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FIRST PRINTING, JUNE, 1971

SIGNET TRADEMARK REG. U.R. PAT. OFF. AND FOREIGN COUNTRIES REGISTERED TRADEMARK-MARCA REGISTRADA

ILECEIO EN WINNIPEG, CANADA

SIGNET, SIGNET CLASSIC, MENTOR AND PLUME BOOKS

are published in Canada by The New American Library of Canada Limited, Scarborough, Ontario

PRINTED IN CANADA COVER PRINTED IN U.S.A.

Introduction

What is tomorrow?

Until Man came along, the creatures of this planet lived only on the raw data of the immediate present. Lower forms of life had instinct, but no conceptual language, no gift for analogies. Man was the first creature on this planet with a cortex complex enough to learn from the past or to speculate on the future; at last, after an unknown number of eons, somebody was around who could make a stab at understanding the meaning of now . . . and once that concept was formalized, it was only a step to its analogs, yesterday and tomorrow.

Because Man is a natural question-asker, we've been fascinated by these concepts ever since. In large measure, this is due to simple anxiety. We're unsure of ourselves and the world around us. We think we know what tomorrow will bring—the sun will rise, the seasons will change, life will continue. These expectations form the basis of our whole life plan. If the future were completely unpredictable there would be no point in plans . . . but then, there might not even be a race of creatures such as we.

Lower creatures do not know—or understand—the meaning of tomorrow. They live always in the present, moving through the great time stream like chips tossed upon a river current, carried where nature will. Because Man does have that capacity to question, however, the future has come to have a real existence, firmly foundationed upon today and our myriad yesterdays.

In these pages, you will see five visions of tomorrow by five of the best questioners around, for science fiction is nothing more than an extension of our natural inquisitiveness about life and the world into the far-distant tomorrow. Science fiction opens a door—an infinity of doors—to possible tomorrows, and the stories here are attempts at finding the secret keys to those doors. Are any of these visions

correct? Come back in twenty years—or two hundred or two thousand—and ask again.

For the present, settle yourself as these five men tickle your imagination with the question-feather—for tomorrow is coming at you faster than you think. Right now it's only twenty-four hours away. Close your eyes and you can see it coming. Open your imagination and come with us ... come to tomorrow!

ROBERT HOSKINS

New York City

The Civilisation Game

By Clifford D. Simak

In a today and a future marked by increasing urban growth, Clifford D. Simak is the master of the simple life. Here he treats of a tomorrow in which the business of politics will carry the mark of shame ... and to be elected President of the nation is to earn the ultimate dishonor....

For some time, Stanley Paxton had been hearing the sound of muffled explosions from the west. But he had kept on, for there might be a man behind him, trailing him, and he could not change his course. For if he was not befuddled, the homestead of Nelson Moore lay somewhere in the hills ahead. There he would find shelter for the night and perhaps even transportation. Communication, he knew, must be ruled out for the moment; the Hunter people would be monitoring, alert for any news of him.

One Easter vacation, many years ago, he had spent a few days at the Moore homestead, and all through this afternoon he had been haunted by a sense of recognition for certain landmarks he had sighted. But his visit to these hills had been so long ago that his memory hazed and there was no certainty.

As the afternoon had lengthened toward an early evening, his fear of the trailing man began to taper off. Perhaps, he told himself, there was no one, after all. Once, atop a hill, he had crouched in a thicket for almost half an hour and had seen no sign of any follower.

Long since, of course, they would have found the wreckage of his flier but they might have arrived too late and so, consequently, have no idea in which direction he had gone.

Through the day, he'd kept close watch of the cloudy sky and was satisfied that no scouting flier had passed overhead to spot him.

Now, with the setting of the sun behind an angry cloud bank, he felt momentarily safe.

He came out of a meadow and began to climb a wooded hill.

The strange boomings and concussions seemed fairly close at hand and he could see the flashes of explosions lighting up the sky.

He reached the hilltop and stopped short, crouching down against the ground. Below him, over a square mile or more of ground, spread the rippling flashes, and in the pauses between the louder noises, he heard faint chattering that sent shivers up his spine.

He crouched, watching the flashes ripple back and forth in zigzag patterning and occasionally a small holocaust of explosions would suddenly break out and then subside as quickly.

Slowly he stood up and wrapped his cloak about him and raised the hood to protect his neck and ears.

On the near side of the flashing area, at the bottom of the hill, was some sort of four-square structure looming darkly in the dusk. And it seemed as well that a massive, hazy bowl lay inverted above the entire area, although it was too dark to make out what it was.

Paxton grunted softly to himself and went quickly down the hill until he reached the building. It was, he saw, a sort of observation platform, solidly constructed and raised well above the ground with the top half of it made of heavy glass that ran all the way around. A ladder went up one side to the glassed-in platform.

"What's going on up there?" he shouted, but his voice could be scarcely heard above the crashing and thundering that came from out in front.

So he climbed the ladder.

When his head reached the level of the glassed-in platform area, he halted. A boy, not more than 14 years of age, stood at the front of the platform, staring out into a noisy sea of fire. A pair of binoculars was slung about his neck and to one side of him stood a massive bank of instruments.

Paxton clambered up the rest of the way and stepped inside the platform.

"Hello, young man!" he shouted.

The youngster turned around. He seemed an engaging fellow, with a cowlick down his forehead.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I'm afraid I didn't hear you."

"What is going on here?"

"A war," said the boy. "Pertwee just launched his big attack. I'm hard-pressed to hold him off."

Paxton gasped a little. "But this is most unusual!" he protested.

The boy wrinkled up his forehead. "I don't understand."

"You are Nelson Moore's son?"

"Yes, sir, I am Graham Moore."

"I knew your father many years ago. We went to school together."

"He will be glad to see you, sir," the boy said brightly, sensing an opportunity to rid himself of this uninvited kibitzer. "You take the path just north of west. It will lead you to the house."

"Perhaps," suggested Paxton, "you could come along and show me."

"I can't leave just yet," said Graham. "I must blunt Pertwee's attack. He caught me off my balance and has been saving up his firepower and there were some manoeuvres that escaped me until it was too late. Believe me, sir, I'm in an unenviable position."

"This Pertwee?"

"He's the enemy. We've fought for two years now."

"I see," said Paxton solemnly and retreated down the ladder.

He found the path and followed it and found the house, set in a swale between two hillocks. It was an old and rambling affair among great clumps of trees.

The path ended on a patio and a woman's voice asked: "Is that you, Nels?"

She sat in a rocking chair on the smooth stone flags and was little more than a blur of whiteness - a white face haloed by white hair.

"Not Nels," he said. "An old friend of your son's."

From here, he noticed, through some trick of acoustics in the hills, one could barely hear the sound of battle, although the sky to the east was lighted by an occasional flash of heavy rockets or artillery fire.

"We are glad to have you, sir," the old lady said, still rocking gently back and forth. "Although I do wish Nelson would come home. I don't like him wandering around after it gets dark."

"My name is Stanley Paxton. I'm with Politics."

"Why, yes," she said, "I remember now. You spent an Easter with us, 20 years ago. I'm Cornelia Moore, but you may call me Grandma, like all the rest of them."

"I remember you quite well," said Paxton. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Heavens, no. We have few visitors. We're always glad to see one. Theodore especially will be pleased. You'd better call him Granther."

"Granther?"

"Grandfather. That's the way Graham said it when he was a tyke."

"I met Graham. He seemed to be quite busy. He said Pertwee had caught him off his balance."

"That Pertwee plays too rough," said Grandma, a little angrily.

A robot catfooted out onto the patio. "Dinner is ready, madam," it said.

"We'll wait for Nelson," Grandma told it.

"Yes, madam. He should be in quite soon. We shouldn't wait too long. Granther has already started on his second brandy."

"We have a guest, Elijah. Please show him to his room. He is a friend of Nelson's."

"Good evening, sir," Elijah said. "If you will follow me. And your luggage. Perhaps I can carry it."

"Oh, course you can," said Grandma drily. "I wish, Elijah, you'd stop putting on airs when there's company."

"I have no luggage," Paxton said, embarrassed.

He followed the robot across the patio and into the house, going down the central hall and up the very handsome winding staircase.

The room was large and filled with old-fashioned furniture. A sedate fireplace stood against one wall.

"I'll light a fire," Elijah said. "It gets chilly in the autumn once the sun goes down. And damp. It looks like rain."

Paxton stood in the centre of the room, trying to remember.

Grandma was a painter and Nelson was a naturalist, but what about old Granther?'

"The old gentleman," said the robot, stooping at the fireplace, "will send you up a drink. He'll insist on brandy, but if you wish it, I could get you something else."

"No, thank you. Brandy will be fine."

"The old gentleman's in great fettle. He'll have a lot to tell you. He's just finished his sonata, sir, after working at it for almost seven years, and he's very proud of it. There were times, I don't mind telling you, when it was going badly, that he wasn't fit to live with. If you'd just look here at my bottom, sir, you can see a dent ..."

"So I see," said Paxton uncomfortably.

The robot rose from before the fireplace and the flames began to crackle, crawling up the wood.

"I'll go for your drink," Elijah said. "If it takes a little longer than seems necessary, do not become alarmed. The old gentleman undoubtedly will take this opportunity to lecture me about hewing to civility, now that we have a guest."

Paxton walked to the bed, took off his cloak and hung it on a bedpost. He walked back to the fire and sat down in a chair, stretching out his legs toward the warming blaze.

It had been wrong of him to come here, he thought. These people should not be involved in his problems and his dangers. Theirs was the quiet world, the easygoing, thoughtful world, while his world of Politics was all clamour and excitement and sometimes agony and fear.

He'd not tell them, he decided. And he'd stay just the night and be off before the dawn. Somehow or other he would work out a way to get in contact with his party. Somewhere else he'd find people who would help him.

There was a knock at the door. Apparently it had not taken Elijah as long as it had thought.

"Come in," Paxton called.

It was not Elijah; it was Nelson Moore.

He still wore a rough walking jacket and his boots had mud upon them and there was a streak of dirt across his face where he'd brushed back his hair with a grimy hand.

"Grandma told me you were here," he said, shaking Paxton by the hand.

"I had two weeks off," said Paxton, lying like a gentleman. "We just finished with an exercise. It might interest you to know that I was elected President."

"Why, that is fine," said Nelson enthusiastically.

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"Let's sit down."

"I'm afraid I may be holding up the dinner. The robot said —"

Nelson laughed. "Elijah always rushes us to eat. He wants to get the day all done and buttoned up. We've come to expect it of him and we pay him no attention."

"I'm looking forward to meeting Anastasia," Paxton said. "I remember that you wrote of her often —"

"She's not here," said Nelson. "She - well, she left me. Almost five years ago. She missed Outside too much. None of us should marry outside Continuation."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have —"

"It's all right, Stan. It's all done with now. There are some who simply do not fit into the project. I've wondered many times, since Anastasia left, what kind of folks we are. I've wondered if it all is worth it."

"All of us think that way at times," said Paxton. "There have been times when I've been forced to fall back on history to find some shred of justification for what we're doing here. There's a parallel in the monks of the so-called Middle Ages. They managed to preserve at least part of the knowledge of the

Hellenic world. For their own selfish reasons, of course, as Continuation has its selfish reasons, but the human race was the real beneficiary."

"I go back to history, too," said Nelson. "The one that I come up with is a Stone Age savage, hidden off in some dark corner, busily flaking arrows while the first spaceships are being launched. It all seems so useless, Stan ..."

"On the face of it, I suppose it is. It doesn't matter in the least that I was elected President in our just-finished exercise, there may be a day when that knowledge and technique of politics may come in very handy. And when it does, all the human race will have to do is come back here to Earth and they'll be living art. This campaign that I waged was a dirty one, Stan. I'm not proud of it."

"There's a good deal of dirty things in the human culture," Nelson said, "but if we commit ourselves at all, it must be all the humans the vicious with the noble, the dirty with the splendid." A door opened quietly and Elijah glided in. It had two cups on a tray.

"I heard you come in," it said to Nelson, "so I brought you something, too."

"Thank you," Nelson said. "That was kind of you." Elijah shuffled in some embarrassment. "If you don't mind, would you hurry just a little? The old gentleman has almost killed the bottle. I'm afraid of what might happen to him if I don't get back to the table."

Dinner had been finished and young Graham hustled off to bed. Granther unearthed, with great solemnity, another bottle of good brandy.

"That boy is a caution," he declared. "I don't know what's come of him. Imagine him out there all day long, fighting fool battles. If he was going to take up something, I should think he'd want it to be useful. There's nothing more useless than a General when there are no wars."

Grandma clacked her teeth together with impatience. "It isn't that we hadn't tried. We gave him every chance there was. But he wasn't interested in anything until he took up warring." "He's got guts," said Granther proudly. "That much I'll say of him. He up and asked me the other day would I write him battle music. Me!" yelled Granther, thumping his chest, write battle music!"

"He's got the seeds of destruction in him," declared Grandma seriously. "He doesn't want to build. He just wants to bust."

"Don't look at me," Nelson said to Paxton. "I gave up long ago. Granther and Grandma took him over from me right after Anastasia left. To hear them talk, you'd think they hated him. But let me lift a finger to him and the both of them -"

"We did the best we could," said Grandma. "We gave him every chance. We bought him all the testing kits. You remember?"

"Sure," said Granther, busy with the bottle. "I remember well. We bought him that ecology kit and you should have seen the planet he turned out. It was the most pitiful, down-at-heels, hungover planet you ever saw. And then we tried robotry —"

"He did right well at that," said Grandma tartly.

