THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

Eleventh Series

Edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars. —Walt Whitman

For ISAAC ASIMOV,
the Good Doctor of F&SF,
without whose nobly lucid
explanations of scientific matters,
and inhumanly faithful
observance of deadlines,
this book would have been
put together just as easily,
but far less pleasantly

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Great wealth can be yours, and happiness, and the girl of your dreams, if only you can locate and hold for yourself alone...

THE SOURCES OF THE NILE

by Avram Davidson

It was in the Rutherford office on Lexington that Bob Rosen met Peter ("Old Pete"—"Sneaky Pete"—"Poor Pete": take your pick) Martens for the first and almost last time. One of those tall, cool buildings on Lexington with the tall, cool office girls it was; and because Bob felt quite sure he wasn't and damned well never was going to be tall or cool enough for him to mean anything to them, he was able to sit back and just enjoy the scenery. Even the magazines on the table were cool: Spectator, Botteghe Oscuro, and Journal of the New York State Geographical Society. He picked up the last and began to leaf through "Demographic Study of The Jackson Whites."

He was trying to make some sense out of a mass of statistics relating to albinism among that curious tribe (descended from Tuscorora Indians, Hessian deserters, London street women, and fugitive slaves), when one of the girls—delightfully tall, deliciously cool—came to usher him into Tressling's office. He lay the magazine face down on the low table and followed her. The old man with the portfolio, who was the only other person waiting, got up just then, and Bob noticed the spot of blood in his eye as he passed by. They were prominent eyes, yellowed, reticulated with tiny red veins, and in the corner of one of them was a bright red blot. For a moment it made Rosen feel uneasy, but he had no time then to think about it.

"Delightful story," said Joe Tressling, referring to the piece which had gotten Rosen the interview, through his agent. The story had won first prize in a contest, and the agent had thought that Tressling ... if Tressling ... maybe Tressling...

"Of course, we can't touch it because of the theme," said Tressling.

"Why, what's wrong with the Civil War as a theme?" Rosen said.

Tressling smiled. "As far as Aunt Carrie's Country Cheese "is concerned," he said, "the South won the Civil War. At least, it's not up to Us to tell Them differently. It might annoy Them. The North doesn't care. But write another

story for us. The Aunt Carrie Hour is always on the lookout for new dramatic material."

"Like for instance?" Bob Rosen asked.

"What the great cheese-eating American public wants is a story of resolved conflict concerning young contemporary American couples earning over ten thousand dollars a year. But nothing sordid, controversial, outre, or passe."

Rosen was pleased to be able to see Joseph Tressling, who was the J. Oscar Rutherford Company's man in charge of scripts for the Aunt Carrie Hour. The *Mene Mene* of the short story was said that year to be on the wall, the magazines were dying like May flies, and the sensible thing for anyone to do who hoped to make a living writing (he told himself) was to get into television. But he really didn't expect he was going to make the transition, and the realization that he didn't really know any contemporary Americans—young, old, married, single—who were earning over ten thousand dollars a year seemed to prophesy that he was never going to earn it himself.

"And nothing avant-garde," said Tressling.

The young woman returned and smiled a tall, cool smile at them. Tressling got up. So did Bob. "Mr. Martens is still outside," she murmured.

"Oh, I'm afraid I won't be able to see him today," said Joe Tressling. "Mr. Rosen has been so fascinating that the time seems to have run over, and then some ... Great old boy," he said, smiling at Bob and shaking his hand. "Really one of the veterans of advertising, you know. Used to write copy for Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup. Tells some fascinating yarns. Too bad I haven't the time to listen. I expect to see you back here soon, Mr. Rosen," he said, still holding Bob's hand as they walked to the door, "with another one of your lovely stories. One that we can feel delighted to buy. No costume dramas, no foreign settings, nothing outre, passe, or avant-garde, and above all—nothing controversial or sordid. You're not going to be one of those *hungry* writers, are you?"

Even before he answered, Rosen observed Tressling's eyes dismiss him; and he resolved to start work immediately on an outre, controversial, sordid costume drama with a foreign setting, etc., if it killed him.

He made the wrong turn for the elevator and on coming back he came face to face with the old man. " 'Demography of the Jackson Whites'," the old man said, feigning amazement. "What do you care about those poor suckers for? They don't buy, they don't sell, they don't start fashion, they don't follow fashion. Just poach, fornicate, and produce oh-point-four hydrocephalic albinos per hundred. Or something."

The elevator came and they got in together. The old man stared at him, his yellow-bloody eye like a fertilized egg. "Not that I blame them," he went on. "If I'd had any sense I'd've become a Jackson White instead of an advertising man. The least you can do," he said, without any transition, "is to buy me a drink. Since Truthful Tressling blames it onto you that he can't

see me, the lying bugger. Why, for crying out loud!" he cried. "What I've got here in this little old portfolio—why, it's worth more to those men on Madison, Lexington, Park—if they only—"

"Let me buy you a drink," said Rosen, resignedly. The streets were hot, and he hoped the bar would be cool.

"A ball of Bushmill," said old Peter Martens.

The bar *was* cool. Bob had stopped listening to his guest's monologue about what he had in his little old portfolio (something about spotting fashion trends way in advance) and had begun talking about his own concerns. By and by the old man, who was experienced beyond the norm in not being listened to, had begun to listen to *him*.

"This was when everybody was reading Aku-Aku," Bob said. "So I thought for sure that mine would go over good because it was about Rapa Nui—Easter Island—and Peruvian blackbirders and hints of great legends of the past and all that."

"And?"

"And it didn't. The publisher, the only one who showed any interest at all, I mean, that publisher, he said he liked the writing but the public wouldn't buy it. He advised me to study carefully the other paperbacks on the stands. See what they're like, go thou and do likewise. So I did. You know the stuff. On even-numbered pages the heroine gets her brassiere ripped off while she cries, *'Yes! Yes! Now! Oh!'* "

He was not aware of signalling, but from time to time a hand appeared and renewed their glasses. Old Martens asked, "Does she cry 'rapturously'—or 'joyously'?"

"Rapturously and joyously. What's the matter, you think she's frigid?"

Martens perished the thought. At a nearby table a large blonde said, lugubriously, "You know, Harold, it's a lucky thing the Good Lord didn't give me any children or I would of wasted my life on them like I did on my rotten stepchildren."
Martens asked what happened on the odd-numbered children.

"I mean, 'pages'," he corrected himself, after a moment.

The right side of Bob Rosen's face was going numb. The left side started tingling. He interrupted a little tune he was humming and said, "Oh, the equation is invariable: On odd-numbered pages the hero either clonks some bastard bloodily on the noggin with a roscoe, or kicks him in the collions and then clonks him, or else he's engaged—with his shirt off, you're not allowed to say what gives with the pants, which are so much more important; presumably they melt or something—he's engaged, shirtless, in arching his lean and muscular flanks over some bimbo, not the heroine, because these aren't her pages, some other female in whose anatomy he reads strange mysteries..." He was silent for a moment, brooding.

"How could it fail, then?" asked the old man, in his husky voice. "I've seen the public taste change, let me tell you, my boy, from A Girl of the Limberlost (which was so pure that nuns could read it) to stuff which makes stevedores blench: so I am moved to inquire, How could the work you are describing to me fail?"

The young man shrugged. "The nuns were making a comeback. Movies about nuns, books about nuns, nuns on TV, westerns ... So the publisher said public taste had changed, and could I maybe do him a life of St. Teresa?"

"Coo."

"So I spent three months doing a life of St. Teresa at a furious pace, and when I finished it turned out I'd done the wrong saint. The simple slob had no idea there was any more than one of the name, and I never thought to ask did he mean the Spanish St. Teresa or the French one? D'Avila or The Little Flower?"

"Saints preserve us ... Say, do you know that wonderful old Irish toast? 'Here's to the Council of Trent, that put the fasting on the meat and not on the drink'?"

Bob gestured to the barkeeper. "But I didn't understand why if one St. Teresa could be sold, the other one couldn't. So I tried another publisher, and all he said was, public taste had changed, and could I do him anything with a background of juvenile delinquency? After that I took a job for a while selling frozen custard in a penny arcade and all my friends said, BOB! You with *your talent*? How COULD you?"

The large blonde put down a jungle-green drink and looked at her companion. "What you mean, they love me? If they love me why are they going to Connecticut? You don't go to Connecticut if you love a person," she pointed out.

Old Martens cleared his throat. "My suggestion would be that you combine all three of your mysteriously unsalable novels. The hero sails on a Peruvian blackbirder to raid Easter Island, the inhabitants whereof he kicks in the collions, if male, or arches his loins over, if female; until he gets converted by a vision of both St. Teresas who tell him their life stories—as a result of which he takes a job selling frozen custard in a penny arcade in order to help the juvenile delinquents who frequent the place."

Bob grunted. "Depend on it, with my luck I would get it down just in time to see public taste change again. The publishers would want a pocket treasury of the McGuffey Readers, or else the memoirs of Constantine Porphyrogenetus. I could freeze my arse climbing the Himalayas only to descend, manuscript in hand, to find everybody on Publishers' Row vicariously donning goggles and spearing fish on the bottom of the Erythrean Sea ... Only thing is, I never was sure to what degree public taste changed by itself or how big a part the publishers play in changing it..."

The air, cool though he knew it was, seemed to shimmer in front of him, and through the shimmer he saw Peter Martens sitting up straight and leaning over at him, his seamed and ancient face suddenly eager and alive. "And would you like to be sure?" old Martens asked. "Would you like to be able to know, really to *know*?"

"What? How?" Bob was startled. The old man's eye looked almost all blood by now.

"Because," Martens said, "*I* can tell you what. *I* can tell you how. Nobody else. Only *me*. And not just about books, about everything. Because—"

There was an odd sort of noise, like the distant susurration of wind in dry grass, and Rosen looked around and he saw that a man was standing by them and laughing. This man wore a pale brown suit and had a pale brown complexion, he was very tall and very thin and had a very small head and slouched somewhat. He looked like a mantis, and a mustache like an inverted V was cropped out of the broad blue surface of his upper lip.

"Still dreaming your dreams, Martens?" this man asked, still wheezing his dry whispery laugh. "Gates of Horn, or Gates of Ivory?"

"Get the Hell away from me, Shadwell," said Martens.

Shadwell turned his tiny little head to Rosen and grinned. "He been telling you about how he worked on old Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup account? Too bad the Harrison Narcotics killed that business! He tell you how he worked on the old Sapolio account. The old Stanley Steamer account?" ("Shove off, Shadwell," Martens ordered, planting his elbows on the table and opening his mouth at Bob again.) "Or has he been muttering away like an old Zambezi hand who claims to know the location of the Elephants' Graveyard? Tell me, where is fashion bred?" he intoned. "In the bottle—or in Martens' head?"

Martens' head, thinly covered with yellowish-white hair, jerked in the direction of the new arrival. "This, my boy, is T. Pettys Shadwell, the most despicable of living men. He runs—out of his pocket, because no one will sell him a hat on credit—he runs a so-called market research business. Though who in blazes would hire him since Polly Adler went respectable beats the Hell out of me. I'm warning you, Shadwell," he said, "take off. I've had my fill of you. I'm not giving you any more information." And with a further graphic description of what else he would *not* give T. Pettys Shadwell if the latter was dying of thirst, he folded his aims and fell silent.

The most despicable of living men chuckled, poked a bone-thin hand into a pocket, plucked out a packet of white flaps of cardboard, one of which he tore along a perforated line and handed to Bob. "My card, sir. My operation, true, is not large, but it is Ever Growing. Don't take Mr. Martens too seriously. And don't buy him too many drinks. His health is not as good as it used to be—but then, it never was." And with a final laugh, like the rustling of dried corn shucks, he angled away.

Martens sighed, lapped the last few dewy drops of Bushmill's off a molten ice-cube. "I live in mortal fear that some day I'll have the money to buy all the booze I want and wake up finding I have spilled the beans to that cockatrice who just walked out. Can you imagine anyone having business cards printed to be torn off of perforated pads? Keeps them from getting loose and wrinkled, is his reason. Such a man has no right, under natural or civil law, to live."

In the buzzing coolness of the barroom Bob Rosen tried to catch hold of a thought which was coyly hiding behind a corner in his mind. His mind otherwise, he felt, was lucid as never before. But somehow he lost the thought, found he was telling himself a funny story in French and—although he had never got more than an 80 in the course, back in high school—marvelled at the purity of his accent and then chuckled at the punch-line.

" 'Never mind about black neglijays,' " the stout blonde was saying. " 'If you want to keep your husband's affections,' I said to her, 'then listen to me—' "

The errant thought came trotting back for reason of its own, and jumped into Bob's lap. " 'Spill the beans'?" he quoted, questioningly. "Spill *what* beans? To Shadwell, I mean."

"Most despicable of living men," said old Martens, mechanically. Then a most curious expression washed over his antique countenance: proud, cunning, fearful...

"Would you like to know the sources of the Nile?" he asked. "Would you?"

" 'Let him *go* to Maine,' I said. 'Let him paint rocks all day,' I said. 'Only for Heaven's sake, keep him the Hell off Fire Island,' I said. And was I right, Harold?" demanded the large blonde.

Pete Martens was whispering something, Bob realized. By the look on his face it must have been important, so the young man tried to hear the words over the buzzing, and thought to himself in a fuddled fashion that they ought to be taken down on a steno pad, or something of that sort ... *want to know, really know, where it begins and how, and how often?* But no; what do I know? For years I've been Clara the rotten step-mother, and now I'm Clara the rotten mother-in-law. *Are there such in every generation? Must be ... known for years ... known for years ... only, Who?—and Where?—searched and sought, like Livingstone and all the others searching and seeking, enduring privation, looking for the sources of the Nile...*

Someone, it must have been Clara, gave a long, shuddering cry and then for a while there was nothing but the buzzing, buzzing, buzzing, in Bob Rosen's head; while old Martens lolled back in the chair, regarding him silently and sardonically with his blood-red eye, over which the lid slowly drooped: but old Martens never said a word more.

It was one genuine horror of a hangover, subsiding slowly under (or perhaps despite) every remedy Bob's aching brain could think of: black coffee,

strong tea, chocolate milk, raw-egg-red-pepper-worcestershire sauce. At least, he thought gratefully after a while, he was spared the dry heaves. At least he had all the fixings in his apartment and didn't have to go out. It was a pivotal neighborhood, and he lived right in the pivot, a block where lox and bagels beat a slow retreat before the advance of hog maw and chitterlings on the one hand and *bodegas, comidas criollas*, on the other; swarms of noisy kids running between the trucks and buses, the jackhammers forever wounding the streets.

It took him a moment to realize that the noise he was hearing now was not the muffled echo of the drills, but a tapping on his door. Unsteadily, he tottered over and opened it. He would have been not in the least surprised to find a raven there, but instead it was a tall man, rather stooping, with a tiny head, hands folded mantis-like at his bosom.

After a few dry, futile clickings, Bob's throat essayed the name "Shadburn?"

"Shadwell," he was corrected, softly. "T. Pettys Shadwell ... I'm afraid you're not well, Mr. Rosen..."

Bob clutched the doorpost, moaned softly. Shadwell's hands unfolded, revealed—not a smaller man at whom he'd been nibbling, but a paper bag, soon opened.

"...so I thought I'd take the liberty of bringing you some hot chicken broth."

It was gratefully warm, had both body and savor. Bob lapped at it, croaked his thanks. "Not at all, not-a-tall," Shadwell waved. "Glad to be of some small help." A silence fell, relieved only by weak, gulping noises. "Too bad about old Martens: Of course, he *was* old. Still, a shocking thing to happen to you. A stroke, I'm told. I, uh, trust the police gave you no trouble?"

A wave of mild strength seemed to flow into Bob from the hot broth. "No, they were very nice," he said. "The sergeant called me, 'Son.' They brought me back here."

"Ah." Shadwell was reflective. "He had no family. I know that for a fact."

"Mmm."

"But—assume he left a few dollars. Unlikely, but—And assume he'd willed the few dollars to someone or some charity, perhaps. Never mind. Doesn't concern us. He wouldn't bother to will his papers ... scrapbooks of old copy he'd written, so forth. That's of no interest to people in general. Just be thrown out or burned. But it would be of interest to *me*. I mean, I've been in advertising all my life, you know. Oh, yes. Used to distribute handbills when I was a boy. Fact."

Bob tried to visualize T. Pettys Shadwell as a boy, failed, drank soup. "Good soup," he said. "Thanks. Very kind of you."

Shadwell urged him strongly not to mention it. He chuckled. "Old Pete used to lug around some of the darndest stuff in that portfolio of his," he said.

"In fact, some of it referred to a scheme we were once trying to work out together. Nothing came of it, however, and the old fellow was inclined to be a bit testy about that, still—I believe you'd find it interesting. May I show you?"

Bob still felt rotten, but the death wish had departed. "Sure," he said. Shadwell looked around the room, then at Bob, expectantly. After a minute he said, "Where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"The portfolio. Old Martens'."

They stared at each other. The phone rang. With a wince and a groan, Bob answered. It was Noreen, a girl with pretensions to stagecraft and literature, with whom he had been furtively lecherous on an off-and-on basis, the off periods' commencements being signaled by the presence in Noreen's apartment of Noreen's mother (knitting, middle-class morality and all) when Bob came, intent on venery.

"I've got a terrible hangover," he said, answering her first (guarded and conversational) question; "and the place is a mess."

"See what happens if I turn my back on you for a minute?" Noreen clucked, happily. "Luckily, I have neither work nor social obligations planned for the day, so I'll be right over."

Bob said, "Crazy!", hung up, and turned to face Shadwell, who had been nibbling the tips of his prehensile fingers. "Thanks for the soup," he said, in tones of some finality.

"But the portfolio?"

"I haven't got it."

"It was leaning against the old man's chair when I saw the two of you in the bar."

"Then maybe it's still *in* the bar. Or in the hospital. Or maybe the cops have it. But—"

"It isn't. They don't."

"But I haven't got it. Honest, Mr. Shadwell, I appreciate the soup, but I don't know where the Hell—"

Shadwell rubbed his tiny, sharp mustache, like a ^-mark pointing to his tiny, sharp nose. He rose. "This is really too bad. Those papers referring to the business old Peter and I had been mutually engaged in—really, I have as much right to them as ... But look here. Perhaps he may have spoken to you about it. He always did when he'd been drinking and usually did even when he wasn't. What he liked to refer to as, "The sources of the Nile? Hmmm?" The phrase climbed the belfry and rang bells audible, or at least

apparent, to Shadwell. He seemed to leap forward, long fingers resting on Bob's shoulders.

"You do know what I mean. Look. You: Are a writer. The old man's ideas aren't in your line. I: Am an advertising man. They are in my line. For the contents of his portfolio—as I've explained, they are rightfully mine—I will give: One thousand: Dollars. In fact: For the opportunity of merely *looking* through it: I will give: One *hundred*. Dollars."

As Bob reflected that his last check had been for $17.72 (Monegasque rights to a detective story), and as he heard these vasty sums bandied about, his eyes grew large, and he strove hard to recall what the Hell *had* happened to the portfolio—but in vain.

Shadwell's dry, whispery voice took on a pleading note. "I'm even willing to pay you for the privilege of discussing your conversation with the old f—the old gentleman. Here—" And he reached into his pocket. Bob wavered. Then he recalled that Noreen was even now on her way uptown and crosstown, doubtless bearing with her, as usual, in addition to her own taut charms, various tokens of exotic victualry to which she—turning her back on the veal chops and green peas of childhood and suburbia—was given: such as Shashlik makings, *lokoumi*, wines of the warm south, *baklava, provalone*, and other living witnesses to the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome.

Various hungers, thus stimulated, began to rise and clamor, and he steeled himself against Shadwell's possibly unethical and certainly inconveniently timed offers.

"Not now," he said. Then, throwing delicacy to the winds, "I'm expecting a girl friend. Beat it. Another time."

Annoyance and chagrin on Shadwell's small face, succeeded by an exceedingly disgusting leer. "Why, of *course*," he said. "Another time? Cer-tain-ly. My card—" He hauled out the perforated pack.

"I already got one," Bob said. "Goodbye."

He made haste to throw off the noisome clothes in which he had been first hot, then drunk, then comatose; to take a shower, comb his mouse-colored hair, shave the pink bristles whose odious tint alone prevented him from growing a beard, to spray and anoint himself with various nostra which T. Pettys Shadwell's more successful colleagues in advertising had convinced him (by a thousand ways, both blunt and subtle) were essential to his acceptance by good society; then to dress and await with unconcealed anticipation the advent of the unchaste Noreen.

She came, she kissed him, she prepared food for him: ancient duties of women, any neglect of which is a sure and certain sign of cultural decadence and retrogression. Then she read everything he had written since their last juncture, and here she had some fault to find.

"You waste too much time at the beginning in description," she said, with

the certainty possible to those who have never sold a single manuscript. "You've got to make your characters come alive—in the very first sentence."

" 'Marley was dead, to begin with,' " muttered Bob.

"What?" murmured Noreen, vaguely, feigning not to hear. Her eye, avoiding lover boy, lit on something else. "What's this?" she asked. "You have so much money you just leave it lying around? I thought you said you were broke." And Bob followed her pointing and encarnadined fingertip to where lay two crisp twenty-dollar bills, folded lengthwise, on the table next the door.

"Shadwell!" he said, instantly. And, in response to her arched brows (which would have looked much better un-plucked, but who can tell her that?), he said, "A real rat of a guy—a louse, a boor—who had some crumby proposal."

"And who also has," said Noreen, going straight to the heart of the matter, "money." Bob resolved never to introduce the two of them, if he could help it. "Anyway," she continued, laying aside Bob's manuscript, "now you can take me out somewhere." Feebly he argued the food then cooking; she turned off the gas and thrust the pots incontinently into the ice-box, rose, and indicated she was now ready to leave. He had other objections to leaving just then, which it would have been impolitic to mention, for in Noreen's scheme of morality each episode of passion was a sealed incident once it was over, and constituted no promise of any other yet to come.

With resignation tempered by the reflection that Shad-well's four sawbucks cpuldn't last forever, and that there was never so long-drawn-out an evening but would wind up eventually back in his apartment, Bob accompanied her out the door.

And so it was. The next day, following Noreen's departure in mid-morning, found Bob in excellent spirits but flat-broke. He was reviewing the possibilities of getting an advance from his agent, Stuart Emmanuel, a tiny, dapper man whose eyes behind double lenses were like great black shoe-buttons, when the phone rang. ESP or no ESP, it was Stuart himself, with an invitation to lunch.

"I'm glad *some* of your clients are making money," said Bob, most ungraciously.

"Oh, it's not my money," said Stuart. "It's J. Oscar Rutherford's. One of his top men—no, it's not Joe Tressling, I know you saw him the day before yesterday, yes, I know nothing came of it, this is a different fellow altogether. Phillips Anhalt. I want you to come."

So Bob left yesterday's half-cooked chow in the ice-box and, very little loath, set out to meet Stuart and Phillips Anhalt, of whom he had never heard before. The first rendezvous was for a drink at a bar whose name also meant nothing to him, though as soon as he walked in he recognized it as the one where he had been the day before yesterday, and this made him uneasy—doubly so, for he had callously almost forgotten what had happened there. The bartender, it was at once evident, had not. His wary

glance at the three of them must have convinced him that they were reasonably good insurance risks, however, for he made no comment.

Anhalt was a middle-aged man with a rather sweet and slightly baffled face and iron-gray haircut *en brosse*. "I enjoyed your story very much," he told Bob—thus breaking in at once upon the shallow slumber of the little scold who boarded in Bob's Writer's Consciousness. Of *course* (it shrilled) I know *exactly* the one you mean, after all, I've written only one story in my entire *life* so "*your story*" is the only identification it needs. I liked your *novel*, Mr. Hemingway. I enjoyed your *play*, Mr. Kaufman.

Stuart Emmanuel, who knew the labyrinthine ways of writers' minds as he knew the figures in his bank statement, said smoothly, "I expect Mr. Anhalt refers to *Unvexed to the Sea*."

With firm politeness Mr. Anhalt disappointed this expectation. "I know that's the prize-winner," he said, "and I mean to read it, but the one I referred to was *The Green Wall*." Now, as it happened, this very short little story had been bounced thirteen times before its purchase for a negligible sum by a low-grade salvage market of a magazine; but it was one of Bob's favorites. He smiled at Phillips Anhalt, Anhalt smiled at him, Stuart beamed and ordered drinks.

The waiter passed a folded slip of paper to Bob Rosen when he came with the popskull. "The lady left it," he said.

"What lady?"

"The blonde lady."

Agent and ad man smiled, made appropriate remarks while Bob scanned the note, recognized it as being in his own handwriting, failed to make it out, crammed it in his pocket.

"Mr. Anhalt," said Stuart, turning dark, large-pupiled eyes on his client, "is a very important man at Rutherford's: he has a corner office." A gentle, somewhat tired smile from Anhalt, who gave the conversation a turn and talked about his home in Darien, and the work he was doing on it, by himself. Thus they got through the round of drinks, then walked a few blocks to the restaurant.

Here Bob was infinitely relieved that Anhalt did not order poached egg on creamed spinach, corned beef hash, or something equally simple, wholesome, and disgusting, and tending to inhibit Bob's own wide-ranging tastes: Anhalt ordered duckling, Stuart had mutton chops, and Bob chose tripe and onions.

"Joe Tressling tells me that you're going to write something for the cheese show," said Anhalt, as they disarranged the pickle plate. Bob half-lifted his eyebrows, smiled. Stuart gazed broodingly into the innards of a sour tomato as if he might be saying to himself, "Ten percent of $17.72, Monegasque rights to a detective story."

"More cheese is being eaten today in the United States than twenty-five years ago," Anhalt continued. "Much, much more ... Is it the result of advertising? Such as the Aunt Carrie Hour? Has that changed public taste? Or—has the public taste changed for, say, other reasons, and are we just riding the wave?"

"The man who could have answered that question," Bob said, "died the day before yesterday."

Anhalt let out his breath. "How do you know he could have?"

"He said so."

Anhalt, who'd had a half-eaten dilled cucumber in his hand, carefully laid it in the ash-tray, and leaned forward. "What else did he say? Old Martens, I mean. You *do* mean old Martens, don't you?"

Bob said that was right, and added, with unintentional untruthfulness, that he'd been offered a thousand dollars for that information, and had turned it down. Before he could correct himself, Anhalt, customary faint pink face gone almost red, and Stuart Emmanuel, eyes glittering hugely, said with one voice, "*Who* offered—?"

"What comes out of a chimney?"

Stuart, recovering first (Anhalt continued to stare, said nothing, while the color receded), said, "Bob, this is not a joke. That is the reason we have this appointment. An awful lot of money is involved—for you, for me, for Phil Anhalt, for, well, for everybody. For just everybody. So—"

It slipped out. "For T. Pettys Shadwell?" Bob asked.

The effect, as they used to say in pre-atomic days, was electrical. Stuart made a noise, between a moan and a hiss, rather like a man who, having trustingly lowered his breeches, sits all unawares upon an icicle. He clutched Bob's hand. "You didn't godforbid *sign* anything?" he wailed. Anhalt, who had gone red before, went white this time around, but still retained diffidence enough to place his hand merely upon Bob's jacket-cuff.

"He's a cad!" he said, in trembling tones. "A swine, Mr. Rosen!"

" "The most despicable of living men'," quoted Mr. Rosen. ("Exactly," said Anhalt.)

"Bob, you didn't *sign* anything, godforbid?"

"No. No. No. But I feel as if I've had all the mystery I intend to have. And unless I get Information, why, gents, I shan't undo one button." The waiter arrived with the food, and, according to the rules and customs of the Waiters' Union, gave everybody the wrong orders. When this was straightened out, Stuart said, confidently, "Why, of course, Bob: Information: Why, certainly. There is nothing to conceal. Not from you," he said, chuckling. "Go ahead, start eating. I'll eat and talk, you just eat and

listen."

And so, as he tucked away the tripe and onions, Bob heard Stuart recount, through a slight barrier of masticated mutton chop, a most astonishing tale. In every generation (Stuart said) there were leaders of fashion, arbiters of style. At Nero's court, Petronius. In Regency England, Beau Brummel. At present and for some time past, everyone knew about the Paris designers and their influence. And in the literary field ("Ahah!" muttered Bob, staring darkly at his forkful of stewed ox-paunch)—in the literary field, said Stuart, swallowing in haste for greater clarity, they all knew what effect a review by any one of A Certain Few Names, on the front page of the Sunday Times book section, could have upon the work of even an absolute unknown.

"It will sky-rocket it to Fame and Fortune with the speed of light," said Stuart.

"Come to the point." But Stuart, now grinding away on a chunk of grilled sheep, could only gurgle, wave his fork, and raise his eyebrows. Anhalt stopped his moody task of reducing the duckling to a mass of orange-flavored fibres, and turned to take the words, as it were, from Stuart's mutton-filled mouth.

"The point, Mr. Rosen, is that poor old Martens went up and down Madison Avenue for years claiming he had found a way of predicting fashions and styles, and nobody believed him. Frankly, *I* didn't. But I do now. What caused me to change my mind was this: When I heard, day before yesterday, that he had died so suddenly, I had a feeling that I had something of his, something that he'd left for me to look at once, something I'd taken just to get rid of him. And, oh, perhaps I was feeling a bit guilty, certainly a bit sorry, so I asked my secretary to get it for me. Well, you know, with the J. Oscar Rutherford people, as with Nature, nothing is ever lost—" Phillips Anhalt smiled his rather shy, rather sweet and slightly baffled smile—"so she got it for me and I took a look at it ... I was..." He paused, hesitated for *mot juste*.

Stuart, with a masterful swallow, leaped into the breach, claymore in hand. "He was flabbergasted!"

Astounded, amended Anhalt. He was astounded.

There, in an envelope addressed to Peter Martens, and postmarked November 10, 1945, was a color snapshot of a young man wearing a fancy weskit.

"Now, you know, Mr. Rosen, no one in 1945 was wearing fancy weskits. They didn't come in till some years later. How did Marten know they were going to come in? And there was another snapshot of a young man in a charcoal suit and a pink shirt. Nobody was wearing that outfit in '45 ... I checked the records, you see, and the old gentleman had left the things for me in December of that year. I'm ashamed to say that I had the receptionist put him off when he called again ... But just think of it: fancy weskits, charcoal suits, pink shirts, in 1945." He brooded. Bob asked if

there was anything about grey flannel suits in the envelope, and Anhalt smiled a faint and fleeting smile.

"Ah, Bob, now, Bob." Stuart pursed his mouth in mild (and greasy) reproof. "You still don't seem to realize that this is S*E*R*I*O*U*S*."

"Indeed it is," said P. Anhalt. "As soon as I told Mac about it, do you know what he said, Stu? He said, 'Phil, don't spare the horses.' " And they nodded soberly, as those who have received wisdom from on high.

"Who," Bob asked, "is Mac?"

Shocked looks. Mac, he was told, the older men speaking both tandem and *au pair*, was Robert R. Mac Ian, head of the happy J. Oscar Rutherford corporate family.

"Of course, Phil," Stuart observed, picking slyly at his baked potato, "I won't ask why it took you till this morning to get in touch with me. With some other outfit, I might maybe suspect that they were trying to see what they could locate for themselves without having to cut our boy, here, in for a slice of the pie. He being the old man's confidant and moral heir, anyway, so to speak." (Bob stared at this description, said nothing. Let the thing develop as far as it would by itself, he reflected.) "But not the Rutherford outfit. It's too big, too ethical, for things like that." Anhalt didn't answer.

After a second, Stuart went on, "Yes, Bob, this is really something big. If the late old Mr. Martens' ideas can be successfully developed—and I'm sure Phil here will not expect you to divulge until we are ready to talk Terms—they will be really invaluable to people like manufacturers, fashion editors, designers, merchants, and, last but not least—advertising men. Fortunes can literally be made, and saved. No wonder that a dirty dog like this guy Shadwell is trying to horn in on it. Why, listen—but I'm afraid we'll have to terminate this enchanting conversation. Bob has to go home and get the material in order—" (What material? Bob wondered. Oh, well, so far: $40 from Shadwell and a free lunch from Anhalt.)—"and you and I, Phil, will discuss those horses Mac said not to spare."

Anhalt nodded. It seemed obvious to Rosen that the ad man was unhappy, unhappy about having given Peter Martens the brush-off while he was alive, unhappy about being numbered among the vultures now that he was dead. And, so thinking, Bob realized with more than a touch of shame, that he himself was now numbered among the vultures; and he asked about funeral arrangements. But it seemed that the Masonic order was taking care of that: the late Peter Martens was already on his way back to his native town of Marietta, Ohio, where his lodge brothers would give him a formal farewell: apron, sprigs of acacia, and all the ritual appurtenances. And Bob thought, why not? And was feel-ing somehow, very much relieved.

On the uptown bus which he had chosen over the swifter, hotter, dingier subway, he tried to collect his thoughts. What on earth could he ever hope to remember about a drunken conversation, which would make any sense to anybody, let alone be worth money? "The Sources of the Nile," the old man had said, glaring at him with bloody eye. Well, Shadwell knew the phrase,

too. Maybe Shadwell knew what it meant, exactly what it meant, because he, Bob Rosen, sure as Hell didn't. But the phrase did catch at the imagination. Martens had spent years—who knew how many?—seeking the sources of his particular Nile, the great river of fashion, as Mungo Park, Livingstone, Speke, and other half-forgotten explorers had spent years in search of theirs. They had all endured privation, anguish, rebuffs, hostility ... and in the end, just as the quest had killed Mungo Park, Livingstone, Speke, the other quest had killed old Peter Martens.

But, aside from insisting that there was a source or sources, and that he knew where, what had Pete said? Why hadn't Bob stayed sober? Probably the fat blonde at the next table, she of the poisonously green drink and the rotten step-children, probably she retained more of the old man's tale, picked up by intertable osmosis, than did Bob himself.

And with that he heard the voice of the waiter at the bar that noon: *The lady left it ... What lady? ... The blonde lady* ... Bob scrabbled in his pocket and came up with the note. On the sweaty, crumpled bit of paper, scrawled in his own writing, or a cruel semblance of it, he read: *Ditx sags su Bimosh oh—*

"What the *Hell*!" he muttered, and fell to, with fur-rowed face, to make out what evidently owed more to Bush-mill's than to Everhard Faber. At length he decided.that the note read, *Peter says, see Bensons on Purchase Place, the Bronx, if I don't believe him. Peter says, write it down.*

"It must mean something," he said, half-aloud, staring ab-sently from Fifth Avenue to Central Park, as the bus roared
and rattled between opulence and greenery. "It has to mean something."

"Well, what a shame," said Mr. Benson. "But how nice it was of you to come and tell us." His wavy-gray hair was cut evenly around in soupbowl style, and as there was no white skin at the back of his neck, had evidently been so cut for some time. "Would you like some iced tea?"

"Still, he Went Quickly," said Mrs. Benson, who, at the business of being a woman, was in rather a large way of business. "I don't think there's any iced tea, Daddy. When I have to go, that's the way I want to go. Lemonade, maybe?"

"There isn't any lemonade if what Kitty was drinking was the last of the lemonade. The Masons give you a nice funeral. A real nice funeral. I used to think about joining up, but I never seem to get around to it. I think there's some gin. Isn't there some gin, Mommy? How about a nice cool glass of gin-and-cider, Bob? Kit will make us some, by and by."

Bob said, softly, that that sounded nice. He sat half-sunken in a canvas chair in the large, cool living-room. A quarter of an hour ago, having found out with little difficulty which house on Purchase Place was the Bensons', he had approached with something close to fear and trembling. Cer-tainly, he had been sweating in profusion. The not-too-recently painted wooden house was just a blind, he told himself. Inside there would be banks of noiseless machines into which cards were fed and from which tapes rolled

in smooth continuity. And a large, broad-shouldered young man whose hair was cut so close to the skull that the scars underneath were plain to see, this young man would bar Bob's way and, with cold, calm confidence, say, "Yes?"

"Er, um, Mr. Martens told me to see Mr. Benson."

"There is no Mr. Martens connected with our organization and Mr. Benson has gone to Washington. I'm afraid you can't come in: everything here is Classified."

And Bob would slink away, feeling Shoulders' scornful glance in the small of his shrinking, sweaty back.

But it hadn't been like that at all. Not anything like that at all.

Mr. Benson waved an envelope at Bob. "Here's a connivo, if you like," he said. "Fooled I don't know how many honest collectors, and dealers, too: Prince Abu-Somebody flies over here from Pseudo-Arabia without an expense account. Gets in with some crooked dealers, I could name them, but I won't, prints off this *en—tire* issue of airmails, pre-cancelled. Made a mint. Flies back to Pseudo-Arabia, *whomp!* they cut off his head!" And he chuckled richly at the thought of this prompt and summary vengeance. Plainly, in Mr. Benson's eyes, it had been done in the name of philatelic ethics; no considerations of dynastic intrigues among the petrol pashas entered his mind.

"Kitty, are you going to make us some cold drinks?" Mrs. B. inquired. "Poor old Pete, he used to be here for Sunday dinner on and off, oh, for just years. Is that Bentley coming?"

Bob just sat and sucked in the coolness and the calm and stared at Kitty. Kitty had a tiny stencil cut in the design of a star and she was carefully lacquering her toenails with it. He could hardly believe she was for real. "Ethereal" was the word for her beauty, and "ethereal" was the only word for it. Long, long hair of an indescribable gold fell over her heart-shaped face as she bent forward towards each per-fectly formed toe. And she was wearing a dress like that of a child in a Kate Greenaway book.

"Oh, Bentley," said B., Senior. "What do you think has happened? Uncle Peter Martens passed away, all of a sud-den, day before yesterday, and this gentleman is a friend of his and came to tell us about it; isn't that thoughtful?"

Bentley said, "*Ahhh*." Bentley was a mid-teener who wore jeans cut off at the knees and sneakers with the toes, insteps, and heels removed. He was naked to the waist and across his suntanned and hairless chest, in a neat curve commencing just over his left nipple and terminating just under his right nipple, was the word *VIPERS* stenciled in red paint.

"*Ahhh*," said Bentley Benson. "Any pepsies?"

"Well, I'd asked you to bring some," his mother said, mildly. "Make a nice,

big pitcher of gin-and-cider, Bentley, please, but only a *little* gin for yourself, in a separate glass, remember now."

Bentley said, "*Ahhh*," and departed, scratch-ing on his chest right over the bright, red S.

Bob's relaxed gaze took in, one by one, the pictures on the mantelpiece. He sat up a bit, pointed. "Who is that?" he asked. The young man looked something like Bentley and something like Bentley's father.

"That's my oldest boy, Barton, Junior," said Mother B. "You see that nice vest he's wearing? Well, right after the War, Bart, he was in the Navy then, picked up a piece of lovely brocade over in Japan, and he sent it back home. I thought of making a nice bed-jacket out of it, but there wasn't enough material. So I made it into a nice vest, in-stead. Poor old Uncle Peter, he liked that vest, took a picture of Bart in it. Well, what do you know, a few years later fancy vests became quite popular, and of course, by that time Bart was tired of his ("Of course," Bob murmured), so he sold it to a college boy who had a summer job at Little and Harpey's. Got $25 for it, and we all went out to dinner downtown that night."

Kitty delicately stenciled another star on her toenails.

"I see," Bob said. After a moment, "Little and Harpey's?" he repeated.

Yes, that same. The publishers. Bart, and his younger brother Alton, were publishers' readers. Alt had been with Little and Harpey but was now with Scribbley's Sons; Bart had worked for Scribbley's at one time, too. "They've been with *all* the biggest publishing houses," their mother said, proudly. "Oh, *they* aren't any of your stick-in-the muds, no siree." Her hands had been fiddling with a piece of bright cloth, and then, suddenly, cloth and hands went up to her head, her fingers flashed, and—complete, perfect—she was wearing an intricately folded turban.

Bentley came in carrying a pitcher of drink in one hand and five glasses—one to each finger—in the other. "I told you to mix yours separately, I think," his mother said. Taking no notice of her youngest's *Ahhh*, she turned to Bob. "I have
a whole basket of these pieces of madras," she said, "some silk, some cotton ... and it's been on my mind all day. Now, if I just remember the way those old women from the West Indies used to tie them on their heads when I was girl ... and now, sure enough, it just came back to me! How does it look?" she asked.

"Looks very nice, Mommy," said Bart Sr. And added, "I bet it would cover up the curlers better than those babush-kas the women wear, you know?"

Bob Rosen bet it would, too.

So here it was and this was it. The sources of the Nile. How old Peter Martens had discovered it, Bob did not know. By and by, he supposed, he would find out. How did they *do* it, was it that they had a *panache*—? or was it a "wild talent," like telepathy, second sight, and calling dice or balls?

He did not know.

"Bart said he was reading a real nice manuscript that came in just the other day," observed Mrs. Benson, dreamily, over her glass. "About South America. He says he thinks that South America has been neglected, and that there is going to be a revival of interest in non-fiction about South America."

"No more Bushmen?" Barton Sr., asked.

"No, Bart says he thinks the public is getting tired of Bushmen. He says he only gives Bushmen another three months and then—poo—you won't be able to give the books away." Bob asked what Alton thought. "Well, Alton is read-ing fiction now, you know. He thinks the public is getting tired of novels about murder and sex and funny war experi-ences. Alt thinks they're about ready for some novels about ministers. He said to one of the writers that Scribbley's publishes, 'Why don't you do a novel about a minister?" he said. And the man said he thought it was a good idea."

There was a long, comfortable silence.

There was no doubt about it. *How* the Bensons did it, Bob still didn't know. But they did do it. With absolute unconsciousness and with absolute accuracy, they were able to predict future trends in fashion. It was marvelous. It was uncanny. It—Kitty lifted her lovely head and looked at Bob through the long, silken skein of hair, then brushed it aside. "Do you ever have any money?" she asked. It was like the sound of small silver bells, her voice. Where, compared to this, were the flat Long Island vocables of, say, Noreen? Nowhere at all.

"Why, Kitty Benson, what a question," her mother said, reaching out her glass for Bentley to refill. "Poor Peter Martens, just to think—a little more, Bentley, don't think you're going to drink what's left, young man."

"Because if you ever have any money," said the voice like the Horns of Elfland, "we could go out somewhere together. Some boys don't ever have any money," it concluded, with infinitely loving melancholy.

"I'm going to have some money," Bob said at once. "Abso-lutely. Uh—when could—"

She smiled an absolute enchantment of a smile. "Not to-night," she said, "because I have a date. And not tomorrow night, because I have a date. But the day after tomorrow night, because then I don't have a date."

A little voice in one corner of Bob's mind said, "This girl has a brain about the size of a small split pea; you know that, don't you?" And another voice, much less little, in the op-posite corner, shrieked, "Who *cares*? Who *cares* ?" Furthermore, Noreen had made a faint but definite beginning on an extra chin, and her bosom tended (unless artfully and arti-ficially supported) to droop. Neither was true of Kitty at all, at all.

"The day after tomorrow night, then," he said. "It's a date."

All that night he wrestled with his angel. "You can't ex-pose these people to the sordid glare of modern commerce," the angel said, throwing him with a half-nelson. "They'd wither and die. Look at the dodo—look at the buffalo. Will you look?"

"*You* look," growled Bob, breaking the hold, and seizing the angel in a scissors-lock. "I'm not going to let any damned account executives get their chicken-plucking hands on the Bensons. It'll all be done through me, see? Through *me*!" And with that he pinned the angel's shoulders to the mat. "And besides," he said, clenching his teeth, "I need the money..."

Next morning he called up his agent. "Here's just a few samples to toss Mr. Phillips Anhalt's way," he said grandi-osely. "Write 'em down. Soupbowl haircuts for men. That's what I said. They can get a sunlamp treatment for the backs of their necks in the barber-shops. Listen. Women will stencil stars on their toenails with nail polish. Kate Greenaway style dresses for women are going to come in. Huh? Well, you bet your butt that Anhalt will know what Kate Greenaway means. Also, what smart women will wear will be madras kerchiefs tied up in the old West Indian way. This is very complicated, so I guess they'll have to be pre-folded and pre-stitched. Silks and cottons ... You writing this down? Okay.

"Teen-agers will wear, summer-time, I mean, they'll wear shorts made out of cut-down blue jeans. And sandals made out of cut-down sneakers. No shirts or undershirts—bare-chested, and—What? *NO*, for cry-sake, just the *boys*!"

And he gave Stuart the rest of it, books and all, and he demanded and got an advance. Next day Stuart reported that Anhalt reported that Mac Ian was quite excited. Mac had said—did Bob know what Phil said Mac said? Well, Mac said, "Let's not spoil the ship for a penny's worth of tar, Phil."

Bob demanded and received another advance. When Noreen called, he was brusque.

The late morning of his date-day he called to confirm it. That is, he tried to. The operator said that she was sorry, but that number had been disconnected. He made it up to the Bronx by taxi. The house was empty. It was not only empty of people, it was empty of everything. The wallpaper had been left, but that was all.

Many years earlier, about the time of his first cigarette, Bob had been led by a friend in the dead of night (say, half-past ten) along a quiet suburban street, pledged to confidence by the most frightful vows. Propped against the wall of a garage was a ladder—it did not go all the way to the roof: Bob and friend had pulled themselves up with effort which, in another context, would have won the full approval of their gym teacher. The roof made an excellent post to observe the going-to-bed preparations of a young woman who had seemingly never learned that window shades could be pulled down. Suddenly light went on in another house, illuminating the roof of the garage; the young woman had seen the two and yelled; and Bob, holding onto the parapet with sweating hands and reaching for the ladder with

sweating feet, had discovered that the ladder was no longer there...

He felt the same way now.

Besides feeling stunned, incredulous, and panicky, he also felt annoyed. This was because he acutely realized that he was acting out an old moving picture scene. The scene would have been closer to the (film) realities had he been wearing a tattered uniform, and in a way he wanted to giggle, and in a way he wanted to cry. Only through obligation to the script did he carry the farce farther: wandering in and out of empty rooms, calling out names, asking if anyone was there.

