was still nine-tenths asleep.

A missile went by overhead and the new man shuddered, drawing muddy knees up under his bearded chin, and wriggling his back in against the side of the hole.

"It's all right," Folley pacified him, because he was now afraid that the man was completely battlehappy and might become violent. "They're not after you or me. They don't know we're here. It's just our machines fighting their machines, now. It's all being done by the automatic weapons systems. There's nobody alive in the cities anymore. Not since the nerve gas."

The new man muttered something that sounded like: "...alive in the cities..." and Folley, who thought the man was arguing with him, said:

"No. Not anybody. I know it's hard to believe. But they told me last month, when I was a clerk up at Battalion, before Battalion got smashed up, there's nobody alive anywhere in the world except around here in North America." Folley's jaw quivered involuntarily, as it always did when he tried to picture the world empty of life, bare of movement except for the dust-fountains where the automatic missiles kept coming in like meteorites hitting the barren Moon.

"I said," the other man replied with patient distinctness, "I know there's nobody left alive in the cities. But I don't care." He fumbled around behind his back and suddenly held up a bottle – a flat, half-pint glass bottle, unbroken, with only mildewed traces of a label but with most of its contents still there. "Not as long as I've still got her."

"What do you mean 'her'?" Folley was badly upset, now. The other man had showed up out of nowhere, last night, mumbling and calling softly to find out if anybody was still alive on the defense perimeter. When Folley answered, he had stumbled down into the hole with him and had fallen in a heap without saying another word. Folley knew nothing about him, except that he obviously wasn't one of the enemy from across the valley, and now he began to wonder whether this might not be some kind of traitor, or propaganda spreader, or at any rate some kind of enemy trying to get him drunk. If Folley got drunk, then the enemy would be able to sneak past him to the rear, without warning. Folley did not know what lay in the rear, anymore – he was deathly afraid there was so little left in the world that if the enemy once got by him, they would have won the war.

Folley could not be clear in his mind about this. He knew he wasn't being completely sane, himself. But he was doing the best he could, for a man who had been a clerk up until last month and had then been given a rifle for the first time since Basic Training, which was ten years ago. He had stayed in his hole, living off the rations of the other men who had been killed on either side of him, and he always fought off the few enemies who were left to make attacks. They would come up through the barbed wire and the minefields, always losing some men, and being driven back at last, but they had been closer and closer to Folley with each attack, even though there were only five of them left.

Folley was practically out of ammunition, and had to choose his shots carefully, and this gave them time to get in close. They had been getting close enough so that he had learned to recognize them as individuals – there was a tall, scar-faced one for instance, who was very cautious but persistent, and a short, stubby one with a nervous grin who shouted insults in pidgin English – and he was sure they knew by now he was all alone on the perimeter. Today they would be braver than ever, and he was down to one clip of eight shots. He had been hoping the new man – who had been such a great hope, for a while – would have more ammunition, but he didn't have as much as a sidearm. All he had was his bottle, and Folley shied away from it like poison.

"Throw that away!" he cried out.

The man hugged the bottle and hunched himself over it, to protect it from the sweep of Folley's arm. "Oh, no!" he said doggedly. "No – I'm not going to throw her away!"

The fact that he did not offer to fight, but only tried to protect the bottle, impressed Folley very deeply. It was such an unusual way for someone to react that Folley decided it must be because the new man

really did feel the bottle was more important than anything else in the world.

"What about her?" he asked soothingly.

"The girl," the new man explained, his face as innocent as a child's under the beard, and the dirt, and the blood, and the sallow, doughy texture of his skin. "The girl in the bottle."

On the other side of the valley, Folley could see the enemy moving around, now. It was too far away for an accurate rifle shot, and neither he nor the enemy men had any other weapons. The enemy soldiers did not bother to hide themselves or their movements. Folley would have been badly upset if they had tried.

It occurred to him that if either side – they or he – were to violate established routine in some way, it would be a disconcerting and possibly fatal tactic to the opposition. But he could not seem to draw any conclusions from this thought, or to fully understand what to do with it. It drifted out of his mind as foggily as it had first entered, and he looked at the new man again. "The girl in the bottle," he said. "Is there a girl in there?"

"Always," the new man said. He weighed the bottle in his hand. Earlier, it had seemed to Folley that the glass was brown. Now he saw it was actually a delicate shade of green. A flash of sunlight sparkled on it as the new man held it up. It was like the sudden sideward turning of a young girl's eyes as she walks by on a park path. Folley blinked.

"Who is she?"

The new man said: "The girl." He became shy. "You know," he said under his breath, not because he was trying to keep Folley from hearing but because he was afraid of how Folley would react if he did grasp his meaning.

But Folley only looked at him blankly. "I don't – "

"Here," the man said tenderly, offering him the bottle.

With his hand carefully cupping the bottle, for fear his fingers might shake and lose their grip, Folley uncapped it and touched his lip to the rim. He winced away from the contact. Then, tilting the bottle very cautiously, he took a few swallows. Lowering the bottle, he slowly recapped it and handed it back. The taste slid down the back of his throat, warm, musky, and bittersweet.

He looked around him, at the rubble and the torn-up equipment, and the fly-clustered things like water-logged feather pillows in too-tight dirty

olive drab pillowslips, and the cracked old stumps of trees. He could feel that there was no longer any clear separation between the raw soles of his feet and the glutinous fabric of his socks. He plucked absently at his shirt, and shifted his seat uncomfortably. A V of slow antipersonnel missiles went hunting by overhead, and he cowered, though he knew that the minimum concentration of men required to attract such a missile was twenty within a hundred yard radius. Abruptly, the missiles seemed to lurch in the air. Bits of machinery whirled out of their noses, and then they fell forward and glided steeply into the ground down in the valley bottom. They had run out of fuel, and had jettisoned their warhead fuzes before crashlanding in open territory.

Folley shook his head violently, having followed the missiles' downward arc all the way to the ground. "She was the first girl I ever loved," he said to the new man, his voice confidential. "We were walking hand-in-hand, along the glassy gray lake where the pelicans swam in the park, under the eyes of the buildings. There were forsythia bushes like soft phosphorus explosions beside us, and there were squirrels fat enough to eat that scampered along beside us. She was wearing a pale green gown and black slippers, and her russet hair came down to her shoulders. I remember I was afraid strands of it would catch on the thorny trees which hung their branches low over the walk, like barbed wire.

"My God," he said, staring in awe at the bottle, "it was beautiful!" He sprang to his feet and shouted across the valley: "Beautiful! Beautiful, you sons of bitches! You and your bombs and your gas and your chemicals – you and your war, your death, your rapine! Beautiful, you bastards!"

Folley crumpled back down into the hole, shuddering. He hugged his knees and rubbed his cheeks against the old camouflage cloth stretched over his bones. He had forgotten why he was here, and now that he had been reminded, he was trying desperately to forget, again. But he remained aware that the bottle was infinitely precious, that the new man was perfectly right in having saved it.

"What's your girl like?" he asked the new man.

"As lovely as yours," the man answered. He looked over the side of the hole, down into the valley. "They're coming," he said. "The enemy. It's another attack."

"The last attack," Folley said. "We've got to save her!" he cried out in panic. "I don't care what else they get – we can't let them get her!"

The new man smiled. "There's nothing else."

"Nothing else?"

"Just you and I, and the few of them down there. There's nothing else left in the whole world."

Folley believed him. There was no uncertainty in the new man's voice at all. But Folley was so shocked at believing him; at finding himself so ready to give up what he thought to be a proper attitude of confidence, that he burst out indignantly: "What do you mean? Not as long as General Gaunt's still alive. He can save us if anyone can, and we would have heard if he was dead!" He clung bitterly to his belief in the genius of General Gaunt, who was his personal hero of the war.

"I am General Gaunt," the new man said, tears in his eyes. He lifted the bottle in salute.

"General Gaunt?" Folley said.

The new man nodded. He extended the bottle. "Would you like another?" He turned his glance momentarily in the direction of the enemy, who were scurrying across the valley floor like baby spiders. "There's time before they get into range."

"No," Folley whispered, "no, we've got to save her!"

"Save her?" Gaunt pawed brutally with the back of hand under his eyes. "Save?" He stood up, feet apart, back arched arms outflung to embrace the world. "Save!" he cried, and the long echo coursed down the valley. He collapsed forward, the enemy bullet bulging a lump from the inside at the back of his thonked helmet. Folley snatched the bottle as he fell, and patted it.

The enemy were leaping up the rocks, and twisting in behind old guns and trucks, hurdling up over the gassy old bodies and the broken ammunition boxes. The short, stubby one was in the lead, screaming out: "Now die! Now die! Now die!" The scarfaced one was bringing up the rear, and this one Folley shot, the carbine banging his shoulder so hard that he clapped his left hand over the shirt pocket where he had put the bottle.

The other four enemies did not stop, and Folley saw that they had nerved themselves for this attack, and would not stop, but would soak up his ammunition until it was gone, and would overrun him. Two of them were firing at him, keeping him down, while the short one and another man advanced.

Then there was nothing to do, for the short one and his companion would soon be at the lip of the hole, and once they did that, all was lost. Folley carefully put the bottle down and sprang to his feet, firing his carbine. He was immediately hit by shots from the two covering riflemen,

but he had known that would happen. He shot at them, and killed them, because it made no difference what happened with the nearer two if the others were alive. Then he turned his gun toward the short one's companion, and shot him, but that was the end of it, for he had used up all his ammunition.

"Now die!" shouted the little enemy. "Now we have your all!" He did not seem to know he was alone, and he held his rifle arched up, ready to thrust down with his bayonet.

Folley pushed him back with a nudge of his carbine butt, like a man stumbling in a crowd, but there was blood running down over his hands, and the carbine slipped away. The little enemy recovered his balance and came forward again. "You die!" he shouted, froth at the corners of his mouth because he was so frightened, "Now you die!"

And it was true. Folley could feel the pain like the teeth of a pitchfork in him, and the cut strings of his muscles would not hold him up.

"Now we rule!" the enemy cried, bayonet flashing down, and for a long moment Folley hung on the point of his rifle, all the wind knocked out of him as it had been once before in his life, when he ran down the long park slope after the girl and tripped over a root, and never afterward could be sure of her admiration.

Then he was flung back, and he lay kicking at the bottom of the hole. "Now ours!" the enemy cried. "All world!" He was straddling the hole, and his victorious glance flashed around him. Slowly, as he looked, dismay crept into it. "All world?"

Folley reached toward the bottle. He began to inch forward very quietly and painfully. Before the enemy saw what he was doing, he broke the bottle against a stone.

The enemy heard the sound, and stared down. He leaped into the hole and scabbled at the wet splotch on the ground. Then he whirled up, his fingers bleeding, and slapped Folley's face:

"Why you break? Why you break?" He slapped Folley again, and began kicking him. "I wanted! Why you no give me?" He spun back toward the shards of glass in the sun, trying to find a few drops caught in the hollow of some curved fragment, but whatever had been there was evaporated, and the glass had turned dull brown. Folley saw it through a glistening fog the color of a gray lake.

The Price © 1960, Mercury Press, Inc.

The Ridge Around the World Copyright © 1957, Algis Budrys

The Girl in The Bottle Copyright © 1959, Great American Publications, Inc.

Go and Behold Them

We spent a long time following bad leads before one finally proved good and we found them. We knew their ship had blown its drive somewhere inside a particular sector of space; it was finding out exactly where within that sector that took a long time, and then there was the business of following the faint trail of stray ions from their atmospheric jets. They had used those, knowing they'd be short of fuel for a landing, but concerned, first, with reaching a solar system to crash in. So we followed the trail, blurred as it was by stellar radiation and all the other invisible forces of the universe, and lost it a dozen times before we found them, too late. I'm glad we were too late.

Lew and Norah Harvey were probably the best astrophysics research team the Institute had. There was no question of their being the best-liked. They were young, gay, and unimpressed with their own competence. Norah was a lovely girl, with startling blue eyes set off by her black hair, and a wide, smiling mouth. She was tall, willowy, and graceful. I shall never forget the first time I danced with her, while Lew sat it out with a girl I was squiring about at the time. Norah was light on her feet; like a ballerina, I thought then, but corrected myself. The image is wrong – the frostily graceful, elegant, and perfectly trained figure in its pristine white costume suggests nothing of Norah but the opposite. Norah was warm in my arms – not ethereal at all; yielding, but resilient; light, but full. The qualities of earthiness and youth were perfectly combined in her, so that you knew this was a woman in your arms, and you knew, without a shadow of uncertainty, what a woman was. Her intelligence appealed to your intellect, her youth called to yours, and her femaleness awakened a quality and depth of manhood that you were positive was buried and leached out long ago by the anemic fluid that passes for blood among civilized peoples.

That was Norah. Lew was the quiet one, shorter than Norah by half a centimeter or so, wiry, with a young-old face already full of lines and a

pair of brooding, deep-set eyes. He was thoughtful, self-contained, and crammed with a fund of outrageously obscene anecdotes no one but he could have told without vulgarity. Lew had an actor's gift for verisimilitude, and a quiet, deadpan delivery unspoiled by a trace of laughter. He called his little autobiographical stories anecdotes, with the implication that they were true, rather than cleverly constructed and narrated jokes. Perhaps they were. It seemed sometimes that he could never have had time to attend a class in college or, indeed, get the growing young man's necessary minimum of sleep, if all these things had really happened to him.

As a couple, they complemented each other perfectly. Lew was indrawn, Norah was outgoing. Lew loved her with a quiet intensity that came close to desperation. The look was there in his eyes, though it had to be watched for. Norah loved him with effusive generosity.

I have said they were probably the best research team the Institute had. They were. Lew was an astrophysicist with a D.Sc. after his name. Norah was a metrographic engineer and statistical analyst. Neither her gaiety nor Lew's storytelling had anything to do with their ability to take out a research ship, spend six months alone in it while they drifted about in the deeps of an interstellar dust cloud, and come back with half again as much data as the next team. Or perhaps they did – I don't know. Whenever anyone at the Institute remarked on it, Lew would drawl in his noncommittal way: "Well, there's no room in one of those cans for a dance floor. So we might as well work."

We always thought that was one of Lew's most quotable lines. Most research teams are made up of what are called 'young marrieds' by the people who sell saccharine for a living, and you can imagine for yourself what kind of repartee that could give rise to at an Institute staff party.

We had those parties often enough. Six months in isolation made us all yearn for as much in the way of noise and crowds of people as could be mustered, and the mustering process had been evolved to a point of high efficiency. Every homecoming team found itself welcomed royally, and every outgoing team had a day or two of grace after the socializing before the Institute medical staff would certify their metabolisms fit for service again. We were a feast-and-famine group, a close-knit academic cadre with few ties outside the clan and little desire for them. Most of us were married. Those who weren't were usually as good as, and two by two we formed our questing brotherhood, as Lew Harvey put it once.

We lost very few to the impersonal dangers of the universe. When Lew and Norah disappeared, it was a stab in all our hearts. Even the Board of

Trustees in charge of the research program, instructed to act with Olympian detachment in promulgating its success, managed to bend a little: it found an extra appropriation at just that time to finance the sending of ten ships into space simultaneously. The official purpose was to accelerate the program, and thus increase Man's knowledge of the universe so much more quickly, of course – but somehow it was made plain to those of us who went that if we did not bring back much routine data, that would be considered only a natural hiatus in the always unsteady curve of human progress.

So we stripped the recording instruments out of the ships and made room for a relief observer, and his extra complement of food and air. It was tricky, but it meant we could stay out searching a little longer, and be a little more alert. So equipped, we left the Institute far behind and converged on the sector where the Harveys had been – a sector only a hundred light- years deep, containing an estimated mere hundred thousand bodies where their ship might have crashed. And we began to search.

We found them; my ship found them, that is. And much too late. We couldn't have saved Lew if we had known the exact pinpointed spot to go to – not if we had had the wings of angels. But we might have saved Norah, with a little luck. I'm glad for both of them that we didn't.

What we found was a rogue body where nothing had any business being. It was forging blindly through the deep – sunless, perhaps a thousand miles in diameter, and the mass readings were fluctuating wildly as we came near. Dozen, the extra on my team, showed me the figures. He was very young. Clean-cut, handsome – fresh fish, and unassigned as yet when the emergency had come up.

"The machines have dropped a stitch, Harry," he said. "Look at these – new mass readings every thousand miles as we come closer."

I looked at them and grunted. "No. The readings are right."

"Oh, come on now, Harry – how could they be?"

"If a gravitic generator were buried in the heart of that body."

"Gravitic generator! My left-footed aunt, Harry."

I can't say I ever cared for loudly positive people. I winced and tapped the other readings scribbled down on the scratch pad. "Just because nobody's ever seen it before, never say what you're looking at isn't there." I could have launched into my favorite diatribe on explorers who resisted making discoveries, but what was the use? "Look at these: Atmosphere

one hundred percent inert gases, mostly neon. Furthermore, it's fluorescing. Hardly a likely state of affairs in nature. You will also notice the presence of some neon snow on the ground, but not much. But the mean temperature is down nudging absolute zero. Why isn't all of that atmosphere piled up in drifts? I'd say the reason is that it was, until very recently. That something, like a spaceship crash on the surface, activated a series of machines which are busily raising the temperature and otherwise moving the ecology from a dormant to an active state. I doubt if Nature includes that kind of reaction when it constructs a planetoid. I'd say that whole business down there might be a machine – or, rather, a complex of mechanisms with some particular purpose in view."

He looked at me as if I were crazy. I looked at him as if he were being deliberately stupid. Some day, an expedition equipped with recorders instead of our ship's simple analyzers is going to have to go out there and prove one of us right. I don't wish to be on that expedition. Dozen can go, if he wants to. I wish him joy of it.

Whatever it was – natural anomaly or artificial leftover from a day and people I am glad are gone – we landed there, coming down on a relatively flat place in the vicious terrain. The sky flamed yellow above us and its fluorescence might have been a working light for autonomous machines, long since gone. It is impossible to speculate on the history of the place; I say, again, that it would be a mistake to go there and try. And for all I know, it was entirely different in appearance as recently as when Lew and Norah Harvey's ship came hurtling out of the sky and smashed itself like a bug on a windscreen. But if anything endowed with biological life ever lived in that place as we saw it, I have only horror for that thing.

What we saw was Hell. All about us, boundless and bare, were scarps and ridges of bleak, decayed metal so desolate, so pitilessly torn and twisted into razor-edged shapes that for a moment I seriously expected to hear a scream of agony from the swirling air.

There was light. There was no heat. The incredible chill of the place was sucking at our ship already; the cabin heaters were whirring furiously. We shivered as we peered out through the windows and outraged our eyes with that masochist's landscape.

Not all of Nature's forms are beautiful – even a dedicated research man occasionally has his soul intruded upon by some particularly offensive example. But all of them, even the most revolting, have a certain organic rightness to them. One can see the reasonableness, if not accept the architectural style, of every form the universe erects.

Not this place. If you have seen a tin can left to rust for a year, its walls broken down and flaking away, then you have seen something of the contours that metallic landscape took, but only something. If you have seen a giant meteorite; pitted, burnt, leprous, half-molten and congealed in gobbets, barely suggestive of some other shape now lost that might once have been regular and purposeful, then you have experienced some of the feeling that place gave us. But not much of it.

The Harvey's broken ship made an island of sanity in that place. It was smashed and scattered, but its fragments, pieced together, would have made a whole.

We could land nowhere near it. We put our own ship down six miles away. We stood at the ports, looking out, and finally I said: "We have to go out."

Doris, my regular teammate, said: "I'll get the suits." She got all three. In the backs of all our minds, I think, was an irrational fear that something might happen to the ship while we were all gone. But there was an even greater fear of being separated in that place, and, to avoid that, we were immediately willing to chance being marooned. We were not very sane in our decision, but in that savage place the nerves were much more potent than the intellect. So we locked our suits on and, armored against any external fearsomeness, clambered down the ladder.

"This way," I said, looking at my direction finder, and set off across the terrain. I tried to look only straight ahead. Doris and Dozzen followed me, at some small distance, staying close to each other. I envied them, for I was very much alone.

I had expected that Doris would find better company than me. It was not a new experience for me to lose my teammate, though it had never before happened in my immediate presence. If Norah and Lew were known for their constancy, I was known for my lack of it. One, perhaps two trips were as long as I and my teammate of the moment ever lasted. If there had been something spectacular or particularly noteworthy in my many partings, the board of directors would long since have removed me. But they were only quiet, amicable dissolutions of temporary working partnerships. No one found them scandalous, though juicy gossip was as well received by the Institute staff as it is anywhere. Each new occurrence was simply another example of Harry Becker's not having found the right girl – or of the girl's not having found the right man in Harry Becker.

Good old Harry Becker, decent fellow, nothing wrong, fine companion –

on all levels, one might add – but apparently just not the right man for Doris; or Sylvia, or Joan, or Ellen, or Rosemary.

"Harry!" I was inching around a jagged wave of pitted metal, and Doris's cry in my headphones almost sent me stumbling against a razor edge. I caught my balance, and turned. Doris had shrunk back against Dozzen.

"Harry, I saw something..." Her voice trailed away. "Oh – no, no, I didn't." She laughed in embarrassment. "It's that formation over to your right – for a minute there, it looked like an animal of some kind. I only saw it out of the corner of my eye, and I played a little trick on myself." She made her voice light, but she was shaken.

I looked around, and said nothing. It was Dozzen who put into words what I had seen and been trying to avoid. Our nerves were taut enough. But Dozzen said it anyway: "There's another. And some more over there. The place is crawling with them. It looks like a lunatic's zoo."

It did. It did, and it was nothing to try to be matter-of-fact about – not then, not ever.

Now that we were down in it, the terrain assumed individual features. I wished it hadn't, for it had become evident what those features were.

Beasts prowled around us; frozen forever, but prowling. Unfinished, misshapen, terribly mangled, they bared their teeth and claws at us only to become tortured metal as we looked at them directly. We saw them beside and a little behind us, always, and not only beasts, but the cities and dwellings they had overrun – the homes they had gutted, the streets they had littered with the remains of their prey. We walked on among them and they followed us, always at the corners of our eyes, and when we turned to see them better they were gone, to lurk where we had been looking.

"It's a common form of illusion," Dozzen said weakly.

"Yes," I said, and led the way through their gantlet.

"This is a terrible place," Doris said.

It was.

We reached the crashed ship, and Dozzen said: "Look!"

The ship lay mashed, but a hull section had held together. There were weld scars on it. Perhaps it had not survived the crash whole, but it was airtight now. There was a cairn beside it, with a cross welded together out of structural members atop it.

"Which one?" I thought. "Which one?" and leaped clambering over the ridges and heaps of fused metals, panting with urgency. I ran at the cairn and flung myself up it, and sprawled at the foot of the cross to read in bright scratches: "Lewis Harvey, Explorer." I slid down the cairn in a shower of fragments, and pounded on the sealed hull section hatch, shouting "Norah! Norah! Norah!" until Doris and Dozzen came and pulled me gently away.

They cut open the door while I sat facing away. They had looked in the port and seen her lying still in her suit; I could not have done either. And once inside, it was they who picked her up tenderly and laid her down on the bunk, the suit out of power, the inside of the faceplate frosted over, and the suit limp, limp and boneless – almost – but too heavy to be empty, though the stupid hope came to me.

They rigged power lines from their suits to the report recorder we found set up beside where she had fallen, and lines back into our audio circuits, and when I heard her voice I did not make a sound.

"Last report," it said in her voice, exhausted and laboring. "Power going fast. I'm in my suit now, and when that goes, that'll be it.

"I don't know where we are. Whatever this place is, it must have just drifted into this sector. I don't know what it was – what purpose a race would have for a machine like this." She stopped momentarily, and the breath she drew was a gasp. I thought of her, starving for air, starving for heat, broken by the crash as she must have been, and I remembered again, the first night she had danced in my arms.

"The changes outside are still going on," she resumed. "But much more slowly. I think they'll stop soon. I see them try, try to complete themselves, and fail, and stop, and start again. But they are slowing down, and each attempt is less forceful than the last. I wish I could understand what was causing them.

"I wish Lew were here," she said wistfully. And there was no question now whether she had given up hope or not. She began to speak for a record greater than the Institute's.

"I loved you, Lew," she said quietly and serenely. "Even though you never believed me. Even though sometimes you hated me. I loved you. If I could never prove it to you in that one narrow way, still, I loved you." Her voice was growing very faint. "I hope I shall meet you," she said. "And if I do, then I would like these to be the first words I say to you: I love you."

That was all. She was dead. Doris reached over and pulled the audio line out of our suits.

There was a long silence. Finally Dozzen sighed and said: "I don't suppose that will mean much to anyone. There are probably earlier spools in the recorder, from when she was still thinking clearly."

"Probably," I said. Doris was watching me closely. I looked at her and thought I had never been as clever as I thought I had – nor as clever at hiding myself from women as I had been at hiding from myself.

I went over to the bunk and picked up Norah in my arms, and carried her outside. Dozzen may have tried to follow me. If he did, Doris held him back. I was left alone.

I built the new cairn beside the other, and welded a new cross with the tools we all carried in our suits, and etched her name upon it. I had plucked the lumps of toothed metal one by one from the surface of the machine-world, and piled them carefully, and opened her faceplate so that the inert atmosphere could flood in, wash out the trapped carbon dioxide and the last trickles of oxygen, and leave her ageless, perfect forever, frozen.

I was done at last, and came down from the cairn. Doris was waiting for me. She took my arm and touched helmets with me so Dozzen could not hear. She said:

"Harry – it's often the most feminine women who..."

"Who aren't female at all?"

"That's a terrible way to put it," she answered softly. "I wonder if that's the way Lew thought of it – if he tortured himself out of shape inside, because he chose the cruelest way of thinking of it? You knew Norah – she was warm, and friendly, and a wonderful person. Who can say, now, what may or may not have happened when she was just becoming a woman? If Lew thought she was a living lie, he ought to have thought that perhaps she knew she was lying to herself, as well. If he'd ever thought to be kind..."

"Don't tell me these things!" I said bitterly, instantly sorry. "I wasn't married to her."

"Are you sorry or glad, Harry?" she asked quietly.

I didn't know, then. It was while we were on our way back to the ship that Doris touched my arm again. "Harry...look!"

I raised my head, and the beasts of the place were gone.

It was a subtle change – a shift of planes, a movement of curvatures; no

more than that – not yet. We never stayed to see the end of that process. It was moving too quickly for us to endure.

The snow stopped and the snow on the ground burst into curling vapor that shrouded us in sparkling mist, as though Spring had come into this place at last.

The metal shapes were still molten, their outlines still broken, and they were still metal, still cold and hard. But the beasts were gone – the pent-up nightmares of frustration were lost with even that beginning of a change. Everywhere the corners of our eyes could see, there was striving. The illusions, Dozzen would have said – did say, the fool – were softening, turning into calm, friendly shapes. The raw hatred had gone, and the viciousness. Now there were spires, minarets, the fragile battlements of faerie cities, and here were hedges, trees, and there – I saw it, if Dozzen did not and Doris never spoke of it – I saw two lovers with their arms entwined.

"It's turning beautiful!" Doris said. It was. It was wild, eerie – many things; not all of them, perhaps, as wispily graceful as the best beauticians would have them – but it was vibrantly alive, glorious with growth.

We left it quickly. There was that about it which unsettled Dozzen badly, and made Doris moody. It did many things to me.

Dozzen made the formal report, without benefit of the recorders and analyzers that would have made fallible human impressions unnecessary. Doris and I initialled it, and I will never know if she, in her own way, was being as evasive as I. We have never talked about it, because what is there to ask?

Illusions are subjective phenomena, and no two people can possibly be expected to see the same face in a shifting cloud, nor can one see anything but the lion in the jumbled granite mountainside where another insists he sees a sheep. These things are nothing but reflections of the viewer's self. How can they possibly be measured or compared?

Dozzen's report says the terrain of the place is broken into free forms which the mind readily supplies with familiar shapes, in a search for the familiar where the familiar does not, in fact, exist. That is as far as he will go, on paper, though he knows there is enough more to the truth to make him unhappy. But he knows he doesn't know just where that truth might lie, so he will not push himself beyond the point where he feels safe.

I think I know what a machine of planetary dimensions might be

intended to do, though I cannot picture a race which would choose metal in an inert atmosphere for a medium in which to attempt the creation of life.

I think that is what we found. I think all races must come to it someday in the prime of their greatness. I think the race that built this machine failed, and died, or we would not be here today. But I think that race came very, very close when it launched its machine into space, a messenger and vessel of nearly fruitful hope. I think they may have missed only one ingredient of life, even though they chose so strange a thing as metal for its womb.

I think I know why the snow was falling again when we first came there. Norah buried Lew, and not in his suit, for that was still hanging in its locker. And when she buried Lew, the planet-machine began to stir to movement again, and take to itself what it had always lacked and, lacking, almost died. And now, having that thing – that spark – it began to change – to search after its goal once more, to strive, to fail, but trying, trying nonetheless, with all it could get from Lew Harvey. And failing, and going back into its ageless somnolence again, leaving only its half-successful attempts behind it to haunt us when we landed. For whatever it was that unfulfilled, tortured Lew Harvey yielded up in the crash, Lew Harvey was not enough.

And I do not say that a Mark Four suit will trap and restrain the kind of thing required for the creation of life... or that a dead girl can say I love you. But the snow stopped after I opened Norah's suit, and the beasts departed. And I saw movement in that planet's metal, at the last. I don't think it was a trick of the light, or of the evaporating snow.

I think, someday, when Doris and I are out there again, we shall meet something. I think she thinks so, too, though we never speak of it or plan for it, because no planning is possible.

I wonder, sometimes, if that primordial race, so great, could be so thoughtless, ever, as to fail – if greater plans were made than I am quite ready to believe. I hope not. I would rather believe that blind chance was the catalyst. In that belief, there is a kind of hope.

I am afraid, and proud, and troubled. I think of what might have been if Norah had loved me, if Lew Harvey had not met her before I ever knew them. I think of the thing between them, the thing we never suspected and they never betrayed. I am glad for them now, if I am sometimes terrified for the universe of Man.

For I think that someday, in the deeps we sift, we shall meet Lew and

Norah Harvey's children.

© 1958 by Fantasy House, Inc.

The Last Brunette

Over the years, I have written any number of stories around illustrations. They serve as convenient objects for the fantasizing part of my mind. Many writers do this, and often develop close relationships with illustrators in part because they find they can cross-flow not ideas, so much, as a spark of creativity which can jump in either direction. Frank Kelly Freas and I did quite a bit of that at one time. He created the art to which I reacted spontaneously with stories called *Who?*, "The Executioner," and "Despite All Valor," among others. I wrote a number of stories – "The End of Summer," "In Clouds of Glory," "Cage of a Thousand Wings" (originally "Priestess of the Witch-Wings") for which Kelly produced illustrations that delighted me.

This story was written at and for Playboy, around an 8 x 10 Ektachrome of a plywood woman with buzz-saw breasts bolted on. The photo of this assemblage was the best of a series taken while the plywood, soaked in lighter fluid, burned. Having bought the art, from a talented person whose name escapes me, Playboy hung it on my office wall, down in Siberia where I was attempting to do something useful with the book-publishing department. It so happened I was then driving a Sunbeam Rapier – which had both a warning light and an ammeter – and had wound up in Warren, Ohio, under circumstances exactly like those in this story, omitting, I fear, the ladies listed herein. Even the rerun of *Only Angels Have Wings* actually happened. But as to the important events in the story, those are either a phantasia in the classical psychiatric sense or a new kind of ghost story, take your pick.

SHORTLY AFTER HOBBS had crossed the Indiana-Ohio border, headed east, his ammeter needle veered over to the left and lay implacably against the peg. His warning light came on a full, startling red. He cut his radio, his heater fans and finally his dash lights, but his headlights yellowed, and when he shone his flashlight on the dark ammeter, the needle had not moved.

He rolled onto the shoulder, stopped and looked under the hood, but the steady water-temperature gauge had already told him it wasn't anything as simple as a loose or broken fan belt. The generator was out, and that was all there was to it. For luck, he tested the firmness of as many electrical connections as he could reach, but nothing came of that. It was now just a question of driving as far as he could on his battery, which, thank God, was up to full charge from all the mileage since Chicago.

Forty miles down the road, practically groping by now and praying against state troopers, he got into a service plaza and had them give his battery a kick with their quick-charger while he went in and ate a disgusted meal. He already knew nobody was going to do anything about a foreign generator this side of Toledo and certainly not at this time of night. He made it into Toledo at three, found a motel operated by a motherly woman who hated him on sight, and slept until morning.

In Toledo, he was sold his own generator, rebuilt, and a new voltage regulator. Two hundred miles later, his ammeter began flashing back and forth like a man waving a shin on a life raft and then went dead again. His voltage regulator began to buzz, and that was how he came to be in Warren, Ohio, when he ought to have been in New York. In New York, he often pondered in later years, an otherwise respectably married lady either did or did not spend two whole, entire, positively humiliating hours sitting in a hotel lobby waiting for him. It was his private opinion that she had done no such thing. If she had, he had missed the only occasion in their relationship on which she did not chicken out. He could stand missing her; he regretted missing the occasion.

Meanwhile, in Warren, Ohio, he had fallen in love.

Love in Warren was very much like love everywhere; he had found a motel for himself, since the Toledo stop had arranged his timing to get him into trouble after all the garages were closed, and had asked the desk clerk for the name of a decent place to eat. Directed to a place which was "good but not dressy," he found it was mediocre but dressy; the hostess

moved him quickly to a very quiet table in an alcove beside the kitchen doors. He sat there in his printed shirt and green twill slacks, wishing idly that he were dead and in hell, looking forward to a fried steak, and wondering what had ever possessed him to think Ohioans considered anything less than a sports coat and white shirt not dressy. Shortly after he had reached the customary peak of irritation, the next table turned out to be occupied by a stunning, sad-faced, full-mouthed, medium-sized brunette with skin like velvet so golden it was almost visibly tinged with green.

Oh, Christ, he thought, I should have known, and noticed that she was drinking a light Scotch in an old-fashioned glass, with just a hint of bubble in it. Four or five loves ago, this had become established as the drink his loves drank, just as they had developed long legs when he was twenty-two, had acquired sad eyes when he was twenty-seven, had become medium tall at about that same time, but had not really produced high, firm breasts until the time early last year when his engine had burned out on his way to New Orleans. They had always been brunettes, of course. This one had by far the best skin, and it seemed reasonable to suppose that he could look forward to this feature from now on, for each was always like the last but better. Meeting them was becoming more and more of a hammer blow; being with them and then watching himself leave them was costing him more each time. If they improved much more, it would become totally unbearable.

"Sam Hobbs," he said to her, and she raised one eyebrow markedly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My name is Sam Hobbs, I'm in town overnight with bad electricity in my car, I've got one hundred eighty-seven dollars cash and a checkbook, and a week's time."

"How very interesting." She tapped an ash from her cigarette with quick precision.

"Now, you, on the other hand, are married, engaged or someone's good friend. You have a well-paying job you don't like, a staggering load of debts public and psychic, a taste for quiet good living, few of the common inhibitions but a number of uncommon ones, and a sexy mouth."

"You're insane."

"So are you," he said with the certainty of a man watching a piano fall down a stairwell. "There is no argument between us. If I were king, nothing now could ever part us."

She looked at him as if over the tops of a pair of glasses and said, "I must say, your finesse staggers me."

"Darling, I've been in Ohio – a two-hundred-and-fifty-mile state – for eighteen hours, and I'm only in Warren, but I am also all used up until such time as you renew me. If you don't like it, screw it, but that is the shape of things that are."

"I don't like bad language."

"Neither do I. Let me tell you some. You can always cover your ears. How about 'It's too early,' and 'It's too late,' or 'Not here!?' How's that for obscenity? Want some more?"

She looked at him like a live human being and shook her head. "You may be right," she said.

He conquered the impulse to reply, "And I may be wrong; you know you're gonna miss me when I'm gone." Instead, he said politely, "Join me for dinner?"

She looked startled and glanced around as if every friend and relative she had were packed into the place, instead of the desultory scattering of good, honest faces that were bent over their soup plates hither and thither about the room. "Where are you staying?" she asked.

He told her the name of the motel and she nodded gravely, indicating she had it memorized, or that she approved his taste, or something equally positive. They went back to minding their own business, she being joined in due course by a chap who apologized for leaving her by herself and looked like a rising young man from a larger city, possibly Youngstown.

Hobbs ate his steak, gathered himself up and took his battery-driven car back to the motel, where he decided in favor of a shave and against a shower. He called his partner collect, told him he was in car trouble and would probably be a little late about everything and not to fret.

Sometime later in the evening, his phone rang and he picked it up while killing the volume on a spottily cut run of Only Angels Have Wings. Trapped in fog, knowing the Andean pass was a nesting place of stupid condors, Thomas Mitchell was groping for an opening through which to urge his laboring old trimotor mailplane.

"Sam," he said.

The girl said, "How are you, Eleanor?"

"Fine," Sam said. "Thomas Mitchell just got a condor through his windshield."

"Oh, no!" the girl said. "Are you hurt?"

"Lonely."

"Is there anything I can do? Do you want me to come over?"

"I can't run the car more than a mile or two at night."

"Yes. Of course. I'll be there in about half an hour. Is there anything you want me to pick up on the way?"

"I don't have anything drinkable on the premises."

"All right, fine. I'm sure I can find a drugstore open."

"See you."

"Yes. Please don't worry – it's no trouble for me at all. It's a shame about your car. It sounds to me as if it might take days to fix."

"Could be."

"I'm sure I'll be there soon."

On the screen, blinded Thomas Mitchell was spinning to his doom in a cloud of condors.

"Hurry," Hobbs said, thinking that by now his fine, leggy blonde wife was certainly in a saloon with his fretful partner.

"You are my cousin Eleanor," the girl explained gravely, setting a paper bag down on the dressing table and lifting out a bottle of White Label. "You were in a little bitty car accident and I may have to take care of you for a couple of days."

"All right, I got that," Hobbs said with equal solemnity, closing the door, wondering what it felt like to come all the way from Youngstown to hear a story about Cousin Eleanor. "What do you do in this town and what's your name?"

"Well, my name is Norah and I teach dancing. Social dancing." She moved her body in her olive silk sheath with a motion that was neither dramatic nor explicit but summed up what it was she did when she danced.

"Style," Hobbs said. "Fine style." He smiled at her suddenly, feeling the sudden outbreak of pure pleasure at having her to smile at, to move his mouth in a way that nothing else ever moved it. She was resting her weight lightly against the edge of the dressing table, her hands flat on the wood-grained Formica beside her hips, and he was thinking that another

woman would have her ankles crossed negligently and her shoulders back, but she did not, and that her eyes were growing larger and larger as he drew nearer.

"I run a little outfit that designs and manufactures custom furniture," he said. "Executive desks at a grand a copy. Stuff like that."

"All right," she was saying. "And you're beautiful."

"Something like that," he said as he reached her.

There had not been much conversation between them. At dawn, he said, "Is somebody going to recognize your car out front?"

She shook her head. "My car is at my cousin Eleanor's," she said with a soft chuckle, warm, sleepy and full of herself. "I switched them," and this seemed to be a full and satisfactory solution to all the possible problems involved.

"What about this Eleanor?" he asked. "How many relatives do you have in this town? How tied up are you?"

She smiled at him like a little jam-faced girl blaming it all on her brother. "Me?" she asked incredulously. "I'm never tied up. When a beautiful man with a bad car came along, how tied up was I?" She closed her teeth lightly on the round of his shoulder. "Why? Do you want to take me somewhere?" she murmured with the tip of her tongue.

"I want— I want," he said, "I want to inhabit faery lands forlorn with you." And he did. He did. He wanted to take her with him through the pass in the Andes and on beyond, to where the Incan roads swept straight and new from way station to way station, innocent of wheel tracks, and at night the torchbearing runners ran lightly, tirelessly, naked and the color of earth, bearing the messages of the emperor.

She was murmuring with pleasure. "Do you say things like that a lot?" she whispered.

"Only to my love."

She turned sleepily, stretching her body, her hair and smooth arms brushing his face and neck. "Am I your love?" she asked lightly.

"My perfect love."

"You are my best."

"And you."

"Mmm!" She turned farther and kissed him, warm and like velvet come alive, light as pale clouds over the face of the full summer moon, her eyes glossy and dark as a river at midnight. Hobbs laughed softly. He was half-asleep, and he had been thinking of her as a princess of the Incas, as the magic woman who had come over the mountains and walked without looking left or right to the palace of the emperor and had found him.

The girl put her mouth lightly against his ear. "Happy?"

"Uh-huh. It's always fun being king." He ran his hand from her shoulder to her hip as if creating her in a dream.

Later he woke up, feeling as if he would live forever and be glad of it. She was drowsing against him, light as a cat. When he moved to slide away carefully off the edge of the bed, she made a soft, mewling, discontented noise and pulled the cover around her shoulders with a lithe, instantaneous twist of her body that left her curled facing him, her breathing once more serene. He looked at her, shaking his head fondly, and went to shower and wake up, making a rumbling, purring sound instead of singing. When he felt adequate, he came back out, drying his shoulders; and stood looking at her again. She had uncurled and was lying sprawled face down, one leg bent up, her arms outstretched toward the corners of the headboard, her face peeping out of the swirled nest of her hair. She was moving her shoulders and hips uncertainly and whimpering in her sleep. Her fingers flexed against the sheets.

He almost got back into the bed, but instead he went to the telephone book.

He found a Volkswagen dealer who said he knew nothing about Hobbs's kind of car but was willing to learn. Fair enough. Hobbs began walking softly around the room, pulling on his clothes. He couldn't keep himself from sneaking occasional glances at the girl in the bed, though he knew in his belly he was only acting like a man with a fresh, salty hole where a tooth had been. A man with other bad teeth biding their time in his jaw.

When he touched the doorknob, the girl sat up, smiled and arched her eyebrows.

"Car," Hobbs said.

"Oh." She sat warm and glowing, looking softer than the girl he had met in the restaurant last night, as if all her pores had opened. But he had seen something very much like that many times before, he reminded himself. "Do you have to go now?"

He shrugged, but he kept his hand on the doorknob.

"Well," she said uncertainly, "if they tell you it'll be a long thing, please call me here. I'll pick you up and we can come back to wait."

He smiled and nodded.

He went out and found the garage, where, after a certain amount of talking and poking back and forth, it was discovered that the too-slack new wires leading from his generator had burned through against the exhaust manifold on their way to the regulator. The mechanics fixed it in ten minutes.

He stood there watching them do it. It was something he should have been able to find out for himself and repair on the road, but he had been too sick of it to go look. He shrugged sadly, thinking of the girl and how he always met them, and it was obvious to him once again that there was nothing he could do about it. So he went back to the motel with his car in good shape and his mind uneasy.

She was there, sitting with her back against the headboard, wearing her coral-colored bikini panties, her bare heels digging into the spread on the made-up bed. She was reading a paperback of the great plays of the 1950s, which she apparently carried in her purse. The reading light burnished her combed-out hair and her shoulders while filling her eyes with darkness. Hobbs thought of Frankie and how she had ached to be a member of the wedding. But if this girl wanted to talk about plays, he would say he didn't know much about them, because he had had that talk in other times and places. He stood just inside the closed door, feeling uncertain.

The girl said, "Hello." She smiled fondly at him. "That didn't take long. How's the car?"

"All fixed."

"Oh."

"Listen, about this dance teaching. Do you have to be at the studio a certain time or what?"

"Not if I don't want to."

"Do you want to?" he asked, remembering how he had smiled the night before.

She looked at him with her head cocked, alert and suddenly wary. "That's up to you. What's the matter?"

And there it was. She had put the book down and was looking closely at

him; it was hard to read her eyes, with the light behind her, but suddenly she was not the same in anything, and he could feel himself groping inside.

"If it's up to me, nothing's the matter," he said and went over to the bed, kissing her, but it was just brave words, and he held the kiss as long as he could, because he did not want them looking at each other's faces any sooner than they had to. He reached out and touched her with every evidence of love and skill.

But at the wane of the sunny afternoon, she finally said, "I'd better go to work. There's somebody important coming in. I forgot."

He lay back on his back, smoking a cigarette and looking up into a corner of the ceiling. "Youngstown?"

"Who?"

"The boy from last night?"

She made a snorting noise through her delicate nostrils and shook her head scornfully. "No, I just have to go." She had good control, but control is not the same as self-, and he reached out to touch her thigh, because he wanted it registered in heaven that he felt compassion for her. And he said, "Please don't."

She looked at him with her neck arched and her eyes turned sideward out of her thoroughbred profile. "Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to," he said to the corner of the ceiling. And he didn't want her to. It seemed to him morally wrong that a girl should be told the things he'd told her and be unwanted in the morning.

"That's bullshit. Your car's fixed and you want to get back on the road. You've wanted to leave since this morning."

And so they were into it, and looking at her he felt the cold fear of discovery, once again, of how vicious they could be, of how the magic woman was more various than the emperor could have guessed when he created her for himself. But what he said, because he was honestly trying to find out why it always went like this, was, "That's not reasonable. You know I'm on my own time. Can there be anything I want in New York that isn't much better here?"

He tried to look at her tenderly, but the fact was that something about her face or his voice made it worse. He thought about the road, about the long, roaring miles between here and New York, the engine and gearbox screaming, the trucks gusting back and forth across the lane markers in crosswinds, the potholes clubbing his tires and suspension, the freeze of

his mind and muscles behind the wheel, his burnt eyes locked on whatever was coming toward the windscreen, the narrow, dripping tunnels with their awful lights, the rough asphalt burring him with vibration on the blind downhill mountainside turns before Harrisburg, the cops, the hot rodders out at night in their Chevies with their clinging girls. Always he managed to hit Pennsylvania sleepless and at night, where they were forever trying to patch up their crumbling can track and marking it with burned-out lanterns. Always he finished up on that Jersey Pike with its too-low speed limit and the tar run into the cracks like the stitching on Frankenstein's monster. And then into Manhattan at some hour between two and eight, when the clerks in his kind of hotel hated giving you a single room, and once you had one you couldn't get to sleep, with your body still on the road. And when you finally did wake up, it was some hour you couldn't use for anything and didn't know whom to call, or what you were going to do, and wound up going around the city with your face numb and your eyes defensive.

"What in hell would make you say a thing like that?" he said, realizing that if he got out on the road now, that was exactly how it would be.

"You would, you son of a bitch," she said, pulling the sheet around herself and looking at the bottle and his overnight bag on the dressing table beside her purse. "Ever since you got back. What the hell made you go to that garage this morning, anyway? Didn't you say you had a whole week?"

Well, no, he'd had as long as the car would let him. But –

"Look," he said clumsily, reaching out for her rigid arm. "Look, I want to stay. But I can't. I want to take you with me. I want–"

She said slowly, her arm cold in his hand, "You've had what you want. You've had me – fooled."

He felt the terrible dismay of knowing they were getting smarter, too. Of having it confirmed that his fear was real. He had, once again, an ever-clearer vision of how beautiful and terrible the last one would be.

"Listen – it's–"

"I want to get dressed now," she said, looking down at his hand.

He let go reluctantly. He still, with some of himself, wanted to awake her to softness and sleep. But that portion of him was only the part he kept to show to God. "All right, Norah," he said. She got up, pulling the sheet from the bed and holding it around herself as she picked up her things. Even though she moved only for herself now, she moved with grace and pride, and he watched her longingly, though he knew it was past time to

long for this one.

"This thing happens with me."

"Don't let it bother you. You're not the only man it happens with."

"I meet you over and over again."

Her mouth pulled sharply at one corner.

"Norah," he said, "I mean it. I wind up driving a lot. To a lot of places. I don't really have a reason. I always have some excuse. I don't want to go. I want to stay with you." He always wanted to stay home, too, with the cheated girl he'd married. But in the long afternoons over the drafting table, his hand would stop moving properly and his brain would turn to porridge, and he'd put it all down and in a matter of minutes he'd have a reason for getting out into the rusting, unwashed car, just pouring gas into the tank and maybe checking the oil and maybe not. It was a good thing he had a partner to stay home and take care of things.

And now his own lips seemed to move of their own accord. "Look, I can't explain it; I don't know why it happens, but I do meet you over and over again."

"What you mean is, you make it with bitchy-looking brunettes in safe places."

He looked around the room. "Not safe. No, not safe places. I—"

"Would you mind not talking to me?"

"Norah, I want you to understand—"

"Please." He saw that there were tears starting in her eyes, and when he saw that, he saw that he was through, because there were some things he would not break even to express himself nearer to his heart's desire. He got into his own clothes again and followed her out to her car, which looked new and massive beside his own. She did nothing to stop him, but it was as if he had gone long ago, or as if she had arrived the night before and waited all night and day in the wrong room.

He stood with his hand on the doorframe beside her, leaning in. She started the car and sat waiting, looking out through the windshield, wanting to close her door. Finally she looked at him as he tried to think of exactly the right thing to say, and said, "Would you mind?"

"I want you to understand something. It's something I can't help. It's not your fault."

"I know it's not my fault. Now I have to go tell my cousin why I took her car last night."

He was watching her graceful left hand. He reached out to touch it and she winced away. He watched the closing door swing toward his fingers. It seemed to him he watched it for a great many heartbeats and with detached interest. At the last possible instant, he gasped and pulled his hand out of the way. He had the impression there had actually been very little time between the jerk of her shoulder and the thud of the door closing tight in the frame. He stood now looking at his hand, at the intricate bones moving under the flesh, while she pulled out of the motel lot. Then he went back inside and packed quickly.

He drove the first 200 miles with his face motionless. By then he was well into the mountains and tunnels. At intervals, he said "Look, Norah," softly, only his mouth moving, the words becoming inaudible only inches from his lips. But as the road took hold of him, the spells of thinking about this particular girl became shorter and more widely separated. He began paying attention to things around him: to the readings on the dash, the signs flashing toward him in the nips. He smiled a little, thinking about good moments from the night before.

He was beginning to be like himself again, he thought. He felt accustomed to himself. He began, with a certain sadness, to think about the first girl, about the crying, intense love of his youth. "Look," he said to her loudly as he cut out around a semitrailer and shifted the wheel a little to take the blow from the wind, automatically registering the slap of his top as he entered the pod of rapidly moving air it carried down the road. "Look, what do you want me to do?"

But he knew what she wanted him to do. She wanted him to go back and change the past, to keep the promises of his youth. He could still remember what it had been like, parked in front of her house that last night and listening to her babble on about how even if he did have to quit school, it didn't matter – they could get married, and both work, and he could finish school at night, and the whole thing going on like that. But the truth of it was, he couldn't think of any way of breaking up with her without quitting school, because the look in her eyes had begun to frighten him.

He remembered looking at her and realizing she wasn't even good-looking, that her waist and legs were too short, and her neck was too thin, and she was going to be coarse-skinned and dough-faced in a few years. That all the virtues and attractions he had seen in her had been judged by too many men before him, and there was a reason why all of them had left her. He remembered the many times she had wept in his

arms and named the others, and enumerated the injustices they had done her, and of the thousand petty things she had said and done to get back at them afterward, and he had realized he was actually frightened of what she would do to him. And he had thought that he had a lot to learn about women, but not any more from her.

He had sat there, hunched over, the sick knot growing in his stomach, listening to her run through a dozen plans for them, each wilder and more abject than the last, and each more savagely delivered, and he had realized suddenly that if he let this go on, she would break him. And he had turned toward her quickly and said, "Look – it's over. Thanks for everything, but it's over. I've got all my clothes and stuff in the trunk, and I'm gonna be three hundred miles away from here by breakfast time. So good-bye. Even if I stayed, I wouldn't be any good to you anymore."

"You won't ever be any good," she had cried bitterly. "I'm the only one who knows how to make you feel like a king. I'm warning you, Sam – if you betray me this way, I'll – "

And that had done it. The digging of her fingertips into his arm, drawing blood through the sweater and shirt, or maybe the threat he didn't want to hear.

"Christ Almighty, get out of the car!" he had cried and shoved her door open, reaching across her and, probably on purpose, pushing with his shoulder against her thin rib cage. She had gone sprawling out of the car, onto the sidewalk in front of the sooty brick row house with the chipping limestone steps, and a drunk hanging around a stoop three or four houses down had laughed.

Hobbs had found himself staring deep into her eyes as she sat there with her shocked mouth open, and he had seen something there that had nearly made his heart stop. He was already lunging across the seat to slam the door shut as she scrambled to her knees and reached to grab the doorframe.

Now, as he automatically checked a pair of headlights growing in his rearview mirror, coming up a hell of a lot faster than his own 73 mph, Hobbs felt his arms grow rigid and his fingers lock on the greasy wood of his steering wheel until the flesh was aching against the bones. He was remembering the sound and then her cry, and the sight of her standing rigid, her back arched, her head thrown back, holding the hand aloft, the blood like ribbons wound around her trembling forearm.

She had gone tottering down the street then, knees stiff, the hand clasped to her stomach, her face white as lightning, and the drunk had

come stumbling toward her uttering, "Hey! Hey, Jesus, miss, can I do anythin' for you?"

"Nobody," Hobbs muttered now as the headlights turned into full quads on high beam and made him duck away from his mirrors, "nobody can do anything for us." He was remembering how he had realized that the only thing for him to do was to get the hell out of there. And he was remembering how his brain had turned over the first time he had been down in a strange town with a broken gearbox and had thought it was she behind the magazine counter in the third-rate hotel.

But it had only been a girl like her. Very much like her, but better. Better for an hour or two. And he was remembering other hours and other towns as the big Caddy came booming up behind him and cut out at the last second and hung head and head with him for a moment, the driver staring curiously at Hobbs's infrequently seen kind of car, while Hobbs watched his wheels and waited for the blowout or the dropped tie rod that would send the Caddy into him. He held the wheel steady, staring across, listening to the beating of his wheels across the expansion joints, feeling his car try to pitch back and forth, listening for the sound of breaking metal anywhere in his car, his shoulders hunched against the sudden wrench in his own steering, wondering if he would hold it.

But that was all reflex, just the way it always was. Nothing was going to happen to the Caddy, and nothing was going to happen to him, because the other car's driver was a man, alone. Hobbs smiled reassuringly across at him. Then he turned his vision back to the road ahead of him, feeling all right, feeling that a man couldn't ask for more than to know exactly how it was all going to end. He wondered, as he sometimes did, where she was at this moment – the last brunette of all, moving toward him somewhere in the space and time of this world. He was content to wait; he assumed she was, too, if she had any idea of what they would do to each other.

The Caddy had pulled away and was gone down the road to its own appointments with speed traps and justices of the peace. Hobbs drove on, watching ahead and behind, and to each pair of headlights gaining on him, he thought, I love you, just in case it's you at last. He wondered if, when the metal broke and the gasoline erupted into their marriage bed, she would cry out in answer.

Little Joe

Howe drove his car down the empty road that paralleled the fencing of Port Sathrea. The last trailings of the rapidly lifting pre-dawn fog whipped past his fender skirts, and the beams of his headlights were just beginning to turn pale and ineffectual as he pulled over to the shoulder and stopped a few yards from the gate.

The armed guard at the gate stepped forward and stopped him.

"I'm sorry, sir, but no one's allowed on the field until the ceremony this after—" The man's voice, which had been brisk and precise, broke off and became apologetic. "Excuse me, Captain Howe. I didn't recognize you. It's rather dark," he added in explanation.

Howe looked around him, at the cyclone fencing that fell away from him to either side, at the stacked silhouette of the faraway city, and the blue tarmac which, given a sheen by the early dew, stretched away toward the lightening horizon with a faint touch of shimmer. He raised his head and surveyed the violet-blue sky and its stars, weeded out to the primary magnitudes by the approaching dawn.

"Yes, it is still a little dim," Howe agreed. He returned his gaze to the sentry's face, which waited for his notice beneath its overlap of steel helmet. "Is it all right? The pass was issued in something of a hurry."

"The pass is certainly in force, Captain Howe," the guard assured him. He seemed to cast about for a chance to interject a few more words, and to be genuinely glad when he found it. "Anyway, sir, I'd recognize you."

Howe turned his eyes back on the man.

"I" – there was an initial hesitation, and then a rush of words – "that is, my brother... Edward Anderson, Stoker 2nd.; perhaps you recognize the name, sir... he served with you on the Maybank, Captain, and he told me a lot about you."

Howe turned his reflections inward. Anderson? Not the most original name in the world, certainly.

"Yes... I remember your brother quite well. He was a credit to the Merchant Service," he lied, finally, and waited for the guard to open the gate.

The gate slid closed behind him, and abruptly his horizon was occupied

only by the damp tarmac and the sky, which had now reached cerise in color. It was not until he had made a completely arbitrary turn on the unmarked field and begun to walk diagonally across the area that the hull became visible; a squat, needle-nosed, stub-finned silhouette of flat darkness that rested near the service hangars.

When he tried to count the number of times and the various places at which he had encountered that familiar stubbornness, he discovered that they had run irrevocably together. He could have arrived at approximate figures derived from average expectancies during the five-year-term of his captaincy on that particular vessel, but could never have assigned a definite port of call to each separate number. He was quite sure, for instance, that he had assumed command at Flushing in '06, and that his next planetfall had been Wolf. He could tick off most of the places to which his career had taken him with fair ease, but he found that he could not even discriminate between the memories of planetfalls in one of his various commands and those in another; much less determine some order, or even, by and large, a coherent purpose.

Still, one would think that there should be something in particular to remember, he thought. Immediately he saw the flaw in his reasoning, for it was not in any one specific voyage, in some peculiarity of cargo or destination, nor even in some hitherto unattainable but now-shattered record of performance or payload that the foundation of Little Joe's reputation rested.

There's length of service, of course, he thought. That's part of it.

But this thought was unsatisfactory for any purposes other than those of partial explanation, for mere tenure was one thing, and Little Joe's history was quite another.

He walked slowly but easily toward the ship, the shock of his footsteps on a hard surface perhaps less finely cushioned and compensated than it had been during the years of his physical peak, but, nevertheless, still not indicative of more than forty years of age.

In due course, he stood beside one of Little Joe's landing jacks, and turned his glance upward along the bellying curve of the ship's flank.

She's nae a beauty, but she's a brae bonny lass for a' that, he thought, and found himself confronted with simultaneous problems in introspection. One was easily solved by the inward examination of his memories until he encountered the image of a book about seafaring, and a man's description of his command, and the other fell before the rationalization that even Little Joe's skipper could be forgiven for an

infrequent assignment of a feminine pronoun to the ship.

He abandoned dialectic, having found himself once more fallen into a habit he had acquired soon after his assumption of Little Joe's command; that of resting his hand on some projection on the ship's surface, and absently running his hand over the pits that had accumulated in the surface.

The ship had never had the quality of sleekness – even on the ways, the graceful and aerodynamically clean but unmistakably heavy-bodied lines must have made any such impression difficult; the addition of the thick, wide-planed fins with their cylindrical jack housings made it impossible, and the roughly cast heavy-duty plates with which the brawny struts and stanchions were sheathed had obviated even tactile sensuality.

Little Joe was a cargo ship, broad of diameter in the loading locks, massive of bulkhead, and cramped of fo'c's'le, which in spacecraft had returned to its traditional place in the otherwise useless compartments of the tapering prow. The plating bore the marks of rough handling by more than one carelessly jockeyed cargo boom, and running years of contact with the pebbly debris of space had added further markings.

Howe's searching fingers found such a spot, and lingered over it.

The greatest part of Little Joe's reputation, I think, he decided, rests in the ship's value as a symbol.

Other craft had, perhaps, gone farther, with greater cargoes. Some were momentarily more famous, for one reason or another. Nevertheless, there was no ship so well known as Little Joe, no matter in what part of the galaxy one might be.

One of the first interstellar freighters, a voice, remembered perhaps from one of the recent public eulogies, said in his mind.

This was true. Not, in all probability, the very first – but certainly the last survivor of the first. The ship's bedplates and tubes had known more modifications than he would have believed improved engine designs possible. The celestial globe in the navigator's cubby had been replaced time after time, to match the progress of that evanescent line where frontier stopped and unknown dark began. The corners and odd angles of the holds were full of the trapped remains of scores of outmoded cargoes, no longer worthy of shipment from one solar system to another.

He heard, again, Scout among the farthest frontiers of the human race.

This was not as strictly true as the first, in its implication that the ship constantly ranged the Imperial rim. Little Joe went to whatever port the

ship's owners specified, this port invariably being the one at which Little Joe served the owners' interests best. True, there had been the run a score of years ago – was Murchison the captain then? – when, as the ship hung coasting at the peak of a great arc, the audiovisual communication from somewhere out of Andromeda's heart had come sputtering into Little Joe's searching receivers, but, though the message, recorded and re-recorded, was permanently safe in the history of the First Galaxy, no other message had ever been caught, nor had the ship been sent to search for any such.

Pride of the Merchant Service, the remembered voice repeated in Howe's mind. This last was never true – not in any utilitarian sense. The ship was neither the largest, the fastest, the finest, nor the most efficient of all the cargo craft that knitted together the fabric of human civilization. Little Joe was merely the best known.

And so, he thought, we return to length of service, but he had already decided that this was, at best, only a partial answer, unless one analyzed and classified all the multitudinous data of the ship's history and functioning, in order to determine the manner of its service. And here, perhaps, was the proof of his earlier decision that Little Joe was somehow a symbol of the human race and its progress into the stars.

He took his eyes from the broken gleam of the ship's hull and saw that dawn had fully broken, and that the sky had lightened into cirrus-combed blue. He stood quietly for a moment, living in the morning air on the tarmac, and then began to climb into the ship's fin on the ladder exposed by the extended jack;

Little Joe's interior was purposely cramped. The ship had not been designed for promenades, and the cargo holds were intersticed with a minimum number of rigidly measured companionways. Captain Howe bent himself into the one-man elevator that served when the ship was vertical, and rode immediately up to the bridge.

He knew the bridge better than any other area on the ship – the difference in his familiarity with the various other departments and divisions being only a shade less than imperceptible. The bridge however, was his particular piece of property aboard Little Joe; the platform from which he directed the ship's operations, the nerve center at whose heart he interpreted the hurrying messages of Little Joe's electric ganglia, and from which, in turn, his orders were returned along those same pathways. From the bridge, he directed the sometimes delicate task; of berthing, and the always precarious functions of blastoff.

He looked down, and saw another fragment of the legend of Little Joe.

Nestled in clear plastic, a pair of dice had been set into the main instrument board by some one of his predecessors who had already been conscious of the growth of the ship's peculiar aura. Each die, of course, was turned so that the face bearing two dots was turned up toward the viewer. There was even a sub-legend about the one time when the faces on the dice changed, so that they totaled two, and this physical impossibility was reputed to have occurred the day the ship's first – and, therefore, automatically, to the supplement mind, best-beloved of the ship – skipper had been retired. Since it was almost sure that the dice had not come to their place until well after that almost forgotten first master, and his children, had found a peaceful rest, the sub-legend was sometimes the occasion of a quirk in Howe's upper lip, but it was interesting to note, nevertheless, that Little Joe had an apocrypha.

He removed his outer coat and draped it over the mate's control couch, while he himself sank down into the familiar texture and spongy response of his own chair and sat with his arms resting near the control levers. Idly, he flicked the medallion of the government seal on the main switches.

Yes, the ship has histories and historians, he thought, some factual and some romantic, some accurate, others not. The legend had begun to grow among the stars that were pencilpoints on Little Joe's charts, and had multiplied as the stories were repeated.

We need a symbol, I think – men tend to think in personifications. It was a peculiarity of the race that it could conceive of such things as Platonism, or Absolute Truth, or even the vague restlessness of racial spirit that sent humanity journeying outward, spreading the starborne seed of man wherever the ships could reach. And, concomitant to this peculiarity was the parallel need of a symbol to embody the concept, as though, once created, the idea needed an easily comprehensive matrix to keep it clear and visible for the searching mind of man to hold firmly before him.

As he thought of it, he somehow doubted that, if all mankind's aspiration for the continued progress of human culture were to be reduced to metal, the result would in any way resemble Little Joe. But one could not be equally positive that if all the separate needs fulfilled in the construction of an interstellar vessel were somehow to be made visible, they would not resemble all the needs that were fulfilled in the growth of human civilization.

Men choose their symbols strangely; but they choose with precision, he thought.

Little Joe – a name born of whimsy on the part of the ship's first owner. Perhaps it was true that he'd built the ship with the winnings of one night at a craps table. But, most probably, this was but another fragment of apocrypha. The galaxy was large, and history is long. The yard that built Little Joe had never come forward to claim the distinction – the design had been a popular one, and who, now, could equate Little Joe, the symbol, with Hull Number K-357, or whatever code it had been. And this, too, was the proper basis for a legend.

He ran his hand over the grip of one of the control levers, feeling the coarseness under his fingertips where perspiration had etched the original molded finish of the composition. Many hands, he thought, and many masters at the ship's helm. An old and honorable ship. This, too, he recalled, came from a book read years before.

He looked out through a porthole at the field stretching away around the ship, lying empty today because it had been closed to traffic for the ceremony. Had it not been, he knew, the sky above the field would be bright with the flashes of incoming ships, and the tarmac would be dotted with spherical hulls.

His lower lip moved in a half-smile, and he discovered that he had actually patted the worn control lever with his comforting hand. The realization disconcerted him momentarily, until he considered that sentimentality was probably the strongest prerogative that a captain of Little Joe could command.

He reached out and patted the nearest pocket of the coat he had thrown over the mate's couch. The manual was there, as he had expected; "Techniques of Gravitomechanical Astronautics," fresh in its Government Printing Office wrapper, with the slim envelope containing his orders tucked inside the flyleaf.

He sighed, remembering that it was for this that he had come out to the field so early in the morning, for it was only here, on the bridge of his ship, that the decision could be made.

He recalled that, at first, he had considered voluntary retirement when the orders standardizing the gravitomechanical drive had been put through. Physiologically, he was still a young man, and the pension for which he was now eligible, together with his considerable savings, would never leave him in financial hardship. If he so chose, as his orders explicitly stated, he was free to retire without prejudice. If not, then he was to report to the designated training installation for instruction in the handling of the new drive.

A two-faced coin, he thought. The manual on the new drive had been included with the orders. He had gone through it carefully, wondering if his mind was still unrigid, whether the complicated new data could ever be learned to the degree of skill which his captain's conscience demanded. But, in the last analysis, it had been exactly the knowledge that so many men would leave space, feeling themselves too old or too inflexible to accept the change, that had persuaded him into remaining.

Perhaps the choice would not have been as complicated if he had not spoken to Martin, his Mate.

Martin had sat in the chair opposite him in his cabin, his aging face restrained from the show of any emotion, his voice deliberate.

"I don't see any but one way to look at it, John," Martin had said, keeping his lean body still in his chair. "It's the same way it is with Little Joe, here. The ship's something like a symbol, the way the people say. It's like everything that human civilization has clone or wants to do, poured into one shape and set off so people can see it, and feel what it means."