"Sure, he built them. He enjoyed building them. Recall the time he geared the two of them to hate each other and they fought until they were just two piles of scrap? I never saw anyone have such a splendid time as Graham during the seven days they fought."

"We could scarcely get him in to meals," said Grandma.

Granther handed out the brandy.

"But the worst of all," he decided, "was the time we tried religion. He dreamed up a cult that was positively gummy. We made short work of that ..."

"And the hospital," said Grandma. "That was your idea, Nels. . ."

"Let's not talk about it," pleaded Nelson grimly. "I am sure Stanley isn't interested."

Paxton picked up the cue Nelson was offering him. "I was going to ask you, Grandma, what kind of painting you are doing. I don't recall that Nelson ever told me."

"Landscapes," the sweet-faced old lady said. "I've been doing some experimenting."

"And I tell her she is wrong," protested Granther. "To experiment is wrong. Our job is to maintain tradition, not to let our work go wandering off in whatever direction it might choose."

"Our job," said Grandma bitterly, "is to guard the techniques. Which is not to say we cannot strive at

progress, if it still is human progress. Young man," she appealed to Paxton, "isn't that the way you see it?"

"Well, in part," evaded Paxton, caught between two fires. "In Politics, we allow evolvement, naturally, but we make sure by periodic tests that we are developing logically and in the human manner. And we make very sure we do not drop any of the old techniques, no matter how outmoded they may seem. And the same is true in Diplomacy. I happen to know a bit about Diplomacy, because the two sections work very close together and —"

"There!" Grandma said.

"You know what I think?" said Nelson quietly. "We are a frightened race. For the first time in our history, the human race is a minority and it scares us half to death. We are afraid of losing our identity in the great galactic matrix. We're afraid of assimilation."

"That's wrong, son," Granther disagreed. "We are not afraid, my boy. We're just awful smart, that's all. We had a great culture at one time and why should we give it up? Sure, most humans nowadays have adopted the galactic way of life, but that is not to say that it is for the best. Some day we may want to turn back to the human culture or we may find that later on we can use parts of it. And this way, if we keep it alive here in Project Continuation, it will be available, all of it or any part, any time we need it. And I'm not speaking, mind you, from the human view alone, because some facet of our culture might sometime be badly needed, not by the human race as such, but by the Galaxy itself."

"Then why keep the project secret?"

"I don't think it's really secret," Granther said. "It's just that no one pays much attention to the human race and none at all to Earth. The human race is pretty small potatoes against all the rest of them and Earth is just a worn-out planet that doesn't amount to shucks."

He asked Paxton: "You ever hear it was secret, boy?"

"Why, I guess not," said Paxton. "All I ever understood was that we didn't go around shooting off our mouths about it. I've thought of Continuation as a sort of sacred trust. We're the guardians who watch over the tribal medicine bag while the rest of humanity is out among the stars getting civilised."

The old man chortled. "That's about the size of it. We're just a bunch of bushmen, but mark me well, intelligent and even dangerous bushmen."

"Dangerous?" asked Paxton.

"He means Graham," Nelson told him quietly.

"No, I don't," said Granther. "Not him especially. I mean the whole kit and caboodle of us. Because, don't you see, everybody who joins in this galactic culture that they are stewing up out there must contribute something and must likewise give up something - things that don't fit in with the new ideas. And the human race has done just like the rest of them, except we haven't given up a thing. Oh, on the surface, certainly. But everything we've given up is still back here, being kept alive by a bunch of subsidised barbarians on an old and gutted planet that a member of this fine galactic culture wouldn't give a second look."

"He's horrible," said Grandma. "Don't pay attention to him. He's got a mean and ornery soul inside that withered carcass."

"And what is Man?" yelled Granther. "He's mean and ornery, too, when he has to be. How could we have gone so far if we weren't mean and ornery?"

And there was some truth in that, thought Paxton. For what humanity was doing here was deliberate double-crossing. Although, come to think of it, he wondered, how many other races might be doing the very selfsame thing or its equivalent?

And, if you were going to do it, you had to do it right. You couldn't take the human culture and enshrine it prettily within a museum, for then it would become no more than a shiny showpiece. A fine display of arrowheads was a pretty thing to look at, but a man would never learn to chip a flint into an arrowhead by merely looking at a bunch of them laid out on a velvet-covered board. To retain the technique of chipping arrows, you'd have to keep on chipping arrows, generation after generation, long after the need of them was gone. Fail by one generation and the art was lost.

And the same necessarily must be true of other human techniques and other human arts. And not the purely human arts alone, but the unique human flavour of other techniques which in themselves were

common to many other races.

Elijah brought in an armload of wood and dumped it down upon the hearth, heaped an extra log or two upon the fire, then brushed itself off carefully.

"You're wet," said Grandma.

"It's raining, madam," said Elijah, going out the door.

And so, thought Paxton, Project Continuation kept on practising the old arts, retaining within a living body of the rape the knowledge of their manipulation and their use.

So the section on politics practised politics and the section on diplomacy set up seemingly impossible problems in diplomacy and wrestled with those problems. And in the project factories, teams of industrialists carried on in the old tradition and fought a never-ending feud with the trade unionism teams. And, scattered throughout the land, quiet men and women painted and composed and wrote and sculpted so that the culture that had been wholly human would not perish in the face of the new and wonderful galactic culture that was evolving from the fusion of many intelligences out in the farther stars.

And against what day, wondered Paxton, do we carry on this work? Is it pure and simple, and perhaps even silly, pride? Is it no more than a further expression of human skepticism and human arrogance? Or does it make the solid sense that old Granther thinks it does?

"You're in Politics, you say," Granther said to Paxton. "Now that is what I'd call a worthwhile thing to save. From what I hear, this new culture doesn't pay too much attention to what we call politics. There's administration, naturally, and a sense of civic duty and all that sort of nonsense - but no real politics. Politics can be a powerful thing when you need to win a point."

"Politics is a dirty business far too often," Paxton answered. "It's a fight for power, an effort to override and overrule the principles and policies of an opposing body. In even its best phase, it brought about the fiction of the minority, with the connotation that the mere fact of being a minority carries with it the penalty of being to a large extent ignored."

"Still, it could be fun. I suppose it is exciting."

"Yes, you could call it that," said Paxton. "This last exercise we carried out was one with no holds barred. We had it planned that way. It was described somewhat delicately as a vicious battle."

"And you were elected President," said Nelson.

"That I was, but you didn't hear me say I was proud of it."

"But you should be," Grandma insisted. "In the ancient days, it was a proud thing to be elected President."

"Perhaps," Paxton admitted, "but not the way my party did it."

It would be so easy, he thought, to go ahead and tell them, for they would understand. To say: I carried it too far. I blackened my opponent's name and character beyond any urgent need. I used all the dirty tricks. I bribed and lied and compromised and traded. And I did it all so well that I even fooled the logic that was the referee, which stood in lieu of populace and voter. And now my opponent has dug up another trick and is using it on me.

For assassination was political, even as diplomacy and war were political. After all, politics was little more than the short-circuiting of violence; an election was held rather than a revolution. But at all times the partition between politics and violence was a thin and flimsy thing.

He finished . off his brandy and put the glass down on the table.

Granther picked up the bottle, but Paxton shook his head.

"Thank you," he said. "If you don't mind, I shall go to bed soon. I must get an early start."

He never should have stopped here. It would be unforgivable to embroil these people in the aftermath of the exercise.

Although, he told himself, it probably was unfair to call it the aftermath - what was happening would have to be a part and parcel of the exercise itself.

The doorbell tinkled faintly and they could hear Elijah stirring in the hall.

"Sakes alive," said Grandma, "who can it be this time of night? And raining outdoors, too!"

It was a churchman.

He stood in the hall, brushing water from his cloak. He took off his broad-brimmed hat and swished

it to shake off the raindrops.

He came into the room with a slow and stately tread.

All of them arose.

"Good evening, Bishop," said old Granther. "You were fortunate to find the house in this kind of weather and we're glad to have Your Worship."

The bishop beamed in fine, fast fellowship.

"Not of the church," he said. "Of the project merely. But you may use the proper terms, if you have a mind. It helps me stay in character."

Elijah, trailing in his wake, took his cloak and hat. The bishop was arrayed in rich and handsome garments.

Granther introduced them all around and found a glass and filled it from the bottle.

The bishop took it and smacked his lips. He sat down in a chair next to the fire.

"You have not dined, I take it," Grandma said. "Of course you haven't - there's no place out there to dine. Elijah, get the bishop a plate of food, and hurry."

"I thank you, madam," said the bishop. "I've had a long, hard day. I appreciate all you're doing for me. I appreciate it more than you can ever know."

"This is our day," Granther said merrily, refilling his own glass for the umpteenth time. "It is seldom that we have any guests at all and now, all of an evening, we have two of them."

"Two guests," said the bishop, looking straight at Paxton. "Now that is fine, indeed."

He smacked his lips again and emptied the glass.

In his room, Paxton closed the door and shot the bolt full home.

The fire had burned down to embers and cast a dull glow along the floor. The rain drummed faintly, half-heartedly, on the window pane.

And the question and the fear raced within his brain.

There was no question of it: The bishop was the assassin who had been set upon his trail.

No man without a purpose, and a deadly purpose, walked these hills at night, in an autumn rain. And what was more, the bishop had been scarcely wet. He'd shaken his hat and the drops had fallen off, and he'd brushed at his cloak and after that both the hat and cloak were dry.

The bishop had been brought here, more than likely, in a hovering flier and let down, as other assassins probably likewise had been let down this very night in all of half a dozen places where a fleeing man might have taken shelter.

The bishop had been taken to the room just across the hall and under other circumstances, Paxton told himself, he might have sought conclusions with him there. He walked over to the fireplace and picked up the heavy poker and weighed it in his hand. One stroke of that and it would be all over.

But he couldn't do it. Not in this house.

He put the poker back and walked over to the bed and picked up his cloak. Slowly he slid it on as he stood there, thinking, going over in his mind the happenings of the morning.

He had been at home, alone, and the phone had rung and Sullivan's face had filled the visor - a face all puffed up with fright.

"Hunter's out to get you," Sullivan had said. "He's sent men to get you."

"But he can't do that!" Paxton remembered protesting.

"Certainly he can," said Sullivan. "It comes within the framework of the exercise. Assassination has always been a possibility ..."

"But the exercise is finished!"

"Not so far as Hunter is concerned. You went a little far. You should have stayed within the hypothesis of the problem; there was no need to go back into Hunter's personal affairs. You dug up things he thought no one ever knew. How did you do it, man?"

"I have my ways," said Paxton. "And in a deal like this, everything was fair. He didn't handle me exactly as if I were innocent."

"You better get going," Sullivan advised. "They must be almost there. I can't get anyone there soon enough to help you."

And it would have been all right, Paxton thought, if the flier had only held together.

He wondered momentarily if it had been sabotaged.

But be that as it may, he had flown it down and had been able to walk away from it and now, finally, here he was.

He stood irresolutely in the centre of the room.

It went against his pride to flee for a second time, but there was nothing else to do. He couldn't let this house become involved in the tag-end rough and tumble of his exercise.

And despite the poker, he was weaponless, for weapons on this now-peaceful planet were very few indeed - no longer household items such as once had been the case.

He went to the window and opened it and saw that the rain had stopped and that a ragged moon was showing through a scud of racing clouds.

Glancing down, he saw the roof of the porch beneath the window and he let his eye follow down the roof line. Not too hard, he thought, if a man were barefoot, and once he reached the edge there'd be a drop of not much more than 7ft.

He took off his sandals and stuffed them in the pocket of his cloak and started out the window.

But, halfway out, he climbed back in again and walked to the door. Quietly he slid back the bolt. It wasn't exactly cricket to go running off and leave a room locked up.

The roof was slippery with the rain, but he managed it without any trouble, inching his way carefully down the incline. He dropped into a shrub that scratched him up a bit, but that, he told himself, was a minor matter.

He put on his sandals and straightened up and walked rapidly away. At the edge of the woods, he stopped and looked back at the house. It stood dark and silent.

Once he got back home and this affair was finished, he promised himself, he'd write Nelson a long apologetic letter and explain it all.

His feet found the path and he followed it through the sickly half-light of the cloudy moon.

"Sir," said a voice close beside him, "I see that you are out for a little stroll ..."

Paxton jumped in fright.

"It's a nice night for it, sir," the voice went on quietly. "After a rain, everything seems so clean and cool."

"Who is there?" asked Paxton, with his hair standing quite on edge.

"Why, it's Pertwee, sir. Pertwee, the robot, sir."

Paxton laughed a little nervously. "Oh, yes, I remember now. You're Graham's enemy."

The robot stepped out of the woods into the path beside him.

"It's too much, I suppose," Pertwee said, "to imagine that you might be coming out to look at the battlefield."

"Why, no," said Paxton, grasping at a straw. "I don't know how you guessed it, but that's exactly what I'm doing. I've never heard of anything quite like it and I'm considerably intrigued."

"Sir," said the robot eagerly, "I'm entirely at your service. There is no one, I can assure you, who is better equipped to explain it to you. I've been in it from the very first with Master Graham and if you have any questions, I shall try to answer them."

"Yes, I think there is one question. What is the purpose of it all?"

"Why, at first, of course," said Pertwee, "it was simply an attempt to amuse a growing boy. But now, with your permission, sir. I would venture the opinion that it is a good deal more."