No one was. And there were no notes or messages, not even Croatan carved on a doorpost. Once, in the gathering shadows, he thought he heard a noise, and he whirled around, half-expecting to see an enfeebled Mr. Benson with a bacon-fat lamp in one hand, or an elderly Negro, perhaps, who would say, tearfully, "Marse Bob, dem Yankees done burn all de cotton..." But there was nothing.

He trod the stairs to the next house and addressed in-quiries to an old lady in a rocking-chair. "Well, I'm sure that *I* don't know," she said, in a paper-thin and fretful voice. "I saw them, all dressed up, getting into the car, and I said, 'Why, where are you all *going*, Hazel?' ("Hazel?" "Hazel Benson. I thought you said you *knew* them, young man?" "Oh, yes. Yes, of course. Please go on.") Well, I said, 'Where are you all *going*, Hazel?' And she said, 'It's time for a change, Mrs. Machen.' And they all laughed and they waved and they drove away. And then some men came and packed everything up and took it away in trucks. Well! 'Where did they all *go*?' I asked them. 'Where did they all *go*?' But do you think they'd have the common decency to *tell* me, after I've lived here for fifty-four years? Not-a-word. Oh—"

Feeling himself infinitely cunning, Bob said, offhandedly, "Yes, I know just the outfit you mean. O'Brien Movers."

"I do *not* mean O'Brien Movers. Whatever gave you such an idea? It was the Seven Sebastian Sisters."

And this was the most that Bob Rosen could learn. In-quiries at other houses either drew blanks or produced such probably significant items as, "Kitty said, 'Here are your curlers, because I won't need them anymore' "; "Yes, just the other day I was talking to Bart, Senior, and he said, 'You know, you don't realize that you're in a rut until you have to look up to see the sky.' Well, those Bensons always talked a little crazy, and so I thought nothing of it, until—"; and, "I said to Bentley, 'Vipe, how about tomorrow we go over to Williamsbridge and pass the chicks there in review?' and he said, 'No, Vipe, I can't make that scene tomorrow, my ancients put another poster on the billboard.' So I said, 'Ay-las,' and next thing I know—"

"His who did what?"

"Fellow, you don't wot this Viper talk one note, do you? His *family*, see, they had made other plans. They really cut loose, didn't they?"

They really did. So there Bob was, neat and trim and sweet-smelling, and nowhere to go, and with a pocketful of money. He looked around the tree-lined street and two blocks away, on the corner, he saw a neon sign. *Harry's*, it flashed (green). *Bar and Grill* (red).

"Where's Harry?" he asked the middle-aged woman be-hind the bar.

"Lodge meeting," she said. "He'll be back soon. They aren't doing any labor tonight, just business. Waddle ya have?"

"A ball of Bushmill," he said. He wondered where he had heard that, last. It was cool in the bar. And then he remembered, and then he shuddered.

"Oh, that's bad," Stuart Emmanuel moaned. "That sounds very bad ... And you shouldn't've gone to the moving van people yourself. Now you probably muddied the waters."

Bob hung his head. His efforts to extract information from the Seven Sebastian Sisters—apparently they were septuplets, and all had gray mustaches—had certainly failed wretchedly. And he kept seeing Kitty Benson's face, framed in her golden hair like a sun-lit nimbus, kept hearing Kitty Benson's golden voice.

"Well," Stuart said, "I'll do my damndest." And no doubt he did, but it wasn't enough. He was forced to come clean with Anhalt. And Anhalt, after puttering around, his sweet smile more baffled than ever, told Mac everything. Mac put the entire *force majeure* of the T. Oscar Rutherford organiza-tion behind the search. And they came up with two items.

Item. The Seven Sebastian Sisters had no other address than the one on Purchase Place, and all the furniture was in their fireproof warehouse, with two years' storage paid in advance.

Item. The owner of the house on Purchase Place said, "I told them I'd had an offer to buy the house, but I wouldn't, if they'd agree to a rent increase. And the next thing I knew, the keys came in the mail."

Little and Harpey, as well as Scribbley's Sons, reported only that Alt and Bart, Junior, had said that they were leaving, but hadn't said where they were going.

"Maybe they've gone on a trip somewhere," Stuart sug-gested. "Maybe they'll come back before long. Anhalt has ears in all the publishing houses, maybe he'll hear something."

But before Anhalt heard anything, Mac decided that there was no longer anything to hear. "I wash my hands of it," he declared. "It's a wild goose chase. Where did you ever pick up this crackpot idea in the first place?"

And Phillips Anhalt's smile faded away. Weeks passed, and months.

But Bob Rosen has never abandoned hope. He has checked with the Board

of Education about Bentley's records, to see if they know anything about a transcript or transfer. He has haunted Nassau Street, bothering—in particular—dealers specializing in Pseudo-Arabian airmail issues, in hopes that Mr. Benson has made his whereabouts known to them. He has hocked his watch to buy hamburgers and pizzas for the Vipers, and innumerable Scotches on innumerable rocks for the trim young men and the girls fresh out of Bennington who staff the offices of our leading publishers. He—

In short, he has taken up the search of Peter Martens (Old Pete, Sneaky Pete). He is looking for the sources of the Nile. Has he *ever* found *anything* ? Well, yes, as a matter of fact, he has.

The strange nature of cyclical coincidences has been sum-med up, somewhere, in the classical remark that one can go for years without seeing a one-legged man wearing a base-ball cap; and then, in a single afternoon, one will see three of them. So it happened with Bob Rosen.

One day, feeling dull and heavy, and finding that the elfin notes of Kitty Benson's voice seemed to be growing fainter in his mind, Bob called up her old landlord.

"No," said the old landlord, "I never heard another word from them. And I'll tell you who else I never heard from, either. The fellow who offered to buy the house. He never came around and when I called his office, he just laughed at me. Fine way to do business." "What's his name?" Bob asked, listlessly. "Funny name," said the old landlord. "E. Peters Shadwell? Something like that. The Hell with him, anyway."

Bob tore his rooms apart looking for the card with the perforated top edge which Shadwell had—it seemed so very long ago—torn off his little book and given him. Also, it struck him, neither could he find the piece of paper on which he had scribbled old Martens' last message, with the Bensons' name and street on it. He fumbled through the Yellow Book, but couldn't seem to locate the proper category for the mantis-man's business. And he gave up on the regular directory, what with Shad, Shadd, -wel, -well, -welle, etc.

He would, he decided, go and ask Stuart Emmanuel. The dapper little agent had taken the loss of the Bensons so hard ("It was a beauty of a deal," he'd all but wept) that he might also advance a small sum of money for the sake of the Quest. Bob was in the upper East 40s when he passed a bar where he had once taken Noreen for cocktails—a mis-take, for it had advanced her already expensive tastes an-other notch—and this reminded him that he had not heard from her in some time. He was trying to calculate just how much time, and if he ought to do something about it, when he saw the third one-legged man in the baseball cap.

That is to say, speaking nonmetaphorically, he had turned to cross a street in the middle of a block, and was halted by the absence of any gap between the two vehicles (part of a traffic jam caused by a long-unclosed incision in the street) directly in front of him. Reading from right to left, the vehicles consisted of an Eleanor-blue truck reading *Grandma Goldberg's Yum-Yum Borsht*, and an Obscene-pink Jaguar containing T. Pettys

Shadwell and Noreen.

It was the moment of the Shock of Recognition. He under-stood everything.

Without his making a sound, they turned together and saw him, mouth open, everything written on his face. And they knew that he knew.

"Why, Bob," said Noreen.

"Ah, Rosen," said Shadwell.

"I'm sorry that we weren't able to have you at the wed-ding," she said. "But everything happened so quickly. Pete just swept me off my feet."

Bob said, "I'll bet."

She said, "Don't be bitter"—seeing that he was, and en-joying it. Horns sounded, voices cursed, but the line of cars didn't move.

"You did it," Bob said, coming close. Shadwell's hands left the wheel and came together at his chest, fingers down. "You saw that crisp green money he left and you saw his card and got in touch with him and you came in and took the
note and—*Where are they*?" he shouted, taking hold of the small car and shaking it. "I don't give a damn about the money, just tell me where they are! Just let me see the girl!"

But T. Pettys Shadwell just laughed and laughed, his voice like the whisper of the wind in the dry leaves. "Why, *Bob*," said Noreen, bugging her eyes and flashing her large, coarse gems, and giving the scene all she had, "why, Bob, was there a *girl*? You never told *me*."

Bob abandoned his anger, disclaimed all interest in the commercial aspect of the Bensons, offered to execute bonds and sign papers in blood, if only he were allowed to see Kitty. Shadwell, fingering his tiny carat of a mustache, shrugged. "Write the girl a letter," he said, smirking. "I as-sure you, all mail will be forwarded." And then the traffic jam broke and the Jag zoomed off, Noreen's scarlet lips pursed in blowing a kiss.

"Write?" Why bless you, of course Bob wrote. Every day and often twice a day for weeks. But never a reply did he get. And on realizing that his letters probably went no farther than Noreen (Mrs. T. Pettys) Shadwell, who doubt-less gloated and sneered in the midst of her luxury, he fell into despair, and ceased. Where is Kitty of the heart-shaped face, Kitty of the light-gold hair, Kitty of the elfin voice? Where are her mother and father and her three brothers? Where now are the sources of the Nile? Ah, where?

So there you are. One can hardly suppose that Shadwell has perforce kidnapped the entire Benson family, but the fact is that they have disappeared almost entirely without trace, and the slight trace which remains leads directly to and only to the door of T. Pettys Shadwell Associates, Market Research Advisors. Has he whisked them all away to some sylvan retreat in the remote recesses of the Great Smoky Mountains?

Are they even now pursuing their prophetic ways in one of the ever-burgeoning, endlessly proliferating suburbs of the City of the Angels? Or has he, with genius diabolical, located them so near to hand that far-sighted vision must needs forever miss them?

In deepest Brooklyn, perhaps, amongst whose labyrinthine ways an army of surveyors could scarce find their own stakes?—or in fathomless Queens, red brick and yellow brick, world without end, where the questing heart grows sick and faint?

Rosen does not know, but he has not ceased to care. He writes to live, but he lives to look, now selling, now search-ing, famine succeeding feast, but hope never failing.

Phillips Anhalt, however, has not continued so successfully. He has not Bob's hopes. Anhalt continues, it is true, with the T. Oscar Rutherford people, but no longer has his corner office, or any private office at all. Anhalt failed: Anhalt now has a desk in the bull pen with the other failures and the new apprentices.

And while Bob ceaselessly searches the streets—for who knows in which place he may find the springs bubbling and welling?—and while Anhalt drinks bitter tea and toils like a slave in a salt mine, that swine, that cad, that most despicable of living men, T. Pettys Shadwell, has three full floors in a new building of steel, aluminum, and blue-green glass a block from the Cathedral; he has a box at the Met, a house in Bucks County, a place on the Vineyard, an apartment in Beekman Place, a Caddy, a Bentley, two Ja-guars, a yacht that sleeps ten, and one of the choicest small (but ever-growing) collections of Renoirs in private hands today...

There were not many of them left, and it was vital to take every precaution against harm from a probably hostile environment. But life could become unbearably boring, par-ticularly for the young, inside the dome.

SOMEBODY TO PLAY WITH

by Jay Williams

The children usually met before school near the emer-gency air-lock, behind a mountain of crates full of spare parts and supplies. Through the foggy plastic of the dome they could see the gritty landscape with its fringe of eroded hills, and not far away the spongy upper branches of a fun-gus forest which grew in a deep ravine they called Grand Canyon, after a place on Earth they knew only from their Social Studies class.

Nick was always the first to arrive. He approached in short dashes, keeping a wary eye out for the Enemy, which today was Comanches. He dropped behind a case labelled INSTRUMENTS CHF IPST X-8852 HANDLE WITH CARE, and lying flat on his stomach turned his head to glance upward at the black stencilled letters which before his very eyes melted into a signpost saying FORT AUSTIN 8 MILES. A flint-pointed arrow buzzed over him and stuck

quivering in the sign; when he squinched up his eyes tightly it almost became real. Slowly, he wriggled forward from the shadow of the cases into the bright, reddish sunlight that came through the dome.

A swift glance to right and left, and he could emerge into the open.

Somebody said, "Bang! Gotcha."

It was Snooky. He had climbed the crate mountain, and from its summit lay prone with his rifle pointing at Nick. The rifle was made from a two-foot section of aluminum tubing and a scrap of styrofoam.

Nick dodged back. "You did not," he retorted. "Bang! I got you."

Snooky fell dead. Then he got up and scrambled down the mountainside, jumping from box to box. His lower lip was thrust forward.

"That's no fair," he complained. "Every time anybody shoots you, you always say they missed. Why don't I get to kill you sometime?"

"Oh, hell," said Nick. "Who cares? Who wants to play this kid stuff anyway?"

Snooky, who was just seven, looked at him in admiration. "Hell, yes," he said.

Nick leaned against the tight, resilient skin of the dome and stared outside. "I'm going out again after school," he said.

"Are you? Are you really, Nick?"

"Sure. Why not? Nobody ever knows."

"Knows what?" asked Judith. She and O-Sato had come up hand in hand while the boys were talking.

"When we go outside."

"Oh, that."

"Are you coming with me?" Nick demanded.

"Maybe. Well, if O-Sato wants to."

The Japanese girl shrugged. "I have to do slide rule ex-ercises this afternoon. Maybe tomorrow."

"Ah-h-h-h! Slide rule. That junk," Nick sneered. "That's for beginners."

"I like it," O-Sato said, with her wide, white smile. She never took offense.

The others were coming: the Dalgleish twins, nine-year-old Jon Bessemer who was only a month younger than Nick, the Firdusi kids, and little

Justinian Brandeis, who was five and lived in a world of his own.

Judith hugged Sally Firdusi, her creamy cheek against the other girl's brown one like cameo and sardonyx in a seal ring.
"Where's Virginie?" she said.

"In bed. She's got the swell-ups."

"Will she die?" Justinian asked, his blue eyes round and clear.

"Course not, stupid. Nobody ever dies of the swell-ups except grownups."

"Yeah. That's why they're called grownups," said Nick. "Grown-up, swell-up, fall-out, fall dead."

He swung away from the others, staring grimly through the plastic. Judith came behind him and put her hand lightly on his shoulder.

"What's the matter, Nicky?" she said.

"Nothing."

"If you want, I'll go outside with you. So will the others."

"I don't care." He turned to look at her, biting his lip. "I get sick of it, every day just the same. School, chores, the same old games, the same old stuff: 'Never go outside without an adult,' 'Wear your mask,' 'Remember you are from Earth.' Hell!" He kicked sullenly at the base of the dome, at the sealing strip beyond which waited the rusty sand. "I'm tired of canned shows, and these cowboys and Indians and out-laws of Sherwood Forest, and all that crap. Outside..."

He looked again at the scarlet and ochre branches which protruded above the ravine, only a few hundred yards away. "That's real, out there," he whispered. "Not all that junky three-vee, or old movies, or stupid books. I've read all the books. I want somebody to play with."

Judith drew back, hurt. "You've got me. And all of us."

"Yeah. Bunch of little snot-noses. And the rest of you—Jon and you and O-Sato and Virginie—you're always wor-ried about going out."

"But if they caught us, Nicky...?"

"So what? What could they do? Send us back to the ash-pile?"

"But we *do* go out with you. Gosh, you sound as though we never do."

"And isn't it fun? Isn't it? More fun than the domes?"

She nodded. "Sure, it's fun. If they'd just let us alone. Let us go out whenever we wanted to. But they're so afraid..."

He shrugged. "*Jee*-susl Grownups are afraid of everything."

"It's nine-thirty," O-Sato broke in. "We'd better get crack-ing. *Aruite ikimasho*."

Justinian took her hand. "What's that mean?"

"Let's walk," she replied. "Are you learning French from Virginie, too?"

"*Hai*," said Justinian. "*Je fais de man mieux*."

Nick scratched his bristly head—the hair was just be-ginning to grow in again after an attack of blue fungus. "I'll have to ask my Dad if he needs me," he said. "He told me yesterday he wanted me to help him clean up the observa-tory."

Nick mimicked him. "Ill *hafta* ask my *Dad*. Okay, sonny. Don't forget to wear your mask."

He could not have said why he was so bitter. After all, today was no different from any other day. But maybe that was the trouble. It was like those houses you used to make out of blocks, when you were little: you piled one block on another block on another block and all of a sudden it was too high and the whole thing collapsed. Too many days like ev-ery other day. A restlessness burned in him; a need for elbow room, for space, for privacy and play somewhere out of the cramped quarters of the city of domes. He was the oldest of the children; maybe that was why he felt it most. And par-ticularly now, in the warm season between the sandstorms and the freeze, the season when things began to move and stir out there, when the sheltered ravines came alive and there was so much to see, so many places to explore, so much to pretend.

Jon felt it, too, and so did the others, but they had other diversions, equally compelling. Jon and O-Sato found a deep and peculiar joy in mathematics and in the jobs they were allotted: Jon loved working in the observatory with its shining instruments, the ticking of the clockwork, the regular, measured, quiet routine, and O-Sato could spend hour after hour with number puzzles and log tables. As for Judy, she had her ups and downs: she was as good as any boy in mak-ing up games and plays, and outside she was as quick as he in the shifting sands, and as bold in exploration, but then for long periods she would turn to the books in the Library, and lose herself in the same old stories and seem to be quite content. As for the younger kids—Nick shrugged. They didn't know yet what they wanted.

If I only had a scooter of my own, he thought. Or a copter. I'd go and go and go...

He lost a little of his restlessness in school. Monsieur Bernstein was a good teacher for whom there were no such things as dull subjects. "I teach living," he said, and so the children could never be quite sure what they might find set before them on any given day. He spoke five languages without a trace of an accent, and one of his favorite games for en-livening

class periods was to switch from language to language to see how quickly the children could follow him.

"Nick!" he might snap. "*Dites-moi, qui etait Plantonp Re-pondez en russe, s'il vous plait*."

"*Filosof grechiskti, tovarishch professor*."

"*Nick wa wake ga wakatte imasu. Sta a voi, Signor Giannino*."

Or he .might, in the same way, jump unexpectedly from one theme to the next, as this morning a chance question led him from a discussion of Plato to the Greek city-states, to Pythagoras and the magic of numbers, to magic in general, to animal totems, to primitive societies, to the extinction of the Tasmanians, and so to a brief discussion of ecology. None of the children understood everything he said, but often the attempt to follow him was fun, and even the younger ones, even Justinian trailing wide-eyed behind, got glimpses of a large and exciting meaning which was as good as informa-tion; perhaps better.

"It may be that the true answer for what happened to our planet lies in ecology," he said, rather sadly. "You understand, my dears, I am speaking of the planet Earth, not of this planet. Man is an explosive force. When he is threat-ened, he blows up in every direction. As his social structures grew more complicated, he could not live side by side with the predators—with beasts of prey. Then came the turn of everything with sharp teeth which might be suspect. The coyote, for example, which might eat one lamb, had to be wiped out, even though ecologists showed that the coyote was worth his weight in gold to farmers because he main-tained the balance of nature by eating mice which otherwise would swarm in great numbers. Naturally, with the coyote gone, the mice multiplied. This led to vast campaigns of poisoning with a nice, nonselective poison called 1080, for which there was no antidote, and while many mice died, so did many birds which preyed upon the mice, and so did any animal—cats or dogs—which ate poisoned mice, and so did deer which ate the poisoned baits, and so even did some men who ate the deer.

"Man surrounded himself with circles of death. Fear, hatred, and a maniac desire for security—as if security were the ultimate in happiness!—spread around him areas of dev-astation. And this, too, happened between men and other men. The hint of sharp teeth could only be met by cam-paigns of destruction, wider and wider circles of slaughter until there was nothing left. And all this in the name of security."

Jon, wrinkling his forehead, said, "Do you mean, *maestro*, that security isn't any good? Because, gosh, that's what all the work of the domes is for, isn't it? And that's why they're always telling us, 'Wear your masks' and 'Don't go outside without an adult' and so on."

Monsieur Bernstein nodded. "I know," he said. "It's the way the Committee has decided. I'm afraid my voice is a minority voice. Still, perhaps it won't do you any harm to hear me. And I think that security is a myth. If there were any such thing as being totally secure from all harm, life would end.

Life itself is a never-ending struggle on the part of protoplasm merely to keep from collapsing into a puddle of water. *Non, non!* The only totally safe place is in the
grave."

Conan Dalgleish, with his chin resting on his palms, said, "Maitre Bernstein, are there any Indians left on the
Earth?"

The teacher smiled wanly. "No, my dear," he replied, and Nick turned in his seat to glare scornfully at Conan. Any-body knew there wasn't anything left there but ash and craters and radioactive jungles, but sometimes the younger kids couldn't grasp the fact, particularly since they saw quite dif-ferent scenes in their picture books, movies, and the three-
vee theatre.

He had gone through that confusion, and had grown out of it. He knew that "Earth" was so much bunk, like the mention of something called "heaven" in some of the books. It was one more make-believe place, something the grownups used as an illustration of their own desires, something on which to pin more of their fears.

He said, "And what about *here*? Is that why there aren't any other people on this planet except us? Because of that ec—ecology?"

"We don't know," Monsieur Bernstein said. "We just haven't found out. Ten years seems to you youngsters like a long time, but when you're establishing yourself in a brand new place, it isn't much. It took us half that time just to get an economy going that would support us: the hydroponics, experimental gardening outside in various areas, power plant, tool replacement manufacturing, a thousand different needs. There are only a handful of us, and the planet is very big. In the past five years we've only begun to scratch the sur-face, explore a tiny fraction of it, just begin to find out
something about its life and its ecology." He laughed. "There it is again, that word. I think we must really devote some time to it. Let me see ... you younger ones will have your reading lessons tomorrow. And you older children, suppose you read up on the subject in the Library and come ready to tell me what you think the ecology of our domes is."

He dismissed the class, and the children went off to the creche for lunch. After lunch, the younger ones had to take their naps. O-Sato settled in the study corner with her slide rule, Jon went off to the observatory, Judith and Sally Firdusi decided to go to the Library, and Snooky and Kamil Firdusi got interested in the chemistry set which occupied more and more of their time. Nick found himself deserted. He hunched sulkily into the big main dome and hung around near Air Lock One.

A man driving a scooter loaded with sheet metal yelled, "Hey, sonny, get out from underfoot!" Two men carrying a long section of plastic hose brushed past him, and one said, "Look out, kid. Watch where you're dreaming."

He strolled nearer the Lock, and a man taking wet-and-dry-bulb readings said, "Don't go out without your mask, buster. And not by yourself."

Nick turned away. Sonny. Kid. Buster. They were all so big, so sure of themselves, and so worried all the time. He was ready to snarl. He made himself invisible, as a child can, walking like a small lithe shadow along the edges of things, skirting all activity, until he came to the stores and wormed his way among the crates and boxes and containers. He came to the emergency air lock. He dropped his mask kit and his pill-pak. He spun the wheel and let himself into the chamber, and then went outside.

The earth, here near the domes, was dry and gravelly and crunched like sugar under the soft soles of his moccasins. He glided swiftly away, watching now for the real Enemy who might suddenly shout at him to return, or ask him why he wasn't wearing his mask. The air was thin and clear and in-vigorating, and he grinned with happiness thinking of the stale disinfectant smell of the mask which he had left behind. He slid over the edge of the ravine like a weasel, los-ing himself among the scarlet boles.

The ravine was nearly half a mile wide and ran on and on toward the distant hills, a great crack in the friable earth. It was not very deep, but it was alive. There was a different quality to the very air you breathed: it was spicy with the smell of growing things, with the pale blue fringe plant and the yellow flowers that drooped from immensely tall hairlike stalks, and the crisp little clusters of green and lavender like springy lettuces, and even from the smooth rubbery trunks of the fungus trees. Tiny winged things dipped and hummed and whizzed. No one could see him here. He spun round like a crazy thing, and galloped madly down the steep slope to the thread of river at the bottom, where jointed and armored worms swam in the pink mud-stained water.

All these things had laborious names given to them by the grownups, names like *Aquilegia* and *Chrysomelida*, which meant nothing. He and Judith and the others had given them their own names, their real names: Fringe Plant, Yellow Sneezer, Snappers, Snicket Bush, names which meant what the plants and creatures *were*. Sitting on his hunkers beside the water, he carefully tickled one of the snappers with a long grassy stem and laughed aloud when the thing whipped it-self wildly back and forth, broke in half, and swam off in opposite directions.

He got up and stretched, hugely and comfortably. He strolled downstream, on the lookout for anything that might be new since last he had come here. All his bitterness was gone as if it had never been; he was in his own place, among friends.

The ochre-patched red fungus trees thinned and gave way to crosseyes, slender feathery things that clustered thickly about the water dropping their hard double fruit, each brown rind decorated with two comical white eyes. He pushed his way between their shaggy trunks and stopped short. A silver snake was feeding on the crosseye fruit. You had to be careful of silver snakes: their long beaks were full of sharp little teeth, and although they were timid they could give you a nasty nip. Jon had been bitten by one once, when he had tried to pick up the shining, handsome thing, stretched

out on a fallen fungus tree, and the bite had festered. The children had had to invent a story about his scratching his hand on a metal case in the store-pile.

Nick watched it, wishing there were some way to tame it. His hands itched to take hold of that many-legged, smooth-muscled thing, to stroke its odd, funny head and its glistening blue-white scales.

Softly, he picked up a couple of crosseye fruits and be-gan edging forward. The snake saw him and drew back upon itself suspiciously. He crouched and held out his hand with the fruit balanced on his palm. With tiny, inching steps he moved himself closer to the beast.

The creature crooked back its head on the delicate neck, and cocked first one bright eye, and then the other, at the hand, the fruit, and the boy. Suddenly, from above, came a flap of wings that set the fronds of the trees rustling; with a flash of scales the snake shot into the water and vanished downstream. Nick dropped the fruit and stood up, gaping.
The thing that sat before him on the ground had a sur-prised face like the owl in his natural history book, with great round feathery eyes and a soft, downy body. Its upper limbs, with their wide sail-like wings, were folded in the attitude of a man raising his hands in astonishment; below them, a second pair of arms had small monkey-fingers that were clasped across its fat belly. Its legs were jointed up-right. It was no more than two feet high. Under the round eyes was coiled a black watch-spring tentacle, like the tongue of an earthly butterfly.

He had seen these things before, but usually from a great distance. One he had seen from close up had shot out its long tentacle and killed a kind of large snail; he had stepped out of hiding to see better and the owl-thing had flown away.

But this one seemed very tame. It looked at him impas-sively, turning its head from side to side, and then it uttered a soft chuckle.

Nick grinned. He stood perfectly still so as not to frighten the owl-thing, and he said, "Hello."

"Hello," said the owl-thing, and then made a ticking, chirping sound, "tk tk, tsp."

Nick imitated the sound. "Tk, tk, tsp. Hello."

The owl-thing hopped a little closer. It burst into a perfect torrent of clucks, chirps, and ticks. Then it suddenly said, "Don't forget your mask."

Nick's mouth dropped open. He shouted with laughter.

At the unexpected noise, the owl-thing leaped back and sat quivering, its tentacle coiling and uncoiling nervously. But Nick choked down his amusement and stood quietly until the creature began to hop towards him again.

Slowly, Nick lowered himself to the ground, and made himself comfortable. After a moment, the owl-thing shook out its wings, furled them again, and seemed to settle it-self too.

It held out one wizened hand and lifted a wrinkled brown finger. Nick snickered; it looked just like Monsieur Bernstein about to make a point.

It squeaked: "—!"

"Sure, I get you," Nick said, keeping his voice low and soothing. "You mean 'one'."

"One," said the owl-thing. "—!"

"—!" squeaked Nick.

The owl-thing held up two fingers. "—!—!"

"Two," said Nick.

"Two." And once again came that elfin chuckle, a gurgle of the purest mirth.

And upon the very heels of that chuckle, capping it, echo-ing it, drowning it in thunder, came the crash of a pistol.
The owl-thing's body flew apart in a spray of feathers and black mist. Moisture splashed Nick's face and arm. The feathery body lay ruined among the crosseyes, one long wing splayed out like a broken umbrella, the delicate feet with their minute hooked claws stretching to the sky.

Nick's father came leaping down the slope, clutching his pistol, his face white. Nick stared up at him, choking, and all he could get out was, "Why—why—?"

His father grabbed him by the shoulder. "Are you all right?" he cried, his voice muffled by his mask. Without waiting for an answer, he yanked the boy to his feet. "Are you crazy? Don't you know these things are deadly? Poor old Doc Mirsky tried to pick one up—the poison from that sting—And you aren't even wearing your mask!"

"It isn't," Nick gasped. "Dad! Why did you—I was talk-ing to it!"

His father shook him impatiently, furiously. "A damn good thing I found out where you were," he said. "How long have you been coming outside like this?"

"We do it all the time," Nick sniveled. "Ow! Pa! Quit it!"

"Quit it? I'll quit you! What the hell's the matter with you? Running around this place as if it was a backyard ... a nice, safe backyard somewhere in Illinois..."

His voice broke. Tears came into his eyes. He stood for a moment holding Nick's shoulder, and then he gave a long sigh and wiped his eyes with the

back of his hand. He took an extra mask from his pouch and handed it to Nick. "Put it on," he said, in a gentler voice.

Nick was crying so hard he could barely see, but he took the mask and clipped it over his face. The sharp smell of disinfectant stung his nostrils.

"I'm sorry, Nicky," his father said. "I was worried about you. There are so few of us. We've got to be careful. We're all that's left."

His fingers tightened on Nick's shoulder. "I didn't mean to scare you, son," he said, trying to smile.

Nick stared into his face with blurred and hostile eyes. Deep in his mind where no one could hear him, he said, *I hate you. I hate you.*

The big man bolstered his pistol. "Come on, son, let's get back to the domes," he said. He reached out for the boy, but Nick cringed away from his hand.

A single feather, golden orange and bordered with red like the color of the fungus trees, clung to the front of Nick's coveralls. He picked it off and clutched it tight in his wet palm. *I'll be back again*, he said wordlessly. *I'll find some way.*

Then he went up the hillslope with the stranger, his father.

"I despise cheap symbolism," Anna said, "even in a vampire..."

SOFTLY WHILE YOU'RE SLEEPING

by Evelyn E. Smith

"Let's not take a cab," Ann proposed, as they came out of the coffee shop. "Let's walk; it's only ten blocks or so. Or don't you like walking?"

Tom squeezed her arm. "Doll, I'm a country boy. Walked ten miles every day through roaring blizzards and raging hurricanes and all that jazz just to get myself an education. But I never expected to find a city girl who liked to walk. Don't tell me you like to cook, too?" He grinned down at her. "Or am I asking too much?"

"Much too much!" Ann hated cooking, and the truth was she hated walking, too. On a blistering hot night like that, the prospect was—well—not sheer horror, because she knew what that could be like, but bad enough. She wasn't masochistic, but it was just after midnight, and, if they walked, they might run into Mr. Varri starting on his nightly rounds. She was desperately anxious to meet him face to face. If Tom was with her, she wouldn't be afraid ... anyhow, she'd be less afraid.

"You must live right by the river," Tom observed, as they pushed further and further east. "One of those big new luxury apartment houses, eh?"

"I live a block away from the river. But not in a new house."

"They've done a nice job of converting some of those old mansions," he said.

She smiled. When they reached the cobbled street with its two rows of white-trimmed black brick tenements, it was empty, and the incandescent moonlight bathing it only em-phasized its desolation. Mr. Varri must have gone already.

"Cobblestones in New York—can you beat that?" Tom said wonderingly. And he shivered, though perspiration was streak-ing his ruddy face. "They ought to do something, though—plant some trees or something! It looks ... dead. What kind of people would want to live in a place like this?"

"People like me, for instance," she said, stopping in front of one of the black brick houses.

"Gosh, Ann, I—I'm sorry; I—" And suddenly something swooped down at them from overhead. Tom pushed her violently up the steps and into the tiny vestibule. "Those things can be dangerous!" His voice was shaking.

And her laugh was cracked. "Some country boy—afraid of a bird!"

He glanced over his shoulder, through the protecting glass of the outer door. "That wasn't a bird," he said. "It was a bat."

She had known, of course, but she had to keep on pre-tending to herself. "I thought bats were really harmless, afraid of people?"

"Normally they are. A bat wouldn't come as close to people as that, not after dark, anyway, unless it was rabid..."

"I don't think it's rabid," Ann said.

A door down the hall creaked open; Mrs. Brumi's moon face glimmered from the shadows. "Sorry if we disturbed you, ma'am," Tom said, giving her the boyish-charm smile full-voltage. She stared at him expressionlessly.

"What on earth was that?" Tom demanded, as they started up the narrow stairs.

Ann waited until they'd climbed two flights before she answered, "My landlady. She worries about my morals, disapproves of my friends, and what can I do? She comes from the same tribe as my father."

"Tribe!" Tom squeaked.

"In Albania, *tribe* is just a word to—well—group people who come from the same part of the country. And everybody who lives in the same part is likely to be connected some-how." She wasn't being entirely truthful. A tribe was a tribe.

"Relatives can be hell," Tom agreed. "You ought to see my aunt Nonie—a real kook if ever there was one."

Ann lived on the third floor. Her apartment was in almost opulent contrast to the rest of the house, and she had come to expect a gasp of surprise from newcomers, as she switched on the light. "Well," Tom said." "We-ell, you really do have this place fixed up; you'd almost think..."

"...you were in one of the new luxury apartment houses...?" she finished for him.

He flushed. "Ann, I didn't mean—Honestly, I didn't realize—All the fellows said you must be making at least..." His regular-featured face took on an exalted expression; he was posing for a statue—Champion of Women's Rights. "I didn't dream the firm paid women so much less than men. It's a darned shame."

"My salary isn't too bad. I just don't believe in spending money on rent." Then she smiled. "I'll go make us something cold to drink. First I'll turn on the fans, though; it's stifling here." She had two fans, one at each end of the apartment, but though both sets of wings beat the air energetically, it remained always hot and stagnant.

"Keep on plugging; someday you'll have enough saved up to get an air-conditioner," he laughed, as she went into the kitchen. Then he was embarrassed again. "Hell, Ann," he called in after her, "I don't make so much money myself." She knew he didn't—less than half of what she herself made.

She started taking out ice, enjoying the cold touch of the cubes on her warm, sticky fingers. He came into the kitchen behind her. "What on earth is that?" he demanded, staring.

"A bathtub," Ann said composedly. "Lots of the old houses have bathtubs in the kitchen. Someday I'll get a stall shower put in." She handed him a glass. "How are you on plumbing?"

He looked surprised. "I don't know; I never tried."

"No good," she decided.

They went back to the living room. Tom punctiliously waited until she sat on the couch before he seated himself beside her. "I don't want to sound officious, Ann," he said, "but I don't think this is a good place for a girl living alone. Even if a relative of yours does own the house, the street isn't safe."

"Mrs. Brumi is not a relative of mine," she said em-phatically. "And the street's safe enough. This is the East Side. It's over on the West Side that they have the street gangs and the muggings. Here, you hardly ever see anyone late at night."

"Oh, it's quiet, all right," he agreed, picking up his drink. His Adam's apple moved up and down contentedly as he swallowed. Then he transferred the drink to his other hand, and, moving closer on the couch, put the liberated hand—and the arm attached to it—around her waist. "Listen, doll, you probably think I have a hell of a nerve coming fresh from the hinterlands and starting to tell you how to run your life, but sometimes somebody from the outside can get a more objective look at things, if you know what I mean. I still say this isn't the kind of place a girl like you should be living in, and I don't mean the safety bit. Appearances are pretty im-portant these days; no matter how nicely you've fixed up your apartment, the house is squalid—you can't get away from that. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if part of the reason you're not making the money a girl in your position ought to is because you're living like this, so the firm feels you don't have the top-executive outlook."

Now the boyish smile was for her alone. "Don't misunder-stand me, doll. It doesn't matter at all about your folks' being Albanian. The only thing is, you've got to work twice as hard to prove you have the real American viewpoint."

He took another swallow of his drink. "You don't have to go out on a financial limb to live decently. If you teamed up with another nice girl, you could move into one of those efficiency apartments a lot of the better buildings are renting. Sure, you'd have less space, but you'd have modern plumb-ing, air-conditioning, and an address you'd be proud of. The whole deal probably wouldn't run you more than a few extra dollars each week, and you'll find it'll be worth every cent of it..."

Something flopped against the window. "It's the bat!" she shrieked. "It's trying to get in! Do something, Tom!"

"For Pete's sake; it couldn't get through the screens, even if it wanted to." His arm tightened. "And this is a hell of a time to be talking about bats. How about dousing those lights, doll? They make the place even hotter."

"Look out of the window," she urged. "See if it is the bat."

He sighed, and then laughed. "Okay, little girl, anything to make you feel better." He strolled over to the window. "Must've been the wind," he reported. "Not a thing in sight."

"Not a thing?"

"There's a man out there. But I thought bats were what you were interested in."

"What kind of man?" she insisted.

"Tall, young, good-looking—if you like the Valentino type." He laughed comfortably, sure that she didn't. "He's wearing a T-shirt and slacks. They look white, but it could be the moonlight. Sensible fellow—wish I'd dressed that way myself." He grinned, because you didn't go to the theatre in T-shirt and slacks, not unless you sat in the balcony. "Very clean type," he

finished kindly.

"It must be Mr. Varri."

"Is that so?" Tom flung his thick body heavily beside her. He took his drink in his right hand and her left breast in his left. "Now, where were we...?"

It never gets too hot for them, she thought smoulderingly.

It had been a burningly hot night when she first saw Mr. Varri. She couldn't sleep, and she was sitting by the window, hoping for a breeze from the river. He came walking down the street; in his T-shirt and slacks, he could have been any-body—from one of the tenements on the block or one of the "luxury" houses by the river. His face was pale and sad. He meant nothing to her, and soon after she fell asleep.

She was awakened by whistling outside. She got up and looked out of the window. It wasn't light yet; he was coming back along the cobblestones. He was less immaculate, but still very clean. There was a rosy joy in his face. Whatever he does, he can't have been working hard. He was either a lover or a criminal; she hoped a criminal and that he would be caught, not because of whatever else he might have done, but because he had robbed her of her sleep; she'd never be able to get back to it again that night. She sat at the win-dow, watching a thick pink dawn spread stickily over the street, trying to remember the name of the tune he had been whistling.

When she came downstairs later that morning, Mrs. Brumi was mopping the front steps. "I want to get finished with this before it gets too hot," she said, wiping sweat from her forehead. "You look tired, Anna; heat getting you?"

Only the middle-aged and the old let themselves be "gotten" by the heat. "It's because I haven't had enough sleep. Four o'clock in the morning, a man came walking down the street, whistling as if he were the only one in the world!"

"Some people got no consideration!" Mrs. Brumi agreed.

"He was dressed all in white," Ann said, wondering now why this should have seemed sinister to her the night before.

"Sounds like Mr. Varri; he works in one of the hospitals. Lives in Mrs. Lugat's place." Mrs. Brumi gave Ann a sly look. "A nice boy—clean and polite and quiet. And he comes from the old country, Anna, from the hills like your papa."

Ann wished Mrs. Brumi wouldn't call her *Anna*. But Mrs. Brumi had known her ever since she was born. Ann's family hadn't lived in Mrs. Brumi's house, but further down the street, in a house that had been torn down later to make room for the luxury apartments Tom admired. Ann had been still quite little when her family moved up to Washington Heights, to a steam-heated apartment with a private bath-room and a refrigerator that made its own ice. "But we can

find all of these things in this neighborhood," Ann's father had complained. "Why must we move so far away?"

"I want my family to have a nice place to live in," her mother had said. "Even more, I don't want them to grow up in this neighborhood." Ann's mother had come from Tirana; she didn't like the hill people.

Time passed and Anna had gone to college and become Ann. Her parents had died, and she'd come back to the old neighborhood. The law had required Mrs. Brumi to put steam heat in her flats and install private toilets; having gone so far, she had put in electric refrigerators also. Rents were three times as high as they'd been when Anna was little, but they were still less than half that of most other apartments. They were in great demand, but Mrs. Brumi had given Ann preference.

The neighborhood had changed. The old-country people were still there, lurking implacably behind drawn blinds, but new-country people had moved in among them, interest-ing and Bohemian people—artists and actors and musicians and doctors from the nearby hospitals. Mrs. Brumi couldn't seem to get it through her head that Ann was now one of the interesting people and had no more old-country ties. She criticized everything Ann did. "Why do you want to fix up your apartment all arty-smarty? It's like paint on the face of an old lady; no matter how much she puts on, you can still see a hag underneath. When you get yourself a husband who makes a good salary, you'll move to a nice house in Long Island and fix it up. Silly to make this place like a de-partment store, the way those arty-smarty pigs do." The arty-smarty pigs, of course, being the actors and artists and musicians.

She had commented freely and adversely upon the young men who came to help Ann paint walls and put up bookshelves. "They're not the kind of boys I'd like my daughters to go out with ... If they were still looking for husbands, of course," she added smugly. Her daughters had all been old-country-type girls and had made solid old-country-type mar-riages; one had even landed a dentist.

"I'm only saving this for your own good, Anna, but those boy friends of yours look like scum. They look like the kind that don't have any respect for a young girl. You can do better than them at least, Anna. You're not bad-looking, even if you are too skinny. All right, so maybe you don't have a dowry, but you've got a steady job."

Mrs. Brumi also disapproved of the long stretches when there were no young men at all, and Ann sat home evenings, reading and listening to her hi-fi. "That's no life for a young girl, specially when she isn't so very young any more and hasn't time to sit and wait. Now, I know a nice young man whose folks come from Scutari. He's a widower with a nice little butcher shop of his own. His mama lives with him and she'd be taking care of the two little boys, so he wouldn't stop you if you wanted to keep on working..."

At this point, Ann had exploded, and told Mrs. Brumi firmly to mind her own business. Mrs. Brumi's broad face hadn't changed expression, but she

stopped dropping in on Anna with fattening old-country dishes and nauseating old-country advice. Ann supposed she ought to be thankful that the old woman did no more now than call her by her first name. She had a feeling, though, that Mrs. Brumi was only quiescent, and that soon she'd erupt again with another small Albanian businessman.

However, Ann couldn't make herself move away. She'd already put too much into the apartment—not money but lots of time and taste. She'd never be able to get one as cheap anywhere else, and she needed her money for the costly annual winter vacations, the clothes from Bonwit's and Saks', and the warm, comfortable bank account.

Yet evenings, in the drenching heat of her apartment, self-doubts started to come at about the same time as darkness. Maybe the scheme of things she'd worked out for herself wasn't perfect; maybe an air-conditioner would be a better investment than a trip to Bermuda. She hadn't really en-joyed herself in Miami, the winter before, or in Mexico City, before that. She'd met young men, but she couldn't meet them on their own terms. Looks and clothes weren't enough—a girl had to be a slut also. Maybe there was something of the old country left in her, she thought.

It was foolish, she knew, not to give up one vacation for an air-conditioner. That didn't mean giving up the plan of things. She could go to Bermuda the year after. But she was afraid—break one link and the whole chain of dreams would fall apart.

The second night she saw Mr. Varri was even hotter than the first. She hadn't even tried to go to sleep but sat at her window, greedily sucking at an imaginary breeze. He came down the street, pale-faced and sad, his feet almost noiseless on the cobblestones. But the hospitals are all in the other direction, she thought. Not necessarily all, she reassured her-self; there might be others.

When she fell asleep, her dreams were unlike any she'd ever had before. They would have been nightmares, but the necessary terror was lacking. Mr. Varri woke her up again just before dawn, singing the same tune he'd whistled the night before. The words brought recognition; her father sang it sometimes, and it always made her mother angry—why, Anna never knew. It seemed so silly and harmless; the words the same as in a thousand other folksongs. So, although Mr. Varri wasn't singing in English, she understood him...

Do not cry, my dearest one,
There is no need for weeping.
Happiness I'll bring to you,
Softly while you're sleeping...

As he passed beneath her window, he looked up, directly at where she was standing, and she felt awareness come alive between them, although she knew it was her imagina-tion; he couldn't possibly see her in the darkness. Yet he smiled and moved his hand in a diffident wave. Mrs. Brumi must have told him about me, she assured herself. But she crossed her arms across her chest to cover the thin nightgown and the strap held up by a

safety-pin, because his face looked as if he saw her quite clearly.

The next morning she deliberately sought out Mrs. Brumi. "That man—the one you said must be Mr. Varri—woke me up again. He was singing, and so loud it's a wonder the whole street didn't wake up. Can't you ask Mrs. Lugat to speak to him?"

"I didn't hear nothing," Mrs. Brumi said. "And I sleep to the front."

"But you must have heard," Ann insisted. "It was so loud."

Mrs. Brumi shook her stolid head. "Girls who aren't mar-ried think their dreams are real..."

The nasty, lying old bitch, Ann thought. She's just get-ting even because I told her to mind her own business. On her way to work, she met several people whom she knew slightly. All of them lived on the street; none of them had heard any singing in the night.

After that, he sang every night as he came home, sang until the glass in all the windows on the street should have quivered and angry heads come popping out. But no one seemed to hear; it was as if his voice existed only in her head. She was eager to see him by daylight, to speak to him, not to stop his singing, but to have him assure her that he had sung. She never saw a sign of him.

One morning she went boldly into Mrs. Lugat's house and pressed the bell marked "Varri." When there was no an-swer, she tugged at the inner door—often the buzzers didn't work—but it was locked. Mrs. Lugat was there, behind the glass, tall, gaunt, with an incongruous red smile painted on her bony face. "Can I help you?"

"I—I wanted to speak to Mr. Varri," Ann said, clutching her handbag with claw fingers, wondering, in a panic, what she could possibly say to him.

"My tenants all work at night," Mrs. Lugat told her. "They don't like to be disturbed daytimes. Come back after dark, and I'll let you in."