Howie had nodded. "I guess they're right about that."

"Well, all right, then. All you have to do is look at what they're doing."

"To the ship, you mean?"

"I mean putting Little Joe in the Smithsonian, where the ship'll always be there."

"For people to come and look at, and. for kids to worship?" Howe had asked, dryly.

"I don't mean that's what I want for myself," Martin had said quickly. "Being worshiped is fine for Little Joe – the ship's earned it. But the way I see it, if they're retiring the ship, then it's time for the crew, too."

"Look, John," Martin had said, leaning forward for the first time, "we're at the top of the ladder. There isn't an officer in the Merchant Service who doesn't want these berths. But if they retire the ship, where do we go? I took a look at the insides of one of those bubble ships last week; hell, it'd be two years before I could find my way around in one."

"I guess, in a way, Little Joe's what we've been working toward all our lives. We're tied up to it, John. It's like I said – I can't see any but one way to look at it, and that's to quit here, at the top of the ladder."

"Maybe you're right," Howe had said then.

And maybe you're right, he repeated now, looking absently at the control banks, subconsciously reading the instruments that told him Little

Joe! was taut, fully fueled, and ready to have the controls unsealed for the last trip home. He pondered the thought that, when one's life was so closely associated with a symbol, it was necessary to follow that symbol wherever it might go.

But that was something he might have accepted as valid earlier this morning, but with which he could not agree now.

It is not from sitting in museums that symbols rise, he thought. Even the eulogizers – the voices and faces on the telesolideo that told their innumerable stories about Little Joe, that recited "Old Ironsides," and reawakened the days when the pennies of schoolchildren had saved the Constitution from the salvage yard – even they, in their sentimental inaccuracies, had touched the source of the legend.

One of the first Interstellar freighters, the voice said again, and Scout among the farthest frontiers of the human race, Pride of the Merchant Service.

No, it was not from sitting in museums that symbols rose, for the greatness of Little Joe's legend rested in the fact that the ship had long and faithfully done the job which the designers intended. A ship was not a statue, nor an exhibit. There were silversided liners that poised gracefully in their berths, and snarling warcraft, but it was by the arcing freighters that the warp and woof of humanity were interlaced.

They're making a mistake, Howe realized. What is the value of a cargo ship in the Smithsonian? That had not been the function for which Little Joe was built – the ship belonged on the starways, plodding along on her intratomics, wrapped in the fragile cocoon of the A-F warp as she might be, and if she had to be retired, why, then, there were better memorials.

No, spaceships and spacemen belonged in space.

The thought struck him, and he tensed to the thrill of it. Andromeda! The message, twenty years old now, countless centuries older as it made its tenuous way out of the nebula and crossed the dark barrier toward the First Galaxy, but a message nevertheless.

And the ship could make it; make it on inertia alone, the warp gone as the engines burned away the last fuel, but make it nevertheless, and if whatever Andromedans there were could send a message at the patient speed of light, why, then, the galaxy could respond in its own way – with Little Joe, a living symbol still.

But what is a symbol? The thought came, and he relaxed his hands. He sat in his chair, and remembered his thoughts of this morning. We need a

symbol, I think – men tend to think in personifications.

That was part of it. But what else had he thought, here on his bridge?

It was a peculiarity of the race, he remembered, that it could conceive of and live by abstract concepts, but it was a concomitant trait that there was a parallel need for a symbol to embody the concept, a matrix to keep it clear and visible.

And so, the thought came to him, it is not Little Joe that is important, for, as long as the concepts remain, there will be other symbols, each equally valid. It is the concepts themselves that must be maintained, and this is the important task.

He slapped his hand once more, affectionately, on the control handle.

"You'll forgive me for calling you a brae bonny lass again, Little Joe, and for not giving you a run to Andromeda," he said aloud, and picked up his coat.

He reached into the pocket and pulled out his orders and the manual. He leafed through the closely printed pages once again, paused to look at the complex diagrams.

There was work there – hard work, and much to learn. But the GM drive and the bubble ships were out among the stars, edging the line where outer dark began, and before he was through he'd be out there with them, a skipper again, with his own command.

And the not outrageous thought came to him that perhaps the Andromedans might soon have an answer to their message – a surer, swifter answer than Little Joe, unmanned, and drifting at random, could ever have brought.

Moving quietly through the narrow companionways, he left the ship, and walked back across the tarmac.

The same guard who had let him in at dawn was still at the gate. As he walked toward him, Howe thought: Anderson? A stoker on the Maybank, the sentry had said. He looked closely at the young features as he walked toward the man. It would have to be an older brother. He superimposed lined tautness and a deep tan on the guard's boyishness, and the eyecreases acquired from hours of peering at flowmeters.

A face emerged from the montage, and with it a voice, and individuality. He smiled inwardly.

The guard pulled the gate open. "You'll be coming back later for the ceremony, won't you, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly. I couldn't very well miss that, could I?" He smiled.

The guard brightened in response. "No – I guess you couldn't, sir."

"What's your first name, Anderson?" Howe asked.

"Peter, sir."

Howe shook hands with the guard. "Glad to know you, Pete. Tell Eddie I said hello. Does he still know all the verses to 'The Song of the Wandering Spaceman'?"

"Sings them at the top of his lungs every Saturday night, sir," the guard said. He was trying to grin in a comradely fashion, but Howe felt a flush prickling the back of his neck at the awe in his eyes.

"Well, thank you for letting me in," he said with a vague feeling of embarrassment. "Good-by."

"Good-by, sir. Good luck!"

Howe walked back to his car, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly at the enthusiasm of that last benediction.

He climbed into his car, turned it around, and began to roll away. Strange, the way the guard had, treated him – and the stoker, Anderson; had he really been so proud of his service aboard the Maybank that, out of all the captains the man must have served under, it had been Howe that he chose to tell his kid brother about?

What makes a symbol? he wondered.

He shook his head in puzzlement. Why? He'd never done anything more than the things a captain's job demanded – no heroic missions, no spectacular runs.

He shifted his eyes to the rear-view screen, and felt a momentary shock.

The guard was a Marine, and Howe was a Merchant Service officer, but for some reason the man had stepped out into the road, looking after Howe's car, and had snapped into rigid salute. He was still holding it as the car dipped over the crest of a hill and Howe could no longer see him.

Living Alone in the Jungle

A man was brought up from Kansas City, whom I would not know to look at. But a certain person pointed him out to me by chance. The Kansas City man was coming out of the pool hall on Paulina that is right on the north edge of Chicago. This other person of my acquaintance gave me the nod, saying: "There is a man I used to work with in Kansas City. What do you suppose he is doing up here around Juneway Terrace, Tierney?"

We were in the submarine sandwich place, eating with our food in front of our faces and looking out through the window. I saw that the Kansas City man was in the habit of touching the back of his neck. He was wearing a blue suit and gray hat. "I don't know," I said, and left the submarine sandwich place by myself.

I saw that the man was walking north, toward the red and yellow brick buildings that they call the Juneway Jungle. He half-turned once, and I stepped into the entrance of the shot- and-beer place across from the school playground, but I had no other trouble following him, and he didn't see me.

I followed him to my street and saw he was going in my building. I went around back in the alley and came up the back steps. Mrs. Macaluso was putting out her garbage into the can on her back landing, and her eyes got big. "Why, hello, Tierney!" she said, "I thought I was hearing you home upstairs," so I put my finger to her lip and went "Shh!" real gentle. So she gave me a nod and went inside behind her closed door, and I went up to the back landing of my place.

When I went in my back door, I could hear there was something going on in the front room. When I looked in around the corner from the dining room, I could see the Kansas City man was holding my brother with one arm circled around his neck and the hand over my brother's mouth, and was also jamming his legs in between my brother's to keep him from getting his weight set. The Kansas City man's other hand had a thing in it with a long thin blade made by grinding on the end of a long electrician's screwdriver. He was putting it in my brother's body low down all along the back, and twisting around in there until he finally found a artery. Then he held my brother for a while until he was beginning to tire and stumble from the weight of him, and he laid him down. On the TV was the first inning of the Chicago Cubs ball game. My brother would get interested in things and not be distracted away from them, especially lately. It was like

there were fewer and fewer switches working along the tracks in his mind, and you could start him on a ball game and he would not so much as swat a mosquito until the last man was out.

The Kansas City man wiped a hand across the back of his mouth and straightened his clothes. He left the knife in my brother's body and got out a Cricket lighter, which he turned up high and used to set fire to the fingerprints on the yellow plastic handle, which made a stink and a lot of soot. Then he went back out through the front door which he had opened I guess with a piece of plastic, which you can do.

This would be a different world if there was no plastic.

The Kansas City man got very confident as soon as he thought he was off my turf. He was no longer touching the back of his neck or taking off his gray hat to wipe his forehead. I followed him toward Roland Armagia's place down below Howard Street, in Rogers Park. His house, not the store off Clark Street that looks like a household electrical fixtures place.

There is a turn you take there, walking, when there is almost no chance you are not going to Roland Armagia's brick bungalow with the Cyclone fencing. So once he took that turn I stepped out from behind some hedging and pulled him in there with me. I did not ask him anything, because going to where he was going was all the answers a reasonable person could expect, so I did him in right away.

I got my mailbox card back from his pocket, and wrote HA HA on his forehead with a ballpoint pen. I put him around to Roland Armagia's alley garage with the \$39.95 repaint blue Ford in it that has heavy duty rear springs and a lot of false panels over odd-shaped little cubbyholes. A man saw me, but I had on the Kansas City man's gray hat shading my face, and all the Rogers Park cops know I never wear a hat. So I just shook my finger at the man, and he ducked back fast inside his garage. Still and all, I walked back out of the alley in the opposite direction, and then went over for a while to the saloon on Western Avenue where Tommy Darling will say you were there all afternoon. They will believe him because all the Foster Avenue station cops eat and do other things there, and he also knows what to do with a gray hat you hand to him and say you found it outside his door.

I had three Hamms Beer and watched the middle of the ball game, then went home and got my brother up. "How did I do?" he said, mopping his face from the heat you get when you have the results of the process.

"How did you do? You did fine, you big cabbage, and the Cubs are

ahead only because the Cincinnati third baseman was watching some girl in the stands, and let a ground ball go through his legs while you were asleep. Stop rolling down your sleeve, Asshole," I said, putting the hypodermic and the empty medicine jar away in the wall. "Your shirt is burned and has holes in it; you have to get out a new one."

He took it off and stood there fingering the holes. "How come I don't bleed, Tierney?" he said.

What can you explain to people without switches? "You bleed." I said. "You bled like a spring pig that time in East St. Louis when they threw the pipe thing full of roofing nails that took the whole front out of my store besides tearing up the walls. I had to go out in the alley and put my lunch in the weeds." I got stores now built like currency exchanges; you would have to get bazookas. "What they did to you this time, you bleed inside and it collects. You have to go to the john?"

"Huh? Yeah... yeah, come to think of it. But I already went that way this morning, you know?"

"The other thing you're gonna do, you're gonna get hungry as hell. Go in the john and then put on another shirt, and I'll call the pizza meanwhile."

"All right." My brother stopped and looked at me. "How come you always know what to do and I can't even remember what I did? Ain't we the same person?"

I went over and kissed him on the cheek before I had to look in his eyes any longer. "It's OK, Tierney," I said. "It's how it has to be. You're happy, ain't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. Yeah. Listen, can we have sausage and anchovies?"

"Sure," I said. "And I'll get it from Laurie's. They'll bring it in one of those little Jeeps with the heater in the back," and he grinned and went off to do what I'd told him.

I don't know. When Sanford first gives him to me and I give Sanford back his markers, I was told the process undoes whatever happens to your brain as well as your body while your metabolism is not working. But I have read in many places that brain cells do funny things if they don't get a lot of attention from the body, and I think Tierney gets a little dumber each time, and I don't mean me.

I called Laurie's, and then I called the University medical center and asked for Doctor Sanford in Research, who got on it right away when he heard who it was calling.

"I need another three cc's of Processor, Doc," I said. "You want the two thousand made out to the Equipment Fund again?"

That would be fine with him; they had seen this new centrifuge or something in a catalog, and it had counter-rotatable eccentric cam capability in stainless steel with Teflon inserts and a Vinyl landau top or something; they always have something they need it for right away.

Lower Than Angels

THIS WAS almost the end: Fred Imbry, standing tiredly at the jungle's edge, released the anchoring field. Streaming rain immediately began coming down on the parked sub-ship on the beach. The circle of sand formerly included in the field now began to splotch, and the sea dashed a wave against the landing jacks. The frothing water ran up the beach and curled around Imbry's ankles. In a moment, the sand was as wet as though nothing had ever held that bit of seashore free.

The wind was still at storm force. Under the boiling gray sky, the craft shivered from half-buried landing jacks to needlenosed prow. Soggy fronds plastered themselves against the hull with sharp, liquid, slaps.

Imbry trudged across the sand, slopping through the water, wiping rain out of his face. He opened the sub-ship's airlock hatch, and stopped, turning for one look back into the jungle.

His exhausted eyes were sunk deep into his face. He peered woodenly into the jungle's surging undergrowth. But there was no sign of anyone's having followed him; they'd let him go. Turning back, he hoisted himself aboard the ship and shut the hatch behind him. He opened the inside hatch and went through, leaving wet, sandy footprints across the deck.

He lay down in his piloting couch and began methodically checking off the board. When it showed green all around, he energized his starting engines, waited a bit, and moved his power switch to Atmospheric.

The earsplitting shriek of the jet throats beat back the crash of the sea and the keening of the wind. The jungle trees jerked away from the explosion of billowing air, and even the sea recoiled. The ship danced, off the ground, and the landing jacks thumped up into their recesses. The sand poured out a shroud of towering steam.

The throttles advanced, and Imbry ascended into Heaven on a pillar of fire.

Chapter I

Almost at the beginning, a week earlier, Fred Imbry had been sitting in the Sainte Marie's briefing room for the first time in his life, having been aboard the mother ship a little less than two weeks. He sat there staring up at Lindenhoff, whose reputation had long ago made him one of Imbry's heroes, and hated the carefully schooled way the Assignment Officer could create the impression of a judgment and capacity he didn't have.

Around Imbry, the other contact crewmen were listening carefully, taking notes on their thigh pads as Lindenhoff's pointer rapped the schematic diagram of the solar system they'd just moved into. Part of Imbry's hatred was directed at them, too. Incompetents and cowards though most of them were, they still knew Lindenhoff for what he was. They'd all served under him for a long time. They'd all been exposed to his dramatics. They joked about them. But now they were sitting and listening for all the world as if Lindenhoff was what he pretended to be – the fearless, resourceful leader in command of the vast, idealistic enterprise that was embodied in the Sainte Marie. But then, the mother ship, too, and the corporation that owned her, were just as rotten at the core.

Lindenhoff was a bear of a man. He was dressed in irongray coveralls; squat, thick, powerful-looking, he moved back and forth on the raised platform under the schematic. With the harsh overhead lighting, his close-cropped skull looked almost bald; naked and strong, a turret set on the short, seamed pillar of his neck. A thick white scar began over his right eye, crushed down through the thick jut of his brow ridge, the mashed arch of his blunt nose, and ended on the staved-in cheekbone under his left eye. Except for the scar, his face was burned brown and leathery, and even his lips were only a different shade of brown. The bright gold color of his eyebrows and the yellow straw of his lashes came close to glowing in contrast.

His voice was pitched deep. He talked in short, rumbled sentences. His thick arm jerked sharply each time he moved the pointer.

"Coogan, you're going into IV. You've studied the aerial surveys. No animal life. No vegetation. All naked rock where it isn't water. Take

Petrick with you and do a mineralogical survey. You've got a week. If you hit anything promising, I'll extend your schedule. Don't go drawing any weapons. No more'n it takes to keep you happy, anyhow. Jusek's going to need 'em on VII."

Imbry's mouth twitched in disgust. The lighting. The platform on which Lindenhoff was shambling back and forth, never stumbling even when he stepped back without looking behind him. The dimensions of that platform must be clearly imprinted in his mind. Every step was planned, every gesture practiced. The sunburn, laid down by a battery of lamps. The careful tailoring of the coveralls to make that ursine body look taller.

Coogan and Petrick. The coward and the secret drunkard. Petrick had deft a partner to die on a plague world. Coogan had shot his way out of a screaming herd of reptiles on his third contact mission – and had never gone completely unarmed, anywhere, in the ten years since.

The rest of them were no better. Ogin had certified a planet worthless. A year later, a small scavenger company had found a fortune in wolfram not six miles away from his old campsite. Lindenhoff hadn't seen fit to fire him. Kenton, the foulminded pathological liar. Maguire, who hated everything that walked or flew or crept, who ripped without pity at every world he contacted, and whose round face, with its boyish smile, was always broadcast along with a blushingly modest interview whenever the Sainte Marie's latest job of opening up a new solar system was covered by the news programs.

Most of those programs, Imbry'd found out in the short time he'd been aboard, were bought and paid for by the Sainte Marie Development Corporation's public relations branch.

His thin hands curled up into tight knots.

The mother ships and the men who worked out of them were the legends of this generation – with the Sainte Marie foremost among them. Constantly working outward, putting system after system inside the known universe, they were the bright hungry wave of mankind reaching out to gather in the stars. The men were the towering figures marching into the wilderness – the men who die unprotestingly in the thousand traps laid by the unknown darkness beyond the Edge; the men who beat their way through the jungles of the night, leaving broad roads behind them for civilization to follow.

He had come aboard this ship like a man fulfilling a dream – and found Coogan sitting in the crew lounge.

"Imbry, huh? Pull up a chair. My name's Coogan." He was whipcord

lean; a wiry, broadmouthed man with a tough, easy grin and live brown eyes. "TSN man?"

Imbry'd shaken his hand before he sat down. It felt a little unreal, actually meeting a man he'd heard so much about, and having him act as friendly as this.

"That's right," Imbry said, trying to sound as casual as he could under the circumstances. Except for Lindenhoff and possibly Maguire, Coogan was the man he most admired. "My enlistment finally ran out last week. I was a rescue specialist."

Coogan nodded. "We get some good boys that way." He grinned and chuckled. "So Old Smiley slipped you a trial contract and here you are, huh?"

"Old Smiley?"

"Personnel manager. Glad hand, looks sincere, got distinguished white hair."

"Oh. Mr. Redstone."

Coogan grinned. "Sure. Mr. Redstone. Well – think you'll like it here?"

Imbry nodded. "It looks like it," he said carefully. He realized he had to keep his enthusiasm ruthlessly under control, or else appear to be completely callow and juvenile. Even before he'd known what he'd do after he got out, he'd been counting the days until his TSN enlistment expired. Having the Corporation offer him a contract on the day of his discharge had been a tremendous unexpected bonus. If he'd been sixteen instead of twenty-six, he would have said it was the greatest thing that could have happened to him. Being twenty-six, he said, "I figure it's a good deal."

Coogan winked at him. "You're not just kiddin' friend. We're on our way out to a system that looks pretty promising. Old Sainte Marie's in a position to declare another dividend if it pays off." He rubbed this thumb and forefinger together. "And how I do enjoy those dividends! Do a good job, lad. Do a bang-up job. Baby needs new shoes."

"I don't follow you."

"Hell, Buddy, I got half of my pay sunk into company stock. So do the rest of these guys. Couple years more, and I can get off this goddam barge and find me a steady woman, settle down, and just cash checks every quarter for the rest of my life. And laugh like a sonavabitch every time I heard about you birds goin' out to earn me some more."

Imbry hadn't known what to make of it, at first. He'd mumbled an

answer of some kind. But, listening to the other men talking – Petrick, with the alcohol puffing out on his breath; Kenton, making grandiose plans; Maguire, sneering coldly; Jusek, singlemindedly sharpening his bush knife – he'd gradually realized Coogan wasn't an exception in this crew of depraved, vicious fakes. Listening to them talk about the Corporation itself, he'd realized, too, that the "pioneers of civilization" line was something reserved for the bought- and paid-for write-ups only. He wasn't dewy-eyed. He didn't expect the Corporation to be in business for its health. But neither had he expected it to be totally cynical and grasping, completely indifferent to whether anyone ever settled the areas it skimmed of their first fruits.

He learned, in a shatteringly short time, just what the contact crew men thought of each other, of the Corporation, and of humanity. They carped at, gossiped about, and despised each other. They took the Corporation's stock as part of their pay, and exploited all the more ruthlessly for it. They jockeyed for favored assignments, brought back as "souvenirs" anything valuable and sufficiently portable on the worlds they visited, and cordially hated the crews of all the rival mother ships. They weren't pioneers – they were looters, squabbling among themselves for the biggest share, and they made Imbry's stomach turn.

They were even worse than most of the TSN officers and men he'd known.

"Imbry."

He looked up. Lindenhoff was standing, arms akimbo, under the schematic at the head of the briefing room.

"Yes?" Imbry answered tightly.

"You take II. It's a rainforest world. Humanoid inhabited."

"I've studied the surveys."

Lindenhoff's heavy mouth twitched. "I hope so. You're going alone. There's nothing the natives can do to you that you won't be able to handle. Conversely, there's nothing much of any value on the planet. You'll contact the natives and try to get them started on some kind of civilization. You'll explain what the Terran Union is, and the advantages of trade. They ought to be able to grow some luxury agricultural products. See how they'd respond toward developing a technology. If Coogan turns up with some industrial ores on IV, they'd make a good market, in time. That's about the general idea. Nobody expects you to accomplish much – just push 'em in the right direction. Take two weeks. All straight?"

"Yes." Imbry felt his jaws tightening. Something for nothing again. First the Corporation developed a market, then it sold it the ores it found on a neighboring world.

No, he wasn't angry about having been given an assignment that couldn't go wrong and that wouldn't matter much if it did. He was quite happy about it, because he intended to do as little for the Corporation as he could.

"All right, that's about it, boys," Lindenhoff finished up. He stepped off the platform and the lights above the schematic went out. "You might as well draw your equipment and get started. The quicker it all gets done, the quicker we'll get paid."

Coogan slapped him on the back as they walked out on the flight deck. "Remember what I said," he chuckled. "if there's any ambition in the gooks at all, shove it hard. Me, I'm going to be looking mighty hard for something to sell 'em."

"Yeah, sure!" Imbry snapped.

Coogan looked at him wide-eyed. "What's eating you, boy?"

Imbry took a deep breath. "You're eating me, Coogan. You and the rest of the set-up." He stopped and glared tensely at Coogan. "I signed a contract. I'll do what I'm obligated to. But I'm getting off this ship when I come back, and if I ever hear about you birds again, I'll spit on the sidewalk when I do."

Coogan reddened. He took a step forward, then caught himself and dropped his hands. He shook his head. "Imbry, I've been watching you go sour for the last week. All right, that's the breaks. Old Smiley made a mistake. It's not the first time – and you could have fooled me, too, at first. What's your gripe?"

"What d'you think it is? How about Lindenhoff's giving you Petrick for a partner?"

Coogan shook his head again, perplexed. "I don't follow you. He's a geologist, isn't he?"

Imbry stared at him in astonishment. "You don't follow me?" Coogan was the one who'd told him about Petrick's drinking. He remembered the patronizing lift to Coogan's lips as he looked across the lounge at the white-faced, muddye-eyed man walking unsteadily through the room.

"Let's move along," Lindenhoff said from behind them.

Imbry half-turned. He looked down at the Assignment Officer in

surprise. He hadn't heard the man coming. Neither had Coogan. Coogan nodded quickly.

"Just going, Lindy." Throwing another teamed glance at Imbry, he trotted across the deck toward his sub-ship, where Petrick was standing and waiting.

"Go on, son," Lindenhoff said. "You're holding up the show."

Imbry felt the knotted tension straining at his throat. He snatched up his pack.

"All right," he said harshly. He strode over to his ship, skirting out of the way of the little trucks that were humming back and forth around the ships, carrying supplies and maintenance crewmen. The flight deck echoed back to the clangs of slammed access hatches, the crash of a dropped wrench, and the soft whir of truck motors. Maintenance men were running back and forth, completing final checks, and armorers struggled with the heavy belts of ammunition being loaded into the guns on Jusek's ship. In the harsh glare of work lights, Imbry climbed up through his hatch, slammed it shut, and got up into his control compartment.

The ship was a slightly converted model of the standard TSN carrier scout.

He fingered the controls distastefully. Grimacing, he jacked in his communication leads and contacted the tower for a check. Then he set up his flight plan in the ballistic computer, interlocked his AutoNav, and sat back, waiting.

Lindenhoff and his fearsome scar. Souvenir of danger on a frontier world? Badge of courage? Symbol of intrepidity?

Actually, he'd gotten it when a piece of scaffolding fell on him during a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, well before he ever came aboard the *Sainte Marie*.

The flight deck cleared. Imbry set his ship's circulators. The flight deck alarm blasted into life.

The deck canopy slid aside, and the flight deck's air billowed out into space. Imbry energized his main drive.

"Imbry clear for launch."

"Check, Imbry. Launch in ten."

He counted down, braced back against his couch. The catapult rammed him up off the deck, and he fired his engines. He rose high above the

Sainte Marie, hovering, and then the ship nosed down and he trailed a wake of fire across the spangled night, in toward the foreign sun.

Chapter II

Almost from pole to pole, World II was the deep, lush color of rainforest vegetation. Only at the higher latitudes was it interspersed with the surging brown-green of prairie grass and bush country, tapering into something like a temperate ecology at the very "top" and "bottom" of the planet. Where there was no land, there was the deeper, bluer, green of the sea. And on the sea, again, the green of islands.

Imbry balanced his ship on end, drifting slowly down. He wanted a good look and a long look.

His training in the TSN had fitted him admirably for this job. Admirably enough so that he depended more on his own observation than he did on the aerial survey results, which had been fed raw into a computer and emerged as a digested judgment on the planet's ecology and population, and the probable state and nature of its culture. The TSN applied this judgment from a military standpoint. The Corporation applied it to contact work. Imbry's experience had never known it to go far wrong. But he distrusted things mechanical, and so he hung in the sky for an hour or more, checking off promising-looking sites as they passed under him – and giving his bitterness and disillusion time to evaporate.

Down there was a race that had never heard of any people but itself; a race to which large portions of even its own planet must be unknown and enigmatic. A fairly happy race, probably. And if the Corporation found no significance in that, Imbry did. He was going to be their first touch with the incredible vastness in which they floated, and whatever he could do to smooth the shock and make their future easier, he meant to do, to the best of his ability. And if the Corporation had no feelings, he did. If there was no idealism aboard the Sainte Marie, there was some in him.

Finally, he picked an area on the eastern shore of the principal continent, and drifted down toward it, slipping in over the swelling expanse of an island-speckled ocean. Following the curve of a chain of atolls extending almost completely across the sea, he lost altitude steadily, finding it possible, now, with some of the tension draining out of him, to enjoy the almost effortless drift through the quiet sky, and the quick responsiveness of his ship. It wasn't quite as he'd dreamed it, but it was

good. The mother ship was far away, and here on this world he was alone, coming down just above the tops of the breakers, now, settling gently on a broad and gleaming beach.

The anchoring field switched on, and bored down until it found bedrock. The sand around the ship pressed down in a shallow depression. Imbry turned away from the beach and began to walk into the jungle, his detectors and pressor fields tingling out to all sides of him. He walked slowly in the direction of a village, wearing his suit with its built-in equipment, with his helmet slung back between his shoulder blades.

The jungle was typical rainforest. There were trees which met the climatic conditions, and therefore much resembled ordinary palms. The same was true of the thick undergrowth, and, from the sound of them, of the avian fauna. The chatter in the trees was not quite as harsh as the Terrestrial version, nor as shrill. From the little he'd seen, that seemed typical – a slightly more leisurely, slightly gentler world than the Pacific belt of Earth. He walked slowly, as much from quiet enjoyment as from caution. Overhead, the sky was a warm blue, with soft clouds hanging over the atolls at the horizon. The jungle ran with bright color and deep, cool green. Imbry's face lost its drawn-up tension, and his walk became relaxed.

He found a trail in a very short time, and began following it, trusting to his detectors and not looking around except in simple curiosity. And quite soon after that, his detector field pinged, and the pressor pushed back against the right side of his chest. He turned it down, stopped, and looked in that direction. The field was set for sentient life only, and he knew he was about to meet his first native. He switched on his linguistic computer and waited.

The native, when he stepped out on the trail, was almost humanoid enough to pass for a Terrestrial. His ears were set a bit differently, and his musculature was not quite the same. It was also impossible to estimate his age, for none of the usual Terrestrial clues were applicable. But those were the only differences Imbry could see. His skin was dark enough so there was no mistaking him for a Caucasian – if you applied human standards – but a great deal of that might be simple suntan. His hair was light brown, grew out of his scalp in an ordinary fashion, and had been cut. He was wearing a short, skirt-like garment, with a perfectly ordinary navel showing above it in a flat stomach. The pattern of his wraparound was of the blocky type to which woven cloth is limited, and it was bright, in imitation of the forms and colors available in the jungle.

He looked at Imbry silently, out of intelligent black eyes, with a

tentative smile on his mouth. He was carrying nothing in his open hands, and he seemed neither upset nor timid.

Imbry had to wait until he spoke first. The computer had to have something to work with. Meanwhile, he smiled back. His TSN training had prepared him for situations exactly like this. In exercises, he'd duplicated this situation a dozen times, usually with ET's much more fearsome and much less human. So he merely smiled back, and there was no tension or misgiving in the atmosphere at all. There was only an odd, childlike shyness which, once broken, could only lead to an invitation to come over to the other fellow's house.

The native's smile broadened, and he raised one hand in greeting, breaking into soft, liquid speech that seemed to run on and on without stopping, for many syllables at a time.

The native finished, and Imbry had to wait for his translator to make up its mind. Finally, it whispered in his ear.

"This is necessarily a rough computation. The communication is probably: 'Hello. Are you a god?' (That's an approximation. He means something between 'ancestor' and 'deity'.) 'I'm very glad to meet you.'"

Imbry shook his head at the native, hoping this culture didn't take that to mean "yes." "No," he said to the computer, "I'm an explorer. And I'm glad to meet you." He continued to smile.

The computer hummed softly. "'Explorer, is inapplicable as yet,'" it told Imbry. It didn't have the vocabulary built up.

The native was looking curiously at the little box of the computer sitting on Imbry's shoulder. His jungle-trained ears were sharp, and he could obviously hear at least the sibilants as it whispered. His curiosity was friendly and intelligent; he seemed intrigued.

"All right, try: 'I'm like you. Hello'" Imbry told the computer.

The translator spoke to the native. He looked at Imbry in gentle unbelief, and answered.

This time, it was easier. The translator sank its teeth into this new material, and after a much shorter lag, with out qualification, gave Imbry the native's communication, in its usual colloquial English, somewhat flavored:

"Obviously, you're not like me very much. But, we'll straighten that out later. Will you stay in my village for a while?"

Imbry nodded, to register the significance of the gesture. "I'd be glad to.

My name's Imbry. What's yours?"

"Good. I'm Tylus. Will you walk with me? And who's the little ancestor on your shoulder?"

Imbry walked forward, and the native waited until they were a few feet apart and then began leading the way down the trail.

"That's not an ancestor," Imbry tried to explain. "It's a machine that changes your speech into mine and mine into yours." But the translator broke down completely at that. The best it could offer to do was to tell Tylus that it was a lever that talked. And "your speech" and "my speech" were concepts Tylus simply did not have.

In all conscience, Imbry had to cancel that, so he contented himself with saying it was not an ancestor. Tylus immediately asked which of Imbry's respected ancestors it would be if it were an ancestor, and it was obvious that the native regarded Imbry as being, in many respects, a charming liar. But it was also plain that charming liars were accorded due respect in Tylus's culture, so the two were fairly well acquainted by the time they reached the outskirts of the village, and there was no longer any lag in translation at all.

The village was built to suit the environment. The roofs and walls of the light, one-room houses were made of woven frond mats tied down to a boxy frame. Every house had a porch for socializing with passersby, and a cookfire out front. Most of the houses faced in on a circular village square, with a big, communal cooking pit for special events, and the entire village was set in under the trees just a little away from the shoreline. There were several canoes on the sand above high water, and at some time this culture had developed the outrigger.

There was a large amount of shouting back and forth going on among the villagers, and a good-sized crowd had collected at the point where the trail opened out into the village clearing. But Tylus urged Imbry forward, passing proudly through the crowd, and Imbry went with him, feeling somewhat awkward about it, but not wanting to leave Tylus marching on alone. The villagers moved aside to let him through, smiling, some of them grinning at Tylus's straight back and proudly carried head, none of them, obviously, wanting to deprive their compatriot of his moment.

Tylus stopped when he and Imbry reached the big central cooking pit, turned around, and struck a pose with one arm around Imbry's shoulders.

"Hey! Look! I've brought a big visitor!" Tylus shouted, grinning with pleasure.

The villagers let out a whoop of feigned surprise, laughing and shouting congratulations to Tylus, and cordial welcomes to Imbry.

"He says he's not a god!" Tylus climaxed, giving Imbry a broad, sidelong look of grinning appreciation for his ability to be ridiculous. "He came out of a big lhoni egg on the beach, and he's got a father-ghost who sits on his shoulder in a little black pot and gives him advice!"

"Oh, that's ingenious!" someone in the crowd commented in admiration.

"Look how fair he is!" one of the women exclaimed.

"Look how much handsomer than us he is!"

"Look how richly he's dressed! Look at the jewels shining in his silver belt!"

Imbry's translator raced to give him representative crowd comments, and he grinned back at the crowd. His rescue training had always presupposed grim, hostile or at best noncommittal ET's that would have to be persuaded into helping him locate the crashed personnel of the stricken ship. Now, the first time he'd put it to actual use, he found reality giving theory a bland smile, and he sighed and relaxed completely. Once he'd disabused this village of its godnotions in connection with him, he'd be able to not only work but be friendly with these people. Not that they weren't already cordial.

He looked around at the crowd, both to observe it and to give everybody a look at his smile.

The crowd was composed, in nearly equal parts, of men and women very much like Tylus, with no significant variation except for age and sex characteristics that ranged from the appreciable to the only anthropologically interesting. In lesser part, there were children, most of them a little timid, some of them awestruck, all of them naked.

An older man, wearing a necklace of carved wood in addition to his wraparound, came forward through the crowd. Imbry had to guess at his age, but he thought he had it fairly accurately. The native had white hair, for one thing, and a slight thickness to his waist. For another, he was rather obviously the village head man, and that indicated age, and the experience it brought with it.

The head man raised his arm in greeting, and Imbry replied.

"I am Iano. Will you stay with us in our village?"

Imbry nodded. "My name's Imbry. I'd like to stay here for a while."

Iano broke into a smile. "Fine! We're all very glad to meet you. I hope your journey can be interrupted for a long time." He smiled. "Well, if you say you're not a god, who do you say you are?" There was a ripple of chuckling through the crowd.

"I'm a man," Imbry answered. The translator had meanwhile worked out the proper wording for what he wanted to say next. "I'm an explorer from another country." The local word, of course, was not quite "explorer" – it was "traveler-from-other-places-for-the-enjoyment-of-it-and-to-see-what-I-can-find."

Iano chuckled. Then gravely, he asked: "Do you always travel in an lhoni egg, Imbry-who-says-he-is-Imbry?"

Imbry chuckled back in appreciation of Iano's shrewdness. He was enjoying this, even if it was becoming more and more difficult to approach the truth.

"That's no lhoni egg," he deprecated with a broad gesture to match. "That's only my... " And here the translator had to give up and render the word as "canoe."

Iano nodded with a gravity so grave it was obviously no gravity at all. Tylus, standing to one side, gave Imbry a look of total admiration at this effort which overmatched all his others.

"Ah. Your canoe. And how does one balance a canoe shaped like an lhoni egg?"

Imbry realized what the translator had had to do. He'd been afraid of as much. He searched for the best answer, and the best answer seemed to be to tell the truth and stick to it. These people were intelligent. If he presented them with a consistent story, and backed it up with as much proof as he could muster, they'd eventually see that nothing so scrupulously self-consistent could possibly be anything but the truth.

"Well," he said slowly, wondering what the effect would be at first, "it's a canoe that doesn't sail on water. It sails in the sky."

There was a chorus of admiration through the crowd. As much of it seemed to be meant for Iano as for Imbry. They appeared to think Imbry had made a damaging admission in this contest.

Iano smiled. "Is your country in the sky?"

Imbry struggled for some way of making it understandable. "Yes and no," he said carefully. "It's necessary to travel through the sky to get to my country, but when you get there you're in a place that's very much like here, in some ways."

Iano smiled again. "Well, of course. How else would you be happy if there weren't places like this to live, in the sky?"

He turned toward the other villagers. "He said he wasn't a god," he declared quietly, his eyes twinkling.

There was a burst of chuckling, and now all the admiring glances were for Iano.

The head man turned back to Imbry. "Will you stay in my house for a while? We will produce a feast later in the day."

Imbry nodded gravely. "I'd be honored." The villagers were smiling at him gently as they drifted away, and Imbry got the feeling that they were being polite and telling him that his discomfiture didn't really matter.

"Don't be sad," Tylus whispered. "Iano's a remarkably shrewd man. He could make anybody admit the truth. I'm quite sure that when he dies, he'll be some kind of god himself."

Then he waved a hand in temporary farewell and moved away, leaving Imbry alone with the gravely smiling Iano.

Chapter III

Imbry sat on the porch with Iano. Both of them looked out over the village square, sitting side by side. It seemed to be the expected posture for conversation between a god and someone who was himself a likely candidate for a similar position, and it certainly made for ease of quiet contemplation before each new sentence was brought out into words.

Imbry was still wearing his suit. Iano had politely suggested that he might be warm in it, but Imbry had explained.

"It cools me. That's only one of the things it does. For one thing, if I took it off I wouldn't be able to talk to you. In my country we have different words."

Iano had thought about it for a moment. Then he said: "Your wraparound must have powerful ancestors living in it." He thought a moment more. "Am I right in supposing that this is a new attribute you're trying out, and it hasn't grown up enough to go about without advice?"

Imbry'd been glad of several minutes in which to think. Then he'd tried to explain.

"No," he said, "the suit (perforce, the word was

'wraparound-for-the-whole-body') "was made – was built – by other men in my country. It was built to protect me, and to make me able to travel anywhere without being in any danger." But that was only just as much as repeating Iano's theory back to him in different form, and he realized it after Iano's polite silence had extended too long to be anything but an answer in itself.

He tried to explain the concept "machine."

"I'll teach you a new word for a new thing," he said.

Iano nodded attentively.

Imbry switched off the translator, making sure Iano saw the motion and understood the result. Then he repeated "machine" several times, and, once Iano had accustomed himself to Imbry's new voice, which up to now he'd only heard as an indistinct background murmur to the translator's speaker, the head man picked it up quickly.

"Mahschin," he said at last, and Imbry switched his translator back on. "Go on, Imbry."

"A machine is a number of levers, working together. It is built by perfectly ordinary artisans – not gods, Iano, but men like yourself and myself – who have a good deal of knowledge and skill. With one lever, you can raise a tree trunk. With many levers, shaped into paddles, men can push the tree trunk through the water, after they have shaped it into a canoe.

"So a machine is like the many levers that move the canoe. But usually it doesn't need men to push it. It goes on by itself, because it – "

Here he had to stop for a minute. These people had no concept of storing energy and then releasing it to provide motive power. Iano waited, patient and polite.

"It has a little bit of fire in it," Imbry was forced to say lamely. "Fire can be put in a box – in something like two pots fastened tightly on top of each other – so that it can't get out. But it wants to get out – it pushes against the inside of the two pots – so if you make a hole in the pots and put a lever in the way, the fire rushing out pushes the lever."

He looked at Iano, but couldn't make out whether he was being believed or not. Half the time, he had no idea what kind of almost-but-sadly-not-quite concepts the translator might be substituting for the things he was saying.

"A machine can be built to do almost anything that would otherwise require a lot of men. For instance, I could have brought another man with

me who was skilled at learning words that weren't his. Then I wouldn't need the little black pot, which is a machine that learns words that aren't the same as mine. But the machine does it faster, and in some ways, better."

He stopped, hoping Iano had understood at least part of it.

After a time, Iano nodded gravely. "That's very ingenious. It saves your ancestors the inconvenience of coming with you and fatiguing themselves. I had no idea such a thing could be done. But of course, in your country there are different kinds of fires than we have here."

Which was a perfectly sound description, Imbry had to admit, granting Iano's viewpoint.

So now they'd been sitting quietly for a number of minutes, and Imbry had begun to realize that he might have to work for a long time before he extricated himself from this embarrassment. Finally he said, "Well, if you think I'm a god, what kind of a god do you think I am?"

Iano answered slowly. "Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know. You might be an ancestor. Or you might be only a man who has made friends with a lot of his ancestors." Imbry felt a flash of hope, but Iano went on: "Which, of course, would make you a god. Or—" He paused, and Imbry, taking a sideward look, caught Iano looking at him cautiously. "Or you might be no ancestor and no man-god. You might be one of the very-real-gods. You might be the cloud god, or the jungle god, taking the attribute of a man. Or... you might be the god. You might be the-father-of-all-lhoni."

Imbry took a deep breath. "Would you describe the lhoni to me, please," he said.

"Certainly." Iano's voice and manner were still cautious. "The lhoni are animals which live in the sea or on the beaches, as they choose. They leave their eggs on the beaches, but they rear their young in the sea. They are fishers, and they are very wise. Many of them are ancestors." He said it with unusual respect and reverence.

Imbry sat quietly again. The god who was the-father-of-all-the-lhoni would not only be the father of many ancestors, who were themselves minor gods, he would also control the sea, everything pertaining to the sea, the beaches, probably all the islands, and the fates of those whose lives were tied to the sea, who were themselves fishers, like the villagers. Imbry wondered how much geography the villagers knew. They might consider that the land was always surrounded by ocean – that, as a matter of fact, the universe consisted of ocean encircling a relatively small bit of land.

If Iano thought that was who Imbry might be, then he might very well be thinking that he was in the presence of the greatest god there was. A typical god, of course – there wasn't a god in the world who didn't enjoy a joke, a feast, and a good untruth-for-the- fun-of-everybody at least as much as anybody else – but still, though you might not expect too much of the household fares and penates, when it came to Jupiter himself...

Imbry couldn't let that go on. Almost anything might happen. He might leave a religion behind him that, in a few generations of distortion, might twist itself – and the entire culture – into something monstrous. He might leave the way open for the next Corporation man to practice a brand of exploitation that would be near to unimaginable.

Imbry remembered what the conquistadores had done in Central and South America, and his hackles rose.

"No!" he exploded violently, and Iano recoiled a little, startled. "No, I'm not a god. Not any kind. I'm a man – a different kind of man, maybe, but just a man. The fact that I have a few machines doesn't prove anything. The fact that I know more about some things than you do doesn't prove anything. I come from a country where the people can keep records, so nothing's lost when a man who has some wisdom dies. I've been taught out of those records, and I'm helped by machines built by other men who study other records. But do you think my people are any better than yours? You think the men I have to work with are good, or brave, or kind? No more than you. Less. We kill each other, we take away from other people what isn't ours, we lie – we tell untruths-for-unfair- advantage – we leave bad where we found good – we're just men, we're not anything like gods, and we never will be!"

Iano had recovered his composure quickly. He nodded.

"No doubt," he said. "No doubt, to one god other gods are much like other men are to a man. Possibly even gods have gods. But that is not for us to say. We are men here, not in the country of the gods. There is the jungle, the sky, and the sea. And those who know more places than that must be our gods." He looked at Imbry with quick sympathy. "It's sad to know that even a god must be troubled."

Chapter IV

The odds were low that any of the food served at the feast could hurt him. Aside from the fact that the ecology was closely parallel to Earth's,

Imbry's system was flooded with Antinfect from the precautionary shot he'd gotten aboard the mother ship. But he couldn't afford to take the chance of getting sick. It might help destroy the legend gathered around him, but it would also leave him helpless. He had too much to do in too short a time to risk that. So he politely faked touching his tongue to each of the dishes as it was passed to him, and settled for a supper of rations out of his suit, grimacing as he heard someone whisper behind him that the god had brought his own god-food with him because the food of men could not nourish him in this attribute.

No matter what he did, he couldn't shake the faith of the villagers. It was obvious at a glance that he was a god; therefore, ipso facto, everything he did was god-like.

He sat beside Iano and his wives, watching the fire roar in the communal pit and listening to the pounding beat of the musicians, but, even though the villagers were laughing happily and enjoying themselves immensely, he could not recapture the mood of easy relaxation he had borrowed from them and their world this afternoon. The Sainte Marie pressed too close to him. When he left here, he'd never be able to come back – and a ravaged world would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"Hey! Imbry! Look what I've got to show you!"

He looked up, and there was Tylus, coming toward him hand-in-hand with a quietly beautiful girl, and holding a baby just into the toddling stage. The child was being half-led, half-dragged, and seemed to be enjoying it.

Imbry smiled broadly. There was no getting away from it. Tylus enjoyed life so hugely that nobody near him could quite escape the infection.

"This is my woman, Pia," Tylus said with a proud grin, and the girl smiled shyly. "And this one hasn't got his name yet." He reached down and slapped the baby playfully, and the boy grinned from ear to ear.

Everyone around the fire chuckled. Imbry grinned despite himself, and nodded gravely to Tylus. "I'm glad to meet them." He smiled at Pia. "She must have been blind to pick you when she could have had so much better." The girl blushed, and everyone burst into laughter, while Tylus postured in proud glee. Imbry nodded toward the boy. "If he didn't look so much like his father, I'd say he was a fine one."

There was fresh laughter, and Imbry joined in it because he almost desperately needed to; but after it trailed away and Tylus and his family were gone back into their hut, after the fire died and the feast was over, when Imbry lay on the mat in Iano's house and the wind clashed the tree

fronds while the surf washed against the beach – then Imbry lay tightly awake.

Given time – given a year or two – he might be able to break down the villagers' idea about him. But he doubted it. Iano was right. Even if he threw away his suit and left himself with no more equipment than any of the villagers possessed, he knew too much. Earth and the Terran Union were his heritage, and that was enough to make a god of any man among these people. If he so much as introduced the wheel into this culture, he was doing something none of these people had conceived of in all their history.

And he had nothing like a year. In two weeks' time, even using eidetic techniques, he could barely build up enough of a vocabulary in their language to do without his translator for simpler conversations. And, again, it wouldn't make a particle of difference whether he spoke their language or not. Words would never convince them.

But he had to get through to them somehow.

The cold fact was that during a half day's talk, he hadn't gotten anyone in the village to take literally even the slightest thing he said. He was a god. Gods speak in allegories, or gods proclaim laws. Gods do not speak man-to-man. And if they do, rest assured it is part of some divine plan, designed to meet inscrutable ends by subtle means.

What was it Lindenhoff had told him?

"You'll contact the natives and try to get them started on some kind of civilization. You'll explain what the Terran Union is, and the advantages of trade. See how they'd respond toward developing a technology."

It couldn't be done. Not by a god who might, at worst, be only a demi-god, who might at best even be the god, and who could not, under any circumstances, possibly be considered on a par with the other travelers-for-pleasure who occasionally turned up from over the sea but who were manifestly only other men.

He wasn't supposed to be a stern god, or an omnipotent god, or a being above the flesh. That kind of deity took a monotheist to appreciate him. He was simply supposed to be a god of these people – vain and happily boastful at times, a liar at times, a glutton at times, a drunkard at times, timid at times, adventurous at times, a hero at times, and heir to other sins of the flesh at other times, but always powerful, always above the people in wisdom of his own kind, always a god: always a mute with a whispering ancestor on his shoulder.

But if he left them now, they'd be lost. Someone else would come down, and be a god. Kenton, or Ogin, or Maguire the killer. And when the new god realized the situation, he'd stop trying to make these people into at least some kind of rudimentary market. They wouldn't even have that value to turn them into an interest to be protected. Lindenhoff would think of something else to do with them, for the Corporation's good. Turn them into a labor force for the mines Coogan would be opening up on IV, perhaps. Or else enslave them here. Have the god nudge them into becoming farmers for the luxury market, or introduce a technology whether they understood it or not.

That might work. If the god and his fellow gods found stones for them to dig and smelt into metal, and showed them how to make machines, they might do it.

To please the god by following his advice. Not because they understood or wanted machines – or needed them – but to fulfill the god's inscrutable plan. They'd sicken with the bewilderment in their hearts, and lose their smiles in the smelter's heat. The canoes would rot on the beaches, and the fishing spears would break. The houses would crumble on the ocean's edge until the sea reached up and swept the village clean, and the lhoni eggs would hatch out in the warming sun. The village would be gone, and its people slaving far away, lonesome for their ancestors.

He had to do it. Somehow, within these two weeks, he had to give them a chance of some kind.

It would be his last chance, too. Twenty-six years of life, and all of it blunted. He was failing here, with the taste of the Corporation bitter in his mouth. He'd found nothing in the TSN but brutal officers and cynical men waiting for a war to start somewhere, so the promotions and bonuses would come, and meanwhile making the best they could out of what police actions and minor skirmishes there were with weak alien races. Before that, school, and a thousand time-markers and campus wheels for everyone who thought that some day, if he was good enough, he'd have something to contribute to Mankind.

The god had to prove to be human after all. And the human could talk to these other men, as just another man, and then perhaps they might advance of themselves to the point where they could begin a civilization that was part of them, and part of some plan of theirs, instead of some god's. And someday these people, too, would land their metal canoes on some foreign beach under a foreign sun.

He had to destroy himself. He had to tear down his own facade.

Just before he fell into his fitful sleep, he made his decision. At the first opportunity to be of help in some way they would consider more than manlike, he'd fail. The legend would crumble, and he could be a man.

He fell asleep, tense and perspiring, and the stars hung over the world, with the mother ship among them.

Chapter V

The chance came. He couldn't take it.

Two days had gone by, and nothing had happened to change the situation. He spent two empty days talking to Iano and as many other villagers as he could, and the only knowledge they gained was an insight into the ways of gods, who proved, after all, to be very much like men, on their own grander scale. One or two were plainly saddened by his obvious concern over something they, being unfortunately only men, could not quite grasp. Iano caught something of his mood, and was upset by it until his face fell into a puzzled, concerned look that was strange to it. But it only left him and Imbry further apart. There was no bridge between them.

On the third day, the sea was flat and oily, and the air lay dankly still across the village. The tree fronds hung down limply, and the clouds thickened gradually during the night, so that Imbry woke up to the first sunless day he'd seen. He got up as quietly as he could, and left Iano's house, walking slowly across the compound toward the sea. He stood on the beach, looking out across the glassy swells, thinking back to the first hour in which he'd hung above that ocean and slowly come down with the anticipation burning out the disgust in him.

He threw a shell as far out into the water as he could, and watched it skip once, skip twice, teeter in the air, and knife into the water without a splash. Then he turned around and walked slowly back into the village, where one or two women were beginning to light their cookfires.

He greeted them listlessly, and they answered gravely, their easy smiles dying. He wandered over toward Tylus's house. And heard Pia crying.

"Hello!"

Tylus came out of the house, and for the first time Imbry saw him looking strained, his lips white at the corners. "Hello, Imbry," he said in a tired voice.

"What's wrong, Tylus?"

Tylus shrugged. "The baby's going to die." Imbry stared up at him. "Why?"

"He cut his foot yesterday morning. I put a poultice on it. It didn't help. His foot's red today, and it hurts him to touch it. It happens."

"Oh, no, it doesn't. Not any more. Let me look at him." Imbry came up the short ladder to Tylus's porch. "It can't be anything I can't handle."

He knew the villagers' attitude toward death. Culturally, death was the natural result of growing old, of being born weak, and, sometimes, of having a child. Sometimes, too, a healthy person could suddenly get a pain in the belly, lie in agony for a day, and then die. Culturally, it usually made the victim an ancestor, and grief for more than a short time was something the villagers were too full of living to indulge in. But sometimes it was harder to take; in this tropical climate, a moderately bad cut could infect like wildfire, and then someone died who didn't seem to have been ready for it.

Tylus's eyes lit up for a moment. Then they became gravely steady.

"You don't have to, if you don't want to, Imbry. Suppose some other god wants him? Suppose his ancestors object to your stepping in? And – and besides – " Tylus dropped his eyes. "I don't know. Maybe you're not a god."

Imbry couldn't stop to argue. "I'd like to look at him anyway. No matter what might happen."

The hopelessness drained out of Tylus's face. He touched Imbry's arm. "Come into my house," he said, repeating the social formula gratefully. "Pia! Imbry's here to make the baby well!"

Imbry strode into the house, pulling his medkit out of his suit. Pia turned away from the baby's mat, raising her drawn face. Then she jumped up and went to stand next to Tylus, clenching his hand.

The baby was moving his arms feverishly, and his cheeks were flushed. But he'd learned, through the night, not to move the bandaged foot.

Imbry cut the scrap of cloth away with his bandage shears, wincing at the puffy, white-lipped gash. He snapped the pencil light out of its clip and took a good look into the wound.

It was dirty as sin, packed with some kind of herb mixture that was hopelessly embedded in the tissues. Cleaning it thoroughly was out of the question. Cursing softly, he did the best he could, not daring to try the

anesthetic syrette in the kit. He had no idea of what even a human child's dosage might be.

He had to leave a lot of the poultice in the wound. Working as fast as he could, he spilled an envelope of antibiotics over the gash, slapped on a fresh bandage, and then stood up. Antipyretics were out. The boy'd have to have his fever. There was one gamble he had to take, but he was damned if he'd take any more. He held up the ampule of Antinfect.

"Universal Antitoxin" was etched into the glass. Well, it had better be.

He broke the seal and stabbed the tip of his hyposprayer through the diaphragm. He retracted carefully. It was a three cc ampule. About half of it ought to do. He watched the dial on the sprayer with fierce concentration, inching the knob around until it read "1.5," and yanking the tip out.

Muttering a prayer, he fired the Antinfect into the boy's leg. Then he sighed, re-packed his kit, and turned around.

"If I haven't killed him, he'll be all right." He gestured down at the bandage. "There's going to be a lot of stuff coming out of that wound. Let it come. Don't touch the bandage. I'll take another look at it in a few hours. Meanwhile, let me know if he looks like he's getting worse." He smiled harshly. "And let me know if he's getting better, too."

Pia was looking at him with an awestruck expression on her face. Tylus's glance clung to the medkit and then traveled up to Imbry's eyes.

"You are a god," he said in a whisper. "You are more than a god. You are the god of all other gods."

"I know," Imbry growled. "For good and all now, even if the boy dies. I'm a god now no matter what I do." He strode out of the house and out across the village square, walking in short, vicious strides along the beach until he was out of sight of the village. He stood for a long time, looking out across the gray sea. And then, with a crooked twist to his lips and a beaten hopelessness in his eyes, he walked back into the village because there was nothing else he could do.

Lord knew where the hurricane had been born. Somewhere down the chain of islands – or past them – the mass of air had begun to whirl. Born out of the ocean, it spun over the water for hundreds of miles, marching toward the coast.

The surf below the village sprang into life. It lashed along the strand in frothing, growling columns, and the lhoni eggs washed out of their nests and rolled far down the slope of the beach before the waves picked them

up again and crushed them against the stones and shells.

The trees tore the edges of their fronds against each other, and the broken ends flew away on the wind. The birds in the jungle began to huddle tightly into themselves.

"Your canoe," Iano said to Imbry as they stood in front of the head man's house.

Imbry shook his head. "It'll stand."

He watched the families taking their few essential belongings out of their houses and storing them inside the overturned canoes that had been brought high inland early in the afternoon.

"What about this storm? Is it liable to be bad?"

Iano shook his head noncommittally. "There're two or three bad ones every season."

Imbry grunted and looked out over the village square. Even if the storm mashed the houses flat, they'd be up again two days afterward. The sea and the jungle gave food, and the fronded trees gave shelter. He saw no reason why these people wanted gods in the first place.

He saw a commotion at the door of Tylus's house. Tylus and Pia stood in the doorway. Pia was holding the baby.

"Look! Hey! Look!" Tylus shouted. The other villagers turned, surprised.

"Hey! Come look at my baby! Come look at the boy Imbry made well!" But Tylus himself didn't follow his own advice. As the other villagers came running, forgetting the possessions piled beside the canoes, he broke through them and ran across the square to Imbry and Iano.

"He's fine! He stopped crying! His leg isn't hot any more, and we can touch it without hurting him!" Tylus shouted, looking up at Imbry.

Imbry didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He smiled with an agonized twist of his mouth. "I thought I told you not to touch that foot."

"But he's fine, Imbry! He's even laughing!" Tylus was gesturing joyfully. "Imbry—"

"Yes?"

"Imbry, I want a gift."

"A gift?"

"Yes. I want you to give him your name. When his naming day comes, I want him to call himself The Beloved of Imbry."

My God, Imbry thought, I've done it! I've saddled them with the legend of myself. He looked down at Tylus. "Are you sure?" he asked, feeling the words come out of his tight throat.

"I would like it very much," Tylus answered with sudden quietness.

And there was nothing Imbry could say but, "All right. When his naming day comes, if you still want to."

Tylus nodded. Then, obviously, he realized he'd run out of things to say and do. With Imbry the ancestor, or Imbry the man-with-many-powerful-ancestors; with Imbry the demi-god, he could have found something else to talk about. But this was Imbry, the god of all gods, and that was different.

"Well... I have to be with Pia. Thank you." He threw Imbry one more grateful smile, and trotted back across the square, to where the other villagers were clustered around Pia, talking excitedly and often looking with shy smiles in Imbry's direction.

It was growing rapidly darker. Night was coming, and the hurricane was trudging westward with it. Imbry looked at Iano, with his wraparound plastered against his body by the force of the wind and his face in the darkness under the overhanging porch roof.

"What'll you do when the storm comes?" Imbry asked.

Iano gestured indefinitely. "Nothing, if it's a little one. If it's bad, we'll get close to the trees, on the side away from the wind."

"Do you think it looks like it'll get bad?"

Iano gestured in the same way. "Who knows?" he said, looking at Imbry.

Imbry looked at him steadily. "I'm only a man. I can't make it better or worse. I can't tell you what it's going to be. I'm only a man, no matter what Tylus and Pia think."

Iano gestured again. "There are men. I know that much because I am a man. There may be other men, who are our ancestors and our gods, who in their turn have gods. And those gods may have greater gods. But I am a man, and I know what I see and what I am. Later, after I die and am an ancestor, I may know other men like myself, and call them men. But these people who are not yet ancestors – " He swept his arm in a gesture that encircled the village. " – these people will call me a god, if I choose to visit them.

"To Tylus and Pia – and to many others – you are the god of all gods. To

myself... I don't know. Perhaps I am too near to being an ancestor not to think there may be other gods above you. But," he finished, "they are not my gods. They are yours. And to me you are more than a man."

The hurricane came with the night, and the sea was coldly phosphorescent as it battered at the shore. The wind screamed invisibly at the trees. The village square was scoured clean of sand and stones, and the houses were groaning.

The villagers sat on the ground, resting their backs against the thrashing trees.

Imbry couldn't accustom himself to the constant sway. He stood motionless beside the tree that sheltered Iano, using his pressors to brace himself. He knew the villagers were looking at him through the darkness, taking it as one more proof of what he was, but that made no difference any longer. He faced into the storm, feeling the cold sting of the wind.

Lindenhoff would be overjoyed. And Maguire would grin coldly. Coogan would count his money, and Petrick would drink a solitary toast to the helpless suckers he could make do anything he wanted.

And Imbry? He let the cold spray dash against his face and didn't bother to wipe it off. Imbry was ready to quit.

The universe was made the way it was, and there was no changing it, whether to suit his ideas of what men should be or not. The legendary heroes of the human race – the brave, the brilliant, selfless men who broke the constant trail for the rest of Mankind to follow – must have been a very different breed from what the stories said they were.

A house crashed over on the far side of the village, and crunched apart. He heard a woman moan in brief fear, but then her man must have quieted her, for there was no further sound from any of the dim figures huddled against the trees around him.

The storm rose higher. For a half hour, Imbry listened to the houses tearing down, and felt the spray in his face thicken until it was like rain. The phosphorescent wall of surf crept higher on the beach, until he could see it plainly; a tumbling, ghostly mass in among the trees nearest the beach. The wind became a solid wall, and he turned up the intensity on his pressors. He had no way of knowing whether the villagers were making any sound or not.

He felt a tug at his leg, and bent down, turning off his pressors. Iano was looking up at him, his face distorted by the wind, his hair standing away from one side of his head. Imbry closed one arm around the tree.

"What?" Imbry bellowed into the translator, and the translator tried to bellow into Ianos's ear.

"It... very... very bad... very... rain... no rain... "

The translator struggled to get the message through to Imbry, but the wind tore it to tatters.

"Yes, it's bad," Imbry shouted. "What was that about rain?"

"Imbry... when ... rain... ."

Clearly and distinctly, he heard a woman scream. There was a second's death for the wind. And then the rain and the sea came in among the trees together.

White, furious water tore at his legs and pushed around his waist. He gagged on salt. Coughing and choking, he tried to see what was happening to the villagers.

But he was cut off in a furious, pounding, sluicing mass of water pouring out of the sky at last, blind and isolated as he tried to find air to breathe. He felt it washing into his suit, filling its legs, weighing his feet down. He closed his helmet in a panic, spilling its water down over his head, and as he snapped it tight another wave raced through the trees to break far inland, and he lost his footing.

He tumbled over and over in the churning water, fumbling for his pressor controls. Finally he got to them, and snapped erect, with the field on full. The water broke against his faceplate, flew away, and he was left standing in a bubble of emptiness that exactly outlined the field. Sea water walled in from the ground to the height of his face, and the rain flooded it from above.

Blind inside his bubble, he waited for the morning.

He awoke to a dim light filtering through to him, and he looked up to see layer after layer of debris piled atop his bubble. It was still raining, but the solid cloudburst was over. There was still water on the ground, but it was only a few inches deep. He collapsed his field, and the pulped sticks and chips of wood fell in a shower on him. He threw back his helmet and looked around.

The water had carried him into the jungle at the extreme edge of the clearing where the village had stood, and from where he was he could see out to the heaving ocean.

The trees were splintered and bent. They lay across the clearing, pinning down a few slight bits of wreckage. But almost all traces of the

village were gone. Where the canoes with their household possessions had lain in an anchored row, there was nothing left.

Only a small knot of villagers stood in the clearing. Imbry tried to count them; tried to compare them to the size of the crowd that had welcomed him into the village, and stopped. He came slowly forward, and the villagers shrank back. Iano stepped out to meet him, and, slowly, Tylus.

"Iano, I'm sorry," Imbry said in a dull voice, looking around the ravaged clearing again. If he'd had any idea the hurricane could possibly be that bad, he would have called the mother ship for help. Lindenhoff would have fired into the storm and disrupted it, to save his potential slaves.

"Why did this happen, Imbry?" Iano demanded. "Why was this done to us?"

Imbry shook his head. "I don't know. A storm – Nobody can blame anything."

Iano clenched his fists.

"I did not ask during the whole day beforehand, though I knew what would happen. I did not even ask in the beginning of the storm. But when I knew the rain must come; when the sea growled and the wind stopped, then, at last, I asked you to make the storm die. Imbry, you did nothing. You made yourself safe, and you did nothing. Why was this done?"

Iano's torso quivered with bunched muscles. His eyes blazed. "If you were who we believed you to be, if you made Tylus's boy well, why did you do this? Why did you send the storm?"

It was the final irony: apparently, if Iano had accepted Imbry as a man, he would have told him in advance how bad the storm was likely to be... .

Imbry shook his head. "I'm not a god, Iano," he repeated dully. He looked at Tylus, who was standing pale and bitter-eyed behind Iano.

"Are they safe, Tylus?"

Tylus looked silently over Imbry's shoulder, and Imbry turned his head to follow his glance. He saw the paler shape crushed around the trunks of a tree, one arm still gripping the boy.

"I must make a canoe," Tylus said in a dead voice. "I'll go on a long journey-to-leave-the-sadness-behind. I'll go where there aren't any gods like you."

"Tylus!"

But Iano clutched Imbry's arm, and he had to turn back toward the head man.

"We'll all have to go. We can't ever stay here again." The grip tightened on Imbry's arm, and the suit automatically pressed it off. Iano jerked his arm away.

"The storm came because of you. It came to teach us something. We have learned it." Iano stepped back. "You're not a great god. You tricked us. You're a bad ancestor – you're sick – you have the touch of death in your hand."

"I never said I was a god." Imbry's voice was unsteady. "I told you I was only a man."

Tylus looked at him out of his dead eyes. "How can you possibly be a man like us? If you're not a god, then you're a demon."

Imbry's face twisted. "You wouldn't listen to me. It's not my fault you expected something I couldn't deliver. Is it my fault you couldn't let me be what I am?"

"We know what you are," Tylus said.

There wasn't anything Imbry could tell him. He slowly turned away from the two natives and began the long walk back to the sub-ship.

He finished checking the board and energized his starting motors. He waited for a minute, and threw in his atmospheric drive.

The rumble of jet throats shook through the hull, and throbbed in the control compartment. The ship broke free, and he retracted the landing jacks.

The throttles advanced, and Imbry fled into the stars.

He sat motionless for several minutes. The memory of Tylus's lifeless voice etched itself into the set of his jaw and the backs of his eyes. It seemed impossible that it wouldn't be there forever.

There was another thing to do. He clicked on his communicator.

"This is Imbry. Get me Lindenhoff."

"Check, Imbry. Stand by."

He lay in the piloting couch, waiting, and when the image of Lindenhoff's face built up on the screen, he couldn't quite meet its eyes.

"Yeah, Imbry?"

He forced himself to look directly into the screen. "I'm on my way in, Lindenhoff. I ran into a problem. I'm dictating a full report for the files, but I wanted to tell you first – and I think I've got the answer."

Lindenhoff grinned slowly. "Okay, Fred."

Lindenhoff was waiting for him as he berthed the subship aboard the Sainte Marie. Imbry climbed out and looked quietly at the man.

Lindenhoff chuckled. "You look exactly like one of our real veterans," he said. "A hot bath and a good meal'll take care of that." He chuckled again. "It will, too – it takes more than once around the track before this business starts getting you."

"So you figure I'll be staying on," Imbry said, feeling tired and older than he ever had in his life. "How do you know I didn't make a real mess of it, down there?"

Lindenhoff chuckled. "You made it back in one piece, didn't you? That's the criterion, Fred. I hate to say so, but it is. No mess can possibly be irretrievable if it doesn't kill the man who made it. Besides – you don't know enough to tell whether you made any mistakes or not."

Imbry grunted, thinking Lindenhoff couldn't possibly know how much of an idiot he felt like, and how much he had on his conscience.

"Well, let's get to this report of yours," Lindenhoff said.

Imbry nodded slowly. They walked off the Sainte Marie's flight decks into the labyrinth of steel decks below.