"You mean a part of Continuation?"

"Certainly, sir. I know there is a natural reluctance among humankind to admit the fact, or to even think about it, but for a great part of Man's history war played an important and many-sided role. Of all the arts that Man developed, there probably was none to which he devoted so much time and thought and money as he did to war."

The path sloped down and there before them in the pale and mottled moonlight lay the battle bowl.

"That bowl," asked Paxton, "or whatever it might be that you have tipped over it? Sometimes you can just make it out and other times you miss it ..."

"I suppose," said Pertwee, "you'd call it a force shield, sir. A couple of the older robots worked it out. As I understand it, sir, it is nothing new -just an adaptation. There's a time factor worked into it as an additional protection."

"But that sort of protection ..."

"We use TC bombs, sir - total conversion bombs. Each side gets so many of them and uses his best judgment and ..."

"But you couldn't use nuclear stuff in there!"

"As safe as a toy, sir," said Pertwee gaily. "They are very small, sir. Not much larger than a pea. Critical mass, as you well understand, no longer is much of a consideration. And the yield in radiation, while it is fairly high, is extremely short-lived, so that within an hour or so ..."

"You gentlemen," said Paxton grimly, "certainly try to be entirely realistic."

"Why, yes, of course we do. Although the operators are entirely safe. We're in the same sort of position, you might say, as the general staff. And that is all right, of course, because the purpose of the entire business is to keep alive the art of waging war."

"But the art ..." Paxton started to argue, then stopped.

What could he say? If the race persisted in its purpose of keeping the old culture workable and intact in Continuation, then it must perforce accept that culture in its entirety.

War, one must admit, was as much a part of the human culture as were all the other more or less uniquely human things that the race was conserving here as a sort of racial cushion against a future need or use.

"There is," confessed Pertwee, "a certain cruelty, but perhaps a cruelty that I, as a robot, am more alive to than would be the case with a human, sir. The rate of casualties among the robot troops is unbelievable. In a restricted space and with extremely high firepower, that would be the natural consequence."

"You mean that you use troops - that you send robots in there?"

"Why, yes. Who else would operate the weapons? And it would be just a little silly, don't you think, to work out a battle and then ..."

"But robots ..."

"They are very small ones, sir. They would have to be, to gain an illusion of the space which is normally covered by a full-scale battle. And the weapons likewise are scaled down, and that sort of evens things out. And the troops are very single-minded, completely obedient and dedicated to victory. We turn them out in mass production in our shops and there's little chance to give them varying individualities and anyhow ..."

"Yes, I see," said Paxton, a little stunned. "But now I think that I..."

"But, sir, I have only got a start at telling you and I've not shown you anything at all. There are so many considerations and there were so many problems."

They were close to the towering, fully shimmering force field now and Pertwee pointed to a stairway that led from ground level down toward its base.

"I'd like to show you, sir," said Pertwee, ducking down the stairs.

It stopped before a door.

"This," it said, "is the only entrance to the battlefield. We use it to send new troops and munitions during periods of truce, and at other times we use it to polish up the place a bit."

Its thumb stabbed out and hit a button to one side of the door and the door moved upward silently.

"After several weeks of battle," the robot explained, "the terrain is bound to become a little cluttered."

Through the door, Paxton could see the churned-up ground and the evidence of dying, and it was as if someone had pushed him in the belly. He gulped in a stricken breath and couldn't let it out and he suddenly was giddy and nearly sick. He put out a hand to hold himself upright against the trench-like wall beside him.

Pertwee pushed another button and the door slid down.

"It hits you hard the first time you see it," Pertwee apologised, "but given time, one gets used to it."

Paxton let his breath out slowly and looked around. The trench with the stairway came down to the

door, and the door, he saw, was wider than the trench, so that at the foot of the steps the area had been widened into a sort of letter T, with narrow embrasures scooped out to face the door.

"You all right, sir?" asked Pertwee.

"Perfectly all right," Paxton told the robot stiffly.

"And now," said Pertwee happily, "I'll explain the fire and tactical control."

It trotted up the steps and Paxton trailed behind it.

"I'm afraid that would take too long," said Paxton.

But the robot brushed the words aside. "You must see it, sir," it pleaded plaintively. "Now that you are out here, you must not miss seeing it."

He'd have to get away somehow, Paxton told himself. He couldn't afford to waste much time. As soon as the house had settled down to sleep, the bishop would come hunting him, and by that time he must be gone.

Pertwee led the way around the curving base of the battle bowl to the observation tower which Paxton had come upon that evening.

The robot halted at the base of the ladder.

"After you," it said.

Paxton hesitated, then went swiftly up the ladder.

Maybe this wouldn't take too long, he thought, and then he could be off. It would be better, he realised, if he could get rid of Pertwee without being too abrupt about it.

The robot brushed past him in the darkness and bent above the bank of controls. There was a snick and lights came on in the panels.

"This, you see," it said, "is the groundglass - a representation of the battlefield. It is dead now, of course, because there is nothing going on, but when there is some action certain symbols are imposed upon the field so that one can see at all times just how things are going. And this is the fire control panel and this is the troop command panel and this ..."

Pertwee went on and on with his explanations.

Finally it turned in triumph from the instruments.

"What do you think of it?" the robot asked, very clearly expecting praise.

"Why, it's wonderful," said Paxton, willing to say anything to make an end of his visit.

"If you are going to be around tomorrow," Pertwee said, "you may want to watch us."

And it was then that Paxton got his inspiration.

"As a matter of fact," Paxton said, "I'd like to try it out. In my youth, I did a bit of reading on military matters, and if you'll excuse my saying so, I have often fancied myself somewhat of an expert."

Pertwee brightened almost visibly. "You mean, sir, that you'd like to go one round with me?"

"If you'd be so kind."

"You are sure you understand how to operate the board?"

"I watched you very closely."

"Give me fifteen minutes to reach my tower," said Pertwee. "When I arrive, I'll press the ready button. After that, either of us can start hostilities any time we wish."

"Fifteen minutes?"

"It may not take me that long, sir. I'll be quick about it."

"And I'm not imposing on you?"

"Sir," Pertwee said feelingly, "it will be a pleasure. I've fought against young Master Graham until the novelty has worn off. We know one another's tactics so well that there's little chance for surprise. As you can understand, sir, that makes for a rather humdrum war."

"Yes," said Paxton, "I suppose it would."

He watched Pertwee go down the ladder and listened to its footsteps hurrying away.

Then he went down the ladder and stood for a moment at the foot of it.

The clouds had thinned considerably and the moonlight was bright now and it would be easier travelling, although it still would be dark in the denser forest.

He swung away from the tower and headed for the path, and, as he did so, he caught a flicker of

motion in a patch of brush just off the trail.

Paxton slid into the denser shadow of a clump of trees and watched the patch of brush.

He crouched and waited. There was another cautious movement in the brush and he saw it was the bishop. Now suddenly it seemed that there was a chance to get the bishop off his neck for good - if his inspiration would only pay off.

The bishop had been let down by the flier in the dark of night, with the rain still pouring down and no moonlight at all. So it was unlikely that he knew about the battle bowl, although more than likely he must see it now, glittering faintly in the moonlight. But even if he saw it, there was a chance he'd not know what it was.

Paxton thought back along the conversation there had been after the bishop had arrived and no one, so far as he remembered, had mentioned a word of young Graham or the war project.

There was, Paxton thought, nothing lost by trying. Even if it didn't work, all he'd lose would be a little time.

He darted from the clump of trees to reach the base of the battle bowl. He crouched against the ground and watched, and the bishop came sliding out of his clump of brush and worked his way along, closing in upon him.

And that was fine, thought Paxton. It was working just the way he'd planned.

He moved a little to make absolutely sure his trailer would know exactly where he was and then he dived down the stairs that led to the door.

He reached it and thumbed the button and the door slid slowly upward without a single sound. Paxton crowded back into the embrasure and waited.

It took a little longer than he had thought it would and he was getting slightly nervous when he heard the step upon the stairs.

The bishop came down slowly, apparently very watchful, and then he reached the door and stood there for a moment, staring out into the churned-up battlefield. And in his hand he held an ugly gun.

Paxton held his breath and pressed his shoulders tight against the wall of earth, but the bishop didn't even look around. His eyes were busy taking in the ground that lay beyond the door.

Then finally he moved, quickly, like a leopard. His silken garments made a swishing noise as he stepped through the door and out into the battle area.

Paxton held himself motionless, watching the bishop advance cautiously out into the field, and when he was far enough, he reached out a finger and pressed the second button and the door came down, smoothly, silently.

Paxton leaned against the door and let out in a gasp the breath he had been holding.

It was over now, he thought.

Hunter hadn't been as clever as he had thought he was.

Paxton turned from the door and went slowly up the stairs.

Now he needn't run away. He could stay right here and Nelson would fly him, or arrange to have him flown, to some place of safety.

For Hunter wouldn't know that this particular assassin had hunted down his quarry. The bishop had had no chance to communicate and probably wouldn't have dared to even if he could.

On the top step, Paxton stubbed his toe and went down without a chance to catch himself, and there was a vast explosion that shook the universe and artillery fire was bursting in his brain.

Dazed, he got to his hands and knees and crawled painfully, hurling himself desperately down the stairs - and through the crashing uproar that filled the entire world ran an urgent thought and purpose.

I've got to get him out before it is too late! I can't let him die in there! I can't kill a man!

He slipped on the stairs and slid until his body jammed in the narrowness and stuck.

And there was no artillery fire, there was no crash of shells, no wicked little chitterings. The dome glittered softly in the moonlight and was as quiet as death.

Except, he thought, a little weirdly, death's not quiet in there. It is an inferno of destruction and a maddening place of sound and brightness and the quietness doesn't come until afterward.

He'd fallen and hit his head, he knew, and all he'd seen and heard had been within his brain. But

Pertwee would be opening up any minute now and the quietness would be gone and with it the opportunity to undo what he had so swiftly planned.

And somewhere in the shadow of the dome another self stood off and argued with him, jeering at his softness, quoting logic at him.

It was either he or you, said that other self. You fought for your life the best way you knew, the only way you knew, and whatever you may have done, no matter what you did, you were entirely justified.

"I can't do it!" yelled the Paxton on the stairs and yet even as he yelled he knew that he was wrong, that by logic he was wrong, that the jeering self who stood off in the shadows made more sense than he.

He staggered to his feet. Without his conscious mind made up, he went down the stairs. Driven by some as yet unrealised and undefined instinctive prompting that was past all understanding, he stumbled down the stairs, with the throb still in his head and a choking guilt and fear rising in his throat. He reached the door and stabbed the button and the door slid up and he went out into the cluttered place of dying and stopped in horror at the awful loneliness and the vindictive desolation of this square mile of Earth that was shut off from all the other Earth as if it were a place of final judgment.

And perhaps it was, he thought - the final judgment of Man.

Of all of us, he thought, young Graham may be the only honest one; he's the true barbarian that old Granther thinks he is; he is the throwback who looks out upon Man's past and sees it as it is and lives it as it was.

Paxton took a quick look back and he saw the door was closed and out ahead of him, in the ploughed and jumbled sea of tortured, battered earth, he saw a moving figure that could be no one but the bishop.

Paxton ran forward, shouting, and the bishop turned around and stood there, waiting, with the gun half lifted.

Paxton stopped and waved his arms in frantic signalling. The bishop's gun came up and there was a stinging slash across the side of Paxton's neck and a sudden, gushing wetness. A small, blue puff of smoke hung on the muzzle of the distant gun.

Paxton flung himself aside and dived for the ground. He hit and skidded on his belly and tumbled most ingloriously into a dusty crater. He lay there, at the bottom of the crater, huddled against the fear of the bullet's impact while the rage and fury built up into white heat.

He had come here to save a man and the man had tried to kill him!

I should have left him here, he thought.

I should have let him die.

I'd kill him if I could.

And the fact of the matter now was that he had to kill the bishop. There was no choice but to kill him or be killed himself.

Not only did he have to kill the bishop, but he had to kill him soon. Pertwee's 15 minutes must be almost at an end and the bishop had to be killed and he had to be out the door before Pertwee opened fire.

Out the door, he thought - did he have a chance? If he ran low and dodged, perhaps, would he have a chance to escape the bishop's bullets?

That was it, he thought. Waste no time on killing if he didn't have to; let Pertwee do the killing. Just get out of here himself.

He put his hand up to his neck, and when he lifted it, his fingers were covered with a sticky wetness. It was funny, he thought, that it didn't hurt, although the hurt, no doubt, would come later.

He crawled up the crater's side and rolled across its lip and found himself lying in a small, massed junkyard of smashed and broken robots, sprawled grotesquely where the barrage had caught them.

And lying there in front of him, without a scratch upon it, where it had fallen from a dying robot's grasp, was a rifle that shone dully in the moonlight.

He snatched it up and rose into a crouch and as he did he saw the bishop, almost on top of him; the bishop coming in to make sure that he was finished!

There was no time to run, as he had planned to - and, curiously, no desire to run. Paxton had never

known actual hate before, never had a chance to know it, but now it came and filled him full of rage and a wild and exultant will and capacity to kill without pity or remorse.

He tilted up the rifle and his finger closed upon the trigger and the weapon danced and flashed and made a deadly chatter.

But the bishop still came on, not rushing now, but plodding ahead with a deadly stride, leaning forward as if his body were absorbing the murderous rifle fire, absorbing it and keeping on by will power alone, holding off death until that moment when it might snuff out the thing that was killing it.