When Ann came back to the house that evening, Mrs. Brumi gave her a gap-toothed grin. "I'm glad you went to see Mr. Varri," she said. "He's a shy boy—he needs encour-agement."

"You said he came from the old country!" Ann stormed. "How could he? There hasn't been any travel between the United States and Albania for years. It's behind the Iron Curtain. How could he get here?"

Mrs. Brumi's smile broadened. "Maybe he flew," she sug-gested.

Mr. Varri seemed to be very much encouraged. All night he sang under her window, and she was afraid to try to go to sleep, afraid he might work his way into her dreams...

You sit and long for one true love,

While true love you're denying,
The only kind of love that's true
Is the love that is undying...

But maybe the translation wasn't quite right, she thought; maybe it should have been "the love of the undying." Maybe that was why her mother had hated the song.

What would they have done about this in the old country? Probably gone to an exorcist; and, in the new country ... an analyst. But analysts were so expensive; besides, she wasn't sure they could cope with fantasies outside the mind.

She'd thought Tom would help, simply by being so solid and real. But he was a little too much of both. She looked at the hay-colored hair mown close to his blocky head and sprouting thickly on his soft-muscled arms, at the circles of sweat under the nylon shirt sleeves—for he'd taken off his coat. And she knew that he was as clean and sanitized and deodorized as a man could be, because odors were part of appearances. But it was a hot night, and he was a man.

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" he asked petu-lantly. "I thought New York girls were supposed to be—well—broad-minded, and, hell, you're worse than the chicks back home." He took hold of her again. "Don't you like me, doll?" he asked throatily. "Am I so hard to take?"

"I do like you, Tom," she said, trying to make her pulling away look more like a retreat than a reflex. "But it's so hot, and that thing flopping at the window..."

"It's been gone for ages." She didn't say anything. His voice rose. "The fellows at the office told me you were ... funny, but I couldn't believe it; you didn't look like that kind of a girl to me. Now, I'm beginning to wonder."

She looked at him. He averted his eyes. "Ann, honestly, I didn't mean anything like that. I—oh, hell, why are you acting like this, then?"

She was no longer under any obligation to placate him. "Have you ever thought that perhaps you're not the most irresistible man in the world?"

"But—but all the other fellows said you were the same with them."

"I'm glad to see you do such a thorough job of research before embarking on a new project," she said. "You should go far. Out that door, to begin with."

He got up, his face a fiery red. "For Pete's sake, Ann..." But it wasn't she he was upset about. He had fumbled the ball; he had goofed; he had failed to live up to his own picture of himself.

"Good-night, Tom." The door crashed shut. Then it opened a little way, and his head came apologetically through the aperture. "Sorry, I didn't mean to

slam it, but the wind—Ann, I truly am sor—"

"For God's sake go!" She almost pushed him down the stairs. "A storm's coming up; you wouldn't want to get caught in it and spoil that pretty new silk suit."

Watching from the window, she saw him come out into the empty street. Not quite empty ... as he walked west, something swooped out of the shadows and fluttered after him. Yes, I'm ... funny, she thought. And I have funny acquaintances.

Lightning streaked the sky; thunder crashed, and the rain did come, in wild sweet gusts. She slept peacefully and comfortably. When Mr. Varri's singing awakened her just before dawn, the rain had stopped, and it was cooler. She looked down from her window, and he grinned up at her, with a face that was darkly handsome, and, at the same time, curiously innocent. His shining immaculacy was gone; great dark stains marred the whiteness of his clothes. "Mud," she said to herself, "just mud..." She began to giggle.

Tom didn't come to the office next day. "He's in the hos-pital," Bill Cullen, the sales manager, Tom's boss, told her.

"Oh, poor Tom." She tried to sound convincingly surprised and regretful. "Awfully sudden, wasn't it? I hope it's nothing serious."

"He was attacked, or something, last night. Got his throat slashed." And Bill looked at her curiously. "He had a date with you, didn't he?"

"Do you think I'm that desperate?" Bill's face took on a "this is no joking matter" expression. She changed her tack. "And how do you happen to know I had a date with him?"

He turned pink. "Well, he just happened to mention to a few of the fellows that he was taking you to see Gypsy."

She could almost hear Tom's confident voice: "So you guys couldn't make any headway with her, eh? Well, maybe we country boys can teach you city fellows a trick or two..." She choked back unseemly laughter. "He was all right when he left my place," she said demurely. "I suppose it must have happened on his way back."

"Looks like it." Bill ran a hand through his thinning crew cut. "But what's funny is he says he's not coming back here afterward. He's quitting. Just like that. And he seemed so happy here, so anxious to get ahead."

"Big city must've been too much for him," she said, and she wondered dreamily what the doctors at the hospital had made of the marks on Tom's throat.

That night the bat hovered outside her window, plain-tively begging, "Please let me in, Anna. Please..."

She wasn't afraid any more. "That would be very foolish of me," she told

him calmly, "after what you did to Tom."

But she doubted that Tom had invited him either, so why did Mr. Varri ask her permission? Was it because he came from the same tribe as her father ... or because she was a woman?

"It's because I love you, Anna. That Tom, he was just food; all I wanted from him was his blood, and that I did not need to ask for. I took what I wanted, and I hurt him because he hurt you. But with you, Anna, it is different. I want your love; so I can come to you only if you ask me. Ask me, Anna, please ask me; I will show you a happiness greater than you have ever dreamed could be possible."

For three nights she held out against him, but, on the fourth, she moved slowly through a fog that seemed to swirl around the room and took out the screen. The black wings swooped in, beating the air into coolness, fluttering against her cheeks in a caress. "I love you, Anna; don't fear me."

Her body relaxed into trembling quietness; her throat throbbed expectantly even before she felt the prickle of the two tiny sharp teeth gently piercing the thin skin, gently drawing out her blood, and, with it, her fears and anxieties and self-doubts. This is love, she thought wonderingly as her throat swelled to meet the vampire's kiss—a true kiss, not the clumsy suction of damp lips and the thrust of slimy tongue, not the disgusting fumble of sweating, odorous human bodies. She wanted it to go on until every drop of blood was drained from her body, leaving her utterly clean, utterly pure.

"No, no, not yet," she moaned, as the pressure started to slacken. Reaching out, she tried to grasp the wings, but they eluded her.

"No more tonight, dearest," he whispered. "It would be too dangerous for you. But I will come to you again to-morrow night ... and every night."

All day at the office she sat surrounded by filing cabinets and telephones and typewriters, dictating letters and memorandums and making decisions with her body, while her mind dreamed of the night that had passed and the night that was to come. Through her fog, she heard little secretaries talking ecstatically about their dates that evening. For the first time in her life, she had a date she was looking forward to; for the first time in her life she had tasted ecstasy...

Night after night, the vampire returned to bring her all the happiness he had promised—and more. As the days and nights passed, she changed, but she wasn't aware of it, or that the change was visible, not until the day Bill Cullen came into her office and asked if she were free that evening ... Bill, who had dated her several times when he'd first joined the firm; then became merely an office friend.

He had to ask twice before his words filtered through the golden fog that insulated her all the time now. "Sorry, Bill," she murmured. "I'm busy tonight. I'm busy every night..."

"You're in love," he told her. "There's something about you, something different. You're softer, more—more human, more like a woman."

She wasn't angry or annoyed or ... anything. "Yes, I am in love." She knew that the word had no real meaning for him, and she did feel a faint emotion—pity.

He looked at her. "Better watch yourself, kid. Don't over-do it. You look wonderful, but you don't look good, if you know what I mean."

The one thing the fog couldn't completely insulate her from was vanity. She went and looked at herself in the washroom mirror. She had always been pale and slender and pretty; now she was chalk-white, gaunt ... and beautiful. But it was a distinctly necrotic loveliness. Shock began to grow in her, dissipating the fog. Almost with clarity, she started wondering what would happen when all the blood had been drained out of her.

That evening, when she got home, she was close to being awake for the first time in days. "I'm so glad everything's turning out so nice for you, Anna!" Mrs. Brumi was beaming from the doorstep.

Ann looked at her, unable to put the question she wanted to ask into words. "It won't be long," Mrs. Brumi said reassuringly.

The words came, then, and, with them, the fears—new fears piled upon the old. "It won't be long until what? Until I'll be of no use to him any more? Until I'm—" and still that was the lesser horror—"dead."

Mrs. Brumi looked appalled. "What a thing to say, Anna! of course you won't be dead. You just won't be alive—that's all."

That's all. Ann was becoming her old bitter self. "What will happen then? Will he buy that house in Long Island, so we'll have a nice place to keep our coffins?"

"You can't expect that, Anna. For a skinny girl who isn't so young and who hasn't any dowry, it's a good match. And there's always room in Mrs. Lugat's house."

"The bride was white," Ann said hysterically, "and a coffin was her dowry." And this is how folksongs start. How had she let herself slip into this? Calm Ann, cool Ann, collected Ann? She was lonely and romantic and she had the heritage ... but that was no reason to have let herself go primitive. She should have known better than to accept a fantasy love. Of course it was more beautiful than a real love; otherwise fan-tasies would never have come into being. Weakness made them real, and she had let herself be weak, but, essentially, she knew, she was strong.

That night the vampire sobbed and pleaded outside her window. She wanted to let him in, but she rehardened her heart against him. "Why, Anna, why?" he moaned. "I love you so much. I thought you loved me."

"I do. But when all my blood is gone, then you won't love me any more."

"Of course I will!" he told her eagerly. "You'll become like me, then. We'll always be together. We'll go out every night, and, after we've drunk our fill, we'll dance together high above Central Park in the silvery moonlight."

"But you'll never be able to drink my blood again; you'll never be able to love me again."

"Of course I will love you, Anna—only in a different way. Love changes after marriage. Even for the others it does."

"Their kind of love isn't love. You taught me that."

"Anna," he wept, beating his head against the screen, "you can't leave me now; you can't leave me alone again. It's wrong; we are betrothed."

"This isn't the old country," she said, angry that he should take so much for granted. "In America, people make love casually, without being betrothed."

"But how could their kind of love be anything but casual? Our kind could never be. Anna, come with me. I'll give you your heart's desires, though you may not know them..."

She thought of going out night after night and feeding on the coarse thick throats of strangers. Disgusting, she thought; what love could survive that? "Look," she said coldly, "my parents didn't come from the old country and work like slaves to give me a decent home and a good education so I should wind up spending my days in a coffin and my nights going out sucking people's blood."

He beat his wings frantically. "But, Anna, all the time you've been living in a coffin. By making you one of the undead, I am bringing you to life—"

Her tone was even chillier. "I despise cheap symbolism," she said, "even in a vampire."

He couldn't understand; his concern was only for him-self. "Anna," he wept, "Anna, I'm so alone. I love you so much. Have pity on me—don't go away from me."

But she left him. The next day she rented another apart-ment—on the West Side, where luxury apartments were cheaper, because it was unfashionable. However, it was on West Seventy-second Street, which is a broad, well-lit thor-oughfare, full of patisseries and quite safe. And it wasn't only to save money that she moved across town; it was to be as far as she could get from the old neighborhood while still being conveniently situated with respect to her office.

She didn't give Mrs. Brumi notice, because she didn't want to give her time to hatch any new plots; she paid her a month's rent instead. And she hired professional packers; so the whole operation could be over in a day, and she wouldn't have to spend another night in the apartment. Not that she was afraid of Mr. Varri—she knew he wouldn't hurt her—but of herself.

The new apartment was completely air-conditioned, so she would never need to open windows. But sometimes, late at night, over the hum of the machinery, she thought she heard something flapping against the windows, and a tiny desperate voice singing...

Do not weep my dearest one,
There is no need for weeping.
Happiness I'll bring to you,
Softly while you're sleeping.

The words were appropriate now, because sometimes she found herself quite openly in tears. Just the same, she didn't open the windows. She was strong.

It took a long time for the marks on her neck to heal. But it was easy to hide them with tight wide necklaces, which were expensive, because everything she put on her body had to be of good quality. However, she got a new boy friend who was a jeweller, and, while he lasted, she got substantial discounts.

The demands that magazines and book publishers have been making in recent years on Dr. Asimov's science non-fiction talents have brought his fiction output virtually to a halt. We are delighted that we were successful in chivvying him into producing this story—particularly because it illuminates so neatly an aspect of computer uses ordinarily left unde-veloped in current scientific reports.

THE MACHINE THAT WON THE WAR

by Isaac Asimov

The celebration had a long way to go and even in the silent depths of Multivac's underground chambers, it hung in the air.

If nothing else, there was the mere fact of isolation and silence—for the first time in a decade, technicians were not scurrying about the vitals of the giant computer, the soft lights did not wink out their erratic patterns, the flow of information in and out had halted.

It would not be halted long, of course, for the needs of peace would be pressing. Yet now, for a day, perhaps for a week, even Multivac might celebrate the great victory, and rest.

Lamar Swift, Executive Director of the Solar Federation, took off the military cap he was wearing and looked down the long and empty main corridor of the enormous com-puter. He sat down rather wearily in one of the technician's swing-stools and his uniform, in which he had never been comfortable, took on a heavy and wrinkled appearance.

He said, "I'll miss it all, in a grisly fashion. It's hard to remember when we weren't at war with Deneb, and it seems against nature now to be at peace and to look at the stars without anxiety."

The two men with Swift were both younger than he. Neither was as gray, neither looked quite as tired.

John Henderson, thin-lipped and finding it hard to control the relief he felt in the midst of triumph, said, "They're destroyed! They're destroyed! It's what I keep saying to my-self over and over and I still can't believe it. We all talked so much, over so many years, about the menace hanging over Earth and all its worlds, over every human being, and all the time it was true, every word of it. And now we're alive and it's the Denebians who are shattered and des-troyed. They'll be no menace now, ever again."

"Thanks to Multivac," said Swift, with a quiet glance at the imperturbable Jablonsky, who through all the war had been Chief Interpreter of science's oracle. "Right, Max?"

Jablonsky shrugged. Automatically, he reached for a cig-arette and decided against it. He alone, of all the thousands who had lived in the tunnels within Multivac, had been al-lowed to smoke, but toward the end he had made definite efforts to avoid making use of the privilege.

He said, "Well, that's what *they* say." His broad thumb moved in the direction of his right shoulder, aiming upward.

"Jealous, Max?"

"Because they're shouting for Multivac? Because Multivac is the big hero in this war?" Jablonsky's craggy face took on an air of contempt. "What's that to me? Let Multivac be the machine that won the war, if it pleases them."

Henderson looked at the other two out of the corners of his eyes. In this short interlude that the three had instinctively sought out in the one peaceful corner of a metropolis gone mad; in this entr'acte between the dangers of war and the difficulties of peace, when, for one moment, they might all find surcease, he was conscious only of his weight of guilt.

Suddenly, it was as though that weight were too great to be borne longer. It had to be thrown off, along with the war—now!

Henderson said, "Multivac had nothing to do with vic-tory. It's just a machine."

"A big one," said Swift.

"Then just a big machine. No better than the data fed it." For a moment, he stopped, suddenly unnerved at what he was saying.

Jablonsky looked at him, his thick fingers once again fumbling for a cigarette and once again drawing back. "You should know. You supplied the data. Or is it just that you're taking the credit?"

"No," said Henderson, angrily. "There is no credit. What do you know of the data Multivac had to use, predigested from a hundred subsidiary computers here on Earth, on the Moon, on Mars, even on Titan? With Titan always delayed and always that feeling that its figures would introduce an unexpected bias."

"It would drive anyone mad," said Swift, with gentle sympathy.

Henderson shook his head. "It wasn't just that. I admit that eight years ago when I replaced Lepont as Chief Programmer, I was nervous. But there was an exhilaration about things in those days. The war was still long range; an ad-venture without real danger. We hadn't reached the point where manned vessels had had to take over and where inter-stellar warps could swallow up a planet clean, if aimed cor-rectly. But then, when the real difficulties began—"

Angrily—he could finally permit anger—he said, "You know nothing about it."

"Well," said Swift. "Tell us. The war is over. We've won."

"Yes." Henderson nodded his head. He had to remember that. Earth had won, so all had been for the best. "Well, the data became meaningless."

"Meaningless? You mean that literally?" said Jablonsky.

"Literally. What would you expect? The trouble with you two was that you weren't out in the thick of it. Max, you
never left Multivac, and you, Mr. Director, never left the Mansion except on state visits where you saw exactly what they wanted you to see."

"I was not as unaware of that," said Swift, "as you may have thought."

"Do you know," said Henderson, "to what extent data concerning our production capacity, our resource potential, our trained manpower—everything of importance to the war effort, in fact—had become unreliable and untrustworthy during the last half of the war? Group leaders, both civilian and military, were intent on projecting their own improved image, so to speak, so they obscured the bad and magnified the good. Whatever the machines might do, the men who programmed them and interpreted the results had their own skins to think of and competitors to stab. There was no way of stopping that. I tried, and failed."

"Of course," said Swift, in quiet consolation. "I can see that you would."

This time Jablonsky decided to light his cigarette. "Yet I presume you provided Multivac with data in your programming? You said nothing to us about unreliability."

"How could I tell you? And if I did, how could you af-ford to believe me?" demanded Henderson. "Our entire war effort was geared to Multivac. It was the one great weapon on our side for the Denebians had nothing like it.

What else kept up morale in the face of doom but the assurance that Multivac would always predict and circumvent any Denebian move, and would always direct and prevent the circum-vention of our moves? Great Space, after our Spy-warp was blasted out of hyperspace we lacked any reliable Denebian data to feed Multivac, and we didn't dare make that public."

"True enough," said Swift.

"Well, then," said Henderson, "if I told you the data was unreliable, what could you have done but replace me and refuse to believe me? I couldn't allow that."

"What did you do?" said Jablonsky.

"Since the war is won, I'll tell you what I did. I corrected the data."

"How?" asked Swift.

"Intuition, I presume. I juggled them till they looked right. At first, I hardly dared. I changed a bit here and there to correct what were obvious impossibilities. When the sky didn't collapse about us, I got braver. Toward the end, I scarcely cared. I just wrote out the necessary data as it was needed. I even had Multivac Annex prepare data for me according to a private programming pattern I had devised for the purpose."

"Random figures?" said Jablonsky.

"Not at all. I introduced a number of necessary biases."

Jablonsky smiled, quite unexpectedly, his dark eyes spark-ling behind the crinkling of the lower lids. "Three times a report was brought me about unauthorized uses of the An-nex, and I let it go each time. If it had mattered, I would have followed it up and spotted you, John, and found out what you were doing. But, of course, nothing about Multivac mattered in those days, so you got away with it."

"What do you mean, nothing mattered?" asked Hender-son, suspiciously.

"Nothing did. I suppose if I had told you this at the time, it would have spared you your agony, but then if you had told me what you were doing, it would have spared me mine. What made you think Multivac was in working order, what-ever the data you supplied it?"

"Not in working order?" said Swift.

"Not really. Not reliably. After all, where were my tech-nicians in the last years of the war? I'll tell you—they were out feeding computers on a thousand different space devices. They were gone! I had to make do with kids I couldn't trust and veterans who were out of date. Besides, do you think I could trust the solid-state components coming out of Cyogenics in the last years? Cyogenics wasn't any better placed as far as personnel was concerned than I was. To me, it didn't matter whether the data being

supplied Multivac were reliable or not. The *results* weren't reliable. That much I knew."

"What did you do?" asked Henderson.

"I did what you did, John, I introduced the bugger factor. I adjusted matters in accordance with intuition—and that's how the machine won the war."

Swift leaned back in the chair and stretched his legs out before him. "Such revelations. It turns out then that the material handed me to guide me in my decision-making capacity was a man-made interpretation of man-made data. Isn't that right?"

"It looks so," said Jablonsky.

"Then I perceive I was correct in not placing too much reliance upon it," said Swift.

"You didn't?" Jablonsky, despite what he had just said, managed to look professionally insulted.

"I'm afraid I didn't. Multivac might seem to say, Strike here, not there; Do this, not that; Wait, don't act. But I could never be certain that what Multivac seemed to say, it really did say; or what it really said, it really meant. I could never be certain."

"But the final report was always plain enough, sir," said Jablonsky.

"To those who did not have to make the decision, per-haps. Not to me. The horror of the responsibility of such decisions was unbearable and even Multivac was not suffi-cient to remove the weight. But the important point is I was justified in doubting, and there is tremendous relief in that."

Caught up in the conspiracy of mutual confession, Jablon-sky put titles aside, "What was it you did then, Lamar? After all, you did make decisions. How?"

"Well, it's time to be getting back, perhaps, but—I'll tell you first. Why not? I did make use of a computer, Max, but an older one than Multivac—much older."

He groped in his pocket and brought out a scattering of small change—old-fashioned coins dating to the first years before the metal shortage had produced a credit system tied to a computer-complex.

Swift smiled rather sheepishly. "I still need these to make money seem substantial to me. An old man finds it hard to
abandon the habits of youth." He dropped the coins back into his pocket.

He held the last coin between his fingers, staring at it absently. "Multivac is not the first computer, friends, nor the best-known, nor the one that can most efficiently lift the load of decision from the shoulders of the

executive. A machine *did* win the war, John; at least, a very simple computing device did, one that I used every time I had a particularly hard decision to make."

With a faint smile of reminiscence, he flipped the coin he held. It glinted in the air as it spun and came down in Swift's outstretched palm. His hand closed over it and brought it down on the back of his left hand. His right hand remained in place, hiding the coin.

"Heads or tails, gentlemen?"

A story which may well explain everything *for you ... un-less, of course, you are one of those types who are inclined to go around putting piranhas in the water cooler...*

GO FOR BAROQUE

by Jody Scott

The patient was a small man with wiry white hair and a white mustache. Dr. Brant nodded across the desk at him, and the patient smiled. It was a peculiar smile. A radiant but eerie smile. It bespoke security, which was obsolete. It looked copied from certain smiles Brant had seen on cherubs in old paintings. So what kind of complex might this indicate? Brant smiled right back. "Good morning," he said pleasantly. "You are Mr. Yog Farouche."

"I'm glad to meet myself," Mr. Farouche said, letting his left hand shake his right.

Well, well. Interesting deviation.

"Odd name," Brant said. "What nationality?"

"Plutonian."

"Plutonian?"

"From Pluto."

"Pluto?"

"Ninth from the sun."

"Ah," Brant said. "Pluto. Yes indeedy." He shuffled some papers on his desk. He cleared his throat. "Well, Mr. Farouche; the report from the state hospital says you're much too difficult a case for their staff, yet you are an intelligent and peaceable man. I mention this because it's the oddest referral I've ever seen. Wouldn't you say so?"

"Give me two minutes to run through all the referrals you've ever seen,"

Farouche said, closing his eyes.

The psychiatrist was about to say something, but he shut it off. The patient's expression ... very strange ... not quite definable...

"Yes," said Farouche.

"Yes, what?"

Farouche looked pained. "If you'd do me the courtesy—" Then he smiled again. "But I'm expecting too much. Your question was loaded to find out how paranoiac I am. Let me answer: that word isn't even in my vocabulary."

"But you've just used it."

"If you're going to stick on logic well never get anyplace."

Brant settled back in his swivel chair. Okay. So this bird was intelligent, peaceable, difficult. The usual patient was pretty dull, which made life boring for Dr. Brant; Mr. Far-ouche offered a pleasant change of pace. "All right, *you* tell *me*. Suppose you start with a rundown of your past life. Make it as long or short as you like ... Sit down in the easy-chair, and relax."

Farouche sighed and obediently sat down. He let his eyes wander over the little room. There were three doors, one to the ward, through which he had come, one to the lab, and one to the reception room. It was a warm sunny morning and the smell of fresh-clipped grass blew in through the open window...

Gradually his eyes clouded, half closed, looking inward, and Brant took the opportunity to study him. A man of about sixty, in the usual tan trousers and tan open-collar shirt. His eyes were a deep amber, his skin as smooth and pale as new parchment. Looked healthy. Must have done a good amount of outside work. Ruffled hair, thick and pure white, lots of it. His eyes had that childlike look that Brant had seen often; innocent eyes, not deep, but not shallow either—very curi-ous. Not psychotic. Not by Brant's yardstick. That was obvi-ous right away.

"As a child," Farouche said at last, "I was too simple and beautiful to live ... So I died.

"...Now don't leap to conclusions. I mean this in the mystical sense. Mystical—you don't like it? Too many bad connotations to that word. Mother used to say, 'Don't play near the aqueduct' ... No, strike that out; that was earlier. Ill tell you about whip-whiskered Uncle Sigh (he was Cy, really, but I called him Sigh, for obvious reasons). He used to say to me 'Yoggsy, if you keep on like this, there will be no face in the mirror when you look.' Such a horrible warn-ing! I was like an ice child—he drinks warm milk and melts; he doesn't, and starves ... Anyway, we lived in Penury, a well-known subsection of Chicago. As a child I was needed at home for certain dramatic scenes. I'm sure this sounds like the regular run of dull cases, eh? But I can't tell you; I've got to show you. Do you mind?"

Before Brant could open his mouth the little man had vaulted across the desk and perched himself on the psychia-trist's knee and begun to weep, loudly, violently, heart-brokenly. Then just as suddenly he was back in his chair across the desk. He seemed perfectly calm now. "Rejected! Rejected by my very own mother," he said dreamily. "Not that she knew it; she thought she loved me; they all do, but they nearly all love only some two-dimensional figurine of their own scrawny invention ... Anyway, I made up for all that. I began to develop certain powers, such as—"

Instantly he was down on all fours creeping around the floor under the desk. He began to gather up coins from hidden nooks; a dime, two nickels, a handful of dirt-crusted pennies. "Here. You've lost these over the last three years," he said, handing up the change.

Neat trick, Brant thought, taking it. He watched, fascin-ated.

"Then I played with other kids," Farouche said. "We played simple, familiar, every-day games, such as cowboy and Indian ... Do you mind?" He opened the desk drawer and took out a length of stout twine and doubled it and tied Brant's hands and feet, deftly, making him fast to the swivel chair. Then he smiled and sat down. "All right, now just go on relaxing while I continue. One point: I want you to express yourself, always. If you have anything to say, say it. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," Brant said. He was feeling a little bounce of exhilaration in the pit of his stomach. It was like being tickled. This guy could certainly generate excitement. Also, it was harmless; all he had to do was reach out and flip the intercom switch and Dr. Eyck and Miss Potter would be here inside of two minutes. Besides, this was good therapy. Brant believed in going along with the patient all the way, as long as things didn't get rough.

"Ropes too tight? How do you feel?"

"I feel fine," Brant grinned.

"Excellent! Care for a cigarette?"

Brant nodded. Farouche lifted a cigarette out of the doc-tor's breast pocket and put it between his lips and lit it for him. "I'm delighted to be here," he said. "I'm glad to have been referred to the famous and capable hands of yourself and your young partner, and of Miss Potter, that under-standing nurse with the starched bosom and the prim smile. You're one of the few men around with imagination. You're accessible, you can change; so you can be cured. And Eyck tries to follow in your footsteps. That's why I chose this place."

"Ah," said Brant. "*You* chose this place."

Farouche smiled. He removed the cigarette so the doctor could exhale. "Yes; I like a small private institution like this, although the large joint of which I was so recently a part was pretty cool too ... But I was running through my past for you. For instance, Grandma dreamed she died of heart failure. This scared her so badly she woke up and died of heart failure. Silly,

wasn't it? And that's the way they go. I have an early memory of Grandma bending over me to whis-per, 'Go to sleep and *don't worry*, Daddy Warbucks will be here in the morning with the helicopter.' That's all I remem-ber about Grandma, for which I'm grateful ... Did you realize that I'm not at all sophisticated? I should say pseudo-sophisticated; that's the fashion of the day; every-body who is anybody is pseudo-sophisticated, with tailfins. I'm a bit of a primitive myself. And I can tell you a story to prove it. Would you like to listen?"

"No," Brant said.

"Good. I like a bit of spirit in a prisoner. What would you like to hear instead?"

"Tell me about your sex upbringing."

"Ah! The first honest psychiatrist I've ever seen," Far-ouche marveled. "Well, as usual, I had a sex upbringing that could choke a crocodile into not laying eggs. However, I made up for all that later; and since you're being so honest, I'll tell you some hot love stories out of my past. I see that you're fond of sex, comics, and adventure stories, in that order. So okay. My past is full of all three.

"Now this episode happened south of Pago-Pago, in a Spanish galleon, of which I was the captain. Also the abso-lute bloody dictator—what fun, to be a bloody dictatorl I loved it. The ship was naturally not a real Spaniard; she was a Hollywood mock-up swiped off the MGM back lot one dark night, complete with skull flag and keelhauling equip-ment and her name in blazing rubies, Corsair's Revenge ... Now relax; the hot scenes come later," he said, smiling.

"I'm not that hung up," Brant said huffily.

"Oh, come on. I'm a telepath—haven't you noticed yet? Anyway, I'll tell you about the crew. The crew! Some boys. I rented them along with the ship, see. I rented the whole works from MGM, right after that studio brought out its colossal sea epic, SWORDS ACROSS JAMAICA. As my first mate I rented the star of the picture, a typical Hollywood waxwork named Rock Bottom. I suppose you think the whole idea was silly."

"Not at all. Except I'm wise you use the term 'rent' ad-visedly."

"Ahhh!" Yog Farouche smiled, leaned back in his chair and stared at Brant. "You're coming along fine. You'll be a well man in no time. Already you sound half alive ... Well, do you get the picture? Here we are, a blood-thirsty, woman-
hungry crew, clipping across the Spanish Main, looking for Yankee ships to plunder. The boys all wear faded blue dungarees, calf-length, with daggers at the waist or between the teeth, and no shirts except on brisk evenings; also techni-color make-up at all times; they are a typical strength and health crowd from Vine Street. I myself wear an Admiral's costume, with sword and much gold frogging, the cat-o'-nine-tails twitching in my hand ... Is this coming along to your taste?"

"Pretty much," Brant said, interested. "Where do the dames come in?"

"Soon, soon. Anyway, mornings, we practiced the Extras Massing Scene, or Operation Swarm. The men climbed the rigging, jumping from high places to mattresses strategically placed below. They engaged in hurly-burly brawls on the bridge and down the hatches. The more daring ones swung from ropes, leaped therefrom to the brawny backs of their mates, and engaged them in noisy combat, drawing blood pretty often. In the afternoon they drank rum and swam bare and chased the cabin boy round the mizzenmast and so forth. Myself, I am up in the crow's nest yelling salty obscen-ities and enjoying the whole scene. Get the picture?"

"Very clearly," said Brant, spellbound.

"Okay. So the first Yankee ship to cross our path was the Queen Mary. Wasn't that a bitch? Naturally we couldn't back out after all that rehearsal, so we figured what the hell, go for baroque. At first the ship was a dim bug on the horizon, but she expanded, gradually, inexorably, like a bad dream. We came about and hove to, taking up picturesque positions about the deck. Mr. Bottom was especially magnificent, with his drawn cutlass and bare chest; he reminded me of my Uncle Sigh, after the latter lost his body hair in a boiler explosion ... I personally am dividing my operations be-tween' bridge and chartroom, rubbing my hands, chuckling about the rapine and plunder to come, smacking my lips, etc., etc. ... Then, I ordered the first broadside fired."

"That's not fair! You're supposed to board them in per-son," Brant protested.

"What's not fair, square? It was a blank, naturally. I told you this was a Metro ship. It was the other captain who behaved like a complete swine. Without waiting for the smoke to clear, he fired, and this was no dummy, and we sank on the spot. Oh, it didn't take much. After all, the galleon was quite fragile. Like so many of our hopes and fears and de-sires..."

His amber eyes clouded. He relapsed into silence. Brant said, "But everything turned out all right, didn't it? Because you're here, aren't you? Alive and happy and all?"

"Alive?" Farouche said with a bitter little laugh. "Happy? ... I never knew what became of my crew. I couldn't swim in my admiral suit. Straight down I went, like a stone, to the bottom of the sea, and then I lost consciousness. When I awoke the most beautiful woman was giving me artificial respiration. As I reached for her she turned to the side and *disappeared*; brother, that's when I got up and made a dash for it. But there was no place to go! I kept running into the edge of the paper.

"Let me explain. It was like being an exchange student with Flatland. In this sea-bottom country, I found myself trapped in a two-dimensional nightmare. At first it looked like a very broad stage setting, with cardboard props and scenery and a mind-shattering afterglow coming from no-where, from the land of Ag, from a water-color sun in some other dimension. Then

the truth hit me. I had fallen into a night scene in a comic strip! Grandma! I thought instantly; she's laid a curse on me.

"It was ghastly. Yellow light gleamed through four-sec-tioned windows, and suddenly a huge yellow moon appeared in the upper righthand corner of the square. I moved down a street of houses which were all facades; when I went be-hind one, I saw the back of the house, with its two-dimen-sional porch upon which stood some flat milkbottles, and a drunken two-dimensional husband trying to sneak in the back door before the clock struck. I knew there'd be trouble so I moved off in a hurry. Farther along were fire-plugs, and dogs to sniff them—you've seen a city landscape in the comics? Well, Grandma, or whoever was mocking this scene up for me, hadn't left out anything. But not a single thing.
"Behind the houses was a pitch-black alley. I felt lost, abandoned. I saw a row of garbage cans, flat, gleaming, aluminum, and a flat high wooden fence with the word *meow* flashing on and off above it. I saw a pair of shiny yellow eyes and a flying (though static) shoe and a big *MEOW* and a stream of *!!?**??!!, and at this point I began to lose my sanity. Cricket noises rose about me, perfect let-tered. A fake wind blew some leaves along the gutter. This was the ultimate in dream suburbiana! The people were asleep; I could tell because out of the four-paned windows came a lot of white balloons, and in each balloon was a saw cutting a log in half, and above the log was the word ZZZZZZZZZ...

"I've never been so scared in my life. A rolling pin flew toward me and went POW and flew away, and I began to run, my shoes pounding on that 2D pitch-black alley be-tween the jagged fences under that slice of yellow moon. It was so utterly—"

"Horrifying," Dr. Brand breathed, wriggling in his bonds.

"Completely. I lived in that country for six months. Six long months, evenings and Sundays only! Can you imagine what that would do to a man's sense of balance? What a freak I felt. How round, how queer, how rejected. There was a disease they got, it never appears in the papers, but some-times it causes the corpses to twitch and jerk; these symptoms set in at the moment of death... You remember Miss Raven, don't you? Such a terrible thing. But I promised not to tell. Anyway, I don't want to chill you with tales of two-dimensional corpses. It was worse than that. Far worse. I fell in love."

"Ahhh," said Brant, his eyes widening.

"Well may you ahhh," Farouche said sadly. "She was gorgeous. She was a redhead. She was a sensation. Her dialogue—you should have seen her balloons! Witty! Sparkling! Sex! She made dumb broads like Snow White look like lumps of coal-tar. Her face was so round, so pink, without a lot of hideous detail; just eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth, and a couple of red spots for the cheeks. No shaded con-tours, no lights and shadows—this girl was pure. Like you don't often find them any more. And when she spoke! Clear black words, in a white balloon, floating over her lovely head: BANG!, she would say, and HOT DINGIES!, and HEY THERE, LOVER BOY, LETS GRAB A COUPLA HAMBURGERS—Oh, my God! I'll never forget her, to my dying

day!"

He burst into tears. Brant watched, disturbed and sad-dened. Gently he said, "But you left that country, anyway, and came back here, didn't you?"

Farouche nodded, tears streaming down his cheeks. He took out a blue polka-dotted handkerchief and blew his nose. He caught his breath. "I got a letter from a guy who signed himself Zarkov. It said, 'You cubist, you are a walking crime against nature. I have constructed a duplicate of you using chicken skin and wire. Get out of this strip immediately or I will turn it over to the brutal and sinister Kah-Mee for torture.' ... Do you think I'm a coward, Brant? Tell me honestly."

The physchiatrist smiled grimly. "I've heard of the Kah-Mee," he said shortly. "You're no coward. It would have been a fate worse than death."

"Yeah. That's what I figured you'd say. So anyway, I split until the heat blew over. You're a sympathetic sort of chap, Brant. Would you like to see a picture of my girl?"

"I'd love to," Brant said eagerly.

Yog Farouche pulled a wallet out of his hip pocket, ex-tracted a piece of five-colored paper from it, unfolded the paper and spread it out on Brant's knee. The psychiatrist sucked in his breath. "Wow," he said. "What a build. Gor-geous!" Across the bottom of the page was written, in a deli-cate feminine hand: "To Yoggsy, for memories and futures, with all of my love, Brenda Starr."

"She's a honey," Brant said, licking his dry lips. "You sure were one lucky guy."

Farouche grunted. "That's what you think. What relationship can anybody have with a two-dimensional woman? Just imagine it! Go ahead! ... Frustrating, isn't it?"

"Ahhh," Brant said, a new light coming into his eyes.

"Yeah." Farouche put the picture back in his wallet. He rubbed his head with his knuckles and he yawned. "Well, it's over and done with, a good many years now. I'm not go-ing to weep my weeps in public. Once again I escaped out the northeast corner of the world. Hunted, persecuted, the man without a country, always by submarine, Miami to Bos-ton, New Orleans to San Diego, forever the neon jungle and the low-register clarinet and overhead the moon like a monocle, like the big eye of the angel ... My friend, we are two puppet masters making our dolls shake hands, believing this to be the only medium of communication. But let me put you wise to the secret of the universe. Here it comes: The grail blends into a trolley line that goes over your head."

"I don't understand," Brant said.

Farouche grinned. "Honester and honester. You're hardly a homo sap any

more. Can you see suns going around inside of stars going around inside of suns? Then you're on the right path. Listen, pal. Let's face it. I am seventy-three trillion years old. I've seen empires rise and fall: Rome and Athens, Ur and Egypt, Atlantis and Mu, Fanthor and Grograndina, back before the beginning of time, and you don't seem surprised at all ... What's wrong? Did you suddenly remember something?"

"Yes," Brant whispered, straining forward in his bonds, his eyes alive and eager. "Listen, you know where I come from? Yeow! Where the electrons are slightly smaller, hence the ehronons are shorter—think what this does to a Mickey Mouse watch! So we have electrons hopping from now to the other side of now, forming different elements; this is the Flipped Coin theory, beautiful as light running through water in space! Do you know that I watched—"

"You're cured," Farouche said. He threw his leg over the chair-arm and began to buff his fingernails, looking bored. "The rest is old hat to me, pal."

"I watched Titanosaurus hatch and wither, right here on this little planet! This planet—hah! Once I wouldn't have stopped here for fuel. This is the backwoods, the edge of town—up there is where all the interesting people live. You can see it on starry nights, the stamping-ground of the intergalactic smart set ... If you knew what games they play, and against what fabulous settings! Listen, Yoggsy. Help me. I've got to go back home. I've got to go back home! I've got to go back home!"

His voice rose to a shriek. Farouche got up, waving him silent. "Shhh! Do you want that Potter bitch in here, that starched custodian of wilted souls? Wait!" He went over to the window and threw one foot across the sill and disappeared into the garden. In a few moments he was back, with a flat green leaf in his hand and the radiant smile on his face.

"Look here, friend." He held the leaf in front of Brant's eyes. In the cupped center of it stood a round firm shim-mering dew-drop. He said, "Nasturtium, with a jewel. Look. Don't think; simply look."

Brant looked. The drop was only a dew-drop. It was a moist solid tiny crystal ball. Inside was the room, turned upside-down, and his own curved attenuated face, and the open window, the sun streaming in, Yog Farouche holding a nasturtium leaf, with a crystal ball in the center, and inside the ball was a room, with an open window, and the sun streaming in, and a world in a world in a world in a whirled—

Brant flipped the switch and said, "Send Eyck" in, Miss Potter, I see what you mean, I certainly do exist. And not because I think, either. Just the opposite. Zowie! Untie me fast!"

Farouche jerked a knot and the rope fell loose. "Here there and everywhere," he said. "It's all yours, beyond the groping fingers of time. Will you remember that?"

"Certainly. Why not? Think of all the hours I wasted! Powie! What do I do now?"

"You go back to my cubicle. If anybody asks, your name is Yog Farouche. If they keep asking, tell them about the land of Yeow. By the way, you are completely rehabilitated in three days, after which you take over Superman's job both daily and Sunday and from there on you're on your own. Are you pleased?"

"Delighted," Brant said, beaming.

"All right; tomorrow, same time, same wave-length. But first, push the intercom button and ask Dr. Eyck to come in here."

Brant flipped the switch and said, "Send Eyck in, Miss Potter," and closed the switch again.

Farouche said, "How do you feel now?"

"I feel very happy. I feel absolutely secure and unspeak-ably serene."

"Good; you'll feel even better tomorrow. I'll see you then."

He closed the door, rubbed his hands briskly, and sat down in Brant's chair behind the big desk. He picked up a blank card from the pile on the desk, and looked at it. Then he opened the drawer and found a bottle of ink, poured some ink on the card, smeared it around with his fingers, blotted it off, and placed the card second in the pile. At that mo-ment, Dr. Eyck came in.

Eyck looked alarmed. "Where's Dr. Brant?"

"Out," said Farouche. "Don't worry; he's put me on mini-mum security." He smiled the radiant smile.

"Oh." The young psychiatrist sat down in the easy-chair. He was a husky blond in whites, with a long face and a broken nose, and he was wearing horn glasses. "Minimum security, hey? You sound like an old hand around here ... Hello, a nasturtium leaf. Where'd this come from?"

"Outside in the garden," Farouche said.

Eyck smiled gently. "Not in this garden. We've only got roses."

"This year, yes; but you will have nasturtiums, summer after next."

"Well, now, that may be true," Eyck said, letting his ex-pression go bland. "So Dr. Brant put you on minimum se-curity, did he? Where did you say he went?"

"I didn't say, but he's out getting in touch with some people he used to know. He wants you to check me on Rorschach while he's gone. Said to tell you he slipped a couple of different blots into the pack, but you just record my state-ments as usual. Whatever *that* means," he smiled.

Eyck smiled back and settled in the chair, on familiar grounds now. "First, you're to look at the ink-blots I show you, and then describe what they seem like to you. I'll just jot down what you say. Say anything that comes into your mind," he said, handing over the top card.

Farouche looked at it. He squinted. He turned it upside down. "Reminds me of blue light passing through a chunk of ice ... You can feel the wind in it. It's a man who puts his fingers to his temples and concentrates on smashing eggs. Ever try that? ... Yes, he's obviously from Betelgeuse, where I was born; crepuscular, in moss gray and moss green, under the blurred signs; and now he's a young psychiatrist whose heart is doing a different thing than his hands. Very sad. Very sad. Very sad."

"Ah," said Dr. Eyck, looking at Farouche for the first time. "Go ahead. What else? Does it remind you of anything in your past?"

"Yeah; it reminds me of the time I put some dough on three race horses; one named Fat Chance, one named Zeitgeist, one named Go for Baroque ... Funny how some guys like long odds more than life itself ... I took one look at your paint-smeared face and I knew you were one of them ... Anyway, I was saying—Goethe, who dropped out of the race some time ago, once asked me this question: Did you ever watch while a bird hypnotizes a snake into eating it?"

Dr. Eyck wrote busily, nodding. "Go on, go on," he said.

"I remember I dumped five grand on Fat Chance and another five on Zeitgeist, simply because I hated myself that day. But the very next day I loved myself and I won a quarter of a million on Go for Baroque. I want you to re-member that. The horse's name will remind you. Baroque—that means 'irregular in form'—it's more fun that way, see. Will you remember?"

"Certainly," Dr. Eyck smiled, writing.

"Eyck, old boy, no wonder you never change anybody. You don't even know anybody is there."

"...How's that?"

"You're alive like a machine," Farouche said. "You don't experience anything. You have a shortage of viewpoints. So naturally you don't help anybody; you just wear a white coat and follow the rulebook."

"We effect a good many cures—" Eyck began stiffly.

"Oh, snap it off. A witch doctor will cure the same per-centage. Check the figures some time. Look at me." He held Eyck's eyes with his amber ones for a few seconds. "You've been thinking along the same lines, haven't you?"

Eyck stared, opened his mouth, closed it again, and nodded.

Farouche said, "All right. Go back to your notebook." He picked up the card

and squinted at it, and Eyck did as he was told, with a flicker of puzzlement on his long face. Well, some patients could sure be peculiar. That's the way it went on this job...

"Okay," Farouche said, flipping the card. "Next picture. Here we are, squeezed between Was and Will-be like yel-lowed photographs in the family album ... Here's a snap-shot of you graduating from high school, with a vulture on your shoulder; that was before you died ... You know what? Sometimes I'm full of nostalgia for something that hasn't happened yet. Or for the second just gone by. Or for wind in a chimney that fell to pieces five hundred years ago. It's funny, saying this to a guy with no imagination, and watching his inner reactions. It may take several weeks to shake you loose ... Well! Here I see a field of flowers growing on the bright sidewalks of eternity," he said, point-ing; and then he put the card down. "That's all. What's the next one?"

Dr. Eyck put the first card face down on the desk, and reached for the second card. He glanced at it. This must be one of the special ones Brant slipped into the pack. H'mmm. What a strange day it was today. This card was unusual too, all right. Never seen anything like it. What could the blot be? It seemed like an eye, the eye of a cyclops, wearing bifocals. One single eye with a fountain of tears rushing out of it. The tears were so real they were getting his hands wet ... How terrible ... Things he'd never thought of before ... Ancient things ... Tears like liquid diamonds, the sorrow of the ages ... What a pit of grief, how sad, how terrible ... Excruciating!

"Don't cry," Farouche soothed. "You're almost born now. Everything's going to be all right very soon."

"Soon!" Eyck sobbed, staring at the gushing tears. "Soon, soon, soon! Always the big waiting room. Pie in the sky. That's how they've fooled me. A crock of lies! No wonder everybody's crazy! Hoo, hoo, hoo. ... I'd like to stuff 'soon' right—"

"I know," Farouche said bitterly. "It's awful. Like they say. When at Delphi do as the delphiniums do. Even if you're a tiger lily. What fools people are! How they love their chains!"