Chapter VI

It was three seasons after the storm, and Tylus was still on his journey. One day he came to a new island and ran his canoe up on the beach. Perhaps here he wouldn't find Pia and the nameless boy waiting for him in the palm groves.

He walked up the sand, and triggered the alarm without knowing it.

Aboard the mother ship, Imbry heard it go off and switched the tight-beam scanner on. The intercom speaker over his head broke into a crackle.

"Fred? You got that one?"

"Uh-huh, Lindy. Right here."

"Which set-up is it?"

"88 on the B grid. It's that atoll right in the middle of the prevailing wind belt."

"I've got to hand it to you, Fred. Those little traps of yours are working like a charm."

Imbry ran his hand over his face. He knew what was going to happen to that innocent native, whoever he was. He'd come out of it a man, ready to take on the job of helping his people climb upward, with a lot of his old ideas stripped away.

Imbry's mouth jerked sideways, in the habitual gesture that was etching a deep groove in the skin of his face.

But he wouldn't be happy while he was learning. It was good for him – but there was no way for him to know that until he'd learned.

"How many this time?" Lindenhoff asked. "Coogan tells me they could use a lot of new recruits in a hurry, in that city they're building up north."

"Just one canoe," Imbry said, looking at the image on the scanner.

"Small one, at that. Afraid it's only one man, Lindy." He moved the picture a little. "Yeah. Just one." He focused the controls.

"It's him! Tylus! We've got Tylus!"

There was a short pause on the other end of the intercom circuit. Then Lindenhoff said: "Okay, okay. You've finally got your pet one. Now, don't muff things in the rush." He chuckled softly and switched off.

Imbry bent closer to the scanner, though there was no real necessity for it. From here on, the process was automatic, and as inevitable as an avalanche.

Imbry watched the protoplasmic robots on the island come hesitantly through the underbrush toward the beach.

On the island, Tylus stopped. There was a crackle in the shrubbery, and a small, diffident figure stepped out. Its expression was watchful, but friendly. It looked rather much like a man, except for its small size and the shade of its skin. Its eyes were intelligent. It looked trustful.

"Hello," Tylus said. "I'm Tylus."

The little native came forward. Others followed it, some more timid than the first, some smiling cordially. They kept casting glances at the magic tree-pod which could carry a man over the sea.

"Hello," the little native answered in a soft, liquid voice. "Are you an ancestor ghost or a god ghost?"

And Tylus began learning about Imbry.

© 1956, Royal Publications, Inc.

The Man Who Tasted Ashes

THE CAR HE'D stolen was a beautifully groomed thing: all polished lacquer and chrome, with almost brand-new dual tread whitewall tires on the nicked wire wheels. But the transmission was bad, the brake drums scraped, and there was a short circuit in the wiring somewhere, so that he had to keep over sixty miles per hour or the generator would not charge at all. He would have stolen another one if he could, but he had got onto the turnpike before he realized just how unreliable this one was. If he changed cars at a restaurant, it would be reported and the police would stop him when he tried to leave the turnpike.

No, he was trapped with what he had. Hunched over the wheel of his roaring cage, the yellowish headlights reflecting white from the lane markers, Redfern swept his eyes systematically over the instruments: ammeter, fuel gauge, oil pressure, water temperature, speedometer, odometer. He thought of himself as doing it systematically, every ten minutes, like a professionally trained driver. Actually, he was dividing his attention almost equally between the road and the odometer. A hundred and ten miles covered, seventy miles to go, ninety minutes before the ship was due to take off, with or without him, average speed required: 42.62, approx.; round off to allow for stopping the car at the exit toll booth, for covering two miles of back roads, for leaving the car and running an unknown distance across a weed-grown field to the ship's airlock – they would take off on schedule with him six inches from the slamming airlock door; they would not stay themselves a microsecond to accommodate him – say fifty miles per hour, average. Then allow for speedometer error. Say fifty-five miles per hour, indicated, average. Allow for odometer error. Say sixty miles per hour, indicated, average. Allow for unforeseen delays. Sixty-five miles per hour.

Redfern's foot trembled on the accelerator pedal. His thigh ached from hours of unremitting pressure. His car flashed by signboards, wove continually around immense trailer trucks in the slow lane. His mind raced to keep up with the changing figures on the odometer. He wished he

weren't feeling a slight miss in the engine whenever he eased up on the accelerator. He cursed the car's owner for his false-front prodigality with wax and whitewalls.

He looked at his watch again. Four in the morning. He turned the radio on, ignoring his fear that something else might happen to the car's wiring.

"—And that's the news," the announcer's professionally relaxed voice said. "After a word about United Airlines, we'll hear, first, Carl Orff's Carmina Burana, followed by—"

His watch was slow.

Five minutes? Fifteen minutes? How long did the news take?

He held the watch to his ear. It was an expensive one, wafer thin, beautifully crafted, left over from his younger days – he could barely hear it running. Was it running at all?

Redfern was a leathery man, his yellowish-white hair brushed back from angular temples, a scruffy Guards mustache over his nearly invisible lips. His suits were made for him by a London tailor, from measurements taken in 1925; they were gored and belted in the backs of the jackets. Outdoors, he wore a Burberry and carried a briefcase. People who saw him on the street in Washington always took him for someone with diplomatic connections. But since Redfern was always seen afoot, these connections perforce had to be minor. Was he an assistant attaché of sorts, perhaps? At his age? Looking at Redfern, people would wonder about it.

People. But the man who'd sat easily on the edge of Redfern's lumpy bed in the wallpapered hotel room – that man, now...

That man had coal-black hair, broad, flat cheekbones above a sharply narrowing chin, oval, maroon-pupiled eyes and cyanotic lips. He smiled easily and agreeable across the room.

Redfern sat in the one chair, sipping at the water tumbler half- full of gin. The bottle his visitor had brought up was standing on the bureau. His visitor, who had given the name of Charlie Spence, was not drinking.

"You don't look like a Charlie," Redfern said abruptly over the tumbler's rim. "You look as cold as ice."

Spence laughed, his small mouth stretching as far as it could. "Maybe I'm made of it," he said. "But then, you're nothing but a lump of coal. Carbon." He brushed his fingertips together.

"But then," Redfern mocked sharply, "I don't pretend to be gregarious."

"Oh, I don't pretend – don't pretend at all. I am gregarious. I love the company of people. I've been moving about among them for several years, now."

"All right," Redfern said sharply, "we've already settled that. Let's let it be. I don't care where you come from – I don't really care what you're made of. It may surprise you, but I've thought for some time that if people were coming to this world from other places, they'd be bound to get in touch with me sooner or later."

"Why on Earth should we try to get in touch with you?" Spence asked, nonplused.

"Because if you people have been coming here for years, then you're not here openly. You've got purposes of your own. People with purposes of their own generally come to me."

Charlie Spence began to chuckle. "I like you," he laughed. "I really do. You're a rare type."

"Yes," said Redfern, "and now let's get down to business." He gestured toward the bureau top. "Pour me some more of that." Alcohol affected him swiftly but not deeply. Once it had stripped him of the ordinary inhibitions, he could go on drinking for some time before his intellect lost its edge. Since he always took two aspirins and went straight to bed at that point, it was not a serious sort of weakness. But without his inhibitions he was a very unpleasant man.

"It's a simple business," Charlie Spence was saying a little later. "The ambassador will land at National Airport and be met by the usual sort of reception committee. Red carpet, band, dignitaries, and so forth. But the red carpet will be a little shabby, the band won't be first-rate, and the reception committee will not be quite as high-ranking as it might be. After all, the ambassador's country is definitely on the other side of the fence."

"Yes," Redfern drawled. "The protocol of prejudice."

"Oh, no, no, nothing deliberate," Spence said, with a hand raised. "Diplomats pride themselves on equal courtesy to all. But the employee in charge of caring for the carpets simply won't do his best. The band won't play with any great enthusiasm. And any of your officials who happen to be ill, with colds or similar afflictions, will honestly decide their health precludes the effort of attending. This is simply human nature, and any snub will be completely unintended."

"I heard you the first time. What's all this to do with me?"

"Well, now," Charlie Spence explained, "the ambassador's not from a particularly large nation in their bloc. It seems doubtful they'd bother to send along any of their own security police. The only guards present will likely be American Secret Service personnel, extending courtesy protection."

"Yes."

"So. In the first place, the ambassador is really a small fish. In the second place, no American, even a trained professional sworn to his duty, is apt to be quite as devoted to the ambassador's life as he would be to that of, say, any American congressman. Those two factors represent a potential assassin's margin of safety."

"And what're you meddling in our politics for?" Redfern growled.

"Your politics? Redfern, my dear fellow, it may or may not be your planet, but it's most assuredly our solar system."

The neck of the bottle finked against the lip of Redfern's glass. "And I'm your assassin?"

"You are."

"What makes you think I'll do it?" Redfern cocked his head and looked narrowly at Spence.

"A compulsive need to meade in human history."

"Oh?"

Charlie Spence laughed. "You were cashiered from your country's foreign service in nineteen hundred and thirty-two. But you've never stopped mixing into international situations. Gun running, courier work, a little export-import, a little field work for foreign development corporations... and, now and then, a few more serious escapades. Don't tell me you don't enjoy it, Redfern. It's a very hard life, all told. No one would stay in it as long as you have if it didn't satisfy his need for power."

Redfern pinched his lips together even more tightly, in the fleeting reflex with which he always acknowledged the truth. "I wasn't cashiered," he said. "I resigned without prejudice."

"Oh, yes; yes, you did. Being unpleasant to one's superiors doesn't disgrace a man – it merely makes him unemployable. Except for special purposes that don't require a pukka sahib. And here I am, as you said, with a special purpose. Ten thousand dollars, on completion, Redfern, and the satisfaction of having started World War III."

Redfern's eyes glittered. "All over one little ambassador?" he asked carefully.

"Over one little ambassador. In life, he's not considered worth the trouble of protecting him. And no one but a rather stout and liverish woman in the Balkans will mourn him in death. But when he dies, his side will suddenly discover a great and genuine moral indignation. Why? Because they will be truly shocked at such a thing happening in America."

"World War III," Redfern said ruminatively.

"Exactly. You'll shake the ambassador's hand. An hour later, when he's already safe inside his embassy refreshing himself after his trip, he'll fall into a sudden coma. The embassy will close its doors, issue a misleading statement, and call its doctor."

"Yes."

"Very well. The embassy staff has taken routine steps, and waits for the ambassador to recover. But, just to allow for all eventualities, the unofficial courier service is already transmitting a notification to the government at home. The doctor examines the patient and discovers an inflamed puncture on his right hand. Another message goes home. The ambassador dies, and tests indicate poison. Obviously, it was hoped the puncture would go unnoticed and the cause of death, which resembles cerebral occlusion, would be mistaken. But the tiny needle must not have been quite sterilized, by accident, and the clever doctor has penetrated the scheme – and another message goes home, before the American State Department even suspects anything serious."

"Hmm. I'll simply shake his hand?"

Charlie Spence reached into his pocket. "Wearing this." He held out a crumpled something, the size of a handkerchief. Redfern took it and unfolded it. "A mask," Spence said. "Drawn over your head, it will mold new features for you. It'll be devilish uncomfortable, but you won't have to wear it long."

"It'll make me look like someone entitled to be on the field?"

Spence grinned the grin of a Renaissance Florentine. "Better than that. It will give you the composite features of six people entitled to be on the field. You will look like none of them, but you will look superficially familiar to anyone who knows any of them. The subsequent questioning of witnesses will yield amusing results, I think."

"Very clever. Good technique. Confuse and obscure. But then, you've practiced it a long time." Redfern pushed himself abruptly out of the chair

and went into the adjoining bathroom, keeping the door open. "Excuse me," he said perfunctorily.

"Lord, you're a type!" Charlie Spence said. "Will you do it?"

"What?" Redfern said from the bathroom.

"Will you do it?" Spence repeated, raising his voice.

Redfern came out, picking up the gin bottle, and sat back down in the chair. He tipped the bottle over the glass. "Maybe."

"I've told you too much for you to back out now," Spence said with a frown.

"Rubbish!" Redfern spat. "Don't try to bully me. You don't care what any of the natives tell each other about you. There are dozens of people living off their tales about you. It's to your advantage to hire native helpers wherever you can – if they're caught, who cares what wild tales they tell? You'd be insane to risk losing one of your own people." He looked sharply into Charlie Spence's eyes. "I don't suppose you fancy the thought of a dissecting table."

Charlie Spence licked his lip with a flicker of his tongue. "Don't be too sure of yourself," he said after a moment, in a more careful tone of voice.

Redfern snorted. "If I acted only on what I was sure of, I'd still be an embassy clerk."

"And you wouldn't like that, I suppose?" Charlie Spence, recovered, was looking around the room. "Sometimes? At night, when you can't sleep?"

"I want an out," Redfern said brusquely. "I won't do it without accident insurance."

"Oh?" Charlie Spence's eyebrows quivered.

"If I'm caught in the field, I'm caught and that's it. I'll protect you."

"Professionalism. I like that. Go on – what if you get away from the field?"

"If I get away, but there's trouble, I want a rendezvous with one of your ships."

"Oh, ho!" Charlie Spence said. "You do, do you?"

"I'll cover my tracks, if you think it's important, but I want a rendezvous. I want to be off this planet if there's trouble. Change that – I want to be off it in any case, and if there's no trouble, I can always be brought back."

"Oh, ho!" Charlie Spence repeated with a grin. "Yes, I'd think you would want to watch the next war from some safe place." It was easy to see he'd been expecting Redfern to lead up to this all along.

"Have it your way," Redfern said ungraciously.

Charlie Spence was laughing silently, his eyes a-slit. "All right, Redfern," he said indulgently. He reached into his card case, took out a photograph of a dumpy blonde woman and a string-haired man on the porch of a middle western farmhouse, and carefully split it with his thumbnails. Out of the center, he took a bit of tissue paper, and stuck the front and back of the photograph together again. Replacing the card case in his pocket, he handed the slip of paper to Redfern.

"Dip it in your drink," he said.

He watched while Redfern complied, but kept his eyes away from the short handwritten directions the alcohol brought up. "Don't repeat the location aloud. I don't know it, and don't want to. Memorize it and destroy it. And I tell you now, Redfern, if the ambassador doesn't die, there'll be no ship." He smiled. "For that matter, you have no guarantee there'll be any ship at all."

Redfern growled. "I know."

"Lord, what meager hopes you live on, Redfern!"

"You're through here now, aren't you?" Redfern said.

"Yes..." Charlie Spence said with pursed lips.

"Then get out." He took the palm hypodermic Charlie Spence handed him in its green pasteboard box, and closed the hotel room door behind his visitor.

Thirty-five miles to go. His watch now read 4:30. It hadn't stopped, but was merely slow. If he'd thought to have it cleaned by a jeweler, last year or even the year before that, it would be accurate now. As it was, he had less than an hour, and he would be off the turnpike fairly soon, onto roads that were paved but had been laid out in the days of horse-drawn wagons.

He tried another station on the radio, but that was playing popular music. A third was conducting some sort of discussion program about water fluoridation. And that was all. The rest of the dial yielded only hisses or garbled snatches from Minneapolis or Cincinnati. His ammeter showed a steady discharge as long as the radio was on, no matter how fast he drove. He turned it off and steered the car, his face like a graven image. He was seething with anger, but none of it showed. As an adolescent, he had made the mistake of equating self-possession with maturity, and had

studiously practiced the mannerism, with the inevitable result that he had only learned to hide his feelings from himself. He was the prisoner of his practice now, to the extent that he often had to search deep to find what emotion might be driving him at any particular time. Often he found it only in retrospect, when it was too late.

That lunch with Dick Farleagh this afternoon...

It had been difficult even to reach him, a call to the embassy – "Who shall I tell Mr. Farleagh is calling? Mr. Redfern?" and then the barely muffled aside, a whispered "Oh, dear." Then the pause, and finally, with a sigh: "Mr. Farleagh will speak to you now, Mr. Redfern," as though the secretary thought a bad mistake was being made.

"Dickie," Redfern said heavily.

"What is it, Ralph?" Farleagh's voice was too neutral. Obviously, he had taken the call only out of curiosity, because he had not heard directly from Redfern in nearly fifteen years. But he must already be regretting it probably he didn't like being called Dickie, now that his junior clerk days were well behind him. Redfern ought to have thought of that, but he was in a hurry, and hurry, like liquor, always took away his social graces.

"I have to speak to you."

"Yes?"

Redfern waited. Only after a moment did he understand that Farleagh had no intention of meeting him in person.

"I can't do it over the telephone."

"I see." Now the voice was crisp, as Farleagh decided he could meet the situation with routine procedure. "I'll ask my secretary to make an appointment. She'll call you. Can you leave a number?"

"No, no, no!" Redfern was shouting into the telephone. "I won't be fobbed off like that!" His words and actions were registering on his consciousness in only the haziest way. He had no idea he was shouting. "This is too important for your blasted conventionalities! I won't put up with it! I have to see you." His voice was wheedling, now, though he did not realize that, either. "Today. No later than lunch."

Farleagh said with quiet shock, "There's no need to rave at me. Now, take hold of yourself, Ralph, and perhaps we can talk this out sensibly."

"Will you come or won't you?" Redfern demanded. "I'll be at the Grosvenor bar in an hour. I'm warning you you'll regret it if you don't come."

There was a long pause, during which there was a sudden buzz in the phone, and the sound of Redfern's coin being collected. In a moment, the operator would be asking for another dime.

"Are you there?" Farleagh asked with maddening detachment. "See here, Redfern – " now the tenor of his thinking was unmistakeable in his voice, even before he continued – "if it's a matter of a few dollars or so, I can arrange it, I suppose. I'll mail you a check. You needn't bother to return it."

"Deposit ten cents for the next three minutes, please," the operator said at that moment.

"I don't want your blasted money!" Redfern cried. "I have to see you. Will you be there?"

"I—" Farleagh had begun when the operator cut them off.

Redfern stared in bafflement at the telephone. Then he thrust it back on its cradle and walked briskly out of the booth.

He waited in the Grosvenor bar for an hour and a half, rationing his drinks out of a sense that he ought to keep his head. He was not a stupid man. He knew that he always got into quarrels whenever he'd been drinking.

He rationed his drinks, but after the first one he did so out of a spiteful feeling that he ought to, to please that stuffed shirt Farleagh. He already knew that if Farleagh appeared at all, their meeting would not do the slightest good. Hunched over his drink, glowering at the door, he now only wanted to be able to say, afterwards, that he had made the utmost effort to do the right thing.

Farleagh came, at last, looking a great deal beefier than he had when he and Redfern were in public school together. His handshake was perfunctory – his maddeningly level gray eyes catalogued the changes in Redfern's face with obvious disapproval – and he practically shepherded Redfern to the farthest and darkest table. Obviously, he did not relish being seen in a public place with a man of Redfern's character. Redfern drawled: "You've gone to fat."

Farleagh's eyes remained steady. "And you to lean. What is it you want, Redfern?"

"If it isn't money?" Redfern's mouth curled. He turned and signaled to a waiter. "What will you have, Dickie?"

"None for me, thank you," Farleagh said in an impassive drone. "I'm pressed for time."

"Are you? You've no idea, do you, that I might be on a close schedule myself." Redfern glanced at his watch. The ambassador's plane was due at National Airport in two hours, and there was a great deal still to be done. "You've kept me waiting." He waved the waiter away in sudden irritation, without ordering. "Now, you listen to me," he told Farleagh. "I'm going to be at a definite place and time tonight. Here." He flicked the balled bit of tissue paper across the table into Farleagh's lap.

Farleagh picked it out and transferred it to a side pocket. He would have been a very bad diplomat if he had ignored it. But it was plain he was merely providing for an extremely remote possibility. "Redfern," he said, "if you're attempting to involve my government in some scheme of yours, that will be the end. You'll have gone too far."

"Our government, Dickie," Redfern almost snarled. "I still carry my passport."

"Precisely," Farleagh said. "I'm sure the American authorities would deport you, at our request. If you stand trial at home, you'll not get off easily."

"There's nothing in my past record that breaks the law at home."

"There's a great deal about you that breaks laws more popular than those in books."

"Damn you, Farleagh," Redfern said in a voice he did not know was high and almost tearful, "you'd better be there tonight."

"Why?"

"Because if you aren't, and I do get involved in something, it'll be found out soon enough that you could have been there. I warn you now, Farleagh, if I go down, it won't be easily. Perhaps it won't matter to you if your career's smashed. I tell you now, there's a great deal more involved in this than your career."

Farleagh was still not taking his eyes away from Redfern's face, nor moderating the set of his mouth. He gave the appearance, sitting there in his expensive suit, with his graying black hair combed down sleekly, of enormous patience nearly at an end.

"Very well, then!" Redfern exclaimed. "I don't care if you believe me or not." He thrust his chair back. "But if someone gets ill who shouldn't, today, you'd better believe me!" He stalked away, his Burberry flapping from his arm, his briefcase banging into the backs of chairs, his face an unhealthy red.

He drove vengefully, in a rage that included the car and the radio, his

watch, Farleagh, Charlie Spence and the world.

Five o'clock, by his watch. He turned into the exit ramp with a squealing from the tires, and one part of his mind was hoping there would be a blowout, just to prove something to the car's owner. He touched the brakes almost reluctantly, and at the same time cursed their criminal softness. He fumbled on the seat beside him for the toll ticket and searched in his nearly empty wallet. He had had to spend a good deal of money today – more than he'd expected, for the drug and the explosive. It had never been his intention to steal a car, but rental had been out of the question. He knew, and damned the fact, that another man might have gotten better prices with his suppliers. But what sort of logic was there in making up to criminals; slapping their backs and buying them drinks, talking to them on an equal basis, when he could not even see the need to do that sort of thing in his dealings with respectable people?

He slapped the ticket and his two remaining dollar bills into the toll attendant's palm, and accelerated again without bothering even to look toward the man. He had seen no sign of drawn-up police cars anywhere around the toll plaza. That was the important thing, the only important thing at the moment.

Now that he was off the turnpike, he forgot he had been so afraid of being stopped for automobile theft. It had been another in a succession of thin-edged risks which could be shown to extend back to the beginning of his independent life. He forgot it as he had forgotten his fears concerning all the others – as he had forgotten that he had been afraid something would go wrong at the airport this afternoon, or that he would be caught as he hung about in Washington for hours afterward, until he was sure the embassy was acting as if something were wrong behind its doors.

As he drove now, forcing his car around the twisting mountain corners, he had other things to be afraid of.

Farleagh might not be there – might have been stubborn, or unaccountably stupid, or simply too slow, in spite of the margin Redfern had allowed him. He looked at his watch again as he turned off onto a dirt track leading almost straight up the hill. Five-twenty by his watch. He had perhaps five minutes.

He took one deep breath – one, and no more, just as he had done at the airport gate this afternoon, and as he had done on other occasions in his life – and drove the car into a tangle of shrubbery just past a mortared-stone culvert that was his position marker. He shut off the ignition and sat as if stupefied by the engine's silence. Almost instantly,

the headlights were no more than a sickly orange glow upon the leaves pressed against the car's grille. He shut them off, picked up his briefcase, and abandoned the car. Burberry flapping around his thighs, he trotted across the road and plunged down a slight decline into a stand of tamaracks. It was dark except for the remaining light of a low halfmoon seeping through the overcast.

He moved with practiced efficiency through the trees, keeping his direction by paralleling the brook that had trickled through the culvert, until he emerged without warning into an open and long-neglected field, choked with proliferating brush, entirely surrounded by evergreens, with the spaceship, tall as an oil refinery's cracking tower, standing in its center.

The airlock door in the side of it was open. Redfern began to force his way through the brush, toward the extended ladder which connected the airlock with the ground. There was a single light in the lock chamber. No other lights were visible – the ship was a complex silhouette of struts and vanes, given the reality of depth only by that open door, and what that door might lead to, Redfern could not really guess.

As he struggled up to the ladder, he was arming the satchel charge in his briefcase.

There was still no sign of life from inside the ship. But as he climbed the ladder, hoisting himself awkwardly with his one free hand, the ladder began to retract with the sound of metal sliding into metal, and other mechanical sounds resonated out of the hull, like generators coming up to speed, and relays in a sequence of switching operations. He looked up and saw the airlock door quiver and begin to turn on its massive hinges.

With a strained motion of his arm, he threw the charge overarm into the airlock, and let go the ladder. He heard the briefcase thump to the deck in the dock chamber, while he himself was falling ten or twelve feet back to the ground. When the explosion came, he was sprawled on the ground, rearing up on his out-thrust arms, and he stared in fascination at the flame-shot billow of orange smoke gouting through the still half-open lock.

He rolled, off to one side, as the outer door rebounded from the hull. He was afraid it might fall on him, but then he saw it was still hanging, like a broken gate.

The starting-noises inside the ship came to a complete stop. He had done what he had hoped to do – breached the hull, and activated the safety cut-offs in the controls. The ship was caught, earthbound, possibly

not for very long, but perhaps for long enough.

The brush crackled and plucked at his passage. He could not bring himself to look away from the ship, and he blundered through the undergrowth with his arms behind him, feeling his way. The light in the airlock chamber was off now, but something was still burning in there, with a dull smoldering red flicker.

A hand placed itself flat between his shoulderblades. "All right, easy now, sir," a voice said.

He turned convulsively, his face contorted as if by pain, and made out a tall, huskily built young man in a narrowbrimmed hat, who was holding a short-barreled revolver in his other hand. The brush was parting all around him – there were many men here – and suddenly a portable floodlight shot up a beam to strike the airlock.

"We were just about ready to send a man aboard when you crippled them, sir," the young man said with his trained politeness.

"Is Farleagh here?" Redfern demanded.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Farleagh's back among the trees, with the chief."

A man had stepped up to the base of the ship, where the ladder had rested. Like Redfern's young man, he wore a civilian suit as if it had been made by a uniform manufacturer. "Aboard the ship!" he shouted up through cupped hands. "Can you hear me? Do you speak English? This is the Secret Service."

There was a grating sound up in the lock chamber, as someone forced open the balky inner door. Then a man stumbled up to the edge and looked down, his white coveralls smudged and a strained look on his face. He squinted at the Secret Service man.

"Jesus Christ, yes, I speak English," he said in outrage. "Who threw that bomb? This is a goddamn Air Force project, and there's gonna be all kinds of hell."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Redfern shouted, mortally afraid things could still go wrong. "It won't wash – not with me to testify against you."

The Secret Service man at the base of the ship turned his head in Redfern's direction long enough to show his exasperation. Then he pointed his pistol up at the man in the lock. "Jump down, you."

There was the sound of someone heavy coming toward them through the brush. After a moment, Farleagh said: "There you are."

"Hullo, Dickie." Redfern grinned at Farleagh in the spottily reflected

light. "Now you know."

"Know what?" Farleagh asked heavily.

Redfern shifted his feet nervously. "Why I got myself cashiered years ago. You see I knew they were coming here – at least, I believed they were – and I decided what sort of human being they would be mostly likely to contact."

Rage crossed Farleagh's face at last, and shocked Redfern. "Stop it, Redfern," he said savagely. "For once in your life, admit you're the sort of man you are."

After that, no one seemed to look at him. An improvised ladder was brought up, and Secret Service men went into the ship and came down again escorting sullen, blue-lipped men.

© Quinn Publishing Co. Inc.

The Master of the Hounds

This story won an "Edgar" special award from the Mystery Writers of America, and was made into a rather ambitious but bad movie with Alan Alda and Blythe Danner, and a marvelous character actor whose name I can never remember. First, it haunted me for many years, in disconnected pieces. The locale is nearly actual; off Route 35 in New Jersey, there are, I'm sure, stranger places than this. The colonel's appearance is that of any number of angular protagonists drawn by Van Dongen for Astounding Science Fiction. He appeared earlier, without his physical disabilities, as a psychically crippled man in an SF story called "The Man Who Tasted Ashes." He is a Royal Marine because the British "Man Who Never Was," created by Ewen Montagu, carried the credentials of an RME officer when he washed ashore on Spain. The dogs, and his commands to them, have been in my mind for years, as a potential practical joke. But none of that came together until I saw what is still one of my favorite movies, The Great Escape. I love it as I love pulp fiction; I have seen it a dozen times and I will see it a dozen more. But it

is a travesty on Paul Brickhill's book based on the real circumstances of that prison camp, just as Brickhill in turn, like all other prison camp descriptors, necessarily glosses over the real burdens and actual grim duties of any senior officer of captured military personnel.

One day, therefore, long after we had left the Jersey coast, I sat bolt upright in my bed in Evanston, Illinois, and a month later I had a check from The Saturday Evening Post, which is gone – check, and old Post, too – but the story remains. I am proud of it not because of the ending, which I like, but because I did not really understand how the colonel was going to be until he appeared, sentence by sentence, effortlessly. And I do not watch reruns of Hogan's Heroes. Or I say I don't.

THE WHITE SAND road led off the state highway through the sparse pines. There were no tire tracks in the road, but, as Malcolm turned the car onto it, he noticed the footprints of dogs, or perhaps of only one dog, running along the middle of the road toward the combined general store and gas station at the intersection.

"Well, it's far enough away from everything, all right," Virginia said. She was lean and had dusty black hair. Her face was long, with high cheekbones. They had married ten years ago, when she had been girlish and very slightly plump.

"Yes," Malcolm said. Just days ago, when he'd been turned down for a Guggenheim Fellowship that he'd expected to get, he had quit his job at the agency and made plans to spend the summer, somewhere as cheap as possible, working out with himself whether he was really an artist or just had a certain commercial talent. Now they were here.

He urged the car up the road, following a line of infrequent and weathered utility poles that carried a single strand of power line. The real-estate agent already had told them there were no telephones. Malcolm had taken that to be a positive feature, but somehow he did not like the looks of that one thin wire sagging from pole to pole. The wheels of the car sank in deeply on either side of the dog prints, which he followed like a row of bread crumbs through a forest.

Several hundred yards farther along, they came to a sign at the top of a

hill:

MARINE VIEW SHORES! NEW JERSEY'S NEWEST, FASTEST GROWING RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY. WELCOME HOME! FROM \$9,990. NO DN PYT FOR VETS.

Below them was a wedge of land – perhaps ten acres altogether that pushed out into Lower New York Bay. The road became a gullied, yellow gravel street, pointing straight toward the water and ending in three concrete posts, one of which had fallen and left a gap wide enough for a car to blunder through. Beyond that was a low drop-off where the bay ran northward to New York City and, in the other direction, toward the open Atlantic.

On either side of the roughed-out street, the bulldozed land was overgrown with scrub oak and sumac. Along the street were rows of roughly rectangular pits – some with half-finished foundation walls in them – piles of excavated clay, and lesser quantities of sand, sparsely weed-grown and washed into ravaged mounds like Dakota Territory. Here and there were houses with half-completed frames, now silvered and warped.

There were only two exceptions to the general vista. At the end of the street, two identically designed, finished houses faced each other. One looked shabby. The lot around it was free of scrub, but weedy and unsodded. Across the street from it stood a house in excellent repair.

Painted a charcoal gray and roofed with dark asphalt shingles, it sat in the center of a meticulously green and level lawn, which was in turn surrounded by a wire fence approximately four feet tall and splendid with fresh aluminum paint. False shutters, painted stark white, flanked high, narrow windows along the side Malcolm could see. In front of the house, a line of whitewashed stones the size of men's heads served as curbing. There wasn't a thing about the house and its surroundings that couldn't have been achieved with a straight string, a handsaw, and a three-inch brush. Malcolm saw a chance to cheer things up. "There now, Marthy!" he said to Virginia. "I've led you safe and sound through the howlin' forest to a snug home in the shadder of Fort Defiance."

"It's orderly," Virginia said. "I'll bet it's no joke, keeping up a place like that out here."

As Malcolm was parking the car parallel to where the curb would have been in front of their house, a pair of handsome young Doberman pinschers came out from behind the gray house across the street and stood together on the lawn with their noses just short of the fence, looking

out. They did not bark. There was no movement at the front window, and no one came out into the yard. The dogs simply stood there, watching, as Malcolm walked over the clay to his door.

The house was furnished – that is to say, there were chairs in the living room, although there was no couch, and a chromium-and-plastic dinette set in the area off the kitchen. Though one of the bedrooms was completely empty, there was a bureau and a bed in the other. Malcolm walked through the house quickly and went back out to the car to get the luggage and groceries. Nodding toward the dogs, he said to Virginia, "Well! The latest thing in iron deer." He felt he had to say something light, because Virginia was staring across the street

He knew perfectly well, as most people do and he assumed Virginia did, that Doberman pinschers are nervous, untrustworthy, and vicious. At the same time, he and his wife did have to spend the whole summer here. He could guess how much luck they'd have trying to get their money back from the agent now.

"They look streamlined like that because their ears and tails are trimmed when they're puppies," Virginia said. She picked up a bag of groceries and carried it into the house.

When Malcolm had finished unloading the car, he slammed the trunk lid shut. Although they hadn't moved until then, the Dobermans seemed to regard this as a sign. They turned smoothly, the arc of one inside the arc of the other, and keeping formation, trotted out of sight behind the gray house.

Malcolm helped Virginia put things away in the closets and in the lone bedroom bureau. There was enough to do to keep both of them busy for several hours, and it was dusk when Malcolm happened to look out through the living-room window. After he had glanced that way, he stopped.

Across the street, floodlights had come on at the four corners of the gray house. They poured illumination downward in cones that lighted the entire yard. A crippled man was walking just inside the fence, his legs stiff and his body bent forward from the waist, as he gripped the projecting handles of two crutch-canes that supported his weight at the elbows. As Malcolm watched, the man took a precise square turn at the corner of the fence and began walking along the front of his property. Looking straight ahead, he moved regularly and purposefully, his shadow thrown out through the fence behind the composite shadow of the two dogs walking

immediately ahead of him. None of them were looking in Malcolm's direction. He watched as the man made another turn, followed the fence toward the back of his property, and disappeared behind the house.

Later Virginia served cold cuts in the little dining alcove. Putting the house in order seemed to have had a good effect on her morale.

"Listen, I think we're going to be all right here, don't you?" Malcolm said.

"Look," she said reasonably, "any place you can get straightened out is fine with me."

This wasn't quite the answer he wanted. He had been sure in New York that the summer would do it – that in four months a man would come to some decision. He had visualized a house for them by the ocean, in a town with a library and a movie and other diversions. It had been a shock to discover how expensive summer rentals were and how far in advance you had to book them. When the last agent they saw described this place to them and told them how low the rent was, Malcolm had jumped at it immediately. But so had Virginia, even though there wasn't anything to do for distraction. In fact, she had made a point of asking the agent again about the location of the house, and the agent, a fat, gray man with ashes on his shirt, had said earnestly, "Mrs. Lawrence, if you're looking for a place where nobody will bother your husband from working, I can't think of anything better." Virginia had nodded decisively.

It had bothered her, his quitting the agency; he could understand that. Still, he wanted her to be happy, because he expected to be surer of what he wanted to do by the end of the summer. She was looking at him steadily now. He cast about for something to offer her that would interest her and change the mood between them. Then he remembered the scene he had witnessed earlier that evening. He told her about the man and his dogs, and this did raise her eyebrows.

"Do you remember the real-estate agent telling us anything about him?" she asked. "I don't."

Malcolm, searching through his memory, did recall that the agent had mentioned a custodian they could call on if there were any problems. At the time he had let it pass, because he couldn't imagine either agent or custodian really caring. Now he realized how dependent he and Virginia were out here if it came to things like broken plumbing or bad wiring, and the custodian's importance altered accordingly. "I guess he's the caretaker," he said.

"Oh."

"It makes sense – all this property has got to be worth something. If they didn't have Someone here, people would just carry stuff away or come and camp or something."

"I suppose they would. I guess the owners let him live here rent-free, and with those dogs he must do a good job."

"He'll get to keep it for a while, too," Malcolm said. "Whoever started to build here was a good ten years ahead of himself. I can't see anybody buying into these places until things have gotten completely jammed up closer to New York."

"So, he's holding the fort," Virginia said, leaning casually over the table to put a dish down before him. She glanced over his shoulder toward the living-room window, widened her eyes, and automatically touched the neckline of her housecoat, and then snorted at herself.

"Look, he can't possibly see in here," Malcolm said. "The living room, yes, but to look in here he'd have to be standing in the far corner of his yard. And he's back inside his house." He turned his head to look, and it was indeed true, except that one of the dogs was standing at that corner looking toward their house, eyes glittering. Then its head seemed to melt into a new shape, and it was looking down the road. It pivoted, moved a few steps away from the fence, turned, soared, landed in the street, and set off. Then, a moment later, it came back down the street running side by side with its companion, whose jaws were lightly pressed together around the rolled-over neck of a small paper bag. The dogs trotted together companionably and briskly, their flanks rubbing against one another, and when they were a few steps from the fence they leaped over it in unison and continued across the lawn until they were out of Malcolm's range of vision.

"For heaven's sake! He lives all alone with those dogs!" Virginia said.

Malcolm turned quickly back to her. "How do you come to think that?"

"Well, it's pretty plain. You saw what they were doing out there just now. They're his servants. He can't get around himself, so they run errands for him. If he had a wife, she would do it."

"You learned all that already?"

"Did you notice how happy they were?" Virginia asked. "There was no need for that other dog to go meet its friend. But it wanted to. They can't be anything but happy." Then she looked at Malcolm, and he saw the old, studying reserve coming back into her eyes.

"For Pete's sake! They're only dogs – what do they know about

anything?" Malcolm said.

"They know about happiness," Virginia said. "They know what they do in life."

Malcolm lay awake for a long time that night. He started by thinking about how good the summer was going to be, living here and working, and then he thought about the agency and about why he didn't seem to have the kind of shrewd, limited intuition that let a man do advertising work easily. At about four in the morning he wondered if perhaps he wasn't frightened, and had been frightened for a long time. None of this kind of thinking was new to him, and he knew that it would take him until late afternoon the following day to reach the point where he was feeling pretty good about himself.

When Virginia tried to wake him early the next morning he asked her to please leave him alone. At two in the afternoon, she brought him a cup of coffee and shook his shoulder. After a while, he walked out to the kitchen in his pajama pants and found that she had scrambled up some eggs for the two of them.

"What are your plans for the day?" Virginia said when he had finished eating.

He looked up. "Why?"

"Well, while you were sleeping, I put all your art things in the front bedroom. I think it'll make a good studio. With all your gear in there now, you can be pretty well set up by this evening."

At times she was so abrupt that she shocked him. It upset him that she might have been thinking that he wasn't planning to do anything at all today. "Look," he said, "you know I like to get the feel of a new thing."

"I know that. I didn't set anything up in there. I'm no artist. I just moved it all in."

When Malcolm had sat for a while without speaking, Virginia cleared away their plates and cups and went into the bedroom. She came out wearing a dress, and she had combed her hair and put on lipstick. "Well, you do what you want to," she said. "I'm going to go across the street and introduce myself."

A flash of irritability hit him, but then he said, "If you'll wait a minute, I'll get dressed and go with you. We might as well both meet him."

He got up and went back to the bedroom for a T-shirt and blue jeans

and a pair of loafers. He could feel himself beginning to react to pressure. Pressure always made him bind up; it looked to him as if Virginia had already shot the day for him.

They were standing at the fence, on the narrow strip of lawn between it and the row of whitewashed stones, and nothing was happening. Malcolm saw that although there was a gate in the fence, there was no break in the little grass border opposite it. And there was no front walk. The lawn was lush and all one piece, as if the house had been lowered onto it by helicopter. He began to look closely at the ground just inside the fence, and when he saw the regular pockmarks of the man's crutches, he was comforted.

"Do you see any kind of bell or anything?" Virginia asked.

"No."

"You'd think the dogs would bark."

"I'd just as soon they didn't."

"Will you look?" she said, fingering the gate latch. "The paint's hardly scuffed. I'll bet he hasn't been out of his yard all summer." Her touch rattled the gate lightly, and at that the two dogs came out from behind the house. One of them stopped, turned, and went back. The other dog came and stood by the fence, close enough for them to hear its breathing, and watched them with its head cocked alertly.

The front door of the house opened. At the doorway there was a wink of metal crutches, and then the man came out and stood on his front steps. When he had satisfied himself as to who they were, he nodded, smiled, and came toward them. The other dog walked beside him. Malcolm noticed that the dog at the fence did not distract himself by looking back at his master.

The man moved swiftly, crossing the ground with nimble swings of his body. His trouble seemed to be not in the spine, but in the legs themselves, for he was trying to help himself along with them. It could not be called walking, but it could not be called total helplessness either.

Although the man seemed to be in his late fifties, he had not gone to seed any more than his property had. He was wiry and clean-boned, and the skin on his face was tough and tanned. Around his small blue eyes and at the corners of his thin lips were many fine, deep-etched wrinkles. His yellowish-white hair was brushed straight back from his temples in the classic British military manner. And he even had a slight mustache. He was wearing a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbows, which

seemed a little warm for this kind of day, and a light flannel pale-gray shirt with a pale-blue bow tie. He stopped at the fence, rested his elbows on the crutches, and held out a firm hand with short nails the color of old bones.

"How do you do," he said pleasantly, his manner polished and well-bred. "I have been looking forward to meeting my new neighbors. I am colonel Ritchey." The dogs stood motionless, one to each side of him, their sharp black faces pointing outward.

"How do you do," Virginia said. "We are Malcolm and Virginia Lawrence."

"I'm very happy to meet you," colonel Ritchey said. "I was prepared to believe Cortelyou would fail to provide anyone this season."

Virginia was smiling. "What beautiful dogs," she said. "I was watching them last night."

"Yes. Their names are Max and Moritz. I'm very proud of them."

As they prattled on, exchanging pleasantries, Malcolm wondered why the colonel had referred to Cortelyou, the real-estate agent, as a provider. There was something familiar, too, about the colonel.

Virginia said, "You're the famous colonel Ritchey."

Indeed he was. Malcolm now realized, remembering the big magazine series that had appeared with the release of the movie several years before.

Colonel Ritchey smiled with no trace of embarrassment. "I am the famous colonel Ritchey, but you'll notice I certainly don't look much like that charming fellow in the motion picture."

"What in hell are you doing here?" Malcolm asked.

Ritchey turned his attention to him. "One has to live somewhere, you know."

Virginia said immediately, "I was watching the dogs last night, and they seemed to do very well for you. I imagine it's pleasant having them to rely on."

"Yes, it is, indeed. They're quite good to me, Max and Moritz. But it is much better with people here now. I had begun to be quite disappointed in Cortelyou."

Malcolm began to wonder whether the agent would have had the brass to call Ritchey a custodian if the colonel had been within earshot.

"Come in, please," the colonel was saying. The gate latch resisted him momentarily, but he rapped it sharply with the heel of one palm and then lifted it. "Don't be concerned about Max and Moritz – they never do anything they're not told."

"Oh, I'm not the least bit worried about them," Virginia said.

"Ah, to some extent you should have been," the colonel said. "Dobermans are not to be casually trusted, you know. It takes many months before one can be at all confident in dealing with them."

"But you trained them yourself, didn't you?" Virginia said.

"Yes, I did," colonel Ritchey said, with a pleased smile. "From imported pups." The voice in which he now spoke to the dogs was forceful, but as calm as his manner had been to Virginia. "Kennel," he said, and Max and Moritz stopped looking at Malcolm and Virginia and smoothly turned away.

The colonel's living room, which was as neat as a sample, contained beautifully cared for, somewhat old-fashioned furniture. The couch, with its needlepoint upholstery and carved framing, was the sort of thing Malcolm would have expected in a lady's living room. Angling out from one wall was a Morris chair, placed so that a man might relax and gaze across the street or, with a turn of his head, rest his eyes on the distant lights of New York. Oil paintings in heavy gilded frames depicted landscapes, great eye-stretching vistas of rolling, open country. The furniture in the room seemed sparse to Malcolm until it occurred to him that the colonel needed extra clearance to get around in and had no particular need to keep additional chairs for visitors.

"Please do sit down," the colonel said. "I shall fetch some tea to refresh us."

When he had left the room, Virginia said, "Of all people! Neighborly, too."

Malcolm nodded. "Charming," he said.

The colonel entered holding a silver tray perfectly steady, its edges grasped between his thumbs and forefingers, his other fingers curled around each of the projecting black-rubber handgrips of his crutches. He brought tea on the tray and, of all things, homemade cookies. "I must apologize for the tea service," he said, "but it seems to be the only one I have."

When the colonel offered the tray, Malcolm saw that the utensils were made of the common sort of sheet metal used to manufacture food cans.

Looking down now into his cup, he saw it had been enameled over its original tinplate, and he realized that the whole thing had been made literally from a tin can. The teapot – handle, spout, vented lid, and all – was the same. "Be damned – you made this for yourself at the prison camp, didn't you?"

"As a matter of fact, I did, yes. I was really quite proud of my handiwork at the time, and it still serves. Somehow, living as I do, I've never brought myself to replace it. It's amazing, the fuddy-duddy skills one needs in a camp and how important they become to one. I find myself repainting these poor objects periodically and still taking as much smug pleasure in it as I did when that attitude was quite necessary. One is allowed to do these things in my position, you know. But I do hope my ersatz Spode isn't uncomfortably hot in your fingers."

Virginia smiled. "Well, of course, it's trying to be." Malcolm was amazed. He hadn't thought Virginia still remembered how to act so coquettish. She hadn't grown apart from the girl who'd always attracted a lot of attention at other people's gallery openings; she had simply put that part of herself away somewhere else.

Colonel Ritchey's blue eyes were twinkling in response. He turned to Malcolm. "I must say, it will be delightful to share this summer with someone as charming as Mrs. Lawrence."

"Yes," Malcolm said, preoccupied now with the cup, which was distressing his fingers with both heat and sharp edges. "At least, I've always been well satisfied with her," he added.

"I've been noticing the inscription here," Virginia said quickly, indicating the meticulous freehand engraving on the tea tray. She read out loud, "'To Colonel David N. Ritchey, R.M.E., from his fellow officers at Oflag XXXIb, on the occasion of their liberation, May 14, 1945. Had he not been there to lead them, many would not have been present to share of this heartfelt token.'" Virginia's eyes shone, as she looked up at the colonel. "They must all have been very fond of you."

"Not all," the Colonel said, with a slight smile. "I was senior officer over a very mixed bag. Mostly younger officers gathered from every conceivable branch. No followers at all – just budding leaders, all personally responsible for having surrendered once already, some apathetic, others desperate. Some useful, some not. It was my job to weld them into a disciplined, responsive body, to choose whom we must keep safe and who was best suited to keeping the Jerries on the jump. And we were in, of course, from the time of Dunkirk to the last days of the war, with the

strategic situation in the camp constantly changing in various ways. All most of them understood was tactics – when they understood at all."

The Colonel grimaced briefly, then smiled again "The tray was presented by the survivors, of course. They'd had a tame Jerry pinch it out of the commandant's sideboard a few days earlier, in plenty of time to get the inscription on. But even the inscription hints that not all survived."

"It wasn't really like the movie, was it?" Virginia said.

"No, and yet – " Ritchey shrugged, as if remembering a time when he had accommodated someone on a matter of small importance. "That was a question of dramatic values, you must realize, and the need to tell an interesting and exciting story in terms recognizable to a civilian audience. Many of the incidents in the motion picture are literally true – they simply didn't happen in the context shown. The Christmas tunnel was quite real, obviously. I did promise the men I'd get at least one of them home for Christmas if they'd pitch in and dig it. But it wasn't a serious promise, and they knew it wasn't. Unlike the motion picture actor, I was not being fervent; I was being ironic.

"It was late in the war. An intelligent man's natural desire would be to avoid risk and wait for liberation. A great many of them felt exactly that way. In fact, many of them had turned civilian in their own minds and were talking about their careers outside, their families – all that sort of thing. So by couching in sarcasm trite words about Christmas tunnels, I was reminding them what and where they still were. The tactic worked quite well. Through devices of that sort, I was able to keep them from going to seed and coming out no use to anyone." The Colonel's expression grew absent. "Some of them called me 'The Shrew,'" he murmured. "That was in the movie, too, but they were all shown smiling when they said it."

"But it was your duty to hold them all together any way you could," Virginia said encouragingly.

Ritchey's face twisted into a spasm of tension so fierce that there might have been strychnine in his tea. But it was gone at once. "Oh, yes, yes, I held them together. But the expenditure of energy was enormous. And demeaning. It ought not to have made any difference that we were cut off from higher authority. If we had all still been home, there was not a man among the prisoners who would have dared not jump of my simplest command. But in the camp they could shilly-shally and evade; they could settle down into little private ambitions. People will do that. People will not hold true to common purposes unless they are shown discipline." The Colonel's uncompromising glance went from Virginia to Malcolm. "It's no

good telling people what they ought to do. The only surety is in being in a position to tell people what they must do."

"Get some armed guards to back you up. That the idea, Colonel? Get permission from the Germans to set up your own machine-gun towers inside the camp?" Malcolm liked working things out to the point of absurdity.

The Colonel appraised him imperturbably. "I was never quite that much my own man in Germany. But there is a little story I must tell you. It's not altogether off the point." He settled back, at ease once again.

"You may have been curious about Max and Moritz. The Germans, as you know, have always been fond of training dogs to perform all sons of entertaining and useful things. During the war the Jerries were very much given to using Dobermans for auxiliary guard duty at the various prisoner-of-war camps. In action, Mr. Lawrence, or simply in view, a trained dog is far more terrifying than any soldier with a machine pistol. It takes an animal to stop a man without hesitation, no matter if the man is cursing or praying.

"Guard dogs at each camp were under the charge of a man called the Hundfuhrer – the master of the hounds, if you will – whose function, after establishing himself with the dogs as their master and director, was to follow a few simple rules and to take the dogs to wherever they were needed. The dogs had been taught certain patrol routines. It was necessary only for the Hundfuhrer to give simple commands such as 'Search' or 'Arrest,' and the dogs would know what to do. Once we had seen them do it, they were very much on our minds, I assure you.

"A Doberman, you see, has no conscience, being a dog. And a trained Doberman has no discretion. From the time he is a puppy, he is bent to whatever purpose has been preordained for him. And the lessons are painful – and autocratic. Once an order has been given, it must be enforced at all costs, for the dog must learn that all orders are to be obeyed unquestioningly. That being true, the dog must also learn immediately and irrevocably that only the orders from one particular individual are valid. Once a Doberman has been trained, there is no way to retrain it. When the American soldiers were seen coming, the Germans in the machine-gun towers threw down their weapons and tried to flee, but the dogs had to be shot. I watched from the hospital window, and I shall never forget how they continued to leap at the kennel fencing until the last one was dead. Their Hundfuhrer had run away... ."

Malcolm found that his attention was wandering, but Virginia asked, as

if on cue, "How did you get into the hospital – was that the Christmas tunnel accident?"

"Yes," the Colonel said to Virginia, gentleman to lady. "The sole purpose of the tunnel was, as I said, to give the men a focus of attention. The war was near enough its end. It would have been foolhardy to risk actual escape attempts. But we did the thing up brown, of course. We had a concealed shaft, a tunnel lined with bed slats, a trolley for getting to and from the tunnel entrance, fat lamps made from shoe-blackening tins filled with margarine – all the normal appurtenances. The Germans at that stage were quite experienced in ferreting out this sort of operation, and the only reasonable assurance of continued progress was to work deeply and swiftly. Tunneling is always a calculated risk – the accounts of that sort of operation are biased in favor of the successes, of course.

"At any rate, by the end of November, some of the men were audibly thinking it was my turn to pitch in a bit, so one night I went down and began working. The shoring was as good as it ever was, and the conditions weren't any worse than normal. The air was breathable, and as long as one worked – ah – unclothed, and brushed down immediately on leaving the tunnel, the sand was not particularly damaging to one's skin. Clothing creates chafes in those circumstances. Sand burns coming to light at medical inspections were one of the surest signs that such an operation was under way.

"However that may be, I had been down there for about an hour and a half, and was about to start inching my way back up the tunnel, feetfirst on the trolley like some Freudian symbol, when there was a fall of the tunnel roof that buried my entire chest. It did not cover my face, which was fortunate and I clearly remember my first thought was that now none of the men would be able to feel the senior officer hadn't shared their physical tribulations. I discovered at once that the business of clearing the sand that had fallen was going to be extremely awkward. First, I had to scoop some extra clearance from the roof over my face. Handfuls of sand began falling directly on me, and all I could do about that was to thrash my head back and forth. I was becoming distinctly exasperated at that when the fat lamp attached to the shoring loosened from its fastenings and spilled across my thighs. The hot fat was quite painful. What made it rather worse was that the string wick was not extinguished by the fall, and accordingly, the entire lower part of my body between navel and knees, having been saturated with volatile fat..." The Colonel grimaced in embarrassment.

"Well, I was immediately in a very bad way, for there was nothing I

could do about the fire until I had dug my way past the sand on my chest. In due course, I did indeed free myself and was able to push my way backward up the tunnel after extinguishing the flames. The men at the shaft head had seen no reason to become alarmed – tunnels always smell rather high and sooty, as you can imagine. But they did send a man down when I got near the entrance shaft and made myself heard.

"Of course, there was nothing to do but tell the Jerries, since we had no facilities whatever for concealing my condition or treating it. They put me in the camp hospital, and there I stayed until the end of the war with plenty of time to lie about and think my thoughts. I was even able to continue exercising some control over my men. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if that hadn't been in the commandant's mind all along. I think he had come to depend on my presence to moderate the behavior of the men.

"That is really almost the end of the story. We were liberated by the American Army, and the men were sent home. I stayed in military hospitals until I was well enough to travel home, and there I dwelt in hotels and played the retired, invalided officer. After that journalist's book was published and the dramatic rights were sold, I was called to Hollywood to be the technical adviser for the movie. I was rather grateful to accept the employment, frankly – an officer's pension is not particularly munificent – and what with selectively lending my name and services to various organizations while my name was still before the public, I was able to accumulate a sufficient nest egg.

"Of course, I cannot go back to England, where the Inland Revenue would relieve me of most of it, but, having established a relationship with Mr. Cortelyou and acquired and trained Max and Moritz, I am content. A man must make his way as best he can and do whatever is required for survival." The Colonel cocked his head brightly and regarded Virginia and Malcolm. "Wouldn't you say?"

"Y– es," Virginia said slowly. Malcolm couldn't decide what the look on her face meant. He had never seen it before. Her eyes were shining, but wary. Her smile showed excitement and sympathy, but tension too. She seemed caught between two feelings.

"Quite!" the Colonel said, smacking his hands together. "It is most important to me that you fully understand the situation." He pushed himself up to his feet and, with the same move, brought the crutches out smoothly and positioned them to balance him before he could fall. He stood leaning slightly forward, beaming. "Well, now, having given my story. I imagine the objectives of this conversation are fully attained, and

there is no need to detain you here further. I'll see you to the front gate."

"That won't be necessary," Malcolm said.

"I insist," the Colonel said in what would have been a perfectly pleasant manner if he had added the animated twinkle to his eyes. Virginia was staring at him, blinking slowly.

"Please forgive us," she said. "We certainly hadn't meant to stay long enough to be rude. Thank you for the tea and cookies. They were very good."

"Not at all, my dear," the Colonel said. "It's really quite pleasant to think of looking across the way, now and then, and catching glimpses of someone so attractive at her domestic preoccupations. I cleaned up thoroughly after the last talents, of course, but there are always little personal touches one wants to apply. And you will start some plantings at the front of the house, won't you? Such little activities are quite precious to me – someone as charming as you, in her summer things, going about her little fussings and tendings, resting in the sun after weeding – that sort of thing. Yes, I expect a most pleasant summer. I assume there was never any question you wouldn't stay all summer. Conelyou would hardly bother with anyone who could not afford to pay him that much. But little more, eh?" The urbane, shrewd look returned to the Colonel's face. "Pinched resources and few ties, eh? Or what would you be doing here, if there were somewhere else to turn to?"

"Well, good afternoon, Colonel," Virginia said with noticeable composure. "Let's go, Malcolm."

"Interesting conversation, Colonel," Malcolm said.

"Interesting and necessary, Mr. Lawrence," the Colonel said, following them out onto the lawn. Virginia watched him closely as she moved toward the gate, and Malcolm noticed a little downward twitch at the corners of her mouth.

"Feeling a bit of a strain, Mrs. Lawrence?" the Colonel asked solicitously. "Please believe that I shall be as considerate of your sensibilities as intelligent care of my own comfort will permit. It is not at all in my code to offer offense to a lady, and in any case – " the Colonel smiled deprecatingly " – since the mishap of the Christmas tunnel, one might say the spirit is willing but... " The Colonel frowned down absently at his canes. "No, Mrs. Lawrence," he went on, shaking his head paternally, "is a flower the less for being breathed of? And is the cultivated flower, tended and nourished, not more fortunate than the wild rose that blushes unseen? Do not regret your present social situation too much,

Mrs. Lawrence; some might find it enviable. Few things are more changeable than points of view. In the coming weeks your viewpoint might well change."

"Just what the hell are you saying to my wife?" Malcolm asked.

Virginia said quickly, "We can talk about it later."

The Colonel smiled at Virginia. "Before you do that, I have something else to show Mr. Lawrence." He raised his voice slightly: "Max! Moritz! Here!" – and the dogs were there. "Ah, Mr. Lawrence, I would like to show you first how these animals respond, how discriminating they can be." He turned to one of the dogs. "Moritz," he said sharply, nodding toward Malcolm, "Kill."

Malcolm couldn't believe what he had heard. Then he felt a blow on his chest. The dog was on him, its hind legs making short, fast, digging sounds in the lawn as it pressed its body against him. It was inside the arc of his arms, and the most he could have done was to clasp it closer to him. He made a tentative move to pull his arms back and then push forward against its rib cage, but the minor shift in weight made him stumble, and he realized if he completed the gesture he would fall. All this happened in a very short time, and then the dog touched open lips with him. Having done that, it dropped down and went back to stand beside Colonel Ritchey and Max.

"You see, Mr. Lawrence?" the Colonel asked conversationally. "A dog does not respond to literal meaning. It is conditioned. It is trained to perform a certain action when it hears a certain sound. The cues one teaches a dog with pain and patience are not necessarily cues an educated organism can understand. Pavlov rang a bell and a dog salivated. Is a bell food? If he had rung a different bell, or said, 'Food, doggie,' there would have been no response. So, when I speak in a normal tone, rather than at command pitch, 'Kill' does not mean 'kiss,' even to Moritz. It means nothing to him – unless I raise my voice. And I could just as easily have conditioned him to perform that sequence in association with some other command – such as, oh, say, 'gingersnaps' – but then you might not have taken the point of my little instructive jest. There is no way anyone but myself can operate these creatures. Only when I command do they respond. And now you respond, eh, Mr. Lawrence? I dare say... Well, good day. As I said, you have things to do."

They left through the gate, which the Colonel drew shut behind them. "Max," he said, "watch," and the dog froze in position. "Moritz, come." The Colonel turned, and he and the other dog crossed the lawn and went

into his house.

Malcolm and Virginia walked at a normal pace back to the rented house, Malcolm matching his step to Virginia's. He wondered if she were being so deliberate because she wasn't sure what the dog would do if she ran. It had been a long time since Virginia hadn't been sure of something.

In the house, Virginia made certain the door was shut tight, and then she went to sit in the chair that faced away from the window. "Would you make me some coffee, please?" she said.

"All right, sure. Take a few minutes. Catch your breath a little."

"A few minutes is what I need," she said. "Yes, a few minutes, and everything will be fine." When Malcolm returned with the coffee, she continued. "He's got some kind of string on Cortelyou, and I bet those people at the store down at the corner have those dogs walking in and out of there all the time. He's got us. We're locked up."

"Now, wait," Malcolm said, "there's the whole state of New Jersey out there, and he can't – "

"Yes, he can. If he thinks he can get away with it, and he's got good reasons for thinking he can. Take it on faith. There's no bluff in him."

"Well, look," he said, "just what can he do to us?"

"Any damn thing he pleases."

"That can't be right." Malcolm frowned. "He's got us pretty well seated right now, but we ought to be able to work out some way of – "

Virginia said tightly, "The dog's still there, right?" Malcolm nodded. "Okay," she said. "What did it feel like when he hit you? It looked awful. It looked like he was going to drive you clear onto your back. Did it feel that way? What did you think?"

"Well, he's a pretty strong animal," Malcolm said. "But, to tell you the truth, I didn't have time to believe it. You know, a man just saying 'Kill' like that is a pretty hard thing to believe. Especially just after tea and cookies."

"He's very shrewd," Virginia said. "I can see why he had the camp guards running around in circles. He deserved to have a book written about him."

"All right, and then they should have thrown him into a padded cell."

"Tried to throw," Virginia amended.

"Oh, come on. This is his territory, and he dealt the cards before we even knew we were playing. But all he is is a crazy old cripple. If he wants to buffalo some people in a store and twist a two-bit real-estate salesman around his finger, fine – if he can get away with it. But he doesn't own us. We're not in his army."

"We're inside his prison camp," Virginia said.

"Now, look," Malcolm said. "When we walk in Cortelyou's door and tell him we know all about the Colonel, there's not going to be any trouble about getting the rent back. We'll find someplace else, or we'd go back to the city. But whatever we do to get out of this, it's going to work out a lot smoother if the two of us think about it. It's not like you to be sitting there and spending a lot of time on how we can't win."

"Well, Malcolm. Being a prisoner certainly brings out your initiative. Here you are, making noises just like a senior officer. Proposing escape committees and everything."

Malcolm shook his head. Now of all times, when they needed each other so much, she wouldn't let up. The thing to do was to move too fast for her.

"All right," he said, "let's get in the car." There was just the littlest bit of sweat on his upper lip.

"What?" He had her sitting up straight in the chair, at least. "Do you imagine that that dog will let us get anywhere near the car?"

"You want to stay here? All right. Just keep the door locked. I'm going to try it, and once I'm out I'm going to come back here with a nice healthy state cop carrying a nice healthy riot gun. And we're either going to do something about the Colonel and those two dogs, or we're at least going to move you and our stuff out of here."

He picked up the car keys, stepped through the front door very quickly, and began to walk straight for the car. The dog barked sharply, once. The front door of Ritchey's house opened immediately, and Ritchey called out, "Max! Hold!" The dog on the lawn was over the fence and had its teeth thrust carefully around Malcolm's wrist before he could take another eight steps, even though he had broken into a run. Both the dog and Malcolm stood very still. The dog was breathing shallowly and quietly, its eyes shining. Ritchey and Moritz walked as far as the front fence. "Now, Mr. Lawrence," Ritchey said, "in a moment I am going to call to Max, and he is to bring you with him. Do not attempt to hold back, or you will lacerate your wrist. Max! Bring here!"

Malcolm walked steadily toward the Colonel. By some smooth trick of

his neck, Max was able to trot alongside him without shifting his grip. "Very good, Max," Ritchey said soothingly when they had reached the fence. "Loose now," and the dog let go of Malcolm's wrist. Malcolm and Ritchey looked into each other's eyes across the fence, in the darkening evening. "Now Mr. Lawrence," Ritchey said, "I want you to give me your car keys." Malcolm held out the keys, and Ritchey put them into his pocket. "Thank you." He seemed to reflect on what he was going to say next, as a teacher might reflect on his reply to a child who has asked why the sky is blue. "Mr. Lawrence, I want you to understand the situation. As it happens, I also want a three-pound can of Crisco. If you will please give me all the money in your pocket, this will simplify matters."

"I don't have any money on me," Malcolm said. "Do you want me to go in the house and get some?"

"No, Mr. Lawrence, I'm not a thief. I'm simply restricting your radius of action in one of the several ways I'm going to do so. Please turn out your pockets."

Malcolm turned out his pockets.

"All right, Mr. Lawrence, if you will hand me your wallet and your address book and the thirty-seven cents, they will all be returned to you when ever you have a legitimate use for them." Ritchey put the items away in the pockets of his jacket. "Now, a three-pound-can of Crisco is ninety-eight cents. Here is a dollar bill. Max will walk with you to the corner grocery store, and you will buy the Crisco for me and bring it back. It is too much for a dog to carry in a bag, and it is three days until my next monthly delivery of staples. At the store you will please tell them that it will not be necessary for them to come here with monthly deliveries any longer – that you will be in to do my shopping for me from now on. I expect you to take a minimum amount of time to accomplish all this and to come back with my purchase, Mr. Lawrence. Max!" The Colonel nodded toward Malcolm. "Guard. Store." The dog trembled and whined. "Don't stand still, Mr. Lawrence. Those commands are incompatible until you start toward the store. If you fail to move, he will grow increasingly tense. Please go now. Moritz and I will keep Mrs. Lawrence good company until you return."

The store consisted of one small room in the front of a drab house. On unpainted pine shelves were brands of goods that Malcolm had never heard of. "Oh! You're with one of those nice dogs," the tired, plump woman behind the counter said, leaning down to pat Max, who had

approached her for that purpose. It seemed to Malcolm that the dog was quite mechanical about it and was pretending to itself that nothing caressed it at all. He looked around the place, but he couldn't see anything or anyone that offered any prospect of alliance with him.

"Colonel Ritchey wants a three-pound can of Crisco," he said, bringing the name out to check the reaction.

"Oh, you're helping him?"

"You could say that."

"Isn't he brave?" the woman said in low and confidential tones, as if concerned that the dog would overhear. "You know, there are some people who would think you should feel sorry for a man like that, but I say it would be a sin to do so. Why, he gets along just fine, and he's got more pride and spunk than any whole man I've ever seen. Makes a person proud to know him. You know, I think it's just wonderful the way these dogs come and fetch little things for him. But I'm glad he's got somebody to look out for him now. 'Cept for us, I don't think he sees anybody from one year to the next – 'cept summers, of course."

She studied Malcolm closely. "You're summer people too, aren't you? Well, glad to have you, if you're doin' some good for the Colonel. Those people last year were a shame. Just moved out one night in September, and neither the Colonel nor me or my husband seen hide nor hair of them since. Owed the Colonel a month's rent, he said when we was out there."

"Is he the landlord?" Malcolm asked.

"Oh, sure, yes. He owns a lot of land around here. Bought it from the original company after it went bust."

"Does he own this store, too?"

"Well, we lease it from him now. Used to own it, but we sold it to the company and leased it from them. Oh, we was all gonna be rich. My husband took the money from the land and bought a lot across the street and was gonna set up a real big gas station there – figured to be real shrewd – but you just can't get people to live out here. I mean, it isn't as if this was ocean-front property. But the Colonel now, he's got a head on his shoulders. Value's got to go up someday, and he's just gonna hold on until it does."

The dog was getting restless, and Malcolm was worried about Virginia. He paid for the can of Crisco, and he and Max went back up the sand road in the dark. There really, honestly, didn't seem to be much else to do. At his front door, he stopped, sensing that he should knock. When Virginia

let him in, he saw that she had changed to shorts and a halter. "Hello," she said, and then stood aside quietly for him and Max. The Colonel, sitting pertly forward on one of the chairs, looked up. "Ah, Mr. Lawrence, you're a trifle tardy, but the company has been delightful, and the moments seemed to fly."