The bishop's gun came up and something smashed into Paxton's chest, and smashed again and yet again, and there was a flood of wetness and a spattering and the edge of Paxton's brain caught at the hint of something wrong.

For two men do not - could not - stand a dozen feet apart and pour at one another a deadly blast and both stay on their feet. No matter how poor might be their aim, it simply couldn't happen.

He rose out of his crouch and stood at his full height and let the gun hang uselessly in his hand. Six feet away, the bishop stopped as well and flung his gun away.

They stood looking at one another in the pale moonlight and the anger melted and ran out of them and Paxton wished that he were almost anywhere but there.

"Paxton," asked the bishop plaintively, "who did this to us?"

And it was a funny thing to say, almost as if he'd said: "Who stopped us from killing one another?"

For a fleeting moment, it almost seemed to Paxton as though it might have been a kinder thing if they had been allowed to kill. For killing was a brave thing in the annals of the race, an art of strength and a certain proof of manhood - perhaps of humanhood.

A kinder thing to be allowed to kill. And that was it, exactly. They had not been allowed to kill.

For you couldn't kill with a popgun that shot out plastic pellets of liquid that burst on contact, with the liquid running down like blood for the sake of realism. And you couldn't kill with a gun that went most admirably through all the motions of chattering and smoking and flashing out red fire, but with nothing lethal in it.

And was this entire battle bowl no more than a toy set with robots that came apart at the right and most dramatic moments and then could be put back together at a later time? Were the artillery and the total-conversion bombs toy things as well, with a lot of flash and noise and perhaps a few well-placed items to plough up the battlefield, but without the power to really hurt a robot?

The bishop said, "Paxton, I feel like an utter fool." And he added other words which a real bishop could never bring himself to say, making very clear just what kind of obscene fool he was.

"Let's get out of here," said Paxton shortly, feeling like that same kind of fool himself.

"I wonder . . ." said the bishop.

"Forget about it," Paxton growled. "Let's just get out of here. Pertwee will be opening up ..."

But he didn't finish what he was about to say, for he realised that even if Pertwee did open up, there'd be little danger. And there wasn't any chance that Pertwee would open up, for it would know that they were here.

Like a metal monitor watching over a group of rebellious children - rebellious because they weren't adult yet. Watching them and letting them go ahead and play so long as they were in no danger of drowning or of falling off a roof or some other reckless thing. And then interfering only just enough to save their silly necks. Perhaps even encouraging them to play so they'd work off their rebelliousness - joining in the game in the typically human tradition of let's pretend.

Like monitors watching over children, letting them develop, allowing them to express their foolish little selves, not standing in the way of whatever childish importance they could muster up, encouraging them to think they were sufficient to themselves.

Paxton started for the door, plodding along, the bishop in his bedraggled robes stumbling along behind him.

When they were a hundred feet away, the door started sliding up and Pertwee stood there, waiting for them, not looking any different than it had before, but somehow seeming to have a new measure of importance.

They reached the door and sheepishly trailed through it, not looking right or left, casually and elaborately pretending that Pertwee was not there.

"Gentlemen," said Pertwee, "don't you want to play?"

"No," Paxton said. "No, thank you. I can't speak for both of us—"

"Yes, you can, friend," the bishop put in. "Go right ahead."

"My friend and I have done all the playing we care to do," said Paxton. "It was good of you to make sure we didn't get hurt."

Pertwee managed to look puzzled. "But why should anybody be allowed to get hurt? It was only a game."

"So we've discovered. Which way is out?"

"Why," said the robot, "any way but back."

Trojan Horse Laugh

by John D. MacDonald

John D. MacDonald is famed as master of the suspense novel . . . stories in which the familiar here-and-now can suddenly become terrifying beyond belief. His views of the future can be no less terrifying, and tomorrow may be closer than we wish in this story of a society victim to the ultimate huckster—the man who sells control of the emotions.

DIVERT YOUR PSYCHE
ADJUST YOUR ID
JOIN THE CROWD AND
GROOVE YOURSELF, KID.

"Like honey on a slow fire," Joe Morgan said in a mildly nauseated tone. "Where on earth they get babes with those voices?"

Sadie Barnum, beside him on the front seat of Joe's vast and asthmatic monster of an automobile, grinned in the darkness, crooned low in her throat, singing an almost perfect imitation of the radio commercial. ". . . and groove yourself, kid."

"Oh, no!" said Joe. "No!"

The car was in the park above the city, nuzzling the stone wall, cheek and jowl with the newer and shinier models on either side. The commercial had originally come from the radio in the car on their left.

Below them, the lights of the city of Dayton made it a very nice looking night indeed.

"You could turn my overpowering love to hate, Barnum," Joe said. "Let us get back to what we came for." He reached for her.

Sadie, her jaw set, fended him off deftly. She had turned so that the dim light touched her face. It was a small, alert, vital face, some of the force of it stolen by eyes that were big and sea-gray and an invitation to drown quietly.

"Now that the subject has been brought up, Joseph," she said firmly, "we will dwell on it apace."

Joe slumped grimly behind the wheel. He was a longheaded citizen, a crisp black crew-cut peppered with premature gray, a limp and lazy body which he threw into chairs in the manner of someone tossing a wet towel, which body, during war years, he had tossed out of various and sundry aircraft.

"Go dwell," he said.

She held up a small hand, counting firmly on her fingers. "One—Dayton is a test city for Happiness, Incorporated. Thus the price is reasonable. Two—it doesn't hurt a bit. Marge told me that. Three—you are a moody cuss and I expect to marry you the next time you ask me and you're going to be rugged to live with unless we get adjusted." Her voice began to quaver. "Besides, I think you're just being . . . oh, stuffy and narrow-minded about the whole thing."

Joe sighed. He had heard it before. And always before he had managed to change the subject before he was pinned down. But something in Sadie's tone made him realize that this time it wasn't going to be

quite as simple.

He collected his forces, turned in the seat, took her small hands in his and said, "Honey, maybe you have the idea that Joseph Morgan, reporter for the *News*, likes to think of himself as a rugged individualist. Maybe you think it's a pose with me. Look, Barnum, I'm Joe Morgan and I'm the guy you happen to love. At least I think you do. I'm not a conformist and it isn't a pose. I don't run around in the same mad little circles as other people because I'm not sold on the idea that what they're after is a good thing."

In a small voice she said, "But they're after happiness, and security, and a home, and kids. Is that bad?"

"By itself, no. But what happens to their heads? Nobody talks any more. Nobody thinks. All those things are fine if you can get them without losing intellectual self-respect. Why do you think I drive this crate instead of a new one? Just because I won't play patty-cake with the people I'm supposed to play patty-cake with. When I want to be amused, I don't have to go to the movies or turn on the TV or go see a floor show. I'm the unmechanized man, baby. Maybe I'm wrong, but it's no pose."

"But Joe, darlin', what's that got to be with going and taking the shots?"

"Everything. I don't want any needles stuck in me to make me joyous. I don't want my emotional cycle analyzed and adjusted to match everybody else's cycle. I want to be my own man, all the way."

"You don't let that attitude creep into the feature stories you've been writing about Happiness, Incorporated."

"Because I'm a conscientious hack, baby. I make the little words do what I want them to do."

"But, Joe—"

His tone softened. He said, "Sadie, if we both went and got adjusted, we'd never know how much of our happiness together was due to a gent with a needle and a mess of charts, and how much was due to Sadie and Joe. Let's make our own music, without outside help."

She came into his arms, her lips close to his ear. "That's the first argument that's made any sense, Joseph," she said.

In a very few moments all thoughts of Happiness, Incorporated, fled from the minds of Joe and Sadie. But, even as they were fleeing, Joe thought, a trifle darkly, of Dr. August Lewsto and the field crew he had brought to Dayton. There was something odd about Lewsto, vaguely unsavory, vaguely disquieting.

There was a great deal of money behind Happiness, Incorporated. They had arrived three months before and it was a newsworthy item that Dayton had been selected as the test city.

Joe Morgan had been assigned the task of gathering the data for the first story. Lewsto had received him in the hotel suite with all courtesy. Lewsto was a gaunt man in his early fifties with hollow eyes, thin, nervous hands, and a habit of smiling broadly at nothing at all.

"Of course, of course. Do sit down, Mr.—"

"Morgan. Of the *News*. Maybe you can give me the dope on this happiness you expect to peddle. It sounds like a tough thing to do."

Lewsto smiled broadly. "Not at all, Mr. Morgan. Our procedure has been tested and approved by the foremost medical associations. It is a bit difficult to explain it to the layman."

"You can try me, Doc."

"Everyone, Mr. Morgan, has an emotional cycle. The period between the peaks varies with the individual, as does the degree of inclination and declination. Call this cycle the emotional rhythm of the individual. This chart shows you the emotional cycles of each individual in a family of four. Note how the mother's cycle is of ten days' duration, a very short cycle, and also note how the peak in each case is so high as to be almost psychotic. In the depths of depression she is often close to suicidal. A very difficult home life for the family."

"I imagine."

"This basic life rhythm is the product, Mr. Morgan, of the secretions of the glands and variations in the intensity of the electrical impulses within the brain itself. Now look at this chart. This shows the same family after adjustment. We have not eliminated the cycle. We have flattened the woman's cycle, made

the man's a bit more intense, and adjusted the cycles of the two children. Now this family can plan ahead. They know that during each thirty-day period they will feel increasingly better for twenty days. Then there will be five days of warm joy, and a five-day decline, not too abrupt, to the starting point. They will feel good together, mildly depressed at the same time. They can plan holidays accordingly and they can always judge the mood of the other members of the family by their own mood."

"I suppose you have to get the glands and the electricity in line, eh?"

"Quite right. We chart the cycle of each person by a method which, I am afraid, must be kept secret. Then, for each individual, we prepare an injection designed to stimulate certain endocrinological manifestations, and suppress others. After thirty days a booster shot is necessary."

"How big a staff do you have?"

"I brought forty persons with me. More will be employed locally. Certain equipment is being shipped to me and I am negotiating to rent a building on Caroline Street."

"You are going to advertise?"

"Oh, certainly! Radio, television, posters, newspaper ads, direct mail, and a team of industrial salesmen."

"What do you mean by industrial salesmen?"

"Take Company X. It employs three hundred men. A round dozen are chronic complainers and trouble-makers. Others have bad days when their work is poor. Morale is spotty. If one hundred percent of the employees are adjusted, the personnel director will know what the plant's morale will be at any time. It will thus be possible to plan ahead and set production schedules accordingly. Labor difficulties are minimized and profit goes up."

"Sounds like Nirvana," Joe Morgan said dryly. "What does paradise cost?"

"Ten dollars for the individual. Eight dollars per person for industrial contracts. Frankly, Mr. Morgan, that is less than our costs, though I do not wish you to print that information."

At that moment there was a knock at the door. Dr. Lewsto went to the door, brought in a very tall, very grave young woman who, in spite of her severe dress, her air of dignity, seemed to walk to the haunting beat of a half-heard chant.

"Mr. Morgan, this is Miss Pardette, our statistician."

Her handshake was surprisingly firm. Dr. Lewsto continued, "Miss Pardette has been in Dayton for the past month with her assistants, compiling statistics on industrial production, retail sales, and similar matters. She will compile new figures as our work progresses." Lewsto's voice deepened and he took on a lecture platform manner. "It is our aim to show, with Dayton as our test city, that the American city can, through Happiness, Incorporated, be made a healthier, happier, and more profitable place in which to live."

Joe Morgan gravely clapped his hands. Both Miss Pardette and Dr. Lewsto stared at him without friendliness.

Dr. Lewsto said, "I'm afraid, Mr. Morgan, that I detect a rather childish sort of skepticism in your manner. You should not be blind to progress."

"How could you say such a thing, Doc?" Joe asked blandly. "I'm impressed. Really impressed. Every red-blooded American wants happiness. And you're the man to see that he gets it."

Lewsto said, visibly melting, "Ah ... yes. Yes, of course. Forgive me, Mr. Morgan."

But Joe felt the cold eye of Miss Pardette on him.

He said quickly, "Am I to assume, Dr. Lewsto, that you will give every one of your patients the same basic emotional cycle?"

"Yes. That is the key to the whole picture. Instead of a tangled maze of cycles, everyone we treat will have exactly the same cycle, coordinated with everyone else."

II

WHERE'D YOU GET THAT EMOTIONAL BINGE?

IT'S AS OUT OF STYLE AS
A RUSTY HINGE.
WIPE THAT FROWN
OFF YOUR SULKY BROW—
WITH A TEN DOLLAR BILL
GET ADJUSTED *NOW!*

Main Street. It just happens to be Dayton. It could be anybody's main street. Warm May sun, sweating cops implementing the street lights at the busiest corners. A rash of panel delivery trucks, housewives cruising looking for a place wide enough in which to park, music blaring from a television store.

Three blocks from the very center of the city another cop has been detailed to keep the line orderly in front of 34 Caroline Street. It is a small building, and across the front of it is a huge sign—HAPPINESS, INCORPORATED.

The line moves slowly toward the doorway. Inside, it is rapidly and efficiently split into the appropriate groups. Those who are arriving for the first time pay at the desk on the right, receive their number. There are a hundred thousand people in Dayton. The new numbers being issued are in the eleven thousand series.