"Yes! Yes!" Eyck wept, tearing up the card and throwing the pieces into the sunshine. "It's true, you're right, I'm surrounded by fools, blind fools, they've got my worst interest at heart."

"Suicide-prone," Farouche prompted. "The race is head-ing down the big drain ... No scream could do justice to that horror!"

Eyck nodded, sobbing. He put his head in his hands.

"Here everything is slick, glossy, tasteless, like expensive cardboard. What's the use of living? The houses, the entertainment, the people—a bunch of lemmings playing follow-the-leader down to the sea!"

Eyck nodded jerkily, head in hands.

"But so what?" Farouche said. He relaxed suddenly. He stretched widely, and he yawned. "When I'm eating a plum, I don't remember how pineapple tastes. So this world is full of debasing attitudes and fashions. Who cares what other idiots do? There are games beyond games beyond games, my friend; and this one is a pip-squeak."

Eyck quit sobbing. He looked up, between stiff fingers. He snuffled. "Yeah? Says who?"

"Says me, that's who. For instance, in the cracks between moments lives a world, which contains beings. Even the terms misrepresent. For when an X is utterly alien, we don't speak of it, we fold our sentience, we freeze the bursting limb. 'Repress' ain't the word for what you are doing one hundred percent of the time," Farouche said.

Eyck stared at him. He looked wary now. His face was wet and contorted. "Who told you about me?"

"Nobody had to tell me. You're fond of flowers, horses, canned ideas, and pessimism. Some combination! No wonder you always lose when you bet. You can't see the future for the trees. You dislike women, because they've kicked you around, because you and other people have kicked them around, around and around. But you buy just about any-thing anybody tries to sell you, which later makes you mad. So I'll have to use these quirks until I can cure them. And that, pal, is the secret of changing the world."

Eyck began to get to his feet, slowly. "You're the one," he whispered. "You are the Voice I've been waiting for. You—"

"No doubt! Pleased to meet you. I remember you well. When you were a kid they took you to Dr. Lamb with the white marble smile, he who washes his hands in formalde-hyde and says, '*All* rightee, we'll have those wings off in no time!' ... This is the way they do it, this gang of local mur-derers. Because wings sometimes break the furniture."

"Yes!" Eyck said excitedly. "How did you know! Every night I used to dream about—Say, what's your name? What's happening here, anyway?"

"We're changing games. The old one was a bore. My name is Farouche. I've taken over three state hospitals, two rehabilitation centers and a chamber of commerce, and my next goal is to induce governmental leaders to come here for my cure. When I've finished with these birds there won't be any war, among other things. And you can assist me. Does that make life worth living?"

"Zowie!" Eyck said. "*Pow!* It's the answer! I never thought I'd—I'm wondering what—"

"Don't worry about a thing. First, I'll ask you to step into the lab and fix me up a needleful of pentothal, because Miss Potter is my next patient, and who knows how she'll react? Except me, of course. She's sub-clinical schizophrenic. You may not have noticed, because anybody who isn't

putting piranhas in the water cooler passes for normal in this corrupt society. You think you've suffered? Take a look at the face of Potter. She may require three or four weeks. And I've got all those patients in the ward to take care of today."

"I see what you mean," Eyck said thoughtfully.

"Before you go, ring the bell and ask Nurse Potter to step in."

"Right," Eyck said. He leaned across the desk and pressed the intercom button. "Will you come in for a moment please, Nurse?" Then he winked at Farouche, and went out through the laboratory door.

Mr. Farouche moved after him and bolted the door so he wouldn't be disturbed too soon.

He sat at Dr. Brant's desk and smoothed down his wiry hair.

He leaned back, relaxed, smiling radiantly, waiting for the nurse...

A new demonstration of Poul Anderson's particular mastery of the battle tale, with a skillful blend of the drama inherent in both the vast potentials of science and the enduring qual-ities of human nature.

TIME LAG

by Poul Anderson

522 Anno Coloniae Conditae:

Elva was on her way back, within sight of home, when the raid came.

For nineteen thirty-hour days, riding in high forests where sunlight slanted through leaves, across ridges where grass and the first red lampflowers rippled under springtime winds, sleeping by night beneath the sky or in the hut of some woodsdweller—once, even, in a nest of Alfavala, where the wild little folk twittered in the dark and their eyes glowed at her—she had been gone. Her original departure was reluctant. Her husband of two years, her child of one, the lake and fields and chimney smoke at dusk which were now hers also, these were still too marvelous to leave.

But the Freeholder of Tervola had duties as well as rights. Once each season, he or his representative must ride circuit. Up into the mountains, through woods and deep dales, across the Lakeland as far as The Troll and then following the Swiftsmoke River south again, ran the route which Karlavi's fathers had traveled for nearly two centuries. Whether on hailu-back in spring and summer, through the scarlet and gold of fall, or by motorsled when snow had covered all trails, the Freeholder went out Into highlands. Isolated farm clans, forest rangers on patrol duty, hunters and

trappers and tim-ber cruisers, brought their disputes to him as magistrate, their troubles to him as leader. Even the flitting Alfavala had learned to wait by the paths, the sick and injured trusting he could heal them, those with more complex problems strug-gling to put them into human words.

This year, however, Karlavi and his bailiffs were much preoccupied with a new dam across the Oulu. The old one had broken last spring, after a winter of unusually heavy snowfall, and 5000 hectares of bottom land were drowned. The engineers at Yuvaskula, the only city on Vaynamo, had developed a new construction process well adapted to such situations. Karlavi wanted to use this.

"But blast it all," he said, "I'll need every skilled man I have, including myself. The job has got to be finished before the ground dries, so the ferroplast can bond with the soil. And you know what the labor shortage is like around here."

"Who will ride circuit, then?" asked Elva.

"That's what I don't know." Karlavi ran a hand through his straight brown hair. He was a typical Vaynamoan, tall, light-complexioned, with high cheek-bones and oblique blue eyes. He wore the working clothes usual to the Tervola dis-trict, leather breeches ending in mukluks, a mackinaw in the tartan of his family. There was nothing romantic about his appearance. Nonetheless, Elva's heart turned over when he looked at her. Even after two years.

He got out his pipe and tamped it with nervous motions. "Somebody must," he said. "Somebody with enough technical education to use a medikit and discuss people's difficulties in-telligently. And with authority. We're more tradition-minded hereabouts than they are at Ruuyalka, dear. Our people wouldn't accept the judgment of just anyone. How could a servant or tenant dare settle an argument between two pio-neers? It must be me, or a bailiff, or—" His voice trailed off.

Elva caught the implication. "No!" she exclaimed. "I can't! I mean ... that is—"

"You're my wife," said Karlavi slowly. "That alone gives you the right, by well-established custom. Especially since you're the daughter of the Magnate of Ruuyalka. Almost equivalent to me in prestige, even if you do come from the other end of the continent, where they're fishers and fanners instead of woodsfolk." His grin flashed. "I doubt if you've yet learned what awful snobs the free yeoman of Tervola are!"

"But Hauki, I can't leave him."

"Hauki will be spoiled rotten in your absence, by an ador-ing nanny and a villageful of ten wives. Otherwise he'll do fine." Karlavi dismissed the thought of their son with a wry gesture. "I'm the one who'll get lonesome. Abominably so."

"Oh, darling," said Elva, utterly melted. A few days later she rode forth.

And it had been an experience to remember. The easy, rocking motion of the six-legged hailu, the mindless leisure of kilometer after kilometer—where however the body, skin and muscle and blood and all ancient instinct, gained an aliveness such as she had never before felt; the silence of mountains with sunlit ice on their shoulders, then bird-song in the woods and a river brawling; the rough warm hospital-ity when she stayed overnight with some pioneer, the eldritch welcome at the Alfa nest—she was now glad she had encountered those things, and she hoped to know them
again, often.

There had been no danger. The last violence between humans on Vaynamo (apart from occasional fist fights, caused mostly by sheer exuberance and rarely doing any harm) lay a hundred years in the past. As for storms, land-slides, floods, wild animals, she had the unobtrusive atten-dance of Huiva and a dozen other "tame" Alfavala. Even these, the intellectual pick of their species, who had chosen to serve man in a doglike fashion rather than keep to the forests, could speak only a few words and handle only the simplest tools. But their long ears, flat nostrils, feathery antennae, every fine green hair on every small body, were al-ways aquiver. This was their planet, they had evolved here, and they were more animal than rational beings. Their senses and reflexes kept her safer than an armored aircraft might.

All the same, the absence of Karlavi and Hauki grew sharper each day. When finally she came to the edge of cleared land, high on the slopes of Hornback Fell, and saw Tervola below, a momentary blindness stung her eyes.

Huiva guided his hailu alongside hers. He pointed down the mountain with his tail. "Home," he chattered. "Food tonight. Snug bed."

"Yes." Elva blinked hard. *What sort of crybaby am I, anyhow?* she asked herself, half in anger. *I'm the Magnate's daughter and the Freeholder's wife, I have a University de-gree and a pistol-shooting medal, as a girl I sailed through hurricanes and skindove into grottos where fanfish laired, as a woman I brought a son into the world ... I will not bawl!*

"Yes," she said. "Let's hurry."

She thumped heels on the hailu's ribs and started down-hill at a gallop. Her long yellow hair was braided, but a lock of it broke loose, fluttering behind her. Hoofs rang on stone. Ahead stretched grainfields and pastures, still wet from winter but their shy green deepening toward summer hues, on down to the great metallic sheet of Lake Rovaniemi and then across the valley to the opposite horizon, where the High Mikkela reared into a sky as tall and blue as itself. Down by the lake clustered the village, the dear red tile of roofs, the whale shape of a processing plant, a road lined with trees leading to the Freeholder's mansion. There, old handhewn timbers glowed with sun; the many windows flung the light dazzingly back to her.

She was halfway down the slope when Huiva screamed. She had learned to

react fast. Thinly scattered across all Vaynamo, men could easily die from the unforeseen. Reining in, Elva snatched loose the gun at her waist. "What is it?"

Huiva cowered on his mount. One hand pointed skyward.

At first Elva could not understand. An aircraft descending above the lake ... what was so odd about that? How else did Huiva expect the inhabitants of settlements hundreds of kilometers apart to visit each other?—And then she regis-tered the shape. And then, realizing the distance, she knew the size of the thing.

It came down swiftly, quiet in its shimmer of antigrav fields, a cigar shape which gleamed. Elva holstered her pistol again and took forth her binoculars. Now she could see how the sleekness was interrupted with turrets and boat housings, cargo locks, viewports. An emblem was set into the armored prow, a gauntleted hand grasping a planetary orb. Nothing she had ever heard of. But—

Her heart thumped, so loudly that she could almost not hear the Alfavala's squeals of terror. "A spaceship," she breathed. "A spaceship, do you know that word? Like the ships my ancestors came here in, long ago ... Oh, botherl A big aircraft, Huiva. Come on!"

She whipped her hailu back into gallop. The first space-ship to arrive at Vaynamo in, in, how long? More than a hundred years. And it was landing here! At her own Tervolal

The vessel grounded just beyond the village. Its enormous mass settled deeply into the plowland. Housings opened and auxiliary aircraft darted forth, to hover and swoop. They were of a curious design, larger and blunter than the fliers built on Vaynamo. The people, running toward the marvel, surged back as hatches gaped, gangways extruded, armored cars beetled down to the ground.

Elva had not yet reached the village when the strangers opened fire.

There were no hostile ships, not even an orbital fortress. To depart, the seven craft from Chertkoi simply made rendezvous beyond the atmosphere, held a short gleeful con-ference by radio, and accelerated outward. Captain Bors Golyev, commanding the flotilla, stood on the bridge of the Askol and watched the others. The light of the yellow sun was incandescent on their flanks. Beyond lay blackness and the many stars.

His gaze wandered off among constellations which the parallax of fifteen light-years had not much altered. The galaxy was so big, he thought, so unimaginably enormous ... Sedes Regis was an L scrawled across heaven. Tradition claimed Old Sol lay in that direction, a thousand parsecs away. But no one on Chertkoi was certain any longer. Golyev shrugged. Who cared?

"Gravitational field suitable for agoric drive, sir," intoned the pilot.

Golyev looked in the sternward screen. The planet called Vaynamo had dwindled, but remained a vivid shield, barred with cloud and blazoned with continents, the overall color a cool blue-green. He thought of ocherous Chertkoi, and the other planets of its system, which were not even habitable. Vaynamo was the most beautiful color he had ever seen. The two moons were also visible, Like drops of liquid gold.

Automatically, his astronaut's eye checked the claims of the instruments. Was Vaynamo really far enough away for the ships to go safely into agoric? Not quite, he thought—no, wait, he'd forgotten that the planet had a five percent greater diameter than Chertkoi. "Very good," he said, and gave the necessary orders to his subordinate captains. A deep hum filled air and metal and human bones. There was a momen-tary sense of falling, as the agoratron went into action. And then the stars began to change color and crawl weirdly across the visual field.

"All's well, sir," said the pilot. The chief engineer con-firmed it over the intercom.

"Very good," repeated Golyev. He yawned and stretched elaborately. "I'm tired! That was quite a little fight we had at that last village, and I've gotten no sleep since. I'll be in my cabin. Call me if anything seems amiss."

"Yes, sir." The pilot smothered a knowing leer.

Golyev walked down the corridor, his feet slamming its metal under internal pseudogravity. Once or twice he met a crewman and accepted a salute as casually as it was given. The men of the Interplanetary Corporation didn't need to stand on ceremony. They were tried spacemen and fighters, every one of them. If they chose to wear sloppy uniforms, to lounge about off-duty cracking jokes or cracking a bottle, to treat their officers as friends rather than tyrants—so much the better. This wasn't the nice-nelly Surface Transport Cor-poration, or the spit-and-polish Chemical Synthesis Trust, but IP, explorer and conqueror. The ship was clean and the guns were ready. What more did you want?

Pravoyats, the captain's batman, stood outside the cabin door. He nursed a scratched cheek and a black eye. One hand rested broodingly on his sidearm. "Trouble?" inquired Golyev.

"Trouble ain't the word, sir."

"You didn't hurt her, did you?" asked Golyev sharply.

"No, sir. I heard your orders all right. Never laid a finger on her in anger. But she sure did on me. Finally I wrassled her down and gave her a whiff of sleepy gas. She'd'a torn the cabin apart otherwise. She's probably come out of it by now, but I'd rather not go in again to see, captain."

Golyev laughed. He was a big man, looming over Pravo-yats, who was no midget. Otherwise he was a normal patron-class Chertkoian, powerfully built, with comparatively short legs and strutting gait, his features dark, snubnosed, bearded, carrying more than his share of old scars. H$ wore a

plain green tunic, pants tucked into soft boots, gun at hip, his only sign of rank a crimson star at his throat. "I'll take care of all that from here on," he said.

"Yes, sir." Despite his wounds, the batman looked a shade envious. "Uh, you want the prod? I tell you, she's a trouble-maker."

"No."

"Electric shocks don't leave any scars, captain."

"I know. But on your way, Pravoyats." Golyev opened the door, went through, and closed it behind him again.
The girl had been seated on his bunk. She stood up with a gasp. A looker, for certain. The Vaynamoan women generally seemed handsome; this one was beautiful, tall and slim, delicate face and straight nose lightly dusted with freckles. But her mouth was wide and strong, her skin suntanned, and she wore a coarse, colorful riding habit. Her exoticism was the most exciting thing: yellow hair, slant blue eyes, who'd ever heard of the like?

The tranquilizing after-effects of the gas—or else plain nervous exhaustion—kept her from attacking him. She backed against the wall and shivered. Her misery touched Golyev a little. He'd seen unhappiness elsewhere, on Imfan and Novagal and Chertkoi itself, and hadn't been bothered thereby. People who were too weak to defend themselves must expect to be made booty of. It was different, though, when someone as good-looking as this was so woebegone.

He paused on the opposite side of his desk from her, gave a soft salute, and smiled. "What's your name, my dear?"

She drew a shaken breath. After trying several times, she managed to speak. "I didn't think ... anyone ... understood my language."

"A few of us do. The hypnopede, you know." Evidently she did not. He thought a short, dry lecture might soothe her. "An invention made a few decades ago on our planet. Suppose another person and I have no language in common. We can be given a drug to accelerate our nervous systems, and then the machine flashes images on a screen and ana-lyzes the sounds uttered by the other person. What it hears is transferred to me and impressed on the speech center of my brain, electronically. As the vocabulary grows, a computer in the machine figures out the structure of the whole language—semantics, grammar, and so on—and orders my own learning accordingly. That way, a few short, daily sessions make me fluent."

She touched her lips with a tongue that seemed equally parched. "I heard once ... of some experiments at the University," she whispered. "They never got far. No reason for such a machine. Only one language on Vaynamo."

"And on Chertkoi. But we've already subjugated two other planets, one of 'em divided into hundreds of language groups. And we expect there'll be others." Golyev opened a drawer, took out a bottle and two glasses. "Care for brandy?"

He poured. "I'm Bors Golyev, an astronautical executive of the Interplanetary Corporation, commanding this scout force," he said. "Who are you?"

She didn't answer. He reached a glass toward her. "Come, now," he said, "I'm not such a bad fellow. Here, drink. To our better acquaintance."

With a convulsive movement, she struck the glass from his hand. It bounced on the floor. "Almighty Creator! No!" she yelled. "You murdered my husband!"

She stumbled to a chair, fell down in it, rested head in arms on the desk and began to weep. The spilled brandy crept across the floor toward her.

Golyev groaned. Why did he always get cases like this? Glebs Narov, now, had clapped hands on the jolliest tawny wench you could imagine, when they conquered Marsya on Imfan: delighted to be liberated from her own drab cul-ture.

Well, he could kick this female back down among the other prisoners. But he didn't want to. He seated himself across from her, lit a cigar out of the box on his desk, and held his own glass to the light. Ruby smoldered within.

"I'm sorry," he said. "How was I to know? What's done is done. There wouldn't have been so many casualties if they'd been sensible and given up. We shot a few to prove we meant business, but then called on the rest over a loudspeaker, to yield. They didn't. For that matter, you were riding a six-legged animal out of the fields, I'm told. You came busting right into the fight. Why didn't you ride the other way and hide out till we left?"

"My husband was there," she said after a silence. When she raised her face, he saw it gone cold and stiff. "And our child."

"Oh? Uh, maybe we picked up the kid, at least. If you'd like to go see—"

"No," she said, toneless and yet somehow with a dim re-turning pride. "I got Hauki away. I rode straight to the mansion and got him. Then one of your fire-guns hit the roof and the house began to burn. I told Huiva to take the baby—never mind where. I said I'd follow if I could. But Karlavi was out there, fighting. I went back to the barricade. He had been killed just a few seconds before. His face was all bloody. Then your cars broke through the barricade and someone caught me. But you don't have Hauki. Or Karlavi!"

As if drained by the effort of speech, she slumped and stared into a corner, empty-eyed.

"Well," said Golyev, not quite comfortably, "your people had been warned." She didn't seem to hear him. "You never got the message? But it was telecast over your whole planet. After our first non-secret landing. That was several days ago. Where were you? Out in the woods?—Yes, We scouted

telescopically, and made clandestine landings, and caught a few citizens to interrogate. But when we understood the situation, more or less, we landed openly, in, uh, your city. Yuvaskula, is that the name? We seized it without too much damage, captured some officials of the planetary government, claimed the planet for IP and called on all citizens to coop-erate. But they wouldn'tl Why, one ambush alone cost us fifty good men. What could we do? We had to teach a les-son. We announced we'd punish a few random villages. That's more humane than bombarding from space with co-balt missiles. Isn't it? But I suppose your people didn't really believe us, the way they came swarming when we landed. Trying to parley with us first, and then trying to resist us with hunting rifles! What would you expect to happen?"

His voice seemed to fall into an echoless well.

He loosened his collar, which felt a trifle tight, took a deep drag on his cigar and refilled his glass. "Of course, I don't expect you to see our side of it at once," he said reasonably. "You've been jogging along, isolated, for centuries, haven't you? Hardly a spaceship has touched at your planet since it was first colonized. You have none of your own, except a couple of interplanetary boats which hardly ever get used. That's what your President told me, and I believe him. Why should you go outsystem? You have everything you can use, right on your own world. The nearest sun to yours with an oxygen atmosphere planet is three parsecs off. Even with a very high-powered agoration, you'd need ten years to get there, another decade to get back. A whole generation! Sure, the time-contraction effect would keep you young—ship's time for the voyage would only be a few weeks, or less—but all your friends would be middle-aged when you came home. Believe me, it's lonely being a spaceman."

He drank. A pleasant burning went down his throat. "No wonder man spread so slowly into space, and each colony is so isolated," he said. "Chertkoi is a mere name in your archives. And yet it's only fifteen light-years from Vaynamo. You can see our sun on any clear night. A reddish one. You call it Gamma Navarchi. Fifteen little light-years, and yet there's been no contact between our two planets for four centuries or more!

"So why now? Well, that's a long story. Let's just say Chertkoi isn't as friendly a world as Vaynamo. You'll see that for yourself. We, our ancestors, we came up the hard way, we had to struggle for everything. And now there are four billion of us! That was the census figure when I left. It'll probably be five billion when I get home. We have to have more re-sources. Our economy is grinding to a halt. And we can't afford economic dislocation. Not on as thin a margin as Chertkoi allows us. First we went back to the other planets of our system and worked them as much as practicable. Then we started re-exploring the nearer stars. So far we've found two useful planets. Yours is the third. You know what your population is? Ten million, your President claimed. Ten mil-lion people for a whole world of forests, plains, hills, oceans ... why, your least continent has more natural resources than all Chertkoi. And you've stabilized at that population. You don't want more people!"

Golyev struck the desk with a thump. "If you think ten million stagnant

agriculturists have a right to monopolize all that room and wealth, when four billion Chertkoians live on the verge of starvation," he said indignantly, "you can think again."

She stirred. Not looking at him, her tone small and very distant, she said, "It's our planet, to do with as we please. If you want to breed like maggots, you must take the con-sequences."

Anger flushed the last sympathy from Bolyev. He ground out his cigar in the ashwell and tossed off his brandy. "Never mind moralizing," he said. "I'm no martyr. I became a spaceman because it's fun!"

He got up and walked around the desk to her.

538 A.C.C.:

When she couldn't stand the apartment any more, Elva went out on the balcony and looked across Dirzh until that view became unendurable in its turn.

From this height, the city had a certain grandeur. On every side it stretched horizonward, immense gray blocks among which rose an occasional spire shining with steel and glass. Eastward at the very edge of vision it ended before some mine pits, whose scaffolding and chimneys did not entirely cage off a glimpse of primordial painted desert. Be-tween the buildings went a network of elevated trafficways, some carrying robofreight, others pullulating with gray-clad clients on foot. Overhead, against a purple-black sky and the planet's single huge moon, nearly full tonight, flitted the firefly arrears of executives, engineers, military techs, and others in the patron class. A few stars were visible, but the fever-flash of neon drowned most of them. Even by full red-tinged daylight, Elva could never see all the way downward. A fog of dust, smoke, fumes and vapors hid the bot-tom of the artificial mountains. She could only imagine the underground, caves and tunnels where workers of the lowest category were bred to spend their lives tending machines, and where a criminal class slunk about in armed packs.

It was rarely warm on Chertkoi, summer or winter. As the night wind gusted, Elva drew more tightly around her a mantle of genuine fur from Novagal. Bors wasn't stingy about clothes or jewels. But then, he liked to take her out in public places, where she could be admired and he envied. For the first few months she had refused to leave the apartment. He hadn't made an issue of it, only waited. In the end she gave in. Nowadays she looked forward eagerly to such times; they took her away from these walls. But of late there had been no celebrations. Bors was working too hard.

The moon Drogoi climbed higher, reddened by the hidden sun and the lower atmosphere of the city. At the zenith it would be pale copper. Once Elva had fancied the markings on it formed a death's head. They didn't really; that had just been her horror of everything Chertkoian. But she had never shaken off the impression.

She hunted among the constellations, knowing that if she found Vaynamo's sun it would hurt, but unable to stop. The air was too thick tonight, though,

with an odor of acid and rotten eggs. She remembered riding out along Lake Rovaniemi, soon after her marriage. Karlavi was along: no one else, for you didn't need a bodyguard on Vaynamo. The two moons climbed fast. Their light made a trembling double bridge on the water. Trees rustled, the air smelled green, something sang with a liquid plangency, far off among moon-dappled shadows.

"But that's beautiful!" she had whispered. "Yonder song-bird. We haven't anything like it in Ruuyalka."

Karlavi chuckled. "No bird at all. The Alfavala name—well, who can pronounce that? We humans say 'yanno.' A little pseudomammal, a terrible pest. Roots up tubers. For a while we thought we'd have to wipe out the species."

"True. Also, the Alfavala would be hurt. Insofar as they have anything like a religion, the yanno seems to be part of it, locally. Important somehow, to them, at least." Unspoken was the law under which she and he had both been raised: the green dwarfs are barely where man was, two or three million years ago on Old Earth, but they are the real natives of Vaynamo, and if we share their planet, we're bound to respect them and help them.

Once Elva had tried to explain the idea to Bors Golyev. He couldn't understand at all. If the abos occupied land men might use, why not hunt them off it? They'd make good, crafty game, wouldn't they?

"Can anything be done about the yanno?" she had asked Karlavi.

"For several generations, we fooled around with electric fences and so on. But just a few years ago, I consulted Paaska Ecological Institute and found they'd developed a wholly new approach to such problems. They can now tailor a dominant mutant gene which produces a strong distaste for Vita-min C. I suppose you know Vitamin C isn't part of native biochemistry, but occurs only in plants of Terrestrial origin. We released the mutants to breed, and every season there are fewer yanno that'll touch our crops. In another five years there'll be too few to matter."

"And they'll still sing for us." She edged her hailu closer to his. Their knees touched. He leaned over and kissed her.

Elva shivered. *I'd better go in,* she thought.

The light switched on automatically as she re-entered the living room. At least artificial illumination on Chertkoi was like home. Dwelling under different suns had not yet changed human eyes. Though in other respects, man's colonies had drifted far apart indeed ... The apartment had three cramped rooms, which was considered luxurious. When five billion people, more every day, grubbed their living from a planet as bleak as this, even the wealthy must do without things that were the natural right of the poorest Vaynamoan. Spaciousness, trees, grass beneath bare feet, your own house and an open sky. Of course, Chertkoi had very sophis-ticated amusements to offer in exchange, everything from multisensory films to live combats.

Belgoya pattered in from her offside cubicle. Elva won-dered if the maidservant ever slept. "Does the mistress wish anything, please?"

"No." Elva sat down. She ought to be used to the gravity by now, she thought. How long had she been here? A year, more or less. She hadn't kept track of time, especially when they used an unfamiliar calendar. Denser than Vaynamo, Chertkoi exerted a ten percent greater surface pull; but that wasn't enough to matter, when you were in good physical condition. Yet she was always tired.

"No, I don't want anything." She leaned back on the couch and rubbed her eyes. The haze outside had made them sting.

"A cup of stim, perhaps, if the mistress please?" The girl bowed some more, absurdly doll-like in her uniform.

"No!" Elva shouted. "Go away!"

"I beg your pardon. I am a worm. I implore your mag-nanimity." Terrified, the maid crawled backward out of the room on her belly.

Elva lit a cigarette. She hadn't smoked on Vaynamo, but since coming here she'd taken it up, become a chainsmoker like most Chertkoians who could afford it. You needed some-thing to do with your hands. The servility of clients toward patrons no longer shocked her, but rather made her think of them as faintly slimy. To be sure, one could see the reasons. Belgoya, for instance, could be fired any time and sent back to street level. Down there were a million eager applicants for her position. Elva forgot her and reached after the teleshow dials. There must be something on, something loud and full of action, something to watch, something to do with her evenings.

The door opened. Elva turned about, tense with expecta-tion. So Bors was home. And alone. If he'd brought a friend along, she would have had to go into the sleeping cubicle and merely listen. Upperclass Chertkoians didn't like women in-truding on their conversation. But Bors alone meant she would have someone to talk to.

He came in, his tread showing he was also tired. He skimmed his hat into a corner and dropped his cloak on the floor. Belgoya crept forth to pick them up. As he sat down, she was there with a drink and a cigar.

Elva waited. She knew his moods. When the blunt, beard-ed face had lost some of its hardness, she donned a smile and stretched herself along the couch, leaning on one elbow. "You've been working yourself to death," she scolded.

He sighed. "Yeh. But the end's in view. Another week, and all the obscenity paperwork will be cleared up."

"You hope. One of your bureaucrats will probably invent nineteen more forms to fill out in quadruplicate."

"Probably."

"We never had that trouble at home. The planetary gov-ernment was only a coordinating body with strictly limited powers. Why won't you people even consider establishing something similar?"

"You know the reasons. Five billion of them. You've got room to be an individual on Vaynamo." Golyev finished his drink and held the glass out for a refill. "By all chaos! I'm tempted to desert when we get there."

Elva lifted her brows. "That's a thought," she purred.

"Oh, you know it's impossible," he said, returning to his usual humorlessness. "Quite apart from the fact I'd be one enemy alien on an entire planet—"

"Not necessarily."

"—All right, even if I got naturalized (and who wants to become a clodhopper?) I'd have only thirty years till the Third Expedition came. I don't want to be a client in my old age. Or worse, see my children made clients."

Elva lit a second cigaret from the stub of the first. She drew in the smoke hard enough to hollow her cheeks.

But it's all right to be launching the Second Expedition and make clients of others, she thought. *The First, that captured me and a thousand more (What's become of them? How many are dead, how many found useless and sent lobotomized to the mines, how many are still being pumped dry of information? ... that was a mere scouting trip. The Second will have fifty warships, and try to force surrender. At the very least, it will flatten all possible defenses, destroy all imaginable war potential, bring back a whole herd of slaves. And then the Third, a thousand ships or more, will bring the final conquests, the garrisons, the overseers and entrepreneurs and colonists. But that won't be for forty-five Vaynamo years or better from tonight. A man on Vaynamo ... Hauki ... a man who survives the coming of the Second Expedition will have thirty-odd years left in which to be free. But will he dare have children?*

"I'll settle down there after the Third Expedition, I think," Golyev admitted. "From what I saw of the planet last time, I believe I'd like it. And the opportunities are unlimited. A whole world waiting to be properly developed!"

"I could show you a great many chances you'd otherwise overlook," insinuated Elva.

Golyev shifted position. "Let's not go into that again," he said. "You know I can't take you along."

"You're the fleet commander, aren't you?"

"Yes, I will be, but curse it, can't you understand? The IP is not like any other corporation. We use men who think and act on their own, not planet-hugging morons like what's-her-name—" He jerked a thumb at Belgoya, who lowered her eyes meekly and continued mixing him a third drink. "Men of patron status, younger sons of executives and engineers. The officers can't have special privileges. It'd ruin morale."

Elva fluttered her lashes. "Not that much. Really."

"My oldest boy's promised to take care of you. He's not such a bad fellow as you seem to think. You only have to go along with his whims. I'll see you again, in thirty years."

"When I'm gray and wrinkled. Why not kick me out in the streets and be done?"

"You know why!" he said ferociously. "You're the first woman I could ever talk to. No, I'm not bored with you! But—"

"If you really cared for me..."

"What kind of idiot do you take me for? I know you're planning to sneak away to your own people, once we've landed."

Elva tossed her head, haughtily. "Well! If you believe that of me, there's nothing more to say."

"Aw, now, sweetling, don't take that attitude." He reached out a hand to lay on her arm. She withdrew to the far end of the couch. He looked baffled.

"Another thing," he argued. "If you care about your planet at all, as I suppose you do, even if you've now seen what a bunch of petrified mudsuckers they are ... remember, what we'll have to do there won't be pretty."

"First you call me a traitor," she flared, "and now you say I'm gutless!"

"Hey, wait a minute—"

"Go on, beat me. I can't stop you. You're brave enough for that."

"I never—"

In the end, he yielded.

553 A.C.C.:

The missile which landed on Yuvaskula had a ten-kilo-meter radius of total destruction. Thus most of the city went up in one radioactive fire-gout. In a way, the thought of men and women and little children with pet kittens, incinerated, made a trifle less pain in Elva than knowing the Old Town was gone: the cabin raised by the first men to land on Vaynamo, the ancient church of St. Yarvi with its stained glass windows and gilded belltower, the

Museum of Art where she went as a girl on entranced visits, the University where she studied and where she met Karlavi—*I'm a true daughter of Vaynamo*, she thought with remorse. *Whatever is traditional, full of memories, whatever has been looked at and been done by all the generations before me, I hold dear. The Chertkoians don't care. They haven't any past worth re-membering.*

Flames painted the northern sky red, even at this distance, as she walked among the plastishelters of the advanced base. She had flown within a hundred kilometers, using an aircar borrowed from the flagship, then landed to avoid possible missiles and hitched a ride here on a supply truck. The Chertkoian enlisted men aboard had been delighted un-til she showed them her pass, signed by Commander Golyev himself. Then they became cringingly respectful.

The pass was supposed to let her move freely about only in the rear areas, and she'd had enough trouble wheedling it from Bors. But no one thereafter looked closely at it. She herself was so unused to the concept of war that she didn't stop to wonder at such lax security measures. Had she done so, she would have realized Chertkoi had never developed anything better, never having faced an enemy of comparable strength. Vaynamo certainly wasn't, even though the planet was proving a hard-shelled opponent, with every farmhouse a potential arsenal and every forest road a possible death trap. Guerrilla fighters hindered the movements of an in-vader with armor, atomic artillery, complete control of air and space; they could not stop him.

Elva drew her dark mantle more tightly about her and crouched under a gun emplacement. A sentry went by, his helmet square against the beloved familiar face of a moon, his rifle aslant across the stars. She didn't want needless questioning. For a moment the distant blaze sprang higher, unrestful ruddy light touched her, she was afraid she had been observed. But the man continued his round.

From the air she had seen that the fire was mostly a burn-ing forest, kindled from Yuvaskula. Those wooden houses not blown apart by the missile stood unharmed in whitest glow. Some process must have been developed at one of the research institutes, for indurating timber, since she left ... How Bors would laugh if she told him! An industry which turned out a bare minimum of vehicles, farm ma-chinery, tools, chemicals; a science which developed fire-proofing techniques and traced out ecological chains; a popu-lation which deliberately held itself static, so as to preserve its old customs and laws—presuming to make war on Chert-koi!

Even so, he was too experienced a fighter to dismiss any foe as weak without careful examination. He had been excited enough about one thing to mention it to Elva—a prisoner taken in a skirmish near Yuvaskula, when he still hoped to capture the city intact: an officer, who cracked just enough under interrogation to indicate he knew something important. But Golyev couldn't wait around for the inquisitors to finish their work. He must go out the very next day to oversee the battle for Lempo Machine Tool Works, and Elva knew he wouldn't return soon. The plant had been constructed under-ground as an economy measure, and to preserve the green parkscape

above. Now its concrete warrens proved highly defensible, and were being bitterly contested. The Chertkoians meant to seize it, so they could be sure of demolish-ing everything. They would not leave Vaynamo any nucleus of industry. After all, the planet would have thirty-odd years to recover and rearm itself against the Third Expedition.

Left alone by Bors, Elva took an aircar and slipped off to the advanced base.

She recognized the plastishelter she wanted by its Intelli-gence insignia. The guard outside aimed a rifle at her. "Halt!" His boyish voice cracked over with nervousness. More than one sentry had been found in the morning with his throat cut.

"It's all right," she told him. "I'm to see the prisoner Ivalo."

"The gooze officer?" He flashed a pencil-beam across her face. "But you're a—uh—"

"A Vaynamoan myself. Of course. There are a few of us along, you know. Prisoners taken last time, who've enlisted in your cause as guides and spies. You must have heard of me. I'm Elva, Commander Golyev's lady."

"Oh. Yes, mistress. Sure I have."

"Here's my pass."

He squinted at it uneasily. "But, uh, may I ask what, uh, what *you* figure to do? I've got strict orders—"

Elva gave him her most confidential smile. "My own patron had the idea. The prisoner is withholding valuable information. He has been treated roughly, but resisted. Now, all at once, we'll take the pressure off. An attractive woman of his own race..."

"I get it. Maybe he will crack. I dunno, though, mistress. These slant-eyed towheads are mean animals—begging your pardon! Go right on in. Holler if he gets rough or, or any-thing."

The door was unlocked for her. Elva went on through, into a hemicylindrical room so low that she must stoop. A lighting tube switched on, showing a pallet laid across the floor.

Captain Ivalo was gray at the temples, but still tough and supple. His face had gone haggard, sunken eyes and a stubble of beard; his garments were torn and filthy. When he looked up, coming awake, he was too exhausted to show much surprise. "What now?" he said in dull Chertkoian. "What are you going to try next?"

Elva answered in Vaynamoan (Oh, God, it was a year and a half, her own time, nearly seventeen years cosmic time, since she had uttered a word to anyone from her planet!): "Be quiet. I beg you. We mustn't be suspected."

He sat up. "Who are you?" he snapped. His own Vay-namoan accent was faintly pedantic; he must be a teacher or scientist in that peacetime life which now seemed so dis-tant. "A collaborator? I understand there are some. Every barrel must hold a few rotten apples, I suppose."

She sat down on the floor near him, hugged her knees and stared at the curving wall. "I don't know what to call myself," she said tonelessly. "I'm with them, yes. But they cap-tured me the last time."

He whistled a soft note. One hand reached out, not al-together steady and stopping short of touching her. "I was young then," he said. "But I remember. Do I know your family?"

"Maybe. I'm Elva, daughter of Byarmo, the Magnate of Ruuyalka. My husband was Karlavi, the Freeholder of Tervola." Suddenly she couldn't stay controlled. She grasped his arm so hard that her nails drew blood. "Do you know what became of my son? His name was Hauki. I got him away, in care of an Alfa servant. Hauki, Karlavi's son, Freeholder of Tervola. Do you know?"

He disengaged himself as gently as possible and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I've heard of both places, but only as names. I'm from the Aakinen Islands myself."

Her head dropped.

"Ivalo is my name," he said clumsily.

"I know."

"What?"

"Listen." She raised her eyes to his. They were quite dry. "I've been told you have important information."

He bridled. "If you think—"

"No. Please listen. Here." She fumbled in a pocket of her gown. At last her fingers closed on the vial. She held it out to him. "An antiseptic. But the label says it's very poisonous if taken internally. I brought it for you."

He stared at her for a long while.

"It's all I can do," she mumbled, looking away again.

He took the bottle and turned it over and over in his hand. The night grew silent around them.

Finally he asked, "Won't you suffer for this?"

"Not too much."

"Wait ... If you could get in here, you can surely escape completely. Our

troops can't be far off. Or any farmer hereabouts will hide you."

She shook her head. "No, I'll stay with them. Maybe I can help in some other small way. What else has there been to keep me alive, but the hope of—It wouldn't be any better, living here, if we're all conquered. There's to be a final attack, three decades hence. Do you know that?"

"Yes. Our side takes prisoners too, and quizzes them. The first episode puzzled us. Many thought it had only been a raid by—what's the word—by pirates. But now we know they really do intend to take our planet away."

"You must have developed some good linguists," she said, seeking impersonality. "To be able to talk with your prisoners. Of course, you yourself, after capture, could be edu-cated by the hypnopede."

"The what?"

"The language-teaching machine."

"Oh, yes, the enemy do have them, don't they? But we do too. After the first raid, those who thought there was a danger the aliens might come back set about developing such machines. I knew Chertkoian weeks before my own capture."

"I wish I could help you escape," she said desolately. "But I don't see how. That bottle is all I can do. Isn't it?"

"Yes." He regarded the bottle with a fascination.

"My patron ... Golyev himself—said his men would rip you open to get your knowledge. So I thought—"

"You're very kind." Ivalo grimaced, as if he had tasted something foul. "But your act may turn out pointless. I don't know anything useful. I wasn't even sworn to secrecy about what I do know. Why've I held out, then? Don't ask me. Stubbornness. Anger. Or just hating to admit my people—our people, damn it!—that they could be so weak and foolish."

"What?"

"They could win the war at a stroke," he said. "They won't. They'd rather die, and let their children be enslaved by the Third Expedition."

"What do you mean?" She crouched to hands and knees.

He shrugged. "I told you, a number of people on Vaynamo took the previous invasion at its word, that it was the vanguard of a conquering army. There was no official action. How could there be, with a government as feeble as ours? But some of the research biologists—"

"Not a plague!"

"Yes. Mutated from the local paracoryzoid virus. Incuba-tion period,

approximately one month, during which time it's contagious. Vaccination is still effective two weeks after exposure, so all our population could be safeguarded. But the Chertkoians would take the disease back with them. Esti-mated deaths, ninety percent of the race."

"But—"

"That's where the government did step in," he said with bitterness. "The information was suppressed. The virus cultures were destroyed. The theory was, even to save ourselves we couldn't do such a thing."

Elva felt the tautness leave her. She sagged. She had seen small children on Chertkoi too.

"They're right, of course," she said wearily. "Perhaps. Perhaps. And yet we'll be overrun and butch-ered, or reduced to serfdom. Won't we? Our forests will be cut down, our mines gutted, our poor Alfavala exterminated ... To hell with it."

Ivalo gazed at the poison vial. "I don't have any scientific data. I'm not a virologist. It can't do any military harm to tell the Chertkoians. But I've seen what they've done to us. I would give them the sickness."

"I wouldn't." Elva bit her lip.

He regarded her for a long time. "Won't you escape? Never mind being a planetary heroine. There's nothing you can do. The invaders will go home when they've wrecked all our industry. They won't come again for thirty years. You can be free most of your life."

"You forget," she said, "that if I leave with them, and come back, the time for me will only have been one or two years." She sighed. "I can't help make ready for the next battle. I'm just a woman. Untrained. While maybe ... oh, if nothing else, there'll be more Vaynamoan prisoners brought to Chertkoi. I have a tiny bit of influence. Maybe I can help them."

Ivalo considered the poison. "I was about to use this any-way," he muttered. "I didn't think staying alive was worth the trouble. But now—if you can—No." He gave the vial back to her. "I thank you, my lady."

"I have an idea," she said, with a hint of vigor in her voice. "Go ahead and tell them what you know. Pretend I talked you into it. Then I might be able to get you ex-changed. It's barely possible."

"Oh, perhaps," he said.

She rose to go. "If you are set free," she stammered, "will you make a visit to Tervola? Will you find Hauki, Karvali's son, and tell him you saw me? If he's alive."

569 A.C.C.:

Dirzh had changed while the ships were away. The evolu-tion continued

after their return. The city grew bigger, smokier, uglier. More people each year dropped from client status, went underground and joined the gangs. Occasionally these days, the noise and vibration of pitched battles down in the tunnels could be detected up on patron level. The desert could no longer be seen, even from the highest towers, only the abandoned mine and the slag mountains, in process of conversion to tenements. The carcinogenic murkiness crept upward until it could be smelled on the most elite balconies. Teleshows got noisier and nakeder, to compete with live performances, which were now offering more elaborate blood-lettings than old-fashioned combats. The news from space was of a revolt suppressed on Novagal, resulting in such an acute labor shortage that workers were drafted from Imfan and shipped thither.

Only when you looked at the zenith was there no appar-ent change. The daylit sky was still cold purplish-blue, with an occasional yellow dustcloud. At night there were still the stars, and a skull.

And yet, thought Elva, you wouldn't need a large tele-scope to see the Third Expedition fleet in orbit—eleven hundred spacecraft, the unarmed ones loaded with troops and equipment, nearly the whole strength of Chertkoi mar-shalling to conquer Vaynamo. Campaigning across interstellar distances wasn't easy. You couldn't send home for supplies or reinforcements. You broke the enemy or he broke you. Fleet Admiral Bors Golyev did not intend to be broken.

He did not even plan to go home with news of a successful probing operation or a successful raid. The Third Expedition was to be final. And he must allow for the Vaynamoans having had a generation in which to recuperate. He'd smashed their industry, but if they were really determined, they could have rebuilt. No doubt a space fleet of some kind would be waiting to oppose him.

He knew it couldn't be of comparable power. Ten million people, forced to recreate all their mines and furnaces and factories before they could lay the keel of a single boat, had no possibility of rrfatching the concerted efforts of six-and-a-half billion whose world had been continuously industrialized for centuries, and who could draw on the resources of two subject planets. Sheer mathematics ruled it out. But the ten million could accomplish something; and nuclear-fusion mis-siles were to some degree an equalizer. Therefore Bors Golyev asked for so much strength that the greatest conceivable enemy force would be swamped. And he got it.

Elva leaned on the balcony rail. A chill wind fluttered her gown about her, so that the rainbow hues rippled and ran into each other. She had to admit the fabric was lovely. Bors tried hard to please her. (Though why must he mention the price?) He was so childishly happy himself, at his accom-plishments, at his new eminence, at the eight-room apartment which he now rated on the very height of the Lebedan Tower.

"Not that we'll be here long," he had said, after they first explored its mechanized intricacies. "My son Nivko has done good work in the home office. That's how come I got this command; experience alone wasn't enough. Of course, he'll expect me to help along his sons ... But anyhow,

the Third Expedition can go even sooner than I'd hoped. Just a few months, and we're on our way!"

"We?" murmured Elva.

"You do want to come?"

"The last voyage, you weren't so eager."

"Uh, yes. I did have a deuce of a time, too, getting you aboard. But this'll be different. First, I've got so much rank I'm beyond criticism, even beyond jealousy. And second—well, you count too. You're not any picked-up native female. You're Elva! The girl who on her own hook got that fellow Ivalo to confess."

She turned her head slightly, regarding him sideways from droop-lidded blue eyes. Under the ruddy sun, her yellow hair turned to raw gold. "I should think the news would have alarmed them, here on Chertkoi," she said. "Being told that they nearly brought about their own extinction. I won-der that they dare launch another attack."