Malcolm looked at Virginia. In the past couple of years, a little fat had accumulated above her knees, but she still had long, good legs. Colonel Ritchey smiled at Malcolm. "It's a rather close evening. I simply suggested to Mrs. Lawrence that I certainly wouldn't be offended if she left me for a moment and changed into something more comfortable."

It seemed to Malcolm that she could have handled that. But apparently she hadn't.

"Here's your Crisco," Malcolm said. "The change is in the bag."

"Thank you very much," the Colonel said. "Did you tell them about the grocery deliveries?"

Malcolm shook his head. "I don't remember. I don't think so. I was busy getting an earful about how you owned them, lock, stock, and barrel."

"Well, no harm. You can tell them tomorrow."

"Is there going to be some set time for me to run your errands every day, Colonel? Or are you just going to whistle whenever something comes up?"

"Ah, yes. You're concerned about interruptions in your mood. Mrs. Lawrence told me you were some sort of artist. I'd wondered at your not shaving this morning." the Colonel paused and then went on crisply. "I'm sure we'd shake down into whatever routine suits best. It always takes a few days for individuals to hit their stride as a group. After that, it's quite easy – regular functions, established duties, that sort of thing. A time to rise and wash, a time to work, a time to sleep. Everything and everyone in his proper niche. Don't worry, Mr. Lawrence, you'll be surprised how comfortable it becomes. Most people find it a revelation." The Colonel's gaze grew distant for a moment. "Some do not. Some are as if born on another planet, innocent of human nature. Dealing with that sort, there comes a point when one must cease to try; at the camp, I found that the energy for over-all success depended on my admiring the existence of the individual failure. No, some do not respond. But we needn't dwell on what time will tell us."

Ritchey's eyes twinkled. "I have dealt previously with creative people. Most of them need to work with their hands; do stupid, dull, boring work

that leaves their minds free to soar in spirals and yet forces them to stay away from their craft until the tension is nearly unbearable." The Colonel waved in the direction of the unbuilt houses. "There's plenty to do. If you don't know how to use a hammer and saw as yet, I know how to teach that. And when from time to time I see you've reached the proper pitch of creative frustration, then you shall have what time off I judge will best serve you artistically. I think you'll be surprised how pleasingly you'll take to your studio. From what I gather from your wife, this may well be a very good experience for you."

Malcolm looked at Virginia. "Yes. Well, that's been bugging her for a long time. I'm glad she's found a sympathetic ear."

"Don't quarrel with your wife, Mr. Lawrence. That sort of thing wastes energy and creates serious morale problems." The Colonel got to his feet and went to the door. "One thing no one could ever learn to tolerate in a fellow Kriegie was pettiness. That sort of thing was always weeded out. Come, Max. Come, Moritz. Good night!" He left.

Malcolm went over to the door and put the chain on. "Well?" he said.

"All right, now, look – "

Malcolm held up one finger. "Hold it. Nobody likes a quarrelsome Kriegie. We're not going to fight. We're going to talk, and we're going to think." He found himself looking at her halter and took his glance away. Virginia blushed.

"I just want you to know it was exactly the way he described it," she said. "He said he wouldn't think it impolite if I left him alone in the living room while I went to change. And I wasn't telling him our troubles. We were talking about what you did for a living, and it didn't take much for him to figure out – "

"I don't want you explaining," Malcolm said. "I want you to help me tackle this thing and get it solved."

"How are you going to solve it? This is a man who always uses everything he's got! He never quits! How is somebody like you going to solve that?"

All these years, it occurred to Malcolm, at a time like this, now, she finally had to say the thing you couldn't make go away.

When Malcolm did not say anything at all for a while but only walked around frowning and thinking, Virginia said she was going to sleep. In a sense, he was relieved; a whole plan of action was forming in his mind,

and he did not want her there to badger him.

After she had closed the bedroom door, he went into the studio. In a corner was a carton of his painting stuff, which he now approached, detached but thinking. From this room he could see the floodlights on around the Colonel's house. The Colonel had made his circuit of the yard, and one of the dogs stood at attention, looking across the way. The setting hadn't altered at all from the night before. Setting, no, Malcolm thought, bouncing a jar of brown tempera in his hand; mood, si. His arm felt good all the way down from his shoulder, into the forearm, wrist, and fingers.

When Ritchey had been in his house a full five minutes, Malcolm said to himself aloud, "Do first, analyze later." Whipping open the front door, he took two steps forward on the bare earth to gather momentum and pitched the jar of paint in a shallow arc calculated to end against the aluminum fence.

It was going to fall short, Malcolm thought, and it did, smashing with a loud impact against one of the whitewashed stones and throwing out a fan of gluey, brown spray over the adjacent stones, the fence, and the dog, which jumped back but, lacking orders to charge, stood its ground, whimpering. Malcolm stepped back into his open doorway and leaned in it. When the front door of Ritchey's house opened he put his thumbs to his ears and waggled his fingers, "Gute Nacht, Herr Kommandant," he called, then stepped back inside and slammed and locked the door, throwing the spring-bolt latch. The dog was already on its way. It loped across the yard and scraped its front paws against the other side of the door. Its breath sounded like giggling.

Malcolm moved over to the window. The dog sprang away from the door with a scratching of toenails and leaped upward, glancing off the glass. It turned, trotted away for a better angle, and tried again. Malcolm watched it; this was the part he'd bet on.

The dog didn't make it. Its jaws flattened against the pane, and the whole sheet quivered, but there was too much going against success. The window was pretty high above the yard, and the dog couldn't get a proper combination of momentum and angle of impact. If he did manage to break it, he'd never have enough momentum left to clear the break; he'd fall on the sharp edges of glass in the frame while other chunks fell and cut his neck, and then the Colonel would be down to one dog. One dog wouldn't be enough; the system would break down somewhere.

The dog dropped down, leaving nothing on the glass but a wet brown smear.

It seemed to Malcolm equally impossible for the Colonel to break the window himself. He couldn't stride forward to throw a small stone hard enough to shatter the pane, and he couldn't balance well enough to heft a heavy one from nearby. The lock and chain would prevent him from entering through the front door. No, it wasn't efficient for the Colonel any way you looked at it. He would rather take a few days to think of something shrewd and economical. In fact, he was calling the dog back now. When the dog reached him, he shifted one crutch and did his best to kneel while rubbing the dog's head. There was something rather like affection in the scene. Then the Colonel straightened up and called again. The other dog came out of the house and took up its station at the corner of the yard. The Colonel and the dirty dog went back into the Colonel's house.

Malcolm smiled, then turned out the lights, double-checked the locks, and went back through the hall to the bedroom. Virginia was sitting up in bed, staring in the direction from which the noise had come.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Oh, changed the situation a little," Malcolm said, grinning. "Asserted my independence. Shook up the Colonel. Smirched his neatness a little bit. Spoiled his night's sleep for him, I hope. Standard Kriegie tactics. I hope he likes them."

Virginia was incredulous. "Do you know what he could do to you with those dogs if you step outside this house?"

"I'm not going to step outside. Neither are you. We're just going to wait a few days."

"What do you mean?" Virginia said, looking at him as if he were the maniac.

"Day after tomorrow, maybe the day after that," Malcolm explained, "he's due for a grocery delivery I didn't turn off. Somebody's going to be here with a car then, lugging all kinds of things. I don't care how beholden those storekeepers are to him; when we come out the door, he's not going to have those dogs tear us to pieces right on the front lawn in broad daylight and with a witness. We're going to get into the grocery car, and sooner or later we're going to drive out in it, because that car and driver have to turn up in the outside world again."

Virginia sighed. "Look," she said with obvious control, "all he has to do is send a note with the dogs. He can stop the delivery that way."

Malcolm nodded. "Uh-huh. And so the groceries don't come. Then

what? He starts trying to freight flour and eggs in here by dog back? By remote control? What's he going to do? All right, so it doesn't work out so neatly in two or three days. But we've got a fresh supply of food, and he's almost out. Unless he's planning to live on Crisco, he's in a bad way. And even so, he's only got three pounds of that." Malcolm got out of his clothes and lay down on the bed. "Tomorrow's another day, but I'll be damned if I'm going to worry any more about it tonight. I've got a good head start on frustrating the legless wonder, and tomorrow I'm going to have a nice clear mind, and I'm going to see what other holes I can pick in his defense. I learned a lot of snide little tricks from watching jolly movies about clever prisoners and dumb guards." He reached up and turned out the bed light. "Good night, love," he said. Virginia rolled away from him in the dark. "Oh, my God," she said in a voice with a brittle edge around it. It was a sad thing for Malcolm to lie there thinking that she had that kind of limitation in her, that she didn't really understand what had to be done. On the other hand, he thought sleepily, feeling more relaxed than he had in years, he had his own limitations. And she had put up with them for years. He fell asleep wondering pleasantly what tomorrow would bring.

He woke to a sound of rumbling and crunching under the earth, as if there were teeth at the foundations of the house. Still sleeping in large portions of his brain, he cried out silently to himself with a madman's lucidity, "Ah, of course, he's been tunneling!" And his mind gave him all the details – the careful transfer of supporting timber from falling houses, the disposal of the excavated clay in the piles beside the other foundations, too, for when the Colonel had more people...

Now one corner of the room showed a jagged line of yellow, and Malcolm's hands sprang to the light switch. Virginia jumped from sleep. In the corner was a trap door, its uneven joints concealed by boards of different lengths. The trap door crashed back, releasing a stench of body odor and soot. A dog popped up through the opening and scrambled into the bedroom. Its face and body were streaked, and it shook itself to get the sand from its coat. Behind it, the Colonel dragged himself up, naked, and braced himself on his arms, half out of the tunnel mouth. His hair was matted down with perspiration over his narrow-boned skull. He was mottled yellow-red with dirt, and half in the shadows. Virginia buried her face in her hands, one eye glinting out between spread fingers, and cried to Malcolm, "Oh my God, what have you done to us?"

"Don't worry, my dear," the Colonel said crisply to her. Then he screamed at Malcolm, "I will not be abused!" Trembling with strain as he

braced on one muscle-corded arm, he pointed at Malcolm. He said to the dog at command pitch: "Kiss!"

© 1966, Curtis Publications Inc.

Never Meet Again

The breeze soughed through the linden trees. It was warm and gentle as it drifted along the boulevard. It tugged at the dresses of the girls strolling with their young men and stirred their modishly cut hair. It set the banners atop the government buildings to flapping, and it brought with it the sound of a jet aircraft – a Heinkel or a Messerschmitt – rising into the sky from Tempelhof Aerodrome. But when it touched Professor Kempfer on his bench it brought only the scent of the Parisian perfumes and the sight of gaily colored frocks swaying around the girls' long, healthy legs.

Doctor Professor Kempfer straightened his exhausted shoulders and raised his heavy head. His deep, strained eyes struggled to break through their now habitual dull stare.

It was spring again, he realized in faint surprise. The pretty girls were eating their lunches hastily once more, so that they and their young men could stroll along Unter Den Linden, and the young men in the broad-shouldered jackets were clear-eyed and full of their own awakening strength.

And of course Professor Kempfer wore no overcoat today. He was not quite the comic pedant who wore his galoshes in the sunshine. It was only that he had forgotten, for the moment. The strain of these last few days had been very great.

All these months – these years – he had been doing his government-subsidized research and the other thing, too. Four or five hours for the government, and then a full day on the much more important thing no one knew about. Twelve, sixteen hours a day. Home to his very nice government apartment, where Frau Ritter, the housekeeper, had his supper ready. The supper eaten, to bed. And in the morning; cocoa, a bit of pastry, and to work. At noon he would leave his laboratory for a little while, to come here and eat the slice of black bread and cheese

Frau Ritter had wrapped in waxed paper and put in his pocket before he left the house.

But it was over, now. Not the government sinecure – that was just made work for the old savant who, after all, held the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross for his work with the anti-submarine radar detector. That, of course, had been fifteen years ago. If they could not quite pension him off, still no one expected anything of a feeble old man pattering around the apparatus they had given him to play with.

And they were right, of course. Nothing would ever come of it. But the other thing...

That was done, now. After this last little rest he would go back to his laboratory in the Himmlerstrasse and take the final step. So now he could let himself relax and feel the warmth of the sun.

Professor Kempfer smiled wearily at the sunshine. The good, constant sun, he thought, that gives of itself to all of us, no matter who or where we are. Spring... April, 1958.

Had it really been fifteen years – and sixteen years since the end of the war? It didn't seem possible. But then one day had been exactly like another for him, with only an electric light in the basement where his real apparatus was, an electric light that never told him whether it was morning, noon, or night.

I have become a cave-dweller! he thought with sudden realization. I have forgotten to think in terms of serial time. What an odd little trick I have played on myself!

Had he really been coming here, to this bench, every clear day for fifteen years? Impossible! But...

He counted on his fingers. 1940 was the year England had surrendered, with its air force destroyed and the Luftwaffe flying unchallenged air cover for the swift invasion. He had been sent to England late that year, to supervise the shipment home of the ultra-short-wave radar from the Royal Navy's anti-submarine warfare school. And 1941 was the year the U-boats took firm control of the Atlantic. 1942 was the year the Russians lost at Stalingrad, starved by the millions, and surrendered to a Wehrmacht fed on shiploads of Argentinian beef. 1942 was the end of the war, yes.

So it had been that long.

I have become an indrawn old man, he thought to himself in bemusement. So very busy with myself... and the world has gone by, even while I sat here and might have watched it, if I'd taken the trouble. The

world...

He took the sandwich from his coat pocket, unwrapped it, and began to eat. But after the first few bites he forgot it, and held it in one hand while he stared sightlessly in front of him.

His pale, mobile lips fell into a wry smile. The world – the vigorous young world, so full of strength, so confident... while I worked in my cellar like some Bolshevik dreaming of a fantastic bomb that would wipe out all my enemies at a stroke.

But what I have is not a bomb, and I have no enemies. I am an honored citizen of the greatest empire the world has ever known. Hitler is thirteen years dead in his auto accident, and the new chancellor is a different sort of man. He has promised us no war with the Americans. We have peace, and triumph, and these create a different sort of atmosphere than do war and desperation. We have relaxed, now. We have the fruits of our victory – what do we not have, in our empire of a thousand years? Western civilization is safe at last from the hordes of the East. Our future is assured. There is nothing, no one to fight, and these young people walking here have never known a moment's doubt, an instant's question of their place in an endlessly bright tomorrow. I will soon die, and the rest of us who knew the old days will die soon enough. It will all belong to the young people – all this eternal world. It belongs to them already. It is just that some of us old ones have not yet gotten altogether out of the way.

He stared out at the strolling crowds. How many years can I possibly have left to me? Three? Two? Four? I could die tomorrow.

He sat absolutely still for a moment, listening to the thick old blood slurring through his veins, to the thready flutter of his heart. It hurt his eyes to see. It hurt his throat to breathe. The skin of his hands was like spotted old paper.

Fifteen years of work. Fifteen years in his cellar, building what he had built – for what? Was his apparatus going to change anything? Would it detract even one trifle from this empire? Would it alter the life of even one citizen in that golden tomorrow?

This world would go on exactly as it was. Nothing would change in the least. So, what had he worked for? For himself? For this outworn husk of one man?

Seen in that light, he looked like a very stupid man. Stupid, foolish – monomaniacal.

Dear God, he thought with a rush of terrible intensity, am I now going

to persuade myself not to use what I have built?

For all these years he had worked, worked – without stopping, without thinking. Now, in this first hour of rest, was he suddenly going to spit on it all?

A stout bulk settled on the bench beside him. "Jochim," the complacent voice said.

Professor Kempfer looked up. "Ah, Georg!" he said with an embarrassed laugh, "You startled me."

Doctor Professor Georg Tanzler guffawed heartily. "Oh, Jochim, Jochim!" he chuckled, shaking his head. "What a type you are! A thousand times I've found you here at noon, and each time it seems as if it surprises you. What do you think about, here on your bench?"

Professor Kempfer let his eyes stray. "Oh, I don't know," he said gently. "I look at the young people."

"The girls—" Tanzler's elbow dug roguishly into his side. "The girls, eh, Jochim?"

A veil drew over Professor Kempfer's eyes. "No," he whispered. "Not like that. No."

"What, then?"

"Nothing," Professor Kempfer said dully. "I look at nothing."

Tanzler's mood changed instantly. "So," he declared with precision. "I thought as much. Everyone knows you are working night and day, even though there is no need for it." Tanzler resurrected a chuckle. "We are not in any great hurry now. It's not as if we were pressed by anyone. The Australians and Canadians are fenced off by our navy. The Americans have their hands full in Asia. And your project, whatever it may be, will help no one if you kill yourself with overwork."

"You know there is no project," Professor Kempfer whispered. "You know it is all just busy work. No one reads my reports. No one checks my results. They give me the equipment I ask for, and do not mind, as long as it is not too much. You know that quite well. Why pretend otherwise?"

Tanzler sucked his lips. Then he shrugged. "Well, if you realize, then you realize," he said cheerfully. Then he changed expression again, and laid his hand on Professor Kempfer's arm in comradely fashion. "Jochim. It has been fifteen years. Must you still try to bury yourself?"

Sixteen, Professor Kempfer corrected, and then realized Tanzler was not thinking of the end of the war. Sixteen years: since then, yes, but fifteen

since Marthe died. Only fifteen?

I must learn to think in terms of serial time again. He realized Tanzler was waiting for a response, and mustered a shrug.

"Jochim! Have you been listening to me?"

"Listening? Of course, Georg."

"Of course!" Tanzler snorted, his moustaches fluttering. "Jochim," he said positively, "it is not as if we were young men, I admit. But life goes on, even for us old crocks." Tanzler was a good five years Kempfer's junior. "We must look ahead – we must live for a future. We cannot let ourselves sink into the past. I realize you were very fond of Marthe. Every man is fond of his wife – that goes without saying. But fifteen years, Jochim! Surely, it is proper to grieve. But to mourn, like this – this is not healthy!"

One bright spark singed through the quiet barriers Professor Kempfer had thought perfect. "Were you ever in a camp, Georg?" he demanded, shaking with pent-up violence.

"A camp?" Tanzler was taken aback. "I? Of course not, Jochim! But – but you and Marthe were not in a real lager – it was just a... a... Well, you were under the State's protection! After all, Jochim!"

Professor Kempfer said stubbornly: "But Marthe died. Under the State's protection."

"These things happen, Jochim! After all, you're a reasonable man – Marthe – tuberculosis – even sulfa has its limitations – that might have happened to anyone!"

"She did not have tuberculosis in 1939, when we were placed under the State's protection. And when I finally said yes, I would go to work for them, and they gave me the radar detector to work on, they promised me it was only a little congestion in her bronchiae and that as soon as she was well they would bring her home. And the war ended, and they did not bring her home. I was given the Knight's Cross from Hitler's hands, personally, but they did not bring her home. And the last time I went to the sanitarium to see her, she was dead. And they paid for it all, and gave me my laboratory here, and an apartment, and clothes, and food, and a very good housekeeper, but Marthe was dead."

"Fifteen years, Jochim! Have you not forgiven us?"

"No. For a little while today – just a little while ago – I thought I might. But – no."

Tanzler puffed out his lips and fluttered them with an exhaled breath.

"So," he said. "What are you going to do to us for it?"

Professor Kempfer shook his head. "To you? What should I do to you? The men who arranged these things are all dead, or dying. If I had some means of hurting the Reich – and I do not – how could I revenge myself on these children?" He looked toward the passersby. "What am I to them, or they to me? No – no, I am going to do nothing to you."

Tanzler raised his eyebrows and put his thick fingertips together. "If you are going to do nothing to us, then what are you going to do to yourself?"

"I am going to go away." Already, Professor Kempfer was ashamed of his outburst. He felt he had controverted his essential character. A man of science, after all – a thinking, reasoning man – could not let himself descend to emotional levels. Professor Kempfer was embarrassed to think that Tanzler might believe this sort of lapse was typical of him.

"Who am I," he tried to explain, "to be judge and jury over a whole nation – an empire? Who is one man, to decide good and evil? I look at these youngsters, and I envy them with all my heart. To be young; to find all the world arranged in orderly fashion for one's special benefit; to have been placed on a surfboard, free to ride the crest of the wave forever, and never to have to swim at all! Who am I, Georg? Who am I?"

"But I do not like it here. So I am going away."

Tanzler looked at him enigmatically. "To Carlsbad. For the radium waters. Very healthful. We'll go together." He began pawing Professor Kempfer's arm with great heartiness. "A splendid idea! I'll get the seats reserved on the morning train. We'll have a holiday, eh, Jochim?"

"No!" He struggled to his feet, pulling Tanzler's hand away from his arm. "No!" He staggered when Tanzler gave way. He began to walk fast, faster than he had walked in years. He looked over his shoulder, and saw Tanzler lumbering after him.

He began to run. He raised an arm. "Taxi! Taxi!" He lurched toward the curb, while the strolling young people looked at him wide-eyed.

He hurried through the ground floor laboratory, his heart pumping wildly. His eyes were fixed on the plain gray door to the fire stairs, and he fumbled in his trousers pocket for the key. He stumbled against a bench and sent apparatus crashing over. At the door, he steadied himself and, using both hands, slipped the key into the lock. Once through the door, he slammed it shut and locked it again, and listened to the hoarse whistle of

his breath in his nostrils.

Then, down the fire stairs he clattered, open-mouthed. Tanzler. Tanzler would be at a telephone, somewhere. Perhaps the State Police were out in the streets, in their cars, coming here, already.

He wrenched open the basement door, and locked it behind him in the darkness before he turned on the lights. With his chest aching, he braced himself on widespread feet and looked at the dull sheen of yellow light on the racks of gray metal cabinets. They rose about him like the blocks of a Mayan temple, with dials for carvings and pilot lights for jewels, and he moved down the narrow aisle between them, slowly and quietly now, like a last, enfeebled acolyte. As he walked he threw switches, and the cabinets began to resonate in chorus.

The aisle led him, irrevocably, to the focal point. He read what the dials on the master panel told him, and watched the power demand meter inch into the green.

If they think to open the building circuit breakers!

If they shoot through the door!

If I was wrong!

Now there were people hammering on the door. Desperately weary, he depressed the firing switch.

There was a galvanic thrum, half pain, half pleasure, as the vibratory rate of his body's atoms was changed by an infinitesimal degree. Then he stood in dank darkness, breathing musty air, while whatever parts of his equipment had been included in the field fell to the floor.

Behind him, he left nothing. Vital resistors had, by design, come with him. The overloaded apparatus in the basement laboratory began to stench and burn under the surge of full power, and to sputter in Georg Tanzler's face.

The basement he was in was not identical with the one he had left. That could only mean that in this Berlin, something serious had happened to at least one building on the Himmlerstrasse. Professor Kempfer searched through the darkness with weary patience until he found a door, and while he searched he considered the thought that some upheaval, manmade or natural, had filled in the ground for dozens of meters above his head, leaving only this one pocket of emptiness into which his apparatus had shunted him.

When he finally found the door he leaned against it for some time, and then he gently eased it open. There was nothing but blackness on the other

side, and at his first step he tripped and sprawled on a narrow flight of stairs, bruising a hip badly. He found his footing again. On quivering legs he climbed slowly and as silently as he could, clinging to the harsh, newly sawed wood of the banister. He could not seem to catch his breath. He had to gulp for air, and the darkness was shot through with red swirlings.

He reached the top of the stairs, and another door. There was harsh gray light seeping around it, and he listened intently, allowing for the quick suck and thud of the pulse in his ears. When he heard nothing for a long time, he opened it. He was at the end of a long corridor lined with doors, and at the end there was another door opening on the street.

Eager to get out of the building, and yet reluctant to leave as much as he knew of this world, he moved down the corridor with exaggerated caution.

It was a shoddy building. The paint on the walls was cheap, and the linoleum on the floor was scuffed and warped. There were cracks in the plastering. Everything was rough – half finished, with paint slapped over it, everything drab. There were numbers on the doors, and dirty rope mats in front of them. It was an apartment house, then – but from the way the doors were jammed almost against each other, the apartments had to be no more than cubicles.

Dreary, he thought. Dreary, dreary – who would live in such a place? Who would put up an apartment house for people of mediocre means in this neighborhood?

But when he reached the street, he saw that it was humpy and cobblestoned, the cobbling badly patched, and that all the buildings were like this one – gray-faced, hulking, ugly. There was not a building he recognized – not a stick or stone of the Himmlerstrasse with its fresh cement roadway and its sapling trees growing along the sidewalk. And yet he knew he must be on the exact spot where the Himmlerstrasse had been – was – and he could not quite understand.

He began to walk in the direction of Unter Den Linden. He was far from sure he could reach it on foot, in his condition, but he would pass through the most familiar parts of the city, and could perhaps get some inkling of what had happened.

He had suspected that the probability world his apparatus could most easily adjust him for would be one in which Germany had lost the war. That was a large, dramatic difference, and though he had refined his work as well as he could, any first model of any equipment was bound to be relatively insensitive.

But as he walked along, he found himself chilled and repelled by what he saw.

Nothing was the same. Nothing. Even the layout of the streets had changed a little. There were new buildings every where – new buildings of a style and workmanship that had made them old in atmosphere the day they were completed. It was the kind of total reconstruction that he had no doubt the builders stubbornly proclaimed was "Good as New," because to say it was as good as the old Berlin would have been to invite bitter smiles.

The people in the streets were grim, gray-faced, and shoddy. They stared blankly at him and his suit, and once a dumpy woman carrying a string bag full of lumpy packages turned to her similar companion and muttered as he passed that he looked like an American with his extravagant clothes.

The phrase frightened him. What kind of war had it been, that there would still be Americans to be hated in Berlin in 1958? How long could it possibly have lasted, to account for so many old buildings gone? What had pounded Germany so cruelly? And yet even the "new" buildings were genuinely some years old. Why an American? Why not an Englishman or Frenchman?

He walked the gray streets, looking with a numb sense of settling shock at this grim Berlin. He saw men in shapeless uniform caps, brown trousers, cheap boots and sleazy blue shirts. They wore armbands with Volkspolizei printed on them. Some of them had not bothered to shave this morning or to dress in fresh uniforms. The civilians looked at them sidelong and then pretended not to have seen them. For an undefinable but well-remembered reason, Professor Kempfer slipped by them as inconspicuously as possible.

He grappled at what he saw with the dulled resources of his overtired intellect, but there was no point of reference with which to begin. He even wondered if perhaps the war was somehow still being fought, with unimaginable alliances and unthinkable antagonists, with all resources thrown into a brutal, dogged struggle from which all hope of both defeat and victory were gone, and only endless straining effort loomed up from the future.

Then he turned the corner and saw the stubby military car, and soldiers in baggy uniforms with red stars on their caps. They were parked under a weatherbeaten sign which read, in German above a few lines in unreadable Cyrillic characters: Attention! You Are Leaving the U.S.S.R.

Zone of Occupation. You Are Entering the American Zone of Occupation. Show Your Papers.

God in heaven! he thought, recoiling. The Bolsheviks. And he was on their side of the line. He turned abruptly, but did not move for an instant. The skin of his face felt tight. Then he broke into a stumbling walk, back the way he had come.

He had not come into this world blindly. He had not dared bring any goods from his apartment, of course. Not with Frau Ritter to observe him. Nor had he expected that his Reichsmarks would be of any use. He had provided for this by wearing two diamond-set rings. He had expected to have to walk down to the jewelry district before he could begin to settle into this world, but he had expected no further difficulty.

He had expected Germany to have lost the war. Germany had lost another war within his lifetime, and fifteen years later it would have taken intense study for a man in his present position to detect it.

Professor Kempfer had thought it out, slowly, systematically. He had not thought that a Soviet checkpoint might lie between him and the jewelry district.

It was growing cold, as the afternoon settled down. It had not been as warm a day to begin with, he suspected, as it had been in his Berlin. He wondered how it might be, that Germany's losing a war could change the weather, but the important thing was that he was shivering. He was beginning to attract attention not only for his suit but for his lack of a coat.

He had now no place to go, no place to stay the night, no way of getting food. He had no papers, and no knowledge of where to get them or what sort of maneuver would be required to keep him safe from arrest. If anything could save him from arrest. By Russians.

Professor Kempfer began to walk with dragging steps, his body sagging and numb. More and more of the passersby were looking at him sharply. They might well have an instinct for a hunted man. He did not dare look at the occasional policeman.

He was an old man. He had run today, and shaken with nervous anticipation, and finished fifteen years' work, and it had all been a nightmarish error. He felt his heart begin to beat unnaturally in his ears, and he felt a leaping flutter begin in his chest. He stopped, and swayed, and then he forced himself to cross the sidewalk so he could lean against a building. He braced his back and bent his knees a little, and let his hands dangle at his sides.

The thought came to him that there was an escape for him into one more world. His shoulder-blades scraped a few centimeters downward against the wall.

There were people watching him. They ringed him in at a distance of about two meters, looking at him with almost childish curiosity. But there was something about them that made Professor Kempfer wonder at the conditions that could produce such children. As he looked back at them, he thought that perhaps they all wanted to help him – that would account for their not going on about their business. But they did not know what sort of complications their help might bring to them – except that there would certainly be complications. So none of them approached him. They gathered around him, watching, in a crowd that would momentarily attract a volkspolizier.

He looked at them dumbly, breathing as well as he could, his palms flat against the wall. There were stocky old women, round-shouldered men, younger men with pinched faces, and young girls with an incalculable wisdom in their eyes. And there was a bird-like older woman, coming quickly along the sidewalk, glancing at him curiously, then hurrying by, skirting around the crowd....

There was one possibility of his escape to this world that Professor Kempfer had not allowed himself to consider. He pushed himself away from the wall, scattering the crowd as though by physical force, and lurched toward the passing woman.

"Marthe!"

She whirled, her purse flying to the ground. Her hand went to her mouth. She whispered, through her knuckles: "Jochim... Jochim..." He clutched her, and they supported each other. "Jochim... the American bombers killed you in Hamburg... yesterday I sent money to put flowers on your grave... Jochim..."

"It was a mistake. It was all a mistake. Marthe... we have found each other..."

From a distance, she had not changed very much at all. Watching her move about the room as he lay, warm and clean, terribly tired, in her bed, he thought to himself that she had not aged half as much as he. But when she bent over him with the cup of hot soup in her hand, he saw the sharp lines in her face, around her eyes and mouth, and when she spoke he heard the dry note in her voice.

How many years? he thought. How many years of loneliness and grief? When had the Americans bombed Hamburg? How? What kind of aircraft could bomb Germany from bases in the Western Hemisphere?

They had so much to explain to each other. As she worked to make him comfortable, the questions flew between them.

"It was something I stumbled on. The theory of probability worlds – of alternate universes. Assuming that the characteristic would be a difference in atomic vibration – minute, you understand; almost infinitely minute – assuming that somewhere in the gross universe every possible variation of every event must take place – then if some means could be found to alter the vibratory rate within a field, then any object in that field would automatically become part of the universe corresponding to that vibratory rate...

"Marthe, I can bore you later. Tell me about Hamburg. Tell me how we lost the war. Tell me about Berlin."

He listened while she told him how their enemies had ringed them in – how the great white wastes of Russia had swallowed their men, and the British fire bombers had murdered children in the night. How the Wehrmacht fought, and fought, and smashed their enemies back time after time, until all the best soldiers were dead. And how the Americans with their dollars, had poured out countless tons of equipment to make up for their inability to fight. How, at the last, the vulture fleets of bombers had rumbled inexhaustibly across the sky, killing, killing, killing, until all the German homes and German families had been destroyed. And how now the Americans, with their hellish bomb that had killed a hundred thousand Japanese civilians, now bestrode the world and tried to bully it, with their bombs and their dollars, into final submission.

How? Professor Kempfer thought. How could such a thing have happened?

Slowly, he pieced it together, mortified to find himself annoyed when Marthe interrupted with constant questions about his Berlin and especially about his equipment.

And, pieced together, it still refused to seem logical.

How could anyone believe that Goering, in the face of all good sense, would turn the Luftwaffe from destroying the R.A.F. bases to a ridiculous attack on English cities? How could anyone believe that German electronics scientists could persistently refuse to believe ultra-shortwave radar was practical – refuse to believe it even when the Allied hunter planes were finding surfaced submarines at night with terrible accuracy?

What kind of nightmare world was this, with Germany divided and the Russians in control of Europe, in control of Asia, reaching for the Middle East that no Russian, not even the dreaming czars, had seriously expected ever to attain?

"Marthe – we must get out of this place. We must. I will have to rebuild my machine." It would be incredibly difficult. Working clandestinely as he must, scraping components together – even now that the work had been done once, it would take several years.

Professor Kempfer looked inside himself to find the strength he would need. And it was not there. It simply was gone, used up, burnt out, eaten out.

"Marthe, you will have to help me. I must take some of your strength. I will need so many things – identity papers, some kind of work so we can eat, money to buy equipment..." His voice trailed away. It was so much, and there was so little time left for him. Yet, somehow, they must do it.

A hopelessness, a feeling of inevitable defeat, came over him. It was this world. It was poisoning him.

Marthe's hand touched his brow. "Hush, Jochim. Go to sleep. Don't worry. Everything is all right, now. My poor Jochim, how terrible you look! But everything will be all right. I must go back to work, now. I am hours late already. I will come back as soon as I can. Go to sleep, Jochim."

He let his breath out in a long, tired sigh. He reached up and touched her hand. "Marthe..."

He awoke to Marthe's soft urging. Before he opened his eyes he had taken her hand from his shoulder and clasped it tightly. Marthe let the contact linger for a moment, then broke it gently.

"Jochim – my superior at the Ministry is here to see you."

He opened his eyes and sat up. "Who?"

"Colonel Lubintsev, from the People's Government Ministerium, where I work. He would like to speak to you." She touched him reassuringly.

"Don't worry. It's all right. I spoke to him – I explained. He's not here to arrest you. He's waiting in the other room."

He looked at Marthe dumbly. "I– I must get dressed," he managed to say after a while.

"No – no, he wants you to stay in bed. He knows you're exhausted. He asked me to assure you it would be all right. "Rest in bed. I'll get him."

Professor Kempfer sank back. He looked unseeingly up at the ceiling

until he heard the sound of a chair being drawn up beside him, and then he slowly turned his head.

Colonel Lubintsev was a stocky, ruddy-faced man with gray bristles on his scalp. He had an astonishingly boyish smile. "Doctor Professor Kempfer, I am honored to meet you," he said. "Lubinstev, Colonel, assigned as advisor to the People's Government Ministerium." He extended his hand gravely, and Professor Kempfer shook it with a conscious effort.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance," Professor Kempfer mumbled.

"Not at all, Doctor Professor. Not at all. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Please." He watched the colonel touch a lighter to a long cigarette while Marthe quickly found a saucer for an ashtray. The colonel nodded his thanks to Marthe, puffed on the cigarette, and addressed himself to Professor Kempfer while Marthe sat down on a chair against the far wall.

"I have inspected your dossier," Colonel Lubintsev said. "That is," with a smile, "our dossier on your late counterpart. I see you fit the photographs as well as could be expected. We will have to make a further identification, of course, but I rather think that will be a formality." He smiled again. "I am fully prepared to accept your story. It is too fantastic not to be true. Of course, sometimes foreign agents choose their cover stories with that idea in mind, but not in this case, I think. If what has happened to you could happen to any man, our dossier indicates Jochim Kempfer might well be that man." Again, the smile. "In any counterpart."

"You have a dossier," Professor Kempfer said.

Colonel Lubintsev's eyebrows went up in a pleased grin. "Oh, yes. When we liberated your nation, we knew exactly what scientists were deserving of our assistance in their work, and where to find them. We had laboratories, project agendas, living quarters – everything! – all ready for them. But I must admit, we did not think we would ever be able to accommodate you."

"But now you can."

"Yes!" Once more, Colonel Lubintsev smiled like a little boy with great fun in store. "The possibilities of your device are as infinite as the universe! Think of the enormous help to the people of your nation, for example, if they could draw on machine tools and equipment from such alternate places as the one you have just left." Colonel Lubintsev waved his cigarette. "Or if, when the Americans attack us, we can transport bombs

from a world where the revolution is an accomplished fact, and have them appear in North America in this."

Professor Kempfer sat up in bed. "Marthe! Marthe, why have you done this to me?"

"Hush, Jochim," she said. "Please. Don't tire yourself. I have done nothing to you. You will have care, now. We will be able to live together in a nice villa, and you will be able to work, and we will be together."

"Marthe—"

She shook her head, her lips pursed primly. "Please, Jochim. Times have changed a great deal, here. I explained to the Colonel that your head was probably still full of the old Nazi propaganda. He understands. You will learn to see it for what it was. And you will help put the Americans back in their place." Her eyes filled suddenly with tears. "All the years I went to visit your grave as often as I could. All the years I paid for flowers, and all the nights I cried for you."

"But I am here, Marthe! I am here! I am not dead."

"Jochim, Jochim," she said gently. "Am I to have had all my grief for nothing?"

"I have brought a technical expert with me," Colonel Lubintsev went on as though nothing had happened. "If you will tell him what facilities you will need, we can begin preliminary work immediately." He rose to his feet. "I will send him in. I myself must be going." He put out his cigarette, and extended his hand. "I have been honored, Doctor Professor Kempfer."

"Yes," Professor Kempfer whispered. "Yes. Honored." He raised his hand, pushed it toward the colonel's, but could not hold it up long enough to reach. It fell back to the coverlet, woodenly, and Professor Kempfer could not find the strength to move it. "Goodbye."

He heard the colonel walk out with a few murmured words for Marthe. He was quite tired, and he heard only a sort of hum.

He turned his head when the technical expert came in. The man was all eagerness, all enthusiasm:

"Jochim! This is amazing! Perhaps I should introduce myself – I worked with your counterpart during the war – we were quite good friends – I am Georg Tanzler. Jochim! How are you!"

Professor Kempfer looked up. He saw through a deep, tightening fog, and he heard his heart preparing to stop. His lips twisted. "I think I am going away again, Georg," he whispered.

© 1957 Royal Pub. Inc.

The Nuptial Flight of Warbirds

I would love to be a pilot. Someday, everything willing, I shall be. When my sister, who is French, tired of reading to me from Robinson Crusoe in an accent which rendered "parrot" as "pirate," and thus charmingly confused me, she read to me from Night Flight and the other aviation volumes of Sainte-Exupery. I think Only Angels Have Wings is the greatest junk motion picture ever made, with the possible exception of Star Wars. One of my favorite books is Richard Bach's Stranger to the Ground, which I found long before anyone had heard of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, and another is Nothing by Chance. When I was a lad on a chicken farm, I built, on a porch, a contraption with control surfaces connected to a working stick and rudder-bar. I sat in it for hours, aviating.

The aviation books in my attic, guest room, living room, cellar, and office would startle Martin Caidin by their number. There was no greater fan than I, once, of G8 and His Battle Aces, though I could not obtain very many copies, and my first fan letter to an editor went not to Planet Stories but to an air war pulp. I find the rarely seen opening sequence of Breaking the Sound Barrier is some of the most exciting black-and-white film footage ever shot. Once in a while, my friend Frank Stankovich, the chopper motorsickel fork king who also chromed the three-bearing crankshaft of my Rapier, used to take me for a ride in his Luscombe tail-dragger. But it didn't have a stick. And once I wrote scripts for industrial films. Another time, I worded for girlie magazines. And by the time I wrote this story, I had finished Michaelmas. But I remember – oh, I remember – the Saturday my father would not let me go to the Beacon and see not only Episode Four of Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe but, also, ah, Dawn Patrol. Hello, Mr. Flynn. Happy landings. Happy landings, Frank.

THE WOMAN GASPED slightly as he began to see her. Dusty Haverman smiled comfortably, extending his lean arm in its brocaded scarlet sleeve, white lace frothing at his wrist. He tilted the decanter over the crystal stem glass shimmering in the stainless air of the afternoon, and rosy clarity swirled within the fragile bell. "You'll enjoy that," he said to her. "It doesn't ordinarily travel well."

She was very pale, with dark, made-up eyes and lips drawn a startling red. A lavender print scarf was bound around her neck-length smoke-black hair, and she wore a lavender voile dress with a full calf-length skirt and a bellboy collar. Below the collar, the front of the dress was open to the waist in a loose slit.

She sat straight in her chair. Her plum-colored nails gripped the ends of the decoratively carved wooden arms. The breeze, whispering over the coarse grass that grew in odd-shaped meadows between the lengths of sandy concrete, stirred her hair. She looked around her at the sideboard, the silver chafing dishes of hot hors d'oeuvres, the Fragonard and the large Boucher hung on ornate wooden racks, the distant structures and the marker lights thrusting up here and there from the edges of the grass. She watched Haverman carefully as he sank back into his own chair, crossed his knees, and raised his own glass. "To our close acquaintanceship," he was saying in his slightly husky voice, a distinguished-looking man with slightly waving silver hair worn a little long over the tops of the ears, and a thin-ish, carefully trimmed silver mustache hovering at the rim of the rose cordial. He wore a white silk ascot.

The woman, who had only a very few signs of latter twentyishness about the skin of her face and the carriage of her body, raised one sooty eyebrow. "Where are we?" she asked. "Who are you?"

Haverman smiled. "We are at the juncture of runways twenty-eight Left and forty-two Right at O'Hare International Airport. My name is Austin Gelvarry."

The woman looked around again, more quickly. Her silk-clad knee bumped the low mahogany table between them, and Haverman had to reach deftly to save her glass. She settled back slowly. "It certainly isn't Cannes," she agreed. She reached for the wine, keeping one hand spread-fingered over the front of her bosom as she leaned. Her eyes did not leave Haverman's face. "How did you do this?"

Gelvarry smiled. "How could I not do it, Miss Montez? Ah, ah, no, don't

do that! Don't press so hard against your mouth. Sip, Miss Montez, please! Withdraw the glass a slight distance. Now draw the upper lip together just a suggestion, and delicately impress its undercurve upon the swell of the edging. Sip, Miss Montez. As if at a blossom, my dear. As if at a chalice." He smiled. "You will get to like me. I was in the Royal Flying Corps, you know."

Just at first light, the mechanics would have the early patrol craft lined up on the cinders beside the scarred turf of the runway. They would waken Gelvarry with the sound of the propellers being pulled through. He would lie-up in his cot, his eyes very wide in the dim, listening to the whup, whup, whup!

The mechanics ran in three-man teams, one team for each of the three planes in the flight. One would be just letting go the lower tip of the wooden airscrew and jumping a little sideward to turn and double back. One would be doubling back, arms pumping for balance, head cocked to watch the third man, who would be just jumping into the air, arms out, hands slightly cupped to catch the tip of the upper blade as it started down.

They ran in perfect rhythm, and they would do this a dozen times before they attempted to start the aircraft. They said it was necessary to do this with the Trompe L'Oeil engine, which was a French design.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion had instituted this drill. If it were not performed precisely, the cylinder walls would not be evenly lubricated when the engines were started. The cylinder walls would score, and very likely seize-up a piston, and all you fine young gentlemen would be dropping your arses, beg pardon (with a wink) all over the perishing map of bleeding Belgium. Then he knocked the dottle out of his pipe, scratched the ribs of the little gray monkey he liked to carry, and turned his shaved neck to shout something to an Other Rank.

Sar'n-Major Mac's speaking voice was sharp and confident, and his manner assertive, in dealing with matters of management. In speaking to Gelvarry and the other flying personnel, however, he was more avuncular, and it seemed to Gelvarry that he saw more than he sometimes let on.

Gelvarry, who was hoping for assignment soon to the high squadron, reckoned that Sergeant-Major MacBanion might have more to do with that than his rank augured for. Nominally, he was only in charge of instruction for transitioning to high squadron aircraft, but since Major Harding never emerged from his hut, it was difficult to believe he was not

dependent on Sergeant Major MacBanion for personnel recommendations.

Gelvarry swung his legs over the side of the cot, taking an involuntary breath of the Nissen hut's interior. Gelvarry's feet had frosted a bit on a long flight the previous week and were quite tender. He limped across the hut, arranging his clothes, and went over to the washstand.

Gelvarry felt there was no better high squadron candidate in the area at the present time. Barton Fisher of XIV Recon Wing had more flight time, but everyone knew Armed Chase flew harder, and Gelvarry had been in Armed Chase for the past year, now being definitely senior man at this aerodrome and senior flying personnel in the entire MC Armed Chase Wing. "I should like very much to apply for assignment to the high squadron, Sir," he rehearsed as he brushed his teeth. But since he had no idea what Major Harding looked like, the face in the mottled fragment of pier glass remained entirely his own.

He spat into the waste bucket and peered at the results. His gums were evidently still bleeding freely. Squinting into the mirror, he lathered his face cold and began shaving with a razor that had been most indifferently honed by Parkins, the batman Gelvarry shared with the remainder of his flight in the low squadron. Parkins had been reduced from Engine Artificer by Sar'n-Major Mac, and quite right. "Give 'im a drum of oil and a stolen typewriter," Gelvarry grumbled as he scraped at the gingery stubble on his pale cheeks. "He'll jump his bicycle and flog 'em in the village for a litre of Vouvray."

He rubbed his face with a damp gray towel full of threads and bent to stare out the end window. The weather was expectable; mist just rising, still snagged a little in the tops of the poplars; eastern sky giving some promise of rose; and the windsock pointing mendaciously inward. By the time they'd completed their sweep, low on petrol and ready for luncheon and a heartfelt sigh, it would have shifted straight toward Hunland and God help the poor sod who attempted the feat of gliding home on an engine stopped by fuel shortage or, better yet, enemy action also involving injury to flying personnel. All up then, my lad, and into the Lagerkorps at the point of some gefreiter's bayonet, to spend the remainder of the war laying railroad lines or embanking canals, Gott Mit Uns and Hoch der Fuehrer! for the Thousand Year Empire, God grant it mischief.

In fact, Gelvarry thought, going out of the hut and running along the duckboards with his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets, the only good thing about the day to this point was that his headache was nowhere near as bad as it deserved to be. Perhaps there was truth in the

rumor that Issue mess brandy had resumed being shipped from England. It had lately been purchased direct under plausible labels from blue-chinned peasant gentlemen who cut prices in deference to the bravery of their gallant allies.

"Get out of my way, you creature," he puffed to Islingden, John Peter, Flying Officer, otherwise third Duke of Landsdowne, who was standing on the boards with a folded Gazette under his arm, studying the sky. "If you're done in there, show some consideration." They danced around each other, arms out for balance, "Nigger Jack" Islingden clutching the Gazette like a baton, his large teeth flashing whitely against his olive-hued Landsdowne complexion, introduced via a Spanish countess by the first Duke, neither of them wishing to step off the slats into the spring mud, their boot toes clattering, until Gelvarry at last gained entrance to the officers' latrine.

The dampness rising from the ground was all through his bones. Gelvarry shivered without cease as he sprinted along the cinder track toward his SE-5, beating his arms across his chest. He paused just long enough to scribble a receipt for the aircraft and return the clipboard to the Chief Fitter, found the reinforced plate at the root of the lower plane, stepped up on it and dropped into the cockpit, his hands smearing the droplets of dew on the leather edging of the rim. He felt himself shaking thoroughly now, proceeding with the business of handsignalling the other two pilots – Landsdowne and a sergeant pilot named O'Sullivan – and ensuring they were ready. He signalled Chocks Out, and the ground personnel yanked sharply at the lines, clearing his wheels and dropping flat to let his lower planes pass over.

As soon as he jassed the throttle to smooth his plugs and build takeoff power, a cascade of water blew back into his face from the top of the mainplane, and he stopped shivering. He glanced left and right, raised his arm, flung his hand forward, and advanced the throttle. The trim little Bristol, responsive as a filly, leapt forward. For a few moments, she sprang and rebounded to every inequality of the turf, while her flying wires sang into harmony with the increasing vibration of the engine and airscrew. The droplets on the doped fabric turned instantly into streaks over the smoke-colored oil smears from the engine. Then there was suddenly the smooth buzzing under his feet of the wheels rotating freely on their axles, all weight off, and the SE-5 climbed spiritedly into the dawn, trailing a momentary train of spray that glistened for an instant in the sunlight above the mist. Soon enough, the remaining condensation turned white and opaque, forming little flowers where the panes of his windscreen were

jointed into their frames. Gelvarry held the stick between his knees and smoothed his gloves tighter over his hands, which retained little trace of their former trembling.

Up around Paschendaele they were dodging nimbly among some clouds when Gelvarry suddenly plucked his Very pistol from its metal clip in the cockpit and fired a green flare. Nigger and O'Sullivan jerked their courses around into exact conformity with his as they, too, now saw the staffel of Albatros falling upon them. They pointed their noses up at a steep angle toward the Boche, giving the engines more throttle to prevent stalling, and briefly testing the firing linkages of their twin Vickers guns. Tracer bullets left little spirals of white smoke in the air beyond Gelvarry's engine, to be sucked up immediately as he nibbled in behind them. He glanced at Landsdowne and Paddy, raising one thumb. They clenched their fists and shook them, once, twice, toward the foe who, mottled with garish camouflage, dropped down with flame winking at the muzzles of the Spandau maschingewehren behind the gleaming arcs of their propellers.

Gelvarry felt they were firing too soon. Nevertheless, there was an abrupt drumming upon his left upper plane, and then a ripping. He saw a wire suddenly vibrate its middle portion into invisibility as a slug glanced from it. There was no damage of consequence. He held his course and refrained from firing, only thinking of how the entire aircraft had quivered to the drumming, and of how when the fabric split it was as if something swift and hot had seared across the backs of his hands. It was Gelvarry's professional opinion that such moments must be fully met and studied within the mind, so that they lose their power of surprise.

There were eight Albatros in the diving formation, he saw, and therefore there might be as many as four more stooging about in the clouds waiting to follow down stragglers.

The stench of overheated castor oil came back from his engine and coated his lips and tongue. He pushed his goggles up onto his forehead, hunched his face down into the full lee of the windscreen, and now, when it might count, began firing purposeful short bursts.

The Albatros is a difficult aircraft to attack headon because it has a metal propeller fairing and an in-line engine, so that many possible hits are deflected and the target area is not large. On the other hand, the Albatros is not really a good diver, having a tendency to shed its wings at steeper angles. Gelvarry had long ago reasoned out that even an apparently sound Albatros mainplane is under considerable stress in a

dive, and so he fired a little above the engine, hoping to damage the struts or even the main spar, but noting that as an inevitable consequence there might also be direct or deflected hits on the windscreen. He did not wish to be known as a deliberate shooter of pilots, but there it was.

The staffel passed through the flight of SE-5s with seven survivors, one of which, however, was turning for home with smoke issuing from its oil cooler. The three British aircraft, necessarily throttling back to save their engines, began to mush out of their climbing attitude. Three Albatros which had been waiting their turn now launched a horizontal attack.

His head swivelling while he half-stood in the cockpit, searching, Gelvarry saw the three fresh Albatros emerge from the clouds. Below him, six of the original assault were looping up to rejoin. On his right, Paddy's aircraft displayed miscellaneous splinters and punctures of the empennage, and was trailing a few streamers of fabric, but appeared to be structurally sound. O'Sullivan, however, was beating at the breechblock of one of his guns with a wooden mallet, one hand wrapped around an interplane strut to hold him forward over the windscreen, the other busy with its hammering as it tried to pop out the overexpanded shell casing. His aircraft was wallowing as he inadvertently nudged the stick back and forth with his legs.

On the left, Nigger was nosedown, his airscrew windmilling, ropy smoke and pink fire blowing back over the cockpit. For a moment, the SE-5's ailerons quickly flapped into a new configuration, and the rudder and elevators came over as Landsdowne tried to sideslip the burning. But they were, in any case, at 7000 feet and at this height there was really no point to the maneuver. Landsdowne stood up in the cockpit as the aircraft came level again, saluted Gelvarry, and jumped, his collar and helmet thickly trailing soot.

"So long, Nig," Gelvarry murmured. He glanced up. A mile above them, the silvery flash of sunlight upon the Ticonderoga's flanks dazzled the eye; nevertheless, he thought he could make out the attendant cloud of dark midges who were the high squadron. He looked to his right and saw that O'Sullivan was being hit repeatedly in the torso by gunfire, white phosphorus tracer spirals emerging from the plucked leather of his coat.

Gelvarry took in a deep breath. He pushed his aircraft into a falling right bank, kicked right rudder, and passed between two of the oncoming Nazis. He converted the bank into a shallow diving roll, and so went down through the climbing group of Albatros at an angle which made it useless for either side to fire. He had also placed all his enemies in such a relationship to him that they would have had to turn and dive at suicidal

inclinations in order to overtake him as he darted homeward.

He flew above the remains of villages that looked like old bones awash in brown soup, and over the lines that were like a river on the moon, its margins festooned with wire to prevent careless Selenites from stumbling in. A high squadron aircraft dropped down and flew beside him for a while, as he had heard they sometimes did lately.

He glanced over at the glossy stagger-wing biplane, its color black except for the white-lettered unit markings, a red-and-white horizontally striped rudder panel, and the American cocardes with the five-pointed white star and orange ball in the center. The pilot was looking at him. He wore a pale yellow helmet, goggles that flashed in the sun, and a very clean white scarf. He raised a hand and waved reservedly, as one might across a tier of boxes at the concert hall. Then he pulled back on his stick and the black aircraft climbed away precipitously, so swiftly that Gelvarry half-expected a crackling of displaced air, but instead heard, very faintly over his own engine, the smooth roar of the other's exhaust. He found that his own right hand was still elevated, and took it down.

He came in over the poplars, and found that he was going to land cross-wind. Ground personnel raised their heads as if they had been grazing at the margins of the runway. He put it down anyhow, swung it about, and taxied toward the hangar, blipping the engine to keep the cylinder heads from sooting up, and finally cut his switch near where Sergeant-Major MacBanion was standing waiting with the little gray monkey perched on his right shoulder. As the engine stopped, the cold once again settled into Gelvarry's bones.

"All right, Sir?" Sar'n-Major Mac asked, looking up at him. The monkey, too, raised its little Capuchin face, the small lobster eyes peering from under the brim of a miniature kepi.

Gelvarry put his hands on the cockpit rim, placed his heels carefully on the transverse brace below the rudder bar, and pushed himself back and up. Then he was able to slip down the side of the fuselage. He stood slapping his hands against his biceps.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion put a hand gently on his shoulder. "And the remainder of the flight, Sir?"

Gelvarry shrugged. He pulled off his helmet and goggles and stuffed them into a pocket of his coat. He stamped his feet, despite the heat, then as the cold began to leave him, he merely stood running his hands up and down his arms, and hunching his back.

"Never mind, Sir," Sar'n-Major Mac said softly. "I've come to tell you

we've had an urgent message. You're posted to high squadron immediately, Sir."

Gelvarry found himself weeping silently.

"Follow me to Major Harding's hut, please, Sir," Sergeant Major MacBanion said quietly and gravely. "Don't concern yourself about the aircraft – we'll see to it."

"Thank you," Gelvarry whispered. He walked behind the spare, erect figure to the Major's hut, watching the monkey gently waving the swagger stick. Then he waited outside, rubbing his hands over his cheeks, feeling the moisture trapped between his palm and the oil film on his skin. He hated the coating in his nostrils and on the roof of his mouth, and habitually scraped it off his lips between his teeth.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion came out of the dark hut, shut the door positively, said, "That's all right, then, Sir," turned his face slightly and shouted: "Private Parkins on the double if you please!"

Parkins came running up with a thud of boots on damp cinders and saluted energetically. "Yes, Sar'n-Major?"

"Parkins, I want you to list three reserve flying personnel with appropriate aircraft for this afternoon's sweep. Make it the three senior men. What flying personnel will that leave at this station during the afternoon hours?"

"Two, Sar'n-Major, in addition to this officer." Parkins nodded slightly toward Gelvarry without taking his eyes off Sergeant-Major MacBanion's steady gaze.

"Don't concern yourself with this officer, Parkins; Chaplain and I'll be taking care of him."

Parkins brought out the sapient manner he had been withholding. "Right, Sar'n-Major. I'll just have Major Harding send them other two officers over to Wing in the Rolls to sign for some engine spares, and that'll clear the premises nicely. I'll take the time to sort through this officer's kit for shipping home, then, as well, shall I?"

"I think not, Parkins," Sergeant-Major MacBanion said meaningly, and Parkins could be seen to bob his Adam's apple. "That is Major Harding's duty. That's what commanding officers are for." The thick, neatly clipped brows drew into a speculating frown. "You're slipping very badly, aren't you, Parkins? I wonder what a rummage through your duffel might turn up; I can't say I care for the smell of your breath."

"Hit's mouthwash, Sar'n-Major!" Parkins exclaimed. "A bit of a soother

for me sore bicuspid, like!"

"I'll give you sore, Private Parkins; I surely will," Sergeant Major Mac declared. "Pull yourself together long enough to attend to your own tasks. You're to telephone Wing for three replacement flying personnel to join here tonight, correct? And there's the lorry and the working party to organize; I want this officer's aircraft crashed and burning, no doubt about it, in No Man's Land, before teatime, and if that's all quite sufficiently clear to you, my man, you will see to it forthwith!"

Parkins saluted, about-faced, and trotted off, sweating. The Sergeant-Major smiled thinly after him, then turned to Gelvarry. "This way, then, please, Sir," he said, and stepped onto the footpath worn through the scrub beside Major Harding's hut.

Following him, Gelvarry was startled to note the neatly cultivated domestic vegetable plot behind the rusty corrugated sheet iron of the Major's dwelling. There were seed packets up on little stakes at the ends of rows, and string stretched in a zigzag web for runnerbeans. Lettuce and carrots were poking up tentatively along one side, and most of the rows were showing early evidence of shooting. A spade with an officer's cap dangling over the handle was thrust into a dirt-encrusted pile of industrial furnace clinkers that had apparently been extracted from the soil.

"Padre!" Sergeant-Major MacBanion called ahead. "Here's an officer to see you!"

Father Collins thrust his head around the fly of his dwelling tent, which was situated beyond the shrubs screening Major Harding's hut from this far end of the aerodrome. He was a round-faced man of kindly appearance whom Gelvarry had occasionally seen in the mess, fussing with the Sparklets machine and otherwise making himself useful and approved of. He came and moved a little distance toward them along the path, and then waited for them to come up. He put out his hand to shake Gelvarry's. "Always here to be of help," he said.

Sergeant-Major MacBanion cleared his throat. "This'll be a high squadron posting, Padre."

Father Collins nodded a little crossly. "One gathers these things, Sergeant-Major MacBanion. Well, young fellah, let's get to it, then, shall we?" His expression softened and he studied Gelvarry's face carefully. "No need prolonging matters, then, is there? Not a decision to be taken lightly, but, once made, to be followed expeditiously, eh?" He put an arm around Gelvarry's shoulders. Gelvarry found himself grateful for the animal warmth; the cold had been at his ribs again. He went along up the path

with Father Collins and Sar'n-Major Mac, and when they reached the little overgrown rise where Father Collins's tent was situated, he stopped. He found he was looking down at a revettment where the transition aircraft was kept.

He walked around and around, a slight smile on his lips, ducking under the planes and squeezing by the end of the rudder where it was nearly right up against the rear embankment. He ran his fingertips lightly over the impeccably doped fabric and admired the workmanship of the rudder and elevator hinges, the delicately shaped brass standoffs that gave extra purchase to the control cables. Everything was new; the smell of the aircraft had the tang of a fitter's storage locker.

He stopped and faced it from outside the revettment. The slim black aircraft pointed its rounded nose well up over his head; it was much larger than he'd expected from seeing one in the air; he'd thought perhaps the pilot was slightly built.

It rested gracefully upon its two fully spatted tires, with a teardrop-shaped auxiliary fuel tank nestled up between the fully faired landing gear struts. Its rest position on its tailskid set it on an angle such that the purposefully sturdy wings grasped muscularly at the air. A glycol radiator slung at the point of the cowling's jaw promised to sieve with jubilation through the stream hurled backward by the three-bladed metal airscrew.

There were very few wires; the struts appeared to be quite thin frontally, but were faired back for lateral strength. It would, yes it would, burgeon upward through the air with every ounce of power available from that promising engine hidden behind the lovingly shaped panels, and it would stoop like a bird of prey. It would not creak or whip in the air; its fuselage panels would not drum and ripple; the dope of its upper surfaces would not star and flake off under the compression of warping wings in a battle maneuver, and one would not find, after twenty or thirty hours, that the planes and the stabilizer had been permanently shaken out of alignment with each other.

This aircraft had the same markings as the one that had flown down briefly, except for the actual numerals. In addition to the national cocardes, it also bore a unit insignia – a long-barreled flintlock rifle crossed upon a powderhorn.

Gelvarry felt a prickling pass along the short hairs of his forearms as he thought of flying under that banner. A great-great-uncle was reputed in

his family to have been among that company vanished in search of Providence Plantations, as others had done in attempting to find Oglethorpe's Colony or the fabled inland cities of Virginia Dare's children. North America was a continent of endless forest and dark rumor. And yet something, it seemed – some seed possessed of patience – had been germinating Ticonderogas and aircraft construction works all the while, and within reach of Mr. Churchill's remarkable winnow.

"This is the Curtis P6E 'Hawk,'" Sar'n-Major Mac said at his elbow. "This model is the ultimate development of what will be considered the most versatile armed chase single-place biplane ever designed. The original airframe will be introduced in the mid-1920s. As you see it here, it is fitted with United States Army Air Corps-specified inline liquid-cooled four-stroke engine developing 450 horsepower, and two fixed quick-firing thirty-calibre machineguns geared to shoot through the airscrew. The U.S. Navy version, known as the 'Goshawk,' will use the Wright 'Whirlwind' radial air-cooled engine. Both basic versions are very highly thought of, will remain in service in the U.S. until the mid-1930s, and a few 'Hawk' versions will be used by the Republican air forces in the Spanish Civil War, should that occur."

Father Collins had been up at the cockpit, leaning in to polish the instrument glass with a soft white cloth. He came down now, pausing to wipe the step let into the fuselage and the place on the wing root where he had rested his other foot.

"All quite ready now," he said, carefully folding the cloth and putting it away in his open-mouthed black leather case. He rested his hand on Gelvarry's shoulder. "We've kept her in prime condition for you, lad. No one's ever flown her before; Sar'n-Major and I just ticked her over now and then, kept her clean and taut; the usual drill."

Gelvarry was nodding. As the moment drew near, he found himself breathing with greater difficulty. Tears were gathering in his eyes. He turned his face away awkwardly.

"Now, as for the hooking on," Sergeant-Major MacBanion was saying briskly, "I'm certain you'll manage that part of it quite well, Sir." He was pointing up at the trapeze hook fixed to the center of the mainplane like the hanger of a Christmas tree ball, and Gelvarry perforce had to look at him attentively.

"Pity there's no way to rehearse the necessary maneuver, Sir," Sar'n-Major Mac went on, "but they say it comes to one. Only a matter of matching courses and speeds, after all, and then just easing up in there."

Gelvarry nodded. He still could not speak.

"Well, Sir," the Sergeant-Major concluded. "Care to try a few circuits and bumps around the old place before taking her to your new posting? Get the feel of her? Some prefer that. Many just climb right in and go off. What'll it be, Sir?"

Gelvarry found himself profoundly disturbed. Something was rising in his chest. Father Collins looked at him narrowly and raised his free hand toward MacBanion. "Perhaps we're rushing our fences, Sergeant-Major. Just verify the cockpit appurtenances there and give us a moment meanwhile, will you?" He turned Gelvarry away from the aircraft and sauntered beside him casually, his arm around Gelvarry's shoulders again.

"Troubles you, does it?"

Gelvarry glanced at him.

"But there was no doubt in your mind when you spoke to MacBanion about this, was there?"

Gelvarry blinked, then shook his head slowly.

"It's good sense, you know. You'd be leaving us the other way, shortly, if it weren't for this. Bound to." He dug in his pocket for his pipe and blew through it sharply to clear the stem. "Sergeant-Major's been discussing it for weeks. Thin as a charity widow, he's been calling you, and twice as pale, except for the Hennessey roses in your cheeks, beggin' all flyin' officers' pardon, Sir. He's been wanting to do something about it."

Gelvarry gave a high, short laugh.

Father Collins chuckled tolerantly. "Ah, no, no, Lad, hoping we'd make the choice for you is not the same. We always wait 'til the man requests it. Have to, eh? Suppose a man were posted on our say-so; liable to resent it, wouldn't he be, don't you think? Might kick up a fuss. Word of high squadron might reach Home. And we can't have that, now, can we?"

Gelvarry shook his head, walking along with his lips between his teeth, his lustrous eyes on his aimless feet.

"Mothers' marches on Whitehall, questions in Parliament – If they're alive, put 'em back on duty or bring 'em home to the shellshock ward – that sort of thing. Be an unholy row, wouldn't you think? And so much grief renewed among the loved ones, to say nothing of the confusion; it would be cruel. Or what would they say at the Admiralty if officers and gentlemen began discussing another Mr. Churchill, he cruising about the skies like the Angels of Mons, furthermore? For that matter, I imagine

their Mr. Churchill would have quite a bit to say about it, and none of it pleasant to the tender ear, eh?"

Gelvarry smiled as well as he was able. He had never laid eyes on or heard the young Mr. Churchill; he imagined him a plump, shrill, prematurely balding fellow in loosely tailored clothing, gesturing with a pair of spectacles.

Father Collins gently turned Gelvarry back toward the aircraft. "We'll miss you, too, you know," he said quietly. "But we must move along now. It's best if other flying personnel can't be certain who's in high squadron and who's left us in the old stager's way, don't you agree? Gives everyone a bit of something to look forward to as the string shortens. MacBanion's a genius at clearing the field, but time is passing. Don't worry, Boy – Major Harding does a lovely job of seeing to it nothing's sent home as shouldn't be, and of course I'll be conveying the tidings by my own hand." They were back beside the P6E. Sergeant-Major MacBanion was standing stiffly attentive, the monkey in the crook of his arm with one small hand curled around the butt of the swagger stick.

"I believe I'll try taking her straight out, Sergeant-Major," Gelvarry said.

"Right, Sir. That's the way! Just a few things to remember about the controls, Sir, and you'll find she goes along quite nicely."

"And thank you very much, Father. I appreciate your concern."

"Nonsense, my boy. Only natural. Just keep it in mind we're all still hitting the Bavarian Corporal where he hurts; high or low makes little difference. Bit more comfortable up where you'll be, I shouldn't wonder, but I'm sure you've earned it. Tenfold. Easily tenfold."

"Let my family down as easily as you can, will you, Father?" Gelvarry said.

"Ah, yes, yes, of course."

Gelvarry climbed up into the cockpit. He sat getting the feel of how it fit him. He waggled the stick and nudged the rudder – there were pedals for his feet, rather than a pivoted bar, but the principle was the same.