Those whose cycles have been charted, are shunted up the stairs to where a small vial awaits, bearing their number. A smaller group files toward the back of the building for the essential booster shots.

A plump little man sulks in line, herded along by his wife who looks oddly like a clipper ship under a full head of sail.

She says, "And you listen to me, Henry. After nineteen years of putting up with your childish moods this is one time when you are going to ..."

Her voice goes on and on. Henry pouts and moves slowly with the crowd. He tells himself that no shot in the arm is going to make his life any more enjoyable. Not with the free-wheeling virago he has endured for these many years.

The policeman on the beat is sweating but he smiles fondly at the line. Fastened to the lapel of his uniform is a tiny bronze button with an interlocked H and I. Happiness, Incorporated. The bronze button is issued with the booster shot.

Back to the main drag. A diaper delivery truck tangles fenders with a bread truck. Both drivers are at fault. They climb out, and through force of habit, walk stiff-legged toward each other, one eye on the damage. They both wear the little bronze button. They smile at each other.

"No harm done, I guess. Anyway, not much."

"Same here. Hey, you're one of the happiness boys, too."

"Yeah, I got herded into it by the wife."

"Me too, and I'm not sorry. Gives everything a glow, sort of."

They stand and measure each other. The cycle is on the upswing. Each day is better than the last. The peak is approaching. It is but three days away.

"Look, let's roll these heaps around the corner and grab a quick beer."

Main Street in May. A small, ruffian child, pressed too closely in a department store, unleashes a boot that bounces smartly off the shin of an elderly matron.

The matron winces, smiles placidly at the child's mother, limps away.

The mother grabs the infant by the ear. "You're lucky she was one of the adjusted ones, Homer. I'm going to take you home and belt you a few, and then I'm going to take you and your father down and get both of you adjusted."

Main Street with a small difference. People smile warmly at strangers. There is a hint of laughter in the air, a hint of expectancy. The little bronze buttons catch the sun. The unadjusted stare bleakly at the smiles, at the little buttons, and wonder what has happened to everybody. They begin to feel as though they were left out of something.

Joe Morgan walks dourly along the street, rigidly suppressing an urge to glare at every smile.

A man hurrying out of a doorway runs solidly into him. Joe, caught off balance, sits down smartly. He is hauled to his feet, brushed off. His hand is pumped up and down by the stranger.

"Whyn't yah look where you're running?" Joe asks. "Fella, I'm sorry. I was just plain clumsy. Say, can I buy you a drink? Or can I take you anywhere? My car's right around the corner."

Joe squints at the little bronze button, says, "Skip it," walks down the street.

Joe is unhappy. The managing editor, proudly sporting a little bronze button, has set up a permanent department called, "The Progress of Happiness," and he has assigned Joe Morgan to run it. Joe is out tracking down progress.

He stands across the street and glares at the long line waiting to be processed. He is torn by doubts, wonders vaguely whether he ought to join the line and be adjusted. But he cannot permit such a violation of his right of privacy.

He goes into the offices assigned to Miss Pardette.

Miss Pardette was busy. Joe Morgan sat near her desk, cocked his head to one side and listened carefully to the music she seemed to carry around with her. He couldn't help thinking of Miss Pardette as wasted talent. All she would have to do in any floor show would be to walk across the floor. In the proper costume she would make strong men clutch the tablecloth and signal for another drink. The vitality of her seemed to press against the dark suit she wore like a torrential river held taut by a new dam.

At last she looked up. Joe said, "What's new on delirium today, kitten?"

"I find your attitude offensive," she said. The words were prim and proper. The tone was husky gold, a warm wrapping for hidden caresses.

Joe smiled brightly. "I find happiness offensive. So we're even. What can I put in the paper, Mona Lisa?"

She shuffled the papers on her desk. "I have just compiled a report on the first month of operation of the Quinby Candy Company since the last of their employees received the booster shot. You will have to clear this report with Mr. Quinby before publishing it. He reports a six point three percent drop in absenteeism, a two percent drop in pilferage, an eleven percent drop in tardiness. Total production was up eight point eight percent over the preceding month, with a drop in rejections and spoilage and consequent increase in estimated net profit from the yearly average of four point six percent to five point three percent. The fee to adjust his workers was two thousand three hundred four dollars. It is Mr. Quinby's estimate that he recovered this initial cost in the first two weeks of operation."

"How nice for him," Joe said, glancing at the figures he had scribbled in his notebook. He said, "How did a dish like you get into this racket?"

"Dr. Lewsto employed me."

"I mean in the statistics game."

She gave him a long, steady look. "Mr. Morgan, I have found that figures are one of the few things in life you can depend upon."

"I thought you could depend on the kind of happiness that you people sell." He looked at the bronze button she wore.

She followed the direction of his glance, looked down at the button. She said, "I'm afraid I'm not entitled to wear this. Dr. Lewsto insisted that it would be better for morale for me to wear it. But a statistician must maintain a rigidly objective attitude. To become adjusted might prejudice that attitude."

"How about Lewsto? He wears one."

"It is the same thing with him. The backers felt that, as administrator, he should refrain from becoming adjusted."

"Just like the restaurant owner who goes out to lunch?"

He saw her first smile. It rang like hidden silver bells. "Something like that, Mr. Morgan."

He sighed. "Well, how far are we as of today?"

"New patients are in the eleven thousand series. Fifty-nine hundred totally adjusted."

"Where are those fifty-nine hundred on the chart?"

She stood up, took a pointer and touched it to the big chart on the wall behind her. "Right here. In

three days they will be at the peak. They will remain at the peak for five days, then five days of regression before they begin the climb back up again."

Joe said softly, "It gives me a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. All those people being pushed through an emotional cycle like cattle being herded down the runways in Chicago."

"You'd change your attitude if you would submit to adjustment."

Joe stood up and stretched. "Exactly what I'm afraid of, friend. Morgan, the Unadjusted. That's me." At the door he turned and waved at her. But she was studying reports and she did not look up.

III

FROM GIMMY RIKER'S COLUMN IN THE NEW YORK *Standard Tribune*:

The boys with the beards couldn't find anything wrong with one Doc Lewsto and his gland band, so, financed by mysterious backers, Doc Lewsto is turning the tanktown of Dayton into a carnival of joy. They say that things are so gay over there lately that the Federal Narcotics people are watching it. If the national debt is getting you down, maybe you ought to run over and let the good doctor give you the needle.

FROM AN EDITORIAL IN THE *Hotel-Keepers' Guide* FOR JUNE:

If this sale of Happiness is extended on a countrywide basis, it is evident from reports we have received from our Dayton members, that managers of bars, clubs, and hotels will have to make alterations in basic policy. The money coming into the till closely follows the emotional cycle set up by Dr. August Lewsto to such a degree that during the peak of the curve our members were unable to meet the demand, whereas, at the bottom of the curve, business fell off to nothing. However, the overall picture on a monthly basis showed a 15 to 18 percent improvement.

FROM THE MINUTES OF A SECRET MEETING IN THE PENTAGON BUILDING,
EXCERPT FROM THE SUMMARY BY LIEUTENANT GENERAL GRADERSBY:

Thus, gentlemen, we can conclude that this sociological experiment in Dayton constitutes no threat to our essential defense production at the X plant four miles distant. In fact, production has improved as has the quality of the end product. It is agreed that it is only coincidence that this experiment by Happiness, Incorporated, was set up in the nearest city to X plant, the only current manufacturer of that item so essential to our military strength. However, it is recommended that a committee be formed to consider the question of setting up an alternate facility and that all necessary steps be taken to implement and facilitate the formation of such a committee and that the workings of this committee be facilitated by a further implementation of –

DECODED EXCERPT FROM AN INNOCENT-APPEARING PERSONAL LETTER SET TO
DR. AUGUST LEWSTO:

Units B, C, D, and E have arrived at the key cities originally indicated. Your reports excellent, providing basis for immediate industrial contracts, one of which already signed involving five thousand workers in basic industry with subcontract for propulsion units. Forward subsequent reports of progress directly to men in charge of indicated units, detailing to each of them five trained technicians from your staff. Report in usual way when booster shot record reaches 50 percent total population Dayton.

Joe Morgan, before going up to the newsroom, went into the room off the lobby of the *News* building where Sadie Barnum and two other girls handled many details including the taking of classified advertising. He didn't see Sadie. Julie, the redhead, winked over the shoulder of a man laboriously writing

out an ad. Joe leaned against the wall until the man had paid and gone.

"Where's my gal?" Joe asked.

"Which one. I'm here, Joey."

"You're for Thursdays. I want today's gal, the ineffable Miss Barnum."

"She hit Clance for an extra hour tacked onto her lunch hour. Love must wait."

Joe turned toward the door. "Tell her to buzz me when she gets in."

He went up, winked at the city editor, walked down to his desk, rolled a sheet of paper into the machine, and stared glumly at it. Small warning bells seemed to be ringing in the back of his mind. He was all set to write the story of the second big period of depression, of what happened to Daylon when twenty-two thousand of the adjusted had a simultaneous slump, but he couldn't get his mind off Sadie. She had been a bit difficult about his refusal to be adjusted the night before.

On a hunch he hurried out, climbed into his asthmatic car and roared to Caroline Street. He parked in the bus stop, went down the line looking for Sadie. When he did not see her, he began to breathe more slowly. He had a hunch that it would somehow turn out to be a very bad thing if Sadie were inoculated.

He was glad that he had been wrong. He glanced back at his car, saw the cop writing out a ticket. As he turned to hurry back, he saw Sadie come out the exit door of Happiness, Incorporated.

Muttering, he ran to her, took hold of her arm, spinning her around.

"Hey, my vaccination!" she said, looking up at him with a wide smile.

"You little dope!" he said. "You feather-headed little female cretin. What on earth possessed you to join this rat race."

She didn't seem disturbed. "Somebody had to take the first step, Joseph, and it didn't look as though you would. So I had to. Now you'll do it too, won't you, darlin'?" He saw that her smile was brave, but that there were tears behind it.

"No," he said flatly. "I stay like I am. I suppose you sneaked off and had your cycle charted last week?"

She nodded. "But, Joe, there isn't any harm in it! It's been so wonderful for everybody. Please, Joe."

He took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Oh, wonderful! It's been ducky! You should know that—" He stopped suddenly as some of the information in the back of his mind assumed new meaning, new ominous meaning. He turned on his heel and walked away from her. She called out to him but he didn't stop. He climbed into his car, drove through the grim streets of unsmiling people.

Score for Daylon: May-5,900. June-14,100. July-22,000. August-31,000. September-50,200.

Over half the population of the city.

The period of intense joy in September had been a time of dancing in the street, of song, of an incredible gaiety almost too frantic to be endured.

And the slump touched the bitter depths of despair. Slowly the city climbs back up into the sunlight. The slumped shoulders begin to straighten and the expressions of bleak apathy lighten once more. The road leads up into the sunlight.

And then the building is as it was before. The big sign, HAPPINESS, INCORPORATED, has been taken down. People gather in the street and stare moodily at it. They are the ones who were going to be adjusted "tomorrow."

They have read the article in the paper by Dr. Lewsto. "I wish to thank the citizens of Daylon who have cooperated so splendidly in helping us advance the frontiers of human knowledge in the realm of the emotions. It is with more than a trace of sadness that I and my staff leave Daylon to set up a similar project in another great American city. But we leave, armed with the statistics we have acquired here, confident in the knowledge that, through our efforts, more than half of you have at last attained that ultimate shining goal of mankind—HAPPINESS!"

Yes, the building is empty and the line has ceased to worm slowly toward the open doors. Two technicians remain in a hotel suite to administer the booster shots yet remaining to be given.

Joe Morgan spends five days with Sadie, watching her sink lower and lower into despondency,

trying vainly to cheer her, infected himself by her apathy, learning to think of her as a stranger.

He walks into the office where she works. She gives him a tremulous smile. She has a fragile look, a convalescent look.

"Honey," he said, "it's nice to see that you can smile."

"But its worth it, Joe. Believe me. Look what I have ahead of me. Twenty-five days without a blue moment, without a sad thought, without a bit of worry."

"Sure, sure," he said, his voice rough. "It's lovely."

She said, "Joe, I've been thinking. There's no point to our going on together. I want somebody I can laugh with, be gay with for the days ahead."

He was amazed at the deep sense of relief inside of him. He pretended hurt. He said, "If that's the way you feel about it—"

"I'm awfully sorry, Joe. But I don't want the slightest cloud on my happiness now that I've got it. Not the tiniest cloud. You do see, don't you?"

"It hasn't been the same since this whole thing came to town, this grin circus, has it?"

"Not really, Joe. Before I was . . . well, I was just walking in the shadows. Now I'm out in the sun, Joe. Now I know how to be happy."

Her hand was small and warm in his. "Be good, kid," he said softly.

He went up to his desk. The city editor had blue-penciled a huge X across the copy Joe had turned in. Joe snatched the sheet, went up to him: "Look, Johnson, this is news. Understand? En ee doubleyou ess. What cooks?"

Johnson touched his fingertips lightly to the bronze button in his lapel, smiled faintly. "I don't think it would be good for the city. Nice job and all that, Morgan. But its against policy."

"Whose policy?"

"The managing editor's. I showed it to him."

Joe said firmly and slowly, with emphasis on each word, "Either it goes in the paper or Morgan goes out the door."

"There's the door, Morgan."

Joe went back to his room, rage in his heart. He uncovered his own typewriter, rewrote his copy in dispatch style, made five carbons, addressed the envelopes and sent them out special delivery.