Golyev grinned. "You should have heard the ruckus. Some Directors did vote to keep hands off Vaynamo. Others wanted to sterilize the whole planet with cobalt missiles. But I talked 'em around. Once we've beaten the fleet and occupied the planet, its whole population will be hostage for good be-havior. We'll make examples of the first few goozes who give us trouble of any sort. Then they'll know we mean what we say when we announce our policy. At the first sus-picion of plague among us, we'll lay waste a continent. If the suspicion is confirmed, we'll bombard the whole works. No, there will not be any bug warfare."

"I know. I've heard your line of reasoning before. About five hundred times, in fact."

"Destruction! Am I really that much of a bore?" He came up behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders. "I don't mean to be. Honest. I'm not used to talking to women, that's all."

"And I'm not used to being shut away like a prize gold-fish, except when you want to exhibit me," she said sharply.

He kissed her neck. His whiskers tickled. "It'll be different on Vaynamo. When we're settled down. I'll be governor of the planet. The Directorate has as good as promised me. Then I can do as I want. And so can you."

"I doubt that! Why should I believe anything you say? When I told you I'd made Ivalo talk by promising you would exchange him, you wouldn't keep the promise." She tried to wriggle free, but his grip was too strong. She contented her-self with going rigid. "Now, when I tell you the prisoners we brought back this time are to be treated like human beings, you whine about your damned Directorate—"

"But the Directorate makes policy!"

"You're the Fleet Admiral, as you never lose a chance to remind me. You can certainly bring pressure to bear. You can insist the Vaynamoans be taken out of those kennels and given honorable detention—"

"Awww, now." His lips nibbled along her cheek.

She turned her head away and continued: "—and you can get what you insist on. They're your own prisoners, aren't they? I've listened enough to you, and your dreary officers when you brought them home. I've read books, hundreds of books. What else is there for me to do, day after day and week after week?"

"But I'm busy! I'd like to take you out, honest, but—"

"So I understand the power structure on Chertkoi just as well as you do, Bors Golyev. If not better. If you don't know how to use your own influence, then slough off some of that conceit, sit down and listen while I tell you how!"

"Well, uh, I never denied, sweetling, you've given me some useful advice from time to time."

"So listen to me! I say all the Vaynamoans you hold are to be given decent quarters, recreation, and respect. What did you capture them for, if not to get some use out of them? And the proper use is not to titillate yourself by kicking them around. A dog would serve that purpose better.

"Furthermore, the fleet has to carry them all back to Vaynamo."

"What? You don't know what you're talking about! The logistics is tough enough without—"

"I do so know what I'm talking about. Which is more than I can say for you. You want guides, intermediaries, puppet leaders, don't you? Not by the score, a few cowards and traitors, as you have hitherto. You need hundreds. Well, there they are, right in your hands."

"And hating my guts," Golyev pointed out.

"Give them reasonable living conditions and they won't. Not quite so much, anyhow. Then bring them back home—a generation after they left, all their friends aged or dead, everything altered once you've conquered the planet. And let me deal with them. You'll get helpers!"

"Uh, well, uh, I'll think about it."

"You'll do something about it!" She eased her body, lean-ing back against the hard rubbery muscles of his chest. Her face turned upward, with a slow smile. "You're good at do-ing things, Bors," she said languidly.

"Oh, Elva—"

Later: "You know one thing I want to do? As soon as I'm well established in the governorship? I want to marry you. Properly and openly. Let 'em be shocked. I won't care. I want to be your husband, and the father of your kids, Elva. How's that sound? Mistress Governor General Elva Golyev of Vaynamo Planetary Province. Never thought you'd get that far in life, did you?"

584 A.C.C.:

As they neared the end of the journey, he sent her to his cabin. An escape suit—an armored cylinder with gravity propulsors, air regenerator, food and water supplies, which she could enter in sixty seconds—occupied most of the room. "Not that I expect any trouble," he said. "But if some-thing should happen ... I hope you can make it down to the surface." He paused. The officers on the bridge moved quietly about their tasks; the engines droned; the distorted stars of near-light velocity framed his hard brown face. There was a thin sheen of sweat on his skin.

"I love you, you know," he finished. Quickly, he turned back to his duties. Elva went below.

Clad in a spaceman's uniform, seated on the bunk, en-closed in toning metal, she felt the inward wrench as the agoratron went off and speed was converted back to atomic mass. The cabin's private view-screen showed stars in their proper constellations again, needle-sharp against blackness. Vaynamo was tiny and blue, still several hundred thousand kilometers remote. Elva ran fingers through her hair. The scalp beneath felt tight, and her lips were dry. A person couldn't help being afraid, she thought. Just a little afraid.

She called up the memory of Karlavi's land, where he had now lain for sixty-two years. Reeds whispered along the shores of Rovaniemi, the wind made a rippling in long grass, and it was time again for the lampflowers to blow, all down the valley. Dreamlike at the edge of vision, the snowpeaks of the High Mikkela floated in an utter blue.

I'm coming back, Karlavi, she thought.

In her screen, the nearer vessels were glinting toys, plung-ing through enormous emptiness. The further ones were not visible at this low magnification. Only the senses of radar, gravpulse, and less familiar creations, analyzed by whirling electrons in a computer bank, gave any approach to reality. But she could listen in on the main intercom line to the bridge if she chose, and hear those data spoken. She flipped the switch. Nothing yet, only routine reports. Had the plan-et's disc grown a trifle?

Have I been wrong all the time? she thought. Her heart stopped for a second.

Then: "Alert! Condition red! Alert! Condition red! Objects detected, approaching nine-thirty o'clock, fifteen degrees high. Neutrino emissions indicate nuclear engines."

"Alert! Condition yellow! Quiescent object detected in or-bit about target planet, two-thirty o'clock, ten degrees low, circa 75,000 kilometers distant. Extremely massive. Repeat, quiescent. Low level of nuclear activity, but at bolometric temperature of ambient space. Possibly an abandoned space fortress, except for being so massive."

"Detected objects identified as spacecraft. Approaching with average radial velocity of 25° KPS. No evident deceleration. Number very large, estimated at five thousand. All units small, about the mass of our scoutboats."

The gabble went on until Golyev's voice cut through: "Attention! Fleet Admiral to bridge of all units. Now hear this." Sardonically: "The opposition is making a good try. In-stead of building any real ships—they could have con-structed only a few at best—they've turned out thousands of manned warboats. Their plan is obviously to cut through our formation, relying on speed, and release tracking torps in quantity. Stand by to repel. We have enough detectors, anti-missiles, negafields, to overwhelm them in this depart-ment too! Once past us, the boats will need hours to decel-erate and come back within decent shooting range. By that time we should be in orbit around the planet. Be alert for possible emergencies, of course. But I expect only standard operations to be necessary. Good shooting!"

Elva strained close to her screen. All at once she saw the Vaynamoan fleet, mere sparks, but a horde of them, twinkling among the stars. Closer! Her fingers strained against each other. *They must have some plan,* she told herself. *If I'm blown up in five minutes—I was hoping I'd get down to you, Karlavi. But if I don't, goodbye, goodbye.*

The fleets neared each other: on the one side, ponderous dreadnaughts, cruisers, auxiliary warcraft, escorting swarms of transport and engineer ships; on the opposite side, needle-thin boats whose sole armor was velocity. The guns of Chertkoi swung about, hoping for a lucky hit. At such speeds it was improbable. The fleets would interpenetrate and pass in a fractional second. The Vaynamoans could not be blasted until they came to grips near their home world. However, if a nuclear shell should find its mark now—what a blaze in heaven!

The flagship staggered.

"Engine room to bridge! What's happened?"

"Bridge to engine room! Gimme some power there! What in all destruction—?"

"*Sharyats* to *Askol*! *Sharyats* to *Askol*! Am thrown off course! Accelerating! What's going on?"

"Look out!"

"*Fodorev* to *Zuevots*! Look alive, you bloody fool! You'll ram us!"

Cushioned by the internal field, Elva felt only the minutest fraction of that immense velocity change. Even so, a wave of sickness went through her.

She clutched at the bunk stanchion. The desk ripped from a loose mooring and crashed into the wall, which buckled. The deck split open under-foot. A roar went through the entire hull, ribs groaned as they bent, plates screamed as they sheared. A girder snapped in twain and spat sharp fragments among a gun turret crew. A section broke apart, air gushed out, a hundred men died before the sealing bulkheads could close.

After a moment, the stabilizing energies regained interior control. The images on Elva's screen steadied. She drew a shaken lungful of air and watched. Out of formation, the *Askol* plunged within a kilometer of her sister ship the *Zuevots*—just when that cyclopean hull smashed into the cruiser Fodorev. Fire sheeted as accumulator banks were shorted. The two giants crumpled, glowed white at the point of impact, fused, and spun off in a lunatic waltz. Men and supplies were pinwheeled from the cracks gaping in them. Two gun turrets wrapped their long barrels around each other like intertwining snakes. Then the whole mass struck a third vessel with shattering impact. Steel chunks exploded into space.

Through the noise and the human screaming, Golyev's voice blasted. "Pipe down there! Belay that! By Creation, I'll shoot the next man who whimpers! The enemy will be here in a minute. All stations, by the numbers, report."

A measure of discipline returned. These were fighting men. Instruments fingered outward, the remaining computers whir-red, minds made deductive leaps, gunners returned to their posts. The Vaynamoan fleet passed through, and the uni-verse exploded in brief pyrotechnics. Many a Chertkoian ship died then, its defenses too battered, its defenders too stunned to ward off the tracking torpedoes. But others fought back, saved themselves, and saw their enemies vanish in the distance.

Still they tumbled off course, their engines helpless to free them. Elva heard a physicist's clipped tones give the deduction from his readings. The entire fleet had been caught in a cone of gravitational force emanating from that massive object detected in orbit. Like a maelstrom of astronomical dimensions, it had snatched them from their paths. Those closest and in the most intense field strength—a fourth of the armada—had been wrecked by sheer deceleration. Now the force was drawing them down the vortex of itself.

"But that's impossible!" wailed the AskoFs chief engineer. "A gravity attractor beam of that magnitude ... Admiral, it can't be done! The power requirements would burn out any generator in a micro-second!"

"It's being done," said Golyev harshly. "Maybe they fig-ured out a new way to feed energy into a space distorter. Now, where are those figures on intensity? And my slide rule ... Yeh. The whole fleet will soon be in a field so powerful that—Well, we won't let it happen. Stand by to hit that generator with everything we've got."

"But sir ... we must have—I don't know how many ships—close enough to it now to be within total destruction radius."

"Tough on them. Stand by. Gunnery Control, fire when ready."

And then, whispered, even though that particular line was private and none else in the ship would hear: "Elva! Are you all right down there? Elva!"

Her hands had eased their trembling enough for her to light a cigaret. She didn't speak. Let him worry. It might re-duce his efficiency.

Her screen did not happen to face the vortex source, and thus did not show its destruction by the nuclear barrage. Not that that could have been registered. The instant ex-plosion of sun-center ferocity transcended any sense, human or electronic. Down on Vaynamo surface, in broad daylight, they must have turned dazzled eyes from that brilliance. Anyone within a thousand kilometers of those warheads died, no matter how much steel and force field he had interposed. Two score Chertkoian ships were suddenly manned by corps-es. Those further in were fused to lumps. Still further in, they ceased to exist, save as gas at millions of degrees tem-perature. The vessels already crashed on the giant station were turned into unstable isotopes, their very atoms dying.

But the station itself vanished. And Vaynamo had had the capacity to build only one such monster. The Chertkoian ships were free again.

"Admiral to all captains!" cried Golyev's lion voice. "Ad-miral to all captains. Let the reports wait. Clear the lines. I want every man in the fleet to hear me. Stand by for mes-sage.

"Now hear this! This is Supreme Commander Bors Gol-yev. We just took a rough blow, boys. The enemy had an unsuspected weapon, and cost us a lot of casualties. But we've destroyed the thing. I repeat, we blew it out of the cosmos. And I say, well done! I say also, we still have a hundred times the strength of the enemy, and he's shot his bolt. We're going on in! We're going to—"

"Alert! Condition red! Enemy boats returning. Enemy boats returning. Radial velocity circa 50 KPS, but accelera-tion circa 100 G."

"What?"

Elva herself saw the Vaynamoan shooting stars come back into sight.

Golyev tried hard to shout down the panic of his officers. Would they stop running around like old women? The enemy
had developed something else, some method of accelerating at unheard-of rates under gravitational thrust. But not by witchcraft! It could be an internal-stress compensator de-veloped to ultimate efficiency, plus an adaptation of what-ever principle was used in the attractor vortex. Or it could be a breakthrough, a totally new principle, maybe something intermediate between the agoratron and the ordinary inter-planetary drive ... "Never mind what, you morons! They're only flocks of splinters! Kill them!"

But the armada was roiling about in blind confusion. The detectors had given mere seconds of warning, which were lost in understanding that the

warning was correct and in frantically seeking to rally men already shaken. Then the splinter fleet was in among the Chertkoians. It braked its furious relative velocity with a near-instantaneous quickness for which the Chertkoian gunners and gun computers had never been prepared. However, the Vaynamoan gunners were ready. And even a boat can carry torpedoes which will annihilate a battleship.

In a thousand fiery bursts, the armada died.

Not all of it. Unarmed craft were spared, if they would surrender. Vaynamoan boarding parties freed such of their countrymen as they found. The *Askol*, under Golyev's per-sonal command, stood off its attackers and moved doggedly outward, toward regions where it could use the agoratron to escape. The captain of a prize revealed that over a hundred Vaynamoans were aboard the flagship. So the attempt to blow it up was abandoned. Instead, a large number of boats shot dummy missiles, which kept the defense fully occupied. Meanwhile, a companion force lay alongside, cut its way through the armor, and sent men in.

The Chertkoian crew resisted. But they were grossly out-numbered and outgunned. Most died, under bullets and grenades, gas and flamethrowers. Certain holdouts, who for-tified a compartment, were welded in from the outside and left to starve or capitulate, whichever they chose. Even so, the *Askol* was so big that the boarding party took several hours to gain full possession.

The door opened. Elva stood up.

At first the half-dozen men who entered seemed foreign. In a minute—she was too tired and dazed to think clearly—understood why. They were all in blue jackets and trousers, a uniform. She had never before seen two Vayna-moans dressed exactly alike. *But of course they would be,* she thought in a vague fashion. *We had to build a navy, didn't we?*

And they remained her own people. Fair skin, straight hair, high cheekbones, tilted light eyes which gleamed all the brighter through the soot of battle. And, yes, they still walked like Vaynamoans, the swinging freeman's gait and the head held high, such as she had not seen for ... for how long? So their clothes didn't matter, nor even the guns in their hands.

Slowly, through the ringing in her ears, she realized that the combat noise had stopped.

A young man in the lead took a step in her direction. "My lady—" he began.

"Is that her for certain?" asked someone else, less gently. "Not a collaborator?"

A new man pushed his way through the squad. He was grizzled, pale from lack of sun, wearing a sleazy prisoner's coverall. But a smile touched his lips, and his bow to Elva was deep.

"This is indeed my lady of Tervola," he said. To her: "When these men

released me, up in Section Fourteen, I told them we'd probably find you here. I am so glad."

She needed a while to recognize him. "Oh. Yes." Her head felt heavy. It was all she could do to nod. "Captain Ivalo. I hope you're all right."

"I am, thanks to you, my lady. Someday we'll know how many hundreds of us are alive and sane—and here!—be-cause of you."

The squad leader made another step forward, sheathed his machine pistol and lifted both hands toward her. He was a well-knit, good-looking man, blond of hair, a little older than she: in his mid-thirties, perhaps. He tried to speak, but no words came out, and then Ivalo drew him back.

"In a moment," said the ex-captain. "Let's first take care of the unpleasant business."

The leader hesitated, then, with a grimace, agreed. Two men shoved Bors Golyev. The admiral dripped blood from a dozen wounds and stumbled in his weariness. But when he saw Elva, he seemed to regain himself. "You weren't hurt," he breathed. "I was so afraid..."

Ivalo said like steel: "I've explained the facts of this case to the squad officer here, as well as his immediate superior. I'm sure you'll join us in our wish not to be inhumane, my lady. And yet a criminal trial in the regular courts would publicize matters best forgotten and could give this man only a limited punishment. So we, here and now, under the conditions of war and in view of your high services—"

The squad officer interrupted. He was white about the nostrils. "Anything you order, my lady," he said. "You pass the sentence. We'll execute it at once."

"Elva," whispered Golyev.

She stared at him, remembering fire and enslavements and a certain man dead on a barricade. Everything seemed distant, not quite real.

"There's been too much suffering already," she said.

She pondered a few seconds. "Just take him out and shoot him."

The officer looked relieved. He led his men forth. Golyev started to speak, but was hustled away too fast.

Ivalo remained in the cabin. "My lady—" he began, slow and awkward.

"Yes?" As her weariness overwhelmed her, Elva sat down again on the bunk. She fumbled for a cigaret. There was no emotion in her, only a dull wish for sleep.

"I've wondered ... Don't answer this if you don't want to. You've been through so much."

"That's all right," she said mechanically. "The trouble is over now, isn't it? I mean, we mustn't let the past obsess us."

"Of course. Uh, they tell me Vaynamo hasn't changed much. The defense effort was bound to affect society somewhat, but they've tried to minimize that, and succeeded. Our culture has a built-in stability, you know, a negative planet of those devils. Liberate their slave worlds and make certain they can't ever try afresh. But that shouldn't be difficult.

"As for you, I inquired very carefully on your behalf. Tervola remains in your family. The land and the people are as you remember."

She closed her eyes, feeling the first thaw within herself. "Now I can sleep," she told him.

Remembering, she looked up a bit startled. "But you had a question for me, Ivalo?"

"Yes. All this time, I couldn't sleep wondering. Why you stayed with the enemy. You could have escaped. Did you know all the while how great a service you were going to do?"

Her own smile was astonishing to her. "Well, I knew I couldn't be much use on Vaynamo," she said. "Could I? There was a chance I could help on Chertkoi. But I wasn't being brave. The worst had already happened to me. Now I need only wait ... a matter of months only, my time ... and everything bad would be over. Whereas—well, if I'd es-caped from the Second Expedition, I'd have lived most of my life in the shadow of the Third. Please don't make a fuss about me. I was actually an awful coward."

His jaw dropped. "You mean you knew we'd win? But you couldn't have! Everything pointed the other way!"

The nightmare was fading more rapidly than she had dared hope. She shook her head, still smiling, not triumphant but glad to speak the knowledge which had kept her alive. "You're being unfair to our people. As unfair as the Chertkoians were. They thought that because we preferred social stability and room to breathe, we must be stagnant. They forgot you can have bigger adventures in the spirit, than in all the physical universe. We really did have a very pow-erful science and technology. It was oriented toward life, toward beautifying and improving instead of exploiting na-ture. But it wasn't less virile for that. Was it?"

"But we had no industry to speak of. We don't even now."

"I wasn't counting on our factories, I said, but on our science. When you told me about that horrible virus weapon being suppressed, you confirmed my hopes. We aren't saints. Our government wouldn't have been quite so quick to get rid of those plagues—would at least have tried to bluff with them—if there weren't something better in prospect. Wouldn't it?

"I couldn't even guess what our scientists might develop, given two generations which the enemy did not have. I did think they would probably have to use physics rather than biology. And why not? You can't have an advanced chemi-cal, medical, genetic, ecological technology without knowing all the physics there is to know. Can you? Quantum theory explains mutations. But it also explains atomic reactions, or whatever they used in those new machines.

"Oh, yes, Ivalo, I felt sure we'd win. All I had to do my-self was work to get us prisoners—especially me, to be quite honest—get us all there at the victory."

He looked at her with awe. Somehow that brought back the heaviness in her. *After all,* she thought ... *sixty-two years. Tervola abides. But who will know me? I am going to be so much alone.*

Boots rang on metal. The young squad leader stepped forward again. "That's that," he said. His bleakness vanished and he edged closer to Elva, softly, almost timidly.

"I trust," said Ivalo with a rich, growing pleasure in his voice, "that my lady will permit me to visit her from time to time.

"I hope you will!" she murmured.

"We temporal castaways are bound to be disoriented for a while," he said. "We must help each other. You, for example, may have some trouble adjusting to the fact that your son Hauki, the Freeholder of Tervola—"

"Hauki!" She sprang to her feet. The cabin blurred around her.

"—is now a vigorous elderly man who looks back on a most successful life," said Ivalo. "Which includes the begetting of Karlavi here." Her grandson's strong hands closed about her own. "Who in turn," finished Ivalo, "is the recent father of a bouncing baby boy named Hauki. And all your people are waiting to welcome you home!"

John Anthony West years ago fled the weather of New York and publishing row to live on Ibiza (an island south of Robert Graves' Majorca], and write. This stimulating (?) example of his special satiric talent is one of the products of that flight, and perhaps in part explains it.

GEORGE

by John Anthony West

George and Marjorie were sitting, alternately reaching for peanuts, watching TV—as they did most weekday eve-nings—when George's foot fell asleep. At least his foot seemed to be asleep though that characteristic tingling

sensa-tion was absent. First he tried massaging the foot but when it failed to improve he rose from his chair and began hop-ping about the living room, thinking that the exercise would restore circulation.

Marjorie watched him with increasing irritation.

"George!" she said, finally. "Cut it out! You're making the image jump."

He stopped and smiled at her apologetically. "Sorry, Dear," he said. "My darn foot's asleep. Must have been sitting in the same position too long," and he began hopping again.

"George! You don't have to make such a fuss about it."

He walked, jiggled and hopped across the room in un-gainly strides, shaking his foot vigorously. "I can't help it," he said, with a grimace, still hopping. "Have to wake it up."

Marjorie struck the table between the armchairs with the palm of her hand. "Everybody's foot falls asleep," she said.

George halted and glared at her. "But my foot," he said, a bit breathlessly, "is asleep right now," and he began hopping about the living room again.

"The least you can do," said Marjorie, with chilled sar-casm, "if you must hop, is to hop out in the hall."

"I'll be goddamned if I'll hop out in the hall just to wake up my foot!" he shouted.

"You're being childish again."

"Childish? What's childish? What's childish about waking up my foot?"

"It's your attitude that's childish."

"Attitude? I'm trying to wake up my foot. There's no atti-tude in the whole picture."

"If you'll just *sit down*, Dear, and forget it, it will pass."

From the middle of the living room he stared at his wife. His brow furrowed with leashed insults; his jaws worked; but when he spoke, finally, he said, "You are right, Dear. It will pass." He sat back in the armchair.

Several minutes later the foot was still asleep. He stood up, took a few tentative hops; but when he saw Marjorie glaring at him with her most baleful glare he sat down sheepishly, took off his shoe and began massaging the foot.

"...George!"

"What?"

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Can't I take off my shoes?"

"Suppose someone comes?"

"Suppose they do?"

"And you're sitting there with your shoe off?"

"Can't I take off my shoes in my own house?"

"But you only took off one shoe."

George put one hand on his knee and with the other ruminatively scratched the balding spot on his head. "I'm afraid I don't see the difference."

"You're completely insensitive," snapped Marjorie.

"Well watch the program," he replied, in strained tones.

But a few minutes passed and he could no longer contain himself. He began thumping the foot on the floor and knocking it against the table leg. He felt Marjorie's gimlet glance.

"I know, I know. I'm being silly—but I can't watch the program when my foot's asleep."

"Other men could. You have no intestinal fortitude, George."

"It's easy for you to say. It isn't your foot.

"And if it were I wouldn't make a fuss about it. Men are all big babies."

George let out a long, sighing breath and jammed his back into the foam rubber cushions.

When George spoke again, his voice had a note of alarm in it. He had his foot crossed over his knee and was rubbing it vigorously. "Marjorie!" he said, "my foot isn't asleep..."

"Then why make all this..."

"Something wrong with it."

"Oh *George*."

"I'm serious. Look! I can't move it. My foot is stiff some-how." He tugged and wrenched at the foot. "See? It won't move."

"You are holding it that way on purpose."

He ripped off his sock. "Will you pay attention to me? Just look!" He wrestled with the foot; tried to flex his toes. "Now do you believe me? My whole foot is rigid."

"You are doing it on purpose. You just want my sym-pathy."

"Marjorie, Darling. Please listen to me." He tugged at the foot. "See? I can't move it."

"You're not trying."

"I know when I'm trying and when I'm not. I am trying. Try to move it yourself."

She looked at the foot disdainfully. "I don't want to play games with your sweaty foot."

"My foot isn't sweaty."

"In this weather?"

"All right. My foot is sweaty. But try and move it."

"I believe you. You can't move your foot."

"You don't believe me. I can tell by the tone of your voice."

"Your foot is asleep and you can't move it. I believe you."

"It is not asleep; there's something wrong with it. A sleep-ing foot doesn't just go rigid."

Marjorie threw a peanut on the rug in pique. "You are such a hypochondriac, George. Every little thing. Just like the time you thought you had appendicitis and it was gas pains."

"What was I supposed to think? I was lying on the bed in agony. It might have been appendicitis."

"Well, it wasn't. And you're not lying in agony right now. Your foot is asleep and you have to make such a *deal* out of it. I just don't know."

"A sleeping foot doesn't get stiff."

"It does when it's very soundly asleep ... maybe you sprained it walking around."

"How would I do that?"

"*I* don't know. Where did you walk today?"

"My usual walking; what do you think? I walked from the subway to the office and then I walked to the water cooler twice ... no, three times."

Marjorie nodded. "You see! Usually you only go to the water cooler twice."

"Yeah," George snarled, "but I only went to the Men's Room once. That makes up for it. You're always talking about things you don't know the first thing about."

"How am I supposed to know? Usually you go twice."

"That's precisely what I mean. Let's forget the whole thing." He plunged into the cushions but when the commer-cial began, Marjorie said:

"Still—you can over-exert a tendon and not know it. Remember Geraldine Roberts? She fell down the subway stairs and broke three ribs and didn't know it for a week."

George laughed mirthlessly. "I didn't fall down the sub-way stairs. I didn't over-exert a tendon. And Geraldine Rob-erts was stewed to the ears when she fell."

"So what," said Marjorie, her eyes glittering. "Your friend, Walter, is a complete *lush*."

"We weren't talking about Walter," he replied tonelessly.

He rose from the chair and began limping about the room. Marjorie watched him with scorn. "Does it hurt?"

"No."

She smiled suddenly. "You walk like a war hero, George ... 'Only hurts when I lawf'," she said, with an abysmal British accent.

"I'm not a war hero and I don't want to walk like one."

"Don't be such a milktoast, George. You could have been a war hero."

George stopped limping and spoke at the wall. "How could I be a war hero? I was in New Jersey training recruits the whole time."

"Yes," said Marjorie, enthusiastically. "You are training recruits and a nervous private drops a hand grenade. In another second you see that the whole regiment will be blown to smithereens and you leap on top of it..."

"All of which results in a stiffened foot. Besides, I was training them to use a calculating machine. And if someone dropped a hand grenade near me, you can bet that..." His sarcastic expression became one of horror. Tentatively he took several steps. When he spoke his voice approached the breaking point.

"Marjorie! Marjorie! My other foot! My other foot's gone stiff! I can't move it!"

She watched his awkward hobble a moment before she spoke. "Please, George," she said. "You mustn't get this excited. Come and sit down and it will pass in a while. Your other foot's gone asleep, that's all. Don't make such a fuss about every little thing."

George hobbled in great, crooked lurches, shaking with fear and anger. "Don't make such a fuss. Great Christ! You'd think I'm just anybody. Me, George. Your husband. Suddenly I'm paralyzed; I can't walk, and you say..."

"Of course you can walk. You were just walking."

"Do you call that walking?" He exaggerated his hobble. "Is that walking?"

"There are millions of people who would give their right arm to walk that well..."

"What the hell do I care about them. It's me, George, who can't walk right now. I've got leprosy or something and you sit there..."

"You don't have leprosy, George. If you had leprosy your feet wouldn't stiffen; they'd fall off..." She stood up sud-denly, and in a high, off-key voice began singing, "Lep-ro-sy. My *God*, I've got lep-ro-sy. There goes my eye-*ball*, right into my high-*ball*..."

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" he cried. "Can't you see I'm frightened?"

Marjorie sat down, chastened. "I was just trying to cheer you up, Dear ... Now look at it this way. It can't be any-thing serious. If it were something serious there'd have been symptoms. Right? There is no serious disease without symptoms. I think you should just go off to bed now and put the whole thing out of mind. Your feet will be back to normal in the morning."

But George paid no attention to her. He hobbled in a frantic circle about the room.

"You have no idea how foolish you look," said Marjorie.

"Do you think I care? Do I care about appearances at a time like this?"

"You might at least *try* to behave like a gentleman."

George smashed his fist into his palm with a ringing thwack. "Appearances!" he shouted. "Always appearances with you! All women are the same. Intrinsic value means nothing to you. As long as it looks nice..."

"That's not true, George, and you know it."

"Nothing was ever more true. You'd eat horse manure if it came served with parsley."

Marjorie stared him straight in the eye. At length, with deliberation, she said, "I would not."

"You would too," George snapped.

"I wouldn't."

"You would."

"Wouldn't!" she cried.

"Would!"

"Wouldn't! Wouldn't! Wouldn't!"

"WOULD. WOULD. WOULD."

"WOULDN'T. WOULDN'T. WOULDN'T. WOULDN'T."

They both paused, breathless. George clutched his head. "God!" he cried. "We sit here talking as though nothing's wrong and my feet are paralyzed. What are we going to do, Dear?"

Marjorie sat back in her chair and smoothed her skirt over her knees. "The first thing, George, is to relax. You mustn't let yourself get so excited. If you were a professional tennis star or something I could understand. But all you have to do is..."

"Yes. Get to the office. As long as I bring home the bacon it doesn't matter how I get there."

"President Roosevelt had to go around in a wheelchair and that didn't stop him from becoming..."

George slumped back into his chair and buried his face in his hands. "You don't understand," he whispered. "You just don't understand."

Marjorie leaned across and put her hand on the nape of his neck. "I understand, George. Believe me, I do. In a week you'll get the hang of it. Really, you will ... Besides, it will be all better in the morning."

"You know it won't," he moaned. "You're just trying to cheer me up. No one's ever had this before. Nobody's feet ever stiffened just like that."

"You always think you're better than everyone else. It happens to lots of people, Dear."

"Name one."

"I don't know any *personally*..."

"That's just it. That's why I'm worried. If we just knew what it was..." He cut himself short. "You're right," he said. "No point in getting excited. We'll watch the pro-gram." But within a few minutes he was unconsciously jig-gling first one foot, then the other. Finally he could contain himself no longer. "First thing wrong with you and you go running for the doctor," he

mumbled.

"George," she said wearily. "It's 9:30. Do you want me to call the doctor at this hour?"

"I didn't say that."

"You implied it ... If it's no better in the morning, we'll call him then. All right?"

But George was on his feet again, limping about the room, hoping to spot some improvement. He concentrated, trying to recall his previous impressions, and it seemed that the condition had become no worse; perhaps it was a shade better. A faint but intent smile curved the corners of his mouth. Then, in one shocking second he was wild with fear. "MARJORIE!" he bellowed. "Marjorie! My knee. Now it's my knee. I can't move my knee. Will you look? For God's sake, look! My knee is completely stiff."

She jumped from her chair and led him to his seat; solici-tous but controlled.

"George, Dear. Relax. Please relax. I'll go and call the doctor. Please relax."

George was past listening. "Relax! Relax! A while ago I was a normal man; a happy man. I went about my business. I didn't bother anyone ... And now, God, Marjorie, look at me. A cripple."

"I'll call the doctor, George."

She started to leave the room but noticed that George was sitting in his chair with his stiffened leg jutting straight out in the air. She went to fetch a hassock. It took George a long moment to realize what she was about.

"Please, Dear. Not now," he pleaded. "Later. Fix that up later. Go and call the doctor. Please call the doctor."

But Marjorie was busy adjusting the hassock under his legs.

"Stop it! Stop it!" he cried. "It's fine this way. The leg doesn't hurt. Call the doctor."

"Don't be silly," she said, using a nurse's clipped speech. "Suppose someone comes and you're sitting there with your foot sticking out straight. They'll think we're crazy."

George moaned. Marjorie left the room, and to George, sick with fright, the minutes seemed eternal. "Marjorie! What's taking so long?" he shouted.

Her answer came from afar. "The doctor wasn't in. I'm calling another one."

As he sat counting seconds, his other knee went rigid. He shrieked for her, beyond all self-control, "MARJORIE! FOR THE LOVE OF GOD. MY OTHER

KNEE. MY OTHER KNEE IS PARALYZED. TELL HIM TO HURRY."

Her voice echoed in the hallway. "I can't carry on two conversations at once."

"BUT MARJORIE. MY KNEE."

Marjorie returned, walking with a nurse's swift stride. Her face wore an expression of righteous conviction.

"Well?" George asked.

"Well what?"

"Well what do you think?" he roared. "What is it? What did he say?"

"Just what I told you. Nothing serious." George sank back in relief.

"Did he know what it was?"

"Of course he knew. Did you think you were the only one? Just as I told you..."

George glared at her. "All right. All right. No sermons. Tell me what he said. What is it?"

Marjorie paused. "Atrophy."

"Atrophy?" he asked, puzzled. "Atrophy?"

"Plain, common atrophy."

George ran a hand over a bristly cheek. "Just atrophy," he mused. "So that's it; atrophy. Well," he said, after a pause, "at least we know what it is."

"I *told* you..."

"I told *you*. It was not knowing that scared me. So ... what do we do about it?"

Marjorie appeared to search for the proper explanatory terms. "Nothing," she said, at last.

"NOTHINGI" He was wild again. "NOTHING! You mean to tell me that I have a fatal disease. I have a fatal disease and you sit there calmly and tell me there's nothing we can do..."

She took his hands. "George! Get a hold of yourself. There's nothing fatal about the disease. The doctor said not to worry. Nothing can be done about it but there are abso-lutely no dangerous effects."

"Oh ... Well ... That's a relief." He thought about it, then eased back in his chair, his tautened muscles relaxed. "There's nothing we can do, but there

are no dangerous effects?" he repeated.

"Right. You can do anything you would do normally ex-cept move."

George let this sink in. "That's at least something," he said. "We should be thankful for that." His tensed features eased and he let himself become engrossed in the TV pro-gram.

"You'll have to have courage, George. *We'll* have to have courage. We have to fashion a whole new life for ourselves. It won't be easy."

George turned to his wife and his stricken look returned.

"I can't face it; it happened too quickly," he said, tears welling. "This evening I was a man in my prime; I could do everything I wanted. Now ... now..."

"We can start from scratch, George," she said. "We'll start a new life."

"I can't walk any more. I can't go for a simple stroll."

Her voice took on its prim nurse's pitch. "You never went for walks, Dear. When did you ever take a walk?"

"That isn't the question. It's that now I can't even if I want to ... And I was planning on taking a walk."

"When?" she challenged.

"This Sunday. I was going to walk around the block."

"You have to stop thinking this way, George. You can't give in to self-pity."

"But such a simple thing. A stroll around the block."

"Stop it, George. You know you wouldn't have gone."

"I was planning to."

"There's nothing on the other side of the block, anyhow."

His rejoinder was skeptical and more than a little con-temptuous. "How do you know?"

"I've been there."

"And there's nothing?"

"Nothing ... well, hardly anything."

"That's what I mean! I wanted to see for myself."

"George!" she said, and for the first time there was a note of concern in her

voice. "You must take my word for it. There's nothing interesting to be seen."

"I've got to get used to the whole idea," he said, discon-solately.

George twitched convulsively in his chair. His thighs had atrophied. "My thighs, Marjorie. My thighs just went ... I can't move them."

"Have courage, Darling. Please. For your sake, for mine, have courage."

"Ah well," he said, "things could have been worse. Sup-pose it happened at home..." he laughed with genuine mirth.

"Lord, yes..."

"It might have happened in the subway, or tying my shoelace, or painting the ceiling."

"You are wonderful, Darling. Keeping your sense of hu-mor."

"Complaining won't do any good."

"George!"

"Please, Dearest. Keep calm. I don't like this any better than you. I can't go bowling any more, or fishing, or play ball. Nothing."

"George, Darling! You never went bowling. You never did any of those things."

"No," he said with resignation. "True. But I'm still young. I could have done them ... I can't play ping-pong."

Her cry was one of anguish. "You never played ping-pong!"

After a long silence, he said, "But I always wanted to."

"We have to make a living," Marjorie said. "You can't work. What will we live on? We have to eat."

"Yes. I hadn't thought of that."

She crushed his limp hand in her tense one. "I'll work, George. I don't care. We'll get along; don't you worry. I'll do anything. I'll take in wash; I'll scrub floors; I'll work in a millinery shop. Don't you worry. I'll keep us going."

"Maybe you can get back that modelling job," he sug-gested. She was about to speak but he silenced her with a nod. "Let's see now. Money? Will we need money?" he mused aloud. "With our social security, company benefits, disability, and all our policies, I figure we ought to get..." His brow creased as he calculated. "Let's see ... our income ought to be increased ... I figure ... forty dollars a week."

Marjorie smiled briefly but the smile turned to a grimace of pain. "The price we have to pay."

George nodded, as though agreeing with some private in-ner thought. "Not so bad. That's not bad at all. We'll have more money; you can buy the things you always wanted. My own needs will be less..." He stretched out his arm toward the peanut bowl and Marjorie set it violently back on the armrest.

"Don't do that, Darling!"

"Don't do what?"

"Reach for the peanuts. Who knows, any minute now ... and you'd be reaching for peanuts the rest of your life."

"Oh, Marge."

"I'm serious. If you want something, Dear, ask me for it. Is there anything you want? You can still move from the waist; would you rather lie down, Dear?"

"This is fine."

"Are you sure? Wouldn't you rather lie down? Remem-ber..."

"This is better. I'll be able to talk to my friends. I can watch the television."

"How about the program, George? Do you like the pro-gram? Would you rather see something else?" She ran to the hall for the TV guide and came back with it opened. "There's boxing, George. Wouldn't you like to watch it?"

"Just leave it the way it is. I like this. And you know you can't stand boxing."

"I'd love to see it. Look! Rocky Florio versus Kid Carver, welter-weights. I'd like to see that."

"You know you wouldn't. You hate boxing."

"Because I never understood it. Teach me, George. I'll learn to like it."

He shivered and a quick spasm contorted his features. "My waist," he said. "The atrophy hit my waist."

Marjorie looked deep into his eyes, and tears trickled from hers. "Won't it stop, George? Why won't it stop? Why us? Why not someone else?"

"That's selfish thinking, Dear."

"It's this sitting around that's so awful. This awful sitting, watching it happen. It would be different if I went out to a movie and came back and

found you atrophied. But this! This dying by inches."

"You know I'm not dying. Please don't get emotional." George raised his arm unconsciously and Marjorie threw her full weight on it pressing it back to the armrest.

"Don't do that! Tell me what you want, George, and I'll do it for you."

He grinned bashfully. "It's such a small thing."

"Anything, George, no matter how small..."

"Will you scratch my nose for me?" She looked at him with deep pity and scratched his nose. "A little higher," George said and then sighed a contented Ahhh.

Marjorie wrung her hands. "A whole life ahead of you," she said in hollow tones, "and you'll never be able to scratch yourself. Oh, George, I'll have to be here, beside you, al-ways, to scratch for you."

George shook his head. "No. Where the atrophy has set in there is no sensation at all. Just for a few minutes..."

"That's the worst part of all!" she cried. "A whole life to live and you'll never know what it is to itch." She ran her hands over his face and he kissed her palm gently. They sat in silence until George broke into both their thoughts.

"You know what I will miss," he said, wistfully. "I'll miss making myself snacks for the Late Late Show..."

"I'll make you marvellous snacks, George."

"No," he said. "No, it won't be the same thing. You don't quite understand. You see, when you go to bed early, I stay up for the Late Show and the Late Late Show. In between between the two I get hungry. The house is completely quiet. Sometimes I hear buses down the avenue; once in a while a fire engine or ambulance; the siren screaming. I'm all alone. I go into the kitchen and switch on the light. It takes a second for the fluorescents to catch and then I'm all alone in the bright, shiny kitchen. Everything is clean and tidy..."

"I do my best!"

"There's no food in sight. The only thing you can see are spotless shelves, a gleaming refrigerator, maybe a drainboard with clean dishes and cups in it. It looks like there isn't a bit of food in the place. I go to the refrigerator and open it..." His voice grew enthusiastic as he reminisced. "A whole world of midnight snacks lights up before my eyes. Herring in sour cream. Herring in wine sauce. Odds and ends of cheddar. Pimento olives. Velveeta spread. A quarter cantaloupe; half a thing of cream cheese. I go through everything. I look around. I pick one out and then I put it back. There are dishes and dishes with covers on them; little things that were left over and

that we've forgotten about. One by one I take off the covers. There is a meatball! Two slices of roast-beef! I look at everything. I don't choose yet. I go to the breadbox. There is half a loaf of rye, three or four kinds of crackers. Still I don't choose. I go to the pantry. There's peanut butter and all kinds of jam. Maybe during the day you bought some sardines, a new brand maybe, or perhaps tuna fish or salmon. Still I don't choose. I go to the cabinet with the sugar and flour and breakfast cereals. There are cornflakes! They weren't there yesterday. Cornflakes! Corn-flakes! Did I see peaches in the refrigerator? No! Yes! I don't remember. I run to the refrigerator. If there are peaches I'll have cornflakes with peaches and cream..."

"No! George!" she cried. "There aren't any peaches. But there are strawberries! Nice big ones. You can have corn-flakes with strawberries instead."

George sighed. She had missed the whole idea. "Ah, well," he said, letting the sentence trail off.

"I never knew it meant so much to you. I never dreamed

"It was a small thing," he said with a deprecating gesture.

"The small things are the most important."

"Really, Darling, it doesn't..." He shuddered as his left arm atrophied. "My arm," he said, matter-of-factly. "The arm just went."

Marjorie said nothing but two bright trickles of tears ran down the two tiny gullies that age was wearing into her face. George darted a sidewise glance at her, saw that her attention was elsewhere, and flicked out his movable arm to the peanut dish.

"George!"

But George was grinning broadly. "I made it," he said.

"You mustn't do that. Do you want to give me heart fail-ure? George, you know what could happen. One second more..."

"But I made it; there's nothing to worry about."

"Promise me you won't do that again."

"Yes. I promise. But I had to reach for my last handful of peanuts."

Marjorie sat upright in her chair and gazed at her hus-band with deep admiration. Solemnly she said, "You have more courage than most men, George. No one will ever tell me that my husband is a coward."

"It was nothing."

"Don't be modest, George. You know perfectly well that most men would

have just sat there. Men with less character would have hesitated..."

George quivered as his other arm atrophied.

"You see," she said, her voice rising to an unnatural pitch.

"That split second was all. Other men would have been less decisive; and in that time—poof. But you, George, you defied fate." She took a deep breath. "I go all weak inside when I think of it. George ... I ... I..." But she couldn't get out whatever it was that she wanted to say. George seem-ed totally absorbed in the program and was unaware that his wife watched him intently; sobbing noiselessly, and flexing her own hands as though she hoped to grasp the physical essence of the futile situation and bend it to her will. She ended the long silence with a piercing little scream.

"George!"

"What is it now, Dear?"

"Our lives, Darling! Our lives are ruined!"

"Please don't start that again." His voice struck a note of mild admonition.

"You have to stay there, in that chair, the whole long rest of your life."

"We both know that, Marge, Dear," he said gently.

She bolted from the chair, leaned over him and spoke with her mouth scant inches from his. "You don't ... I don't think you know what that means. You can't ever leave, never, forever you'll always be sitting there..."

"Of course I know that. It's perfectly clear."

"You don't understand. You don't see." She searched his eyes for the gleam that would tell her he knew her unspoken meaning; but she saw no light.

"We can't fight City Hall," George said. "We have to face the realities."

"George, George," she moaned. "You don't understand; you don't see. All the time ... never to leave."

George's pronounced, balding forehead creased and crinkled in thought as he struggled toward comprehension. "Yes," he said, finally, smiling faintly. "I see. You'll have to bring me my food; that will be a bother. You'll have to vacuum around me ... I still don't see why you have to get so excited..."

"You can't come to bed, George," she blurted.

"Yes," he said, after a pause. "That's so. I hadn't thought of that ... but with a couple of extra blankets I'll be warm here. It won't be as bad as all..."

"And me, George. I have to get between the cold sheets alone..."

"Oh now, Marge, a couple of extra blankets and you'll be warm enough."

"We can't make love any more, George!" she cried. "We aren't husband and wife. We aren't lovers any more."

"True," George said. "I hadn't' thought of that."

"Not another chance! Never again. Oh George!" She was standing erect now, her arms stretched before her in an imploring gesture. Her voice became poetic, nostalgic. "That was the best part, George; I loved you most then; always in your arms, the little light glowing ... You always said such silly little things; I loved you most then, George." She paused and then continued in anguish. "And it's my fault, George. All my fault. If I had been a little more understanding be-fore; if I had listened to my intuition just a while ago; when it was just your foot. We would have had one last chance; we would have had time. One last chance; it doesn't seem so much to ask."

"But we didn't think of it," George said, trying to be both consoling and logical. "We didn't think of it, Marge."

"I know, I know. It's all my fault. I didn't think. I didn't dream ... Oh George, just one last time. It wouldn't have been so much to ask; one last time in your arms."

"We didn't think of it, Marge. I didn't and you didn't. It isn't Wednesday. There's no use crying over spilt..."

But Marjorie was talking at him, not to him, rapturously. "All our quarrels were made up there, George. Whatever the day, the nights were all soft and tender; in your arms I was a princess at dawn, George, beside my sleeping prince. It was marvellous; it was perfect; wasn't it?"

"Oh yes," he said.

"We were passionate; how we were passionate; like lovers, not like husband and wife. Each day was an experience; wasn't it, George? Every night eight hours of paradise. We were happy, so very happy, weren't we, George?"