Sar'n-Major Mac got up on the lower plane root and leaned into the cockpit over him. "Here's your magneto switch, and that's your throttle, of course; some of these instruments you can just ignore – can't imagine why a real aviator'd want them, tell the truth – and this is a wireless telegraphy device, but you don't need that – can you imagine, from the way the seat's designed when Padre and I take 'em out of the shipping crate, I'd say you

were intended to be sitting on a parachute, of all things; get yourself mistaken for a ruddy civilian, next thing – but this, here's, your supercharger cut-in."

"Supercharger?"

"Oh, right, right, yes, Sir, no telling how high you might find Ticonderoga; things could be a bit thin. And in that vein, Sir, you'll note this metal bottle with petcock and flexible tubing. That's your oxygen supply; simply place the end of the tube in your mouth, open the petcock as required, and suck on it from time to time at altitudes above 12,000 feet, or lower if feeling a bit winded. Got all that, Sir?"

"Yes, thank you, Sar'n-Major."

"Very good! Well, then Sir, Padre'll be wanting another brief word with you, and then anytime after that we'll just get her started, shall we? I understand the Navy type has a crank thing called an inertia starter, but the old familiar way's for us. After that, I'd suggest a little taxiing for the feel of the controls and throttle, and then just head her into the wind, full throttle, and pleasure serving with you, Sir, if I do say so. You'll find she favors her nose a little, so keep throttle open a bit until you bring her nearer to level; I imagine she stalls something ferocious. But there'll be no trouble; never had any trouble yet. Just head west and look about; you'll see your new post up there somewhere. Can't really miss it, after all – large enough. Anything else, Sir?"

"No. No, thank you, Ma – Sergeant-Major MacBanion."

MacBanion's right eyebrow had been rising. It dropped back into place. He patted Gelvarry manfully atop the shoulder. "That's the way, Sir. Have a good trip, and think of us grubbing away down here, once in a while, will you?" He jumped from the lower plane and Father Collins came up, holding the bag. "Might be a longish flight, Son," he said. "You've had nothing to eat or drink since midnight, I believe. So you'll be wanting some of this." He opened the bag and handed Gelvarry a small flask and a piece of bread. "And there's windburn at those altitudes." He put ointment on Gelvarry's forehead and eyelids. "Have a safe flight," he said.

Gelvarry nodded. "Thank you again." When Father Collins jumped down, Gelvarry ducked his head below the level of the cockpit coaming and wiped his face. He put his arm straight up in the air and rotated his hand. Sergeant-Major MacBanion and he began the starting procedure.

The aircraft handled very well. He did a long figure eight over the

aerodrome at low altitude after he'd gotten the feel of it. The ground personnel of course were busy at their various tasks. An unfamiliar figure learning with one foot on a garden spade waved up casually from behind Major Harding's hut. The monkey was perched on a new pineboard crate. Father Collins and Sergeant Major MacBanion were manhandling down into the revetment from the back of an open lorry. As Gelvarry flew over, the little creature scrambled up to the apex of the tilting box, grinned at him, and raised its kept.

Past the field, Gelvarry did a creditable Immelmann turn, gained altitude, settled himself a little more comfortably on the cushion made from a gunneysack stuffed with rags, and flew toward the afternoon sun, looking upward.

The aircraft was a joy, he gradually realized. He probed tentatively at the pedals and stick, at first, hardly recognizing he was doing so because he was under the impression his mind was full of confusions and sorrows. But as he held steadily west, his back and his arse heavy in the seat, his mind began to develop a certain wire-hard incised detachment which he recognized from his evenings with the brandy. In fact, as he gained more and more altitude, and began to rock the wings jauntily and even to give it a little rudder so that he set up a slight fishtail, he could almost hear the messroom piano, as it was every day after nightfall, all snug around the stove, grinning at each other if they could, and roaring out: "Warbirds, Warbirds, ripping through the air/Warbirds, Warbirds, fighting everywhere/Any age, any place, any foreign clime/Warbirds of Time!"

Catching himself, Haverman slipped the oxygen tube into his mouth and opened the valve on the bottle. As the dry gas slid palpably into his mouth and down his throat, the squadron theme faded from the forefront of his mind, and he began to fly the aircraft rather than play with it. He reached out, his bared wrist numbingly exposed for a moment between glove and cuff, and cut in the supercharger. There was a thump up forward of the firewall, and the engine note steadied. There was a faint, somewhat reassuring new whine in its note.

He began to feel quite himself again, encased within the indurate fuselage, his dark wings spread stiffly over the crystal-clear air below, the gleaming fabric inviolate as it hissed almost hotly through the wind of its passage. He took another pull on the oxygen. He gazed over the side of the cockpit. Down there, little aircraft were dodging and tumbling, their mainplanes reflecting sunlight in a sort of passionate Morse. He knew that message, and he drew his head back inside the cockpit. He resumed

searching the deepened blue of the sky above him. And in a little bit, he saw a silver glint northwest of the sun. He turned slightly to aim straight for it, and flew steadily.

After a while, Gelvarry noticed that his throat was being desiccated by the steady flow of the oxygen. He shut the valve and spat out the tube. Pulling the Padre's chased silver flask from the bosom of his tunic, he drank from it. He also ate the cold dry bread. He did not feel particularly sustained by the snack, but the flask was quite nice as a present.

As he went, the distant speck took on breadth as well as length, and then details, size, and a gradual dulling down as the silvered cloth covering began to reveal some panels fresher than others, and the effect of varying hands at the brushwork of the doping. It now looked much as it did on those occasions when it hovered above the aerodrome and Mr. Churchill came down in his wicker car at the end of a cable, as he had done in addressing the squadron several times during Gelvarry's posting.

Ticonderoga in flight upon the same levels as the tropopausal winds, however, was even larger, somehow, and the light fell altogether differently upon it, now that he looked at it again. Boring purposefully onward, its great airscrews turning invisibly but for cyclic reflections, it filled the very world with a monster throbbing that Gelvarry could not hear as sound over the catlike snarlings of his own engine, but to which every surface of his aircraft, and in fact of his mouth and of the faceted goggles over his eyes, vibrated as if being struck by driving wet snow.

Ticonderoga suspended a dozen double-banked radial engines in teardrop pods abaft its main gondola; they seemed to float just below its belly like subsidiary craft of its own kind. Gelvarry, who had seen one or two Zeppelin warcraft, was struck by the major differences – Ticonderoga's smoothly tapered rather than bluntly rounded tail and bow; its almost fishlike control surfaces, with ventral and dorsal vertical stabilizers, and matching symmetrical horizontal planes, rather than the kitelike box-sections of the Fuehrer's designs; the many glassed compartments and blisters along the hull, and the smoothly faired main and after gondolas, rather than a single rope-slung control car. But the main thing was the size, of course. He resumed taking oxygen.

As he drew nearer, tucking himself into its shadow as if under a great living cloud, Ticonderoga began blinking a red light at him from a ventral turret just abaft the great open bay in its belly amidships. Then three aircraft launched from that yawning hangar, dropping one, two, three like a stick of bombs but immediately gaining flying speed and wheeling into formation around him. He saw their unit numbers were in sequence with

his. He waved, and their three pilots waved back.

Gelvarry watched them, fascinated. They flew with mesmerizing precision, carving smooth arcs in the air as if on wires, showing no reaction at all to the turbulence back along Ticonderoga's hull. They circled him effortlessly; they in fact created the effect of fuming about him while really flying flat spirals along the dirigible's flight path. Gelvarry waved again to show his appreciation of their skis, barely remembering to breathe. His gauntleted hands touched lightly at his own stick and throttle, not so much to make changes as to remind himself that he was flying, too.

One of the P6Es had a commander's broad bright stripe belting its fuselage. As soon as it was clear Gelvarry understood enough to hold while they maneuvered, the flight leader could be seen bringing his wireless microphone to his lips and speaking to Ticonderoga. The landing trapeze came lowering steadily down out of the bay, and hung motionless, a horizontal bar streaming along across the line of flight at the end of its complicated looking latching tether.

The leader looked across at Gelvarry, light shining on his goggles, and pointed to one of the other Hawks, which immediately moved out of formation and approached the trapeze. Gelvarry nodded so the leader could see it; they were teaching him. Then he watched the landing aircraft intently.

The hook rising out of the center of the mainplane was designed very much like a standard snap-hook. Once it had been pushed hard against the trapeze bar, it would open to hook around it, and then would snap shut. The trick, Gelvarry thought as he watched his squadronmate sway from side to side, was to center the hook on the bar at exactly the right height. Otherwise, the P6E's nose would be forced to one side or the other of the ideal flight line, and there might be embarrassing consequences.

But the pilot brought it off nicely, apparently unconcerned about tipping his airscrew into the tether or slashing his main-plane fabric with the trapeze. He sideslipped once to bring himself into perfect alignment, and put the hook around the bar with a slight throttle-blip that put one little puff of blue smoke out the end of his exhaust pipe. Then he cut throttle, the trapeze folded around the hook to make assurance doubly sure and he was drawn up into the hangar bay, allez-ooop! in one almost continuous movement.

In a moment, the trapeze came down again, and the second pilot did essentially the same thing. The other half of the trick was not to create

significant differences between the forward speeds of the dirigible and the aircraft along their identical flight lines, and Gelvarry lightly touched his throttle again, without moving it just yet. But when he glanced across at the leader, he was being gestured forward and up, and the trapeze was once more waiting. The leader drifted down and to the side, where he could watch.

Gelvarry took in a good breath from the bottle and came up into the turbulence, well back of the trapeze but at about the right height. He took another breath, and his mind crisped. He touched the throttle with delicate purposefulness, and came inching up on the bar, which was rocking rhythmically from side to side until he put his knees to either side of the stick and rocked his body from side to side. Thus rocking the ailerons to compensate, thus revealing that the bar had been quite steady all along, and that he was now reasonably steady with it. He was coming in an inch or two off center. He gulped again at the tube. What can happen? he thought dispassionately, and twitched the throttle between thumb and forefinger, a left-handed pinball player's move. With a clash and a bang, the hook snapped over and the trapeze folded. He closed throttle and cut the magneto instantaneously, slip-slap, and he was already inside the shadow of the hangar, swaying sickeningly at the end of the tether, but already being swung over toward the landing stage, with a whine of gears from the tether crane, whose spidery latticework arm overhead blended into the shadowy, endlessly repeated lattice girders that formed frame after identical frame, a gaunt cathedral whose groins and mullions retreated into diminishing distances fore and aft, housing the great bulks of the helium bags, interlaced by crew catwalks and ladders, spotted here and there by worklights but illuminated in the main by the featureless old-ivory glow through the translucent hull material.

Suddenly there was no sound immediately upon his ears, except for the pinging of his exhaust pipes and cylinder heads. The great roaring of passage pierced into the air was gone. What was left instead was a distant buzz, and the sighing rush of air rubbing over the great fabric.

The P6E's tailskid, and then its tires, touched down on the landing stage. A coveralled man wearing a hood over his mouth and a bottle on his back stepped up on the lower plane, then reached to the mainplane and disengaged the hook from the trapeze, which was swung away instantly. Other aircraft handlers stood looking impatiently at Gelvarry, who lifted himself up out of the cockpit and down to the jouncy perforated-aluminum deck. Down past his feet, he could see the structures of the lower hull, and the countryside idling backward below the open bay

before the leader's Hawk nosed blackly forward toward the trapeze.

He could see almost everywhere within the dirigible. Here and there, there were housed structures behind solid dural sheets or stretched canvas screens. Machinery – winches, generators, pumps – and stores of various kinds might interrupt a line of sight to some extent, but not significantly. Even the helium bags were not totally opaque. (Nor rigid, either; he could see them breathing, pale, and creased at the tops and bottoms, and he could hear their casings and their tethers creaking). He felt he could shout from one end of Ticonderoga to the other; might also spring into the air toward that stanchion, swing to that brace, go hand over hand along the rail of that catwalk, scramble up that ladder, swing by that cable to that inspection platform, slip down that catenary, rebound from the side of that bag, land lightly over there on the other side of the bay and present himself, grinning, to his fellow pilots standing there watching him now, all standing at ease, their booted feet spread exactly the same distance part, their hands clasped behind their backs, their cavalry breeches identically spotless, their dark tunics and Sam Browne belts all in a row above beltlines all at essentially the same height, their helmets on and their goggles down over their eyes.

He licked his lips. He glanced up guiltily toward the catwalk higher up in the structure, where a row of naked gray monkeys the size of large children was standing, paws along the railing, motionless, studying things. Gelvarry glanced aside.

The flight leader's plane was swung in and then rolled back to join the dozen others lashed down along the hangar deck. The man had jumped down out of the cockpit; he strode toward Gelvarry now. As he approached, Gelvarry saw his features were nondescript.

"You're to report to Mr. Churchill's cabin for a conference at once," he said to Gelvarry. He pointed. "Follow that walkway. You'll find a hatch forward of the main helium cells, there. It opens on the midships gondola. Mr. Churchill is waiting."

Gelvarry stopped himself in midsalute. "Aren't you going to take me there?"

The flight leader shook his head. "No. I can't stand the place. Full of the monkeys."

"Ah."

"Good luck," the officer said. "We shan't be seeing more of each other, I'm afraid. Pity. I'd been looking forward to serving with you."

Gelvarry shrugged uncomfortably. "So it goes," he said for lack of something precise to say, and turned away.

He followed directions toward the gondola. As he moved along, the monkeys flowed limb-over-limb above him among the higher levels of the structural bracing, keeping pace. As they traveled, they conducted incidental business, chartering, gesticulating, knotting up momentarily in clumps of two and three individuals in the grip of passion or anger that left one or two scurrying away cowed or indignant, the level of their cries rising or falling. The whole group, however, maintained the general movement with Gelvarry.

He was fairly certain he remembered what they were, and he did what he could to ignore them.

He came to the gondola hatch, which was an engine-turned duraluminum panel opening on a ladder leading down into a long, windowed corridor lined with crank-operated chest-high machines, at each of which crouched and cranked a monkey somewhat smaller than Gelvarry. As he set foot on the ladder, several of the larger monkeys from the hull spaces suddenly shoved past him, all bristles and smell, forcing their way into the corridor. They were met with immediate, shrieking violence from the nearest machine monkeys, and Gelvarry swung himself partway off the ladder, his eyes wide, maintaining his purchase with one boot toe and one gloved hand while he peered back over his shoulder at the screams and wrestlings within the confined space.

Bloodied intruder monkeys with their pelts torn began to flee back toward safety past him, voiceless and panting, their expressions desperate. The attempted invasion was becoming a fiasco at the deft hands of the machine monkeys, who fought with ear-ripping indignation, uttering howls of outrage while viciously handling the much more naive newcomers. Out of the corner of his eye, Gelvarry saw exactly one of the intruders – who had shrewdly chosen a graying and instinctively diffident machine monkey several positions away from the hatch – pay no heed to the tumult and close its teeth undramatically and inflexibly in its target's throat. In a moment, the object of the maneuver was a limp and yielding bundle on the deck. While all its fellows streamed up past Gelvarry and took, dripping, to the safety of the hull braces, the one victorious new monkey bent over the dispossessed machine and began fuming the crank. No attention was paid to it as things within the gondola corridor resumed to normal.

Gelvarry closed and secured the hatch while monkeys returned to their machines. The wounded ones ignored their hurts cleverly. Neither neighbor of the successful invader paid any overt attention to matters as they now stood, but Gelvarry noticed that as they bobbed and weaved at their machines, with the new monkey between them and with the dead cranker supine at his feet, they unobtrusively extended their limbs and tails to nudge lightly at the body, until they had almost inadvertently kicked it out of sight behind the machines.

Each of the machines displayed a three-dimensional scene within a small circular platform atop the device. Aircraft could be seen moving in combat among miniature clouds over distant background landscapes. Doped wings glistened in the sunlight, turning, fuming, reflecting flashes: Dot dot dot. Dash dash dash. Dot. Dot. Dot. Gelvarry brushed forward between the busy animals and moved toward the farther hatch at the other end of the corridor. Atop the nearest machine, he saw a Fokker dreidekker painted red, whipping through three fast barrel rolls before resuming level flight above the floundering remains of a broken Nieuport. Dot dot dot dash.

The monkey at that machine frowned and cranked the handle backwards. The Baron's triplane suddenly reversed its actions. Dash dot dot dot. The Nieuport reassembled. Stork insignia could be seen painted on its fuselage. The crank turned forward again. The swastika-marked red wings corkscrewed into their victory roll again above the disintegrating Frenchman.

The monkey at the machine was crooning and bouncing on the balls of its feet, rubbing its free hand over its lips. It moved several knobs at the front of the viewing machine, and the angle changed, so that the point of view was directly from the cockpit of the Fokker, and pieces of the Nieuport flew past the wing struts to either side. The monkey jabbed its neighbors with its elbows and nodded toward the action. It searched the face on either side for reaction. One of them, fuming away from a scene of Messerschmitt 262 tactical jet fighters rocketing a column of red-starred T-34 tanks on the ice of Lake Ladoga, glanced over impatiently and pushed back at the Fokker monkey's shoulder, resuming its attention to its own concerns. But the other neighboring monkey was kinder. Despite the fact that its flight of three Boeing P-26s was closing fast on a terrified Kawanishi flying boat over the Golden Gate Bridge, it paused long enough to glance at the Baron's victory, pat its neighbor reassuringly on the back, and utter a chirp of approbation. Pleased, the first monkey was immediately rapt in rerunning the new version of the scene. The kind

monkey stole a glance over again, shrugged, and resumed cranking its own machine.

Gelvarry continued pushing between the monkeys to either side. The flooring was solid, but springy underfoot. The ceiling was convex, and wider than the floor, so that the duraluminum walls tapered inward. They were pierced for skylights above the long banks of machines, but Ticonderoga was apparently passing through clouds. There were rapid alterations of light at the ports, but only slight suggestions of any detail. Over the spasmodic grinding of the cranks, and the constant slight vocalizations of the monkeys, the sound of air washing over the walls and floor could be made out if one paused and listened ruminatively.

Gelvarry reached Mr. Churchill's compartment door. He knocked, and the reassuring voice replied: "Come!" He quickly entered and closed the sheetmetal panel securely behind him.

The compartment was large for his expectations. Its deck was parqueted and dressed in oriental carpets. Armchairs and taborets were placed here and there, with many low reading lumps, and opaque drapes swayed over the portholes. Mr. Churchill sat heavily in a Turkish upholstered chair at the other end of the room, facing him, wearing his pinstriped blue suit with the heavy watchchain across the rounded vest. He gripped a freshly lighted Uppman cigar between his knuckles. The famous face was drawn up into its wet baby scowl, and Gelvarry at once felt the impact of the man's presence.

"Ah," Mr. Churchill said. "None too soon. Come and sit by me. We have only a moment or two, and then they shall all be here." His mouth quirked sideward. "Rabble," he growled. "Counterjumpers."

Gelvarry moved forward toward the chair facing the Prime Minister. "Am I a unique case, Sir?" he said, sitting down with a trace of uneasiness. "I was told high squadron posting was voluntary only."

Mr. Churchill raised his eyebrows and turned to the taboret beside him. He punched a bronze pushbell screwed to the top. "Unique? Of course you're unique, man! You're the principal, after all." A doorway somewhere behind him opened, and a young woman with soot-black hair and bee-stung lips entered wearing a French maid's costume. She brought a silver tray on which rested two crystal tumblers and a bottle of the familiar Hennessy Rx Official. "Very good! Very good!" Mr. Churchill said, pouring. "Mr. Dunstan Haverman, I'm introducing Giselle Montez," he said, giving her name the Gallic pronunciation. "It is very possible that

you shall – " He shrugged. "meet again." Gelvarry tried not to appear much out of countenance as Miss Montez brought the salver and stood gracefully silent, her eyes downcast, while he took his tumbler. "Charmed" he said softly.

"Thank you," she murmured, turned, and retreated through her doorway. She had left the bottle with Mr. Churchill.

Gelvarry sipped. Mr. Churchill raised his glass. "Here's to reality."

Haverman shuddered. "No," he said, drinking more deeply anyway, "I was beginning to depend on it too much. Sam, what's going wrong?"

Sam grunted as the amber liquid hit his own esophagus. He was normally a self-contained, always pleasant-spoken individual – the typical golf or tennis pro at the best club in the county – who in Haverman's long experience of him had once frowned when a drunk at a business luncheon had pawed a waitress. And then calmly tipped a glass of icewater into the man's lap, costing himself a thirty-nine-week deal.

"Sam?" Haverman peered through the Hennessey effect at his grimacing old acquaintance.

"Take a look." The leaner, longer-legged, short-haired man sitting in the chrome-and-leather captain's chair turned toward the har-edged cabinet standing beside him. The pushbell atop it seemed incongruous. Sam flipped up a panel and punched a number on the keyboard behind it. He closed the panel and nodded toward a cleared area of the panelled, indirectly lighted room. Haverman immediately recognized it as a holo focus, of course, even before he remembered what an inlaid circle in the flooring signified. It was a large one half again the size of normally sold commercial receivers – as befitted the offices of a major industry figure.

Laurent Michaelmas appeared; urbane, dark-suited, scarlet flower in his lapel. "Good day," he said. "I have the news." He paused, one eyebrow cocked, hands slightly spread, waiting for feedback.

Sam raised his voice slightly above normal conversational level. "Just give us the broadcast industry top story, please," he said, and the Michaelmas projection flicked almost imperceptibly into a slightly new stance, then bowed and said:

"The top broadcast story is also still the top general story, sir. Now here it is:" He relaxed and stepped aside so that he was at the exact edge of the circle, visually related to the room floor level, while the remainder of the holo sphere went to an angled overhead view of Lower Manhattan.

"Well, today is October 25, 2005, in New York City, where the impact of

the latest FCC ruling is still being assessed by programming departments for all major media." The scene-camera point of view became a circling pan around Wall Street Alley, picking up the corporate logos atop the various buildings: RCA, CBS, ABC, GTV, Blair, Neilsen. In a nice touch, the POV zoomed smoothly on an upper-storey window, showing what appeared to be a conference room with three or four gesticulating figures somewhat visible through the sun-repelling glass. It was excellent piloting, too – the camera copter was being handled smoothly enough in the notorious off-bay crosscurrents so that the holo scanner's limited compensatory circuits were able to take all the jiggle and drift out of the shot. Here was a flyer, Haverman thought, who wouldn't be a disgrace at the trapeze. Then he winced and took another nibble at the Hennessey.

"While viewers reaped an unexpected bonanza," Michaelmas said, and the background cut to an interior of a typical dwelling and a young man and woman watching Laurent Michaelmas with expressions of pleasant surprise, "industry spokesmen publicly lauded the FCC's Reception Release Order." The cut this time was to a pleasant-looking fellow in a casual suit, leaning against a holo cabinet. He smiled and said: "Folks, it's got to be the greatest thing since free tickets to the circus." He patted the cabinet. "Imagine! From now on, you can receive every and any channel right where you are, no matter what type of receiver you own! Yes, it's true – for only a few pennies, we'll bring you and install one of the new Rutledge-Karmann adapter units, with the best coherer circuit possible, that'll transform any receiver into an all-channel receiver! Now, how about that? Remember, the government says we have to use top-quality components, and we have to sell to you at our cost! So – " He grinned boyishly. "Even if we wanted to screw you, we can't."

"Others, however," Michaelmas said, "were not so sanguine. Even in public."

The holo went to Fingers Smart in the elevator lobby of what was recognizably the New York FCC building. He was striding out red-faced, followed by several figures Haverman could recognize as GTV attorneys and GTV's favorite consulting lawyer. "When interviewed, GTV Board Chairman Ancel B. Smart had this to say at 1:15 P.M. today:"

Now it was a two-shot of Smart being faced by an interested, smiling Laurent Michaelmas, while the lawyers milled around and tried to get a word in edgewise. Nobody ever effectively got between that friendly-uncle manner of Michaelmas's and whoever he was after.

"That's exactly right, Larry," Smart was saying. "We built the holovision industry the way it is because the FCC wanted it that way then. Now it

wants it another way, and that's it. Public interest. Well, damn it, we're part of the public, too!" Smart's other industry nickname was Notso.

"Are you going to continue fighting the ruling?"

A belated widening of Smart's eyes now occurred. "Who says we're fighting it? We were here getting clarification of a few minor points. You know GTV operates in the public interest."

Sam chuckled, unamused, while Haverman peered and thought. GTV controlled eighty-seven entertainment channels that operated twenty-four hours a day. There were six GTV-owned channels leased to religious and political lobbies. There was also, of course, GTV's ten percent share of the public network subsidy. Paid off in programs given to PTV from the summer Student Creative internship plan.

That was how the dice had fallen when the Congress legislated cheap 3-D TV. The existing broadcast companies were trapped in their old established images with heavy emphasis on sports or news, women's daytime, musical variety, feature documentary anthologies, and the like. That had left an obvious vacuum which GTV had filled promptly.

AD-channel receivers at an affordable price had been out of the question. As usual, Congress had been straining technology to its practical limits, and compromises had had to be made in the end. A good half of the receivers sold, Haverman remembered, were entertainment only. Now, apparently, because of something very cheap called the Harmonn-Cutlass or something, he wouldn't have to remember it any longer.

"Oh!" he said, raising his eyes to Sam's nod.

Michaelmas cocked his head at Smart. "Just one or two more questions, please. Are you saying you haven't already cut your ratings guarantees to your advertisers? I believe your loss this quarter has just been projected at nearly twenty percent of last year's profits."

Smart glanced aside to his legal staff. But he was impaled on Michaelmas's smile. He tried one of his own; it worked beautifully at the annual entertainment programming awards dinner. "Come on, Larry – you know I'm no bean-counter. GTV's going to continue to offer the same top drawer – "

"Well, one would assume that," Michaelmas said urbanely. "You have most of the season's product still on the shelf, unshown. No one would expect you to just dump a capital investment of that scope. What is your plan for after that? Or don't you expect to be the responsible executive six months from now?"

"Ouch!" Haverman said.

"I don't think I have to answer that here," Smart said quickly. He frowned at Michaelmas as he moved to step around him. "Come to think of it, you're in competition with us now, aren't you?" He actually laid a hand on Michaelmas's arm and pushed him a little aside, or would have, if Michaelmas didn't have a dancer's grace. "No further comment," Smart said, and strode off.

Michaelmas turned toward the point of view, while the background faded out behind him and left him free-standing. He shrugged expressively. "These little tiffs sometimes occur within the fellowship of broadcasting," he said with a smile. "But most observers would agree that competition is always in the public interest." There was the faintest of flicks to a stock tape; computer editing was instantaneous in real time, smooth, and due to become smoother. Even now, only an eye expecting it could detect it. "And that's how it is today," flick, "in broadcasting," flick, "and in the top story at this hour." He bowed and was gone.

Haverman rolled his eyes. "What happened?" he said. "I thought Hans Smart had a lock on Congress."

Sam grinned crookedly and grimly. "He's dead, poor chap. His liver gave out two weeks ago, and there went Notso's brains."

"Physiology got to the wrong brother."

"Yeah. It wouldn't have been as bad as it was, but three days before he went, NBC sprang a prime-time documentary. It was about this new little engineering company in Palo Alto that could pick up all channels on your \$87.50 Sony portable. He wasn't cold in the ground before a dozen senators were on the all-channel bandwagon. The House delegation from California began lobbying as a bloc, New York City, and then Nassau and Dutchess counties jumped in, and the next you know Calart-Hummer or whatever it is, is the law of the fund. Hans Smart could handle legislators with the best of 'em, but I don't think it was the booze chat killed him; it was that friggin' feature."

Sam grinned more genuinely. "It was a beaut. NBC sent out engraved invitations, on paper, messenger-delivered to every member of Congress and anybody else they figured could swing a little. About six months ago, they had bought excerpt rights to about a dozen old Warbirds things. Newsfeature use only; you know how that goes, I guess. Well, it all turned up in that show. Michaelmas walking around narrating over it. Only they scaled it down behind him, so he was just stepping around over the

battlefields and the planes were buzzing around him while he just smiled and talked. King damned Kong in a pinstripe suit. You wouldn't have believed it. Show it to you sometime; everybody in the business must have made a copy of it. Scare hell out of you. Even if you weren't personally involved, I mean."

Haverman sucked a little more Hennessey carefully between his lips and across the edges of his tongue. "What's been happening to the Warbirds ratings, Sam?"

Ticonderoga Studios produced other things besides Warbirds, but Warbirds was what it was known for in the industry, and Warbirds was GTV's top-rated show. GTV's contract was what kept Ticonderoga flying.

"Well, Dusty, we're having to be ingenious." Sam looked down at the stick between his fingers, then broke it open and inhaled in a controlled manner. "These things are pretty good," he remarked. Haverman settled himself carefully in his chair. "Isn't this thing bound to settle out? I mean, it's a new toy. Notso may flail around for a while—"

Sam nodded, but not encouragingly. "He's gone. He knows it. But he's telling himself he can make it unhappen if he just yells and shits loud enough. Flailing around isn't the phrase you need. But he's gone. I've got some GTV stock; want it?"

"It'll work its way back up again, Sam," Haverman said carefully. "Especially if Smart gets kicked out by the Board and they hire a new president." Haverman suddenly sat up straighter. "Hey, Sam, why couldn't that be you?"

"I've thought about that."

"Right! It's perfect for them – a top gun from outside, but not too far outside. An experienced new broom. The PR is made for it, friend!"

"I don't want it."

Haverman looked at him watchfully. "Oh?"

Sam shook his head. "Too soon. I'm staying right where I am and building a record. Some other poor son of a bitch can have the next couple of years to get ulcerated in."

Haverman pursed his lips thoughtfully. "It's going to be that bad." He had one hundred percent respect for Sam's judgment. "I guess I'm being a little slow. If our audience could switch away to other channels, can't their people switch to GTV?"

"All of them can and some of them will. But they're hardcore

generalists; they'll take a little of us, and a little of CBS, and a little of NBC, and a little of Funkbeobachter, and a little Shimbun, and some ABC, and God knows what else when the new relay sets go in. No, these are the kind of people that're used to a little of everything, no matter what network they're from. Any of 'em that hankered for a little side action from GTV or anyplace else could afford additional sets long ago. But our viewers, you know – " He held his hand out, palm up, and slowly turned it over.

Haverman said reluctantly: "That's not how we talk at the awards dinners."

"I don't see any chicken and peas around here right now," Sam said. "There's no way I would have pulled you out of your milieu if I didn't think we were in trouble."

"We can counterprogram," Haverman said emphatically. "We've got the skills and me facilities."

"Yes, I have."

"O.K. We can do news and sports stuff like the other people. That's the way it's going to go anyhow – back to the way it was in flat-V time, when everybody had a little of everything."

"Yeah, but not now," Sam said. "Later. Meanwhile, how do we get the National League to break its contract with ABC? Where do you think CBS's legal department would be if we started talking option-breakers to Mandy Carolina? Two years from now, Michaelmas's contract is up for renewal at NBC. There's talk he's thinking of going completely freelance. That'll start a trend. Give me enough bucks, and I'd build you the top-rated action news show. Then. Then, Dusty," he said gently. "Not now. And now is when Fingers Smart and old Sam the Ticonderoga are fighting for their lives, you know?" He inhaled deeply on the stick and threw the exhausted pieces to the floor.

"I can't start another league to compete with what ABC can show my people. There aren't that many big jocks in the world. And I can't find another talk show hostess; only God can make a mouth. I can't get Michaelmas, I can't get Walter Enright. I can get the guy who's sick of being Skip Jacobson's Sunday-night backup, and so what. What I've got is actors. I can get actors. I can get enough actors to fill eighty times twenty-four hours of programming every week, if I have to." Sam sighed. "I can make actors. So can anybody else; it's no secret how you do almost two thousand different shows a week, thirty-nine weeks a year. So you know what I've got left?" Sam leaned forward.

"Me," Sam said. "I've got me, and what's in me here." He tapped his

head and patted his crotch. "And we're gonna find out how many years it's good for."

The silence had persisted palpably. "And me, Sam," Haverman said finally.

"Uh-huh," Sam said. He poured another shot into Haverman's glass. "Here," he said, and sipped his own to knock off the stick effect. "Have a snort. Now, listen. You're my guy, and don't forget it. You were one of the first people to sign on with me, and you've been the principal of Warbirds ever since almost the beginning."

Haverman nodded emphatically. There had been a Rex something or other. But that was long ago. "I have a following," he said confirmingly, as if that was what he thought mattered to Sam about him. And of course it was one of the things that did matter. It must. Sam was not a creative for his health.

"That's right," Sam said gently. "And I'm going to protect you, and you're going to help me."

"I'm not going back into Warbirds."

"Something like Warbirds. Something recognizably like it, and you're going to have the same character name."

Haverman cocked his head. "But there are going to be changes."

"Oh, yes. Got to have those, so it can be new and different. But not too many, really – got to save something so they can identify with the familiar. It'll have airplanes and things."

"Ah," Haverman said warily.

"A new show. All your own. Name over the title. We're going to promo hell out of it – 'Haverman Moves!' Maybe 'Dusty Moves!' I don't know. Hell with it. Think of something better. Not the point. We'll get every one of the Warbirds audience, and with that kind of promo, we'll get plenty of new lookers. Once they've looked, we'll have 'em. Guarantee it."

"Well, certainly, if it's one of your ideas – "

"Hell, yes, it's one of mine. More important, it's the one whose time has come. What the hell – eighty-odd channels of our own for a looker to choose from, and God knows how many more coming from all kinds of places. It's got to happen; I can hit the FCC with First Amendment and Right of Free Choice at the same time. It'll be years before they beat me. And you know something, Duster?" he said in a suddenly calm voice, "I don't think they're ever going to beat me. I think we really can make it

stick."

"Oh?" Haverman felt the skin prickle sharply at the backs of his hands. He had never seen Sam like this; only heard of such moments, when the conviction of having thought and done exactly right transformed his good friend's face. The triumphant force of having created a truth came blazing from his eyes. And when he said "I think we can make it stick," his voice reharmonized itself so that though it never rose in volume, it might have been played by solo viola. Haverman could only say again: "Oh."

Sam was grinning. Grinning. "It's beautiful, Duster," he said. "Once we've beaten the test case, we can do another thing – open up a whole channel to the genre. Maybe more than one. And you shoot the whole thing on one set, with a couple of pieces of furniture and just a handful of props, and a holoprojected background. There's no long shot, and damned little tracking, so you do it with two cameras. One, if you're willing to settle. But I wouldn't. Or at least I'd want a damn good optical reflector to back me up. A whole new show, and then a whole channel full of new shows, for a third – maybe a fourth – of what anything else costs."

"And I'm going to do the first one," Haverman said. "Smart'll go for it. He has to. What kind of show is it, exactly, Sam?"

When Sam explained it to him further, he sat shaking his head. "Oh, no, Sam, no, I'm not sure I could do that."

But Sam said: "Sure you can."

Haverman sat uncertainly through the beginning of the conference. First the door to the office corridor was opened, and the senior technical staff came in; Hal, the most senior, carried a model of an aircraft carrier and a model of a silvery biplane, both of which he set down on Sam's white table. Sam turned them over in his hands, and nodded and winked at Hal, who smiled and sat down in the nearest of the informally grouped chairs. Dusty sat back along the wall, in a comfortable alcove next to Miss Montez's door, waiting.

Sam looked around at his people. "Everybody ready? O.K., let's give the great man a call," he said, and apparently punched up Ancel Smart's phone number, because Smart, after a little work with a secretary, appeared in the holo circle. He sat in a chair with his own people around him, and said heavily: "Shoot."

"Right," Sam said. "Anse, you know Hal and the rest of the boys, here. Now, we're proposing as follows – "

And it continued from there, with Smart nodding from time to time, or interposing a question, and changing his POV to watch whoever on the Ticonderoga staff was giving him the data. Then he'd turn back to Sam. Occasionally, one of Smart's people would address Sam. But it was Smart and Sam one-on-one, as it ought to be, Dusty saw, beginning to feel better as his friend clearly established dominance over the meeting Smart was inclined to cough and play with his chin. Sam sat slim and upright, his hands, spread-fingered, molding premises in the air above the white tabletop where the models waited. Dusty begun to feel better as Sam grew.

"All right, I promise you this new show'll grab 'em and won't let go. I've taken a closer look at the tentative figures we discussed earlier, and I'll stand behind 'em." Sam named an in-the-can cost half of what it might have been. "And no concept fee, absolutely nothing in front. I get it back on reruns; we go to full rate on those, but, what the hell, if we ever see reruns, you're golden and you don't care, right? O.K., so that's Part One of what Ticonderoga's prepared to do. What do you do, Anse?"

Smart nodded. "Like I said. If it packages up the way you described, GTV'll help with the Feds. We've still got an office in Washington, after all, and my brother left a well-trained staff."

"Specifically, you're agreeing to hold Ticonderoga harmless in the event of criminal penalties or monetary losses caused by legal or regulatory action. Is that correct?"

One of Smart's legal staff suddenly leaned forward and began to whisper urgency in his ear. Smart waved him off impatiently. "That's right. I haven't changed my mind."

"On the record, and on behalf of GTV?" Sam pointed toward his own lawyer, who held up a sealed recorder.

"If we buy the program at all, GTV defends," Smart confirmed.

"O.K.," Sam said. "Now I'm gonna tell you who's in it."

"Ah."

"According to the formula we discussed," Sam said, turning to his holo box, talking aside, "we're going for a total ego-spectrum across four archetypical blocs. Now, each bloc embodies several potent identification features. We go young woman, young but experienced man, older and ego-stable woman, fully sophisticated man at the top end of middle age. We go soft, why, tight, sinewy; dark, reddish, blondy, silver. Sometimes we vary a little; there's room to do it; you get different overlaps, but you still

cover it all the way across your maximized consumer ideals. We anchor at each end with an identifiable regular, but we can vary in the middle. Right so far?"

Smart nodded. "Acceptable." His and Sam's lawyers nodded.

"All right." Sam was still turned toward the control cabinet and speaking along his shoulder at Smart. He began to slowly raise one arm toward the top of the box. It was a good move; Haverman could see the tension building in Smart, and the distraction that was mirrored in the flickering of his eyes. More and more, Haverman felt the welling of admiration for Sam, and the comfort of being one of his people. "Now, you buy the concept of guest celebrities?"

"As long as they fit the formula."

"As long as they fit the formula defined above," Sam corroborated. "Are you worried about our being able to create authenticity?"

"With your makeup and research departments? Never. You guarantee audience believability, and I'll take your word for it right now."

"So guaranteed. Done." Sam nodded. "All right, we work from now on the assumption that the celebrity pair on each show will cover the two middle blocs, and Ticonderoga has discretion there as long as the portrayals remain convincing. To whom? Do you want to designate an audience-reaction service, Ancel?" His hand was poised above the holo controls now.

Smart shrugged. "We've been using TeleWinner all along. Let's give 'em this, too. Split the cost, right?" He chuckled. "What the hell, you know the reason GTV buys Warbirds is because I'm hooked on it. I'm my own symbol-bloc survey; they just make it official."

Sam smiled faintly. Audience size was what made it official.

"And, what the hell," Smart said, "you're keeping the alternate time tracks premise for the new show, aren't you? So if somebody says Rocky Marciano wasn't lefthanded or Sonja Henie didn't rollerskate, well, hell that was then but this is elsewhen, right? But it has to look right; that we've got to have."

"Absolutely." Even if there'd been no other public source of visual data, there was GTV's own Channel 29, steadily programming out reprocessed old movie and newsreel footage for all the Deser warbabies who'd just missed it. The reprocessing was done by TStudiolab, Inc., one of Sam's subsidiaries.

"Okay, so we've got all that out of the way," Smart said. "Now let's see

the goods."

"Of course." Sam smiled. His hand moved unexpectedly, and rang the little pushbell. "Let me introduce our talented newcomer. The next big word in viewer households, known to you and me as the young bloc archetype and all that implies, but professionally known as Giselle Montez – "

On her cue, Miss Montez came through her door in a high squadron pilot's uniform, the leather of her boots and Sam Browne belt glistening. She swept off her aluminized goggles and her helmet with one deft swirl of the hand that released her cloud of hair, and stood holding them on her hip, while her other hand rested its fingertips at the first button in the vee of her tunic. Ancel Smart leaned forward sharply in his chair. His mouth formed a loose o.

"Thank you, Miss Montez," Sam said, and she about-faced and walked out quickly; the door closed behind her with one darting flip of her fingertips. "And at the other end of the spectrum, the fine silver of sophisticated experience." Sam touched the cabinet controls. A sketch materialized in the air, facing Smart. It was a deceptively loose artist's rendering, life size, of a whipcordy-slim man with delicate limbs and waving, glossy white hair struck with contrasting pewter-colored low-lights. The expression of the aristocratic face suggested certain things.

Smart nodded reservedly. "Yes. All right. Looks all right. Who's going to play it? Something familiar about him. Who was your artist using for a model? Dusty Haverman?" Smart grinned.

Sam did not. He simply kept looking steadily at Smart, whose eyes first narrowed, then enlarged. "You're kidding! You're – How do we do Warbirds without him? – Jesus – " He slapped his thigh. "Perfect! It's perfect! It's a stroke, Sam, a fuckin' stroke!"

"Sure," Sam said.

The back of the meeting was broken. It was all a big long happy glide thereafter. Sar'n-Major Mac would come to the fore as the real manager of low squadron, and Private Parkins would play up raffishly. Major Harding's part would be padded a little, and Father Collins would listen to his troubles as he thrashed about trying to assert himself and spoil MacBanion's schemes. At its own expense, as an additional contribution to the relief of the crisis, Ticonderoga Studios would go back into the existing unshown episodes and re-edit to the new slant, so the Gelvarry character would be free to Go West, grow up, and change shows

immediately. Sam had some experimental footage, it seemed, which might fit some of that.

In return, GTV would guarantee renewal next year. About next year – Sam's latest idea was to move on to dirigible-launched P6E's against Fiat CR32 biplanes; he held up the glittering model of the 220-mph Italian fighter, which had not gone out of use until 1938. They would be launched from the Graf Zeppelin, which had been Nazi Germany's sole aircraft carrier. Named for the man who pioneered practical lighter-than-air flight.

Smart considered the possibilities and the twists. "Cute," he admitted. "I like it." He shook his head. "I don't know where you get your ideas, Sam. Christ. Planes that sound like cars comin' off a ship that sounds like a dirigible, and what do they run up against? Damn! Yeah – let me see some footage pretty soon, will you?"

Sam had some, it seemed, which would fit some of that. They'd be able to show a rough cut in about a week.

"How about the new show? How soon can I have that?"

Well, it took a little while to get the actors into the milieu. Smart could understand that.

Yes, he could. But –

Oh, they'd push it. Tell you what; how about a progress report in ten days?

Well, if that meant they were close to delivery on the pilot episode.

Right. The pilot episode.

Everybody suddenly laughed, and Sam promised to send the little models over to Smart's office right away, for the shelves over the bar.

Smart punched off, and everybody in Sam's conference room began to grin and make enthusiastic quips. They were a high-morale outfit. It almost reminded Haverman of – Well, it should, shouldn't it? Art mirrors life.

Haverman got up from his inconspicuous seat and went over to Sam. "I thought it went very well."

Hal raised an eyebrow. "Well, hello!" he said.

Sam smiled reassuringly. "You heard the man, Duster," he said. "GTV's buying it, and they'll protect us. So it's all right." His eyes said: I told you I'd take care of you.

"I'm sure of that," Haverman said with conviction. "It's a Ticonderoga production," and everyone within earshot smiled.

"Why don't we get started?" Sam said and, putting an arm around his shoulders, walked with him out through the door to the technical spaces, which in this area were half-partitioned workrooms and offices grouped-up to either side of the long central aisle that run back toward the sound stages. Overhead were the whitewashed skylights and the zigzag trusses of the broad, arching roof, and to either side of them were the sounds of word-processing machines and footage splicers. They walked along to a side aisle, and there Sam had to leave him, after opening and holding open for him the heavy wood-grained door marked ACTORS AND MEDICAL PERSONNEL ONLY.

A bright-looking young medical person leafed through his printout. "Dusty Haverman," he said wonderingly. "I never knew you'd been an accounting student."

"Isn't Doctor Virag going to do me? Doctor Virag and I know each other very well," he said, sitting stiffly in his chair.

The medical person did his best to smile disarmingly. "Doctor Virag is no longer with us, I'm afraid. Time passes, you know. I'm Doctor Harcourt; I think you'll find me competent. Sam personally asked me to take you."

"Oh. Well, I didn't mean to imply – "

"That's all right, Mr. Haverman. Now, if you'll just relax, Miss Tauchnitz will begin removing that hairpiece and so forth." Harcourt's fingers danced over keys, and he peered at the screen beside his chair. "Let me just refresh myself on this – yes, well, I think you may find it a relief to wear your own hair, for one thing; we'll just bleach it up a little bit. And we'll tan you. That'll be better than that tarty pinky-cheeks tinting, don't you think? Other than that, there's just a tiny bit of incising to do... a touch of a lift to one eyebrow, and that'll have the desired effect, I'm sure. Oh, yes, the cosmetology here is minimal, minimal. Which is just as well, since we do have a rather thick book of response-adjustments to perform, but, then, none of us is perfect for our role in life, really. Or is it 'are perfect'? Would you happen to know which it is, Miss Tauchnitz?"

When they had that done, they walked him down the corridors, past the rows of costume mannequins, and to the processing room, which was

hung in soft black non-reflecting fabric, and where they had symphonic control of the lighting. They put him in the chair with the trick armrests and the neck brace.

"This is wine, Mr. Haverman," and he peered aside at the rollaway table with the clear decanter of rosy clarity, and the goblet. As long as he moved his arm smoothly and no more quickly than was gracious he could reach out and take it, and sip. "That's right. Have some more," the pleasant voice behind him said, and when he had had some more, they showed him a holo of Miss Montez and stimulated an electrode.

"Ah! Ah-ah-ah!"

"A little more wine, Mr. Haverman." And again the Montez and the incredible sensation beside which all past experience paled.

To see her come fully lighted out of the featureless soft warm darkness, and to feel what he could feel when she did that, he had only to reach out and take more wine. There was no thought in him of a spastic attempt to pluck something from his skull.

"Shouldn't you be feeding me oysters or Vitamin E? Perhaps some Tiger's Milk?" he jested once after they had stopped the wine and given him some Hennessy to refresh him. The pleasant voice murmured a throaty chuckle behind him.

When there was no further response to his gambit, he said: "Ah, well, I've really always been a steak and potatoes man, actually," and carelessly reached around to circle his hand into the unknown space behind him, but the pleasant voice said: "More wine, Mr. Gelvarry," and an unnoticeable hand put the goblet into his fingers. "Good enough," Gelvarry said. "Ah! Yes, yes, good enough, I say."

They showed him a slim, freckled woman with prominent front teeth, dressed in a calf-length skirt and a cardigan sweater over a cotton blouse. She wore soft leather street boots over dark lisle stockings, and moved like something wary in a strange part of the forest. They wiped, and went to a reprocessed, tinted, computer-animated photo of the famous person this was supposed to represent, and when he sipped the wine, they gave him the pleasure effect. Soon enough in the process he found it difficult to distinguish between the photo and the actress in her costume, no matter how the costume changed per reveal, for they always had a fresh photo after each wipe-and-switch, and the costume had clearly been cued by something in the photo, as much as chiffon can be patterned to remind one of gingham. In truth, in a while, he could not distinguish at all, and he

found that although after a while they didn't wipe the actress, he had to concentrate very hard to make her out behind the features he now saw for her. So they gave him more wine, and the idea of concentrating was, to his relief, lost.

They did roughly the same thing with the identity of the purposeful young man with the angelic eyes.

And it was done.

"It's good, Sam," Haverman said, sitting in the office with the Hennessey.

"Sure," Sam said.

"I feel it. I feel absolutely certain." He ran a hand along the silvery waves at the side of his head, and touched one finger to his pencil mustache. His hand was lean and browned by the suns of expensive resorts. A chased gold ring set with a ruby glittered on his little finger. "The way you can make me see the guests, instead of the actors playing them – "

"Yeah, well, they aren't actually playing them, you know. We've got this computer tied into the cameras, and when those people move around, the image data gets put through and modified by this fancy program I had the fellows work up. It's pretty good; probably get better. As long as the players don't do anything grossly out of character, the computer can edit the image to fit the model character. That's what goes on the air."

"But how do I see it, playing with them?"

"Well, you can't, Duster, that's why we do that hocus-pocus in the dark room. One of the hocus-pocuses." Sam patted him lightly at the neck. "Saves you having to act, you know, old Duster." He was sitting beside him on the couch, and leaned forward to cap the Hennessey.

"I think I could act it," Haverman said very softly.

Sam sighed. "Well, perhaps you could. But you see, this way it all goes smoothly and very naturally, don't you see? No lines to remember, no breaks for lunch – But those are all technical details, Dus, and there's absolutely no need for you to learn them."

"Still and all," Haverman said. "Still and all." Sam was uncapping the wine now. "I think you're very inventive," Haverman hastened. "That was always true of you. Do you know what I think? I think your next computer program will make it completely unnecessary to have anyone walking around for the cameras to focus on. Sam, that's true, isn't it? That's what you'd really, really like, isn't it?"

"Why, that's not true at all," Sam almost said; Haverman strained to hear him say that, and it seemed to him he was saying it, just outside the range of human hearing. He peered, and he craned his neck. But Sam was saying: "It's almost studio time, Dus. Have some wine," in his pleasant voice.

Haverman sighed. "Oh, all right, if that's the best you can do."

"My name is Austin Gelvarry," he repeated to Miss Montez, who was probably staring over his shoulder at the glistening, intricately decorated brass bed. "I have the power to call up whatever pleases me." He sipped from his glass, as she was doing. A nice light was developing in her eyes.

"I – seem to remember something different – "

"Have some more wine. It does no harm. It's strong drink that is raging," Gelvarry said, preoccupied, watching the little monkey plucking fruit from the bowl on the sideboard. The monkey caught his eye and winked.

"Listen," Miss Montez said, "It's just you can't find a secretary job anywhere anymore," but she was sipping.

Gelvarry smiled. Beyond her a Lockheed Electra was just touching down, crabbing a little in the wind as one might very well expect of so small an aircraft, even if it were an all-metal cabin twin. She settled in nicely, with just a spurt of blue smoke at the tires, and began to run out. He watched the pilot swing the Electra around deftly, and begin taxiing toward them.

"Do I please you, Austin?" Miss Montez said over the rim of her glass, looking at him through her lashes. She seemed quite nicely settled in now.

"Ah," Gelvarry said. "Ah." The Electra came to a halt and the cabin door popped open. A slim figure jumped down and waved, and began running toward them. "Here's Amelia!" Gelvarry exclaimed gladly.

A Ryan high-wing monoplane, lacking the reflection of sun on windscreen glass, came over low, light glittering at its engine-turned cowling. A figure waved down from a side window, and then the Spirit of St. Louis banked away to line up upwind, flaring out for its landing, its prominent wheels seeming to reach down for the ground against the red outline of the evening sun. Gelvarry and Miss Montez both half-rose with pleasure. "And here's Lucky Lindy now!"

© 1978, Conde Nast Publications, Inc.

Scream at Sea

I have never felt I couldn't write anything but SF. When the late Rogers Terrill put out word that Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., which then paid well for pulp fiction, was looking for sea stories in a hurry, I provided. I was living in an apartment house on the corner of Eighth Avenue and 23rd Street in New York. The rent was more per month than I was earning in six months. Ziff-Davis paid a respectable sum for the story, and gave me the feeling that I was breaking into the general fiction market. Then the magazine failed, and this story has twice appeared in Fantastic, a former Z-D property, presumably because I had an established SF byline. I apologize to all SF magazine buyers who felt done-on by this tactic; it wasn't mine. Now here it is again – the story and the tactic, both – but the circumstances are more appropriate.

THE PRINCIPAL FEATURE of Harry Meglow's life had been his ability to escape from seemingly complete disaster. True, his means of escape usually required trips to out-of-the-way corners, but Harry had been tailored by some Providence with the foresight to ensure that he would feel at home in them.

Consequently, he had found life in Venezuela not disagreeable, and not financially unrewarding. However, it became necessary, as a result of the latter circumstance, to find urgent employment as a cook's helper on a Panamanian tanker which had the desirable quality of departing for Lisbon almost immediately. He might have preferred a more elevated position, but he was completely ignorant of the sea. Moreover, hustling slops is still preferable to a South American jail and the good offices of the Venezuelan penal code.

The tanker was a thousand miles into the Atlantic when Meglow's special kind of good fortune reasserted itself. He was standing casually on

deck, scratching the ears of the cook's cat, when some spark touched off the cargo of casing head.

Gasoline vapor is one of the more vicious explosives. Meglow found himself in the sea, and it was not until he tried to scramble aboard a raft that had whirled into the water near him that he became sufficiently conscious of what had happened to notice that the cat was still in his arms. He tossed it aboard and pulled himself up after it.

He and the cat were equally uncomprehending observers as the tanker tore itself completely open with one final blast, fountaining debris and fire.

It was near twilight. Meglow found no survivors in the darkening water – or, rather, none cried out or swam toward him as the raft drifted away. This fact did not particularly bother him, for he was used to the undemanding company of himself. The thought that he was alone in the Atlantic was not particularly disquieting either, for by now the roots of his faith in the inevitable survival of Harry Meglow were sunk deep into the past, so thoroughly intertwined with every significant event in his life that it was a fundamentally optimistic Harry Meglow whose raft carried him farther and farther from the place where the tanker had wallowed down into the sea.

So, once he had accustomed himself to the raft's staccato motion on the choppy water, he was able to sleep without first giving any special thought to his present situation, the sequence of preceding events which had brought him to it, or the course of the future.

He woke up once during the night. The chop had subsided, but an overcast had left the ocean almost completely black, without stars or moonlight. He stared around him at the featureless unfamiliarity of the Atlantic at night, hearing no sound except the slap of water against the raft and the sibilance of his breath.

The water around him was pouring out the warmth it had stored up during the day. Nevertheless, his wet clothing was a cold and clinging shell around him. He tried to peel off his sweater, but the sodden wool bound around his neck and shoulders, smothering him, and he fought his face free with a flail of his arms and a frantic twist of his body. Breathing in spasms, he pulled the sweater back down over his stomach, but in a few minutes he managed a chuckle, and a little later he was asleep again.

He was awakened in the morning by the clawing and meowing of the cat. He rolled over, pushed the animal away from him, and stretched. The

slats of the raft's superstructure were 1 x 2 lumber, spaced a half inch apart – an unyielding surface that stiffened muscle, bruised bone, and cut into skin. His sweater had shrunk, and clung tightly to his chest and arms. Both it and his dungarees were stiff and crusted with salt. His skin itched. He put his hand up to his eyebrows and hair. They were clogged and sticky. He grimaced in disgust.

It was too early to tell, but he thought he might be getting a cold. His nasal passages were congested, and his throat was raw. Perhaps it was merely irritation from salt water inhaled during his frantic lunge for the raft. If it was a genuine cold – well, at least he was alive to have it.

He stood up and moved about in bursts of energy, quickening his circulation. It took him a while to become accustomed to the yielding surface the raft presented, but he was soon able to adjust his movements to it. He began to look around the raft.

The raft itself was more properly a float. It consisted of a slat superstructure around and on a series of metal drums – one of them, a makeshift replacement, actually was an empty oil drum – and stood about a foot out of the water. It was well in keeping with the ship from which it had come.

He found the food locker and watertank after a short while, sunken into the superstructure. There was a considerable supply of biscuits and some canned stuff with a Spanish label that turned out to be ham. He had no way of estimating how long it would last him, but there certainly seemed to be enough of it for some time to come. The watertank was full, and he had no great worries there, either, though again he did not know how many days' supply this actually was. To the problem of survival and rescue, he brought only his perversely optimistic fatalism.

He dug some ham out of the can with his fingers and began to eat it. When the cat rubbed up against his leg and wailed, he bent down absently and put some food on the deck for her, where she ate it hungrily. As he ate, he continued to survey his surroundings.

The raft was on smooth water, with a clear blue, white-flecked sky overhead. The wooden slats of the raft were warped in places, and some pieces of the deck – the top of the raft could be called a deck, he decided – had been replaced, the newer wood contrasting with the old, which was weathered and dotted with black pockmarks where the heads of nails had lost their paint and corroded. The entire raft needed repainting badly.

He finished the ham and threw the can overside, after which he bent down to the watertank for a drink.

The tank, as far as he could see, was the only piece of modern – or almost modern – equipment on the raft. It had a lid with a cup clipped to the underside, and a rubber seal to prevent as much evaporation as possible. He drank thirstily, then refilled the cup and set it down on the deck for the cat.

Idly, he swept his glance around the horizon, not especially hoping to see a ship, and was only mildly disappointed when he did not. There was something vaguely disquieting about the empty sea, not for its lack of any sign of rescue, but because of the sense that he was the only living man in at least thirteen hundred square miles – that is, if his memory was right about the horizon line being about twenty miles away, and if the formula for the area of a circle was $A = \pi r^2$. The raft, henceforth a structure that it was, embodied the only evidence that anything of Man had ever stirred this featureless water.

Meglow had never in his life been twenty miles away from another human being. The visualization of himself alone in the middle of a vast circle of emptiness was completely outside his experience.

He looked at the water around him again. It was no different in one direction than in another. It was all smooth water, apparently changing from dirty green to blue as it stretched farther away, but he knew that actually, even beyond the horizon, it was still dirty green.

Becoming conscious for the first time of the volume of sheer emptiness that an ocean could present, he lost some of the sense of romantic adventure which he had felt up to now – and still felt, but to a lesser degree. Still optimistic, if somewhat subdued, he spent the remainder of the day simply sitting on the raft with his hands around his knees, occasionally stroking the cat, which seemed to be having little difficulty in adjusting to a ten-by-ten environment. After eating some more ham, and drinking another cupful of water, he fell asleep.

He was awakened by the pitching and bucking of the raft, which shook with a completely unfamiliar and mechanical vibration. The cat, somewhere in the darkness beside him, was scratching at the slats.

He looked to his left, and saw something huge and gray slipping past him in the blackness. Running lights tracked a colored line across the sky, and the open door of a radio shack was a moving square of light. Paralyzed, he crouched on the bucking raft, riding the white froth of the ship's wake. When he finally managed to shout, the sound was thin and empty under the beat of the propeller in the water, and he knew it had not

carried to the deck.

"Hey! Hey there! For God's sake – "

He shouted after the retreating ship for a long time, rasping his throat, and it was only after the raft had steadied down once more that he stopped, realizing with even greater force just how large an ocean was, how rare a thing had just occurred, and passed him by. Even on the deck of a ship, the closeness of bulkheads and cargo booms made the sea a thing that was somehow not as desolate as it actually was. Only a man alone on a miniscule platform of warped and dirty slatting could appreciate the closeness, the immediacy of the ocean. To a man on a ship, the sea was a stretch of broad uniformity which carried him on its back. To a man on a raft, the sea was a wilderness.

His heart was pounding. He could not sleep. When it began to rain shortly thereafter, he lay down flat on his stomach, his hands over the back of his head, the slats digging into his face. He felt the cat burrowing against him, but he continued to lie stiff and unmoving. It was up to her to take care of herself.

It rained into daylight. He was stiff and wet, and now he definitely had a cold. Moreover, either because the raft was bobbing on a chop even heavier than that of the first day, or as a reaction to his disappointment during the night, he was feeling sick. His eyes were burning, and his mouth was full of a thick spittle that tasted like corroded copper. The back passages of his nose felt swollen, he was nauseous, and his throat was ragged from the periodic rushes of bile that fought their way up into his esophagus. He was coughing a little.

He looked at the cat, which was huddled miserably against him, and this somehow made him feel better. He managed to chuckle at her unintelligible cries.

The fact that he was still able to laugh made him feel better, and once the mood had been cracked, it broke and left him optimistic again, in spite of the steady downpour of rain and his coughing, which was complicating his nausea.

All right, so he'd missed the ship. For all he knew, it was headed for Venezuela, where the police would be only too happy to have him. As a matter of fact, the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that something unpleasant would have awaited him aboard that vessel. No disaster in his life, no matter how serious it had been at first look, had ever really been as bad as it seemed. He had gotten into trouble in the States, and had found his way to South America. Once

there, he had gotten quite a bit of money. Of course, he'd had to run for it, but the tanker had been readily available. And when the tanker exploded, he had survived. Come to think of it, it was probably because some harm waited for him in Lisbon that the ship had sunk.

He stared out over the white-capped ocean at the steel-gray horizon, and some of this new mood left him. He began to worry about the possibility of a full-fledged storm. Somehow, the sea seemed to be outside the abilities of his protecting destiny. On the raft, he was still Harry Meglow, still a living human being, with faith in himself and the future. But the Atlantic ran a foot below him, and in the Atlantic he would be a chip, an insignificant, purposeless something that would drift through the water for days before the pulped and fish-eaten remains settled down to the soundless bottom.

He tried to visualize the death of Harry Meglow. He tried to picture a world without him – and failed.

It rained until very late in the day, when the clouds broke and left the ocean in sunset. He was able to eat and drink a little. He fed the cat at the same time. She seemed to have come through the rain without any harm, and although her fur was still damp, it was drying rapidly. He became conscious of his own wetness. The temperature had dropped, and he began to shiver. His cough had gotten worse, and the glands in his throat had swollen, so that every time he swallowed, a painful pressure caught him around the neck. The breath whistling out of his nostrils was hot, and he knew he had a fever.

This time, he managed to get the sweater off. He sat with the wind chilling his bare skin, until finally he stood up, took off the dungarees as well, and began to exercise violently. He was warm and dry in a few minutes, but it would be hours before his clothes would dry. He was caught with the choice of putting them on again, or of remaining naked, in which case he would have to keep moving around.

Even as he considered the matter, he cooled off again, and began swinging his arms and running in place.

After five hours, the dungarees were dry enough to wear, and he put them on gratefully. The sweater was still wet, and he crouched on the slats with his arms folded over his chest. He tried hugging the cat for warmth, but she clawed at his arms and finally bit his hand. He dropped her with a curse and barely restrained himself from flinging her into the ocean.

The following day, the fever was worse, and his eyes were burning badly.

Each time he swallowed, his eardrums popped, and his throat was almost closed. His bones ached, and there was a sharp pain in his chest. His vision was a little blurred.

When he got to his feet, the headache that pounded his skull made him stagger, and he closed his eyes at the pain. The cat was hungry again, and he opened a can of ham. By now, he had come to hate the salty taste and the mushy consistency, but he forced down a few mouthfuls and left the rest for the cat, which had a difficult time eating out of the flat, narrow can, but made the best of it. He opened the lid of the watertank and drank a cupful of water, seeing another cupful down for the cat, but when he lurched away, his foot struck the cup, and kicked it overside. He stared at the place where it had gone over, his face dull, but then he shrugged. He could always use an empty ham can to bring water up out of the tank. The cat would go thirsty in the meantime, but that was the cat's problem. He collapsed on the deck, and lay staring at the sea.

On his side, as he was, his eyes were only a little more than a foot above the water. The illusion that he was actually in the sea had grown more powerful, and a corresponding fear of the Atlantic had grown with it.

It was not merely the realization of the ocean's incredible area that overwhelmed him. It was the knowledge that the ocean was as old as all the Earth itself, and as enduring. Where the wrecked tanker had been, there was not even a dimple in the water. A ship had passed him in the night, tossing the water under his raft. Where was the ship? Where was the wake? They had existed for a few moments, then disappeared, and left the sea unmarked.

He realized that the sea could take him, and that the ripples would not reach a hundred yards. There would be no marker, no sign to the world that it had lost him.

"No!" The word burst out of him, a croaked shout. He sat up, trembling, sharp chills running through his body, his chest heaving as he coughed. Somehow, he would live through this. The sea would not have him.

He fell back, his jaw clenched, his body rigid, his hands in tight fists.

But that night it rained again, a cold, sharply driven rain from the north that first cooled his dry and feverish skin, but which was soon an icy slick that shot his temperature up and had him delirious by morning. He thrashed about on the raft, retching past the agony in his throat. The raft was tossing badly, and the cat had dug its claws into one leg of his dungarees in an effort to hang on.

Enough consciousness returned to permit a lance of fear at the thought that he might roll off the raft. Shuddering with chills, his teeth chattering, he got to his hands and knees and took off his belt. He passed it around a slat and buckled it around his waist again. Then the bone-wrenching fever took hold of him once more, and he lost consciousness.

He regained consciousness another time and lay staring up into the bright sky, with his eyes running from the fever. The pain in his chest was like a spike transfixing him. He tried to move, could not, and remembered the belt. His cracked lips twisted into a grimace as he plucked at it feebly but could not find the buckle. He heard a scratching sound, and turned his head. The cat was clawing at the trap over the food locker and the watertank. His own mouth was dry, and he tried to open the belt once more, but when he finally located the buckle, he could not open it. His hands were weak, robbed of strength.

Dully, he turned his head in the opposite direction, and looked at the sea.

Once again, and for the last time, his perverse luck had made sure that things were not as bad as they might have been. The sea would not get him.

He coughed, and smiled at the pain. His breath was hoarse – harsh, labored. No, the sea had not killed him. He was going to die of pneumonia. He had not starved, or died of thirst, or been swept overboard. The sea had lost. He snorted again, a painful "huh" that gusted from his nostrils.

The cat was clawing at his leg. He managed to raise his hand and swing it through the air, and the cat jumped back, mewling.

"Sor – sorry, cat," he grunted. "Nobody's going to – be around – to open – any food for – you."

His head fell back, and he chuckled. He had even managed to leave a living thing behind to regret his passing. Somehow, the thought appealed to him.

And then he realized to what precise end his special Providence had brought him, and he found the energy, buried deep in his system somewhere, to cry out, the harsh yell flinging itself over the whitecaps. He braced his shoulders against the deck and tried to break free, but the effort drained him, and he collapsed. He lay motionless, except for the tears that poured from his eyes.

The raft was picked up three weeks later by a Brazilian tramp. The cat had not starved to death. It was not even hungry.

© 1954, Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., Inc.

Silent Brother

THE FIRST STARSHIP was home.

At first, the sight of the Endeavor's massive bulk on his TV screen held Cable's eager attention. At his first glimpse of the starship's drift to its mooring, alongside a berthing satellite, he'd felt the intended impression of human grandeur; more than most viewers, for he had a precise idea of the scale of size.

But the first twitch of ambiguity came as he watched the crew come out and cross to the Albuquerque shuttle on their suit jets. He knew those men: Dugan, who'd be impatient to land, as he'd been impatient to depart; Frawley, whose white hair would be sparsely tousled over his tight pink scalp; Snell, who'd have run to fat on the voyage unless he'd exercised like the very devil and fasted like a hermit; young Tommy Penn, who'd be unable to restrain his self-conscious glances into the cameras.