And when that was done, in the late afternoon, he found a small bar with bar stools, took a corner seat, his shoulder against the wall, began treating himself to respectable jolts of rye.

No girl, no job—and a fear in the back of his mind so vast and so shadowy as to make his skin crawl whenever he skirted the edge of it.

Business was poor in the bar. He remembered happier, more normal times, when every day at five there was a respectable gathering of the quick-one-and-home-to-dinner group.

A sleepy bartender wearing a myopic smile lazily polished the glasses and sighed ponderously from time to time. He moved only when Joe raised his finger as a signal for another.

The bar had achieved an aching surrealistic quality and Joe's lips were numb when she slid up onto the stool beside him.

He focused on her gravely. "I thought you left town with the rest of the happy boys," he said.

Alice Pardette said, "I was walking by." She stared at his shotglass. "Would those help me?"

"What've you got?"

"The horrors, Mr. Morgan."

"The name is Joe and if a few of these won't help, nothing will. Why are you still in town?"

As the bartender poured the two shots she said, "When I finished the statistical job, Dr. Lewsto said I could go along with them in an administrative capacity."

"And why didn't you?"

The professional look had begun to wear off Alice Pardette. Joe noticed that her dark eyebrows inscribed two very lovely arcs. He noticed a hollowness at her temples and wondered why this particular and illusive little element of allure had thus far escaped him. He wanted to plant a very gentle kiss on the nearest temple.

"Joe, they wanted to adjust me."

"I hear it's very nice. Makes you happy, you know."

"Joe, maybe I'm afraid of that kind of happiness." She finished her shot, gasped, coughed, looked at him with dark brimming eyes. "Hey," she said, "you didn't go and get—"

"Not Morgan. No ma'am. Uh-uh. All that happened to me is that my girl got herself adjusted and gave me up for the duration. And today I was fired because I had an article they wouldn't print. Oh, I've been adjusted, but not with a needle."

She giggled. "Hey, these little things are warm when you get them down. Gimme another. What was the article about, Joe?"

"Suicides," he said solemnly. "People gunning holes in their heads and leaping out windows and hanging themselves to the high hook in the closet wearing their neckties the wrong way."

"Don't they always do that?"

"In the five days of depression, baby, fourteen of them joined their ancestors. That is more in five days than this old town has seen in the last seventeen months."

He watched the statistical mind take over. "Hm-m-m," she said.

"And 'hm-m-m' again," Joe said. "As far as ethical responsibility is concerned, who knocked 'em off? Answer me that."

"Ole Doc Lewsto, natch."

"Please don't use that expression, Pard. And who helped ole Doc by compiling all those pretty figures? Who but our girl, Alice? Wanna stand trial, kitten?"

She looked at him for long seconds. "Joe Morgan, you better buy me another drink."

He said, "I mailed out releases to a batch of syndicates. Maybe somebody'll print the stuff I dug up."

IV

FROM DELANCEY BOOKER'S COLUMN IN THE WASHINGTON MORNING *Sentinel*:

Happiness, Incorporated, is expanding their operations at an amazing speed. It is only a week since their Washington Agency was established and already it is reported that over seven thousand of our fellow citizens have reported to have profiles made of their emotional cycles. As usual with every move intended to improve the lot of the common man, several Congressmen who represent the worst elements of isolationism and conservatism are attempting to jam through a bill designed to hamstring Happiness, Incorporated. These gentlemen who look at life through a perpetual peashooter are trying to stir up public alarm on the basis that the procedures used by Happiness, Incorporated, have not been properly tested. They will find the going difficult, however, because, though they do not know it, some of their enemies in Congress have already received the initial inoculation. Your columnist saw them there while having his own cycle plotted.

EXCERPT FROM THE INFORMAL TALK GIVEN TO ALL EXECUTIVES OF THE HEATON STEEL COMPANY BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD:

Using our Daylon Plant as a test, it has been conclusively proven that Happiness, Incorporated, is the answer to industrial unrest, high taxes, and dwindling profit. Consequently you will be glad to know that, starting tomorrow morning, we have made special arrangements with Happiness, Incorporated, to set up an inoculation center in every one of our fourteen plants. Within forty days the entire hundred and sixteen thousand employees of Heaton Steel will be happy and adjusted. This procedure will be optional for executives. Any man who refuses to be so treated will please rise.

NOTE ON BULLETIN BOARD AT PAXINSON FIELD, HEADQUARTERS OF THE 28TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP:

All personnel is advised that, beginning tomorrow, 18 Sept., Bldg. 83 will be set aside for civilian

employees of Happiness, Incorporated. Any military personnel desirous of undergoing adjustment can obtain, for a special price of five dollars, a card entitling him or her to receive a complete emotional adjustment styled to fit the optimum curve. In this matter you will notice that the Air Force has once again moved with greater rapidity than either the Army or the Navy—2nd Lt. Albert Anderson Daley, Post Exchange Officer.

MEMO TO ALL MEMBER STATIONS, INTERCOAST BROADCASTING COMPANY:

In the spot commercials previously contracted for, kindly revise lyric to read as follows, utilizing local talent until new disks can be cut:

Divert your psyche

Repair your Id

Join the crowd and

Adjust yourself, kid.

Remainder to be, "Go to your nearest adjustment station set up in your community by Happiness, Incorporated. See those happy smiles? Do not wait . . . et cetera ... et cetera ... et cetera.

FROM THE SCRIPT OF THE CAROLAX PROGRAM, FEATURING BUNNY TUXES AND HIS GANG:

Bunny: ... yeah, and fellas, I went in nand they fastened those gimmicks on my head and they started plotting my cycle.

Others: And what happened, Bunny?

Bunny: While they were working this dolly walked through the office and boy, do I mean dolly! My tired old eyes glazed when she gave me that Carolax smile, what I mean.

Stooge: And what then? (eagerly)

Bunny: The doc looks down at the drum where the pen is drawing my cycle and he says, "Mr. Jukes, you are the first patient in the history of Happiness, Incorporated, whose cycle forms the word—WOW!"

Audience: Laughter.

Daylon in transition. For twenty days the spiral has been upward. Tomorrow it will reach a peak. There is laughter in the streets and people sing.

The city has a new motto—The Original Home of Happiness. The city is proud of being the first one selected.

Everyone walks about with a look of secret glee, as though barely able to contain themselves with the thought of the epic joy the morrow will bring.

And those that have not been adjusted find that they, too, are caught up in the holiday spirit, in the air of impending revel. Strangers grin at each other, and whole buses, homeward bound from work, ring with song as everyone joins in. Old songs: "Let a Smile be Your Umbrella," "Singing in the Rain," "Smiles," "Smile the While."

Joe Morgan and Alice Pardette have grown very close in the past twenty days. To him it is a new relationship—a woman who can think as frankly and honestly as any man, who has about her none of the usual feminine deviousness, though physically she is so completely feminine as to make his pulse pound.

And Mice, too, fords something in Joe she has never before experienced. A man willing to take her at face value, a man who does not try to force their relationship into channels of undesired intimacies, a man who listens to what she says and who will argue, person to person, rather than man to woman.

Dusk is over the city and the buzzing neon lights up the overcast in a hue of pink-orange. The old car is parked where often he parked with Sadie Barnum. He wonders what Sadie is doing. They look out over the city and they are not at ease.

"Joe," she said suddenly, "don't you feel it when you're down there with them?"

"You mean feel as though I want to go around grinning like an idiot, too? Yes, and it scares me, somehow. I knew a few other guys who didn't want to have anything to do with being adjusted. Now they're as bad as the ones who had the shots. That good cheer is like a big fuzzy cloud hanging over the city."

"And it's worse than last time, isn't it, Joe?" she asked softly.

He nodded. "Worse in a funny way. It's sort of like the city was a big machine and now the governor is broken and it's moving too fast. It's creaking its way up and up and up to where maybe spin apart."

She said, "Or like a boat that was going over gentle regular waves and now the waves are getting bigger and bigger."

He turned and grinned at her. "You know, we can scare each other into a tizzy."

Alice didn't respond to his grin. She said, in a remote voice, "Tomorrow is going to be . . . odd. I feel it. Joe, let's stay together tomorrow. Please."

She rested her hand on his wrist.

Suddenly she was in his arms. For the first time. Thirty seconds later Joe said unsteadily, "For a statistician you—"

"I guess you'd better make a joke of it, Joe. I guess maybe it's the only thing you can do, Joe. I guess ... it wasn't ever this way before."

Like a slow rocket rising for twenty days, bursting into a bright banner of flame on the twenty-first day.

Joe walked out of his apartment into the street, turned and stared incredulously at an elderly man who, laughing so hard that he wept, held himself up by clinging to a lamppost. The impossible laughter was contagious, even as it frightened. Joe felt laughter stretching his lips, painting itself across his mouth.

At that moment he dodged aside, barely in time. A heavy convertible, a woman with tears of laughter streaming down her cheeks behind the wheel, bounced up over the curb. The old gentleman, still laughing, was cradled neatly on the bumper, was carried over and crushed against the gray stone front of the apartment building.

Blood ran in a heavy slow current down the slope of the sidewalk toward the gutter. The crowd gathered quickly. For just a fleeting second they were solemn and then someone giggled and they were off. They howled with laughter and pounded each other's shoulders and staggered in their laughter so that the blood was tracked in wavered lines back and forth.

Joe fought free of them, and, even with the horror in his mind, he walked rapidly down the street, his lips pulled back in a wide grin. Behind him he could hear the woman, between great shouts of laughter explaining, "I . . . I got laughing and the car ... it came over here ... and he was standing there and he ... and he ..." She couldn't go on and her voice was drowned by the singing and laughing around her.

They were singing, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." The counterman where Joe usually had breakfast had just finished printing a large crude sign. "Everything on the house. What will you have?"

The girl next to Joe yelped and grabbed his arm, laughed into his face and said, "Tell him I want gin." The man beyond the girl, holding his belly, wavered to the door, whooping with laughter. He kicked the front window out of the nearby liquor store, came back with the gin.

The girl ripped the top off, lifted the bottle, and drank heavily. More bottles were passed around. The liquor store man came in with an armful.

As Joe tried vainly to order his eggs, the girl, gin heavy on her breath, ran warm fingers up the back of Joe's neck and, breathing rapidly, said, "Honeylamb, I don't know who you are, but you're cute as a bug. Who can work on a happy day like this? Come on along with me, huh?"

Joe, still feeling that infuriating smile on his lips, stared at her. She had a very respectable look about her, and she was well-dressed.

Joe meant to say, "No thanks." He heard himself saying eagerly, "Sure. That sounds fine."

They went arm in arm along the street and she stopped every ten paces to take another swig out of the bottle. Two blocks further she gave a little sigh, slipped down onto the sidewalk, rolled over onto her

back and passed out. She had a warm smile on her lips.

Joe stood over her, laughing emptily, until a whole crowd of people, arm in arm, swept down on him, pushing him along with them. He saw a heavy heel tear open the mouth of the girl on the sidewalk, but Joe couldn't stop laughing.

He went down Main Street and it was a delirium of laughter and song and the crash and tinkle of plate glass, the crunch of automobile accidents.

There was an enormous scream of laughter, getting closer every moment, and a large woman fell from a great height onto the sidewalk, bursting like a ripe fruit. Joe grew dizzy with laughter. The crowd who had caught him up passed by and Joe Morgan leaned against a building, tears running down his face, his belly cramped and sore from the laughter, but still horror held tightly to his mind with cold fingers.

Through brimming eyes he saw the street turn into a scene of wild, bacchanalian revel where people without fear, without shame, without modesty, with nothing left but lust and laughter, cavorted, more than half mad with the excesses of their glee.

Slowly he made his way to the News Building. In the lobby he saw Sadie Barnum with a stranger. He saw how eager her lips were and she turned glazed eyes toward Joe and laughed and turned back to the man.

And then he stumbled out, bumping into an old man he had seen in the bank. The old man, with an endless dry chuckle, walked slowly wearing a postman's mailbag. The bag was crammed full of bills of all denominations. He cackled into Joe's face, stuffed a handful of bills into Joe's side pocket, went on down the street, throwing handfuls into the air. The wind whipped them about and they landed on the sidewalk where they were trampled by people who had no inclination to pick them up.

A fat, grinning man sat in the window of the jewelry store, cross-legged, throwing rings out onto the sidewalk through the shattered window.

"Happy New Year!" he yelled as Joe went by.

And then a woman had come from somewhere and she clung to Joe's neck with moist hands and her eyes were wide and glassy.

Her weight knocked Joe down. He got to his feet and she lay there and laughed up at him. Joe looked across the street to where a burly man strode along dragging another woman by the wrist. A small cold portion of Joe's mind told him, "There is Alice. That is Alice. You have to do something."

He ran between the spasms of helpless laughter and at last he spun the big man around. He wanted to hit him, but instead he collapsed against him and they both howled with insane glee.

Alice sat on the sidewalk, the tears dripping off her chin, her mouth spread in a fantastic smile. He picked her up, held her tightly, staggered off with her. She kept trying to kiss him.

He knew that he had to get her out of there, and soon.

Twice she was taken away from him by men who roared with joy and twice he staggered back, got hold of her again.

A crowd of men were going down the street, tipping over every car, having the time of their lives. A grinning cop watched them. One of the men took out a gun, pointed it at the cop, and emptied it. The cop sat down on the street and laughed and hugged his perforated belly until he died.