"Oh yes," he said.

"We did things together. What lives we led! Everyone envied us, we made life so exciting. We never fought, never bickered like other couples; we were happy, weren't we?"

"I said we were," he replied gently. "We were very happy."

"The nights, George! How will I get through the long nights alone ... We are so young, George!" Her voice sank to a keening grief. "Our lives were all before us. So young! I'm thirty-two, George; a girl, a young girl. And you—thirty-four—your life had just begun..."

"Marge?" he said, hesitantly.

"Yes, Darling?"

"Are you sure I'm thirty-four?"

"I'm certain ... Oh, George..."

He gave a little snort of surprise. "That's funny," he said. "I always thought of myself as older."

"It's affected your mind, Darling. That too!"

"No." He considered the statement. "No. Not really. Just you know how it is. One day is like the next. A year goes by and you don't notice it. Then five..." He winced as his neck atrophied.

"It's all over, George. Our lives are finished, there's noth-ing left for us."

It took a time before her words penetrated; he shifted his gaze to meet hers. "That's not so, Marge. We can still talk."

"Yes," she said, in a sort of delirium. "We can still talk. That's right, George; we can still talk ... Talk to me, Dar-ling."

"I can't just talk," he said, in a tone of forbearing pa-tience. "First I have to have something to say."

She burst into a wild peal of laughter. "Yes, of course. But when you think of something, you'll talk to me, won't you, George? Promise me?"

She hovered over him, fluttering about, making ineffec-tual attempts to comfort and soothe him. "You mustn't worry, Darling," she said. "I'll always be beside you. When-ever you need me..." She waited for his reply.

"Swell," he said, at last.

"I'll stay by your side. Always. I'll never leave you for another. I'll refuse all invitations; I won't let myself be tempted."

"George! Look at me!"

He snuffled with faint bemusement. "Funny. I can't. My eyes are focussed straight ahead; atrophied, and I didn't even know it."

She seemed about to fly to new heights of frenzy but at the last moment controlled herself. "Well, it's almost over. Thank God for that..." She cut herself short. "But George, are you blind? Can you see?"

"Yes. I can see." A strange smile had settled on his face.

"Aren't you afraid, George?"

"No. No. I'm not afraid."

"GEORGE!" she cried. "That's not your normal voice. Not that too! George! Talk to me! I'm frightened. Say some-thing. Some last thing! Don't leave me like this ... tell me what it's like. What do you feel? I've got to know, George."

His benign smile had set firmly on his features. "It's not so bad," he said, speaking slowly, his voice thickening with each syllable. "Not bad at all. I ... I..." And he had to summon every reserve of strength for his last words. "I ... I sort of like it," he said.

It was pure chance that the alien with the wonderful gift for mankind should have come first to Dr. Kelly in quiet little Millville. Would the end result have been different if he'd gone first to a doctor in some other town?

SHOTGUN CURE

by Clifford D. Simak

The clinics were set up and in the morning they'd start on Operation Kelly—and that was something, wasn't it, that they should call it Kelly!

He sat in the battered rocking chair on the sagging porch and said it once again and rolled it on his tonguer, but the taste of it was not so sharp nor sweet as it once had been, when the great London doctor had risen in the United Nations to suggest it could be called nothing else but Kelly.

Although, when one came to think of it, there was a deal of happenstance. It needn't have been Kelly. It could have been just anyone at all with an M.D. to his name. It could as well have been Cohen or Johnson or Radzonovich or any other of them—any one of all the doctors in the world.

He rocked gently in the creaking chair while the floor boards of the porch groaned in sympathy, and in the gather-ing dusk were the sounds, as well, of children at the day's-end play, treasuring those last seconds before they had to go inside and soon thereafter to bed.

There was the scent of lilacs in the coolness of the air and at the corner of the garden he could faintly see the white flush of an early-blooming bridal wreath—the one that Martha Anderson had given him and Janet so many years ago, when they first had come to live in this very house.

A neighbor came tramping down the walk and he could not make him out in the deepening dusk, but the man called out to him. "Good evening, Doc," he said.

"Good evening, Hiram," said old Doc Kelly, knowing who it was by the voice

of him.

The neighbor went on, tramping down the walk.

Old Doc kept up his gentle rocking with his hands folded on his pudgy stomach and from inside the house he could hear the bustling in the kitchen as Janet cleared up after supper. In a little while, perhaps, she'd come out and sit with him and they'd talk together, low-voiced and casually, as befitted an old couple very much in love.

Although, by rights, he shouldn't stay out here on the porch. There was the medical journal waiting for him on the study desk and he should be reading it. There was so much new stuff these days that a man should keep up with—although, perhaps, the way things were turning out it wouldn't really matter if a man kept up or not.

Maybe in the years to come there'd be precious little a man would need to keep up with.

Of course, there'd always be need of doctors. There'd al-ways be damn fools smashing up their cars and shooting one another and getting fishhooks in their hands and falling out of trees. And there'd always be the babies.

He rocked gently to and fro and thought of all the babies and how some of them had grown until they were men and women now and had babies of their own. And he thought of Martha Anderson, Janet's closest friend, and he thought of Con Gilbert, as ornery an old shikepoke as ever walked the earth, and tight with money, too. He chuckled a bit wryly, thinking of all the money Con Gilbert finally owed him, never having paid a bill in his entire life.

But that was the way it went. There were some who paid and others who made no pretense of paying, and that was why he and Janet lived in this old house and he drove a five-year-old car and Janet had worn the self-same dress to church the blessed winter long.

Although it made no difference, really, once one consid-ered it. For the important pay was not in cash.

There were those who paid and those who didn't pay. And there were those who lived and the other ones who died, no matter what you did. There was hope for some and the ones who had no hope—and some of these you told and there were others that you didn't.

But it was different now.

And it all had started right here in this little town of Millville—not much more than a year ago.

Sitting in the dark, with the lilac scent and the white blush of the bridal wreath and the muted sounds of chil-dren clasping to themselves the last minutes of their play, he remembered it.

It was almost 8:30 and he could hear Martha Anderson in the outer office talking to Miss Lane and she, he knew, had been the last of them.

He took off his white jacket, folding it absent-mindedly, fogged with weariness, and laid it across the examination table.

Janet would be waiting supper, but she'd never say a word, for she never had. All these many years she had never said a word of reproach to him, although there had been at times a sense of disapproval at his easy-going ways, at his keeping on with patients who didn't even thank him, much less pay their bills. And a sense of disapproval, too, at the hours he kept, at his willingness to go out of nights when he could just as well have let a call go till his regular morning rounds.

She would be waiting supper and she would know that Martha had been in to see him and she'd ask him how she was, and what was he to tell her?

He heard Martha going out and the sharp click of Miss Lane's heels across the outer office. He moved slowly to the basin and turned on the tap, picking up the soap.

He heard the door creak open and did not turn his head.

"Doctor," said Miss Lane, "Martha thinks she's fine. She says you're helping her. Do you think..."

"What would you do?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"Would you operate, knowing it was hopeless? Would you send her to a specialist, knowing that he couldn't help her, knowing she can't pay him and that she'll worry about not paying? Would you tell her that she has, perhaps, six months to live and take from her the little happiness and hope she still has left to her?"

"I am sorry, doctor."

"No need to be. I've faced it many times. No case is the same. Each one calls for a decision of its own. It's been a long, hard day..."

"Doctor, there's another one out there."

"Another patient?"

"A man. He just came in. His name is Harry Herman."

"Herman? I don't know any Hermans."

"He's a stranger," said Miss Lane. "Maybe he just moved into town."

"If he'd moved in," said Doc, "I'd have heard of it. I hear everything."

"Maybe he's just passing through. Maybe he got sick driving on the road."

"Well, send him in," said Doc, reaching for a towel. "I'll have a look at him."

The nurse turned to the door.

"And Miss Lane."

"Yes?"

"You may as well go home. There's no use sticking round. It's been a real bad day."

And it had been, at that, he thought. A fracture, a burn, a cut, a dropsy, a menopause, a pregnancy, two pelvics, a scattering of colds, a feeding schedule, two teethings, a sus-picious lung, a possible gallstone, a cirrhosis of the liver and Martha Anderson. And now, last of all, this man named Harry Herman—no name that he knew and when one came to think of it, a rather funny name.

And he was a funny man. Just a bit too tall and willowy to be quite believable, ears too tight against his skull, lips so thin they seemed no lips at all.

"Doctor?" he asked, standing in the doorway.

"Yes," said Doc, picking up his jacket and shrugging into it. "Yes, I am the doctor. Come on in. What can I do for you?"

"I am not ill," said the man.

"Not ill?"

"But I want to talk to you. You have time, perhaps?"

"Yes, certainly," said Doc, knowing that he had no time and resenting this intrusion. "Come on in. Sit down." He tried to place the accent, but was unable to. Central European, most likely.

"Technical," said the man. "Professional."

"What do you mean?" asked Doc, getting slightly nettled.

"I talk to you technical. I talk professional."

"You mean that you're a doctor?"

"Not exactly," said the man, "although perhaps you think so. I should tell you immediate that I am an alien."

"An alien," said Old Doc. "We've got lots of them around. Mostly refugees."

"Not what I mean. Not that kind of alien. From some other planet. From some other star."

"But you said your name was Herman..."

"When in Rome," said the other one, "you must do as Romans."

"Huh?" asked Doc, and then: "Good God, do you mean that? That you are an alien. By an alien, do you mean..."

The other nodded happily. "From some other planet. From some other star. Very many light-years."

"Well, I be damned," said Doc.

He stood there looking at the alien and the alien grinned back at him, but uncertainly. "You think, perhaps," the alien said, "but he is so human!"

"That," said Doc, "was going through my mind."

"So you would have a look, perhaps. You would know a human body."

"Perhaps," said Doc, grimly, not liking it at all. "But the human body can take some funny turns."

"But not a turn like this," said the stranger, showing him his hands.

"No," said the shocked Old Doc. "No such turn as that."

For the hand had two thumbs and a single finger, almost as if a bird claw had decided to turn into a hand.

"Nor like this." asked the other, standing up and letting down his trousers.

"Nor like that," said Doc, more shaken than he'd been in many years of practice.

"Then," said the alien, zipping up his trousers, "I think that it is settled." He sat down again and calmly crossed his knees.

"If you mean I accept you as an alien," said Doc, "I sup-pose I do. Although it's not an easy thing."

"I suppose it is not. It comes as quite a shock."

Doc passed a hand across his brow. "Yes, a shock, of course. But there are other points..."

"You mean the language," said the alien. "And my knowl-edge of your customs."

"That's part of it, naturally."

"We've studied you," the alien said. "We've spent some time on you. Not you alone, of course..."

"But you talk so well," protested Doc. "Like a well-edu-cated foreigner."

"And that, of course," the other said, "is what exactly I am."

"Why, yes, I guess you are," said Doc. "I hadn't thought of it."

"I am not glib," said the alien. "I know a lot of words, but I use them incorrect. And my vocabulary is restricted to just the common speech. On matters of great technicality, I will not be proficient."

Doc walked around behind his desk and sat down rather limply. "All right," he said, 'let's have the rest of it. I accept you as an alien. Now tell me the other answer. Just why are you here?"

And he was surprised beyond all reason that he could approach the situation as calmly as he had. In a little while, he knew, when he had time to think it over, he would get the shakes.

"You're a doctor," said the alien. "You are a healer of your race."

"Yes," said Doc. "I am one of many healers."

"You work very hard to make the unwell well. You mend the broken flesh. You hold off death..."

"We try. Sometimes we don't succeed."

"You have many ailments. You have the cancer and the heart attacks and colds and many other things—I do not find the word."

"Diseases," Doc supplied.

"Disease. That is it. You will pardon my shortcomings in the tongue."

"Let's cut the niceties," suggested Doc. "Let's get on with it."

"It is not right," the alien said, "to have all these diseases. It is not nice. It is an awful thing,"

"We have less than we had at one time. We've licked a lot of them."

"And, of course," the alien said, "you make your living with them."

"What's that you said!" yelped Doc.

"You will be tolerant of me if I misunderstand. An eco-nomic system is a hard thing to get into one's head."

"I know what you mean," growled Doc, "but let me tell you, sir..." But what was the use of it, he thought. This being was thinking the self-same thing

that many humans thought.

"I would like to point out to you," he said, starting over once again, "that the medical profession is working hard to conquer those diseases you are talking of. We are doing all we can to destroy our own jobs."

"That is fine," the alien said. "It is what I thought, but it did not square with your planet's business sense. I take it, then, you would not be averse to seeing all disease destroyed."

"Now, look here," said Doc, having had enough of it, "I don't know what you are getting at. But I am hungry and I am tired and if you want to sit here threshing out philoso-phies..."

"Philosophies," said the alien. "Oh, not philosophies. I am practical. I have come to offer an end of all diseases."

They sat in silence for a moment, then Doc stirred half protestingly and said, "Perhaps I misunderstood you, but I thought you said..."

"I have a method, a development, a find—I do not catch the word—that will destroy all diseases."

"A vaccine," said Old Doc.

"That's the word. Except it is different in some ways than the vaccine you are thinking."

"Cancer?" Doc asked.

The alien nodded. "Cancer and the common cold and all the others of them. You name it and it's gone."

"Heart," said Doc. "You can't vaccinate for heart."

"That, too," the alien said. "It does not really vaccinate. It makes the body strong. It makes the body right. Like tuning up a motor and making it like new. The motor will wear out in time, but it will function until it is worn out entirely."

Doc stared hard at the alien. "Sir," he said, "this is not the sort of thing one should joke about."

"I am not joking," said the alien.

"And this vaccine—it will work on humans? It has no side effects?"

"I am sure it will. We have studied your—your—the way your bodies work."

"Metabolism is the word you want."

"Thank you," said the alien.

"And the price?" asked Doc.

"There is no price," the alien said. "We are giving it to you."

"Completely free of charge? Surely there must be..."

"Without any charge," the alien said. "Without any strings." He got up from the chair. He took a flat box from his pocket and walked over to the desk. He placed it upon the desk and pressed its side and the top sprang open. Inside of it were pads—like surgical pads, but they were not made of cloth.

Doc reached out, then halted his hand just above the box. "May I?" he asked.

"Yes, certainly. You only touch the tops." Doc gingerly lifted out one of the pads and laid it on the desk. He kneaded it with a skittish finger and there was liquid in the pad. He could feel the liquid squish as he pressed the pad. He turned it over carefully and the underside of it was rough and corrugated, as if it were a mouthful of tiny, vicious teeth.

"You apply the rough side to the body of the patient," said the alien. "It seizes on the patient. It becomes a part of him. The body absorbs the vaccine and the pad drops off."

"And that is all there's to it?"

"That is all," the alien said.

Doc lifted the pad between two cautious fingers and dropped it back into the box. He looked up at the alien. "But why?" he asked. "Why are you giving this to us?"

"You do not know," the alien said. "You really do not know."

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

The alien's eyes suddenly were old and weary and he said: "In another million years you will."

"Not me," said Doc.

"In another million years," the alien said, "you'll do the same yourself, but it will be something different. And then someone will ask you, and you won't be able to answer any more than I am now."

If it was a rebuke, it was a very gentle one. Doc tried to decide if it were or not. He let the matter drop.

"Can you tell me what is in it?" he asked, gesturing at the pad.

"I can give you the descriptive formula, but it would be in our terms. It would be gibberish."

"You won't be offended if I try these out?"

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't," said the alien. "I would not expect your faith to extend so far. It would be simple-minded."

He shut the box and pushed it closer to Old Doc. He turned and strode toward the door.

Doc rose ponderously to his feet. "Now, wait a minute there!" he bellowed.

"I'll see you in a week or two," the alien said. He went out and closed the door behind him.

Doc sat down suddenly in the chair and stared at the box upon the desk. He reached out and touched it and it was really there. He pressed the side of it and the lid popped open and the pads were there, inside.

He tried to fight his way back to sanity, to conservative and solid ground, to a proper—and a human—viewpoint. "It's all hogwash," he said.

But it wasn't hogwash. He knew good and well it wasn't.

He fought it out with himself that night behind the closed door of his study, hearing faintly the soft bustling in the kitchen as Janet cleared away from supper.

And the first fight was on the front of credibility. He had told the man he believed he was an alien and there was evidence that he could not ignore. Yet it seemed so incredible, all of it, every bit of it, that it was hard to swal-low.

And the hardest thing of all was that this alien, whoever he might be, had come, of all the doctors in the world, to Dr. Jason Kelly, a little one horse doctor in a little one horse town.

He debated whether it might be a hoax and decided that it wasn't, for the three digits on the hand and the other thing
he'd seen would have been difficult to simulate. And the whole thing, as a hoax, would be so stupid and so cruel that it simply made no sense. Besides, no one hated him enough to go to all the work. And even granting a hatred of appro-priate proportion, he doubted there was anyone in Millville imaginative enough to think of this.

So the only solid ground he had, he told himself, was to assume that the man had been really an alien and that the pads were *bona fide*.

And. if that was true, there was only one procedure: He must test the pads.

He rose from his chair and paced up and down the floor.

Martha Anderson, he told himself. Martha Anderson had cancer and her life was forfeit—there was nothing in man's world or knowledge that had a chance to save her. Surgery was madness, for she'd probably not survive it.

And even if she did, her case was too advanced. The killer that she carried had already broken loose and was swarming through her body and there was no hope for her.

Yet he could not bring himself to do it, for she was Janet's closest friend and she was old and poor and every instinct in him screamed against his using her as a guinea pig.

Now if it were only old Con Gilbert—he could do a thing like that to Con. It would be no more than the old skinflint rightly had coming to him. But old Con was too mean to be really sick; despite all the complaining that he did, he was healthy as a hog.

No matter what the alien had said about no side effects, he told himself, one could not be sure. He had said they'd studied the metabolism of the human race and yet, on the face of it, it seemed impossible.

The answer, he knew, was right there any time he wanted it. It was tucked away back in his brain and he knew that it was there, but he pretended that it wasn't and he kept it tucked away and refused to haul it forth.

But after an hour or so of pacing up and down the room and of batting out his brains, he finally gave up and let the answer out.

He was quite calm when he rolled up his sleeve and opened up the box. And he was a matter-of-fact physician when he lifted out the pad and slapped it on his arm.

But his hand was shaking when he rolled down the sleeve so Janet wouldn't see the pad and ask a lot of questions about what had happened to his arm.

Tomorrow all over the world outside Millville, people would line up before the clinic doors, with their sleeves rolled up and ready. The lines, most likely, would move at a steady clip, for there was little to it. Each person would pass before a doctor and the doctor would slap a pad onto his or her arm and the next person would step up.

All over the world, thought Doc, in every cranny of it, in every little village; none would be overlooked. Even the poor, he thought, for there would be no charge.

And one could put his finger on a certain date and say: "This was the day in history when disease came to an end." For the pads not only would kill the present ailments, but would guard against them in the future.

And every twenty years the great ships out of space would come, carrying other cargoes of the pads and there would be another Vaccination Day. But not so many then—only the younger generation. For once a person had been vaccinated, there was no further need of it. Vaccinated once and you were set for life.

Doc tapped his foot quietly on the floor of the porch to keep the rocker

going. It was pleasant here, he thought. And tomorrow it would be pleasant in the entire world. Tomor-row the fear would have been largely filtered out of human life. After tomorrow, short of accident or violence, men could look forward confidently to living out their normal lifetime. And, more to the point, perhaps, completely healthy life-times.

The night was quiet, for the children finally had gone in, giving up their play. And he was tired. Finally, he thought, he could admit that he was tired. There was now, after many years, no treason in saying he was tired.

Inside the house he heard the muffled purring of the phone and the sound of it broke the rhythm of his rocking, brought him forward to the chair's edge.

Janet's feet made soft sounds as they moved toward the phone and he thrilled to the gentleness of her voice as she answered it.

Now, in just a minute, she would call him and he'd get up and go inside.

But she didn't call him. Her voice went on talking. He settled back into the chair. He'd forgotten once again.

The phone no longer was an enemy. It no longer haunted him.

For Millville had been the first. The fear had already been lifted here. Millville had been the guinea pig, the pilot project.

Martha Anderson had been the first of them and after her Ted Carson, whose lung had been suspicious, and after him the Jurgens' baby when it came down with pneumonia. And a couple of dozen others until all the pads were gone. And the alien had come back.

And the alien had said—what was it he had said? "Don't think of us as benefactors nor as supermen. We are neither one. Think of me if you will, as the man across the street."

And it had been, Doc told himself, a reaching by the alien for an understanding, an attempt to translate this thing that they were doing into a common idiom.

And had there been any understanding—any depth of understanding? Doc doubted that there had been.

Although, he recalled, the aliens had been basically very much like humans. They could even joke.

There had been one joking thing the original alien had said that had stuck inside his mind. And it had been a sort of silly thing, silly on the face of it, but it had bothered him. The screen door banged behind Janet as she came out on the porch. She sat down on the glider. "That was Martha Anderson," she said.

Doc chuckled to himself. Martha lived just five doors up the street and she

and Janet saw one another a dozen times a day and yet Martha had to phone.

"What did Martha want?" he asked,

Janet laughed. "She wanted help with rolls."

"You mean her famous rolls?"

"Yes. She couldn't remember for the life of her, how much yeast she used."

Doc chortled softly. "And those are the Ones, I suppose, she wins all the prizes on at the county fair."

Janet said, crisply: "It's not so funny as you make it, Jason. It's easy to forget a thing like that. She does a lot of baking."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," said Doc.

He should be getting in, he told himself, and start reading in the journal. And yet he didn't want to. It was so pleasant sitting here—just sitting. It had been a long time since he could do much sitting.

And it was all right with him, of course, because he was getting old and close to worn out, but it wouldn't be all right with a younger doctor, one who still owed for his edu-cation and was just starting out. There was talk in the United Nations of urging all the legislative bodies to consider medi-cal subsidies to keep the doctors going. For there still was need of them. Even with all diseases vanished, there was still need of them. It wouldn't do to let their ranks thin out, for there would be time and time again when they would be badly needed.

He'd been listening to the footsteps for quite a while, com-ing down the street, and now all at once they were turning in the gate.

He sat up straighter in his chair. Maybe it was a patient, knowing he'd be home, coming in to see him.

"Why," said Janet, considerably surprised, "it is Mr. Gil-bert."

It was Con Gilbert, sure enough.

"Good evening, Doc," said Con. "Good evening, Miz Kelly."

"Good evening," Janet said, getting up to go.

"No use of you to leave," Con said to her.

"I have some things to do," she told him. "I was just getting ready to go in."

Con came up the steps and sat down on the glider. "Nice evening," he declared.

"It is all of that," said Doc.

"Nicest spring I've ever seen," said Con, working his way around to what he had to say.

"I was thinking that," said Doc. "It seems to me the lilacs never smelled so good before."

"Doc," said Con, "I figure I owe you quite a bit of money."

"You owe me some," said Doc.

"You got an idea how much it might be?"

"Not the faintest," Doc told him. "I never bothered to keep track of it."

"Figured it was a waste of time," said Con. "Figured I would never pay it."

"Something like that," Doc agreed.

"Been doctoring with you for a right long time," said Con.

"That's right, Con."

"I got three hundred here. You figure that might do it?"

"Let's put it this way, Con," said Doc. "I'd settle for a whole lot less."

"I guess then, that sort of makes us even. Seems to me three hundred might be close to fair."

"If you say so," said Doc.

Con dug out his billfold, extracted a wad of bills and handed them across. Doc took them and folded them and stuffed them in his pocket.

"Thank you, Con," he said.

And suddenly he had a funny feeling, as if there were something he should know, as if there were something that he should be able to just reach out and grab.

But he couldn't no matter how he tried, figure what it was. Con got up and shuffled across the porch, heading for the steps.

"Be seeing you around," he said.

Doc jerked himself back to reality.

"Sure, Con. Be seeing you around. And thanks."

He sat in the chair, not rocking, and listened to Con going down the walk

and out the gate and then down the street until there was only silence.

And if he ever was going to get at it, he d have to go in now and start reading in the journal.

Although, more than likely, it was all damn foolishness. He'd probably never again need to know a thing out of any medic journal.

Doc pushed the journal to one side and sat there, wonder-ing what was wrong with him. He'd been reading for twenty minutes and none of it had registered. He couldn't have told a word that he had read.

Too upset, he thought. Too excited about Operation Kelly, and wasn't that a thing to call it—Operation Kelly!

And he remembered it once again exactly.

How he'd tried it out on Millville, then gone to the county medical association and how the doctors in the county, after some slight amount of scoffing and a good deal of skepti-cism, had become convinced. And from there it had gone to state and the AMA.

And finally that great day in the United Nations, when the alien had appeared before the delegates and when he, himself, had been introduced—and at last the great London man arising to suggest that the project be called nothing else but Kelly.

A proud moment, he told himself—and he tried to call up the pride again, but it wasn't there, not the whole of it. Never in his life again would he know that kind of pride.

And here he sat, a simple country doctor once again, in his study late at night, trying to catch up with reading he never seemed to get the time to do.

Although that was no longer strictly true. Now he had all the time there was.

He reached out and pulled the journal underneath the lamp and settled down to read.

But it was slow going.

He went back and read a paragraph anew.

And that, he told himself, was not the way it should be.

Either he was getting old or his eyes were going bad or he was plain stupid.

And that was the word—that was the key to the thing that it had seemed he should have been able to just reach out and grab.

Stupid!

Probably not actually stupid. Maybe just a little slow. Not really less intelligent, but not so sharp and bright as he had been. Not so quick to catch the hang of things.

Martha Anderson had forgotten how much yeast to use in those famous, prize-winning rolls of hers. And that was something that Martha should never have forgotten.

Con had paid his bill, and on the scale of values that Con had subscribed to all his life, that was plain stupidity. The bright thing, the sharp thing would have been for Con, now that he'd probably never need a doctor, just to forget the obligation. After all, it would not have been hard to do; he'd been forgetful of it up to this very night.

And the alien had said something that, at the time, he'd thought of as a joke.

"Never fear," the alien had said, "we'll cure all your ills. Including, more than likely, a few you don't suspect."

And was intelligence a disease?

It was hard to think of it as such.

And yet, when any race was as obsessed with intelligence as Man was, it might be classed as one.

When it ran rampant as it had during the last half cen-tury, when it piled progress on top of progress, technology on top of technology, when it ran so fast that no man caught his breath, then it might be disease.

Not quite so sharp, thought Doc. Not quite so quick to grasp the meaning of a paragraph loaded with medical terminology—being forced to go a little slower to pack it in his mind.

And was that really bad?

Some of the stupidest people he'd ever known, he told himself, had been the happiest.

And while one could not make out of that a brief for planned stupidity, it at least might be a plea for a less har-assed humanity.

He pushed the journal to one side and sat staring at the light.

It would be felt in Millville first because Millville had been the pilot project. And six months from tomorrow night it would be felt in all the world.

How far would it go, he wondered—for that, after all, was the vital question.

Only slightly less sharp?

Back to bumbling?

Clear back to the ape?

There was no way one could tell...

And all he had to do to stop it was pick up the phone.

He sat there, frozen with the thought that perhaps Opera-tion Kelly should be stopped—that after all the years of death and pain and misery, Man must buy it back.

But the aliens, he thought—the aliens would not let it go too far. Whoever they might be, he believed they were decent people.

Maybe there had been no basic understanding, no meet-ing of the minds, and yet there had been a common ground—the very simple ground of compassion for the blind and halt.

But if he were wrong, he wondered—what if the aliens proposed to limit Man's powers of self-destruction even if that meant reducing him to abject stupidity ... what was the answer then? And what if the plan was to soften man up before invasion?

Sitting there, he knew.

Knew that no matter what the odds were against his being right, there was nothing he could do.

Realized that as a judge in a matter such as this he was unqualified, that he was filled with bias, and could not change himself.

He'd been a doctor for too long to stop Operation Kelly.

By the author of the prize-winning KRISHNA FLUTING *... a tale of the Himalayas, of "the terrifying being who lives in the snows," of a priest who disappeared, and of an abbot prepared to go to extremes in defense of his own "truths."*

THE ONE WHO RETURNS

by John Berry

Father Ryan had disappeared completely and mysteriously about two months before my arrival at the hill station of Rampoche on April 25, 1952. He had left the monastery in company with four other European priests and was hiking in the Himalayas somewhere near the Nepal frontier. A botanist

of sorts, he had strayed a few steps away from his party, with the intention of identifying a certain tree. His companions never saw him again, although they searched for him all the rest of that day. Sherpas, Lepchas, Tibetans, Nepalese, and several companies of Indian soldiers combed the whole area for a week, in vain.

It surprised me, rather, that a mysterious disappearance should make much of an impression on Rampoche. The town was surrounded by deep gorges and forests where I once saw a python lower ten feet of itself out of a tree and pull up a yelling thing that looked like a large sloth.

And there were the Yetis, the half-legendary, hairy, man-like creatures who, I am now convinced, do really inhabit the upper slopes of the Himalayas. So far as I can recall, there is nothing funny about the Yeti except the English translation of the Tibetan word—which, if the truth be told, is not even Yeti—made by a charming man whose native tongue is not English. "The terrifying being who lives in the snows" thus becomes "the Abominable Snow Man"—a name that was quickly seized upon, not by true skeptics but by those who were determined not to believe; however, these were mere outsiders.

The people of the mountains know better. They evince a polite curiosity at the many photographs which have now been amassed, showing the huge footprints of the Yetis in the snow. These are common Yetis, though it is doubtful that the outsider will ever lay eyes on them, for they are masters of privacy. There are other Yetis who are far advanced in the ways of yoga.

And there is the Great Yeti, who is Illumined. His name must not be mentioned.

The story was told to me gradually, over a period of time, in several languages of men and of events; often imperceptibly: a word here or there, perhaps unnoticed at the time, dropped casually by some villager, shopkeeper, porter, or passing lama. For it was only the outsider, like myself, who did not already know the truth.

One morning, not very early, but before the sun had hur-dled the Himalayas, I was out splitting wood beside my cabin on the mountainside above Rampoche. A Tibetan lama in purple rags and a tall, peaked cap came down the path. Standing before me and smiling, he began to jingle a little bell with one hand. With the other, he twirled a small drum on a handle, so that it was beaten by two dangling weights, one on each side. Then he sang. I remember the song, per-fectly, from that one hearing, but having tried once to sing it, I know that the song is his alone—perhaps because he possesses nothing in this world.

When he had sung, he blessed me until I felt blessed.

We squatted on the ground, not quite looking at each other, not quite not looking at each other, not able to concentrate on nor to ignore the perpetual snows of Kinchinjunga, now suddenly kindled into flaming colors by the rising sun. My smile and his smile were the same. They did not belong to either of us. I experienced freedom and contentment, the

invisible commodities of this wandering men-dicant.

During a fit of madness brought on by dysentery, senti-mentality and the study of Sanskrit grammar, I had once insulted a Tibetan lama who came to me begging a bit too boisterously. I pushed him, I shouted curses at him, I threat-ened and nearly struck him with my brass opium pipe. And he laughed! Backing away in mock terror, the gigantic sim-pleton—the fool of God—thanked me for the experience. He walked away chortling, happier, if possible, than when he had first come.

Feelings of guilt now made me gauge my present lama's happiness by that of the former one. They seemed about the same, although I had given insults to the other one, and this Lama-ji was sharing my breakfast. Evidently I could have no effect upon either.

Lama-ji stirred butter into his tea and drank it with re-spect, crinkling his eyes at me.

"The Flat Land must be a very interesting place," he ven-tured.

I mentioned oceans, deserts and peoples, and improve-ments in methods of transportation, communication and government. However, he came to the point:

"Your Grand Lama is called a 'Pope,' is he not? Doubtless he is of a very high spiritual attainment?"

I told him that that was certainly the case, but that he had many troubles on account of the sin that is prevalent in the Flat Land.

Lama-ji murmured sympathetically. "It is true," he said. "Father Ryan showed me a picture of the Pope Lama, and also one of the Illumined Jesus as a young man."

We changed the subject several times and then were silent. In this silence, all at once, I remembered that Father Ryan was the priest who had disappeared.

"Father Ryan," I said.

"We met on a hill before dawn," Lama-ji said, and I felt, looking at him, that he might be speaking metaphorically.

I continued to look at him.

"It was seven days before he was taken," he added.

I said: "I am ignorant. Please tell me what happened to him."

Lama-ji looked at me with surprise, then he said softly:

"The Great Yeti took him—Yeti Guru."

I presumed that the Yeti had eaten Father Ryan.

Lama-ji laughed merrily.

"You are thinking of the big footprints in the snow," he said. "They are different. No, the Great Yeti is a spirit."

"Incarnated?"

"Yes, but he has no need to eat. Father Ryan is still alive."

"What is the Yeti like?"

"He is like a good and great yogi, but he is a Boddhisattva, much bigger than men. He lives in a cave, high, very high up in the snows."

"Why has he taken Father Ryan?"

Lama-ji became very serious. With an awed expression he said: "Sometimes the Great Yeti comes down from the snows to look at people. Usually he returns alone. But if he finds a human with a pure soul, he will take that person with him. There in the cave Yeti Guru teaches the man and the man receives Illumination."

"But the man does not return to the world?"

"At the end of six months he appears again among human beings in order to teach them. He has one month to do this, and at the end of that time—if he lives that long—he dies quickly and turns to dust. In that month he must stay in dark places, for he casts no shadow, and human beings are afraid at the approach of the Illumined One—and indeed he does make a great deal of trouble for them."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

"Ah," said Lama-ji sadly. "Men are provoked by the truth—as in your country they were provoked by the Illumined Jesus before he became a Boddhisattva. Did they not burn him to ashes?"

"No," I said. "They crucified him."

"That is not fatal to One Who Returns," Lama-ji said. "Everyone knows that he must be burned to ashes, like a scroll. Otherwise he goes on teaching and disturbing people. You will see what happens when Father Ryan-Boddhisattva comes down from the snows."

Lama-ji's face was now serene, but with a suggestion of inward irony, a baffling combination of naivete and sophisti-cation.

"And whose side are you on?" I asked with some asperity.

Lama-ji quaked with suppressed laughter. "My son," he said, "there are no sides. All is ritual."

At the end of June, I went down to the Gangetic Plains. It was not until the following April that I returned to Rampoche to escape the heat. This time I made the acquain-tance of Joan Venkataramanan, a handsome, learned and courageous Englishwoman who had married an Indian. Daily she assaulted the Everest of her existence, and neither she nor it could ever admit defeat.

She and I and her two children were hiking along a mountain trail late one afternoon, when we stopped to sit on some boulders, to catch our breath. Joan was not a com-pulsive talker, but she talked steadily to me on that day, for the simple reason that she had stored up so much that had to be told and could not be told—except to another inward sort of outsider. We sat there gazing out across immense depths and heights and distances of an indescribable grandeur. A black spot at the base of the mountain to our left loomed up curiously. I seemed to recall a white building—

The children—a boy of seven and a girl of about ten—were scampering up the mountainside in back of us. Joan was talking about Freedom. It might be a good thing, she said, to be a nun for the sake of the esprit de corps—only she was afraid of finding herself stuck without much esprit and no corps at all.

"I once knew an Irish priest who was a free spirit," Joan said. "He lived in a monastery that used to be down there, where you see that black spot—it burned down last Octo-ber, with the Abbot inside, and possibly someone else. The others were Belgians and a couple of Poles. Father Ryan—"

I suppose I looked intense, for Joan at once concentrated on this subject in order to remove any pretext I might have for interfering with her oblique confession. And indeed I did not wish to intrude. She was creating a world out of words. It was like the falling of snow.

Under it lay Everest.

"The Abbot," Joan was saying, "was a formidable man. I went to see him about the children's education and we had a bit of a row. He was one of those granite-faced Walloons—a convert himself, I suspect. They always go to extremes to make up for their heretical past, you know."

Father Ryan, on the other hand, seemed to have been a good-hearted sort of fellow. He had given the children lessons in natural science until his superior, who may have feared Joan's possible influence on the teacher, forbade him to continue his friendship with them.

Then Father Ryan had disappeared on that hiking ex-pedition...

And the monastery?

"Last October," Joan said, "the Abbot did a terrible and heroic thing—I've been ashamed of myself ever since for having quarreled with him. Just after nightfall a fire broke out in the monastery. It must have been in the Abbot's cell, because he was the only one who was aware of it.

"He rang the big bell—we heard it for miles around, wild and defiant—and he ordered everyone out of the monastery. Then he locked the gates to keep anyone from coming back in. He stayed in there alone to fight the fire, and he died in there. It was foolish of him—with help he might have put out the fire—but he wouldn't risk the lives of the others. I can hardly understand such absolute courage, can you? Within an hour the place was in ashes.

"Of course, you know how people like to embroider simple events. Some of the monks claimed to have seen a shadowy figure at nightfall moving majestically out of the forest, into the monastery, and up to the Abbot's room, which was in a sort of tower. That was just before the fire started.

"Then there was that unstable Polish monk, a sort of menial. When the flames were at their height, he saw in them a vision of Christ—smiling ever so slightly, seated in the *padmasana* or lotus posture, His hands raised in the *mudra* of Divine Teaching."

The children were coming down the mountain toward us. I began to convey to Joan, by gestures, a certain restlessness that had taken hold of me. It was getting late, and after nightfall the trails in those precipitous mountains are not altogether safe, especially for the outsider whose gaze may be momentarily distracted by the sight of moonlight on snow over a considerable area and at some height.

By the author of THE CIRCUS OF DR. LAO *and* THE OLD CHINA HANDS*, a tale of one hundred men who marched into imprisonment in a long, green valley. The imprisonment was not a usual one ... neither was its effect...*

THE CAPTIVITY

by Charles G. Finney

Yes, said Rops, I know it sounds like the Abyssinia of Rasselas, but there it was, and it was real. One hundred of us were there; it dawned on us later that we had been selected. *They* held about six thousand of us as captives, you know. So *they* picked this Hundred, and all the rest were allowed to escape. It wasn't much they could escape to. Everything—nearly everything—was in ruins. But the escapees and the ones who were still alive in the cities and the villages they escaped to managed to rebuild, to survive. Probably that was the purpose in letting them escape.

Of course, why we Hundred were kept in captivity is something I'll never know. That was forty years ago, but things haven't changed a bit. We're all ready to go at it again—bang, bang, bang! The winners of the one forty years ago have become weakened, and the losers have become strong. There seems to be some sort of law which governs these things, but I don't know what it is.

But the winners that time had been plenty strong, strong enough, I suppose, to have imposed their will on the whole world. A sort of compromise ended the fighting, but there was no question about who the victors were. There does seem to be a question now about who will win this next one; all sides are prepared about equally; the only way to settle it is to fight it out.

This Hundred I was in was captured in the Far North Region; *they* flew us out the next day—after *they* had culled us over—to the place which was to be our prison camp for the next three years. You have seen the green-covered hills rising in Hawaii and the green-covered chasms in Mindanae. It was a place like that. There was a canyon all covered with green about ten miles long, flat at the bottom, and probably fifteen miles across from rim to rim. The sides of the canyon were benched and terraced. The whole thing was fenced in, as is a wildlife section in a zoo; the animals seem to be living in their natural habitat, but everybody—even the animals—knows there's a fence around it and that there's no escape.

There were trails and pathways along the benches and terraces, and there were big roomy caves carved in the can-yon walls. The Hundred was broken up into Tens, and each of the Tens was given a cave to use as barracks. Toilet facilities were provided in the caves, and each man had sleeping privacy for his hammock was screened off. *They* took away our Far North Region uniforms and gave us flower-print loin cloths to wear. *They* immunized us against all possibility of sickness. I never knew any of the Hundred to become ill during the three years we were there. There was never a death, either. The Hundred that marched in all marched out again three years later.

Never once did we see our actual captors. Their word was passed down to us through an intermediate race, military men who acted as our jailers. Perhaps attendants would be a better word than jailers. In no sense were we in a jail. We were in a little ten-mile-long world of our own, but it wasn't like a jail at all. We were nurtured, cared for, looked after as if we were the rarest of rare animals. And it was a beauti-ful world of river and hills and flowers and fruits and sunny greenery.

We played at sports much of the time, a game of balls on a sanded court being the most favored contest. Twenty men could play at a time, one Ten against a rival Ten. We drew up a schedule and held a tournament; the Ten I was in became the world champions one year, but lost the next. We used to seine in the river, ten men manning the big nets they had given us. This was as much a sport as anything else. The prize for the seiners who netted the most fish was an extra little pipe of wine. We hunted, with knives made of flint, the deer and pigs that lived high up on the green benches, and this was the best sport of all. The meat thus secured, the white meat of fish, the pale meat of pig, and the red meat of deer, we turned over to the intermediates who attended us, and the meat was cooked for us and served to us.

The arts were encouraged. I myself took up painting, for I had always wanted to paint. *They* provided me with pigments, brushes, and lovely thin boards of hard white wood to paint on. When I asked for it, through the

intermediates, they provided me with a book of instructions on how the proper shading was done to delineate the eyes and muscles and breasts of the nude figure.

Many of the men wished to pursue sculpturing and model-ing and ceramy. *They* provided these men with the tools needed. Seven men from one of the Tens down the canyon erected a scaffolding against a bare rock wall and chiseled into the wall heroic-size statues of themselves standing there in different postures. They won the prize that year for art. One of my paintings was singled out for honorable mention. It was a nude I had done of Leaf. She had just caught a salamander, and in my painting she stands holding it with a look of fright on her face, and drops of water glisten on her skin. Oh, yes, *they* provided us with women. *They* con-sidered women as necessary to our well-being as food and exercise and wine and shelter. We named the girls after the pretty things around us. Thus I called mine Leaf and another man in our Ten named his Twig and another named his Petal. They were girls from another race, captive, too, of course, with skins lighter than ours. I remember how de-lighted the Hundred was when it learned, on the third day of our captivity, that there would be girls. We had a long frolic the night the girls arrived. We built a great fire on the sand that bordered the river, and *they* provided us with extra wine. The girls were given their own caves. We could visit them whenever we chose, visit whichever one we chose, provided she gave us entry.

We mated, in fact, as birds mate—for the week, for the month, for the season. One of the men of a Ten near ours sired eleven children during his three years of captivity.

Like hippos in a zoo, you know: the keepers give them the best care possible, and are happy when they breed. Or like pigs, perhaps. You have seen the feeding arrangements on pork farms. There will be so many troughs for so many pigs, and the pigs quickly learn to gather at the troughs at the stated feeding times. Of course, we were not fed at troughs; we were given our food in black and brown stone-ware bowls. Each Ten had its own feeding place, garitas we called them after their similarity to sentry boxes. They were gate-like places, ten of them, in the fence at the mouth of our canyon. It was just a wire mesh fence, but it was very high; the lianas had crawled all over it, concealing its steel meshes and making it look like an impenetrable barricade of green. Five stated times a day we of the Tens would gather at our own garitas and be served. Here is a typical menu, though the menu changed daily, and remember that the servings were quite small:

Breakfast: Fruit, cereal, egg, coffee.

First Lunch: One little sausage, roll, pickle.

Second Lunch: Soup (lentil or bean or pea], roll, tart, wine (red, one cup).

Dinner: Meat or fish or fowl, raw vegetable salad, wine (white, one cup).

Third Lunch (in the evening): Broth, three large olives, roll, beer (one large flagon).

Our daily schedule, though it varied every day, was some-thing like this:

Breakfast, then hunting in the hills or seining in the river.

First lunch, then group games where the Tens would vie against each other.

Second lunch, then a rest period which was usually de-voted to art (sculpturing, painting, wood carving, etc.).

Dinner, eaten together with the girls.

Third lunch, very late in the evening. We would be tired then and the girls would drift away up the canyon to their own caves.

Now, none of this was hard and fast. We could follow the daily schedule or disregard it. We could eat at the stated times, or we could miss the meals. We could spend the whole day sleeping, or playing with the girls, just as we chose. We could hunt the whole day or work the whole day on our art projects. There was no discipline, and there were no roll calls or inspections. But mostly we followed the routine. We referred to it as "the rut."

I found it necessary, after I had been there about fifteen months, to take long, solitary walks, which I usually did after Second Lunch. The canyon terraces and benches were laced with paths, little trailways under a constant canopy of green, moist little trailways full of bird sounds and fern odors and shadows. Even in all the three years I was there, I was never able to explore all the paths.

Once I followed one which led upward rather sharply, almost like stair steps, and then leveled off into a glade where there was an opening in the roof of greenery. In the glade was a mountain hillside pool fed by a waterfall which plunged over a cliff formed by the bench, above, the water frothing down through waving, spumid ferns. In the pool three of the girls, Twig, Nest and Vine, were playing, and they had three men with them. None wore anything, for they were playing in the water; the young men had long beards, for they had not shaved for nearly two years. A radiant fruit grew on vines near the pool; they were eating of it and throwing the seeds at each other. Lotos Land. On the hills like gods reclined. I hurried back to my cave and gathered up my painting things, and I coaxed Twig and Nest and Vine and the three youths to arrange themselves in a frieze there by the waterfall. And thus it was that I painted them, and I think I am the only man ever to have painted nymphs and satyrs in the flesh.

Another time I took another path. As always, it was a green path, moist and full of bird sounds and the odor of ferns. It led to a place which, because of the enormity of the trees which grew there and the spacing of their trunks, seemed like the interior of a cathedral. And there was a youth there from one of the other Tens. He had made a kind of table of green branches, and when I came upon him he was standing before it, and I heard him say, "I shall go up to the altar of God, to God the joy of my

youth." Then he saw me and he giggled. He giggled only a little, then began to weep. "I have taken the name of the Lord in vain. I have sinned," he said. He fled from there. I never saw him again.

We had no Sundays. Everyday was like another day. We never knew which day it was, but used to spend much time in aimless arguments over whether it was Monday or Thurs-day.

It was during one of those solitary walks toward the end of the second year that I came upon a man from one of the upper Tens. He had his girl with him. She was very beautiful. Neither wore anything, for by then all of us, men and girls alike, had given up clothing as a nuisance. He seemed to want to talk, so I stopped beside him. He was an older man, probably twenty-two or twenty-three.