It was exactly those thoughts which dulled his vicarious satisfaction. He stayed in front of the set, watching through the afternoon, while the four men took off their suits and grouped themselves briefly for the still photographers, while they got past the advance guard of reporters into the shuttle's after compartment, and refused to speak for the video coverage.

It made no essential difference that Snell was lean and graceful, or that all four of them, Frawley and Penn included, were perfectly poised and unruffled. Perhaps it was a little more irritating that they were.

Endeavor's crew was stepping gracefully into history.

The cameras and Cable followed the four men out of the shuttle and across the sun-drenched field at Albuquerque. Together they watched every trivial motion; Dugan's first cigarette in six months; Frawley's untied shoelace, which he repaired by casually stopping in the middle of the gangway and putting a leg up on the railing; Tommy Penn giving a letter to a guard to mail.

Together with a billion other inhabitants of what was no longer Man's

only planet, Cable looked into the faces of the President of the United States, of the United Nations Secretary General, of Premier Sobieski, and Marshal Siemens. Less than others, because he had a professional's residual contempt for eulogies, he heard what they had to say.

By nine or nine-thirty that night he had gathered the essential facts about the solar system of Alpha Centaurus. There were five planets, two of them temperate and easily habitable, one of them showing strong hints of extensive heavy metal ores. The trip had been uneventful, the stay unmarked by extraordinary incident. There was no mention of inhabitants.

There was also no mention of anything going wrong with the braking system, and that, perhaps, intensified the crook that had begun to bend one corner of Cable's thin mouth.

"You're welcome," he couldn't help grunting as Frawley described the smoothness of the trip and the simplicity of landing. That decelerating an object of almost infinite mass within a definitely finite distance was at all complicated didn't seem to be worthy of mention.

More than anything, it was the four men's unshakable poise that began to grate against him.

"Happens every day," he grunted at them, simultaneously telling himself he'd turned into a crabby old man at thirty-four, muttering spitefully at his friends for doing what he no longer could.

But that flash of insight failed to reappear when his part in Endeavor's development was lumped in with the "hardworking, dedicated men whose courage and brilliance made our flight possible." Applied to an individual, phrases like that were meaningful. Used like this, they covered everyone from the mess hall attendants to the man in charge of keeping the armadillos from burrowing under the barrack footings.

He snapped the set off with a peevish gesture. Perhaps, if he stayed up, the program directors, running out of fresh material at last, might have their commentators fill in with feature stuff like "amazing stride forward in electronics," "unified field theory," "five years of arduous testing on practical application to spaceship propulsion," and the like. Eventually, if they didn't cut back to the regular network shows first, they might mention his name. Somebody might even think it important that Endeavor had cost the total destruction of one prototype and the near-fatal crash of another.

But suddenly he simply wanted to go to bed. He spun his chair away from the set, rolled into the bedroom, levered himself up and pulled his

way onto the bed. Taking his legs in his callused hands, he put them under the blankets, turned off the lights, and lay staring up at the dark.

Which showed and told him nothing.

He shook his head at himself. It was only twenty miles to the field from here. If he was really that much of a gloryhound, he could have gone. He was a dramatic enough sight. And, in all truth, he hadn't for a minute been jealous while the Endeavor was actually gone. It was just that today's panegyrics had been a little too much for his vanity to stave off.

He trembled on the brink of admitting to himself that his real trouble was the feeling that he'd lost all contact with the world. But only trembled, and only on the brink.

Eventually he fell asleep.

He'd slept unusually well, he discovered when he awoke in the morning. Looking at his watch, he saw it had only been about eight hours, but it felt like more. He decided to try going through the morning without the chair. Reaching over to the stand beside his bed, he got his braces and tugged them onto his legs. Walking clumsily, he tottered into the bathroom with his canes, washed his face, shaved, and combed his hair.

He'd forgotten to scrub his bridge last night. He took it out now and realized only after he did so that his gums, top and bottom, were sore.

"Oh, well," he told himself in the mirror, "we all have our cross to bear."

He decided to leave the bridge out for the time being. He never chewed with his front teeth anyway. Whistling "Sweet Violets" shrilly, he made his way back into the bedroom, where he carefully dressed in a suit, white shirt, and tie. He'd seen too many beat-up men who let themselves go to pot. Living alone the way he did made it even more important for him to be as neat as he could.

What's more, he told himself insidiously, the boys might drop over.

Thinking that way made him angry at himself. It was pure deception, because the bunch wouldn't untangle themselves out of the red tape and de-briefings for another week. That kind of wishful thinking could drift him into living on hungry anticipations, and leave him crabbed and querulous when they failed to materialize on his unreal schedule.

He clumped into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator with a yank of his arm.

That was something else to watch out for. Compensation was all well

and good, but refrigerators didn't need all that effort to be opened. If he got into the habit of applying excessive arm-strength to everything, the day might come when he'd convince himself a man didn't need legs at all. That, too, was a trap. A man could get along without legs, just as a man could teach himself to paint pictures with his toes. But he'd paint better with finger dexterity.

The idea was to hang on to reality. It was the one crutch everybody used.

He started coffee boiling and went back out to the living room to switch on the TV.

That was another thing. He could have deliberately stopped and turned it on while on his way to the kitchen. But he'd never thought to save the steps before he'd crashed. More difficult? Of course it was more difficult now! But he needed the exercise.

Lift. Swing. Lock. Lean. Lift other leg. Swing, lock. Lean. Unlock other leg. Lift –

He cursed viciously at the perspiration going down his face.

And now the blasted set wouldn't switch on. The knob was loose. He looked more closely, leaning carefully to one side in order to get a look at the set's face.

He had no depth perception, of course, but there was something strange about the dark square behind the plastic shield over the face of the tube.

The tube was gone. He grunted incredulously, but, now that his eye was accustomed to the dimmer light in this room, he could see the inside of the cabinet through the shield.

He pushed the cabinet away from the wall with an unexpected ease that almost toppled him. The entire set was gone. The antenna line dangled loosely from the wall. Only the big speaker, mounted below the chassis compartment, was still there.

First, he checked the doors and windows.

The two doors were locked from the inside, and the house, being air-conditioned, had no openable windows. He had only to ascertain that none of the panes had been broken or removed. Then he catalogued his valuables and found nothing gone.

The check was not quite complete. The house had a cellar. But before he was willing to go through that effort, he weighed the only other possibility in balance.

His attitude on psychiatry was blunt, and on psychology only a little less so. But he was a pragmatist; that is, he played unintuitive poker with success.

Because he was a pragmatist, he first checked the possibility that he'd had a mental lapse and forgotten he'd called to have the set taken out for repairs. Unlocking the front door, he got the paper off the step. A glance at the date and a story lead beginning "Yesterday's return of the Endeavor" exploded that hypothesis, not to his surprise. The set had been there last night. It was still too early today for any repair shop to be open.

Ergo, he had to check the cellar windows. He hadn't lost a day, or done anything else incredible like that. Tossing the paper on the kitchen table, he swung his way to the cellar door, opened it, and looked down, hoping against hope that he'd see the broken window from here and be able to report the burglary without the necessity of having to ease himself down the steps.

But, no such luck. Tucking the canes under his left arm, he grasped the railing and fought his body's drag.

Once down, he found it unnecessary to look at the windows. The set chassis was in the middle of his old, dust-covered workbench. It was on its side, and the wiring had been ripped out. The big tube turned its pale face toward him from a nest of other components. A soldering iron balanced on the edge of the bench, and some rewiring had been begun on the underside of the chassis.

It was only then – and this, he admitted to himself without any feeling of self-reproach, was perfectly normal for a man like himself – that he paid any notice to the superficial burns, few in number, on the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

The essence of anything he might plan, he decided, was in discarding the possibility of immediate outside help.

He sat in his chair, drinking a cup of the coffee he'd made after having to scrape the burnt remains of the first batch out of the coffee-maker, and could see where that made the best sense.

He had no burglary to report, so that took care of the police. As for calling anyone else, he didn't have the faintest idea of whom to call if he'd wanted to. There was no government agency, local, state, or federal – certainly not international, ramified though the United Nations was – offering advice and assistance to people who disassembled their own TV

sets in their sleep and then proceeded to re-work them into something else.

Besides, this was one he'd solve for himself.

He chuckled. What problem wasn't? He was constitutionally incapable of accepting anyone else's opinion over his own, and he knew it.

Well, then, data thus far:

One ex-TV set in the cellar. Better: one collection of electronic parts.

Three burns on fingertips. Soldering iron?

He didn't know. He supposed that, if he ever took the trouble to bone up with a book or two on circuitry, he could throw together a fair FM receiver, and, given a false start or two, mock up some kind of jackleg video circuit. But he'd never used a soldering iron in his life. He imagined the first try might prove disgracefully clumsy.

Questions:

How did one shot-up bag of rag-doll bones and twitchless nerves named Harvey Cable accomplish all this in his sleep?

How did he pull that set out of the cabinet, hold it in both arms as he'd have to, and, even granting the chair up to this point, make it down the cellar steps?

Last question, par value, \$64.00: Where had the tools come from?

He searched the house again, but there was definitely no one else in it.

Toward noon he found his mind still uneasy on one point. He got out his rubber-stamp pad, inked his fingertips, and impressed a set of prints on a sheet of paper. With this, his shaving brush, and a can of talcum powder, he made his way into the cellar again and dusted the face of the picture tube. The results were spotty, marred by the stiffness of the brush and his lack of skill, but after he hit on the idea of letting the powder drift across the glass like a dry ripple riding the impetus of his gently blown breath, he got a clear print of several of his fingers. There were some very faint prints that were not his own, but he judged from their apparent age that they must belong to the various assemblers in the tube's parent factory. There were no prints of comparable freshness to his own, and he knew he'd never handled the tube before.

That settled that.

Next, he examined the unfamiliar tools that had been laid on the bench. Some of them were arranged in neat order, but others – the small electric soldering iron, a pair of pliers, and several screwdrivers – were scattered

among the parts. He dusted those, too, and found his own prints on them. All of the tools were new, and unmarked with work scratches.

He went over to where his electric drill was hanging up beside his other woodworking tools. There were a few shavings of aluminum clinging to the burr of the chuck. Going back to the reworked chassis, he saw that several new cuts and drillings had been made in it.

Well. He looked blankly at it all.

Next question: What in the name of holy horned hell am I building?

He sat looking thoughtfully down at the paper, which he'd finally come around to reading. He wasn't the only one infested with mysteries.

The story he'd glanced at before read:

OFFICIAL CENSORSHIP SHROUDS ENDEAVOR CREW

Albuquerque, May 14 – Yesterday's return of the Endeavor brought with it a return of outmoded press policies on the part of all official government agencies concerned. In an unprecedented move, both the U. S. and U. N. Press Secretaries late last night refused to permit further interviews with the crew or examination of the starship. At the same time, the Press was restricted to the use of official mimeographed releases in its stories.

Unofficial actions went even farther. Reporters at the Sandia auxiliary press facilities were told "off the record" that a "serious view" might "well be taken" if attempts were made to circumvent these regulations. This was taken to mean that offending newspapers would henceforth be cut off from all official releases. Inasmuch as these releases now constitute all the available information on the Endeavor, her crew, and their discoveries, this "unofficial device" is tantamount to a threat of total censorship. The spokesman giving this "advice" declined to let his name be used.

Speculation is rife that some serious mishap, in the nature of an unsuspected disease or infection, may have been discovered among members of the Endeavor's crew. There can, of course, be no corroboration or denial of this rumor until the various agencies involved deign to give it.

Under this was a box: *See Editorial, "A Free Press in a Free World," p. 23.*

Cable chuckled, momentarily, at the paper's discomfiture. But his face twisted into a scowl again while he wondered whether Dugan, Frawley, Snell, and Tommy Penn were all right. The odds were good that the disease theory was a bunch of journalistic hogwash, but anything that made the government act like that was sure to be serious.

Some of his annoyance, he realized with another chuckle on a slightly different note, came from his disappointment. It looked like it might be even longer before the bunch was free to come over and visit him.

But this return to yesterday's perverse selfishness did not stay with him long. He was looking forward eagerly to tonight's experiment. Cable smiled with a certain degree of animation as he turned the pages. By tomorrow he'd have a much better idea of what was happening here. Necessarily, his own problem eclipsed the starship mystery. But that was good.

It was nice, having a problem to wrestle with again.

There was an item about a burgled hardware store – "small tools and electrical supplies were taken" – and he examined it coolly. Data on source of tools?

The possibility existed. Disregard the fact he was the world's worst raw burglar material. He hadn't been a set designer before last night, either.

He immediately discarded the recurring idea that the police should be called. They'd refuse to take him seriously; there was even a tangible risk of being cross-questioned by a psychiatrist.

He judged as objectively as he could that it would take several days of this before he grew unreasonably worried. Until such time, he was going to tackle this by himself, as best he could.

His gums still ached, he noticed – more so than this morning, perhaps.

His eyes opened, and he looked out at morning sunshine. So, he hadn't been able to keep awake at night. He'd hardly expected to.

Working methodically, he looked at the scratch pad on which he'd been noting the time at ten-minute intervals. The last entry, in a sloppy hand, was for eleven-twenty. Somewhat later than he was usually able to keep awake, but not significantly much.

He looked at his watch. It was now 7:50 a.m. A little more than eight hours, all told, and again he felt unusually rested. Well, fine. A sound mind in a sound body, and all that. The early worm gets the bird. Many lights

make hand work easier on the eyes. A nightingale in the bush is worth two birds in the hand.

He was also pretty cheerful.

Strapping on his braces and picking up his canes, he now swung himself over to the locked bedroom door. There were no new burns on his fingers.

He looked at the door critically. It was still locked, and, presumably until proven otherwise, the key was still far out of reach in the hall, where he'd skittered it under the door after turning the lock.

He turned back to the corner where he'd left the screwdriver balanced precariously on a complex arrangement of pots and pans which the tool's weight kept from toppling, and which he'd had to hold together with string while he was assembling it. After placing the screwdriver, he'd burned the string, as well as every other piece of twine or sewing thread in the house.

He was unable to lift the tool now without sending the utensils tumbling with a crash and clatter that made him wince. It seemed only reasonable that the racket would have been quite capable of waking the half-dead, even if none of his other somnambulistic activities had. But the screwdriver hadn't been touched – or else his sleeping brain was more ingenious than his waking one.

Well, we'll see. He went back to the door, found no scratches on the lock, but left quite a few in the process of taking the lock apart and letting himself out.

Data: key still far out on hall floor. He picked it up after some maneuvering with his canes and brace locks, put it in his pocket, and went to the cellar door, which was also still locked.

His tactics here had been somewhat different. The key was on the kitchen table, on a dark tablecloth, with flour scattered over it in a random pattern he'd subsequently memorized with no hope of being able to duplicate it.

The flour was undisturbed. Nevertheless, there was a possibility he might have shaken out the cloth, turned it over to hide the traces of flour remaining, replaced the key, and somehow duplicated the flour pattern – or, at any rate, come close enough to fool himself, provided he was interested in fooling himself.

This checked out negative. He'd done no such thing. He defied anyone to get all the traces of flour out of the cloth without laundering it, in which

case he'd been wonderfully ingenious at counterfeiting several leftover food stains.

Ergo, he hadn't touched the key. Ipso facto. Reductio ad absurdum. Non lessi illegitimis te carborundum.

Next move.

He unlocked the cellar door and lowered himself down the steps.

Which gave him much food for thought. He stood cursing softly at the sight of the chassis with more work done on it.

For the first time he felt a certain degree of apprehension. No bewilderment, as yet; too many practical examples in his lifetime had taught him that today's inexplicable mystery was tomorrow's dry fact. Nevertheless, he clumped forward with irritated impatience and stood looking down at the workbench.

All the tools were scattered about now. The tube had been wiped clean of his amateur fingerprintings yesterday, and the tools, apparently, had come clean in handling. The chassis was tipped up again, and some parts, one of which looked as though it had been revamped, had been bolted to its upper surface and wired into the growing circuit. The soldering was much cleaner; apparently he was learning.

He was also learning to walk through locked doors, damn it!

He'd left a note for himself: "What am I doing?" blockprinted in heavy letters on a shirt cardboard he'd propped against the chassis. It had been moved to one side, laid down on the far end of the bench.

There was no answer.

He glowered down at the day's paper, his eye scanning the lines, but not reading. It wasn't even in focus.

His entire jaw was aching, but he grimly concentrated past that, grinding at the situation with the sharp teeth of his mind.

The new fingerprints on the set were his, again. He was still doing a solo – or was it a duet with himself?

He'd rechecked the locks, examined the doors, tried to move the immovable hinge pins, and even tested the bedroom and cellar windows to make sure against the absurd possibility that he'd gotten them open and clambered in and out that way.

The answer was no.

But the thing in the cellar had more work done on it.

The answer was yes.

That led nowhere. Time out to let the subconscious mull it over. He concentrated on the paper, focusing his blurred vision on the newspaper by main force, wondering how the starship base was doing with its mystery.

Not very well. The entire base had been quarantined, and the official press releases cut to an obfuscatory trickle.

For a moment, his anxiety about the boys made him forget his preoccupation. Reading as rapidly as he could with his foggy eye, he discovered that the base was entirely off limits to anyone now; apparently that applied to government personnel, too. The base had been cordoned off by National Guard units at a distance of two miles. The paper was beating the disease drum for all it was worth, and reporting a great deal of international anxiety on the subject.

It seemed possible now that the paper was correct in its guess. At any rate, it carried a front-page story describing the sudden journeys of several top-flight biologists and biochemists en route to the base, or at least this general area.

Cable clamped his lips into a worried frown.

He'd been in on a number of the preliminary briefings on the trip, before he'd disqualified himself. The theory had been that alien bugs wouldn't be any happier on a human being than, say, a rock lichen would be. But even the people quoting the theory had admitted that the odds were not altogether prohibitive against it, and it was Cable's experience that theories were only good about twenty-five per cent of the time in the first place.

It was at this point that the idea of a correlation between the starship's mystery and his own first struck him.

He fumed over it for several hours.

The idea looked silly. Even at second or third glance, it resembled the kind of brainstorm a desperate man might get in a jam like this.

That knowledge alone was enough to prejudice him strongly against the possibility. But he couldn't quite persuade himself to let go of it.

Item: The crew of the starship might be down with something.

Item: The base was only twenty miles away. Air-borne infection?

Item: The disease, if it was a disease, had attacked the world's first astronauts. By virtue of his jouncings-about in the prototype models, he

also qualified as such.

A selective disease attacking people by occupational specialty?

Bushwah!

Air-borne infection in an air-conditioned house?

All right, his jaw ached and his vision was blurred.

He pawed angrily at his eye.

When he had conceived of interfering with the progress of the work, he'd intended it as one more cool check on what the response would be. But now it had become something of a personal spite against whatever it was he was doing in the cellar.

By ten o'clock that night, he'd worked himself into a fuming state of temper. He clumped downstairs, stood glaring at the set, and was unable to deduce anything new from it. Finally he followed the second part of his experimental program by ripping all the re-done wiring loose, adding a scrawled "Answer me!" under yesterday's note, and went to bed seething. Let's see what he did about that.

His mouth ached like fury in the morning, overbalancing his sense of general well-being. He distracted himself with the thought that he was getting a lot of sound rest, for a man on a twenty-four day, while he lurched quickly into the bathroom and peeled his lips back in front of the mirror.

He stared at the front of his mouth in complete amazement. Then he began to laugh, clutching the washbasin and continuing to look incredulously at the sight in the mirror.

He was teething!

With the look of a middle-aged man discovering himself with chicken pox, he put his thumb and forefinger up to his gums and felt the hard ridges of outthrusting enamel.

He calmed down with difficulty, unable to resist the occasional fresh temptation to run his tongue over the sprouting teeth. Third sets of teeth occasionally happened, he knew, but he'd dismissed that possibility quite early in the game. Now, despite his self-assurances at the time the bridge was fitted, he could admit that manufactured dentures were never as satisfying as the ones a man grew for himself. He grinned down at the pronged monstrosity he'd been fitting into his mouth each morning for the past year, picked it up delicately, and dropped it into the waste basket

with a satisfying sound.

Whistling again for the first time in two days, he went out to the cellar door and opened it, bent, and peered down. He grunted and reached for the rail as he swung his right foot forward.

He opened his mouth in a strangled noise of surprise. He'd seen depth down those stairs. His other eye was working again – the retina had re-attached itself!

The stairs tumbled down with a crash as their supports, sawed through, collapsed under his weight. The railing came limply loose in his clutch, and he smashed down into the welter of splintered boards ten feet below.

I shouldn't, he thought to himself in one flicker of consciousness, have ripped up that set. Then he pitched into blackness again.

He rolled over groggily, wiped his hand over his face, and opened his eyes. There didn't seem to be any pain.

He was facing the stairs, which had been restored. The braces had been splinted with scrap lumber, and two of the treads were new wood. The old ones were stacked in a corner, and he half-growled at the sight of brown smears on their splintered ends.

There was still no pain. He had no idea of how long he'd been lying there on the cellar floor. His watch was smashed.

He looked over at the workbench, and saw that whatever he'd been building was finished. The chassis sat right side up on the bench, the power cord trailing up to the socket.

It looked like no piece of equipment he'd ever seen. The tube was lying on the bench beside the chassis, wired in but unmounted. Apparently it didn't matter whether it was rigidly positioned or not. He saw two control knobs rising directly out of the top of the chassis, as well as two or three holes in the chassis where components had been in the TV circuit but were not required for this new use. The smaller tubes glowed. The set was turned on.

Apparently, too, he hadn't cared what condition his body was in while he worked on it.

He'd been fighting to keep his attention away from his body. The teeth and the eye had given him a hint he didn't dare confirm at first.

But it was true. He could feel the grittiness of the floor against the skin of his thighs and calves. His toes responded when he tried to move them,

and his legs flexed.

His vision was perfect, and his teeth were full-grown, strong and hard as he clamped them to keep his breathing from frightening him.

Something brushed against his leg, and he looked down. His leg motions had snapped a hair-thin copper wire looped around one ankle and leading off toward the bench. He looked up, and the triggered picture tube blinked a light in his eyes.

Blink can't think blink rhythm I think blink trick think blink sink blink wink – CAN'T THINK!

He slammed his hands up against his face, covering his eyes.

He held them there for a few choked moments. Then he opened two fingers in a thin slit, like a little boy playing peek-a-boo with his mother.

The light struck his eye again. This time there was no getting away. The trigger of the picture tube's flicker chipped at each attempt to think, interrupting each beat of his brain as it tried to bring its attention on anything but the stimulus of that blink. He had no chance of even telling his hands to cover his eyes again.

His body collapsed like a marionette, and his face dropped below the flickering beam. His head hanging, he got to his hands and knees like a young boy getting up to face the schoolyard bully again.

The blink reflected off the floor and snapped his head up like a kick. The beam struck him full in the eyes.

It was even impossible for him to tell his throat to scream. He swayed on his knees, and the blink went into his brain like a sewing machine.

Eventually he fell again, and by now he was beginning to realize what the machine was doing to him. Like an Air Force cadet feeling the controls of his first trainer, he began to realize that there was a logic to this – that certain actions produced a certain response – that the machine could predict the rhythm of his thoughts and throttle each one as it tried to leave his brain and translate itself into coherent thought.

He looked up deliberately, planning to snatch his face to one side the moment he felt it grip him again.

This time he was dimly aware of his arms, flailing upward and trying to find his face in a hopelessly uncoordinated effort.

He discovered he could sidestep the blink. If he upset the machine's mechanical prediction, he could think. His mind rolled its thought processes along well-worn grooves. As simple a thought as knowing he was

afraid had to search out its correlations in a welter of skin temperature data, respiration and heartbeat notations, and an army of remembered precedents.

If he could reshuffle that procedure, using data first that would ordinarily claim his attention last, he could think. The blink couldn't stop him.

Like a man flying cross-country for the first time, he learned that railroads and highways are snakes, not arrows. Like a pilot teaching his instincts to push the nose down in a stall, abrogating the falling-response that made him ache to pull back on the stick, he learned. He had to, or crash.

To do that, he had to change the way he thought.

The blink turned into a flashing light that winked on and off at pre-set intervals. He reached up and decided which knob was logically the master switch. He turned it off, feeling the muscles move, his skin stretch, and his bones roll to the motion. He felt the delicate nerves in his fingertips tell him how much pressure was on his capillaries, and the nerves under his fingernails corroborate their reading against the pressure there. His fingers told him when the switch was off, not the click of it. There was no click. The man who'd put that switch in hadn't intended it for human use.

Most of all, he felt his silent brother smile within him.

The three uniformed men stopped in the doorway and stared at him.

"Harvey Cable?" one of them finally asked. He blinked his eyes in the bright sunshine, peering through the doorway.

Cable smiled. "That's right. Come on in."

The man who'd spoken wore an Air Force major's insignia and uniform. The other two were United Nations inspectors. They stepped in gingerly, looking around them curiously.

"I refurnished the place," Cable said pleasantly. "I've got a pretty good assortment of wood-working tools in the cellar."

The major was pale, and the inspectors were nervous. They exchanged glances. "Typical case," one of them muttered, as though it had to be put in words.

"We understood you were crippled," the major stated.

"I was, Major—?"

"Paulson. Inspector Lee, and Inspector Carveth." Paulson took a deep breath. "Well, we're exposed, now. May we sit down?"

"Sure. Help yourselves. Exposed to the disease, you mean?"

The major dropped bitterly into a chair, an expression of surprise flickering over his face as he realized how comfortable it was. "Whatever it is. Contagious psychosis, they're saying now. No cure," he added bluntly.

"No disease," Cable said, but made little impression. All three men had their mouths clamped in thin, desperate lines. Apparently the most superficial contact with the "disease" had proved sufficient for "infection."

"Well," Cable said, "what can I do for you? Would you like a drink first?"

Paulson shook his head, and the inspectors followed suit. Cable shrugged politely.

"We came here to do a job," Paulson said doggedly. "We might as well do it." He took an envelope out of his blouse pocket. "We had quite a battle with the Postmaster General about this. But we got it. It's a letter to you from Thomas Penn."

Cable took it with a wordless tilt of one eyebrow. It had been opened. Reaching into the envelope, he pulled out a short note:

Harv—

Chances are, this is the only way we'll have time to get in touch with yaz. Even so, you may not get it. Don't worry about us, no matter what you hear. We're fine. You won't know how fine until you get acquainted with the friend we're sending you.

Good luck,

Tommy

He smiled, feeling his silent brother smile, too. For a moment they shared the warmth of feeling between them. Then he turned his attention back to the three men. "Yes?"

Paulson glared at him. "Well, what about it? What friend? Where is he?"

Cable grinned at him. Paulson would never believe him if he told him. So there was no good in telling him. He'd have to find out for himself.

Just as everybody would. There was no logic in telling. Telling proved nothing, and who would welcome a "parasitic" alien into his body and mind, even if that "parasite" was a gentle, intelligent being who kept watch over the host, repairing his health, seeing to his well-being? Even if that "parasite" gave you sanity and rest, tranquillity and peace, because he needed it in order to fully be your brother? Who wants symbiosis until he's felt it? Not you, Major. Not Harvey Cable, either, fighting his battles on the edge of the world, proud, able – but alone.

Who wants to know any human being can go where he wants to, do what he wants to, now? Who wants to know disease is finished, age is calm, and death is always a falling asleep, now? Not the medical quacks, not the lonely hearts bureaus, not the burial insurance companies. Not the people who live on fear. Who wants a brother who doesn't hesitate to slap you down if you need it while you're growing up?

Should the Endeavor have brought riot and war back with it? Better a little panic now, damping itself out before it even gets out of the Southwest.

No, you don't tell people about this. You simply give it.

"Well?" Paulson demanded again.

Cable smiled at him. "Relax, Major. There's all the time in the world. My friend's where you can't ever get him unless I let you. What's going on up around the base?"

Paulson grunted his anger. "I don't know," he said harshly. "We were all in the outer quarantine circle."

"The outer circle. It's getting to one circle after another, is it?"

"Yes!"

"What's it like? The disease. What does it do?"

"You know better than I do."

"Men walking in their sleep? Doing things? Getting past guards and sentries, getting out of locked rooms? Some of them building funny kinds of electronic rigs?"

"What do you think?" Paulson was picturing himself doing it. It was plain on his face.

"I think so. Frighten you?"

Paulson didn't answer.

"It shouldn't. It's a little rough, going it alone, but with others around

you, I don't imagine you'll have any trouble."

It wasn't the man who momentarily disorganized his body and passed under a door who was frightened. Not after he could do it of his own volition instead of unconsciously, at his brother's direction. It was the man who watched him do it, just as it was the men on the ground who were terrified for the Wright brothers. Paulson was remembering what he'd seen. He had no idea of how it felt to be free.

Cable thought of the stars he'd seen glimmering as he rode Endeavor's prototype, and the curtains and clouds of galaxies beyond them. He'd wanted to go to them all, and stand on every one of their planets.

Well, he couldn't quite have that. There wasn't time enough in a man's life. But his brother, too, had been a member of a race chained to one planet. The two of them could see quite a bit before they grew too old.

So we were born in a Solar System with one habitable planet, and we developed the star drive. And on Alpha's planet, a race hung on, waiting for someone to come along and give it hands and bodies.

What price the final plan of the universe? Will my brother and I find the next piece of the ultimate jigsaw puzzle?

Cable looked at the three men, grinning at the thought of the first time one of them discovered a missing tooth was growing back in.

Starting with Paulson, he sent them each a part of his brother.

© 1963 Algis Budrys

The Skirmisher

IT WAS A hot day, and near noon, when Ben Hoyt pulled the unmarked radio car to a stop in front of the house. He cut the motor and ran his hand around his neck, where the starch in his shirt collar was leaving a red weal like a rope burn. He thought: One of these days I'm going to marry a woman just to quit using those damned laundries.

But he hadn't been thinking about starch. Not really; it had just been the sound his brain made, idling, while he listened to the steady,

monotonous rhythm of rifle shots coming from behind the house. They were sharp and spiteful, and they echoed flatly through the palmetto scrub and turpentine pine behind the house. Hoyt got out of the car and unbuttoned his suit coat so he could get at the .45 stuck in his waistband. Then he closed the car door quietly and walked toward the back of the house. The shots kept up in driving succession, one after the other in a group of three, then a pause, then another group of three. The house was a new ranch type, with light green stuccoed walls and a low tile roof, with a close-cropped lawn and a solar hot water heater up on the south face of the roof. It was set in a good-sized lot, about four hundred feet to a side, and had a waist-high cinder block fence that walled off the front and sides of the lot, running back into a stretch of pine barren that just kept going until it merged into the Everglades. It looked odd all the way out here, as if a man had wanted to keep inconspicuous and still didn't want to get cheated out of living as if he were in a town.

Hoyt came around to the back of the house with his hand on his .45 just for luck, but he'd had it figured right. The man lying on the ground, squinting through the backlight of a rifle, was shooting at a row of paper targets set at distances of fifty, a hundred, and a hundred and fifty feet away from him. The rifle he was using looked like a standard .22, but it was making too much noise and recoiling much too hard. It had to be a rechambered wildcat model, kicking a .22 slug out of a shell case necked down from a 30-30, or maybe even something heavier.

The man on the ground was about thirty. He was sunburned and as hard as something carved out of solid mahogany. He was wearing a pair of ragged shorts made out of an old pair of denims, and nothing else. There were full and empty boxes of shells lying scattered on the ground all around him. There were fired shell cases strewn out like a glittering carpet to his right. A half-full glass of liquor with the ice almost melted was set down in easy reach. He had a cigarette hanging out of the left side of his mouth, and there were ashes all up and down his sweaty left arm. Hoyt watched. The man pumped a shot into the fifty-foot target, the hundred, and the hundred and fifty, flicking the backlight up a notch every time he palmed the bolt and fed another round into the chamber. His shoulder jumped every time he fired, and the ashes shook off the end of his cigarette. Hoyt looked out past the targets, and every shot was tearing holes in a log backstop. There were white chips of wood trailed out behind it for a good twenty feet. "Four-oh-eight," the man on the ground muttered to himself. "Four-oh-nine, four-ten."

"Hey, there," Hoyt said.

The man on the ground grimaced and looked back over his shoulder. He had close-cropped black hair, flattened on top, a flat, small face with close-set eyes, heavy ears, and a thin nose that had been knocked over to one side. "Yeah?" Other than that, he didn't move.

Hoyt held out his badge. "You Albert Madigan?"

"That's right."

"My name's Hoyt. Wade County Sheriff's office. Want to talk to you."

Madigan shrugged. "Well, go ahead." He flipped the backsight down and fired into the fifty-foot target. "Four- eleven." The target was cut to ribbons in a scattered group that ranged from around the ten ring to absolute bogeys. The other two targets were even worse. Madigan moved his sight and squeezed off a shot into the hundred-foot target. It punched out wide at four o'clock. "Four-twelve."

"Hey there, I said I wanted to talk to you. Haven't got all day."

Madigan dropped the clip out of the rifle and fed in a new one from a pile of them he had lying on the ground under his chin. "Well, squat down and talk. I'm not about to go anywhere." He put a shot in each of the targets. "Four-fifteen," he muttered, turning on his side and massaging his right shoulder. There was a purplish-red blotch on his skin.

"Stand up, punk," Hoyt said with his fist on the butt of the .45.

"Go chase ducks," Madigan said. He rolled back over on his stomach and the rifle barked three times. "Four-sixteen, four- seventeen, four-eighteen," he muttered.

Hoyt pulled his .45 out and pointed it at the back of Madigan's head. "Stand up, I said."

Madigan looked back over his shoulder. "Go ahead and shut me, Bud. Do you a whole lot of good."

Hoyt stood over him cursing, with the sweat going down the back of his shirt.

Madigan grinned up at him. "Or is there something you want to find out from me?"

Hoyt took a stubborn breath. "Four years ago, a man named Stevens went off the Overseas Highway into the Gulf. His car busted through the guard rail and the barracuda got him. A little later, a man named Powers was getting off the Champion at Boca Raton when his foot slipped. He went under the wheels, and the train was still rolling. He was a damn fool for jumping the stop, but he'd of made it if he hadn't put a foot in a busted

hair tonic bottle. The bottle wasn't there a minute earlier. Somebody dropped it ahead of him. And Stevens drove into a sheet of newspaper that was blown out of the car in front of him."

"Tough," Madigan said. "Tough, and out of the county, too. What's your beef?"

"Three years ago, a woman named Cummings jumped off Venetian Causeway into the bay. That's in the county. And last year a kid named Peterson was riding a motor scooter up U. S. 1 when his back tire blew. He went across the road in front of a trailer truck, and that was in this county, too. After that, there was a fellow named Pines. Diabetic. Went to a drugstore, got some insulin. Came in a sealed box of little glass bottles. Took it home, snapped the neck off one of the bottles, filled his hypo, gave himself a shot. It wasn't insulin. Somebody'd gotten the boxes mixed up in the drugstore refrigerator. After that, there was a man named – "

"Make your point."

"All right. The Cummings woman jumped because her boyfriend called her up and told her he was going back to Oklahoma with his wife. Only the boyfriend never called her. Fellow in a lunch counter phone box heard this other fellow in the next booth. Didn't take much notice of it until after she made the papers. Then he told us about this fellow: Five eight or nine, broken nose, black hair, half-moon scar on his right cheek. The boyfriend didn't look one bit like that. How good're you at imitating voices, Madigan?"

Madigan grinned. The scar on his cheek lost itself in the wrinkles.

"We didn't have much to tie that on to. We let it ride. The boyfriend wasn't even married. Now, this Peterson kid on the scooter. He hit a piece of board with a nail on it. The board fell off a truck in front of him. There was a fellow sitting on the tail-gate. Hitch-hiker. The driver remembers him because he wanted a ride up to Dania, and after the accident when he got there he crossed the road and started to thumb back toward Miami. Looked like you."

"Lots of people look like me," Madigan said, grinning like a reptile.

"Quit stalling around, Madigan," Hoyt said, hefting the .45 in his hand. "I got a busy schedule."

Madigan shrugged. "Tough."

Hoyt narrowed his eyes. Madigan had a funny, dangerous look about him. Hoyt had seen a few men like him during the last war – guys who'd got caught in combat, somewhere, and whipsawed to the point where they

knew they were going to die. Then, for some reason, they got out of it, but after that they didn't care about anything. Nothing could touch them any more, and they were very hard to kill. Still, it took a lot of combat to get a man to a point like that, and Hoyt wondered just where somebody Madigan's age could have found enough of it. "You want to see me get tough, Madigan?"

Madigan shrugged. "Suit yourself, Bud. Seeing you're so busy, though, why don't you come back when you can say what you want me for?"

"I know what I want you for," Hoyt said coldly. "How long did you think you could get away with it?"

"With what?"

"Come off it, Madigan. We tied you up with the Cummings woman. We tied you up with the Peterson kid. We know you delivered that mislabeled phony insulin. The same kind of car as the one you rented that day was barreling down the road in front of the Stevens car when it went into the Gulf. So us, and the Howard County cops, and the state cops, we got together and started comparing notes. See, we had this funny coincidence to work with: that diabetic was going to get married the next day, and the Peterson kid was on his way up to Allandale to run off and elope with this high school freshman. And one of the Howard County cops remembered these other three cases in the past two years, where people got accidentally killed just before they were going to get married. So he checked it, and what do you know? – there was this same guy, with the same funny scar, mixed up in all three of them somewhere."

"Yeah?" Madigan was smirking.

"Yeah! So we started taking it from the other end. We went into the marriage license records, and checked out everybody in south Florida who took out a license but never got married. And, you know what? Fifty-three of them died. Fifty-three in five years. Now, you figure it out. That's a lot of accidents. So we checked 'em. Some of them turned out to be for real. Some of them, we're not so sure. But guess who else we found on the list? Two people: Powers, the guy on the train, and Stevens, the guy in the car. What's the matter, Madigan – you hate newlyweds, or something?"

Madigan grinned and shook his head. "I don't give a damn for newlyweds one way or the other. It's their grandchildren that bother me."

"Make sense," Hoyt growled.

"Nah – nah, you make sense. You tell me how the county prosecutor's going to convince a jury that anybody in the Year of Our Lord 1958 – "

"'57," Hoyt corrected automatically.

"Okay, '57." Madigan shrugged. He looked at Hoyt like somebody on the right side of the bars in a zoo. "You just tell a jury how a man could rig those accidents."

"We'll figure it out."

"You couldn't do it in seventy-four years, Bud. And that's a fact. Well, so long, Hoyt."

Madigan turned suddenly and started to run, but he wasn't trying hard. He loped easily, barefoot, picking his steps with care.

"Stop!" Hoyt shouted. Madigan grinned back over his hard shoulder and kept loping, dodging perfunctorily toward a tree now and then.

"Stop!" Madigan kept running. Hoyt raised his heavy .45 and shouted for the last time: "Stop!" He fired over Madigan's head. The heavy recoil jarred his arm. He took a small step to correct his balance, and his foot nudged the half-full glass of liquor over on its side. His foot slipped in the mess of suddenly wet shell cases, and he fought wildly to keep from falling. The .45 flew out of his hand, and Madigan was out of the handgun's short range. Hoyt scooped up the abandoned rifle, thumbed the sight, and fed a round into the chamber. He put the bead of the hooded foresight between Madigan's shoulder blades and squeezed the trigger. And the weakened chamber burst, exploding jagged steel into his skull.

He lay in the pine needles and shell cases, blind and relaxed. He heard Madigan stop running and come walking casually back, but that was no longer any affair of his. It was a comfortable feeling, knowing you were going to die in a minute, before the shock could possibly wear off and let the waiting pain reach you. It freed you of the problem of your messed-up face. It freed you of any problem you cared to name. There, now – it was beginning to hurt just a little. Time to go, Hoyt – time to go... slip down, slip away... that waitress at the lunch counter... hell, Hoyt, you've got the best excuse in the world for not keeping that date with her tonight...

© 1957, Royal Publications, Inc.

The Sound of Breaking Glass

DAYLIGHT glared outside, but the room was full of shadows. It was too big – hollow; empty – cut through the broad building from one side to the other. There had once been double doors at either end, opening on the north- and south- bound parking areas. But Alma Petrie's father had bricked up the doorways and ripped out the snack bar. The room had become an echoing box, with stubs of pipe and ends of bx cable coming out of the floor and back wall. Where the snack bar had been, the defensive nerve center now was.

The pounds of instrumentation were housed in unfinished plywood cabinets that Alma Petrie's father had hammered together. They were dwarfed by the room. They looked like packing cases left overnight by workmen who hadn't yet begun to make the room fit for human occupancy. And in this shadowed, bare chamber with its hard terrazzo floor and enameled steel-tiled walls, a dull bell was clacking out its persistent alarm.

Alma Petrie faced an arced row of television sets. The alarm had activated only one of them. Its closed-circuit camera was one of twelve mounted behind masked loopholes in the roof parapet, and was pointed toward the entrance ramp leading up from the northbound roadway. Through it, Alma Petrie peered out into the harsh day.

The shrubs in the center island, the grass on the embankments along both roadways, the woods above the embankments – all were brown and burnt brittle. There had been a drought for weeks. Tar oozed like oil from expansion joints in the curb along the parking lots and around the shattered pump islands in the service area. Heat shimmered above the animal-scattered bones of men who had tried to use the gasoline pump housings for cover, long ago. Alma Petrie's white-eyed glance passed over them hurriedly. It had been in mortal panic that she had watched the automatic cannon do their butcher's work among the bandits. It was in mortal shame that she remembered how she'd quailed at giving decent burial to their remains.

Alma Petrie wiped the back of a gaunt hand across her forehead and, with the same leaden gesture, let her hand fall on the switch to the alarm circuit. It choked to silence in the middle of a beat, and left the room so still that she could plainly hear the flat, graveled asphalt roof crackling in the heat above her. There was nothing moving in the television screen.

She stood tense, her narrow skull jutting forward on her thin neck. The muscles quivered in her calves. She jeered at herself in driven malice:

The alarm system had gone wrong at last. Somewhere in the complex of

photoelectric eyes, thermal detectors, acoustic pickups, infrared scanners, trip wires and treadles that interlaced the terrain for half a square mile around her, a short circuit was sputtering its lie into the master controls. Some one among the patiently circling radar antennas was tracking a ghost. And, beginning with this, the complex, camouflaged system would progressively decay; rot and dissolution would creep with electric stealth through the miles of wiring, destroying, paralyzing as they came, and in the end would leave her naked to the world.

She put her knuckles to her mouth and ground the dry skin between her teeth. She answered herself with fanatic insistence:

Her father had designed and installed that alarm system. It was perfect. It would never, never betray her!

The alarm system had lighted only that one set. She threw the switches for all of them, her eyes blazing and her jawline exaggerated as she peered from one to the other, looking suspiciously at everything that surrounded her. But all her world was empty – the north-bound lanes as they swept blackly by, the north-bound exit ramp, the automatic sewage disposal plant in its grove of trees behind the building, the south-bound entrance ramp, the generator building, the south-bound lanes, and finally the south-bound exit. Nothing moved. Only the heat shimmered, full of water mirages on the roadways.

She began to cry, and then a sudden awareness of her own hysteria made her fly into a sobbing rage. She railed at the unknown chemist who had first developed Lobotomol in the laboratories of a pharmaceutical manufacturer, years ago when the world was civilized. She cursed the stupidity that had rushed the drug on the market as a miracle cure for psychoses, neuroses, and Monday Morning Blues. She felt her stomach clench as she envisioned the bright young sales executive who inevitably came to demand, and get, a tasteless, odorless, non-allergenic form of the stuff, for oral dosage in cases where the patient would not hold still for the needle. And she cried out against the Food and Drug Administration because the stuff could be bought across any drugstore counter, without prescription, without supervision, without conscience.

She cursed at shadows, and knew it. No one could really know the true history of the drug's genesis, or ferret out the reasons for its instantaneous availability. Perhaps that first chemist had immediately put Lobotomol to its most logical use. He would have had to be a singular man to resist the temptation to try and become master of the world. Then no one could be to blame for anything that happened afterwards.

No one would ever know, or untangle legend from fact. Lobotomol had killed Truth, and without Truth there is no civilization, no record of the past.

Lobotomol, the first manufacturer had said in the days when there were still newspapers and magazines to run the stories his public relations staff had planted, was simple to use. A small dose, administered intravenously, or later, orally, was immediately effective. Its action was directed against the forebrain, where it paralyzed the higher reasoning faculties for a period of several hours. During those hours, the patient would accept as truth anything anyone told him was truth. The drug itself wore off. The new truth, firmly established, as difficult to eradicate as any child's earliest training, stayed.

Lobotomol, that first manufacturer had hastened to explain, was of course intended for clinical use in the treatment of intractable psychotics. In the interval of the drug's action, such an individual's false, insane assumptions about the nature of the world could be explained to him. Powerless to resist the explanation, the psychotic mind would thus be taught sanity; would accept Reality; would be cured.

It was a great advance in psychiatric medicine, the manufacturer pointed out. And it was... it was. But simple neurosis, too, was based on mistaken thinking, and was often more difficult to bear than certifiable insanity. Neurosis, hitherto largely incurable, must also fall before "The Magic Bullet of The Mind." And simple household depression, too... for, after all, if a loving husband could convince his wife that things were fine – that she was glamorous and passionate beyond belief, withal a superb homemaker – wasn't that better for them both than nag, nag, nag, whine, whine, whine, all day, every day, after a hard day at the office and over a hot stove?

It was a great advance in psychiatric medicine – and it was put in the hands of anyone capable of searching out a drugstore and giving the druggist a dollar.

Perhaps, up to that point, it was simply all part of a criminal plot on the part of the discovering chemist. Or simple greed on the part of the pharmaceutical house. But no one would ever know, because it got into too many hands at once, and the murder of Truth proceeded exponentially.

What happened was that Truth came to depend on whose company you had been in last. The use of the drug proceeded not only exponentially but

circulatorily. If things had gone a little more systematically, someone's plan for becoming Lord of All – or simply for showing everyone the Obvious True Way – would probably have reached fruition. But the thing spread too quickly, proliferating like wildfire, and men switched loyalties and drives a dozen times in the course of an afternoon. Everybody had it. Everybody used it, in simple self-defense, frantically trying to create a sea of protective loyalty around himself, only to fall victim to someone else. It was everywhere – in the food you ate, in the water you drank, in the air you breathed if your best friend happened to think of spray guns...

First, no one ate in public anymore. Then, no one congregated in public places. Then came the realization that the only incorruptible individuals were the dead. Then – and by now civilization was collapsing – families split into suspicious fragments.

Even after civilization crumbled to the point where the stuff could no longer be manufactured, the downward tumble did not stop until the last cubic centimeter of the stockpiled supply had been exhausted, and the last protective murder had been done.

Then there was time to rest. Then there were also plagues, deficiency diseases, war, and universal psychosis, leveling out from sheer exhaustion into a rock-bottom society of truculent little villages and brooding, gloomy, brutal suspicion. All this inside a quarter-century, and Alma Petrie crouched at her alarms and detectors, hating the unknown chemist who had done this to her.

Alma Petrie moaned with tension and shut off all the television sets again – all but the one with its camera on the northbound entrance ramp. There had to be something out there. But where – where?

There. At the edge of the roadway, something heaved itself up from the ditch and into sight. It teetered on two spindly supports, inched forward with enormous persistence, and then collapsed across the lip of the ditch.

Open-mouthed, breathing harshly, Alma Petrie watched it gather itself, pull itself a little farther toward her, and resolve into a woman crawling on all fours.

She did not seem to look where she was going. Her head hung down between her arms, trailing its long hair on the ground. The woman was pulling forward with her hands, rather than pushing with her knees. She stopped after each effort, sagging on her locked elbows before nerving herself for the next attempt. She was actually on the asphalt surface of the ramp now, making no attempt to protect her face each time she fell

sprawling Rags, apparently torn from her skirt, were wrapped around her knees, and were stained.

Alma Petrie watched motionless. Outside, there was no movement of air to stir the dry shrubs. There was no sound of birds. The blazing sky was cloudless. Only the woman moved, crawling up the ramp with her maddening gait.

Hesitantly, Alma Petrie turned off the automatic weapons trained on the ramp. She watched, still unable to bring herself to do anything beyond that, quiet as death, scarcely conscious of breathing. And the woman on the ramp inched on and on, coming closer.

Alma Petrie had spent all twenty years of her adult life in the abandoned parkway restaurant. There had been a time when the place had great strategic desirability, for a bandit who wanted to control the commerce along that superb highway. The commerce had dwindled, trickled, and stopped. The bandit had died, he and his successors, under the guns Alma Petrie's father had placed, in the minefields, and in the traps. But if Alma Petrie had not learned then that death waited outside the building, she had learned it later, when a cruder and less ambitious kind of bandit had begun trying to get at her for the machine-woven cloth and steel cutlery – the riches beyond price in a world of hamlets and brush-choked roads.

Alma Petrie had watched them die, trying to get up the rise, trying to crawl up under cover of darkness, spitted by fragmentation shells in the pitiless infrared spotlights, stitched by the machine guns, tossed by the mines. She had watched them and wept, and at first, when they cried out with pain in the darkness, she tried to help them. But what she guarded was too precious for even dying men not to covet. They lay in wait and tried to stab her in the darkness as she came out to nurse them, and in a hundred ingenious ways they had tried to lure her. She had fled from them, and shut herself up, and finally no one tried to break through to her any more, but she had learned her lesson by that time.

She watched, breathless and agonized, while the woman crawled. She did not know what to do.

Then the woman collapsed and lay sprawled in the entrance to the parking area, her legs scraping back and forth on the asphalt, her hands pawing out in mindless reflex.

Alma Petrie could stand it no longer. She threw the switch that opened the narrow sliding steel door to the outside, and ran out of the building with a terrified pumping of her legs. After all, it was only one woman. Only

one helpless woman, no doubt terribly wronged and hurt, who desperately needed help. Alma Petrie knew very well what could befall a woman in these times – her father had told her repeatedly and graphically. She had no difficulty imagining herself in the other's place.

She thought of men as she ran toward the fallen woman: rough, brawling brutes, stinking of liquor and mumbling swinishly when at last they crashed to the floor and their vetted brains lost all control of their vile bodies. She thought of men, and as she ran she gasped for air, her vocal cords stirring quite unconsciously and making peculiar sounds.

The woman was a thin-faced blonde with a waxy complexion and harsh lines at the corners of her mouth. Alma Petrie tugged at her, and she rolled over with her arms outflung. "Get—" she whispered, "Get... Danny... husband... down there..." One arm flapped palm-up, pointing down the ramp.

Husband ! Alma Petrie whirled.

If she had known there were two of them – if she had seen the man first... Alma Petrie sobbed. But she hadn't known, and the man had been out of sight of the cameras. Now it was too late. Now she had come outside. Now she was committed.

She ran to help him, flinging herself down the ramp as though all the pressures of the world had suddenly converged to shoot her down that one narrow pathway.

The man stopped dragging himself forward and waited for her, his head lifted. The sight of his youth, his handsomeness, and the lean angularity of his body were like a hammerblow to Alma Petrie.

There was nothing to do but help them inside. Somehow, Alma Petrie got them into the building, and sealed the door. She left them and re-set all the alarms and weapons in a flurry of panic, and then she went back to where they were slumped on the floor. The woman worked her way to her feet, pulling herself up the wall and pressing against it, her legs barely holding her. The man was pulling weakly at the dirt-encrusted rags and jagged lengths of wood that had been wrapped around his bare, swollen and discolored ankle.

"Farmers..." the man mumbled up at Alma Petrie. "Three days ago... We were trying to get to Princeton... Robbed us for our horse..."

The woman began to look around with burning eyes, whispering curses in a hissing, venomous voice.

Alma Petrie could not take her glance away from the man. She stared at him in fascination.

There were bits of leaves and dirt clinging to his short black beard and his hair. There was a smell of mud and leaf-mold about him, and his clothes were in shreds. His face was distorted by pain, drawn with hunger and exhaustion, badly bruised where something had struck his cheekbone. But he was fantastically handsome, with thick, regular brows, long-lashed eyes and full lips.

"Didn't know there was anybody in here... looking for shelter..." he mumbled.

"We need food," the woman said harshly. "We need to get clean. We need clothes. Danny's ankle needs a cast. Are you going to help us?"

Alma Petrie looked up at last. The woman clung to the wall, her eyes intent on Alma Petrie's face. "We've been in the woods three days. No food, and drinking out of creeks so dried up it was like eating mud. We're through. Are you going to help us any?"

The driven sibilance of her voice finally cut through to Alma Petrie's consciousness.

"Yes. I'll help you. Yes. But I don't have the strength to drag you any farther. Can you get to the next room by yourselves? That's where I live. That's where everything is."

"I can make it," the woman said. "But Danny can't. Quit mooning over him and help him in there."

"Mooning?"

The woman gave her no answer. She pushed herself away from the wall and, keeping one hand pressed against it, began working her way toward the door into what had once been the dining room and was now Alma Petrie's living quarters. She hobbled stiff-legged, without bending her knees, and an edge of fresh red began to show under her bandages. After the first few steps she put both hands on the wall and mauled her lower lip between her teeth, but, moving sideways, she continued to inch toward the door without speaking.

"I think if you helped me get up... " the man said faintly, "I could lean on you and make it on one foot."

Lean on me, Alma Petrie thought. Lean on me. Oh, I can't – But she stooped and clutched him around the shoulders, gasping with effort as she lifted him. He took her forearms and pulled himself upward, almost upsetting her balance, but somehow she managed to stand up with him

and let him throw one arm over her shoulders. Hopping and stumbling, he reached the doorway with her.

The weight of him, Alma Petrie thought – the strong weight of him! She opened the door, and the hard-eyed woman tottered into the room ahead of her. Then Alma Petrie could bring the man in and let him sink to rest on her bed.

She straightened up and found the woman slumped down in a chair, sneering at her.

There was plenty of canned and radio-sterilized food from the restaurant stockroom. Some of it had been there when her father took possession of the place. Some of it had been brought in during the eighteen months in which he had created this refuge. There was plenty, but there was only one-tenth as much as there had been once.

Alma Petrie prepared a meal in the one part of the kitchen left unchanged when her father took the remainder of the space for his laboratory. She brought food to the couple, together with tap water from the restaurant's power-pumped well. The restaurant was a self-sufficient island to itself, set down on the parkway with no reference to preexisting towns or cities, independent of municipal services. It had supported and nourished Alma Petrie for twenty years, fifteen of which she had been the only drain on its resources. The pumps, the sewage disposal, the generator – all worked, all worked alone, all worked silently, except for, here and there, the insidious rasp of a decaying bearing.

Alma Petrie searched through the medicine chest for a traction splint, antiseptics, and bandages. She brought them back to the couple, and tended the man first, while he and the woman ate.

She washed his lower leg, keeping her head bent away from the woman's look, and locked the splint in place. He paid no attention to her, wolfing down the strips of fried meat and gulping at his glass of water, but when she was finished he smiled brilliantly and said: "That feels much better, thank you." The food had given him back some of his drained energy, and for the first time she heard him in what must have been his normal, well-modulated, somewhat throaty voice.

"You're... you're welcome. It wasn't anything." The sound of her own voice did not so much surprise as it did dismay her. She had spoken to no one in fifteen years, except for those hastily extinguished lapses when she caught herself talking to the past.

"Don't worry, Danny," the woman barked wolfishly. "We'll be paying for it."

Alma Petrie looked at the woman in bewilderment. "I don't understand what you mean. I don't expect payment."

"Don't you? Don't you? You don't see us as two handy slaves?"

"Slaves? How?"

The woman laughed. "Don't play innocent with me! I'm not dumb. I've been looking around. And I don't just mean I've been watching you make sheep's eyes at Danny."

"Wh...?"

"Shut up!" the woman cried out; her face suddenly twisted in frustrated rage. "You think I would have eaten your food if I thought we could get some somewhere else? You think I wouldn't have tried to get Danny out of here, if I thought he could go any farther? What do you think I am, silly or something? You've got us. You've got us where we've got to trade full bellies for free will." She went on bitterly: "Did you put it in our food, or are you going to wait and give us needles when we're asleep?"

"I... I don't understand... "

"The Lobotomol!" the woman exploded. "The Lobotomol, you nitwit!"

Alma Petrie stared in astonishment and fear. "Nonsense!" she said. "Lobotomol is an extremely complex chemical. The technology is far below a point where any of it could possibly be manufactured now.

"Yah!" the woman cried in a louder and more hysterical voice. "I'm no dope!" She waved at the room. "Electric lights, electric alarms, decent food, medicines... You've got all that, and you don't have Lobotomol? You wouldn't use it? How else is a dried up old bag like you going to get herself a man?"

"That's nonsense!" Alma Petrie gasped. "Vicious nonsense. I don't have to listen to any more of it!" And she burst out of the room, flinging herself into the old kitchen, where the laboratory was and the supply of Lobotomol was kept.

Lobotomol had not of itself been a project of research and development. That is, no one had predicted it in theory, developed it experimentally, and then undertaken a program leading to a commercial production process. Pharmacology is not that kind of a science, in the main. The basic product from which Lobotomol derived was intended for an only distantly related medical use. It was itself the product of a complex industrial process requiring a great deal of heavy equipment, as well as delicate treatment at many stages. The organic chemist who discovered Lobotomol had been a technician on a routine job – running through by-products

from the basic process, in search of anything useful – and he came upon it as only the latest in a series of hundreds.

That fact had ultimately been Humanity's salvation. No one had ever worked out a means of making the stuff in the bathtub at home. It had more than likely been tried, but no one had succeeded in those confused days when all kinds of normally accessible supplies and facilities had stopped being accessible or workable. The only known way to make it was to lay in a huge stock of the parent compound – one of the standard pain-killers – and run it through a plant a block long. It was easily done if you had the plant and the trained staff, and could maintain them.

It had been left for Alma Petrie's father to discover the shortcut home laboratory method, and that knowledge had been born in this building and never left it.

Theron Petrie had been a stoop shouldered, waspishly thin man with an impatient curl to the corners of his mouth and a gleam of genius burning in his eyes. Splenetic, shrill, and altogether unpleasant to the vast number of people who were slower-witted than he, he had effectively wrecked his life and buried his talent by making himself intolerable to the society of Man. His thought processes were unblinkingly quick and deadly accurate. His ability to associate a known fact with a new conjecture and thus arrive at an unshakable new postulate was founded on an eidetic memory and an enormous store of data. If he did not know everything there was to know, it was only because life was too short. The only thing he seemed incapable of learning, as a matter of record, was the fact that people with a slower associational speed were nevertheless not to be accounted insignificant.

He had graduated brilliantly from McGill, and taken his biology doctorate at Johns Hopkins before the beard was fairly started on his prominent cheekbones. He had the distinction of never having made a friend anywhere he studied. His instructors tolerated him only because of his intelligence – they could not very well like a man with a habit of shouting "Nonsense!" in their faces. They were glad to see the last of him, and he, in turn, was at least as glad to be free to closet himself in a research laboratory, where he would not have to deal with any mind but his own.

But nothing in this world has been that simple since the first emergence of Business Administration as a craft. Theron Petrie was not independently wealthy. He could not build his own facilities, or hare off on his own pursuits. Wherever he went, whatever he did, he had to deal with

someone in charge of things. And that was flatly impossible for him. He could discharge his assistants for incompetence and impertinence, and Personnel would always find new ones for him. But he could not attempt to tell a Director of Research that the company ought to revise all its plans and reschedule all its projects. He might be a genius, but he could not deliver what he was paid for. He could not get it through his head that the company had a right to hire him for a certain kind of work and then insist he do it. He could not assimilate the fact that a company could recognize his talent by hiring him for a considerable sum, and still, once it had taken his measure, want to get rid of him as soon as it could break his contract.

It made no sense to him. He flung himself from one employment to another with a blind, foaming desperation, and in a very few years he was virtually unemployable.

At the time Lobotomol was discovered by a man one-twentieth as clever, Theron Petrie was a seedy man in a sleazy job with a third-rate patent medicine mill. He had acquired a sickly, disappointed wife and begotten a frail and by now adolescent daughter, both of whom he crushed with his vicious personality when the one stopped worshiping his intellect and the other could not outthink him. He persecuted his assistants and held his job only by doing the work of four men at one-fifth the expense. When he was assigned the job of pirating Lobotomol, he did so with great speed and pathological joy. The result was that his company did a great deal more than its share toward flooding the market.

But he was a genius. He could see what was coming, and he could apply all his fantastic energies toward doing something about it.

What he did was to spend weeks scouting a suitable location and meanwhile acquiring all the supplies needed to fulfill a superbly well thought-out list of requirements. The day the restaurant was abandoned by its staff, he moved in and set to work establishing a fortress. The proper defense system was the result of a great deal of advance study in unaccustomed branches of science, but this was as nothing to his genius, properly driven. He put his family in the fortress almost as an afterthought, and set to work.

For it was obvious to him that any fool could discover Lobotomol, but a man of Theron Petrie's caliber was required to develop an antigen. Some compound that could be retained harmlessly by the body – or perhaps one that, once introduced, would stimulate a self-perpetuating reaction – and which, upon contact by Lobotomol, would neutralize the stuff before it could set to work. This, too, ought to be easily manufactured and simply administered.

He anticipated no real trouble. He anticipated the boundless wealth and acclaim that Society could no longer begrudge him, no matter how much it might plot to thwart him. He dreamed of these things while he set up his laboratory, and he sang at his work.

His wife was his only assistant. At first she worked willingly enough, doing what he told her, while their wan daughter hung about in the background and watched from out-of-the-way corners. But several months went by, and then several years, and Theron Petrie was not much closer to his goal. It was all very well for Thomas Edison to say, at one point, that now he knew two thousand sure ways that would not produce a practical incandescent lamp. The pressures on Theron Petrie, and his family, were of a different order.

By the time Petrie's wife died from the effects of his latest experiment, the family atmosphere had been at a murderous pitch for some years. The event came as a perfect, almost trite climax to a rising tide of emotional tension, and, tritely, Theron Petrie took to drink. Whether from love or rage his daughter was unequipped to judge.

Whichever it was, he began by taking one drink of alcohol and water after supper every night, on the basis that he needed relaxation and could handle it without any effect on his intellect. Alma Petrie was also not equipped to know that some people are instinctive abstainers because they have no tolerance for alcohol, and that once the abstinence is broken there is very little chance of going back.

In short order, Theron Petrie was a drunk. He followed the classic barroom "Professor" pattern, spitefully mumbling snatches of erudition at his daughter while half his drink splashed onto his sleeve. But he did not become a hopeless case until his final series resulted in the accidental discovery of the short-cut method for producing Lobotomol.

That was too much. Brilliant Theron Petrie could not stand against that blow – nor did he try very hard. With malice and in terrible bitterness he did one more useful thing in his life: between bouts of delirium tremens, he took his stupid daughter's dull mind and poured into it as much of his knowledge as he could transmit, forcing it on her like a man making a phonograph record on a blank disk. It came out of him in mumbling gobbets and shouted freshets, disorganized and sometimes incomprehensible. He was not teaching – he was carving his own memorial – and he bullied and beat Alma Petrie, and cursed her incessantly, like a bad sculptor with stiff clay, and she, with her defenses long since beaten down, absorbed it all in a kind of numb fit.

Alma Petrie, standing stock-still in the restaurant kitchen, clenched the edge of a sink and remembered, a soft, tense whine vibrating unheard in her throat.

"Listen, you clod—" With an iron claw of his hand around her wrist, he dragged his face closer to hers and shouted: "Listen, you miserable travesty of a thinking being, are you ever going to get this right? What else have you got to do with your brain? What else is in it to get in the way?" He snorted and let go of her, falling back in his chair. He gulped at his glass and looked at her hollow-eyed, his pale face wet with perspiration.

"You poor, miserable moron," he mumbled. "I feel sorry for you. What chance have you got? Someday there won't be anybody here to protect you, and inside of a month you'll be dead. Or worse. You're not equipped to deal with this world – or any other, for that matter. You're hangover from the days when Society could afford to support incompetents... yah, afford; afforded itself straight to hell... and the least you could do is listen, instead of sitting there sniveling!"

"I... I'll try to do better, father," Alma Petrie promised tearfully.

Then, one night, Theron Petrie looked up at the stars through one of his TV screens, croaked, "Why?" in a stuporous breath, collapsed, and died. So Alma Petrie was left alone, impregnable, with a liter of Lobotomol and her memories of her father. So she remained for years.

She came out of the laboratory after a while, with the freshly sealed syrette held tightly in the fist of her left hand, and with her left arm pressed against her side. The woman and her husband looked at Alma Petrie, the woman with a sneer and the husband with a smile that obviously came to him as automatically as breathing. Alma Petrie looked back at him and felt her knees turn to water.

"All over your little tantrum?" the woman asked.

Alma Petrie nodded. She could not keep her eyes off the man. His expression grew curious, and he raised his shoulders from the bed.

The woman laughed. "They all like you, Danny It's those cow eyes of yours."

"Stop it," Alma Petrie muttered.

"Bother you?"

"Cut it out, Iris!" the man complained.

"Shut up," the woman said.

"What are you trying to make of this?" Alma Petrie cried. "I haven't done anything. Or said anything. All I've done is take you two in and give you shelter. What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with me? Look at you – you're shaking." The woman tried to stand up, and fell back. "All right," she muttered. "I just want you to know he's no good. He's up to the ears in education, but he's no good at all. I had to push, push, push all the time. If I hadn't dragged him this far, he'd be lying dead in a ditch by now. He would have got himself killed ten years ago. The only reason I've kept him alive is because he's a chemist." She snarled at Alma Petrie. "You'd better take him quick. If you don't, I'll still figure out some way to push him into turning out Lobotomol. Because I'm not going to go around like this all my life." She thumped her breastbone. "I'm going to be rich! I'm going to have a house, and servants, and good clothes, and men-at-arms to protect me... What's that in your hand!"

Alma Petrie had sobbed, and started across the room. The man drew himself up in a bundle of fear. The woman flung herself to her quivering feet, her clawed hands outstretched.

But Alma Petrie got across the room, and the syrette's glittering point was sunk in the man's arm. Alma Petrie squeezed the tube, and the man cried out. He clutched his arm and stared down at the welling blot of red.

The woman toppled against Alma Petrie, scratching at her face. "You... I'll kill you!"

Crying, Alma Petrie tore herself away. "Look!" she shouted hoarsely, wiping the needle on a scrap of alcohol-soaked cotton. She dug the syrette into her own arm and forced another cubic centimeter out of the 3cc syrette. "It isn't what you think," she sobbed. "It isn't what you think." The woman was staring at her, dumfounded, and Alma Petrie stabbed out once more. Then her fingers crumpled the unbreakable flexible plastic, and she threw the empty syrette down. "It's not Lobotomol," Alma Petrie sobbed. "It's the antigen. The three of us are permanently immune. Nobody can ever force us to do anything we don't want to."