Two men stood playing Russian Roulette. They passed the gun back and forth and each man spun the chamber before sucking on the barrel, pulling the trigger.

As Joe staggered by, clutching Alice, the gun went off, spattering them both with tiny flecks of brain tissue from the exploded skull. The man lurched into them, yelled, "Wanna play? Come-on, play with me!"

"Play his game, Joe," Alice squealed.

But Joe, spurred by his hidden store of horror, pulled her along, got her to the car. He shoved her in, climbed behind the wheel, got the motor started.

In the first block a woman tried to ram him. He slammed on the brakes. She went across his bows, smashed two people on the sidewalk, and crashed through the main window of a supermarket.

Joe, with Alice gasping helplessly beside him, went three blocks north, turned onto Wilson Avenue, and headed out of town. His eyes streamed so that he could barely see.

Ten miles from Daylon he turned up a dirt road, parked in a wide shallow ditch, pulled Alice out of the car, hauled her up across a sloping field to where a wide grassy bank caught the morning sunshine.

They lay side by side and the gasps of laughter came with less and less frequency. Alice, her eyes tortured, pulled herself to her feet, went over behind the shelter of a line of brush, and he could hear that she was being very ill. In a few moments the reaction hit him. He was ill, too.

They found a brook at the foot of the field and cleaned up. Their clothes were smeared with dots of blood from the city.

Back on the grassy bank she rolled onto her stomach, cradled her head in her arms, and cried monotonously while he gently stroked her dark hair.

Finally she got control of herself. She sat up and he gave her a lighted cigarette.

She said, "I'll never be without the memory of those hours, Joe. Never."

He thought of the scenes, still vivid in his mind. "Do you think you're different?"

"Thank God, Joe, that you found me when you did. Thank God that you kept hold of a little bit of sanity!"

There was a cold objective place down in me and I could see everything around me and I knew the horror of it, but I couldn't stop joining in."

"Me, too. My mouth's sore from laughing. And my sides."

Because it had to be talked out, because it couldn't be permitted to stay inside to fester, they told of what they had seen, leaving much unsaid, but nothing misunderstood.

He told her about Sadie Barnum and her eyes were soft with pity.

After a long silence he said, "What can we do?"

"That's the question, isn't it? I won't let you go back, Joe."

"What could I do if I went back? Pick the money off the streets?"

He remembered the old man with the mailbag. He took the crumpled bills out of his pocket. Seven hundreds, three fifties, and four ones.

Her fingers were tight on his arm. "Joe, we've got to let the rest of the country know what happens."

He shrugged. "They wouldn't even print my dispatches. Why should they listen to me now?"

"But we can't just sit here! Think of the children back in the city, Joe. Can't we ... save any of them?"

"Let me think," he said. "Let me think of some way we could keep from getting infected by that ... that insanity back there."

She said softly, "Suppose you couldn't hear all that ... that laughing around you?"

He jumped up and snapped his fingers. "I'll bet that's part of it. Not all of it, because deaf men join lynch mobs. But some of it. If you couldn't see and couldn't hear, you'd still sense the excitement around you and some of it would still get to you. You need something to take your mind off it, like in the old days when they bit on bullets, you know, for operations."

"Like a toothache," she said.

"I'm going to try it, kitten," Joe Morgan said. "With my ears stuffed up with cloth and with my pet filling removed and a pebble in the socket where I can bite down on it. I have to see what's going on down there."

"And I go with you, Joe. I won't stay here alone and I can help and if it should start to get you, darling, I'll be there to ... to help you."

V

Joe Morgan, big crooked grin loosely in place, and Alice Pardette, pale and shaking with the white horror of what they had seen in the streets, stood in the almost deserted telephone building.

"You sure you can run one of those long distance switchboards?"

"I did that work for over a year. Come on."

Her fingers were quick with the plugs. He said, "Get the state capitol. See if you can land the

governor himself."

She talked into the mouthpiece, her tone flat and insistent. At last she motioned to him. He picked up the phone off the nearby desk.

A warm, hearty voice said, "Gudlou speaking. Who did you say this is?"

"Governor, this is Joseph Morgan speaking from Dayton. I want to make an immediate appeal for help. Call out the National Guard. Get men here. Men and ambulances and tear gas. The town has gone crazy."

"Is this some sort of a joke?"

"Check with the phone company and the telegraph people. Try to get our local station on your radio, sir. Believe me, this is a terrible mess here."

"But I don't understand! What has happened there?"

"This Happiness, Incorporated, thing, sir."

The governor laughed heartily. "Very clever publicity stunt, Morgan, or whatever your name is. Sorry, my boy, but we can't use the National Guard to promote your product, even if I do have an appointment for my first shot."

"Look, sir, send over a plane. Get pictures—"

But the line was dead. Joe sighed heavily. "Didn't work, angel. See if you can get me the President."

But after two hours of fighting their way up through ranks of incredulous underlings, they were forced to give up. The world would know soon enough. With the trains halted, buses and trucks stalled in the city, all communications cut, the world would begin to wake up and wonder what had happened to Dayton.

One day of madness, and another, and another, and another. The streets resound with hoots of hoarse laughter. Bodies lie untended. It is discovered that detachments sent in to help fall under the general spell. News planes circle overhead by day and all roads leading to town are jammed with the cars of the curious, those who come to watch. Many of them get too close, stay to revel and to die.

The power plants have failed and at night the city is lighted by fires that burn whole blocks.

The laughter and the madness go on.

Throughout the nation the various clinics set up by Happiness, Incorporated, cut the fees and go on twenty-four hour operation. The spokesmen for Happiness, Incorporated, say that the riots in Dayton are due to an organized group attempting to discredit the entire program.

And at the end of the fifth day the laughter stops as though cut with a vast knife.

Joe Morgan, unshaven and pale with fatigue, drove the last busload of screaming children out of Dayton. With the money he and Alice had taken on that first day, nearly two million dollars in cash, they had set up emergency headquarters in Lawper, a fair-sized village seventeen miles from Dayton. Renting space, hiring a large corps of assistants, they had managed to evacuate nearly thirty-six hundred children, tend their wounds, feed them and house them.

Organized agencies were beginning to take some of the administrative burden off their hands.

Alice, looking pounds thinner, stood by him as the attendants took the children off for medical processing. "What was it like, Joe?" she asked.

"The whole city has a stink of death. And the laughter has stopped. It's quiet now. I saw some of them sitting on the curb, their faces in their hands. I think it's going to get worse."

VI

NEWS BULLETIN, 6 P.M., OCT. 3RD:

First in the news tonight is, as usual, the city of Dayton. The stupendous wave of suicides is now over and the city is licking its wounds. Those wounds, by the way, are impressive. Twenty-one hundred known dead. Four thousand seriously injured. Fifteen hundred missing, believed dead. Property damage

is estimated at sixty millions, one third of the city's total assessed valuation. Today the Congressional Investigating Committee arrived at Dayton, accompanied by some of the nation's outstanding reporters of the news. The courage with which the good people of Dayton are going about the repair of their city is heartwarming. Psychologists call this a perfect example of mass hysteria, and the cause is not yet explained.

FROM THE DETROIT *Citizen Banner*, OCT. 7TH:

Judge Fawlkon today refused to allow an injunction against the three local clinics of Happiness, Incorporated, brought by the Detroit Medical Association who state that the Dayton disaster may have its roots in the inoculations given in the city, used as a test locale by Happiness, Incorporated. Judge Fawlkon stated that, in his considered judgment, there was no logical reason to link these two suppositions. Court was adjourned early so that the judge could keep his appointment at the nearest clinic of Happiness, Incorporated.

PROM THE BUNNY JUKES PROGRAM:

Stooge: Hey, Bunny, I understand that you've got the lowdown on what happened over there in Dayton.

Bunny: Don't tell anybody, but Dayton was the first place where the new income tax blanks were distributed.

Audience: Laughter.

EDITORIAL IN THE DAYLON *News*:

The attitude of the courts in making no effort to prosecute citizens of Dayton who unknowingly committed crimes during the recent Death Week is an intelligent facing of the facts. However, this paper feels that no such special dispensation should be made in the case of the codefendants Joseph Morgan, onetime reporter on this newspaper, and Alice Pardette, one-time employee of Happiness, Incorporated. It has been proven and admitted that the codefendants were able to resist the inexplicable hysteria and did knowingly enter the city and make away with close to two million dollars in cash. The fact that a portion of this money was used to evacuate children is mildly extenuating, but, since the codefendants were captured by police before they had fulfilled their expressed "intent" to return the balance of the funds, their position is feeble indeed. Other organizations were prepared to aid the children of this city. It is hoped that Joseph Morgan and Alice Pardette, when their case comes to trial, will be punished to the full extent of the law, as their crime is indeed despicable.

EXCERPT FROM TOP SECRET MEETING IN THE PENTAGON, GENERAL OF THE ARMIES LOEFSTEDTER PRESIDING

To summarize, a key utility, the X Plant, has been almost totally destroyed in the Dayton hysteria. We believe that the riot was fomented by enemies of this nation for the express purpose of destroying the plant. The report of the Committee on the Establishment of Alternate Facilities will be ready at next month's meeting at which time decisions can be made and contracting officers appointed. As the finished products in storage at the X Plant were also destroyed by fire, our situation is grave. Head of Field Service will immediately suspend all tests at the Proving Ground and assembled items in the hands of troops will be strictly rationed.

The fat guard said, "I shouldn't do this, you know."

Joe said, "Sure, I know. But we just happened to keep your kid from being burned to death and you want to make it up to us."

"Yeah," the guard said. "You wait in here. I'll go get her."

Joe waited five minutes before Alice was brought into the small room. She was wan and colorless, dressed in a gray cotton prison dress. She gave Joe one incredulous look and then ran to him. He felt her thin shoulders shake as he held her tightly.

"Hey, they can't put you in here!" he said softly, and was rewarded by her weak smile. He winked over her shoulder at the guard. "Wait in the hall, junior."

The guard shrugged, left them alone in the room. Alice said, "Why are they doing this to us?"

"They've got to be sore at somebody, you know. They've got to take a smack at something. Only they aren't taking it at the right people, that's all. Besides, we've got nothing to fret about."

She regained her old fire. "Just what do you mean, Joe Morgan?"

He grinned. "When does our case come up for trial?" "November tenth they said." Alice cocked her head on one side.

"And before that we walk out of here during the next little attack of 'hysteria.' "

"Oh, Joe!" she said. "It isn't going to happen again! Not again!"

"The way I see it, baby, it's going to keep right on happening. So get the earmuffs ready."

"Keys, Joe!" she said in a half whisper.

"Leave that to me."

Once again the spring is wound taut in Dayton. Once again the joy comes bubbling up, the joy and the anticipation. There is no more mourning for the dead. The streets are festive. The October days are crisp and cool. Many have sudden little twinges of fear, but the fear is forgotten in the heady flood of anticipation of delights to come.

Two dozen cities have passed the 50 percent mark. Among them are Detroit, Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, Buffalo, Los Angeles, Houston, Portland, Seattle, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Atlanta, and ten other big cities. A round three dozen smaller cities are above 40 percent.

And then all of the clinics are suddenly closed. Millions are infuriated at missing their chance.

But the clinic personnel all show up in New York City. Mobile units are established and the price of inoculation is cut to fifty cents. New methods speed up the work. The clinics work day and night.

All over the country happiness grows constantly more intense. It can be felt everywhere. Man, for a time, is good to his neighbor and to his wife.

All over the country the vast spring is wound tighter and tighter. At the eleventh hour the original personnel of all the clinics, and they are a surprisingly small number, board a steamship at a Brooklyn dock. Reservations have been made weeks in advance.

On the morning of explosion, the ship is two hundred miles at sea.

And 51 percent of the population of Greater New York have been inoculated.

A famed public document speaks of "the pursuit of happiness."

It has been pursued and it has been at last captured, a silver shining grail, throughout the ages always a misty distance ahead, but now at last, in hand. It is a grail of silver, but it is filled with a surprising bitterness.

On the morning of explosion, every channel of communication, every form of public conveyance, all lines of supply are severed so cleanly that they might never have existed.

An airline pilot, his plane loaded with a jumbled heap of gasping and spasmed humanity, makes pass after pass at the very tip of the Empire State Building until at last the television tower rakes off one wing and the plane goes twisting down to the chasm of the street.

On a Hollywood sound stage a hysterical cameraman, aiming his lens at the vista of script girls and sound men and actresses and agents takes reel after reel of film which could not have been duplicated had he been transported back to some of the revels of ancient Rome.

In Florida screaming technicians shove a convulsed and world-famous scientist into the instrument package of a rocket and project him into a quick death in space.

In Houston a technician, bottle firmly clutched in his left hand, opens the valves of tank after tank of gasoline.

He is smiling as the blue-white explosion of flame melts the bottle in a fraction of a second.

When he opened the door to her cell, Alice had a taut, mechanical smile on her lips. He slapped her sharply until she stopped smiling. He carried two guns taken from the helpless guards who rolled on the floor in the extremity of their glee at this ludicrous picture of two prisoners escaping.

He found a big new car with a full tank of gas a block from the jail. Together they loaded it with provisions, with rifles and cartridges, with camping equipment. And, five miles from the city he was forced to stop the car.

It was twenty minutes before he could stop trembling sufficiently to drive. He told her of his plans, and of what he expected, and about their destination.

At dusk he drove down to the lake shore, the tall grasses scraping the bottom of the car. There were kerosene lamps in the small camp, a drum of kerosene in the shed back of the kitchen.