"See these little roots," he said, indicating a cluster of them which thrust out from a crack in the cliff wall. "They look like tiny electric wires, don't they? I used to have a job with a telephone company, working with such wires. Each was a different color; the job was to match color to color and so complete the splicing accurately. It was a very tedious job and did not pay too much. But, you know, when it was done, and done properly, there was a satisfaction in it. A feeling that something had been accomplished."

"Well," I said, "I suppose you could do something of the sort here. You have only to let *them* know, and *they'*ll pro-vide you with wires and things."

"Here?" he cried. "Let *them* know? I'd cut my throat first." And he took the cigarette from my fingers and burnt his girl savagely with it on her shoulder.

During the third year, another man and myself decided to escape. We had examined the fence at the garita where we were fed and had discovered that its meshes were no more formidable than chicken wire. So our plan was simple enough. We would merely climb to the rim of the canyon where we assumed the fence stood and, with clubs made from dead tree limbs, batter our way through it. The reason we had never attempted to escape before was because up to that point we had rather enjoyed our captivity.

We started out after Second Lunch and after an hour's climbing had gotten up about five thousand feet, for the path we took was terribly steep. As we ascended the higher benches other paths crossed ours again and again, and on these paths there was a deer hunt in full cry, a hunt which started at the usual time after Breakfast but which because of the superb stamina of the particular deer being hunted had gone on far longer than the ordinary chase.

There in our canyon we hunted deer as the Tarahumara Indians of the barrancas of the Sierra Madre Occidental hunted them: We ran them down and cut their throats. On a hunting party we stationed ourselves at intervals along the terraces where the deer were found and whoever first started a deer would give a cry and take up the chase, and he would bound after the deer until he became winded. Then another of us, or two or three of us, would take up the chase in his stead, ever bounding, ever on the

deer's trail. The animal was never allowed to stop and rest, never allowed to stop and graze, never allowed to pause and drink, for once the chase was taken up it never halted until the deer was dead. And the deer itself would never halt until its lungs were full of blood and its hooves were torn and splintered from endless clawing and pounding over the rocks of the trails. The deer only halted and fell when it could run no longer, and when the deer fell the deadly relay was done.

So, as my companion and I climbed up the side of the canyon, we could hear the noise of the chase, the pounding of the deer's hooves, the cries of its pursuers. And from far down in the canyon from the ball courts along the river we could hear the shouts of the players as one Ten vied against another Ten in another of their interminable games. Then at times the noise of the chase would fade away as quarry and hunters swept far up the canyon on some curving path, and the shouts from the playing courts would die out after a score was made, and then all we could hear would be the bird sounds in the canyon's greenery and the sounds of the great ferns as the wind stirred them.

By afternoon we thought we should have reached the canyon's finite rim where we assumed the fence would be, but the benches and terraces still reared above us. The chase continued on the paths and trails around us; we wondered how one deer could hold out so long against that pack of human wolves.

And then we did reach the rim of the canyon, and we looked down, and the canyon was a long winding slash of green with a thin white streak through its center—the river and its sanded sides. We also found the fence. It was not formidable at all; it was neither very high nor very strong. There was no point in making clubs and battering a hole in it, for the fence had a gate in it and the gate was unlocked..

As we examined the gate the sound of the chase arose again; it was coming toward us along a path that bordered the inner side of the fence. We were so high now that we could no longer hear the sounds of the players down on the sands. My companion and I looked at each other, and we nodded in agreement. We opened the gate of the fence and when the deer came bounding along the trail we leaped in front of him and startled him, and with a bound he went through the gate to freedom. He was a great, gray stag, the biggest we had ever seen; his sides were heaving, and his horns were streaming with fronds of fern.

We closed the gate and went down the trail and halted the three young men who, with flint knives in their hands, had been pursuing him. We told them what we had done. "So there's a gate up there?" one of them said. "Could we all go through it—like the big buck did?"

"Certainly," we said.

"But what's on the other side?" he asked.

"Nothing," we said. "Just more greenery, more mountains. It's better on this side."

So they threw away their knives and joined my companion and me as we began our descent into the canyon.

During the third year animosities arose; fighting between the Tens and the individuals of the Tens was monotonously frequent. But, although there was no ordinance against it, none of us killed another. "Thou shalt not murder" was the only law we obeyed, but none of us could explain why we did so. Certainly *they* had never so ordered us; *they* never gave us any orders in any form at all. But as a troop of monkeys in trees operates without formal rules or laws to guide it, yet, nevertheless, observes certain taboos, so did we. There were many flare-ups over many things: scoring on the playing field, minor pilferings, suspected insults; and there were many, many fights over the girls, some of whom were prettier than the others. But none of the fights ever ended in murder. There seemed to be some agreement among us that One Hundred had marched into imprisonment and One Hundred would some day march out. So we beat and clawed and cursed each other, and sometimes we cut each other with flint knives, but never did we kill each other. I think that was our only pride.

For we could take no pride in anything else. When we had marched in we were civilized; at least we had the veneer of civilization. There were certain things we would do and certain things we would not do. We obediently wore the loin cloths they had given us. We obediently said our prayers at night. But with no discipline over us, with no restrictions upon us, with no necessity for doing anything, with no ani-mal desire left unfulfilled, we became as animals. We threw away our loin cloths and stopped saying our prayers.

You might say there was a price attached to all this. And there was. Our captivity ended exactly on the hour when the three years were up. One hundred men had marched into it; one hundred men marched out. We had marched in as one group, but we marched out as two. The first fifty of us to march out were those who had somehow survived. The second fifty were those who had gone mad.

Those who in good weather have searched the horizon for distant specks which might be ships or planes are familiar with the curious fact that such specks are more easily seen from the corner of the eye than looked at straight on. A phenomenon Cordwainer Smith here exploits, in the lit-erary sense, in seeking a glimpse of a future world, and cer-tain enduring human values...

ALPHA RALPHA BOULEVARD

by Cordwainer Smith

We were drunk with happiness in those early years. Every-body was, especially the young people. These were the first years of the Rediscovery

of Man, when the Instrumentality dug deep in the treasury, reconstructing the old cultures, the old languages, and even the old troubles. The nightmare of perfection had taken our forefathers to the edge of suicide. Now under the leadership of the Lord Jestocost and the Lady Alice More, the ancient civilizations were rising like great land masses out of the sea of the past.

I myself was the first man to put a postage stamp on a letter, after sixteen thousand years. I took Virginia to hear the first piano recital. We watched at the eye-machine when cholera was released in Tasmania, and we saw the Tasmanians dancing in the streets, now that they did not have to be protected any more. Everywhere, things became exciting. Everywhere, men and women worked with a wild will to build a more imperfect world.

I myself went into a hospital and came out French. Of course I remembered my early life; I remembered it, but it did not matter. Virginia was French, too, and we had the years of our future lying ahead of us like ripe fruit hanging in an orchard of perpetual summers. We had no idea when we would die. Formerly, I would be able to go to bed and think, "The government has given me four hundred years. Three hundred and seventy-four years from now, they will stop the stroon injections and I will then die." Now I knew anything could happen. The safety devices had been turned off. The diseases ran free. With luck, and hope, and love, I might live a thousand years. Or I might die tomorrow. I was free.

We revelled in every moment of the day.

Virginia and I bought the first French newspaper to appear since the Most Ancient World fell. We found delight in the news, even in the advertisements. Some parts of the culture were hard to reconstruct. It was difficult to talk about foods of which only the names survived, but the homunculi and the machines, working tirelessly in Downdeepdowndeep, kept the surface of the world filled with enough novelties to fill anyone's heart with hope. We knew that all of this was make-believe, and yet it was not. We knew that when the diseases had killed the statistically correct number of people, they would be turned off; when the accident rate rose too high, it would stop without our knowing why. We knew that over us all, the Instrumentality watched. We had confidence that the Lord Jestocost and the Lady Alice More would play with us as friends and not use us as victims of a game.

Take, for example, Virginia. She had been called Menerima, which represented the coded sounds of her birth num-ber. She was small, verging on chubby; she was compact; her head was covered with tight brown curls; her eyes were a brown so deep and so rich that it took sunlight, with her squinting against it, to bring forth the treasures of her irises. I had known her well, but never known her. I had seen her often, but never seen her with my heart, until we met just outside the hospital, after becoming French.

I was pleased to see an old friend and started to speak in the Old Common Tongue, but the words jammed, and as I
tried to speak it was not Menerima any longer, but someone of ancient

beauty, rare and strange—someone who had wan-dered into these latter days from the treasure worlds of time past. All I could do was to stammer: "What do you call yourself now?" And I said it in ancient French.

She answered in the same language, "Je m'appelle Virginie."

Looking at her and falling in love was a single process. There was something strong, something wild in her, wrapped and hidden by the tenderness and youth of her girlish body. It was as though destiny spoke to me out of the certain brown eyes, eyes which questioned me surely and wonderingly, just as we both questioned the fresh new world which lay about us.

"May I?" said I, offering her my arm, as I had learned in the hours of hypnopedia. She took my arm and we walked away from the hospital.

I hummed a tune which had come into my mind, along with the ancient French language.

She tugged gently on my arm, and smiled up at me.

"What is it," she asked, "or don't you know?"

The words came soft and unbidden to my lips and I sang it very quietly, muting my voice in her curly hair, half-sing-ing half-whispering the popular song which had poured into my mind with all the other things which the Rediscovery of Man had given me:

She wasn't the woman I went to seek.
I met her by the merest chance.
She did not speak the French of France,
But the surded French of Martinique.

She wasn't rich. She wasn't chic.
She had a most entrancing glance,
And that was all...

Suddenly I ran out of words, "I seem to have forgotten the rest of it. It's called 'Macouba' and it has something to do with a wonderful island which the ancient French called Martinique."

"I know where that is," she cried. She had been given the same memories that I had. "You can see it from Earthport!"

This was a sudden return to the world we had known. Earthport stood on its single pedestal, twelve miles high, at the eastern edge of the small continent. At the top of it, the Lords worked amid machines which had no meaning any more. There the ships whispered their way in from the stars. I had seen pictures of it, but I had never been there. As a matter of fact, I had never known anyone who had actually been up Earthport. Why should we have gone? We might not have been welcome, and we could always see it just as well through the pictures on the eye-machine. For Menerima—familiar, dully pleasant, dear little Menerima—to have gone

there was uncanny. It made me think that in the Old Perfect World things had not been as plain or forthright as they seemed.

Virginia, the new Menerima, tried to speak in the Old Common Tongue, but she gave up and used French instead: "My aunt," she said, meaning a kindred lady, since no one had had aunts for thousands of years, "was a Believer. She took me to the Abba-dingo. To get holiness and luck."

The old me was a little shocked; the French me was dis-quieted by the fact that this girl had done something unusual even before mankind itself turned to the unusual. The Abba-dingo was a long-obsolete computer set part way up the column of Earthport. The homunculi treated it as a god, and occasionally people went to it. To do so was tedious and vul-gar.

Or had been. Till all things became new again.

Keeping the annoyance out of my voice, I asked her: "What was it like?"

She laughed lightly, yet there was a trill to her laughter which gave me a shiver. If the old Menerima had had secrets, what might the new Virginia do? I almost hated the fate which made me love her, which made me feel that the touch of her hand on my arm was a link between me and time—forever.

She smiled at me instead of answering my question. The surfaceway was under repair; we followed a ramp down to the level of the top underground, where it was legal for true persons and hominids and homunculi to walk.

I did not like the feeling; I had never gone more than twenty minutes' trip from my birthplace. This ramp looked safe enough. There were few hominids around these days, men from the stars who (though of true human stock) had been changed to fit the conditions of a thousand worlds. The homunculi were morally repulsive, though many of them looked like very handsome people; bred from animals into the shape of men, they took over the tedious chores of work-ing with machines where no real man would wish to go. It was whispered that some of them had even bred with actual people, and I would not want my Virginia to be exposed to the presence of such a creature.

She had been holding my arm. When we walked down the ramp to the busy passage, I slipped my arm free and put it over her shoulders, drawing her closer to me. It was light enough, bright enough to be clearer than the daylight which we had left behind, but it was strange and full of danger. In the old days, I would have turned around and gone home rather than to expose myself to the presence of such dreadful beings. At this time, in this moment, I could not bear to part from my new-found love, and I was afraid that if I went back to my own apartment in the tower, she might go to hers. Anyhow, being French gave a spice to danger.

Actually, the people in the traffic looked commonplace enough. There were many busy machines, some in human forms and some not. I did not see a single hominid. Other people, whom I knew to be homunculi because they yielded the right of way to us, looked no different from the real human

beings on the surface. A brilliantly beautiful girl gave me a look which I did not like—saucy, intelligent, pro-vocative beyond all limits of flirtation. I suspected her of being a dog by origin. Among the hominids, d'persons are the ones most apt to take liberties. They even have a dog-man philosopher who once produced a tape arguing that since dogs are the most ancient of men's allies, they have the right to be closer to man than any other form of life. When I saw the tape, I thought it amusing that a dog should be bred into the form of a Socrates; here, in the top underground, I was not so sure at all. What would I do if one of them be-came insolent? Kill him? That meant a brush with the law and a talk with the Subcommissioners of the Instrumen-tality.

Virginia noticed none of this.

She had not answered my question, but was asking me questions about the top underground instead. I had been there only once before, when I was small, but it was flatter-ing to have her wondering, husky voice murmuring in my ear.

Then it happened.

At first I thought he was a man, foreshortened by some trick of the underground light. When he isame closer, I saw that it was not. He must have been five feet across the shoulders. Ugly red scars on his forehead showed where the horns had been dug out of his skull. He was a homunculus, obviously derived from cattle stock. Frankly, I had never known that they left them that ill-formed.

And he was drunk.

As he came closer I could pick up the buzz of his mind. "...they're not people, they're not hominids, and they're not Us—what are they doing here? The words they think confuse me." He had never telepathed French before.

This was bad. For him to talk was common enough, but only a few of the homunculi were telepathic—those with special jobs, such as in the Downdeep-downdeep, where only telepathy could relay instructions.

Virginia clung to me.

Thought I, in clear Common Tongue: "True men are we. You must let us pass."

There was no answer, but a roar. I do not know where he got drunk, or on what, but he did not get my message. I could see his thoughts forming up into panic, helpless-ness, hate. Then he charged, almost dancing toward us, as though he could crush our bodies.

My mind focussed and I threw the stop order at him.

It did not work.

Horror-stricken, I realized that I had thought French at him.

Virginia screamed.

The bull-man was upon us.

At the last moment he swerved, passed us blindly, and let out a roar which filled the enormous passage. He had raced beyond us.

Still holding Virginia, I turned around to see what had made him pass us.

What I beheld was odd in the extreme.

Our figures ran down the corridor away from us—my black-purple cloak flying in the still air as my image ran, Virginia's golden dress swimming out behind her as she ran with me. The images were perfect and the bull-man pursued them.

I stared around in bewilderment. We had been told that the safeguards no longer protected us.

A girl stood quietly next to the wall. I had almost mistaken her for a statue. Then she spoke. "Come no closer. I am a cat. It was easy enough to fool him. You had better get back to the surface."

"Thank you," I said, "thank you. What is your name?"

"Does it matter?" said the girl. "I'm not a person."

A little offended, I insisted, "I just wanted to thank you." As I spoke to her I saw that she was as beautiful and as bright as a flame. Her skin was clear, the color of cream, and her hair—finer than any human hair could possibly be—was the wild golden orange of a Persian cat.

"I'm C'mell," said the girl, "and I work at Earthport."

That stopped both Virginia and me. Cat-people were be-low us, and should be shunned, but Earthport was above us, and had to be respected. Which was C'mell?

She smiled, and her smile was better suited for my eyes than for Virginia's. It spoke a whole world of voluptuous knowledge. I knew she wasn't trying to do anything to me; the rest of her manner showed that. Perhaps it was the only smile she knew.

"Don't worry," she said, "about the formalities. You'd bet-ter take these steps here. I hear him coming back."

I spun around, looking for the drunken bull-man. He was not to be seen.

"Go up here," urged C'mell. "They are emergency steps and you will be back on the surface. I can keep him from following. Was that French you were speaking?"

"Yes," said I. "How did you—?"

"Get along," she said. "Sorry I asked. Hurry!"

I entered the small door. A spiral staircase went to the surface. It was below our dignity as true people to use steps, but with C'mell urging me, there was nothing else I could do. I nodded goodbye to C'mell and drew Virginia after me up the stairs.

At the surface we stopped.

Virginia gasped, "Wasn't it horrible?"

"We're safe now," said I.

"It's not safety," she said. "It's the dirtiness of it. Imagine having to talk to her!"

Virginia meant that C'mell was worse than the drunken bull-man. She sensed my reserve because she said, "The sad thing is, you'll see her again..."

"What! How do you know that?"

"I don't know it," said Virginia. "I guess it. But I guess good, very good. After all, I went to the Abba-dingo."

"I asked you, darling, to tell me what happened there."

She shook her head mutely and began walking down the streetway. I had no choice but to follow her. It made me a
little irritable.

I asked again, more crossly, "What was it like?"

With hurt, girlish dignity she said, "Nothing, nothing. It was a long climb. The old woman made me go with her. It turned out that the machine was not talking that day anyhow, so we got permission to drop down a shaft and to come back on the rolling road. It was just a wasted day."

She had been talking straight ahead, not to me, as though the memory were a little ugly.

Then she turned her face to me. The brown eyes looked into my eyes as though she were searching for my soul. (Soul. There's a word we have in French, and there is noth-ing quite like it in the Old Common Tongue.) She bright-ened and pleaded with me: "Let's not be dull on the new day. Let's be good to the new us, Paul. Let's do something really French, if that's what we are to be."

"A cafe," I cried. "We need a cafe. And I know where one is."

"Where?"

"Two undergrounds over. Where the machines come out and where you can see the homunculi peering over the edge." The thought of homunculi peering out struck the new-me as funny, though the old-me had taken them as much for granted as clouds or windows or tables. Of course homun-culi had feelings; they weren't exactly people, since they were bred from animals, but they looked just about like peo-ple, and they could talk. It took a Frenchman like the new-me to realize that those things were picturesque. More than picturesque: romantic.

Evidently Virginia thought the same, for she said, "But they're *nette*, just adorable. And what is the cafe called?"

"The Greasy Cat," said I.

The Greasy Cat. How was I to know that this led to a nightmare between high waters, and to the winds which cried? How was I to suppose that this had anything to do with Alpha Ralpha Boulevard?

No force in the world could have taken me there, if I had known.

Other new-French people had gotten to the cafe before us.

A waiter with a big brown moustache took our order. I looked closely at him to see if he might be a licensed homunculus, allowed to work among people because his services were indispensable; but he was not. He was pure machine, though his voice rang out with old-Parisian heartiness, and the designers had even built into him the nervous old habit of mopping the back of his hand against his big mous-tache, and had fixed him so that little beads of sweat showed high up on his brow, just below the hairline.

"Mamselle? M'sieu? Beer? Coffee? Red wine next month. The sun will shine in the quarter after the hour and after the half hour. At twenty minutes to the hour it will rain for five minutes so that you can enjoy these umbrellas. I am a native of Alsace. You may speak French or German to me."

"Anything," said Virginia. "You decide, Paul."

"Beer, please," said I. "Blonde beer for both of us."

"But certainly, m'sieu," said the waiter. He left, waving his cloth wildly over his arm.

Virginia puckered up her eyes against the sun and said, "I wish it would rain now. I've never seen real rain."

"Be patient, honey."

She turned earnestly to me. "What is 'German,' Paul?"

"Another language, another culture. I read they will bring it to life next year. But don't you like being French?"

"I like it fine," she said. "Much better than being a num-ber. But Paul—" And then she stopped, her eyes blurred with perplexity.

"Yes, darling?"

"Paul," she said, and the statement of my name was a cry of hope from some depth of her mind beyond new-me, beyond old-me, beyond even the contrivances of the Lords who moulded us. I reached for her hand.

Said I, "You can tell me, darling."

"Paul," she said, and it was almost weeping, "Paul, why does it all happen so fast? This is our first day, and we both feel that we may spend the rest of our lives together. There's something about marriage, whatever that is, and we're sup-posed to find a priest, and I don't understand that, either. Paul, Paul, Paul, why does it happen so fast? I want to love you. I do love you. But I don't want to be made to love you. I want it to be to the real me," and as she spoke, tears poured from her eyes though her voice remained steady enough.

Then it was that I said the wrong thing. "You don't have to worry, honey. I'm sure that the Lords of the Instrumentality have programmed everything well."

At that, she burst into tears, loudly and uncontrollably. I had never seen an adult weep before. It was strange and frightening.

A man from the next table came over and stood beside me, but I did not so much as glance at him.

"Darling," said I, reasonably, "darling, we can work it out—"

"Paul, let me leave you, so that I may be yours. Let me go away for a few days or a few weeks or a few years. Then, if—if—if I *do* come back, you'll know it's me and not some program ordered by a machine. For God's sake, Paul—for God's sake!" In a different voice she said, "What is God, Paul? They gave us the words to speak, but I do not know what they mean."

The man beside me spoke. "I can take you to God," he said.

"Who are you?" said I. "And who asked you to interfere?" This was not the kind of language that we had ever used when speaking the Old Common Tongue—when they had given us a new language they had built in temperament as well.

The stranger kept his politeness—he was as French as we but he kept his temper well.

"My name," he said, "is Maximilien Macht, and I used to be a Believer."

Virginia's eyes lit up. She wiped her face absent-mindedly while staring at the man. He was tall, lean, sunburned. (How could he have gotten

sunburned so soon?) He had reddish hair and a moustache almost like that of the robot waiter.

"You asked about God, Mamselle," said the stranger. "God is where He has always been—around us, near us, in us."

This was strange talk from a man who looked worldly. I rose to my feet to bid him goodbye. Virginia guessed what I was doing and she said: "That's nice of you, Paul. Give him a chair." There was warmth in her voice.

The machine waiter came back with two conical beakers made of glass. They had a golden fluid in them with a cap of foam on top. I had never seen or heard of beer before, but I knew exactly how it would taste. I put imaginary money in the tray, received imaginary change, paid the waiter an imaginary tip. The Instrumentality had not yet figured out how to have separate kinds of money for all the new cultures, and of course you could not use real money to pay for food or drink. Food and drink are free.

The machine wiped his moustache, used his serviette (checked red and white) to dab the sweat off his brow, and then looked inquiringly at Monsieur Macht.

"M'sieu, you will sit here?"

"Indeed," said Macht.

"Shall I serve you here?"

"But why not?" said Macht. "If these good people permit."

"Very well," said the machine, wiping his moustache with the back of his hand. He fled to the dark recesses of the bar.

All this time Virginia had not taken her eyes off Macht. "You are a Believer?" she asked. "You are still a Believer, when you have been made French like us? How do you know you're you? Why do I love Paul? Are the Lords and their machines controlling everything in us? I want to be *me*. Do you know how to be *me*?"

"Not you, Mamselle," said Macht, "that would be too great an honor. But I am learning how to be myself. You see," he added, turning to me, "I have been French for two weeks now, and I know how much of me is myself, and how much has been added by this new process of giving us language and danger again."

The waiter came back with a small beaker. It stood on a stem, so that it looked like an evil little miniature of Earthport. The fluid it contained was milky white.

Macht lifted his glass to us. "Your health!"

Virginia stared at him as if she were going to cry again. When he and I sipped, she blew her nose and put her handkerchief away. It was the first

time I had ever seen a person perform that act of blowing the nose, but it seemed to go well with our new culture.

Macht smiled at both of us, as if he were going to begin a speech. The sun came out, right on time. It gave him a halo, and made him look like a devil or a saint.

But it was Virginia who spoke first. "You have been there?"

Macht raised his eyebrows a little, frowned, and said, "Yes," very quietly.

"Did you get a word?" she persisted.

"Yes." He looked glum, and a little troubled.

"What did it say?"

For answer, he shook his head at her, as if there were things which should never be mentioned in public.

I wanted to break in, to find out what this was all about.

Virginia went on, heeding me not at all: "But it did say something!"

"Yes," said Macht.

"Was it important?"

"Mamselle, let us not talk about it."

"We must," she cried. "It's life or death." Her hands were clenched so tightly together that her knuckles showed white. Her beer stood in front of her, untouched, growing warm in the sunlight.

"Very well," said Macht, "you may ask ... I cannot guarantee to answer."

I controlled myself no longer. "What's all this about?"

Virginia looked at me with scorn, but even her scorn was the scorn of a lover, not the cold remoteness of the past.
"Please, Paul, you wouldn't know. Wait a while. What did it say to you, M'sieu Macht?"

"That I, Maximilien Macht, would live or die with a brown-haired girl who was already betrothed." He smiled wrily. "And I do not even quite know what 'betrothed' means."

"We'll find out," said Virginia. "When did it say this?"

"Who is 'it'?" I shouted at them. "For God's sake, what is this all about?"

Macht looked at me and dropped his voice when he spoke: "The Abba-dingo." To her he said, "Last week."

Virginia turned white. "So it does work, it does, it does. Paul, darling, it said nothing to me. But it said to my aunt something which I can't ever forget!"

I held her arm firmly and tenderly and tried to look into her eyes, but she looked away. Said I, "What did it say?"

"Paul and Virginia."

"So what?" said I.

I scarcely knew her. Her lips were tense and compressed. She was not angry. It was something different, worse. She was in the grip of tension. I suppose we had not seen that for thousands of years, either. "Paul, seize this simple fact, if you can grasp it. The machine gave that woman our names—but it gave them to her twelve years ago."

Macht stood up so suddenly that his chair fell over, and the waiter began running toward us.

"That settles it," he said. "We're all going back."

"Going where?" I said.

"To the Abba-dingo."

"But why now?" said I; and, "Will it work?" said Vir-ginia, both at the same time.

"It always works," said Macht, "if you go on the northern side."

"How do you get there?" said Virginia.

Macht frowned sadly. "There's only one way. By Alpha Ralpha Boulevard." Virginia stood up. And so did I.

Then, as I rose, I remembered. Alpha Ralpha Boulevard. It was a ruined street hanging in the sky, faint as a vapor trail. It had been a processional highway once, where con-querors came down and tribute went up. But it was ruined, lost in the clouds, closed to mankind for a hundred centuries.

"I know it," said I. "It's ruined."

Macht said nothing, but he stared at me as if I were an outsider...

Virginia, very quiet and white of countenance, said, "Come along."

"But why?" said I. "Why?"

"You fool," she said, "if we don't have a God, at least we have a machine. This is the only thing left on or off the world which the Instrumentality doesn't understand. Maybe it tells the future. Maybe it's an un-machine. It

certainly comes from a different time. Can't you see it, darling? If it says we're us, we're us."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we're not." Her face was sullen with grief.

"What do you mean?"

"If we're not us," she said, "we're just toys, dolls, puppets that the Lords have written on. You're not you and I'm not me. But if the Abba-dingo, which knew the names Paul and Virginia twelve years before it happened—if the Abba-dingo says that we are us, I don't care if it's a predicting machine or a god or a devil or a what. I don't care, but I'll have the truth."

What could I have answered to that? Macht led, she fol-lowed, and I walked third in single file. We left the sunlight of The Greasy Cat; just as we left, a light rain began to fall. The waiter, looking momentarily like the machine that he was, stared straight ahead. We crossed the lip of the underground and went down to the fast expressway.

When we came out, we were in a region of fine homes. All were in ruins. The trees had thrust their way into the buildings. Flowers rioted across the lawn, through the open doors, and blazed in the roofless rooms. Who needed a house in the open, when the population of Earth had dropped so that the cities were commodious and empty?

Once I thought I saw a family of homunculi, including little ones, peering at me as we trudged along the soft gravel road. Maybe the faces I had seen at the edge of the house were fantasies.

Macht said nothing.

Virginia and I held hands as we walked beside him. I could have been happy at this odd excursion, but her hand was tightly clenched in mine. She bit her lower lip from time to time. I knew it mattered to her—she was on a pilgrimage. (A pilgrimage was an ancient walk to some powerful place, very good for body and soul.) I didn't mind going along. In fact, they could not have kept me from coming, once she and Macht decided to leave the cafe. But I didn't have to take it seriously. Did I?

What did Macht want?

Who was Macht? What thoughts had that mind learned in two short weeks? How had he preceded us into a new world of danger and adventure? I did not trust him. For the first time in my life I felt alone. Always, always, up to now, I had only to think about the Instrumentality and some protector leaped fully-armed into my mind. Telepathy guard-ed against all dangers, healed all hurts, carried each of us forward to the one hundred and forty-six thousand and ninety-seven days which had been allotted us. Now it was different. I did not know this man, and it was on him that I relied, not on the powers which had shielded and protected us.

We turned from the ruined road into an immense boule-vard. The pavement was so smooth and unbroken that noth-ing grew on it, save where the wind and dust had deposited random little pockets of earth.

Macht stopped. "This is it," he said. "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard."

We fell silent and looked at the causeway of forgotten empires.

To our left the boulevard disappeared in a gentle curve. It led far north of the city in which I had been reared. I knew that there was another city to the north, but I had forgotten its name. Why should I have remembered it? It was sure to be just like my own. But to the right—To the right the boulevard rose sharply, like a ramp. It disappeared into the clouds. Just at the edge of the cloud-line there was a hint of disaster. I could not see for sure, but it looked to me as though the whole boulevard had been sheared off by unimaginable forces. Somewhere beyond the clouds there stood the Abba-dingo, the place where all questions were answered...

Or so they thought.

Virginia cuddled close to me.

"Let's turn back," said I. "We are city people. We don't know anything about ruins."

"You can if you want to," said Macht. "I was just trying to do you a favor."

We both looked at Virginia.

She looked up at me with those brown eyes. From the eyes there came a plea older than woman or man, older than the human race. I knew what she was going to say be-fore she said it. She was going to say that she had to know.

Macht was idly crushing some soft rocks near his foot.

At last Virginia spoke up: "Paul, I don't want danger for its own sake. But I meant what I said back there. Isn't there a chance that we were *told* to love each other? What sort of a life would it be if our happiness, our own selves, depended on a thread in a machine or on a mechanical voice which spoke to us when we were asleep and learning French? It may be fun to go back to the old world. I guess it is. I know that you give me a land of happiness which I never even suspected before this day. If it's really us, we have some-thing wonderful, and we ought to know it. But if it isn't—" She burst into sobs.

I wanted to say, "If it isn't, it will seem just the same," but the ominous sulky face of Macht looked at me over Virginia's shoulder as I drew her to me. There was nothing to say.

I held her close.

From beneath Macht's foot there flowed a trickle of blood. The dust drank it

up.

"Macht," said I, "are you hurt?"

Virginia turned around, too.

Macht raised his eyebrows at me and said with uncon-cern, "No. Why?"

"The blood. At your feet."

He glanced down. "Oh, those," he said, "they're nothing. Just the eggs of some kind of an un-bird which does not even fly."

"Stop it!" I shouted telepathically, using the Old Common Tongue. I did not even try to think in our new-learned French.

He stepped back a pace in surprise.

Out of nothing there came to me a message: thankyou thankyou goodgreat gohomeplease thankyou goodgreat goaway manbad manbad manbad ... Somewhere an animal or bird was warning me against Macht. I thought a casual thanks to it and turned my attention to Macht.

He and I stared at each other. Was this what culture was? Were we now men? Did freedom always include the freedom to mistrust, to fear, to hate?

I liked him not at all. The words of forgotten crimes came into my mind: assassination, murder, abduction, insanity, rape, robbery...

We had known none of these things and yet I felt them all.

He spoke evenly to me. We had both been careful to guard our minds against being read telepathically, so that our only means of communication were empathy and French. "It's your idea," he said, most untruthfully, "or at least your lady's..."

"Has lying already come into the world," said I, "so that we walk into the clouds for no reason at all?"

"There is a reason," said Macht.

I pushed Virginia gently aside and capped my mind so tightly that the anti-telepathy felt like a headache.

"Macht," said I, and I myself could hear the snarl of an animal in my own voice, "tell me why you have brought us here or I will kill you."

He did not retreat. He faced me, ready for a fight. He said, "Kill? You mean, to make me dead?" but his words did not carry conviction. Neither one of us knew how to fight, but he readied for defense and I for attack.

Underneath my thought shield an animal thought crept in: goodman goodman take him by the neck no-air he-aah no-air he-aaah like broken

egg...

I took the advice without worrying where it came from. It was simple. I walked over to Macht, reached my hands around his throat and squeezed. He tried to push my hands away. Then he tried to kick me. All I did was hang on to his throat. If I had been a lord or a go-captain, I might have known about fighting. But I did not, and neither did he.
It ended when a sudden weight dragged at my hands. Out of surprise, I let go.

Macht had become unconscious. Was that *dead*? It could not have been, because he sat up. Virginia ran to him. He rubbed his throat and said with a rough voice: "You should not have done that."

This gave me courage. "Tell me," I spat at him, "tell me why you wanted us to come, or I will do it again."

Macht grinned weakly. He leaned his head against Vir-ginia's arm. "It's fear," he said. "Fear."

"Fear?" I knew the word—*peur*—but not the meaning. Was it some kind of disquiet or animal alarm?

I had been thinking with my mind open; he thought back yes.

"But why do you like it?" I asked.

It is delicious, he thought. *It makes me sick and thrilly and alive. It is like strong medicine, almost as good as stroon. I went there before. High up, I had much fear. It was won-derful and bad and good, all at the same time. I lived a thousand years in a single hour. I wanted more of it, but I thought it would be even more exciting with other people.*

"Now I will kill you," said I in French. "You are very-very..." I had to look for the word. "You are very evil."

"No," said Virginia, "let him talk."

He thought at me, not bothering with words. *This is what the Lords of the Instrumentality never let us have. Fear.*
Reality. We were born in a stupor and we died in a dream. Even the underpeople, the animals, had more life than we did. The machines did not have fear. That's what we were. Machines who thought they were men. And now we are free.

He saw the edge of raw red anger in my mind, and he changed the subject. *I did not lie to you. This is the way to the Abba-dingo. I have been there. It works. On this side, it always works.*

"It works," cried Virginia. "You see he says so. It works! He is telling the truth. Oh, Paul, do let's go on!"

"All right," said I, "we'll go."

I helped him rise. He looked embarrassed, like a man who has shown something of which he is ashamed.

We walked onto the surface of the indestructible boule-vard. It was comfortable to the feet.

At the bottom of my mind the little unseen bird or ani-mal babbled its thoughts at me: goodman goodman make him dead take water take water...

I paid no attention as I walked forward with her and him, Virginia between us. I paid no attention.

I wish I had.

We walked for a long time.

The process was new to us. There was something exhila-rating in knowing that no one guarded us, that the air was free air, moving without benefit of weather machines. We saw many birds, and when I thought at them I found their minds startled and opaque; they were natural birds, the like of which I had never seen before. Virginia asked me their names, and I outrageously applied all the bird-names which we had learned in French without knowing whether they were historically right or not.

Maximilien Macht cheered up, too, and he even sang us a song, rather off key, to the effect that we would take the high road and he the low one, but that he would be in Scotland before us. It did not make sense, but the lilt was pleasant. Whenever he got a certain distance ahead of Virginia and me, I made up variations on "Macouba" and sang-whispered the phrases into her pretty ear.

She wasn't the woman I went to seek.
I met her by the merest chance.
She did not speak the French of France,
But the surded French of Martinique.

We were happy in adventure and freedom, until we became hungry. Then our troubles began.

Virginia stepped up to a lamppost, struck it lightly with her fist and said, "Feed me." The post should either have opened, serving us a dinner, or else told us where, within the next few hundred yards, food was to be had. It did neither. It did nothing. It must have been broken.

With that, we began to make a game of hitting every single post.

Alpha Ralpha Boulevard had risen about half a kilometer above the surrounding countryside. The wild birds wheeled below us. There was less dust on the pavement, and fewer patches of weeds. The immense road, with no pylons below it, curved like an unsupported ribbon into the clouds.

We wearied of beating posts and there was neither food nor water.

Virginia became fretful: "It won't do any good to go back now. Food is even further the other way. I do wish you'd brought something."

How should I have thought to carry food? Who ever car-ries food? Why would they carry it, when it is everywhere? My darling was unreasonable, but she was my darling and I loved her all the more for the sweet imperfections of her temper.

Macht kept tapping pillars, partly to keep out of our fight, and obtained an unexpected result.

At one moment I saw him leaning over to give the pillar of a large lamp the usual hearty but guarded whop—in the next instant he yelped like a dog and was sliding uphill at a high rate of speed. I heard him shout something, but could not make out the words, before he disappeared into the clouds ahead.

Virginia looked at me. "Do you want to go back now? Macht is gone. We can say that I got tired."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course, darling."

I laughed, a little angrily. She had insisted that we come, and now she was ready to turn around and give it up, just to please me.

"Never mind," said I. "It can't be far now. Let's go on."

"Paul..." She stood close to me. Her brown eyes were troubled, as though she were trying to see all the way into my mind through my eyes. I thought to her. *Do you want to talk this way?*

"No," she said in French. "I want to say things one at a time. Paul, I do want to go to the Abba-dingo. I need to go. It's the biggest need in my life. But at the same time I don't want to go. There is something wrong up there. I would rather have you on the wrong terms than not have you at all. Something could happen."

Edgily, I demanded, "Are you getting this 'fear' that Macht was talking about?"

"Oh, no, Paul, not at all. This feeling isn't exciting. It feels like something broken in a machine—"

"Listen!" I interrupted her.

From far ahead, from within the clouds, there came a sound like an animal wailing. There were words in it. It must have been Macht. I thought I heard "take care." When I sought him with my mind, the distance made circles and I got dizzy.

"Let's follow, darling," said I.

"Yes, Paul," said she, and in her voice there was an un-fathomable mixture of happiness, resignation, and despair...

Before we moved on, I looked carefully at her. She was my girl. The sky had turned yellow and the lights were not yet on. In the yellow rich sky her brown curls were tinted with gold, her brown eyes approached the black in their irises, her young and fate-haunted face seemed more mean-ingful than any other human face I had ever seen.

"You are mine," I said.

"Yes, Paul," she answered me and then smiled brightly. "You said it! That is doubly nice."

A bird on the railing looked sharply at us and then left. Perhaps he did not approve of human nonsense, so flung himself downward into dark air. I saw him catch himself, far below, and ride lazily on his wings.

"We're not as free as birds, darling," I told Virginia, "but we are freer than people have been for a hundred centuries."

For answer she hugged my arm and smiled at me.

"And now," I added, "to follow Macht. Put your arms around me and hold me tight. I'll try hitting that post. If we don't get dinner we may get a ride."

I felt her take hold tightly and then I struck the post.

Which post? An instant later the posts were sailing by us in a blur. The ground beneath our feet seemed steady, but we were moving at a fast rate. Even in the service under-ground I had never seen a roadway as fast as this. Vir-ginia's dress was blowing so hard that it made snapping sounds like the snap of fingers. In no time at all we were in the cloud and out of it again.

A new world surrounded us. The clouds lay below and above. Here and there blue sky shone through. We were steady. The ancient engineers must have devised the walk-way cleverly. We rode up, up, up without getting dizzy.

Another cloud.

Then things happened so fast that the telling of them takes longer than the event.

Something dark rushed at me from up ahead. A violent blow hit me in the chest. Only much later did I realize that this was Macht's arm trying to grab me before we went over the edge. Then we went into another cloud. Before I could even speak to Virginia a second blow struck me. The pain was terrible. I had never felt anything like that in all my life. For some reason,

Virginia had fallen over me and beyond me. She was pulling at my hands.

I tried to tell her to stop pulling me, because it hurt, but I had no breath. Rather than argue, I tried to do what she wanted. I struggled toward her. Only then did I realize that there was nothing below my feet—no bridge, no jetway, nothing.

I was on the edge of the boulevard, the broken edge of the upper side. There was nothing below me except for some looped cables, and, far underneath them, a tiny ribbon which was either a river or a road.

We had jumped blindly across the great gap and I had fallen just far enough to catch the upper edge of the road-way on my chest.

It did not matter, the pain.

In a moment the doctor-robot would be there to repair me.

A look at Virginia's face reminded me there was no doctor-robot, no world; no Instrumentality, nothing but wind and pain. She was crying. It took a moment for me to hear what she was saying.

"I did it, I did it, darling, are you dead?"

Neither one of us was sure what "dead" meant, because people always went away at their appointed time, but we knew that it meant a cessation of life. I tried to tell her that I was living, but she fluttered over me and kept dragging me further from the edge of the drop.

I used my hands to push myself into a sitting position.

She knelt beside me and covered my face with kisses.

At last I was able to gasp, "Where's Macht?"

She looked back. "I don't see him."

I tried to look too. Rather than have me struggle, she said, "You stay quiet. I'll look again."

Bravely she walked to the edge of the sheared-off boule-vard. She looked over toward the lower side of the gap, peering through the clouds which drifted past us as rapidly as smoke sucked by a ventilator. Then she cried out:
"I see him. He looks so funny. Like an insect in the mu-seum. He is crawling across on the cables."

Struggling to my hands and knees, I neared her and looked too. There he was, a dot moving along a thread, with the birds soaring by beneath him. It looked very unsafe. Perhaps he was getting all the "fear" that he needed to keep himself happy. I did not want that "fear," whatever it was. I wanted food, water, and a doctor-robot. None of these was here.

I struggled to my feet. Virginia tried to help me but I was standing before she could do more than touch my sleeve. "Let's go on."

"On?" she said.

"On to the Abba-dingo. There may be friendly machines up there. Here there is nothing but cold and wind, and the lights have not yet gone on."

She frowned. "But Macht..."

"It will be hours before he gets here. We can come back."

She obeyed.

Once again we went to the left of the boulevard. I told her to squeeze my waist while I struck the pillars, one by one. Surely there must have been a reactivating device for the passengers on the road. The fourth time, it worked.

Once again the wind whipped our clothing as we raced upward on Alpha Ralpha Boulevard.

We almost fell as the road veered to the left. I caught my balance, only to have it veer the other way. And then we stopped. This was the Abba-dingo.

A walkway littered with white objects—knobs and rods and imperfectly formed balls about the size of my head. Virginia stood beside me, silent.

About the size of my head? I kicked one of the objects aside and then knew, knew for sure, what it was. It was people. The inside parts. I had never seen such things be-fore. And that, that on the ground, must once have been a hand. There were hundreds of such things along the wall.

"Come, Virginia," said I, keeping my voice even, and my thoughts hidden.

She followed without saying a word. She was curious about the things on the ground, but she did not seem to recognize them.

For my part, I was watching the wall. At last I found them—the little doors of Abba-dingo. One said meteorological. It was not Old Common Tongue, nor was it French, but it was so close that I knew it had something to do with the behavior of air. I put my hand against the panel of the door. The panel became translucent and ancient writing showed through. There were numbers which meant nothing, words which meant nothing, and then: "Typhoon coming."

My French had not taught me what a "coming" was, but "typhoon" was plainly *typhon*, a major air disturbance. Thought I, let the weather machines take care of the matter. It had nothing to do with us. "That's no help," said I. "What does it mean?" she said. "The air will be disturbed."

"Oh," said she. "That couldn't matter to us, could it?"

"Of course not."

I tried the next panel, which said food. When my hand touched the little door, there was an aching creak inside the wall, as though the whole tower retched. The door opened a little bit and a horrible odor came out of it. Then the door closed again.

The third door said help and when I touched it nothing happened. Perhaps it was some kind of tax-collecting device from the ancient days. It yielded nothing to my touch. The fourth door was larger and already partly open at the bottom. At the top, the name of the door was predictions. Plain enough, that one was, to anyone who knew Old French. The name at the bottom was more mysterious: PUT PAPER HERE it said, and I could not guess what it meant.
I tried telepathy. Nothing happened. The wind whistled past us. Some of the calcium balls and knobs rolled on the pavement. I tried again, trying my utmost for the imprint of long-departed thoughts. A scream entered my mind, a thin
long scream which did not sound much like people. That was all.

Perhaps it did upset me. I did not feel "fear," but I was worried about Virginia.

She was staring at the ground.

"Paul," she said, "isn't that a man's coat on the ground among those funny things?"

Once I had seen an ancient X-ray in the museum, so I knew that the coat still surrounded the material which had provided the inner structure of the man. There was no ball there, so that I was quite sure he was dead. How could that have happened in the old days? Why did the Instrumen-tality let it happen? But then, the Instrumentality had always forbidden this side of the tower. Perhaps the violators had met their own punishment in some way I could not fathom.

"Look, Paul," said Virginia. "I can put my hand in."

Before I could stop her, she had thrust her hand into the flat open slot which said PUT PAPER HERE.

She screamed.

Her hand was caught.

I tried to pull at her arm, but it did not move. She began gasping with pain. Suddenly her hand came free.

Clear words were cut into the living skin. I tore my cloak off and wrapped her hand.

As she sobbed beside me I unbandaged her hand. As I did so she saw the words on her skin.

The words said, in clear French, "You will love Paul all your life."

Virginia let me bandage her hand with my cloak and then she lifted her face to be kissed. "It was worth it," she said, "it was worth all the trouble, Paul. Let's see if we can get down. Now I know."

I kissed her again and said, reassuringly, "You do know, don't you?"

"Of course," she smiled through her tears. "The Instru-mentality could not have contrived this. What a clever old machine! Is it a god or a devil, Paul?"

I had not studied those words at that time, so I patted her instead of answering. We turned to leave.

At the last minute I realized that I had not tried predic-tions myself.

"Just a moment, darling. Let me tear a little piece off the bandage."

She waited patiently. I tore a piece the size of my hand, and then I picked up one of the ex-person units on the ground. It may have been the front of an arm. I returned to push the cloth into the slot, but when I turned to the door, an enormous bird was sitting there.

I used my hand to push the bird aside, and he cawed at me. He even seemed to threaten me with his cries and his sharp beak. I could not dislodge him.