She looked at the man. Just one, she thought. Just one person to love me. That's all I want. But after that one – how do I know I won't want more, and more? How do I know that I, of all the people in the world, would be strong enough never to use Lobotomol again?

She had made her choice, and made it alone, in the laboratory, where no one could watch her face to see how much it cost her.

"It's the antigen," Alma Petrie whispered to the woman. "And I can

never, never steal your man from you. Are you satisfied?"

Theron Petrie's stupid daughter hadn't died without him. It had been months before she realized she would be alone for years, to the end of her life, with the outside world too dangerous to live in. But once she did realize it, she began groping about for something to do.

There was only one thing she knew how to do, and only one thing the laboratory was equipped for. And she had had years in which to work.

"I'm not stupid," Alma Petrie blurted at the woman. "I'm not!" She lifted her face and cried out: "Do you hear me?" Then, out of some other complexity in herself, she whispered: "I'm sorry."

"Holy smoke!" the man shouted happily. "We're in, Iris! We're rich! We've got it made!"

The woman's eyes narrowed. She peered at Alma Petrie. "Yes," she said slowly. "I think you're right. She's not kidding. She's got the stuff. Look at her – she isn't trying to give us orders." The woman exchanged a glance with the man. "It's perfect. She stays here and turns it out, and the two of us start slipping into these hick towns with it. They'll pay through the nose for it."

"Yah!" the man exulted. "This is better than Lobotomol! I figure we can get two, three times as much for it. Wow! Think of all those people, waitin' for the day they could get Lobotomol again, savin' up those hypos and those bottles. Think of the people that've been hoarding some of it, maybe giving somebody a quiet dose now and then." He began to laugh. "Think of the looks on their faces. One shot of this stuff of Pruneface's, here, and that's all over. Boy, that's gonna make one doozey of a tinkle, when all those hypos get thrown away!"

Alma Petrie was sobbing into her hands, her shoulders shaking, hardly hearing what the other two were saying, knowing only that something tightly coiled within her had broken at last.

Theron Petrie had saved the world.

© 1959 Algis Budrys

Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night

The title is Frederik Pohl's; I forget how I had it when I sold this story to him for Galaxy, and that's a good sign I more than approve of his choice. I wrote it overnight, during a period when I was trying to see if I could understand what Cordwainer Smith was doing. The central Nemesis is drawn from my experience as a whilom investigator of unusual travelers' cheque refund claims for American Express. A clerical investigator, but the seed is father to the stalk.

I delivered the manuscript to Fred's house, not far from where we lived, and when I returned home Edna was washing her hair and hurrying to make me some breakfast. After breakfast, she asked me to drive her to the hospital, and a few hours later our second son, Steven, was born. Steve is now (1978) the junior chess champion of Illinois.

SOFT AS THE voice of a mourning dove, the telephone sounded at Rufus Sollenar's desk. Sollenar himself was standing fifty paces away, his leonine head cocked, his hands flat in his hip pockets, watching the righted world through the crystal wall that faced out over Manhattan Island. The window was so high that some of what he saw was dimmed by low cloud hovering over the rivers. Above him were stars; below him the city was traced out in light and brimming with light. A falling star – an interplanetary rocket – streaked down toward Long Island Facility like a scratch across the soot on the doors of Hell.

Sollenar's eyes took it in, but he was watching the total scene, not any particular part of it. His eyes were shining.

When he heard the telephone, he raised his left hand to his lips. "Yes?" The hand glittered with utilijem rings; the effect was that of an attempt at the sort of copper-binding that was once used to reinforce the ribbing of wooden warships.

His personal receptionist's voice moved from the air near his desk to the air near his ear. Seated at the monitor board in her office, wherever in this building her office was, the receptionist told him:

"Mr. Ermine says he has an appointment."

"No." Sollenar dropped his hand and resumed to his panorama. When he had been twenty years younger – managing the modest optical factory

that had provided the support of three generations of Sollenars – he had very much wanted to be able to stand in a place like this, and feel as he imagined men felt in such circumstances. But he felt unimaginable now.

To be here was one thing. To have almost lost the right, and regained it at the last moment, was another. Now he knew that not only could he be here today but that tomorrow, and tomorrow, he could still be here. He had won. His gamble had given him EmpaVid – and EmpaVid would give him all.

The city was not merely a prize set down before his eyes. It was a dynamic system he had proved he could manipulate. He and the city were one. It buoyed and sustained him; it supported him, here in the air, with stars above and light-thickened mist below.

The telephone mourned: "Mr. Ermine states he has a firm appointment."

"I've never heard of him." And the left hand's utilijems fell from Sollenar's lips again. He enjoyed such toys. He raised his right hand, sheathed in insubstantial midnight-blue silk in which the silver threads of metallic wiring ran subtly toward the fingertips. He raised the hand, and touched two fingers together: music began to play behind and before him. He made contact between another combination of finger circuits, and a soft, feminine laugh came from the terrace at the other side of the room, where connecting doors had opened. He moved toward it. One layer of translucent drapery remained across the doorway, billowing lightly in the breeze from the terrace. Through it, he saw the taboret with its candle lit; the iced wine in the stand beside it; the two fragile chairs; Bess Allardyce, slender and regal, waiting in one of them – all these, through the misty curtain, like either the beginning or the end of a dream.

"Mr. Ermine reminds you the appointment was made for him at the Annual Business Dinner of the International Association of Broadcasters in 2018."

Sollenar completed his latest step, then stopped. He frowned down at his left hand. "Is Mr. Ermine with the IAB's Special Public Relations Office?"

"Yes," the voice said after a pause.

The fingers of Sollenar's right hand shrank into a cone. The connecting door closed. The girl disappeared. The music stopped. "All right. You can tell Mr. Ermine to come up." Sollenar went to sit behind his desk.

The office door chimed. Sollenar crooked a finger of his left hand, and

the door opened. With another gesture, he kindled the overhead lights near the door and sat in shadow as Mr. Ermine came in.

Ermine was dressed in rust-colored garments. His figure was spare, and his hands were empty. His face was round and soft, with long dark sideburns. His scalp was bald. He stood just inside Sollenar's office and said: "I would like some light to see you by, Mr. Sollenar."

Sollenar crooked his little finger.

The overhead lights came to soft light all over the office. The crystal wall became a mirror, with only the strongest city lights glimmering through it. "I only wanted to see you first," said Sollenar; "I thought perhaps we'd met before."

"No," Ermine said, walking across the office. "It's not likely you've ever seen me." He took a card case out of his pocket and showed Sollenar proper identification. "I'm not a very forward person."

"Please sit down," Sollenar said. "What may I do for you?"

"At the moment, Mr. Sollenar, I'm doing something for you."

Sollenar sat back in his chair. "Are you? Are you, now?" He frowned at Ermine. "When I became a party to the By-Laws passed at the '18 Dinner, I thought a Special Public Relations Office would make a valuable asset to the organization. Consequently, I voted for it, and for the powers it was given. But I never expected to have any personal dealings with it. I barely remembered you people had carte blanche with any IAB member."

"Well, of course, it's been a while since '18," Ermine said. "I imagine some legends have grown up around us. Industry gossip – that sort of thing."

"Yes."

"But we don't restrict ourselves to an enforcement function, Mr. Sollenar. You haven't broken any By-Laws, to our knowledge."

"Or mine. But nobody feels one hundred per cent secure. Not under these circumstances." Nor did Sollenar yet relax his face into its magnificent smile. "I'm sure you've found that out."

"I have a somewhat less ambitious older brother who's with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. When I embarked on my own career, he told me I could expect everyone in the world to react like a criminal, yes," Ermine said, paying no attention to Sollenar's involuntary blink. "It's one of the complicating factors in a profession like my brother's, or mine. But I'm here to advise you, Mr. Sollenar. Only that."

"In what matter, Mr. Ermine?"

"Well, your corporation recently came into control of the patents for a new video system. I understand that this in effect makes your corporation the licensor for an extremely valuable sales and entertainment medium. Fantastically valuable."

"EmpaVid," Sollenar agreed. "Various subliminal stimuli are broadcast with and keyed to the oven subject matter. The home receiving unit contains feedback sensors which determine the viewer's reaction to these stimuli, and intensify some while playing down others in order to create complete emotional rapport between the viewer and the subject matter. EmpaVid, in other words, is a system for orchestrating the viewer's emotions. The home unit is self-contained, semiportable and not significantly bulkier than the standard TV receiver. EmpaVid is compatible with standard TV receivers – except, of course, that the subject matter seems thin and vaguely unsatisfactory on a standard receiver. So the consumer shortly purchases an EV unit." It pleased Sollenar to spell out the nature of his prize.

"At a very reasonable price. Quite so, Mr. Sollenar. But you had several difficulties in finding potential licensees for this system, among the networks."

Sollenar's lips pinched out.

Mr. Ermine raised one finger. "First, there was the matter of acquiring the patents from the original inventor, who was also approached by Cortwright Burr."

"Yes, he was," Sollenar said in a completely new voice.

"Competition between Mr. Burr and yourself is long-standing and intense."

"Quite intense," Sollenar said, looking directly ahead of him at the one blank wall of the office. Burr's offices were several blocks downtown, in that direction.

"Well, I have no wish to enlarge on that point, Mr. Burr being an IAB member in standing as good as yours, Mr. Sollenar. There was, in any case, a further difficulty in licensing EV, due to the very heavy cost involved in equipping broadcasting stations and network relay equipment for this sort of transmission."

"Yes, there was."

"Ultimately, however, you succeeded. You pointed out, quite rightly, that if just one station made the change, and if just a few EV receivers

were put into public places within the area served by that station, normal TV outlets could not possibly compete for advertising revenue."

"Yes."

"And so your last difficulties were resolved a few days ago, when your EmpaVid Unlimited – pardon me; when EmpaVid, a subsidiary of the Sollenaar Corporation – became a major stockholder in the Transworld TV Network."

"I don't understand, Mr. Ermine," Sollenaar said. "Why are you recounting this? Are you trying to demonstrate the power of your knowledge? All these transactions are already matters of record in the IAB confidential files, in accordance with the ByLaws."

Ermine held up another finger. "You're forgetting I'm only here to advise you. I have two things to say. They are:

"These transactions are on file with the IAB because they involve a great number of IAB members, and an increasingly large amount of capital. Also, Transworld's exclusivity, under the IAB By-Laws, will hold good only until thirty-three per cent market saturation has been reached. If EV is as good as it looks, that will be quite soon. After that, under the By-Laws, Transworld will be restrained from making effective defenses against patent infringement by competitors. Then all of the IAB's membership and much of their capital will be involved with EV. Much of that capital is already in anticipatory motion. So a highly complex structure now ultimately depends on the integrity of the Sollenaar Corporation. If Sollenaar stock falls in value, not just you but many IAB members will be greatly embarrassed. Which is another way of saying EV must succeed."

"I know all that! What of it? There's no risk. I've had every related patent on Earth checked. There will be no catastrophic obsolescence of the EV system."

Ermine said: "There are engineers on Mars. Martian engineers. They're a dying race, but no one knows what they can still do."

Sollenaar raised his massive head.

Ermine said: "Late this evening, my office learned that Cortwright Burr has been in close consultation with the Martians for several weeks. They have made some sort of machine for him. He was on the flight that landed at the Facility a few moments ago."

Sollenaar's fists clenched. The lights crashed off and on, and the room wailed. From the terrace came a startled cry, and a sound of smashed glass.

Mr. Ermine nodded, excused himself and left.

A few moments later, Mr. Ermine stepped out at the pedestrian level of the Sollenar Building. He strolled through the landscaped garden, and across the frothing brook toward the central walkway down the Avenue. He paused at a hedge to pluck a blossom and inhale its odor. He walked away, holding it in his naked fingers.

Drifting slowly on the thread of his spinneret, Rufus Sollenar came gliding down the wind above Cortwright Burr's building.

The building, like a spider, touched the ground at only the points of its legs. It held its wide, low bulk spread like a parasol over several downtown blocks. Sollenar, manipulating the helium-filled plastic drifter far above him, steered himself with jets of compressed gas from plastic bottles in the drifter's structure.

Only Sollenar himself, in all this system, was not effectively transparent to the municipal antiplane radar. And he himself was wrapped in long, fluttering streamers of dull black metallic sheeting. To the eye, he was amorphous and non-reflective. To electronic sensors, he was a drift of static much like a sheet of foil picked by the wind from some careless trash heap. To all of the senses of all interested parties he was hardly there at all – and, thus, in an excellent position for murder.

He fluttered against Burr's window. There was the man, crouched over his desk. What was that in his hands – a pomander?

Sollenar clipped his harness to the edges of the cornice. Swayed out against it, his sponge-soled boots pressed to the glass, he touched his left hand to the window and described a circle. He pushed; there was a thud on the carpeting in Burr's office, and now there was no barrier to Sollenar. Doubling his knees against his chest, he catapulted forward, the riot pistol in his right hand. He stumbled and fell to his knees, but the gun was up.

Burr jolted behind his desk. The little sphere of orange-gold metal, streaked with darker bronze, its surface vermicular with encrustations, was still in his hands. "Him!" Burr cried out as Sollenar fired.

Gasping, Sollenar watched the charge strike Burr. It threw his torso backward faster than his limbs and head could follow without dangling. The choked-down pistol was nearly silent. Burr crashed backward to end, transfixed, against the wall.

Pale and sick, Sollenar moved to take the golden ball. He wondered where Shakespeare could have seen an example such as this, to know an

old man could have so much blood in him.

Burr held the prize out to him. Staring with eyes distended by hydrostatic pressure, his clothing raddled and his torso grinding its broken bones, Burr stalked away from the wall and moved as if to embrace Sollenar. It was queer, but he was not dead.

Shuddering, Sollenar fired again.

Again Burr was thrown back. The ball spun from his splayed fingers as he once more marked the wall with his body.

Pomander, orange, whatever – it looked valuable.

Sollenar ran after the rolling ball. And Burr moved to intercept him, nearly faceless, hunched under a great invisible weight that slowly yielded as his back groaned.

Sollenar took a single backward step.

Burr took a step toward him. The golden ball lay in a far corner. Sollenar raised the pistol despairingly and fired again. Burr tripped backward on tiptoe, his arms like windmills, and fell atop the prize.

Tears ran down Sollenar's cheeks. He pushed one foot forward... and Burr, in his corner, lifted his head and began to gather his body for the effort of rising.

Sollenar retreated to the window, the pistol sledging backward against his wrist and elbow as he fired the remaining shots in the magazine.

Panting, he climbed up into the window frame and clipped the harness to his body, craning to look over his shoulder... as Burr – shredded; leaking blood and worse than blood – advanced across the office.

Sollenar cast off his holds on the window frame and clumsily worked the drifter controls. Far above him, volatile ballast spilled out and dispersed in the air long before it touched ground. Sollenar rose, sobbing –

And Burr stood in the window, his shattered hands on the edges of the cut circle, raising his distended eyes steadily to watch Sollenar in night across the enigmatic sky.

Where he landed, on the roof of a building in his possession, Sollenar had a disposal unit for his gun and his other trappings. He deferred for a time the question of why Burr had failed at once to die. Empty-handed, he resumed uptown.

He entered his office, called and told his attorneys the exact times of departure and return and knew the question of dealing with municipal authorities was thereby resolved. That was simple enough, with no witnesses to complicate the matter. He began to wish he hadn't been so irresolute as to leave Burr without the thing he was after. Surely, if the pistol hadn't killed the man – an old man, with thin limbs and spotted skin – he could have wrestled that thin-limbed, bloody old man aside – that spotted old man – and dragged himself and his prize back to the window, for all that the old man would have clung to him, and clutched at his legs, and fumbled for a handhold on his somber disguise of wrappings – that broken, immortal old man.

Sollenar raised his hand. The great window to the city grew opaque.

Bess Allardyce knocked softly on the door from the terrace. He would have thought she'd resumed to her own apartments many hours ago. Tortuously pleased, he opened the door and smiled at her, feeling the dried tears crack on the skin of his cheeks.

He took her proffered hands. "You waited for me," he sighed. "A long time for anyone as beautiful as you to wait."

She smiled back at him. "Let's go out and look at the stars."

"Isn't it chilly?"

"I made spiced hot cider for us. We can sip it and think."

He let her draw him out onto the terrace. He leaned on the parapet, his arm around her pulsing waist, his cape drawn around both their shoulders.

"Bess, I won't ask if you'd stay with me no matter what the circumstances. But it might be a time will come when I couldn't bear to live in this city. What about that?"

"I don't know," she answered honestly.

And Cortwright Burr put his hand up over the edge of the parapet, between them.

Sollenar stared down at the straining knuckles, holding the entire weight of the man dangling against the sheer face of the building. There was a sliding, rustling noise, and the other hand came up, searched blindly for a hold and found it, hooked over the stone. The fingers tensed and rose, their tips flattening at the pressure as Burr tried to pull his head and shoulders up to the level of the parapet.

Bess breathed: "Oh, look at them! He must have torn them terribly climbing up!" Then she pulled away from Sollenar and stood staring at him, her hand to her mouth. "But he couldn't have climbed! We're so high!"

Sollenar beat at the hands with the heels of his palms, using the direct, trained blows he had learned at his athletic club.

Bone splintered against the stone. When the knuckles were broken the hands instantaneously disappeared, leaving only streaks behind them. Sollenar looked over the parapet. A bundle shrank from sight, silhouetted against the lights of the pedestrian level and the Avenue. It contracted to a pinpoint. Then, when it reached the brook and water flew in all directions, it disappeared in a final sunburst, endowed with glory by the many lights which found momentary reflection down there.

"Bess, leave me! Leave me, please!" Rufus Sollenar cried out.

Rufus Sollenar paced his office, his hands held safely still in front of him, their fingers spread and rigid.

The telephone sounded, and his secretary said to him: "Mr. Sollenar, you are ten minutes from being late at the TTV Executives' Ball. This is a First Class obligation."

Sollenar laughed. "I thought it was, when I originally classified it."

"Are you now planning to renege, Mr. Sollenar?" the secretary inquired politely.

Certainly, Sollenar thought. He could as easily renege on the Ball as a king could on his coronation.

"Burr, you scum, what have you done to me?" he asked the air, and the telephone said: "Beg pardon?"

"Tell my valet," Sollenar said. "I'm going." He dismissed the phone. His hands cupped in front of his chest. A firm grip on emptiness might be stronger than any prize in a broken hand.

Carrying in his chest something he refused to admit was terror, Sollenar made ready for the Ball.

But only a few moments after the first dance set had ended, Malcolm Levier of the local TTV station executive staff looked over Sollenar's shoulder and remarked:

"Oh, there's Cort Burr, dressed like a gallows bird."

Sollenar, glittering in the costume of the Medici, did not turn his head. "Is he? What would he want here?"

Levier's eyebrows arched. "He holds a little stock. He has entree. But he's late." Levier's lips quirked. "It must have taken him some time to get that makeup on."

"Not in good taste, is it?"

"Look for yourself."

"Oh, I'll do better than that," Sollenar said. "I'll go and talk to him a while. Excuse me, Levier." And only then did he turn around, already started on his first pace toward the man.

But Cortwright Burr was only a pasteboard imitation of himself as Sollenar had come to know him. He stood to one side of the doorway, dressed in black and crimson robes, with black leather gauntlets on his hands, carrying a staff of weathered, natural wood. His face was shadowed by a sackcloth hood, the eyes well hidden. His face was powdered gray, and some blend of livid colors hollowed his cheeks. He stood motionless as Sollenar came up to him.

As he had crossed the floor, each step regular, the eyes of bystanders had followed Sollenar, until, anticipating his course, they found Burr waiting. The noise level of the Ball shrank perceptibly, for the lesser revelers who chanced to be present were sustaining it all alone. The people who really mattered here were silent and watchful.

The obvious thought was that Burr, defeated in business, had come here in some insane reproach to his adversary, in this lugubrious, distasteful clothing. Why, he looked like a corpse. Or worse.

The question was, what would Sollenar say to him? The wish was that Burr would take himself away, back to his estates or to some other city. New York was no longer for Cortwright Burr. But what could Sollenar say to him now, to drive him back to where he hadn't the grace to go willingly?

"Cortwright," Sollenar said in a voice confined to the two of them. "So your Martian immortality works."

Burr said nothing.

"You got that in addition, didn't you? You knew how I'd react. You knew you'd need protection. Paid the Martians to make you physically invulnerable? It's a good system. Very impressive. Who would have thought the Martians knew so much? But who here is going to pay attention to you now? Get out of town, Cortwright. You're past your

chance. You're dead as far as these people are concerned – all you have left is your skin."

Burr reached up and surreptitiously lifted a corner of his fleshed mask. And there he was, under it. The hood retreated an inch, and the light reached his eyes; and Sollenar had been wrong; Burr had less left than he thought.

"Oh, no, no, Cortwright," Sollenar said softly. "No, you're right – I can't stand up to that."

He turned and bowed to the assembled company. "Good night!" he cried, and walked out of the ballroom.

Someone followed him down the corridor to the elevators. Sollenar did not look behind him.

"I have another appointment with you now," Ermine said at his elbow.

They reached the pedestrian level. Sollenar said: "There's a cafe. We can talk there."

"Too public, Mr. Sollenar. Let's simply stroll and converse." Ermine lightly took his arm and guided him along the walkway. Sollenar noticed then that Ermine was costumed so cunningly that no one could have guessed the appearance of the man.

"Very well," Sollenar said.

"Of course."

They walked together, casually. Ermine said: "Burr's driving you to your death. Is it because you tried to kill him earlier? Did you get his Martian secret?"

Sollenar shook his head.

"You didn't get it." Ermine sighed. "That's unfortunate. I'll have to take steps."

"Under the By-Laws," Sollenar said, "I cry *laissez faire*."

Ermine looked up, his eyes twinkling. "*Laissez faire*? Mr. Sollenar, do you have any idea how many of our members are involved in your fortunes? They will cry *laissez faire*, Mr. Sollenar, but clearly you persist in dragging them down with you. No, sir, Mr. Sollenar, my office now forwards an immediate recommendation to the Technical Advisory Committee of the IAB that Mr. Burr probably has a system superior to yours, and that stock in Sollenar, Incorporated, had best be disposed of."

"There's a bench," Sollenar said. "Let's sit down."

"As you wish." Ermine moved beside Sollenar to the bench, but remained standing.

"What is it, Mr. Sollenar?"

"I want your help. You advised me on what Burr had. It's still in his office building, somewhere. You have resources. We can get it."

"Laissez faire, Mr. Sollenar. I visited you in an advisory capacity, I can do no more."

"For a partnership in my affairs could you do more?"

"Money?" Ermine tittered. "For me? Do you know the conditions of my employment?"

If he had thought, Sollenar would have remembered. He reached out tentatively. Ermine anticipated him.

Ermine bared his left arm and sank his teeth into it. He displayed the arm. There was no quiver of pain in voice or stance. "It's not a legend, Mr. Sollenar. It's quite true. We of our office must spend a year, after the nerve surgery, relearning to walk without the feel of our feet, to handle objects without crushing them or letting them slip, or damaging ourselves. Our mundane pleasures are auditory, olfactory, and visual. Easily gratified at little expense. Our dreams are totally interior, Mr. Sollenar. The operation is irreversible. What would you buy for me with your money?"

"What would I buy for myself?" Sollenar's head sank down between his shoulders.

Ermine bent over him. "Your despair is your own, Mr. Sollenar. I have official business with you."

He lifted Sollenar's chin with a forefinger. "I judge physical interference to be unwarranted at this time. But matters must remain so that the IAB members involved with you can recover the value of their investments in EV. Is that perfectly clear, Mr. Sollenar? You are hereby enjoined under the By-Laws, as enforced by the Special Public Relations Office." He glanced at his watch. "Notice was served at 1:27 AM, City time."

"1:27," Sollenar said. "City time." He sprang to his feet and raced down a companionway to the taxi level.

Mr. Ermine watched him quizzically.

He opened his costume, took out his omnipresent medical kit, and sprayed coagulant over the wound in his forearm. Replacing the kit, he adjusted his clothing and strolled down the same companionway Sollenar had run. He raised an arm, and a taxi flittered down beside him. He

showed the driver a card, and the cab lifted off with him, its lights glaring in a Priority pattern, far faster than Sollenar's ordinary legal limit allowed.

Long Island Facility vaulted at the stars in great kangaroo-leaps of arch and cantilever span, jeweled in glass and metal as if the entire port were a mechanism for navigating interplanetary space. Rufus Sollenar paced its esplanades, measuring his steps, holding his arms still, for the short time until he could board the Mars rocket.

Erect and majestic, he took a place in the lounge and carefully sipped liqueur, once the liner had boosted away from Earth and coupled in its Faraday main drives.

Mr. Ermine settled into the place beside him.

Sollenar looked over at him calmly. "I thought so."

Ermine nodded. "Of course you did. But I didn't almost miss you. I was here ahead of you. I have no objection to your going to Mars, Mr. Sollenar. Laissez faire. Provided I can go along."

"Well," Rufus Sollenar said. "Liqueur?" He gestured with his glass.

Ermine shook his head. "No, thank you," he said delicately.

Sollenar said: "Even your tongue?"

"Of course my tongue, Mr. Sollenar. I taste nothing. I touch nothing." Ermine smiled. "But I feel no pressure."

"All right, then," Rufus Sollenar said crisply. "We have several hours to landing time. You sit and dream your interior dreams, and I'll dream mine." He faced around in his chair and folded his arms across his chest.

"Mr. Sollenar," Ermine said gently.

"Yes?"

"I am once again with you by appointment as provided under the By-Laws."

"State your business, Mr. Ermine."

"You are not permitted to lie in an unknown grave, Mr. Sollenar. Insurance policies on your life have been taken out at a high premium rate. The IAB members concerned cannot wait the statutory seven years to have you declared dead. Do what you will, Mr. Sollenar, but I must take care I witness your death. From now on, I am with you wherever you go."

Sollenar smiled. "I don't intend to die. Why should I die, Mr. Ermine?"

"I have no idea, Mr. Sollenar. But I know Corwright Burr's character. And isn't that he, seated there in the corner? The light is poor, but I think he's recognizable."

Across the lounge, Burr raised his head and looked into Sollenar's eyes. He raised a hand near his face, perhaps merely to signify greeting. Rufus Sollenar faced front.

"A worthy opponent, Mr. Sollenar," Ermine said. "A persevering, unforgiving, ingenious man. And yet—" Ermine seemed a little touched by bafflement. "And yet it seems to me, Mr. Sollenar, that he got you running rather easily. What did happen between you, after my advisory call?"

Sollenar turned a terrible smile on Ermine. "I shot him to pieces. If you'd peel his face, you'd see."

Ermine sighed. "Up to this moment, I had thought perhaps you might still salvage your affairs."

"Pity, Mr. Ermine? Pity for the insane?"

"Interest. I can take no part in your world. Be grateful, Mr. Sollenar. I am not the same gullible man I was when I signed my contract with IAB, so many years ago."

Sollenar laughed. Then he stole a glance at Burr's corner.

The ship came down at Abernathy Field, in Aresia, the Terrestrial city. Industrialized, prefabricated, jerry-built and clamorous, the storm-proofed buildings huddled, but huddled proudly, at the desert's edge.

Low on the horizon was the Martian settlement – the buildings so skillfully blended with the landscape, so eroded, so much abandoned that the uninformed eye saw nothing. Sollenar had been to Mars – on a tour. He had seen the natives in their nameless dwelling place; arrogant, venomous and weak. He had been told, by the paid guide, they trafficked with Earthmen as much as they cared to, and kept to their place on the rim of Earth's encroachment, observing.

"Tell me, Ermine," Sollenar said quietly as they walked across the terminal lobby. "You're to kill me, aren't you, if I try to go on without you?"

"A matter of procedure, Mr. Sollenar," Ermine said evenly. "We cannot risk the investment capital of so many IAB members."

Sollenar sighed. "If I were any other member, how I would commend

you, Mr. Ermine! Can we hire a car for ourselves, then, somewhere nearby?"

"Going out to see the engineers?" Ermine asked. "Who would have thought they'd have something valuable for sale?"

"I want to show them something," Sollenar said.

"What thing, Mr. Sollenar?"

They turned the corner of a corridor, with branching hallways here and there, not all of them busy. "Come here," Sollenar said, nodding toward one of them.

They stopped out of sight of the lobby and the main corridor. "Come on," Sollenar said. "A little farther."

"No," Ermine said. "This is farther than I really wish. It's dark here."

"Wise too late, Mr. Ermine," Sollenar said, his arms flashing out.

One palm impacted against Ermine's solar plexus, and the other against the muscle at the side of his neck, but not hard enough to kill. Ermine collapsed, starved for oxygen, while Sollenar silently cursed having been cured of murder. Then Sollenar turned and ran.

Behind him Ermine's body struggled to draw breath by reflex alone.

Moving as fast as he dared, Sollenar walked back and reached the taxi lock, pulling a respirator from a wall rack as he went. He flagged a car and gave his destination, looking behind him. He had seen nothing of Cortwright Burr since setting foot on Mars. But he knew that soon or late, Burr would find him.

A few moments later Ermine got to his feet. Sollenar's car was well away. Ermine shrugged and went to the local broadcasting station.

He commandeered a private desk, a firearm and immediate time on the IAB interoffice circuit to Earth. When his call acknowledgment had come back to him from his office there, he reported:

"Sollenar is enroute to the Martian city. He wants a duplicate of Burr's device, of course, since he smashed the original when he killed Burr. I'll follow and make final disposition. The disorientation I reported previously is progressing rapidly. Almost all his responses now are inappropriate. On the flight out, he seemed to be staring at something in an empty seat. Quite often when spoken to he obviously hears something else entirely. I expect to catch one of the next few flights back."

There was no point in waiting for comment to wend its way back from Earth. Ermine left. He went to a cab rank and paid the exorbitant fee for transportation outside Aresian city limits.

Close at hand, the Martian city was like a welter of broken pots. Shards of wall and roof joined at savage angles and pointed to nothing. Underfoot, drifts of vitreous material, shaped to fit no sane configuration, and broken to fit such a mosaic as no church would contain, rocked and slid under Sollenar's hurrying feet.

What from Aresia had been a solid front of dun color was here a facade of red, green and blue splashed about centuries ago and since then weathered only enough to show how bitter the colors had once been. The plum-colored sky stretched over all this like a frigid membrane, and the wind blew and blew.

Here and there, as he progressed, Sollenar saw Martian arms and heads protruding from the rubble. Sculptures.

He was moving toward the heart of the city, where some few unbroken structures persisted. At the top of a heap of shards he turned to look behind him. There was the dust-plume of his cab, returning to the city. He expected to walk back – perhaps to meet someone on the road, all alone on the Martian plain if only Ermine would forebear from interfering. Searching the flat, thin-aired landscape, he tried to pick out the plodding dot of Cortwright Burr. But not yet.

He turned and ran down the untrustworthy slope.

He reached the edge of the maintained area. Here the rubble was gone, the ancient walks swept, the statues kept upright on their pediments. But only broken walls suggested the fronts of the houses that had stood here. Knifing their sides up through the wind-rippled sand that only constant care kept off the street, the shadow-houses fenced his way and the sculptures were motionless as hope. Ahead of him, he saw the buildings of the engineers. There was no heap to climb and look to see if Ermine followed close behind.

Sucking his respirator, he reached the building of the Martian engineers.

A sounding strip ran down the doorjamb. He scratched his fingernails sharply along it, and the magnified vibration, ducted throughout the hollow walls, rattled his plea for entrance

The door opened, and Martians stood looking. They were

spindly-limbed and slight, their faces framed by folds of leathery tissue. Their mouths were lipped with horn as hard as dentures, and pursed, forever ready to masticate. They were pleasant neither to look at nor, Sollenar knew, to deal with. But Cortwright Burr had done it. And Sollenar needed to do it.

"Does anyone here speak English?" he asked.

"I," said the central Martian, his mouth opening to the sound, closing to end the reply.

"I would like to deal with you."

"Whenever," the Martian said, and the group at the doorway parted deliberately to let Sollenar in.

Before the door closed behind him, Sollenar looked back. But the rubble of the abandoned sectors blocked his line of sight into the desert.

"What can you offer? And what do you want?" the Martian asked. Sollenar stood half-ringed by them, in a room whose corners he could not see in the uncertain light.

"I offer you Terrestrial currency."

The English-speaking Martian – the Martian who had admitted to speaking English – turned his head slightly and spoke to his fellows. There were clacking sounds as his lips met. The others reacted variously, one of them suddenly gesturing with what seemed a disgusted flip of his arm before he turned without further word and stalked away, his shoulders looking like the shawled back of a very old and very hungry woman.

"What did Burr give you?" Sollenar asked.

"Burr." The Martian cocked his head. His eyes were not multi-faceted, but gave that impression.

"He was here and he dealt with you. Not long ago. On what basis?"

"Burr. Yes. Burr gave us currency. We will take currency from you. For the same thing we gave him?"

"For immortality, yes."

"Im– This is a new word."

"Is it? For the secret of not dying?"

"Not dying? You think we have not-dying for sale here?" The Martian spoke to the others again. Their lips clattered. Others left, like the first one had, moving with great precision and very slow step, and no remaining tolerance for Sollenar.

Sollenar cried out: "What did you sell him, then?"

The principal engineer said: "We made an entertainment device for him."

"A little thing. This size." Sollenar cupped his hands.

"You have seen it, then."

"Yes. And nothing more? That was all he bought here?"

"It was all we had to sell – or give. We don't yet know whether Earthmen will give us things in exchange for currency. We'll see, when we next need something from Aresia."

Sollenar demanded: "How did it work? This thing you sold him."

"Oh, it lets people tell stories to themselves."

Sollenar looked closely at the Martian. "What kind of stories?"

"Any kind," the Martian said blandly. "Burr told us what he wanted. He had drawings with him of an Earthman device that used pictures on a screen, and broadcast sounds, to carry the details of the story told to the auditor."

"He stole those patents! He couldn't have used them on Earth."

"And why should he? Our device needs to convey no precise details. Any mind can make its own. It only needs to be put into a situation, and from there it can do all the work. If an auditor wishes a story of contact with other sexes, for example, the projector simply makes it seem to him, the next time he is with the object of his desire, that he is getting positive feedback – that he is arousing a similar response in that object. Once that has been established for him, the auditor may then leave the machine, move about normally, conduct his life as usual – but always in accordance with the basic situation. It is, you see, in the end a means of introducing system into his view of reality. Of course, his society must understand that he is not in accord with reality, for some of what he does cannot seem rational from an outside view of him. So some care must be taken, but not much. If many such devices were to enter his society, soon the circumstances would become commonplace, and the society would surely readjust to allow for it," said the English-speaking Martian.

"The machine creates any desired situation in the auditor's mind?"

"Certainly. There are simple predisposing tapes that can be inserted as desired. Love, adventure, cerebration – it makes no difference."

Several of the bystanders clacked sounds out to each other. Sollenar looked at them narrowly. It was obvious there had to be more than one

English-speaker among these people.

"And the device you gave Burr," he asked the engineer, neither calmly nor hopefully. "What sort of stories could its auditors tell themselves?"

The Martian cocked his head again. It gave him the look of an owl at a bedroom window. "Oh, there was one situation we were particularly instructed to include," the Martian said. "Burr said he was thinking ahead to showing it to an acquaintance of his.

"It was a situation of adventure; of adventure with the fearful. And it was to end in loss and bitterness." The Martian looked even more closely at Sollener. "Of course, the device does not specify details. No one but the auditor can know what fearful thing inhabits his story, or precisely how the end of it would come. You would, I believe, be Rufus Sollener? Burr spoke of you and made the noise of laughing."

Sollener opened his mouth. But there was nothing to say.

"You want such a device?" the Martian asked. "We've prepared several since Burr left. He spoke of machines that would manufacture them in astronomical numbers. We, of course, have done our best with our poor hands."

Sollener said: "I would like to look out your door."

"Pleasure."

Sollener opened the door slightly. Mr. Ermine stood in the cleared street, motionless as the shadow buildings behind him. He raised one hand in a gesture of unfelt greeting as he saw Sollener, then put it back on the stock of his rifle. Sollener closed the door, and turned to the Martian. "How much currency do you want?"

"Oh, all you have with you. You people always have a good deal with you when you travel."

Sollener plunged his hands into his pockets and pulled out his billfold, his change, his keys, his jeweled radio; whatever was there, he rummaged out onto the floor, listening to the sound of rolling coins.

"I wish I had more here," he laughed. "I wish I had the amount that man out there is going to recover when he shoots me."

The Martian engineer cocked his head. "But your dream is over, Mr. Sollener," he clacked drily. "Isn't it?"

"Quite so. But you to your purposes and I to mine. Now give me one of those projectors. And set it to predispose a situation I am about to specify to you. Take however long it needs. The audience is a patient one." He

laughed, and tears gathered in his eyes.

Mr. Ermine waited, isolated from the cold, listening to hear whether the rifle stock was slipping out of his fingers. He had no desire to go into the Martian building after Sollenar and involve third parties. All he wanted was to put Sollenar's body under a dated marker, with as little trouble as possible.

Now and then he walked a few paces backward and forward, to keep from losing muscular control at his extremities because of low skin temperature. Sollenar must come out soon enough. He had no food supply with him, and though Ermine did not like the risk of engaging a man like Sollenar in a starvation contest, there was no doubt that a man with no taste for fuel could outlast one with the acquired reflexes of eating.

The door opened and Sollenar came out.

He was carrying something. Perhaps a weapon. Ermine let him come closer while he raised and carefully sighted his rifle. Sollenar might have some Martian weapon or he might not. Ermine did not particularly care. If Ermine died, he would hardly notice it – far less than he would notice a botched ending to a job of work already roiled by Sollenar's breakaway at the space field. If Ermine died, some other SPRO agent would be assigned almost immediately. No matter what happened, SPRO would stop Sollenar before he ever reached Abernathy Field.

So there was plenty of time to aim an unhurried, clean shot.

Sollenar was closer, now. He seemed to be in a very agitated frame of mind. He held out whatever he had in his hand.

It was another one of the Martian entertainment machines. Sollenar seemed to be offering it as a token to Ermine. Ermine smiled.

"What can you offer me, Mr. Sollenar?" he said, and shot.

The golden ball rolled away over the sand. "There now," Ermine said. "Now, wouldn't you sooner be me than you? And where is the thing that made the difference between us?"

He shivered. He was chilly. Sand was blowing against his tender face, which had been somewhat abraded during his long wait.

He stopped, transfixed.

He lifted his head.

Then, with a great swing of his arms, he sent the rifle whirling away. "The wind!" he sighed into the thin air. "I feel the wind." He leapt into the

air, and sand flew away from his feet as he landed. He whispered to himself "I feel the ground!"

He stared in trembling joy at Sollenar's empty body. "What have you given me?" Full of his own rebirth, he swung his head up at the sky again, and cried in the direction of the Sun: "Oh, you squeezing, nibbling people who made me incorruptible and thought that was the end of me!"

With love he buried Sollenar, and with reverence he put up the marker, but he had plans for what he might accomplish with the facts of this transaction, and the myriad others he was privy to.

A sharp bit of pottery had penetrated the sole of his shoe and gashed his foot, but he, not having seen it, hadn't felt it. Nor would he see it or feel it even when he changed his stockings; for he had not noticed the wound when it was made. It didn't matter. In a few days it would heal, though not as rapidly as if it had been properly attended to.

Vaguely, he heard the sound of Martians clacking behind their closed door as he hurried out of the city, full of revenge, and of reverence for his savior.

The War Is Over

A slow wind was rolling over the dusty plateau where the spaceship was being fueled, and Frank Simpson, waiting in his flight coveralls, drew his nictitating membranes across his stinging eyes. He continued to stare abstractedly at the gleaming, just-completed hull.

Overhead, Castle's cold sun glowed wanly down through the ice-crystal clouds. A line of men stretched from the block-and-tackle hoist at the plateau's edge to the exposed fuel racks at the base of the riveted hull. As each naked fuel slug was hauled up from the plain, it passed from hand to hand, from man to man, and so to its place in the ship. A reserve labor pool stood quietly to one side. As a man faltered in the working line, a reserve stepped into his place. Sick, dying men staggered to a place set aside for them, out of the work's way, and slumped down there, waiting. Some of them had been handling the fuel since it came out of the processing pile, three hundred miles across the plains in a straight line, nearer five hundred by wagon track. Simpson did not wonder they were dying, nor paid them any attention. His job was the ship, and he'd be at it

soon.

He wiped at the film of dirt settling on his cheeks, digging it out of the serrations in his hide with a horny forefingernail. Looking at the ship, he found himself feeling nothing new. He was neither impressed with its size, pleased by the innate grace of its design, nor excited by anticipation of its goal. He felt nothing but the old, old driving urgency to get aboard, lock the locks, throw the switches, fire the engines, and go – go! From birth, probably, from first intelligent self-awareness certainly, that drive had loomed over everything else like a demon just behind his back. Everyone of these men on this plateau felt the same thing. Only Simpson was going, but he felt no triumph in it.

He turned his back on a particularly vicious puff of dust and found himself looking in the direction of Castle town, far over the horizon on the other side of the great plains that ended at the foot of this plateau.

Castle town was his birthplace. He thought to himself, with sardonic logic, that he could hardly have had any other. Where else on Castle did anyone live but in Castle town? He remembered his family's den with no special sentimental affection. But, standing here in the thin cold, bedeviled by dust, he appreciated it in memory. It was a snug, comfortable place to be, with the rich, moist smell of the earth surrounding him. There was a ramp up to the surface, and at the ramp's head were the few square yards of ground hard-packed by the weight of generations of his family lying ecstatically in the infrequently warm sun.

He hunched his shoulders against the cold of the plateau, and a wish that he was back on the other side of the plains, where Castle town spread on one side of the broad hill above a quiet creek, crept past the demon that had brought him here.

The thought of Castle town reminded him of his father – "This is the generation, Frank! This is the generation that'll see the ship finished, and one of us going. It could be you, Frank!" – and of the long process, some of it hard work, some of it inherent aptitude, some of it luck, that had brought him here to pilot this ship into the stars.

And, having brought his reverie back to the ship, he turned away from the plains and Castle town, looking at the ship.

Generations in the building, and generations in the learning how before the first strut was riveted to the first former. The search, the world over, for a fuel source. Literally hundreds of exploring teams, some of them never coming back, disappearing into the uncharted lands that

surrounded the plains. The find, at last, and the building of the pile. The processing of the fuel that killed its handlers, no one knew why.

The ship, rising here on this plateau year by slow year, at the focus of the wagon tracks that led out to the orepits and the metalworkers' shops where swearing apprentices struggled with hot melt splashing into the molds, and others tore their hands to tatters, filing the flash off the castings.

The hoist operators, hauling each piece up the side of the plateau because this had been the place to build the ship, up where the air was thin and the ground was thousands of feet below, and the patient teamsters, plodding up with new wagonloads, the traces sunk deep in their calloused shoulders.

Now it had all culminated, and he could go.

The crunch of gravel turned his head to his left, and he saw Wilmer Edgeworth coming up to him with the sealed, rusty metal box.

"Here it is," Edgeworth said, handing him the box. Edgeworth was a blunt, unceremonious man, and Simpson could not have said he liked him very much. He took the box and held it.

Edgeworth followed his glance toward the ship. "Almost ready, I see."

Simpson nodded. "The fueling's almost done. They'll rivet those last plates over the racks, and then I can go."

"Yes, then you can go," Edgeworth agreed. "Why?"

"Eh?"

"Why are you going?" Edgeworth repeated. "Where are you going? Do you know how to fly a spaceship? What have any of us ever flown before?"

Simpson looked at this madman in startlement. "Why!" he exploded. "I'm going because I want to – because I'm 'here, because the ship's here, because we've all of us worked ourselves to the bone for generations, so I could go!" He shook the metal box violently under Edgeworth's jaws.

Edgeworth backed several steps away. "I'm not trying to stop you," he said.

Simpson's rage fell away at the disclaimer, "All right," he said, catching his breath. He looked at Edgeworth curiously. "What made you ask questions like that, then?"

Edgeworth shook his head. "I don't know," he said. He was not so constituted as to be able to top his first climax. His biggest bolt was shot, and now his manner lost much of its sureness. "Or, rather," he went on, "I

don't know what I know. But something— Something's wrong. Why are we doing this? We don't even understand what we've built here. Listen – did you know they found little towns, like Castle town, but much smaller? With little men in them, about three inches tall, walking on their hands and feet, naked. They can't talk, and they don't have any real hands."

"What's that got to do with this?"

Edgeworth's head was wagging. "I don't know. But – did you ever look at the boneyard?"

"Who wants to?"

"Nobody wants to, but I did. And, listen – our ancestors were smaller. Their bones are smaller. Each generation, going back – their bones are smaller."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"No," Edgeworth said. The breath whistled slowly out between his teeth "It doesn't mean anything to me, either. But I had to tell someone."

"Why?" Simpson shot back.

"Eh?"

"What's the use of that kind of talk?" Simpson demanded. "Who cares about old bones? Who looks in boneyards? The ship's the only important thing. We've sweated and slaved for it. We've died and wandered away into who knows where, we've mined and smelted and formed metal to build it, when we could have been building other things for ourselves. We've fought a war with time, with our own weak bodies, with distance, dragging those loads up here, we've hauled them up and built the ship and now I'm going!"

He saw Edgeworth through a red-shot haze. He blinked his eyes impatiently, and slowly the driving reaction to any obstacle was drained out of his bloodstream again, and he could feel a little sheepish.

"Sorry, Edgeworth," he muttered. He jerked his head toward the ship as the sound of riveting mauls came hammering toward him. The filled fuel racks were being plated over, and the long line of empty-handed fuel handlers was sinking down toward the ground, resting and watching the ship being finished.

"Well, I'm going," Simpson said. He put the metal box under one arm and walked toward the ship's ladder, passing among the men who rested on the ground. None of them looked up at him. Who went didn't much matter. It was the ship they were interested in.

The inside of the ship was almost all hollow shell, latticed by girders converging on a series of heavy steel rings. Shock-mounted in the cylinder of free space inside the rings was a hulking, complex machine, full of hand-drawn wires and painstakingly blown tubes, all nestled together in tight patterns, encased in fired clay, and wrapped around with swaths of silicone rubber sheeting. Heavy wiring ran from the apertures in the final shield of pressed steel, and joined the machine to a generator. Other wires ran to posts projecting from the inner hull plating. Nobody knew what it was for. A separate crew had built it while the hull sections were being formed, taking years at the job. Simpson looked at the shield seams, and realized the word for that kind of process was "welding."

Below the main compartment were the engines, with their heavy lead bulkhead. "Now, what's that for?" he remembered asking when he saw it being levered into place.

"Buddy, I don't know, and I specified for it." The crew foreman spread his hands helplessly. "The ship just... wouldn't feel right... without it."

"You mean it wouldn't fly without a ton of dead weight?"

"No. No... I don't think that's it. I think it'd fly, but you'd be dead, like the fuel-handlers, before you got there." The foreman shook his head. "I think that's it."

In the nose of the ship, hanging over Simpson's head as he clung to the interior ladder beside the air lock, was the piloting station. There was a couch in gimbals, and there were control pedestals rooted in the tapering hull and converging on the couch. The nose was solid, and Simpson wondered how he'd see out. He suspected there'd be some way. With one last look around, he clambered up the ladder and into the couch, moving awkwardly with the box under his arm. Once in the couch, he found a frame jutting out of its structure. The box fitted it exactly, with spring clips holding it fast.

He settled himself in the couch, fastening broad straps over his hips and chest. He reached out tentatively, and found all the controls in easy distance of his fingers.

Well, he thought to himself, I'm here and I'm ready.

His fingers danced over a row of switches. In the belly of the ship, something rumbled and the wan emergency lights went out as the operating lights came on. A cluster of screens mounted over his head, inside the gimbal system, came to life and showed him the outside, all

around and fore and aft. He took his last look at the plateau and the watching men, at the sky overhead and the plains behind him. Up here in the ship's nose, that much higher above the plains, he thought he could just make out Castle town's hill.

But he had no time for that. His hands were flying over the controls. Ready lights were flashing on his board, and somewhere in the forest of girders behind him, auxiliary motors were working themselves up toward full song. He pulled the operating levers toward him, and the massive engines began to growl. He tripped interlocks, and more fuel canisters began sliding down their racks, slipping into place. His mouth opened, and he began to heave for breath. He felt the ship tottering, and felt panic flash through him. In the next instant, calm settled on him knowledgeably. It was all right. The ship was just breaking loose. It was all right, the ship was all right, and he was going. At last, at last he was going.

The after screens were blank with the haze of burning sand. The ship rumbled up into the sky, incinerating the watchers on the plateau behind it.

He had never, never in his life imagined that anything like this lay beyond the sky. There were no clouds, no curtains of dust, no ripples of atmosphere, no diffused glows of light. There were stars and nothing but stars, with nothing to veil them, strewn over the black in double handfuls, forming themselves into coagulating spirals and sheets of light, gigantic lenses and eggs of galaxies, sun after sun after sun. He stared at them open-mouthed while the massive ship charged at them, completely bewildered. But when the time came to trip controls he had heretofore left scrupulously alone, he did it precisely and perfectly. The machine, nestling in the girders behind him, gulped at power from the generator, surged it through into the hull, and in an instant in which he saw quite clearly why the ship had needed so much internal bracing, he was in hyperspace. He ran through it like a man on a raft on a broad river at night, and then he was out again, with alarm bells exploding through the hollow ship, and hull after gigantic interstellar spaceship hull occluding the new stars around him.

He cut off all power except signal circuits and lights, rested one hand protectingly on the metal box, wondering what was in it and where he'd come, and waited.

Simpson pushed through the inner lock hatch into the Terran ship and stopped, looking at the two aliens waiting for him.

They were smooth-skinned and tarnish-white, with soft-looking fibrous growths trimmed into shape on their scalps. "Soft-looking" was a good general description, too. Their skins were flexible as cloth, their faces were rounded, and their features were muddily defined. Soft. Pulpy. He looked at them with distaste.

One of them muttered to the other, probably not allowing for Simpson's range of hearing: "Terran? From that? I don't believe it!"

"How'd he understand enough to get in here, then?" the other snapped back. "Be yourself, Hudston. You heard me using the phone. He's got a terrible accent, and some odd idioms, but it's Terran, right enough."

Simpson deciphered their mushy intonations. He should have been angry, but he wasn't. Instead, there was something welling up in his throat – something buried, something that had begun not with him but with generations past, bottled up for all this time and now bursting out:

"The war's over!" he shouted. "It's all over – we've won it!"

The first Terran looked at him in astonishment, one eyebrow raised. "Really? What war is that? I wasn't aware of any."

Simpson felt confused. He felt empty, too, and bewildered at what had erupted from his larynx. He didn't know what answer to make. He waited for himself to say something new, but nothing else came. Uncertainly, he offered the metal box to the Terran.

"Let's see that!" the second Terran said quickly, snatching it out of Simpson's hand. He stared down at the lid. "Good God!"

"What is it, admiral?" Hudston asked. The second Terran wordlessly showed him the stamping on the lid, which had never meant anything to Simpson or anyone else on Castle.

"T.S.N. Courier Service?" Hudston spelled out. "What the deuce – Oh, of course, sir! Disbanded in the Twenty-fourth Century, wasn't it?"

"Late Twenty-third," the admiral muttered. "When the hyperspace radio network was completed."

"Four hundred years, sir? What's he doing with it?"

The admiral was fumbling with the box. The lid everyone on Castle thought was sealed sprang open. The admiral pulled out a sheaf of crumbling maps, and the leathercovered book that had been under them. Neither of the Terrans was paying any attention to Simpson. He stirred uneasily, and saw several short rods in the compartment wall swing to follow his move.

The admiral brushed carefully at the book's cover. He peered down at the gold-stamped lettering. "Official Log, TSNS Hure. All right, now we're getting somewhere!" He thumbed gingerly through the first few pages, silently showing Hudston the date, shaking his head, then going on. "Routine stuff. Let's get to the meat, if there is any." He stopped and looked at Simpson again for a moment, shook his head violently, and resumed searching through the pages. Then he said: "Here it is, Hudston! Listen:

"Proceeding at full speed, course for Solar System. All well," he read. "At 0600 GST, Eglin Provisional Government concluded truce pending armistice. Signatories were – ' Well, that doesn't matter. They've all been dust a long time. Let's see what happened to him." The admiral paged forward. "Here we are. Here's the next day's entry. It's interrupted here, you'll notice, and finished later: 'Proceeding at full speed, course for Solar System. In hyperspace. All well. Estimated Time of Arrival, Griffon Base, +2d., 8hrs.'

"Notice the squiggle here, Hudston – he must have jerked his arm. Now: 'Resumption of log: Chance encounter with Eglin picket boat, apparently ignorant of truce, resulted in severe torpedo damage Compartments D-4, D-5, D-6, D-7. Ship out of control. Engines and hyperspatial generator functioning erratically, and ship definitely off course, though navigation at present impossible. Have sustained superficial burns and simple fractures, right leg and left arm.'

"Here's the next day's entry: 'Ship still out of control, and engines and generator continue erratic. Almost all ship's instruments sprung or shortcircuited by explosion shock. Navigation impossible. Ship now falling in and out of hyperspace at random intervals. Attempted shut-off of generator with no success. Suspect complex progressive damage to co-ordinator circuits and tuning grids.'"

"Why didn't he call for help, sir?"

The admiral glared at Hudston. "He couldn't. The reason he was out there in the first place was because they couldn't communicate faster than light, except by couriers. He was stuck, Hudston. Hurt and trapped. And that, by the way, is the last entry in the official log. The rest of it's a short journal:

"Crash-landed about 1200 GST on small, uninhabited, unknown planet. The constellations don't make any sense, even by Navigational Projection. I'm down here for good.

"The ship went to hell when I hit. Now I've got two broken legs, and

some gashes. Got the medkit out, though, so that's not much problem. Not right away. I'm losing blood inside, and I can't figure out how to put a Stedman splint on that.

"Did some exploring this afternoon. From where I am, this place looks like nothing but grass, but I saw some mountains and rivers before I hit. It's cold, but not cold enough to bother, unless it's summer now. Maybe it's spring. I'll worry about winter when I get to it.

"Wonder how long it's going to be before Earth finds out the war's over, now?"

Simpson's head jerked. There were the words again. He felt more and more confused, and more and more listless and empty. He should have been interested in this ship, and in these people. But he only turned his head perfunctorily, and neither the smooth, massive bulkheads, glowing with their own light, nor the two Terrans in their scarlet uniforms, seemed to be able to make much real impression on him.

He was here. He'd made it. And he didn't seem to care what happened next.

"There's not much more to the journal," the admiral was saying. "Feel pretty rocky today. Not much doubt about it – I'm losing more than I can stand. Been eating Prothrombin bars like candy, but no help. Running out of them, anyway.

"Food'd get to be a problem, anyway. There doesn't seem to be anything I can eat on this place, except for some little things that look like a cross between a prairie dog and a lizard. Take about two dozen of them to make one breakfast.

"No use kidding myself. If my AID can't hold my insides together, Vitamin K isn't going to do it either. Food doesn't turn out to be a problem after all.

"That brings me to a pretty interesting thought. I've got this piece of information, and an AID's supposed to live inside you and see it gets through. Never thought about it much, before. Always managed to deliver my own messages. But here's this thing, now, that's halfalive in its own right, living inside me. It's built so it's got to see that any information I have gets to the right people. I've even heard of AIDs jumping out of a man and crossing over to an Eggy, and making him bring the message in. They're smart as hell, in their own way Nothing stops 'em. Nothing shuts 'em off.

"Well, here I am God knows where, all by myself, where nobody'll ever

find me. If I had a ship, I could just get in it and go. Bound to hit Federation territory sometime. But I haven't got a ship. I haven't even got much of me. I wonder what the AID's going to do now.' "

The admiral looked at Hudston. "That's the end of it. It's signed 'Norman Castle, Ensign, TSN,' and that's the end of it"

Hudston looked casually at the admiral. "Fascinating," he said. "That was quite a problem for his AID, wasn't it? I suppose, with the crude model he must have had, it simply died with him."

"AIDs don't die, Hudston," the admiral said slowly. He closed the old logbook, and his face was twisting under the cumulative impact of an idea. "If you've got one AID, you've got a thousand. And they never give up," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "They're too unintelligent to give up, and too shrewd."

He looked at Simpson. "Though I don't suppose that one had progressed far enough to have a time sense. Not a real time sense. Not one that could judge when its mission was obsolete." He shook his head at Simpson. "The war's over," he told him. "It's over a long time. But thanks, anyway. You did your job."

Simpson didn't hear him. He felt empty. The demon was gone out of him, and he felt his mind closing in, losing interest in things that were important to men. He was down on the deck, on his hands and feet, tearing at his clothes with fretful jaws and whimpering.

Watch Your Step

The admiral frowned thoughtfully down at the charts. Absently, he rubbed his cheek with the blunt end of a pencil. Then he tapped the chart. "This one seems the most suitable," he said to his aide. "What do you think of establishing a forward base in this area, Cargre?" He bent to read the minute lettering. "This... this... Cargre, is that word Sol? The light is very bad."

Cargre bent forward and peered. He grimaced in annoyance and wiped his fingers over the surface. "There seems to be a smudge on the chart, sir," he muttered, bending closer. "Yes, sir," he said, straightening. "Sol. That's a foreign word – native, probably. They must have been contacted some time."

Admiral Tarlaten raised an eyebrow. "Don't you know definitely?"

The aide apologized. "I'm afraid not, admiral. It's a very minor system. I'll check the ship's references," he said, turning immediately to the intercommunicator. He spoke into it briefly, waited, received some reply, spoke at greater length, waited another, longer interval, was supplied with the additional answer, shrugged, and switched off.

The admiral had been waiting patiently, his gaze on the chart, his hand on his jaw. Without looking up, he twitched his head interrogatively.

"It's barely listed in our catalogues, sir. Ten planets, only one of them permanently inhabited. That would be Terra. We have no survey report on it – apparently, it was made quite a while ago. Someone must have decided it was too out-of-date to be retained, but no new one has yet been filed."

The admiral grimaced. He surveyed the chart again, shaking his head. "Well, there seems to be nothing else in the area. I'm afraid we'll just have to settle for... for–"

"Terra, sir. Of Sol."

"Yes. Thank you, Cargre." He turned away from the chart. "Awkward name to remember," he observed. "Any idea of what these Terrestrials are like?"

Cargre shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir."

Admiral Tarlaten grimaced again. "It seems we'll have to furnish our own survey." He scratched his neck philosophically. "Well, if we're ever to launch a decent campaign against the Tratens, we'll be slopping through deeper backwaters than even this... Cargre, what's that name again?"

His aide had to snatch a glance at the chart before he could answer.

Cargre stood at the main screens, one step behind the admiral, as the flagship floated down. Terra had turned out to be a drab planet, from her puffy white clouds and brilliant blue skies to the deep, heaving green of her oceans. Monotonous mountain chains, draped in every shade of green and brown, crowned with white fire, shambled along the spines of her continents. The deep, breeze-stirred grass of her plains stretched out for unrelenting miles. The natives and their inconsiderable works broke the monotonous topography only with fresh monotony.

The flagship stopped its descent at an altitude of fifteen miles and waited, hovering. Cargre felt the shock tingle up through the deck as the

landing party broke away.

Admiral Tarlaten brooded at the screens. "Well," he sighed at last, "it has a breathable atmosphere. Not a very attractive place, is it?"

Cargre shook his head. "I can understand why Survey hasn't bothered to re-check it."

The admiral nodded slightly. "That central plain," he muttered to himself, "ought to make a good supply dump. Bleak place. Have to provide more than the usual amount of recreation for the quartermaster's men. Cargre, get me Captain Laukon on the phone, will you? Wonder if we can store most of our stuff in the open? Save time and work – Cargre, when you've got Laukon, get me Meteorology, will you please? Get this operation organized as fast as possible. Any chance of getting additional supplies from the natives ought to be checked. Probably have some cockeyed standard of exchange." He took the phone from Cargre's hand. "Hello – Laukon? Listen, get your men organized to discharge supplies from the transports as soon as you get a go-ahead. And – hold on a minute, will you? – Cargre, get me the Bursar, please – Laukon? Yes, I was saying, start drafting plans for a receiving base on that central plain on Continent Four. Establish a liaison with Disbursements and set up a purchasing team. Get your research section to work on finding out what supplies the natives can furnish. O.K. – call in and tell Cargre when you're set up. Hello, Drall? What's the dope on the weather?"

Cargre touched the admiral's arm. "Excuse me, sir – the landing party's come back. They've got a native with them."

"Good. Good. I want to see the party's report, first. Have the native made comfortable. I'll talk to him later."

Cargre pulled the report out of the admiral's message box and handed it to him. While the admiral sat down to pore over it, he smoothly took over the job of directing operations.

The tenuous exhaust wakes of tenders and barges began to link the ships of the hovering fleet. Twinkling in the sun, the vehicles of Fleet's Messengers crisscrossed the sky. The complex, yet smoothly working machinery of Fleet Operations had begun its work.

Below the fleet, Terra revolved slowly, drifting around its sun – Sol, wasn't it?

Admiral Tarlaten closed the report and sat back thoughtfully. Despite its drabness, the planet – here he had to leaf back until he found the word

"Terra" – the planet, Terra, was an ideal site for a base. So ideal, as a matter of fact, that only sheer neglect could have kept the Traten from foreseeing the possibility and defending it.

Hm-m-m. But, no, the Traten set no traps. What they held as their own they defended from the outset, throwing up an almost impenetrable defense and extracting a terrible price for every cubic inch of territory. They had absolutely no concepts of offensive strategy – nor, to do them justice, did they need them. It followed that this system was outside the Traten "sphere" – though the very fact that no holding in space can be a sphere made this system so valuable a base, located as it was, deep within a wedge of unclaimed stars that pointed like a spearhead at the Traten Empire's abdomen.

The planet itself was populated by humanoids. This had long ago ceased to be considered unusual in the universe. But it meant that the fleet's men were unlikely to suffer the ill effects of a misfit ecology. It did mean lots of work on immunization shots, but, generally speaking, what plagues one humanoid race also plagues the others, so there was little likelihood of serious trouble with deficient antibodies.

The people were a motley lot, yet drab in the monotony of perfect variegation. No two of them were alike, either in their tastes or inclinations. They had a simple barter-system economy embracing everything from turnips to musical compositions. Every one of them was a dabbler. You could depend on it that any native, picked at random, could sing you a song, build you a chair, or weed your garden. They lived in simple, unexciting homes that might be clustered together in a village or separated from each other by the distance of a day's hike.

They were good handicrafters. Quartermaster Corps might be able to do something with that – trade them simple machine-tools for finished valve parts – something like that.

Admiral Tarlaten picked up his phone. "Linguistics, please," he said into it. "Hello, Linguistics? What have you got on the native's language?"

"Nothing unusual, sir. It's derived from the same root that all humanoid languages are. It has drifted away by a considerable amount, of course, but we've already got a keyed Translator set up, and it won't take more than a day or two – possibly three – before he's talking Freasan like a native. He's a bright enough chap: Seems quite interested in our work. Fascinated by the Translator."

The admiral's mouth twitched. Had anyone tried glass beads or mirrors on the fellow yet? The degree of fascination – and comprehension – would

certainly not change by much.

"All right, then – ship him up here." He looked at Cargre. "Any trouble?"

Cargre shook his head. "No, sir. All the transports are down and unloading. Meteorology tells me the planet has a highly regular and predictable climate. It won't storm for three months, so I authorized Quartermaster to unload in the open and build shelters at leisure. As a matter of fact" – Cargre threw a glance at a situation board – "there goes the green light on the transports now, sir. We're unloaded."

"Any trouble with the natives?"

Cargre's fingertip traced out the complicated network of one organizational chart. That led him into another, and that to a third. "Uh... oh, yes – No, sir, no trouble. As a matter of fact, I see that Quartermaster's hired a gang of them to help stack supplies."

"Well, good. Good, Cargre. Thank you."

Cargre turned back to his phones and ordered the transports into convoy for their return to Haldeja. The faster they got there, the faster they'd get back with more. Two or three ten-day trips and they'd have this base fully equipped. Once that was done, the admiral could launch the first stages of the offensive.

The annunciator on the cabin door chimed softly. Cargre looked up from his charts, caught the admiral's nod, and opened the door.

The native stood just outside, waiting. A Fleet courier, holding the Translator, stood beside him. Cargre shrugged and got back to his work.

The native looked like an ordinary humanoid being, with absolutely no distinguishing features. His hair was cropped close to his scalp, and his face was weatherbeaten into a permanent brown mask. Hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes were all bleached out to the shade of straw. His undistinguished pale-blue eyes glowed like cold steel. He could easily have passed unnoticed in the average Freasan crowd.

Cargre was far too busy to pay him any further attention. The native seemed to understand that. He turned toward the admiral, his eyes roving inquisitively over every detail of Tarlaten's features and uniform.

The courier set the Translator down on the admiral's desk, plugged it in, saluted and left to wait outside the door.

The admiral looked up at the native. "Sit down, please," he said, indicating the chair beside his desk.

As he sat down, the native shook the admiral's hand. "How do you do, admiral," he said. "My name's John Smith. Pleased to meet you."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Smith," the admiral replied politely. Actually, he had absolutely no feelings in the matter. As long as the landing party had brought the man back, well and good. But there was no real reason why he should waste his time. The native's mental horizons could not possibly coincide with his own. His conceptions of the universe could not help but be narrow and provincial. There was very little likelihood of their finding a common ground broad enough to be of any help.

The admiral sighed inwardly. Ah, well— What had he told Cargre? "We'll be slopping in deeper backwaters than this" – something like that. Looking at this native – this... Smith – the admiral wondered if he hadn't been wrong.

Smith had been peering curiously at Cargre's situation boards while the admiral had been musing. The admiral caught his eye and smiled. "Complicated business, wouldn't you say?"

Smith nodded slowly, obviously awe-struck at the complexity of blinking lights and Cargre's continual barrage of orders into one phone or another.

"I don't suppose you people have ever seen a spacefleet before?"

Smith shook his head. "Not that I can remember."

"Well, we've been here before, but it must have been quite some time ago. You're listed in our catalogues. It seems to me there was an indication that you possessed interplanetary travel at the time."

Smith shrugged. "It's possible, I guess." He was plainly fascinated by the cabin, his eyes rarely remaining directed at the admiral. His glance roved around the furniture and appointments, stopping to stare wide-eyed at the screens and the panels of instruments and indicators.

"I suppose you're wondering why we're here?"

"I was told you were fighting a war with some other race."

The admiral nodded. "That's right. The Tratens. They're a nonhuman race, and they've been giving us trouble for centuries."

Smith shook his head. The admiral could not decide whether he was expressing sympathy or bewilderment. One was as unimportant as the other. The man, like his race, was completely incapable of being important to any scheme of things but his restricted own.