Then I tried telepathy. *I am a true man. Go away!* The bird's dim mind flashed back at me nothing but *no-no-no-no-no!*

With that I struck him so hard with my fist that he flut-tered to the ground. He righted himself amid the white litter on the pavement and then, opening his wings, he let the wind carry him away.

I pushed in the scrap of cloth, counted to twenty in my mind, and pulled the scrap out.

The words were plain, but they meant nothing: "You will love Virginia twenty-one more minutes."

Her happy voice, reassured by the prediction but still un-steady from the pain in her written-on hand, came to me as though it were far away. "What does it say, darling?"

Accidentally on purpose, I let the wind take the scrap. It fluttered away like a bird. Virginia saw it go.

"Oh," she cried disappointedly, "we've lost itl What did it say?"

"Just what yours did.""But what words, Paul? How did it say it?"

With love and heartbreak and perhaps a little "fear," I lied to her and whispered gently, "It said, 'Paul will always love Virginia.' "

She smiled at me radiantly. Her stocky, full figure stood firmly and happily against the wind. Once again she was the chubby, pretty Menerima whom I had noticed in our block when we both were children. And she was more than that. She was my new-found love in our new-found world. She was my mademoiselle from Martinique. The message was foolish. We had seen from the food-slot that the machine was broken.

"There's no food or water here," said I. Actually, there was a puddle of water near the railing, but it had been blown over the human structural elements on the ground, and I had no heart to drink it.

Virginia was so happy that, despite her wounded hand, her lack-of-water and her lack-of-food, she walked vigorously and cheerfully.

Thought I to myself, "Twenty-one minutes. About six hours have passed. If we stay here we face unknown dangers."

Vigorously we walked downward, down Alpha Ralpha Boulevard. We had met the Abba-dingo and were still "alive." I did not think that I was "dead," but the words had been meaningless so long that it was hard to think them.

The ramp was so steep going down that we pranced like horses. The wind blew into our faces with incredible force. That's what it was, wind, but I looked up the word vent only after it was all over.

We never did see the whole tower—just the wall at which the ancient jetway had deposited us. The rest of the tower was hidden by clouds which fluttered like torn rags as they raced past the heavy material.

The sky was red on one side and a dirty yellow on the other.

Big drops of water began to strike at us.

"The weather machines are broken," I shouted to Virginia.

She tried to shout back at me but the wind carried her words away. I repeated what I had said about the weather machines. She nodded happily and warmly, though the wind was by now whipping her hair past her face and the pieces of water which fell from up above were spotting her flame-golden gown. It did not matter. She clung to my arm. Her happy face smiled at me as we stamped downward, bracing ourselves against the decline in the ramp. Her brown eyes were full of confidence and life. She saw me looking at her and she kissed me on the upper arm without losing step. She was my own girl, forever, and she knew it.

The water-from-above, which I later knew was actual "rain," came in increasing volume. Suddenly it included birds. A large bird flapped his way vigorously against the whistling air and managed to stand still in front of my face, though his air speed was many leagues per hour. He cawed in my

face and then was carried away by the wind. No sooner had that one gone than another bird struck me in the body. I looked down at it but it too was carried away by the racing current of air. All I got was a telepathic echo from its bright blank mind: *no-no-no-no!*

No what? thought I. A bird's advice is not much to go upon.

Virginia grabbed my arm and stopped. I too stopped.

The broken edge of Alpha Ralpha Boulevard was just ahead. Ugly yellow clouds swam through the break like poisonous fish hastening on an inexplicable errand.

Virginia was shouting. I could not hear her, so I leaned down. That way her mouth could almost touch my ear. "Where's Macht?" she shouted.

Carefully I took her to the left side of the road, where the railing gave us some protection against the heavy racing air, and against the water commingled with it. By now neither of us could see very far. I made her drop to her knees. I got down beside her. The falling water pelted our backs. The light around us had turned to a dark dirty yellow. We could still see, but we could not see much. I was willing to sit in the shelter of the railing, but she nudged me. She wanted us to do something about Macht. What anyone could do, that was beyond me. If he had found shelter, he was safe, but if he was out on those cables, the wild pushing air would soon carry him off and then there would be no more Maximilien Macht. He would be "dead" and his interior parts would bleach somewhere on the open ground.

Virginia insisted. We crept to the edge.

A bird swept in, true as a bullet, aiming for my face. I flinched. A wing touched me. It stung against my cheek like fire. I did not know that feathers were so tough. The birds must all have damaged mental mechanisms, thought I, if they bit people on Alpha Ralpha. That is not the right way to be-have toward true people.

At last we reached the edge, crawling on our bellies. I tried to dig the fingernails of my left hand into the stone-like material of the railing, but it was flat, and there was nothing much to hold to, save for the ornamental fluting. My right arm was around Virginia. It hurt me badly to crawl for-ward that way, because my body was still damaged from the blow against the edge of the road, on the way coming up. When I hesitated, Virginia thrust herself forward. We saw nothing. The gloom was around us. The wind and the water beat at us like fists. Her gown pulled at her like a dog worrying its master. I wanted to get her back into the shelter of the railing, where we could wait for the air-disturbance to end.

Abruptly, light shone all around us. It was wild electricity, which the ancients called *lightning*. Later I found that it occurs quite frequently in the areas beyond the reach of the weather machines.

The bright quick light showed us a white face staring at us. He hung on the

cables below us. His mouth was open, so he must have been shouting. I shall never know whether the expression on his face showed "fear" or great happiness. It was full of excitement. The bright light went out and I thought that I heard the echo of a call. I reached for his mind telepathically and there was nothing there. Just some dim, obstinate bird thinking at me, *no-no-no-no-no!*

Virginia tightened in my arms. She squirmed around. I shouted at her in French. She could not hear.

Then I called with my mind.

Someone else was there.

Virginia's mind blazed at me, full of revulsion. "The cat girl. She is going to touch me!"

She twisted. My right arm was suddenly empty. I saw the gleam of a golden gown flash over the edge, even in the dim light. I reached with my mind, and I caught her cry: "Paul, Paul, I love you. Paul ... help me!"

The thoughts faded as her body dropped.

The someone else was C'mell, whom we had first met in the corridor.

"I came to get you both," she thought at me; "not that the birds cared about her."

"What have the birds got to do with it?"

"You saved them. You saved their young, when the red-topped man was killing them all. All of us have been wor-ried about what you true people would do to us when you were free. We found out. Some of you are bad and kill other kinds of life. Others of you are good and protect life."

Thought I, is that all there is to *good* and *bad*?

Perhaps I should not have left myself off guard. People did not have to understand fighting, but the homunculi did. They were bred amidst battle and they served through troubles. C'mell, cat-girl that she was, caught me on the chin with a piston-like fist. She had no anesthesia, and the only way—cat or no cat—that she could carry me across the cables in the "typhoon" was to have me unconscious and relaxed.

I awakened in my own room. I felt very well indeed. The doctor-robot was there. Said he: "You've had a shock. I've already reached a subcommissioner of the Instrumentality, and I can erase the mem-ories of the last full day, if you want me to." His expression was pleasant.

Where was the racing wind? The air falling like stone around us? The water driving where no weather machines controlled it? Where was the golden gown and the wild fear-hungry face of Maximilien Macht?

I thought these things, but the doctor-robot, not being telepathic, caught none of it. I stared hard at him.

"Where," I cried, "is my own true love?"

Robots cannot sneer, but this one attempted to do so. "The naked cat-girl with the blazing hair? She left to get some clothing."

I stared at him.

His fuddy-duddy little machine mind cooked up its own nasty little thoughts: "I must say, sir, you 'free people' change very fast indeed..."

Who argues with a machine? It wasn't worth answering him.

But that other machine? Twenty-one minutes. How could that work out? How could it have known? I did not want to argue with that other machine either. It must have been a very powerful leftover machine—perhaps something once used in ancient wars. I had no intention of finding out. Some people might call it a god. I call it nothing. I do not need "fear" and I do not propose to go back to Alpha Ralpha Boulevard again.

But hear, oh heart of mine!—how can you ever visit the cafe again?

C'mell came in and the doctor-robot left.

Rosser Reeves, Chairman of the Board of Ted Bates & Co., Inc.—the world's fifth largest advertising agency—and author of the best-seller REALITY IN ADVERTISING *(Knopf), first ap-peared in* F & SF *with a longish poem titled "Infinity." It drew more favorable letters than any poem we have pub-lished in some years—which led us to ask him for more...*

EFFIGY

by Rosser Reeves

Could it be that under death's disguise
The man who loved my mother lies?
Whose seed helped shape my heart, my eyes?
My brain? My hands? My blood? My size?

No, this is a wax-work. Strange new face.
Propped in lace,
Hands in place.
Cheap, crude art. Different. Queer.
Shed no tear
On this bier!
This is a dummy, with an air of unction,
Waxed and rouged for a tribal function.

Where now, wax-work, where away
In your black frock coat?
To the Eden Musee?
Where away, with your silent candles?
Your long gray box with the silver handles?

You're not the man with the prophet's eye,
The holy fire, the battle cry.
You're not the man with the scholar's face,
The open books, the gentle grace.

Nor are you the one condemned to bed,
The paralyzed, whom doctors fed
When all except his mind was dead.

Nor are you the corpse, poor things of rust,
Whose hand I held, as all sons must.
Ashes to ashes! Dust to dust!

What are you?

You know what you are,
With your ascot tie,
Your hair so prim,
And your mouth so sly?
You're a wax-work thing, with an air of unction,
Waxed and rouged for a tribal function.

Go—and leave but this to me:
A little more of memory,
My father's image, clear and plain.
I do not think we'll meet again.

E=MC2

by Rosser Reeves

Some day, perhaps, some alien eye or eyes,
Blood red in cold and polished horny lids,
Set in a chitinous face
Will sweep the arch of some dark, distant sky
And see a nova flare,
A flick of light, no more,
A pinpoint on a photographic plate,
A footnote in an alien chart of stars
Forgotten soon on miles of dusty shelves
Where alien beetles feed.
A meal for worms,

Sole epitaph
To mark the curious end of restless man,
Who for a second of galactic time
Floated upon a speck of cosmic dust
Around a minor sun.

The author of SIRENS OF TITAN, *and a mordant little tale with rather more to say that its size would indicate...*

HARRISON BERGERON

by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law, they were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else; nobody was better looking than anybody else; nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th, Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April, for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear—he was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter, and every twenty sec-onds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about, as the ballerinas came to the end of a dance.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burgular alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"Huh?" said George.

"That dance—it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They

weren't really very good—no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat dragged in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

"Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ballpeen hammer," said George.

"I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the dif-ferent sounds," said Hazel, a little envious. "The things they think up."

"Um," said George.

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Clampers. "If I was Diana Moon Clam-pers," said Hazel, "I'd have chimes on Sunday—just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion."

"I could think, if it was just chimes," said George.

"Well—maybe make 'em real loud," said Hazel. "I think I'd make a good Handicapper General."

"Good as anybody else," said George.

"Who knows better'n I do what normal is?" said Hazel.

"Right," said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one gun salute in his head stopped that.

"Boy!" said Hazel, "that was a doozy, wasn't it?"

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling, and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor, were holding their temples.

"All of a sudden, you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so's you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch." She was refer-ring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around Geerge's neck. "Go on and rest the bag for a little while," she said. "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while."

George weighed the bag with his hands. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me."

"You been so tired lately—kind of wore out," said Hazel. "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and a two-thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain."

"If you could just take a few out when you came home from work," said Hazel. "I mean—you don't compete with anybody around here. You just set around."

"If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people'd get away with it—and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"I'd hate it," said Hazel.

"There you are," said George. "The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?"

If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head.

"Reckon it'd fall all apart," said Hazel.

"What would?" said George blankly.

"Society," said Hazel uncertainly. "Wasn't that what you just said?"

"Who knows?" said George.

The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn't clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, "Ladies and gentlemen—"

He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

"That's all right," Hazel said of the announcer, "he tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard."

"Ladies and gentlemen—" said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extrordinarily beautiful, be-cause the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred-pound men.

And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous., timeless melody. "Excuse me—" she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

"Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen," she said in a grackle squawk, "has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and is extremely dangerous."

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen—upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right-side up. The picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever borne heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick, wavy lenses besides. The spectacles were intended not only to make him half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three-hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

"If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not—I re-peat, do not—try to reason with him."

There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries of consternation came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have—for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. "My God!" said George. "That must be Harrison!"

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood in the cen-ter of the studio. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians and announcers cowered on their knees before him,

expecting to die.

"I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

"Even as I stand here," he bellowed, "crippled, hobbled, sickened—I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!"

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison's scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

"I shall now select my Empress!" he said, looking down on the cowering people. "Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!"

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous deli-cacy. Last of all, he removed her mask.

She was blindingly beautiful.

"Now—" said Harrison, taking her hand. "Shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!" he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harri-son stripped them of their handicaps, too. "Play your best," he told them, "and I'll make you barons and dukes and earls."

The music began. It was normal at first—cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again, and was much improved.

Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while—listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

They shifted their weight to their toes.

Harrison placed his big hands on the girl's tiny waist, let-ting her sense the

weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gam-boled and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling.

They kissed it.

And then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Clampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Clampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons' television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.
George came back in with the beer, paused while a handi-cap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. "You been crying?" he said to Hazel, watching her wipe her tears.

"Yup," she said.

"What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something real sad on television."

"What was it?" he said.

"It's all kind of mixed up in my mind," said Hazel.

"Forget sad things," said George.

"I always do," said Hazel.

"That's my girl," said George. He winced. There was the sound of a riveting gun in his head.

"Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Gee—" said Hazel, "—I could tell that one was a doozy."

It was said in the countryside that the village was haunted, and Barin came to research a magazine article. But when he met the girl whose face was identical with that on his old cameo, everything somehow shifted for him ... and the village pressed in...

THE HAUNTED VILLAGE

by Gordon R. Dickson

He came to the hill overlooking the village and braked to a halt. Below him the still town lay, caught like a mirage of the hot air in a shallow cup of the enforested earth. He stared at it as he might have stared at a mirage, not quite certain even now as to how he had found it, for the in-structions of the boy at the filling station had been vague and he had seen no one along the way who could give him directions. He had taken County Road number twelve and hunted at random through the small, twisting and rutted trails of dirt that snaked back from it among the pines and birch. Now, as twilight was dimming the hollows with the long rays of a red sunset glancing across the rolling hills of soft, glaciated earth, he had come upon it.

He looked down. In the still, late afternoon, the heat waves still beat and shimmered in the narrow streets and above the dark housetops, giving the town a twisting, insub-stantial look. Still as a dream, it lay; and no people were visible about it.

He released the brakes and the car rolled forward down the hill, and the first houses, building quickly to a wall on either side of his car, trapped the sound of his car's motor, and magnified it, so that it seemed to clamor in the stillness. He went slowly, searching for a stopping place, until he saw to his right a high, weathered building of brown clapboard with three steps leading up to a dusty porch that bore a HOTEL sign upon its overhang. He stopped his car beside the porch and got out.

A tall dark man with gray eyes large in a thin face ap-peared out of the porch's deeper shadow, walking toward him.
"Can I help you?" he asked. His voice was deep, but muted, as if a sort of weary sadness in him made it a special effort to speak.

"Why, yes," said Barin, mounting the three steps. I'm looking for a room."

"Oh," said the tall man. "You'll have to ask inside, then."

He waited until Barin had passed him, then followed half a step behind. And Barin thought he felt the slight breath of a sigh on the back of his neck, but it was so light he could not be sure.

He opened the door and stepped into a dim lobby, lit only by the fading light from a bay window. To the left a shadowed passage led away into the gloomy depths of the hotel and about the lobby heavy leather chairs sat cracked and withdrawn. Ahead was the desk. He walked toward it, the tall man behind him.

"Mikkelson?" It was a heavy voice from behind the desk, hoarse and mechanical as the grating of a spade on concrete.

"There's a guest," answered the tall man from behind Barin's shoulder, in his sad, tired voice.

Beyond the counter of the desk, a cubbyhole reached back into obscurity. At the counter, a pale patch of light from the distant window fell on the grained wood and the stiff white pages of an open guest book—just turned, evi-dently, to a new page, for there were no signatures upon it.

There was the squeak of a chair from the darkness and the heavy, creaking steps of a large man; a thick form loomed up out of the cubbyhole to stand with belly pressed against the worn inner edge of the counter. Barin looked into a wide face, the face of a man past middle age, heavy-lipped and broad-nosed, above a thick, coarse body loosened only slightly from a younger strength.

"For how long?" The hoarse voice was now directed at Barin.

"A couple of days—maybe three." Again Barin thought he caught the trailing wisp of a sigh from the man behind him. He added quickly, to forestall questions, "I'm a photog-rapher. A writer. I'm doing a piece on the woods up here. I'd like to explore a bit—for a day or two."

"Sign." One thick hand swiveled the guest book toward him. Another passed him the stub of a pencil on the end of a string. He took it and signed. He laid it down and looked up into the face of the man behind the desk.

"I'll be eating my meals in town," he said. "Any idea where—" He left the question hanging, but the man behind the desk did not take it up and a long silence drew itself out between them.

"Certainly you—Rosach—" The voice of the tall man again.

"We can take care of you," said Rosach, abruptly. "Not now. Too late. Breakfast."

"Oh," said Barin; and he tried to sound disappointed, al-though he did not feel hungry. "Any place else in town?"

"No." Rosach reached under the counter and produced a key.

"Up there," he said, jerking a thumb to his left. "Second door on the right."

Barin turned and looked, seeing what he had not noticed before, a narrow stairway that led up and back from beside the desk.

"Thank you," he said, taking the cold metal of the key into the palm of his hand. He picked up the suitcase he had brought in with him and started up. At the turn of the stairs, he hesitated for a second and looked back. He could see the two faces, the heavy and the sad, upturned to him, caught in the patch of light from the desk and watching after him.

He went on up the stairs, emerging at the top into a long, narrow corridor, lit at the far end by a window which still gave on the fading sky. He moved down it, his shoes giving off no sound against the hall carpet. And, as he went, a girl emerged from one of the rooms farther down the hall and came toward him.

She was dressed in a simple, loose dress of some dark color and the blackness of her hair was gathered together in a bun at the back of her head. Although she could not avoid seeing him, she gave no sign of it and came toward him, looking through and past him, carrying some towels over her arm.

He reached his door before he met her; and turned to in-sert the key in the lock. It was his intention to stop her as she passed, to ask her some small question about the bed-sheets or the location of the bathroom. But her indiffer-ence to his presence made him hesitate; and he stepped back out of her way, as her dress passed him.

In the light of the distant window her face stood out sharp and clear. It was unadorned and serious, the pale, white skin thinly stretched over the delicate bones of the face, the lips soft and straight and with two slight shadows under the narrow protrusion of her cheekbones.

He saw her in profile as she went by; and his breath caught, because for a second the shadow below the near cheekbone was gone, the graceful line of the narrow jaw, the smooth, high forehead, outlined against the dark wall opposite—and it was as if he gazed at his secret cameo.

He awoke to lethargy, and gazed dully about the dingy room, wondering at himself and his whereabouts in that little uncertainty that always followed his wakening.

He must have gone to bed immediately on entering his room the evening before, because all he could remember were the wild fantasies of his dreams—his dreams about the girl who resembled exactly that cameo about which no one in the world had known, but himself.

It was a cameo he had stolen from a house locked up for the summer, back when he had been a boy. He had kept it secretly to himself and woven about it dark dreams of a strange love of the flesh. He still had it locked in his safety deposit box, back in the city. Not even Ellen knew about it—Ellen, whom he had now decided to marry, just before he had slipped

away on this final trip. It belonged to that dark side of him that he intended to bury forever.

Now there was no thought of Ellen, or the magazine article he had come up here to do. A sullen fire burned in him. Before it, the life he had envisioned with Ellen, and his work, were darkly shadowed. He had come up here on a hint, a breath of rumor from the country about this village. The people outside it considered it to be haunted in some strange way—haunted, in this day and age! He had laughed. But it had attracted him. A good chance, he had thought, for a humorous article on back-country superstitions. Now, he was no longer interested. It was the girl that demanded all his attention, the girl in the corridor.

He washed and shaved himself quickly in the veined washbowl of the bathroom down the hall, dressed and went downstairs. Behind the desk, the unchanging darkness seemed vacant of all life. He hunted by himself for the dining room and found it at the end of the passageway he had noticed when he had first stepped in. A small room with three square tables and a row of windows along one wall.

He sat down and rang the little bell that stood with its dull silver gleaming in the center of the white and thread-bare tablecloth. The tiny tinkle sounded in the room and echoed away through the half-open door that led beyond, he surmised, to the kitchen. He lit a cigaret and waited.

It would, he thought, looking out the window, be an-other hot day. The haze was already stirring the air above the street; and the hot glare of the sun, reaching him through the glass, was no aid in rousing him from the lethargy with which he had awakened, but reached into him with smouldering sullenness and stirred something thick and hot within the animal part of him. He felt at once dull and eager, with the feverish urge to concupiscence induced by sickness and being long in bed. The smoke from his cigaret went no-where, but coiled about him, hanging in the still air; and he waited impatiently for his service.

Paced footsteps sounded at last from beyond the door. The girl of the corridor came through its opening and up to his table. Now, in the strong sunlight from the windows, he could see that her dress was gray, but her hair was as black as ever.

"What would you like?" she said.

Now that the question was asked, he found that no more than on the proceeding evening had he any desire for food. But he was committed to the ritual of eating breakfast by his demands of yesterday; and moreover, he wanted to prolong his contact with this girl.

"What's your name?" he asked, smiling up at her.

"Dineen," she said, without change of expression. "What would you like?"

As she stood there, attendant and silent, her perfect passiv-ity touched sudden flame from the heat within him, like spontaneous combustion in a

compost heap. So sharp was the chemical change that he felt his face cool with the shock; and to cover it up, spoke quickly.

"Bacon and eggs. Anything."

She turned and went out, the click of her footsteps fading away behind the door. He sank back into the smouldering
of his lethargy.

It was some minutes later when she returned; and he looked at the platter in her hands, startled to remember what he had been waiting for. Picking up his fork, he felt a slight twinge of revulsion from the food. She turned to go.

"Dineen," he said.

She turned, calm and unsurprised. He searched for the color of her eyes; but even in the light from the window, this escaped him.

"Yes?" she said.

"I don't know this town of yours," he said with his lips, still watching her. "How do I get out into the woods?"

"Take any road," she said.

"Any road?"

"Yes." She waited a second further, but the sound of her voice went flying away and away into nothingness in his head, as if it would echo into eternity; and he did not say anything more. When he recovered from the sound of it, she had gone.

He sat, wrung with a desire to follow her that was coun-tered by a feverish inertia like that of the weakly sick. After a little while he turned to his plate and ate automatically, not tasting the food, but feeling it soft and slab-like upon his tongue. It was nothing, but it woke him up. He finished his cold coffee and got up.

He went out; down the dark passageway, through the front door and out into the sunlight. Its glare seized him, blinding and baffling him, and he realized with a start that the morning was already gone. It was high noon. He walked off through the streets at random...

He stood in the hills surrounding the town and looked down on the hot gleam of its rooftops. The air was motionless and under the glare of light, the dancing heat-waves seemed to cause the whole conglomeration of buildings to seethe and boil. The forest about it stood like a protecting rampart. Its coolness held him. It smelled cleanly of natural scents, like his Ellen. And he was reminded of her again and he felt the urge to give up the notion of work here, to pack and drive, and so slip back into the protection of the outside world.

But the impulse was like the distant twinge of a nerve, the prick of a dentist's needle in an area where the novocaine has already gone to work. For, superimposed on Ellen's image came the face of his cameo, the face of Dineen. And the wish to break through the invisible barrier of reticence he felt in the girl returned to him again and again, like the pounding of a drum, until he could feel the feverish thump and plunge of his heart, beating in unison with it.

It was the town, he thought. The town guarded her. The unanimity of its conclave of dusty streets, through which he had walked on his way just now to these hills, its solitary figures, just out of hailing distance, its still houses with their blank and eyeless windows, these walled him off from Dineen. He had felt the alien spirit of this place from the first. He had recognized it at the hotel desk and when she had spoken in the hotel dining room. He had felt it on his way to here, passing the houses. Whole and alive, they had stood, lining either side of his way, their windows unbroken and the half-glimpsed hint of a limp curtain here and there behind a glassy edge. But silent, silent—in tenanted silence. He had tried vainly to see women and children peeping from those dead glass eyes.

It was the town, he thought, climbing higher on a little knoll for a better view. It was not Dineen that held him at a distance, but the town. Once within its walls of suspicion and distrust—they were small-town, country people and they undoubtedly knew how the rest of the countryside spoke of them—he would find himself the stronger of the two of them. He could break through to her core, inside.

He struck his right fist suddenly into the palm of his left hand. Of course! The town distrusted him because he was an outsider. They thought he had come in an evening, and would leave in a morning. As long as they believed this, their reticence would hold. But undermine that—and the wall of their defenses would come tumbling down. He would be one of them, not one against many, but one against the one that was Dineen; and in that contest he felt sure he would be superior. That was the answer, to announce that he was staying, that he would be among them henceforward and that there was no point in their standing aloof, for he was in their midst and of them.

So, thinking this, the old emotion of the cameo came upon him, and in the still glow of the sun and the silent wood a haze seemed to form about him so that he felt himself a dream moving in a world of dreams; and near and far off, past, present and future, were all no more than things and shadows of his mind. And, turning, he went back down the slope and once more into the village.

The streets closed once again about him. He drifted on down their dusty sidewalks, past the soundless houses and dead stores. They seemed not so remote now. The figures of townspeople swam in and out of his sight, half a block and a block away. He wandered at random, half-expecting at any moment to come upon Dineen; until, turning around a cor-ner no different from the rest, he came suddenly upon a small blind alley, at the far end of which a tiny old woman, bent and wrinkled, hunched and spat at the sight of him.

"Go away!" she screamed in a cracked voice that struck distantly upon his ears. "Get away from herel"

He looked at her dreamily as she crouched against the wall of the alley's far end. He thought of the answer that should reassure her. "No, no," he said. "I'm a new neighbor. Just moved in. You should get to know me."

He stepped forward and reached out his hand to her; but she cowered away from him still, and went on screaming, "Get away! Get away!" in her thin, ancient voice.

"Is that any way to treat the citizens?" he said, smiling at her. "A fellow citizen?"

"Get away!" she cried. *"Help!"*

"But I'm settling down here," he said, walking toward her. "I'll buy a house—pay taxes, you know? I'll be settling down with one of your local girls. When Dineen and I—" He hesitated suddenly at the word married, as if the crazy old woman would pounce on it and twist it into something mock-ing or obscene.

"—settle things," he finished, lamely.

She screamed more loudly, a long and piercing wail. He stood right in front of her now, his hands outstretched. And suddenly he was conscious of movement behind; him and Mikkelson, the tall, sad man, pushed past his shoulder to take the old woman by her monkey hands and lead her past him and away to a door in one wall of the alley that opened on blackness and took her in.

The door closed and Mikkelson turned back to face Barin. "She's old," he said in his tired voice, "and not quite right, sometimes."

"I guessed something like that," said Barin. "You know, I was only trying to be friendly. I've just been thinking of staying. Settling down here—" He thought he saw the shad-ow of a frown beginning to form on the tall man's face. "—Of course, you're right, she's not quite—"

He hesitated. Mikkelson turned and began to lead the way out of the alley. Barin followed, feeling a sudden spurt of anger. "She ought to be in an institution!" he said.

"Some of our people here," Mikkelson turned his head as he walked, "have ideas brought over from the old country. They don't believe in sending away relatives. They keep them to themselves, in some dark room."

The words struck Barin with an odd ring; but they were back out on the street now and he saw a chance to show his agreement with the spirit of the local people.

"And why not?" he said. "Probably the best way, when you come right down

to it. Are there many around here like her?"

"A few," said Mikkelson. "Some. Maybe more than you'd think—by outside standards."

"Oh, not me," said Barin. He made an open gesture with his hand. "It's like the stories about this place. I'll be honest with you. The rest of the country around here seems to think you people are haunted. In fact, that's the article I actually came up here to do. Quaint country superstitions, you know. Well, very possibly it's this practice with the old and senile that's given them that notion about you. After all, it's all relative. Who can tell? Who can set the standards of sanity or insanity? Looked at from one point of view every-one is a little insane. Or everyone is sane."

Mikkelson turned his large eyes upon him. "That's true," said the tall man. "I suppose you lost your way?"

"Why, yes. That's what happened," said Barin. "Your streets—and I was so busy thinking I didn't notice where I was going." He smiled at Mikkelson. "It was quite easy."

"Very easy," said Mikkelson, "even in a small town like this." He pointed up the street. "There's your hotel, now. I have to turn off here."

Barin looked up and saw the porch and sign of the hotel half a block away. He turned to thank Mikkelson, but the tall man had already turned and was striding off down a street to Barin's right.

Barin went on to the hotel.

In the dining room that evening, he caught Dineen by the wrist after she had brought him his dinner coffee and held her. "Sit down," he begged.

She looked from his face to his hand, his long fingers en-closing her slim wrist with the white hand limp beyond it. She looked back with no expression on her face and sat down. When he released her arm she drew it to her and out of reach below the edge of the tabletop.

"I love you," he said.

"No," she said, and shook her head.

"You don't understand," he said, leaning toward her. "You think it's impossible, the sort of thing that happens in movies, that I could come in from nowhere and see you once and fall in love. But it *is* possible. It isl"

She shook her head again.

"Listen," he said, putting his face close to hers. "If love is something different to you, it can happen this way. You think I'm just talking—that I'll be going away again. But I won't. I've been looking for a place to settle; and I like it here. You think about that." He put his hands under her el-bows and lifted, so that she got to her feet. He pushed her toward the

kitchen door. "Go on, think about it."

She went off, turning about like a sleepwalker. He watched her go.

The next morning, the waters of sleep were turgid and heavier, harder to brush from him. He woke to a feeling of heavy dullness and indifference so deep it seemed to hold his body in near paralysis.

He rose and dressed with great effort. Nor, this morning, could he bring himself to make the effort of shaving and washing. Dully, he went out of his room and downstairs.

The front door of the hotel opened under the pressure of the palms of his hands and he stepped out again into the sunlight. He went down the three steps to the sidewalk; and, turning right, began to walk aimlessly through the town.
There was a thought, vague but insistent in his mind, that he should look up some local owner or dealer in real estate. With someone like that, he could go through the motions of renting, or—why not, he had the money—buying a place. But he hesitated at asking directly from Rosach or Dineen where such a man could be found. Dineen might not believe it.

It would be better to stumble across someone like that on his own.

For the first time, now, having walked a little ways, he lifted his eyes from the grayish pavement of the sidewalk that streamed slowly past his plodding feet, and looked around. This day, it seemed, there were more people moving about the village, as if -they were all losing their fear of his strangeness. He saw them on every street he turned into; standing, walking or talking, although those who talked were always at such a distance that the sound of their voices did not reach him; and on several occasions, he could see through some magnification of the haze their very lips moving, but could not catch a word.

And of the others, there were many within easy hailing distance, across the street or a few feet away, up on wide, shadowy verandas; but for some reason, he had a disinclina-tion to call out to them, as he might have on his first day here. It seemed to him now that so abrupt and unwarranted an action might easily shatter the fragile web he was weav-ing to bind himself into the structure of their isolation.

Yet he must ask directions.

He looked around. On a nearby veranda, a woman was sweeping listlessly at the dust on the painted surface of the boards. He took his politeness in both hands, and turned in through the gate in the wrought iron fence that guarded the parched and dying front lawn.

The click of the metal gate, opening and closing, an-nounced his coming. The woman looked up. Her broom stopped and she stood waiting in silence, defensively, for him to come up.

His feet rang hard on the concrete of the walk and hollow on the wooden

steps to the porch level.

"Pardon me," he said. "But I'm looking for a local real estate agent. You couldn't tell me where to find one, could you?"

She looked at him with a face scoured of character and expression by long years of hard work and stifled thought. "I don't know." Her voice was rusty and uncertain.

"Who might know?" Barin asked. "Do you know some-body who would be able to tell me?"

"I don't know," she repeated dully. "My man, you might ask him."

"And where would I find him?"

"I don't know," she repeated for the third time, wearily. Her hand made a feeble gesture of vague indication. "Out, someplace. Downtown."

She stopped. Barin waited for her to continue, but she seemed to have forgotten his presence. She made some small, aimless movements with the broom as if she would take up her sweeping again.

"What's his name?" asked Barin, finally.

"His name?" she said, lifting her head, and hesitated. "George. George Monk," she said at last.

"Thank you." Barin gave her a small, half-wave with his hand and turned, going down the walk and out again past the click of the gate, into the street. As he walked away, he turned once briefly to look back over his shoulder. She had gone back to her sweeping.

He walked toward what he took to be the business section.

As the shadowed houses gave way to the dusty panes of the store fronts, he came out on a street which was obviously the main one of the village, three blocks of brick arid clapboard buildings with high blank windows on the second story and square shop windows below. Under the baking sun, on this street no one stirred.

He looked about and turned at random to the nearest store, which had HARDWARE painted in faded yellow let-ters above the store front. He opened the windowless door and went in.

Above his head a bell chimed. A little man came to meet him between narrow counters piled high with metal goods and pieces of household equipment.

"Yes?" he said. "Yes, what do you want?"

"I'm looking for a George Monk," said Barin. "Do you know where I can find him?"

The little man peered up at Barin through rimless, glint-ing glasses. His voice was dusty and crackled like old paper that shatters when crumpled. "George Monk?"

"Yes."

The little man laughed like leaves rustling across concrete. "He's dead. George Monk's dead."

"His wife—" Barin began.

"His wife!" The little man snorted thinly through his small nostrils. "You've been talking to his wife, have you?"

"Well, I didn't know," said Barin. "I wanted a real estate agent."

"Real estate?" The hardware man looked up and struck the palms of his hands together. "Good. Good! There'll be a boom yet, you wait and see. Were you wanting to speculate?"

"No," said Barin. "I just wanted a place."

"Oh!" he chuckled. "A place. That's good. That's fine."

"I'm thinking of settling down here—" The words were a little hard, making their way past Barin's throat. "I might marry. People do, you know." He tried to give his last words a sly twist, as if joking. Instead they sounded ominous in his own ears. The little man did not seem to notice.

"Well now," he said. "Well, now, I have a place. A fine place just above the store here. That might be just the thing now, don't you think?"

Barin looked around the ancient dirtiness of the store. It was not attractive. But upstairs it might be better, and beggars could not be choosers, and he wanted to rent some-thing to convince Dineen he was serious.

"All right," he said. "If you'd like to let me look at it—"

"Absolutely, absolutely. This way." The hardware man turned and led the way to the store's back, and up a dark staircase to a rickety landing and narrow door. He threw the door open and ushered Barin through it.

"A fine, big place," he said.

Barin walked away from him, through the bare, unfur-nished rooms and to the windows in front overlooking the main street. The sunlight slanted through the windows, throwing strong shadows on the floor but without lighting the inside clearly. Standing in the light-glare and breathing the dead, unmoving air, Barin felt coming on him once again the haziness that he had felt on the hill overlooking the town. The walls about him seemed to stretch away to infinity, but at the same time to close about him, so that he felt himself locked like a fly between two panes of glass, caught by the

unseen, prisoned-in transparency.

"A fine, big room. An excellent room," the hardware man was chuckling at his elbow; and he, turning, sealed the bargain, paying his fee, whatever the little man asked; and so, not listening to the squeaks and mutterings of the other, turned and went down the stairs and away into the streets of the town. But all in a daze, all in a dream, all under the cloak of unreality.

How long this particular fit lasted, he found himself un-able to estimate, as he sat on the grass later in the day, opposite a boy perhaps seven or eight years old, perched on the pediment of a stone lion in a tiny park. Thin and close-hunched in khaki shorts and a striped T-shirt faded from much washing, the boy was coloring with crayons the faces of pictures in a coloring book. Barin watched, absorbed, as the boy worked.

"How long will it take?" Barin asked finally, breaking the silence.

"As many days as there are pictures in the book," said the boy. And he held it up to show Barin.

"You see," he said, "everything has to be done just right. Once I make a mistake, there's no fixing it. If the red happens to go just a bit over a line into the blue, the line gets spoiled. When I was just a baby, I used to spoil a lot of pictures. But now I know when you color one, it's for good, and I never make any mistakes."

"I like to color pictures," said Barin, dreamily.

"Then you got to find your own book," said the boy, seriously, without raising his eyes from the page on which he was working. "But remember, it has to be perfect."

He became completely absorbed in his coloring; and, after watching for a little while longer, Barin left him.

The day was fading when Barin came back at last to the hotel. It was the same hour of the afternoon on which he had driven into the town, two days before. The sun smouldered low on the pines of the western hill tops and the lobby of the hotel, when he entered it, was stifled in gloom. The feverish after-effects of his dream-fit were still on him; but in spite of it he felt strong now with the memory of his day's accom-plishment, and he strode straight to the desk.

In the dark depths behind it, Rosach stirred, a deeper shadow. "Yes?" his voice came grating.

"I just thought I'd tell you I'll be leaving tomorrow," Barin said. "I'm going to stay a while in town here. I thought I'd settle down and write. I've rented a place, above the hardware store."

Rosach grunted.

"I'll move early in the morning." Barin leaned a little for-ward over the

counter, trying to make out the expression of the hotel man's face. "I think I'll go to bed early, now. I'm not feeling so well. Would you mind sending Dineen up with a glass of hot milk for me?"

Again Rosach grunted, like some wild pig back in a thicket. It was impossible to tell whether he agreed or dis-agreed; and Barin, hesitating at repeating his question, turned slowly away and went up the stairs.

The hall above was shadowed darkness, but his room was filled with the clear dimness of the fading twilight seen through the window. Brian lay down on top of the covers of the made bed without even taking off his shoes. The mattress, felt through the sheets and blankets, pressed hard against his back; but he lay back gratefully drugged with tiredness that seemed to clot and impede the nervous mus-cles of his body. He felt that he did not want to move ever again, but to continue to lie as he was for time unending. Now, indeed, he did begin to feel hot and dizzy and a little out of his head as he might be with fever. He turned his face to the closed door of his room and waited.

After a little while, there was a knock at the door. "Come in," he said, looking away out the window. He heard footsteps in the cadence of Dineen's walk, ap-proaching his bed. But he kept his eyes on the glowing ob-long of window until he heard the glass of milk being set down on the table beside the head of his bed. Then he spoke. "Don't go," he said.

The sound of his own voice, bleating and strange, shocked him; and, turning his head at last, he was shocked even more by Dineen's appearance, for she had made no move to go, but stood with lowered head, hands limply at her side like one condemned before the executioner. For a second a thrill of pity cooled him; and then the buried heat of his desire beat up more fiercely. He took her by one still hand, swinging himself up into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. She neither stirred nor spoke. "Dineen—" he said.

She did not move. And at that he told himself that she had already heard the news of his day's action. Rosach had told her, no doubt. There could be no other interpretation.

"Now you know," he said.

"Yes." Her voice was calm and hopeless, so that he shud-dered at it while at the same time it increased his hunger and he tightened his grip on her hand, pulling her toward him. She came, neither helping nor resisting, and the weight of her body fell softly and heavily upon him, pushing him back down on the bed. The last rays of the sun through the window struck him full in the eyes, blinding him; and a surge of triumph like nothing he had ever felt before washed through and over him.

"Dineen!" he cried wildly, putting his arms around her.

He awoke gradually, fighting returning consciousness and a feeling of growing sickness that came with it, an abiding ugliness that hung just outside the limits of his knowledge and that increasing wakefulness did

nothing to dispel.

He could not remember what had happened the night be-fore, beyond the moment of his calling Dineen's name. There was a vague feeling that nothing had happened, that after a little while she had left him with everything all inconclusive. Forcing himself up to sit on the edge of the bed, he dis-covered himself still fully clothed, on a bed still fully made. The memory of the evening grew more clear. No, they had done nothing, they had not even talked. She had lain in his arms like a life-size imitation of a woman, a cloth doll stuffed with sawdust—yet the memory of this, just this, was a par-ticular horror. And now, suddenly, he remembered why. It was because, even then, even with her just like that, he had not wanted to let her go.

Now, he wanted nothing but to leave.

At any cost he wanted to pack up and get away from this place. Leave Dineen with the lie of his love and prom-ise, leave the hardware owner with the rent money he had paid down. Leave all, leave everything, but get away before he should be tripped again, to sink once more into the par-ticular foulness he had gone down into the night before.
He thought of Ellen now with the intensity of a drown-ing man. The image of her was a light, natural and clean as the glimmer of day, far off at the end of this dank and underground tunnel in which he was now groping. He must get back to her, he must get out, at any cost he must get out. Struggling against lethargy, spurred by the sickly fear that held him, he began to dress.

He did not have strength to pack his suitcase. He left it and went out into the hall. He came down the stairs, slowly and awkwardly, his body protesting against the dreamlike exhaustion that held him in its octopus coils. He walked heavily to the desk.

"Leaving?" said the deep, harsh voice from back in the shadows behind the desk.

"Leaving." He echoed the word wearily. There was the creak of the chair, the heavy footsteps moving forward and Rosach emerged into the dim patch of daylight behind the counter. He looked at Barm with a hint of obscure triumph on his heavy face. He stood there.

"Well?" said Barin, with a sigh. "How much?"

"Fifteen," said Rosach. He did not refer to the guest book or any ledger; and when Barin painfully laid the bills on the counter between them, he made no effort to pick them up.

"Well—goodby," said Barin.

"Goodby," answered Rosach, still watching him without moving or altering the expression on his face.

Away in the distance, an unfamiliar sound could be heard, the rattling roar

of an ancient car breasting the height above the village and starting down the street Barin had followed before.

"Goodby," repeated Barin, almost inaudibly. He turned away from the desk, picked up his suitcase and trudged toward the door. Outside the sound of the car could be heard, coming close. It moved up and stopped in front of the hotel.
He was only a few feet from the door when a patch of shadow near the dusty front window stirred and took on outline. It was Dineen, saying nothing, standing white-faced in the shadows and waiting for him.

He stopped and half-turned to her, a stumbling apology on his lips. He stepped toward her, but she faded back into the gloom, and was lost. Slowly he turned away.

Behind him, Rosach's heavy footsteps could be heard com-ing around the counter and toward him.

Barin's gaze went to the window and centered on the weathered convertible that had just pulled up, and on the couple, a young man and girl, who stood at the foot of the porch steps talking up to Mikkelson. For a second they struck welcomely upon Barin's eyes, like representatives of a wholesome world apart. And then it was as if the soft kindness of emotion was wiped away by the acid of a preju-diced and fouled appraisal. The gentle planes of the two young faces became blocky and ugly, the eyes seemed nar-row, the pallor unhealthy, the lips sagging and lush and lewd under the sharply seen hairs curling from the nostrils.

They were alien—alien!

Horror mounted in Barin, and repulsion. Against his will, like a strange thing which had ceased to obey orders, he could feel his body shrinking, drawing back from the win-dow, and his mouth opening and widening, stretching at the corners in preparation for letting out the droning, whining bleat that was mounting up from his lungs to his straining throat.

—Then a bear-like arm caught him from behind and Rosach's thick and grainy hand was over his mouth, throttling that madman's wail. He was dragged back from the win-dow and the scene dissolved into a confusion of low voices and the pressure of holding hands as he was dragged back-ward through obscure corridors and black ways until he felt earth under his feet and a stable smell came up in his nos-trils as the arms finally let him go—and he sank into yet greater blackness where his whirling and insane senses de-parted from him.

Some time afterwards, he came back to himself, lying in muck and dirt, and opened his eyes. Low voices were talk-ing in the darkness about him like voices in a nightmare. But the blackness was relieved, for here and there a chink of light showed as through ill-fitted boards, filtering a grayness into the place. In one lighter portion of the dark, Dineen sat, on something unseen, her face half-turned to him. She sat mo-tionless, her profile a thing of patchwork shade and shadow, like a woodcut.

"Are you awake?" It was the voice of Rosach, above him.

"Yes," Barin whispered. But it seemed they had not heard him.

"It never happened before," clicked the voice of the hard-ware man. "Not like this."

"It was..." said Barin, and stopped.

"What?" demanded the crackling, high old voice.

"Nothing," said Barin. "Nothing—"

There were confused murmurs from above him, muted argument in which nothing was understandable.

"We have, after all, a duty," said the deep, sad voice of Mikkelson, louder than the rest.

"—And the others passed through?" asked Rosach.

"Directions," said Mikkelson, "that was all they wanted."

"It was the others," said Barin, numbly, "those in the car ... it's the rest of the world that haunts here."

"Shut him up!" cried the crackling voice, angrily.

"This place is haunted by the rest of the world. Dineen!" cried Barin suddenly. "Dineen, this town is haunted by the real world, isn't it?"

"Yes," her voice came calmly through the darkness. She had riot moved.

"Shut her up too!" screeched the old voice. "How can we think with that gabbling?"

"What sin was it that—" Barin raised himself suddenly on one elbow. "What's that smell?"

"It will be fall in a few months," said Mikkelson's voice, "and with the first snow, the roads—"

"It's goats!" screamed Barin suddenly, scrabbling to his feet. "It's a goat pen in here! You're not going to lock me up with goats—" He made a plunge into darkness, but the arms were around him again.

"There's no goats!" squawked the old voice.

"You can't fool me!" cried Barin, plunging and biting. "I won't be locked up to rot in a pen with goats. I tell you I can smell them!"

"He smells himself, now," said the voice of Rosach in Barin's ear. "Help me get the rope around him and tie him up."

Barin felt the harsh, thick fiber winding around him, but it could hardly hold him. He twisted and plunged in the darkness, butting at anything he felt close to him and bleat-ing his terror, while his churning feet pounded and galloped to nowhere on the hard packed dirt of the ground, like hooves.

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