"Well," the admiral said, completely bored and searching for a conversational topic, "what do your people think of our establishing a base on your planet?"

Smith spread his hands. "We don't mind."

And that seemed to be that. The admiral sighed inwardly once more. Why in the name of all space had he bothered to let himself in for this?

Smith had reverted to his first love – the Translator. He had abandoned his ocular examination of the cabin and was twisting his head at uncomfortable angles, his eyes prowling around the Translator's case. He noted the microphones that picked up the conversation between them, the speakers from which the Freasan-to-Terran and Terran-to-Freasan translations came. He ran his fingers over the metal of the case. "Good workmanship," he muttered. He fiddled with the grommet around the line-cord entry. "Mighty nice plier work."

The admiral, with a vision of a towering drop-forge turning out Translator cases by the thousands, could barely restrain his impatience.

"Well. Well, Mr. Smith, I want to thank you for giving me your time. I'll see to it that you're given passage back to your village."

Smith stood up and extended his hand again. "Oh, that's all right, Admiral. It's been a pleasure. And thanks."

Cargre let him out, and made sure he was safely in the hands of his courier. Then he exchanged a sour glance with the admiral.

The admiral got to his feet and stood in front of the screens, looking down at the planet trudging along below him.

Why had he come to this particular planet – granting that he had to put a base in this system? There was absolutely nothing special about this world. Its features were dull, its natives uninteresting. The men would grumble and do their work shiftlessly.

The thought occurred to him that he might have made a mistake in favoring this planet. It might be best to set the base some place where the men would have an environment that kept them busy.

"No wonder the Tratens never bothered with this planet," he said aloud. "They'd have died with boredom before the first battery was in place." He shook his head. "I think we ought to move out before we do the same. What about those transports, Cargre?"

Cargre looked at a board. "They've already left."

The admiral grimaced. "Well, let's get them back as fast as possible.

What's the name of the next planet in?"

"Venus, sir."

The admiral nodded. "That's right, Venus. Comes easier than the name of this place, doesn't it?"

"It does seem to, sir."

"Yes. Get me Laukon, will you please?"

The admiral was already balancing factors in his mind, calculating elapsed time for the transports to turn back, land, load, get to Venus and unload. Then there were the additional factors of underground storage depots to be blasted out, oxygen extractors to be set up, dormitories built— "Hello, Laukon? Look, get set to load the transports. Hold on a second — Cargre, how long before the transports get back? Laukon, you'll have ships in two hours. That's right. Call in and tell Cargre when you're set. Cargre, get me Meteorology, will you? Wonder what the effect of wind-driven formaldehyde will be? Cargre, before you give me Drall, get me Artificers, will you? We'll need something special in the way of suits—"

Sunlight shimmered down the flanks of the ships as the Fleet moved spaceward. Below it, the abandoned planet revolved slowly around her sun, left to her own devices.

The name is Terra, isn't it?

Yes, Terra. A hard name to remember.

Once you got him away from the stultifying atmosphere of his home planet, Smith was an interesting person to talk to. Quite often, after the day's punishing work of supervising the establishment of the base, the admiral found it relaxing to invite Smith up to his cabin and spend an hour or so in conversation. Smith had brought along one of his native musical instruments, and he sometimes sang for the admiral.

As a matter of fact, it was the first time Smith sang that they achieved their first really intelligent conversation.

Smith had been sitting in his chair, idly strumming the instrument. Probably because of the perpetual sound of Venusian winds rumbling by aboveground, he had begun to hum in a low voice, and, as the song tightened its grip on his consciousness, had broken into words. His voice was not good by Freasan standards. Nevertheless, the native had a gift of pitch and delivery.

"Oh, blow ye winds a-mournin'—"

Blow all ye winds – cry oh!

Ah, cry, ye winds a-mournin'–

Oh, oh, oh!... "

He sang in Terran. Even so, the admiral, who had looked up sharply, asked: "Is that a native song?"

Smith nodded absently, his head bent over the instrument

"Odd," the admiral mused. "I know a song very much like it."

Smith shrugged, his fingers stroking muted sounds out of the tight cords.

"And... and that instrument – what's your word for it?"

"Guitar."

"Yes. Now, it looks very much like a Freasan instrument called the iter. Smith – have you ever wondered why you and I look as though we were descended from the same stock?"

Smith twitched a shoulder.

The admiral found himself deeply taken by the idea. "Could it be because we are? Look – there are so many similarities. Our languages are based on the same root tongue. You shook my hand when we first met. That is no unfamiliar custom to a Freasan. So many things –

"Consider, Smith. It has been thousands of years since our race first developed space travel. We have had it as long as our history goes back. The history of our race, of any race – is a fragmentary thing. There are disasters, dark ages – times which might be centuries long when men are not concerned with anything more than sheer survival. Who is to say that we did not, some time unimaginably long ago, leave a colony on... on... excuse me, Smith–"

"Terra."

"Yes. On your planet. Who is to say that when communication was interrupted, perhaps by the Tratens, perhaps by something else, your people did not forget their heritage and live on as though they were an entirely separate race?"

Smith nodded slowly. "Sounds logical."

"Yes, it does. Very much so," the admiral mused. "Play something else for me, will you please?"

"Sure." And Smith had played while the admiral pondered, the sound of

an unfamiliar – and yet hauntingly reminiscent – phrase occasionally bringing a slow, speculative look into the admiral's eyes.

Cargre, Smith, and the admiral stood bulkily encased on a ledge, watching the transports struggle down on their third trip from Haldeja. The grimace on Cargre's face was reflected in his voice over the radio as they watched the ships whirl and dip like balloons on a gusty March day.

"We'll lose one, at least," he said.

The admiral kept his eyes locked on the descending green-and-gold of the transports. "I'm afraid so," he sighed. "Well, it couldn't be helped."

Smith watched silently, his face a brown-and-straw blur behind the diffusing curve of his faceplate.

In the howling hell that served Venus for a sky, two ships touched.

"No!" the admiral moaned in agony as they burst apart. Fragments whirled down out of the sky, shearing the storm. The admiral paid no attention to them. He was half crouched, counting the very few escape-pods kaleidoscoping in the sky. Cargre was cursing steadily, blind with rage. A jag-toothed hull section screamed silently down at them, followed by a shower of broken metal.

An unexpected gust of wind caught it, throwing it up like a shield from which the dozen small pieces suddenly rebounded like shrapnel. Then it fell vertically, scarred by the impacts, and dropped to the ground well short of Cargre, the admiral, and Smith.

That night, the admiral sat brooding in his quarters. He talked more to himself than he did to Smith.

"Five ships, so far," he muttered. "Five ships before we're fairly started." He clutched a thigh with his angry hand. Then he sighed.

"Well, we knew it would cost us." He turned to Smith for a sounding board. "This is only one fleet. There are six others, equally big, working their way around the Traten periphery, setting up bases from which to supply the final attack. And we don't expect more than five or six percent to come back. What d'you think of that?" He found the shock he was looking for in the native's face. "What d'you think of sitting here and talking to a man who won't be alive next year? And yet we've got to do it.

"Listen – we've been at war with the Traten for almost a thousand years. War! I don't think a disinterested observer would call it that – it's been going on too long.

"They hold their stars, and won't let us come into them. There are stars beyond in which they have no interest They don't attack us. But they will not let us go through. We've sent fleet after fleet against them. We can't let them block us. We'd stifle. You can't have two empires in space.

"They're like a steel wall in the sky. One fleet after another's smashed itself against them.

"We've had enough. It's taken us a long time to reach this almost suicidal point, but we have reached it.

"It'll bankrupt our economy, and decimate our race. It'll throw us back a hundred years. But we'll smash them, this time. And, after those hundred lost years have passed, We'll be back. We'll have a clear sky to travel in, and the Tratens will be out of our way at last.

"But what do you think of that? Has anyone on your world, in your society, ever imagined war on that sort of scale? What do you think of my people – of your people, perhaps, as well – who have been able to reach that kind of decision?"

Smith looked at him for a long time, his eyes sad. His fingers plucked at the strings of his guitar.

"Blow all ye winds – cry oh!

Ah, cry, ye winds a-mournin'–

oh, oh, oh!..."

The days went by in a stink of formaldehyde. As the base grew nearer to its intended function, the admiral's eyes seemed to inch back under his brows, taking on a darker coloring. His nightly sessions with Smith began to lengthen, as though he had no hope of sleep, however the time was spent. One by one, the days whipped away and were gone over the ugly horizon.

When Smith stepped into his quarters on the last night, the admiral smiled at him wanly.

"Tomorrow's the day," he said.

Smith nodded, sitting down. "How do you feel?"

The admiral twisted a corner of his mouth. "Glad it's finally gotten past the spadework stage.

"You know," he mused, "I find myself wondering what I'm doing here." He shrugged helplessly "I've had opportunities to retire. I used to think,

sometimes, that if I ever came to a quiet, peaceful world – some place with mountains to hunt in and rivers to fish– But, let's face it. There aren't any places like that. And the Tratens have got to be broken, once and for all."

He broke himself out of the mood and laughed. "Tomorrow I'll be standing on my bridge with blood in my eye, happy as a colt that I'm finally off this God-forsaken place and moving." He turned to Smith. "You know, I'll admit I had you tagged as a pretty dull specimen, back on... your planet. But I'm glad you came along. I'll tell you the truth – I'll be sorry to see you go. I've arranged for a patrol boat to take you back. You wouldn't want to be with us when we get where we're going."

"You're right. I wouldn't."

"I'll miss you. Which is more than I can say for this solar system. Let's face it, and no insults intended – you people may or may not have as much claim to being Freasan as I do, but there's no real intellectual tie between us. I come from a complex culture that's been evolving for thousands of years. We don't even visit most solar systems any more. We know you're there. We've got you catalogued and surveyed – most of you, anyway. But there just isn't anything about you to... to interest us. D'you see what I mean? Your motives – your actions – they're important and meaningful to you. To us, no. We've had them, and done them. We're beyond them."

Smith nodded slowly. "Sounds logical."

"I'm glad you see it." The admiral was walking back and forth animatedly. "Look – we've got mechanisms and sciences you don't know anything about. If we were competing with you for something, you wouldn't stand a chance. So what's the good of competing? We just leave you alone. I wish I could say that the average Freasan feels he's following a carefully thought-out 'hands off and let 'em evolve for themselves' policy. Maybe some of our theoreticians do, and, certainly, that's the effect. But the blunt truth is that the average Freasan would no more become involved with you than he would with a bunch of kids solving kindergarten problems."

Smith pulled his fingers across the strings of his guitar.

The admiral put up his hand as he walked. "No. Quit trying to spare me embarrassment. I'm keyed-up as a bridegroom the night before the wedding, and I've got to run down." He swung around and faced Smith.

"Look – as one Freasan to another, and to hell with where the chips fall – if this system wasn't located in a little enclave of space that's managed to somehow stick itself into the middle of the Tretan empire, we wouldn't

have revisited you in a million years. Maybe more. But from here we can cut 'em in two. So here we are, in spite of the fact that we would ordinarily have just as soon set up housekeeping in the middle of a desert.

"Now – how do you feel about Freasans ? Still feel sorry for me?"

The admiral stopped to look at him again. "You're one prime example of a cool customer," he said with a certain tinge of admiration. "I still haven't figured out how we forgot to drop you off when we left... uh... did you deliberately pick a name nobody could remember for your planet?"

Smith chuckled. "Terra."

"Terra. All right. It could just as well be any one of a hundred other planets in a hundred similar systems – none of which I can remember."

Smith nodded quietly to himself.

"What'd you say?" the admiral asked.

"Me? Nothing."

"Could have sworn I heard you say 'I know.' Well, anyway – you get my point. We're evolving. We're moving up. We're leaving things behind, sure, but we're gaining other things – better things – to replace them. And, some day, we're going to find out where the human race is going. This thing with the Tratens is going to set us back. But not permanently. We'll come up again."

"This time," Smith said with complete conviction, "I will say I know."

"Right. One of these days, the galaxy is going to be Freasan from end to end."

"Except for the solar systems that bore you."

"All right, except for the solar systems that bore us. But what's a solar system or two when you can walk across the suns?"

Something – nothing he could see as he looked down to search for it – made him stumble.'

Smith grinned dryly. "Careful," he said.

© 1955 Algis Budrys

Dream of Victory

PART I

FUOSS CRACKED his knuckles and pushed the empty glass across the bar. He took a pull on his cigarette, driving the smoke into his lungs as hard as he could. He exhaled a doughnut-shaped cloud that broke against the bartender's stomach.

"Want another one, Mister?" the bartender asked.

Fuoss bit down hard, enjoying the pressure on his teeth. "I'll take one."

The bartender picked up the glass. "I don't think she's coming in tonight."

"Who?"

"Carol. It's a little late for her to be in."

"Carol who?"

"You kidding, Mister?"

Fuoss pushed the stub of his cigarette into an ashtray, took out another one and waited for it to light. "I never knew a Carol in my life. You trying to sell me on a friend named Carol?"

"You know how many of these you've had, Mister?" The bartender held the glass up.

Fuoss bit down again. "You keeping tab?"

"Sure I am. I was just wondering if you knew." The bartender poured a finger of lemon juice into his mixer. "You're an android, aren't you?"

"What's that got to do with it?" Fuoss cracked his knuckles in the opposite direction.

The bartender added gin. "Carol's human. Grew up on the block. I remember the first time she came in here, with this look on her face daring me to say she wasn't old enough." The bartender, who was a bulky man, was apparently used to having globules of sweat tremble on his forehead. "Carol's human," he repeated, without raising his glance from the mixer.

Fuoss's stool clattered on the floor.

The bartender looked up. The door shut loudly. The bartender ducked

under the bar and ran to the door. He looked through the glass but couldn't see anything, so he opened the door and stuck his head outside. A sound of footsteps came from down the street, but the street lamp in front of the bar cut off his vision.

The bartender quirked his mouth up at the corners. He went back inside the bar, set the stool up, and drank the Tom Collins himself.

In sleep, the conscious mind – that cohabitant collection of mix-directed clockwork – is quiescent, and the dramatic subconscious is free of its restraints.

Seven-thirty.

Fuoss's day began. Usually, the shift from subconsciousness back to conscious thought was so precise that he was able to believe that he never dreamt, but this morning the fatigue of the previous day's unusually hard work held him on the borderline.

Seven-thirty, then, in the clock's modulated voice, and Fuoss let the end of a snore trickle out of his nostrils, closed his mouth, and scratched a buttock, but was not yet completely awake.

Seven-thirty and a half. Recall the length and complexity of the dream that comes between the first alarm and the subsequent feel of the bedside carpeting under your feet as you gather your pajama bottom back up to your waist. Mohammed knocked a glass from a table, bent, caught it, and dreamed a lifetime in the interval.

Fuoss pushed the clock's cutoff and walked to the bathroom, skirting his wife's bed. He shaved and showered, walking back into the bedroom with his pajamas over his arm. He went to the night table between the twin beds, picked up a cigarette, then sat down on his bed instead of taking fresh underwear out of the bureau and dressing.

"Stac?"

His wife had awakened. She turned her head and looked at him, raising a hand to brush the hair out of her eyes. "You're not getting dressed. What's the matter?"

Fuoss widened his eyes and relaxed them, trying to come fully awake. "I don't know," he said. "I had this dream just before I woke, and I'll be damned if I can remember it. Guess I just sat down for a minute trying to remember it."

"Is that all?" Lisa smiled. "Why let a dream bother you?" She stretched her arms at her sides, bending them upward at the elbows. "Kiss me good morning."

Fuoss smiled, threw the cigarette into an ashtray, and bent over the bed. "Does sound silly, doesn't it? Can't get the idea out of my head that it's important, though."

Lisa raised her lips. Her swollen eyes and mouth were crusted at the corners. Fuoss kissed her absently.

"Stac! What in the devil's the matter with you this morning?"

Fuoss shook his head. "I don't know. It's that damned dream. I haven't felt right since I woke up. Can't pin it down."

Lisa frowned. "Whatever it was, I don't like it. From the way you kissed me, you'd think it was about another woman."

Fuoss felt a jab of guilt. He got up from Lisa's bed and walked over to the bureau. The taste of Lisa's unwashed mouth was on his lips, and he yanked at the top drawer.

"If I knew I wouldn't be bothered about it, would I?" He dressed rapidly. "Do I have to kiss you like Don Juan every morning?" He went to the night table and picked up his watch and keys. "Haven't got time for breakfast, now. I hope Brownfield's wife finally had her kid, so Tom can get back to the office. I'm getting sick of doing his work overtime without getting paid for it."

Lisa made an impatient sound, got up and walked toward the bathroom. She slept naked. Fuoss watched her.

"Arms and legs," he said. "Two of each, perfectly molded, attached with correct smoothness, and equally smoothly articulated and muscled. Breasts and hips – also two of each – and superbly useless for anything but play. All this equipment joined to a sculptured torso, and the entire work of the designer's art surmounted by a face with just enough deliberate irregularities to make it appealing."

Lisa turned, a half-frightened look on her face. "What did you say?"

Fuoss smiled with restrained bitterness. "That was just Culture S, Table C Fuoss reading specification on Culture L, Table S ditto. My wife, by the grace of Section IV, Paragraph 12 of the Humanoids Act of 1973, and the General Aniline Company, Humanoids Division. Good morning, Mrs. Mannikin—"

Whatever it was that had been fermenting in him suddenly came to a head. "Why the hell don't you buy a hairnet?" he said, and slammed the bedroom door behind him.

Fuoss stepped out of the Up chute into the office a few minutes before

nine. He went to his desk and sat down, staring at the In basket which the file clerks had already filled with folders and correspondence. He ran a thumb along the edge of a batch of files.

Blue Tabs. McMillin. First Brownfield's stuff and now McMillin's, too. There wasn't anything wrong with Mac's wife. Why should he be doing part of his stuff?

He wiped his forearm over his eyes. He'd tried to explain this morning's outburst to himself during the drive to the office. It couldn't be the dream. He was tired. Work had been piling up on his desk during the past month, and he'd had to do overtime. Brownfield had been out lately, with his wife's pregnancy developing complications at term. That meant more work to be done. More reading, more dictation, more interviews. His nerves were strained.

He remembered some of the other jobs he'd worked at. Doing rewrites for the Times, for instance. He'd liked it, been good at it. He'd saved enough from that so the extra money he'd picked up free-lancing had paid for the destruction and replacement of the unmatured remainder of Lisa's culture. At that time, the thought of being married to a true individual had seemed important.

After the newspaper business got a little tight, he'd tried his hand at managing a chain store, and when that petered out he'd done any number of other things, until he'd finally landed this insurance claim adjusting job. Come to think of it, he'd held a lot of jobs.

Guess I'm the restless type, he decided.

"...and thank you for your kind cooperation," he dictated an hour later. "Rush that out, will you, Ruthie?"

He looked up from the file and saw Brownfield come in.

"Thank God!" he said. Brownfield was carrying a box of cigars and wearing the smile of a new father. "Look who's here."

"Why, it's Mr. Brownfield! He called this morning and said he might be in," the stenographer said.

But they figured I might as well do his work anyway, huh? Fuoss thought. "What's the news on his wife?" he asked.

"Oh, she's fine. They had a baby boy." Ruth smiled enviously.

Brownfield came across the office to his desk. Fuoss got up. "Well, hell, Tom, congratulations!" he said, slapping Brownfield on the back. "Boy,

huh? Bet he looks like his mother. Most boys do, I hear."

"Little early to tell yet, Stac," Brownfield said happily. "Might be, though. He's got blue eyes like Marion."

"Well, all babies have blue eyes at first," Fuoss said. The thought struck him that young Brownfield probably resembled nothing so much as he did a slightly boiled marmoset.

"All babies do?" Brownfield said. "I didn't know that. How come you did?"

Meaning "What does an android know about children," huh? You smug son of a bitch. "Don't know. Most have read it somewhere, I guess," he said.

"Guess so. Have a cigar?"

"Thanks. Say, these are good."

"Nothing but the best for the first-born, I always say."

Fuoss hid a grimace. "What're you going to call him, Tom – Junior?" he asked unnecessarily.

"What else? Have to carry on the family names, you know."

In a pig's left nostril, I know!

Brownfield looked over his desk. "Looks like all my work's been done for me while I was gone. You do it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, boy, I owe you a drink don't I? What say we drop in some place after work? I sure appreciate you doing this for me."

Why not?

"Sure. I'll see you at five."

"Sure thing." Brownfield walked away, the open box of cigars in his hand.

Fuoss threw the cigar into the back of his desk drawer and picked up another file.

Carol had short, dusty-black hair. Her blue eyes were wide. They were accented by sweeping brows and outlined by coalblack lashes. Her nose was short, flat, turned up at the end. Her lips were small and thin. They twisted nervously whenever she forgot to control them. Her face was round, suntanned, and slightly flat.

Fuoss waved at the waitress and silently pointed to the three empty glasses. The girl put the glasses on her tray and moved off.

Brownfield shifted awkwardly in his chair. "I've got to go home, Stac," he said petulantly. "It's getting late. I've got to call the hospital and talk to my wife."

Fuoss looked at him from under his lowered eyebrows, his eyes a dark mud color. "You can call her from here."

"I'm hungry, too. I've got to go home and eat."

"You can order a sandwich here, you know." Fuoss took a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and held it out to Carol.

"Light it for me, will you?" she said.

Fuoss grinned. He put the two cigarettes in his mouth until they lit, and handed one over. "Tommie boy, here, gave me a cigar today," he said. "Good cigar. Too bad I hate cigars." He turned to Brownfield, smiling. "Don't get me wrong, Tommie. You're a hell of a good joe. I just don't like cigars." He leaned across the table and laid his hand on Carol's arm.

"Tommie sure did me a big favor today," he said emphatically. "He brought me in here, didn't he? Introduced me to one of the really nicest people I ever met. Even if I don't like cigars. Was that Tommie's fault? Good cigar. Did his best." He laughed. "Sure did his best. Mr. Brownfield has fathered a son. Ever hear of a better best than that?"

Carol shook her head. "Never did. That's really something."

Brownfield pushed his chair back. "I've got to go."

Fuoss narrowed his eyes and stared at him. He looked at Carol with a sidewise swing of his eyes and then looked back at Brownfield. "All right. 'F I was you I'd be celebrating the blessed event, but I guess you know what you're doing. Thanks for the drink. And thanks for introducing me to Carol. Goodbye."

Brownfield grinned uncomfortably and raised his hand awkwardly. "I'll see you." He turned his awkward smile in Carol's direction. "I'll see you, too."

"Won't wifey mind?" Carol answered, puffing on the cigarette. "It's been fun and all that, but you're a proud papa now."

Brownfield put his hand on the back of his chair and opened his mouth, but closed it again and then said something else instead: "Yeah. I guess so. I— I'll see you." He turned and walked out.

Carol broke into a laugh. "Ever see an expression like that on anybody's

face before?"

Fuoss guffawed. "Not once. Never." The waitress had brought three fresh drinks, and he picked up Brownfield's. "Brownie's a good guy, though. Never thought a bird like him knew about a place like this. Damnedest thing."

"The place isn't really much. It's too quiet usually. I like it to rest up in until the bigger places open."

Fuoss looked around and nodded. "Yeah, come to think of it, you're right. The place would be dead if I hadn't run into you. I guess it's the company that gives any place its atmosphere."

He finished Brownfield's drink and started on his own. "Damnedest thing, us just walking in here and finding you."

Carol smiled. "Oh, I'm usually in here. It's awfully dull, usually."

Fuoss nodded. "Come to think of it," he said abruptly, "Brownie was right. It is time to eat. You hungry?"

Carol nodded, wrinkling her nose. "Uh-huh."

"Okay. Order something. You know the food in here. Order for both of us."

"Oh, the food stinks in this place. Tell you what... " Carol smiled, dimpling sweetly. "Why don't we go up to my place? I'll cook something up for us and we can go out someplace later. How's that?"

Fuoss's eyes glittered. "Sounds good," he said, and waved to the waitress for their check.

There was no point to going all the way back to the carport to pick up Fuoss's Buick, so they took a cab to Carol's apartment. Fuoss helped her out of the cab and held her coat while she unlocked the door.

She opened the door and swayed against him. "Whew! I didn't know I was that high," she murmured. She laughed, a low chuckling laugh and leaned forward.

"S all right," Fuoss said. "'S all right. We'll be okay when we get some food down."

"Sure we will," Carol said, and laughed again. "Mix yourself a drink while I go find the kitchen."

Fuoss was recording impressions on his senses. There were a lot of them. They wheeled by; sight, hearing, smell, taste, feel, all reeling by. He had no means of slowing them down or cutting them off, so he simply

recorded, letting them run into his mental tape recorder, not analyzing, not examining, just letting them spin, stopping once in a while to drive his fingernails into his forearm when the fog became too pervasive.

Slap! His head recoiled. Slap! Other direction. He was leaning against the flextile bathroom wall, facing the mirror. He slapped himself again. And again, trying to drive some of the fuzz out from around his senses. The air was tight, squeezing against him from all directions, compressing.

There was just too much of it. Too much going on, going by. He opened his eyes and the spinning stopped. No, not quite. But it did slow down considerably.

Carol's arm was around his neck. "Hi," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Hi." He pouted a smile in return.

"I don't think we're going out after supper." She giggled.

"Why not?"

"It's two o'clock in the morning and we haven't had supper yet."

Fuoss looked down at a coffee table covered with bottles. Most of them had been sampled. "Well, let's eat, then." He was having real trouble focusing his eyes.

Carol put her other arm around his neck. "In a minute, honey. Let's have one more drink. We haven't tried the Cherry Heering yet." She nuzzled his ear.

Fuoss stifled a belch. "All right."

Just before morning he had the dream again.

He thrashed out in the night, twisting the sheet around his legs and bringing a sleepy protest from Carol. He kicked, but the sheet held. He was soaking in sweat.

He had no clear image of the woman. She remained disembodied. Discarnate, but woman incarnate. He knew only that she was human, and this knowledge brought him a sense of

triumph, of victory. He was victorious, glorious.

She came from blackness, and it was into blackness that he went for her.

He rolled and jerked on the bed. Time whinnied by like a silver beast.

The woman was gone, hidden in blackness. His feet moved spasmodically against the sheets.

The blackness parted and the woman returned. There was with her—
His subconscious recoiled. He cried out.

"Stac!"

The infant turned from his mother's breast and stretched out his hands.
"Father!"

"Wake up, Stac! Goddamn it, wake up!" Carol pounded his shoulder.
"Wake up, will you, for Christ's sake! You're bawling like a baby."

Fuoss opened his eyes and looked up into the darkness. He reached out for Woman.

Fuoss stayed behind a pillar, out of sight of the hundreds of arriving commuters, until his car was driven down the ramp. Then he scrambled inside and drove out of the exit as rapidly as possible. He swung into the Uptown lane and relaxed for the first time since stepping out of the cab at the carport.

A dose of B-1 had calmed his stomach, but his head was still feverish. His hands had a tendency to shake. When he paid his toll at the bridge, he almost dropped the coin. He drove jerkily, tramping down on the accelerator and letting up too fast on the brake.

Despite this, there was a smile of satisfaction on his face.

Lisa met him at the door. "Tal's here," she said.

"The old family legal advisor, huh? Going to get a divorce before you even hear my side of the story?" Fuoss twisted his mouth.

Lisa smiled coldly. "If you're going to go tom-cattin', I can't stop you, but at least get the purr out of your voice when you come back. Tal called up early this morning – wanted to see you. When I told him you weren't in, he came over to wait for you."

"Uh-huh. The office call?"

"Yes. I had to tell them you were sick. I don't think they believed me."

Fuoss grinned sourly. "Not with Brownie running around telling them what a bad boy I've been." He shrugged. "Tal in the living room? I'll go in and talk to him."

He brushed his lips across Lisa's cheek. "Fix me some breakfast, will you, honey?"

Tal Cummins, like most androids, was the next thing to a chain smoker. He opened a gold case as Fuoss came in and threw him a cigarette without asking.

"How are you, Stac?"

Fuoss sat down opposite him. "Fair. What's up?"

Cummins waited until his cigarette had a good light. His black hair had fashionable grey strands in it. His face was lean and aristocratic. His manner matched them. He had bought the hair and face to replace the ordinary undistinguished android features, but the manner had taken a number of years to cultivate. Only with another android did he fail to rise, murmur a greeting, and offer his cigarette case with polite urbanity. "How's your job coming along?" he finally asked.

"Hell of a question after two years."

Cummins tapped his cigarette and watched the ash drift into a tray. "Doing a lot of overtime lately, are you?"

"Sure."

"Getting paid for it?"

"Supper money. Executives don't draw overtime – you know that."

Cummins snorted. "Ever hear of the Junior Executives Union? Don't tell me – the answer's no. It's a part of the dead and glorious Prewar past. The companies beat it by putting everybody from file clerks on up on the private payroll. Bingo, they were ineligible for unionization."

"And I'm that kind of an executive huh?"

"You're in good company." Cummins let some more ash fall. "How about the other fellows in your office? They do a lot of extra work?"

"Not much. I sort of take care of about everything around here."

"I'll bet you do. How's your production record? Handle more cases than anybody else in the office, don't you? Even without the extra work, I mean."

"Sure. It's pretty easy work."

"Getting steady raises, are you?"

"Well – times are a little rough in the insurance game. They promised me one pretty soon, though." Fuoss ran a hand through his hair. "What's all this getting at?"

Cummins doused his cigarette. "Did it ever strike you that you were being put upon, old chum? Don't you think it's kind of funny that a guy with your ability has held so many jobs?"

Fuoss grunted. "Maybe. I was thinking about it yesterday, as a matter of

fact." Tal Cummins is a hell of a nice guy, but I'd like him better if he didn't talk in circles. He shifted his feet.

Cummins smiled thinly. "I'll get to the point in a minute."

"Mind reader?" Fuoss growled.

"Lawyer." Cummins let himself smile for a minute more, wasted a little time on a new cigarette, then leaned forward. "Stac, I'll bet you anything you'd care to risk that you'll lose your job within the month."

"Why?"

"May I acquaint you with a little history?"

"If it's got anything to do with me. But cut it short."

"History is never short, my boy." Cummins kicked the end of his cigarette with his thumbnail. "History is extremely complicated, and we—" he gestured from Fuoss to himself, and included Lisa with a wave toward the kitchen, "are one of the prize complications.

"You've heard of the war. You have also heard of the extreme devastation and depopulation. I've done more than that. I've gone through books that describe a complicated civilization from its most revealing angle – its legal structure. I've also studied the 1960 census, and compared it with the emergency figures compiled in '68. Being an android, specializing in the cases covered by the Humanoids Act, I've also built up a better-than-average picture of what shape the humans were in when they finally dropped in their tracks in '67."

The sophisticated mask fell away. "Things were rugged, Stac. Seventy-five per cent of the civilized population was dead. Their technology was either completely wrecked or useless, because some fragment which remained operative depended on another part which hadn't. The humans were headed for the most colossal dark age since the Western Roman Empire collapsed.

"We were the answer. They took their soldier androids, did an extensive revamping and improving, and here we are. Or rather, there we were, because things are different now." The faintest trace of bitterness found an unaccustomed home on the bland features.

"Anyway," he went on, "what they needed in a hurry was a labor force. Not just a bunch of quasi-robots, but intelligent individuals, or near-individuals, who could handle anything a human could. The result was not only android pick-and-shovelers, but android technicians, android scientists, and android teachers. Even – " he smiled – "android lawyers."

"They did a good job. For all practical purposes, androids are duplicates of humanity. The main difference, of course, lies in the fact that androids cannot reproduce themselves by natural means. There, the humans knew they had a problem. If we were comparatively unintelligent, it wouldn't matter too much. But they gave us brains – and the potential for a nasty bundle of neuroses. They gave us android wives to take some of the sting off, but nobody's ever figured out a way to give us a substitute for parenthood. Adoption, unfortunately, is not the answer for the genuine article."

Fuoss looked at Cummins through a screening cloud of cigarette smoke. The lawyer was a smart cookie. Was he smart enough to be hinting around?

"But that's beside the point," Cummins said.

Fuoss relaxed.

"That problem is going to be solved as a by-product solution to a much larger problem," the lawyer continued. "In a way, your working overtime is a symptom of that same problem."

"How?"

"Look around you," Cummins said simply. "Any traces of the war left? Any poverty, hardship, devastation? You don't use matches on your cigarettes, you drive a two-hundred mph Buick with an automatic pilot, you never used an elevator in your life, and your alarm clock's been on voice for the last ten years. You, friend, are living in the technology of the late Twentieth Century. The fact that it's fifty years late is unimportant. Another thing – this civilization is truly worldwide. There are no 'backward' areas – the day of the ignorant savage gaping before the white man's magic is over."

"We did a good job," Fuoss said.

Cummins laughed, with no trace of humor. "Exactly. We worked ourselves right out of it."

"Now – wait a minute! You don't mean they're going to stop making androids."

"They have stopped."

"What! When? How come nobody knows about it?"

"Relax, Stac." Cummins waved him back into his chair. "There's nothing we can do about it. You'd be surprised how many people have tried." He smiled inscrutably. "I'm one of them, as a matter of fact. But

there's more to worry about than that."

"Such as?"

"What's happening to you – and me. Haven't you figured it out yet? The human population's back up to normal. Nobody needs androids any more. They don't want to come right out and say so, and in many cases the humans themselves aren't deliberate in their actions. It's simply a question of an employer hiring humans rather than androids. After all, if you were a human employer, and two applicants, one human and the other android, showed up for the same job, which would you hire?"

"So I'm being eased out of my job?" Fuoss searched his pockets for a cigarette.

"Shows all the signs, doesn't it? Looks to me like they're trying to disgust you into resigning. They might also pick on some pretext – like you being out all night on a bat."

"That was a celebration with Tom Brownfield! He was with me!"

"All night?"

"All right – we split up about eight! So what?"

Cummins made another one of his soothing gestures. "Relax, boy. I'm not accusing you of selling anybody in slavery. I'm just saying your company might decide it was a beautiful opportunity. Insurance companies are pretty stuffy outfits, anyway, you know."

That was what Cummins said, but Fuoss could see the shrewd light in the lawyer's eyes. He'd let a little too much slip about last night. Worst of all, he'd protested too much. Well, there was nothing he could do about it now.

"So there won't be any more androids, huh?" Fuoss said.

"Correct. One of the obscurer subsections of the Humanoids Act covers the case. But why worry? One thing we androids have over the humans is a complete lack of interest in the succeeding generation."

"Don't be so Goddamned smug about it!"

Cummins raised his eyebrows. "Did I touch a sore spot?"

"Never mind what you touched. You've been spreading a lot of stuff around here this morning. I'm not ready to believe all of it. I particularly don't care about you prying into my married and personal life. Got me?"

Cummins got up, the urbane barrister once more. "Well, it seems I share Cassandra's popularity. Prophets without honor and all that. I'll be

going."

"Good idea. I need some sleep."

"You do. And Stac..." Cummins paused on his way into the hall, "there's a law clerk's job open in my office when you need it."

"Go take a flying – "

"Goodbye."

Stac kept his eyes on Cummins until the lawyer had gone out of the door. Then he swung around and went into the kitchen. He stood just inside the door and looked at Lisa His upper lip twitched.

"Breakfast's ready. Where's Tal?" Lisa said.

"Thanks. Tal's gone."

"What'd he want?"

Fuoss cut into a slice of ham. "Nothing much. Bunch of chatter, is all. Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No."

Fuoss looked up. Lisa was looking at him quietly.

"I was out with Brownie. His wife had a son and we were celebrating. That's all."

"All right, Stac." Lisa smiled. "Did you have that dream again?"

"Goddamn it!" Stac slammed his fist onto the tabletop. "Goddamn it to hell!"

PART II

Fuoss moved down the street. He stayed in the shadows and kept his footsteps light. He crossed the avenue and went into Carol's apartment house. He went into the lobby and pushed Carol's annunciator button.

A note, printed in Carol's handwriting, full of sweepingly crossed T's and curlicued S's, was thrown on the screen beside the button.

Hi, whoever –

Sorry – nobody's home. Don't know when I'll be back, but the lobby chairs are nice and cuddly if you want to wait. Or leave me a note.

See You.

Fuoss grimaced with satisfaction and turned the screen off. He went over to the chute, unlocked it, and rode to Carol's floor. He went down the hall to her apartment and let himself in.

Carol had left the lights on, as usual. He reached up to turn them off, then changed his mind. He went into the kitchen instead and took a can of beer. He removed the top and went into the bedroom, tilting his head back to let the beer slide down his throat.

The bedroom was a lot neater than he had expected it to be. The bedspread was folded over a chair and one of the vanity drawers was open, but the usual collection of washed but not yet ironed underthings was missing from the top of the bureau.

Fuoss put the beer can down on top of a table, went over to the closet and reached into a back corner. He pulled out his topcoat.

He put his hand in the left side pocket, fumbled around, grunted, tried the other pocket. He couldn't find anything in that one, either. He frowned and got to his hands and knees to search the closet floor. There was nothing there.

He swung the closet door angrily. A negligee that had slipped from its hanger kept it from closing completely. He pushed the negligee farther inside with his foot and slammed the door shut. He walked toward the bed, tangling his feet in the topcoat he had thrown to the floor. He kicked it up into reach and threw it on the bed. He moved over to the table, picked up his can of beer and drained it. He stood in front of the open bedroom window, bouncing the can in his hand.

He threw the can out and lay down on the bed. He propped his head up with two pillows so that he could watch the entrance to the apartment through the open bedroom door.

The office boy was about sixteen. He had pimples and an elaborate coiffure that had to be rebuilt by frequent recourse to a men's room washbasin and mirror. He liked to smirk.

"They wanna see you in the V.P.'s office, Mister Fuoss," he said.

"Thanks."

"Right away."

"Thanks."

"There's an awful lot of big shots in there."

"Scram."

"Huh?"

"Whip out of here, punk. If I'm getting the ax, I can at least stop acting like a human fountain pen. Now get going, before I wipe my nose with you." Fuoss stood up, and the boy backed out of the way.

"So Cummins was right," Fuoss muttered. He rummaged quickly through his desk, taking out his fountain pens and a few other items that belonged to him. He ran across Brownfield's cigar, grinned, and put it in his breast pocket.

He walked back between the rows of desks toward the Vice President's office. He had thought he'd be angry, or disappointed, perhaps, if Cummins' prediction actually came true. Instead, he discovered that he was feeling considerable relief. When he walked into the office, there was a slight smile at the corners of his mouth.

The office boy had been right. Aside from the division head, there was a complete representation of section supervisors. Brownfield sat in one corner.

"Good morning, Mr. Crofton, Mr. Mantell. Good morning, John, Harry, George," Fuoss said heartily. "Good morning, Brownie."

Crofton, the V.P., frowned. "Good morning, Fuoss. Sit down."

Fuoss moved into the indicated chair, crossed his legs and sat back. "What's up, W.C.?" One of the section heads snickered.

"I'd regard this occasion in a more serious light if I were you," Crofton said heavily.

Fuoss smiled. "It's a question of relative importance, I imagine," he said. He leaned forward. "Look, Mr. Crofton, let's cut this short. You're a busy man and I've got a new job to look for, so suppose I just have Ruthie run up a letter of resignation and we'll get this thing done right. Will any excuse do, or do you have some particular preference?"

There was an uncomfortable rustling among the section heads, but Crofton took it without any special reaction. "No. Almost anything will do. Make it effective next Wednesday. I'm sorry to see you go, Fuoss. On the other hand, I have no choice. You'll acquaint Mr. Brownfield with the cases you're handling currently." He extended a hand smilingly.

"Oh, I don't think I'll wait that long. Suppose I make it effective at five o'clock yesterday? And as for me acquainting Brownie with my current

cases, that's hardly necessary, since most of them were his originally, anyway. Well, so long." He flipped a hand in salute and walked out.

Brownfield caught up with him in the cloakroom. "Say, Stac, I'm sorry this happened," he said, fumbling at Fuoss's sleeve. "It's just that when you didn't show up yesterday, somebody remembered that we went out together the night before and started asking questions."

"Sure, Brownie."

"I'm glad you're taking this so calmly," Brownfield said, his face ineffectual.

"Sure. I'll see you around, huh, Brownie?" He put his jacket on, picked up his briefcase, and took the hand Brownfield extended. "Oh, yeah..." He reached into his breast pocket. "Have a cigar, Brownie."

Fuoss walked jauntily down the sidewalk toward the bar where he had met Carol. He picked up a paper at the corner newsstand, intending to check a few ads for luck. The sun was shining and a cool breeze came off the harbor.

He went into the bar and sat down. "Give me a gin and tonic, will you?" he said to the bartender and settled himself comfortably on the stool. His hands began to tremble, and he broke out in a sweat.

My God, what'm I going to do? I've got bills to pay, a wife to support. The rent's due pretty soon, and the tax installment. What I've got in the bank won't carry me long. Where's it coming from?

He leaned forward and wrapped his fingers over the bar's molding. He began to tremble violently.

"You all right, buddy?" the bartender asked, setting a shot glass and a glass of quinine water in front of him.

"Fine. Just don't mix that drink, and bring me another shot of gin." He raised the shot glass to his mouth and sucked the gin out jerkily.

Carol came in at about four. Fuoss waved to her from the booth he'd spent the day in. She smiled and went over.

"Hi!"

"Hiya. Real higher. Pull up a drink and sit down," Fuoss said.

Carol laughed.

"Lost my job. Nobody loves androids any more. Rather have people. You rather have people?"

Carol shook her head. "That's too bad. I love androids." She moved her

hand over, on top of his. "To hell with people."

Fuoss grinned happily. "You're people. But you're nice people. One of the nicest people I know." He threw back his head and laughed.

"Say, you are packaged. You want to come over to my place and sleep it off."

"Yeah. Yeah, I need it. Thanks, Carol. Thanks a lot. You're one of the best. No, really, you are." He pushed his way out of the booth and stood up weakly.

He had the dream again, that night.

Lisa's eyes were underscored by purple shadows. "Haven't we gone through this before, recently?"

Fuoss shut the door and dropped into a chair. "All right. Who'd you tell this time?"

Lisa's eyes widened with her failure to understand him.

Fuoss snorted. "Cut it out. I haven't known you for these years and not learned anything. Who?"

Lisa kept her eyes from his. "Tal."

"I thought so. Was he here again? To see me, of course."

"God, but you came back in a nasty mood!" Lisa clenched her fists, knuckles forward, woman-fashion.

"Long as I came back. That's all you've got to worry about. What'd you tell Cummins?"

"What do you mean what'd I tell him? I told him the truth."

"What's your version of 'the truth'?"

Lisa advanced toward him fiercely. "Stop it, Stac! I'm warning you – cut it out right now. I don't particularly give a damn if you spent the night in a hotel with some call girl, but don't come back in the morning and get nasty with me!"

Fuoss jumped out of his chair. Lisa's near-guess had come too close. He stood spraddle-legged in front of her, his arms shaking.

"Listen, baby," he said in a cold rage, "you're dead right. What I did last night is my own business." He bounced his palm off his chest. "At most, it's our business – yours and mine; not Tal Cummins's, not anybody else's. You've got a hell of a nerve standing there all housewifey, with that

Goddamned egg-sucking grin on your face, trying to bull me. And when I catch you lying—" he was breathing in short gasps "you pull off the oldest defensive stunt in the world by flaring up at me!"

His head was pounding. He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "Listen, Lisa-so-ashamed-of-being-an-android, Lisa-who-diddled-her-name-so-it-sounds-human, get me, Lista, and get me good! If it wasn't for me, you'd still be a sniveling shopgirl, and if it wasn't for me breaking my neck over a typewriter for five years, there'd be a carbon-copy of you on every block, and I'll bet my back teeth most of them wouldn't be too careful how they earned their keep, either. Just remember I set you up to a lifetime of Wednesday Bridge Clubs and Ladies Auxiliaries. Any time you decide you're going to get snotty with me, just run that over in your mind, and remember you're no better than a glorified animal cracker. I bought you, kid, lock, stock, and physiomolded backside. Now, clear out of my way and let me get some sleep."

"You bastard!" Lisa reached out an arm and pawed his face.

Fuoss ducked his head and pushed her away. He broke into short, high-pitched laughter. "Honey, that's one thing I can't be!" He turned around and walked toward the bedroom.

Lisa laughed too. "That's right. That's perfectly right. Just you remember that! You're nothing but a Goddamned android yourself."

Fuoss turned around. The blood had gone out of his face. He moved up on Lisa. "Watch yourself, baby. Be very careful what you say to me.

"In fact," he said slowly, "your troubles with me are over. Tal Cummins has clear title to you, at least as far as I'm concerned."

Carol was glad to have him move in with her. They spent the week end in a drunken stupor and he had the dream again.

The personnel manager shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Fuoss. We'd like to have a man of your experience with our organization, but we simply don't have any openings. Thank you for thinking of us, though, and we'd keep your application on file. I'll be sure to let you know if anything comes up."

"All right." Fuoss smiled and shook the man's hand. "Thanks, anyway."

"Certainly."

That night he and Carol got drunk together, and he had the dream again.

The next day a different personnel manager, for a company which would have paid five dollars a week less, was just as polite as the first.

An envelope from Tal Cummins, office had been delivered to him at Carol's apartment.

"How's it feel to be a corespondent, hon?" Fuoss asked her.

Carol shrugged.

They got drunk, Fuoss took some sleeping pills, and they went to bed.

On the following morning, he went down to his bank and discovered that Lisa had drawn out exactly one-half of his account. He sold his car on the way down to the employment agency.

Fuoss noticed an item in a newspaper on the employment agency bench:

ANDROIDS URGED AS IDEAL FOR EXPLORATION OF SPACE

In a letter released today by the office of the Secretary of Defense, Tal Cummins, prominent android and well-known legal figure, urged the use of androids as crewmen in the projected attempt to put a manned rocket in an orbit around the Earth.

Authorities agree," Cummins said in his letter, "that there is no sure way of knowing whether human beings can live in deep space under any conditions without actually making the attempt. I submit that androids provide an easy means of practical testing. Moreover, for this and similar projects, such as the proposed Moon rocket and the later expedition to Mars and Venus, specialized androids could be manufactured to meet special conditions, if it should prove that a humanoid organism cannot, for some reason, survive.

Speaking for most androids, I can say that we would be glad to cooperate in any such program. Our satisfaction would lie in the knowledge that we had been of help in the greatest human undertaking since the dawn of civilization."

The office of the Secretary of Defense declined any official comment on the letter, but informed sources close to the Secretary admit that the proposal is being given serious consideration.

Fuoss's face was half-way between a scowl and a grin. "Half a loaf is better than none, eh, Cassandra?" he muttered. He re-read the story, which had drawn a two-column head on page two, and this time he

scowled. He got up, found a nickel in his pocket and went to a pay phone in the corner. He dialed Cummins' number, talked his way past two secretaries, and was connected with the lawyer.

"Hello, Stac! How are you?" Cummins' voice and expression were as urbane as ever.

"Okay. How's Lisa?"

"I – don't know. I haven't seen her." The lawyer's tone was an almost successfully concealed mixture of anger and disappointment.

Fuoss bared his teeth. "If I had time, I'd laugh like hell." He would have, too. "I've been reading about you in the papers, Tall."

"You mean Project Spaceward?"

"Is that what they're calling it? Wouldn't Project Grab be more appropriate?"

"Just what do you mean by that?" Cummins was angry.

"That was a mighty clever piece of work, boy. If I were human, I'd fall for it myself. But I'm not, so I don't go for it." Fuoss chuckled. "Not that I give a damn. In fact, I think it's kind of a good joke on the humans. Boy oh boy, are they in for a shock when your satellite station androids 'prove' that humans can't survive the conditions. But that shock's not going to be anything, is it? Not compared to the one they'll get when they wake up to the fact that space belongs to the androids, and they had better be nice or they'll find themselves living on a second asteroid belt. I have to hand it to you, Cummins."

"All right, Stac. I won't try to kid you. That's exactly what I'm doing. Can you blame me? You, of all people. How many favors have the humans done you? They've fired you out of every job you ever held, and they're making it impossible for you to get another one. Tit for tat, Stac. They don't want us any more. All right – we'll give them Earth. But we'll take the rest of the universe for ourselves."

Fuoss shook his head. "Uh-uh. It might even happen. I hope so. But one thing stinks about this project, and that's you. You told me once that androids have no interest in their succeeding generation, remember? You were wrong. Whenever I see a young kid android, I try to do him all the favors I can. But as far as you're concerned, you were right. You look at life as a sort of Out-of-the-culture-dish, live a while, Into-the-recovery-vat process. As far as you're concerned, android history began on your Awareness Day, and will end with your death. So there's something in this for you, Cummins. There are mighty few drives left to an android. You've

got the main one: power. Well, spin your little web. Dream your little dream. I hope you get away with it. Not because I like you. Because I hate humans more."

He laughed. "Just thought I'd let you know how I feel. So long, pal." He cut the connection and watched the lawyer's face dissolve on the screen.

That day he got a job, but he was carrying a bottle around with him by then, so he was paid off at three o'clock.

Carol wasn't there when he reached home, so he got drunk by himself. And that night he had the dream again.

One of the interviewers at the employment agency looked him right in the eye and said, in an impatient tone of voice, "Let's face it, Fuoss. You're not going to get anywhere with trying for white-collar work. Not anymore. There's no point in getting emotional about it; it's a plain fact; It's the way things are today, and you've got to accept it. Why don't you try something like construction work? Your pay'll be a lot bigger than you'll ever get in an office."

Fuoss did a mental run-down on his bank balance. "All right."

But the union just couldn't provide jobs for all its present members, much less take in a new one.

Tal Cummins had a guest appearance on a TV program, and spoke at some length about Project Spaceward. By the time he got to the end of it, Fuoss had gotten tired of waiting for Carol and gone to bed. He had the dream again.

Carol woke him up on Saturday morning and made breakfast.

After breakfast they sat down on the couch and smoked.

"Where were you these last two nights," Fuoss asked.

"Out."

"Where?"

Carol turned her head and faced him. "Look, Stac, you're a nice guy. I like you. But liking you hasn't got much to do with it. You're living here – that's O.K., so far, but you haven't got any strings on me."

Fuoss shrugged. "Okay – if that's how it is."

They spent a pretty miserable week end.

Fuoss now took a job with a landscaping contractor out on Long Island. It paid a dollar and a half an hour, but it involved digging holes through fill that was well interlarded with brick halves, pieces of BX cable, folded

lengths of thick tar paper, gravel and cinder block. His muscles weren't used to the job, but the worst strain was on his wrists, which took the shock of pick-swings that ended suddenly in some unseen obstacle. Nevertheless, he managed to last out the day without blistering his palms too badly.

When he rode back to the apartment that night, he felt better than he had in days.

Carol was home. He came in the door and she looked up. "Christ!" She stared at his clothes. "What've you been doing? Digging ditches?"

"That's right – just about, anyway. Digging holes for trees. You get your hands dirty, but you make money. Twelve bucks today." He grinned. He was feeling good.

Carol nodded. "Up-huh. Twelve bucks. Go take a shower, will you?"

When he came out, she was waiting for him. She was walking around in haphazard circles, smoking a cigarette. "Sit down, will you, Stac?"

"Sure. What's cooking?"

"Look – today's the first of the month. Rent's due. You want to pay half of it?"

He frowned. "Christ, I'd like to, Carol. You know that. But I can't. I haven't got any money. I can give it to you in about two weeks."

"Yeah... maybe. And could you raise fifty-five more two weeks after that?"

"Hell, Carol, sure. Twelve bucks a day comes out to sixty a week."

"Before taxes, social security, unemployment insurance, transportation, lunches and cigarettes it does, yeah. Add laundry bills to that, too. What's more, this is August now. How much longer do you think landscaping's going to be open?"

"All right – so it's not the best job in the world!"

"I didn't say that. You should be able to make out pretty well with it, and they'll probably find you a winter job. Or else you can hole up on your unemployment checks. But not here, Stac. Not the way you're living." She flipped the cigarette into the sink.

"What're you trying to say?"

"I'm not trying – I'm saying. It's a matter of simple economics." She sat down beside him and put her hand on his knee. "Look, honey, I've been

paying for your food the last two weeks. Some of the liquor we've mopped up you've bought, but most of it was here when you came. Up to now it hasn't cost you a dime to live here – or it wouldn't have, if you weren't a lush."

"Goddamn it! I am not a lush! I come home, we have a couple of drinks after supper, and then we start necking. Next thing we know, we're pie-eyed. But that doesn't make me a lush!" He realized that there were bigger things to argue over, but for some reason he kept pressing this point, as if concentrating on it would make the other problems disappear.

"Okay, honey." Carol stroked his hair. "Okay." She smiled. "You know, a doctor I knew once said that alcohol was an extreme form of sublimation. But I can't imagine what you would be sublimating." She grinned, and Fuoss grinned with her.

"Okay. I made a funny," Carol said. "That doesn't change anything. I can't afford to keep you, and you can't afford to stay. It's tough, but it's true." Impulsively, she put her arms around his neck. "Look, you ought to get yourself a room somewhere near where you work. It'll work out fine that way. You can still come and see me."

Fuoss sat stiffly, looking at the opposite wall over her shoulder. "Sure. Sure, Carol. I understand. It'll work out pretty well." He tightened his arms around her. "I'll find a good job for the Winter, and then maybe we can really set up something in style."

"I'd like that, Stac," she murmured in his ear. She drew her head back and kissed him. "I like you, Stac. You know I do. It just doesn't work out right now. You know that."

"Sure."

He moved to a furnished room in New Hyde Park, and rode the bus a mile up to work for ten days. He wrote Carol a few letters, and got a few answers. He read the paper one day and saw that Operation Spaceward had officially begun. Stock in Androids Incorporated, DuPont, and General Aniline went up again. Tal Cummins was getting his, but the androids – we're getting ours, too.

On Friday, the fourteenth of August and the thirteenth day of his last two weeks, he went out to Babylon with his crew.

They dug a hole two yards deep and about five across for an oak the owner wanted moved into it. They cut a ramp into one side of the hole, and craned the tree over to the top of the ramp. A bunch of overhead wires

that couldn't be cut or moved kept them from dropping the tree in, so they mounted it upright on a skid, lashed the tree firmly, and guyed it to the front bumper of a truck with a couple of lengths of Manila.

Stac was driving the truck. As the rest of the crew manhandled the tree over the lip of the ramp, he was supposed to lower it slowly, keeping the truck in double-low and judging the strain on the Manila.

It didn't work out that way. The Manila snapped, lashed a couple of boys across the face, and fouled the skid. The tree tipped forward, picked up momentum, and toppled over, catching a man under the branches.

Stac got out of the truck and the Boss came over to him.

"You stupid son-of-a-bitch!" the Boss said. "You stupid android son-of-a-bitch! I should have had more sense than to hire a...!"

It was the first time Stac had heard the word, but it was self-explanatory. It described in a simple term the substances from which they claimed androids were made.

Fuoss reached out and gathered the Boss's shirt up in his hands. "I ought to hit you," he said. "I ought to rub your face on a macadam road and drive a truck over your crotch."

The Boss turned pale. He saw the look on Fuoss's face. "You're nuts!" he screamed.

Fuoss laughed and pushed him away. "Yeah."

He had done it so many times that the blanket's constriction was nothing new. His arms flailed and his pillow fell to the floor, knocking the bottle over.

Woman.

Stac – little Stac, his firstborn. Have a cigar, Brownie. Have a cigar, you smug bastard. Good cigar, Brownie – nothing's too good for the first born. Have a fat cigar.

Woman. The woman raised her face.

Carol. Carol!

The Boss said Get the hell away from her, you secondhand son of a...

Carol said You second-hand son of a...

Little Stac said You second-hand son of a son of a son of a sonofasonofasonofa...

He went out in the morning and bought another bottle. He went into the candy store next door for a pack of cigarettes, and then he went back to the liquor store and bought another bottle to make sure.

PART III

He looked at his watch. 2:30. Sunday morning, but still Saturday night, by almost anybody's definition. He moved his feet impatiently on the bed.

The door to the apartment opened, and Carol came in. There was a man with her.

"Go home, Brownie. Go home to your wife and your firstborn son."

"God! What's keeping him on his feet?"

"Never mind what's keeping me on my feet, Brownie. Go home."

Brownfield left. "I'll call the police for you, Carol."

"Are you crazy? He's all right – he's just packaged. I've seen him like this before. You know – he's right. Go home to your wife. I'll take care of him."

"Well, all right."

"You bet it's all right. Now beat it." Fuoss locked the door behind him, turned around and leaned against it.

"Hi, Carol."

She smiled hesitantly. "Hi, Stac."

"Marry me, Carol?"

"Not right now, Stac. It's kind of late. Why don't you sack out and we can talk about it in the morning."

"Uh-uh. This morning business doesn't go. You gonna marry me?"

"Look Stac, fun's fun, and drinking's drinking, but there's a limit. I'm not sure I even want you to sleep here. There's a hotel down the block. Stay there and I'll see you in the morning."

"Can't stay at any hotel. Haven't got any more money. I had some in my topcoat pocket, but you took it."

"I didn't take it. There wasn't any there. You took every cent you had to the Island with you."

"You took it all right. But that's okay. I'll forgive you. Just marry me."

Carol moved around to the other side of an easy chair. "What are you talking about? Me, marry an android?"

"Listen, Carol. You've got to do it. Nobody's ever tried it before. Maybe there's a chance."

"A chance for what?"

Fuoss spread his arms pleadingly. "For Stac – for little Stac. We've got to try it, Carol. Please. Marry me, Lisa, please."

"My name isn't Lisa! You're crazy, you're raving nuts. Get the hell out of here!" She picked up a bookend. "You're insane!"

Fuoss picked up the Scotch bottle from the table beside the door and broke the end off over the table's corner. He laughed. "Yeah."

Tal Cummins went hurriedly down the corridor between the cells. He was sweating, and his hair was not combed.

"There he is. You want to go in there?" The turnkey had stopped at Fuoss's cell.

"No, thanks." Cummins leaned forward and looked at Fuoss. "Stac?"

Fuoss looked up.

"You realize what you've done?" Cummins was suddenly shouting, waving the full-color newspaper in his hand. "You're all over the papers. The public's going crazy for your blood. You realize what you've done to the whole android re- establishment program?"

Fuoss got up and put his face close to Cummins. He looked into the lawyer's eyes. His hands wrapped around the bars.

"Is she dead?" he asked hopefully.

© 1953, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company

About the Author

Born in East Prussia in 1931 as Algirdas Jonas Budrys, the writer and editor Algis Budrys has been in the USA since 1936. He early worked as an

assistant to his father, who was Consul General of Lithuania in New York until his death in 1964; this experience has arguably shaped some of AB's fiction. He began publishing sf in 1952 with "The High Purpose" for ASF, and very rapidly gained a reputation as a leader of the 1950s sf generation, along with Philip K. Dick, Robert Sheckley and others, all of whom brought new literacy, mordancy and grace to the field; since 1965 he has written regular, incisive book reviews for Gal and latterly for FSF, but relatively little fiction.

During his first decade as a writer AB used a number of pseudonyms on magazine stories: David C. Hodgkins, Ivan Janvier, Paul Janvier, Robert Marnier, William Scarff, John A. Sentry, Albert Stroud and (in collaboration with Jerome Bixby) Alger Rome. He wrote few series, though "The High Purpose" had two sequels: "A.I.D." (1954) and "The War is Over" (1957), both in ASF. The Gus stories, as by Paul Janvier, include "Nobody Bothers Gus" (1955) and "And Then She Found Him" (1957).

AB's first novel has a complex history. As *False Night* (1954) it was published in a form abridged from the manuscript version; this manuscript served as the basis for a reinstated text which, with additional new material, was published as *Some Will Not Die* (1961; rev 1978). In both versions a post-Holocaust story is set in a plague-decimated USA and, through the lives of a series of protagonists, a half century or so of upheaval and recovery is described. *Some Will Not Die* is a much more coherent (and rather grimmer) novel than its predecessor.

His second novel, *Who?* (1958), filmed as *Who?* (1974), not quite successfully grafts an abstract vision of the existential extremity of mankind's condition onto an ostensibly orthodox sf plot, in which it must be determined whether or not a prosthetically rebuilt and impenetrably masked man is in fact the scientist, vital to the US defence effort, whom he claims to be. As AB is in part trying to write an existential thriller about identity (rather similar to the later work of Kobo Abe), not an sf novel about the perils of prosthesis, some of the subsequent detective work seems a little misplaced; however, the seriousness of purpose is never in doubt. Similarly, *The Falling Torch* (1957-9 various mags; fixup 1959; text restored vt *Falling Torch* 1991) presents a story which on the surface is straight sf, describing an Earth, several centuries hence, dominated by an alien oppressor; the son of an exiled president returns to his own planet to liaise with the underground. But the novel can also be read as an allegory of the Cold War in its effects upon Eastern Europe (less awkward but more discursive in the restored text), and therefore, like *Who?*, asks of its generic structure rather more significance than generic structures of this

kind have perhaps been designed to bear.

Much more thoroughly successful is AB's next novel, *Rogue Moon* (1960), now something of an sf classic. A good deal has been written about the highly integrated symbolic structure of this story, whose perfectly competent surface narration deals with a hard-sf solution to the problem of an alien labyrinth, discovered on the Moon, which kills anyone who tries to pass through it. At one level, the novel's description of attempts to thread the labyrinth from Earth via matter transmission makes for excellent traditional sf; at another, it is a sustained rite de passage, a doppelganger conundrum about the mind-body split, a death-paeon. There is no doubt that AB intends that both levels of reading register, however any interpretation might run; in this novel the two levels interact fruitfully. After some years away from fiction, AB returned in the late 1970s with his most humanly complex and fully realized novel to date. *Michaelmas* (1977) describes in considerable detail a near-future world whose information media have become even more sophisticated and creative of news than at present – as depicted in Sidney Lumet's film *Network* (1976) and as represented by such figures as CBS broadcaster Walter Cronkite. Like Cronkite, though to a much greater extent, the *Michaelmas* of the title is a moulder of news. Unusually, however, the book does not attack this condition. *Michaelmas* is a highly adult, responsible, complex individual, who with some cause feels himself to be the world's Chief Executive; beyond his own talents, he is aided in this task by an immensely sophisticated computer program named *Domino*, with which he is in constant contact, and which itself (as in books like Alfred Bester's *The Computer Connection* [1975; vt *Extro UK*]) accesses all the computers in the world-net. Although the plot – *Michaelmas* must confront and defeat mysterious aliens who are manipulating mankind from behind the scenes – is straight out of pulp-magazine fiction, *Michaelmas* is a sustained, involving and peculiarly realistic novel.

AB is that rarity, an intellectual genre writer, as is also demonstrated by his three collections of short stories, *The Unexpected Dimension* (coll 1960), *Budrys's Inferno* (coll 1963; vt *The Furious Future* 1964 UK) and *Blood and Burning* (coll 1978). From his genre origins stem both his strengths – incisiveness, exemplary concision of effect – and his weaknesses – mainly the habit, which he may have mastered, of overloading genre material with mainstream resonances. His sf criticism, especially that from before the mid-1980s, is almost unfailingly perceptive, and promulgates with a convert's grim elan a view of the essential nature of the genre that ferociously privileged the US magazine tradition. *Non-Literary Influences on Science Fiction (An Essay)* (1983

chap) eloquently represents this view, as do, more relaxedly, the reviews collected in *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf* (coll 1985).

In the 1980s, AB controversially associated himself with a programme for new writers initiated (or at least inspired) by L. Ron Hubbard, arousing fears that Hubbard's Church of Scientology might itself be the source for the apparent affluence of L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future. It was, nevertheless, evident by their participation that many sf writers felt these worries to be trivial, and the programme can claim to have introduced several authors of note (like Karen Joy Fowler and David Zindell) to the field. In pieces like *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1990 chap), composed originally for the enterprise, AB projected a detailed sense of what it meant to be a professional. The Hubbard school absorbed most of his energies for the remainder of the decade, although in 1991 he announced his semi-retirement from Writers of the Future, and soon published, in *Hard Landing* (1993) – his first novel since *Michaelmas* – a condensed, intricate, virtuoso narrative following the lives – as resident aliens – of four crashed extraterrestrials in America from the 1940s through the 1970s.

John Clute

Other works: *Man of Earth* (1955 *Satellite*; rev 1958); *The Amsirs and the Iron Thorn* (1967; vt *The Iron Thorn* 1968 UK); *Cerberus* (1967 *FSF*; 1989 chap).

As Editor: The L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future series: *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future* (anth 1985; vt without title reference to Hubbard 1986 UK); *Vol II* (anth 1986); *Vol III* (anth 1987); *Vol IV* (anth 1988); *Vol V* (anth 1989); *Vol VI* (anth 1990); *Vol VII* (anth 1991); *Vol VIII* (anth 1992) with Dave Wolverton.

About the author: *More Issues at Hand* (coll 1970) by William Atheling Jr (James Blish), Chapter V; "Rite de Passage: A Reading of *Rogue Moon*" by David Ketterer in *Foundation* 5, 1974; *Visions of Tomorrow: Six Journeys from Outer to Inner Space* (1975) by David N. Samuelson; *An Algis Budrys Checklist* (1983 chap) by Chris Drumm; *Conspiracy Theories* (anth 1987 chap) ed Christopher Evans, providing a range of views on the Writers of the Future/Scientology dispute and on AJB's role.

Table of Contents

BLOOD AND BURNING 1

The Short Fiction of Algis Budrys 1

Introduction 1

A.I.D. 3

And Then She Found Him... 9

Aspirin Won't Help It 19

Be Merry 24

I. 24

II. 26

III. 28

IV. 30

V. 32

VI. 35

VII. 37

VIII. 40

IX. 43

X. 45

Between the Dark and the Daylight 47

The Burning World 55

II. 58

III. 61

IV. 63

V. 66

VI. 69

VII. 71

Contact Between Equals 74

The Distant Sound of Engines 82

The End of Summer 85

I 85
II 88
III 90
IV 93
The Executioner 99
First To Serve 118
Three Stories 128
The Price 128
The Ridge Around The World 130
The Girl in the Bottle 135
Go and Behold Them 139
The Last Brunette 145
Little Joe 153
Living Alone in the Jungle 159
Lower Than Angels 161
Chapter I 161
Chapter II 164
Chapter III 168
Chapter IV 170
Chapter V 171
Chapter VI 176
The Man Who Tasted Ashes 178
The Master of the Hounds 186
Never Meet Again 200
The Nuptial Flight of Warbirds 208
Scream at Sea 230
Silent Brother 235
The Skirmisher 245
The Sound of Breaking Glass 248
Wall of Crystal, Eye of Night 257
The War Is Over 269

Watch Your Step 275
Dream of Victory 282
PART I 282
PART II 289
PART III 295
About the Author 297
Table of Contents 299

Compiled and proofed by teddy-oh for #bookz

300