The last of the sunset glow was gone from the lake. The birds made a sleepy noise in the pines. The air was sweet and fresh.

While Alice worked in the kitchen, he went out and tried the car radio. He heard nothing but an empty hum. His heart thudded as he found one station. He listened. He heard the dim jungle-sound of laughter, of the sort of laughter that floods the eyes and cramps the stomach and rasps the throat. With a shudder of disgust, Joe turned off the radio.

They finished the meal in odd silence. He pushed his plate away and lit two cigarettes, passed one to her. "Not exactly cheery, are we?" she said.

"Not with our world laughing itself to death."

She hunched her shoulders. "To death?"

He nodded. "Lewsto was a phony. He knew what would happen, you know. He had a plan. He was under orders."

"Whose?"

"How should I know? The country is laughing itself to death. They'll wait, whoever they are. They'll wait for the full five days of hysteria and the first few days of mass suicide—and then they'll move in. Maybe there'll be enough of us left to make an honest little scrap of it."

"But why, Joe? Why does it work that way?"

"You ever hear of resonance?"

"Like a sound?"

"The word covers more than that, Alice. It covers coffee sloshing out of a cup when you walk with it, or soldiers breaking step crossing a bridge. Daylon and the other cities were fine when everybody had their own pattern. But now all the patterns are on the same groove. Everybody is in step. Everybody adds to everybody else's gaiety and it build up and up to a peak that breaks men apart, in their heads. Pure resonance. The same with the depression. Ever hear one of those records with nothing but laughter on them. Why'd you laugh? You couldn't help it. The laughter picked you up and carried you along. Or did you ever see people crying and you didn't know the reason and you felt your eyes sting? Same deal."

"What's the answer, Joe?"

"Is there any? Is there any answer at all? We had the best ships and the best planes and the best bombs and the biggest guns. But we're laughing ourselves out of them."

He stood up abruptly, grabbed his jacket off the hook and went out onto the long porch of the camp overlooking the dark lake. Porch and lake that were a part of his childhood, and now a part of his defeat.

There was only a faint trace of irony left in him. He grieved for his nation and he felt the helpless stir of anger at this thing which had been so skillfully done, so carefully done, so adequately done.

She came out and stood beside him and he put his arm around her waist

"Don't leave me, Joe," she whispered. "Not for a minute."

His voice hoarse, he took the massive seal ring off finger, slipped it over hers, saying, "With this ring I

wed. Fugitives get cheated out of the pageantry, angel.

She shivered against the night, said, "Dandy proposal. I'm wearing the ring before I can open my mouth to say no."

"Then give it back."

"A valuable ring like this! Don't be silly."

He laughed softly. She moved away from him. Her face was pale against the darkness. "Please don't laugh, Joe. Ever. I never want to hear laughter again."

Her hands were like ice and her lips were tender flame.

VII

FOURTH BULLETIN OF THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT, NOV, 12:

Remnants of the 11th and 14th Army Corps, fighting without air cover, today bent the left prong of the pincer movement of the two enemy columns converging on the provisional capital at Herkimer, Idaho. In spite of determined resistance, eventual capture of the provisional capital seems imminent. All troops and irregulars isolated by enemy columns will endeavor to make their way through enemy lines to bolster our position. Live off the land. Conserve ammunition. Make each shot mean the death of an invader. All troops and irregulars who did not undergo adjustment under the auspices of the invader's Trojan Horse, miscalled Happiness, Incorporated, will be careful to stay away from the cities. All commanders will discover which men under their command have been "adjusted" and will mark these men unfit for further duty.

PAMPHLET AIR-DROPPED BY BOMBERS OF THE INVADER EXPEDITIONARY FORCES:

Americans! Lay down your arms. Further resistance is useless. Your active army is outnumbered five to one and virtually without equipment. You have lost the war. Help to make the peace as easy on you as possible. For each day of continued resistance your eventual food ration will be cut a certain percentage. Lay down your arms!

"Drop it!" Joe Morgan snapped. He held the rifle leveled. The two men in ragged field uniform, swaying with weariness dropped their weapons, a carbine and a submachine gun. They were dirty and unshaven and one of them had a bandage, dark-stained with blood, across his left hand.

"Move over to the side!" he ordered. The men obeyed meekly. Alice went down the steps and picked up the weapons, staying well out of the line of fire.

"Who are you?" Joe demanded.

The older of the two said, deep weariness in his voice, "Baker Company, Five oh eight battalion, Eighty-third." Then he added, with a note of ironic humor, "I think maybe Harry and me are the whole company."

"You've given up, eh? You're looking for a hole to hide in."

The younger one took two heavy steps toward the porch. He said, "Put down that pop-gun, junior, and we'll talk this over. I don't like what you said."

"Shut up, Harry," the older one said. "Mister, yesterday we picked us a nice spot and kept our heads down until they come along with a high-speed motor convoy. They were too close together. We killed the driver in the lead truck and piled up the convoy. We sprayed 'em real nice and got away up the hill. As long as we got a few rounds we're not through."

Joe grinned. "Then welcome to the Morgan Irregulars. Come on in. We've got food and hot water and some bandages for that hand. How close do you guess they are?"

"Fifteen miles, maybe. But they're not headed this way. They're using the main road as a supply line, I think "

The men came up on the porch. Joe stood his rifle beside the door. The older man said, "What makes you think we won't bust you one and take your food and take over your nest, mister?"

"Because," Joe said, "you have a hunch that maybe I can help you be a little more effective. You don't know what I got up my sleeve. And besides, you're not the first guys to get here, you know. If you'd made a move toward that rifle, you would have caught a surprise from the brush out there." He turned and said, "O.K., guys. These two will do."

By twos and threes about fifteen well-armed men sauntered out of the brush.

America in turmoil. Not a man but who, at some time in his life, had speculated on how the country would behave under the iron heel of an invader. Had the softness of life in this big lush country destroyed the hidden focus of resistance? Where was the heart of the country?

Gaunt and bearded men, with nothing left but fury, rushed the armored columns with home-made bombs of rags and gasoline. The jacketed bullets smashed them down but always a few got close enough to throw the bomb and die. And black greasy smoke wound up into the fall sky and the blackened hull of a vehicle was towed off onto the shoulder, sentinel of death, monument to valor.

In the night an absurdly young man wormed on his belly behind the hangars, killed the guard with a knife, crawled into the cockpit of the jet fighter, ripped off into the pink dawn. They climbed after him. He went around in a screaming arc, leveled out twenty feet above the ground, and smashed himself and the alien ship into whining fragments—but he took with him six of the enormous bombers.

A destroyer, the last of the fuel almost gone, cut all lights, drifted like a wraith through the night, drifted with the tide into a vast harbor where the enormous supplies of invasion were being unloaded under the floodlights.

Erupting with all weapons, with the boiling wake of torpedoes, the can fought and smashed its way down the line of freighters, drifting at last, a flaming ruin into one last supply ship, blanketing it in the suicide flame.

In the Sangre de Cristo Mountains three full divisions hide, and at night the patrols in strength smash invader communications, blow up ammunition dumps. When the bombers sail out at dawn to punish such insolence, nothing can be seen but the raw red rock of the mountains.

The Invader, taunted and stung from every side, lashes in fury, destroying without cause, forsaking all plans of gentle administration to rule by flame and by the firing squad and with machine guns aimed down the deserted streets of the silent towns.

The common denominator is fury, and the pain of loss. But thirty-five millions, the city dwellers, are yet hostage to the new weapon of emotional resonance, and as the long days go by, the empty and hopeless days, once again within them builds up the cretin joy, the mechanical gaiety, the vacuous death-dance, threatening to explode once more into crazy violence.

Thirty-five millions, tied, one to another, by a life-rhythm so carefully adjusted as to be the final indignity meted out to the human spirit.

They have not left their cities and neither the attacks of the Invader nor the destructive joy of the adjusted has served to destroy those cities.

The Invader, wise in the ways of his own weapon, evacuates his troops from the afflicted cities during the week before the emotional peak is reached.

Joe Morgan, grown to new stature during this time of trial, has carefully husbanded his strength, has made no move so flagrant as to cause a punitive column to be sent to the small lake. He has sent his men on recruiting missions and his force has grown to over two hundred.

Seventy miles away is a small city where, before the invasion, there was a splendid medical center. A spy returns and reports to Joseph Morgan that the doctors from the medical center have been impressed into the medical service of the Invader, that they work in the original medical center, now filled with Invader troops.

Joe Morgan remembers a feature story he once wrote—on a certain Dr. Horace Montclair.

Five days before the adjusted were to reach their emotional peak, their five-day orgy, Joe Morgan, leading a picked group of ten men, crouched in the back of a big truck while another of his men, dressed in a captured uniform, drove the truck up to the gate of the medical center.

The gate guard sauntered over to the cab window, reached a hand up for the transportation pass. The entrenching tool smashed the guard's throat and he dropped without a sound. The truck rolled up to the main building and Joe led the ten men inside.

In the stone corridor the weapons made a sound like a massive hammering on thick metal.

But four men backed with Joe out the door to the waiting truck. One of them was Dr. Montclair.

The dead guard had been found. Whistles shrilled near the gate. Joe, at the wheel, raced the truck motor, smashed the slowly closing gates, rode down the men who stood in his path.

He took the road west out of town, as planned, pursuit in swifter vehicles shrilling behind them.

At the appointed place he stopped the truck. The five of them ran awkwardly across the field, dropped into a shallow ditch. The pursuit screamed to a stop by the abandoned truck. A patrol spread out, advanced slowly across the field.

At the proper moment Joe shouted. The rest of his command, the full two hundred, opened up with a curtain of fire. Two men of the patrol turned, tried to race back, and they, too, were smashed down by the aimed fire.

In the black night they circled the town, headed back across country to the quiet lake. The return trip took three days.

The windows of the cabin were carefully sealed. Joe Morgan sat at the table facing Dr. Montclair. They were alone, except for Alice who sat back in the shadows. She, like Joe Morgan, had acquired a new strength, a new resolution, born both of anger and despair and the shared weight of command.

"It was daring, my friend," the doctor said. He was a small man with too large a head, too frail a body, looking oddly like an aging, clever child.

"It was something we had to do," Joe said, "or go nuts sitting here waiting for company."

"I didn't care for you, Mr. Morgan, when you interviewed me. I thought you lacked integrity of any sort." Joe grinned: "And now I've got some?"

"Maybe that wryness which is an essential part of you is what all men need in these times. But we are getting too philosophical, my friend. What can I do for you?"

"Doc, you've studied this Trojan Horse of theirs, where the people defeat themselves. What's the answer?"

"Just like that? The answer?" Dr. Montclair snapped his fingers. "Out of the air? Answers have to be tested. I have suppositions only."

"There isn't much time to set up a lab to do the testing. Just pick your best supposition and we'll work on it."

Dr. Montclair rubbed his sharp chin, stared at the table top. "Obviously one of the basic qualities of the disease, and we will call it that, is the progressive infectiousness of it. The peaks are intensified by the proximity of the other victims. Thus one possible answer is isolation. But the infected must be thinned out to such an extent that they do not, in turn, infect their neighbors, eh?"

"Oh, sure. Thirty-something million people, so we isolate them."

"Do not be sarcastic, Mr. Morgan. Another thought is whether, if a man were drugged heavily enough, it would delay his cycle so that his peak would come at a different time, thus destroying the synchronization which appears to be the cause of resonance."

"Look, Doc, those suppositions are interesting, but we have a little war on our hands. I've been wondering how we can turn their Trojan Horse against them. A horse on them, you might say."

"They have withdrawn from the focal points of infection, my boy. They are unwilling to risk infection of their troops."

"How many men would you say they have inside our borders?"

"I can make a guess through having seen consolidated medical reports. Forty divisions, I believe. With service troops you could estimate the total strength at one and a quarter millions."

Joe Morgan whistled softly.

He said, "In two days the peak of hysteria hits again. The cities will be like ... like something never seen before on earth. How does the Invader plan to handle it after all resistance has stopped?"

Montclair spread his hands, shrugged his shoulders. "Do they care? Left alone the thirty-something millions will at last tear themselves apart. The human mind cannot stand that constant pattern. Suicide, laughing murder. They will cease to be a problem and then the empty cities can be occupied safely."

"There's nothing we can do in time for the next big binge?"

"Nothing," Montclair said sadly.

"Then we've got roughly thirty-two days to dream up a plan and put it in operation. What've we got? A few hundred men, ample supplies, a hidden base and some expert technical knowledge. We're not too bad off, Doc Not too bad off at all."

VIII

STATUS SUMMARY, RADIO REPORT BY COMMANDING GENERAL, EXPEDITIONARY FORCES:

Resistance continued to stiffen up until ten days ago. Then, when the peak of hysteria was reached, the cities ceased to operate as supply bases for guerrilla forces. Death in the cities was high, our forces having withdrawn to safe positions to avoid contagion. The breathing space was used to track down and eliminate hundreds of irregular groups engaging in punishing ambushing tactics. Our lines were consolidated. Resistance by organized and uninfected detachments of the enemy army continues high, but their position is, of course, hopeless. With amazing ingenuity they have constructed certain airfields which our bombers have, as yet, been unable to locate. But it is merely a question of time. It is regretted that so many of the naval vessels of the enemy were permitted to escape the surprise attacks, as they are definitely hampering supply.

REPORT BY COMMANDING GENERAL, ARMIES OF DEFENSE, TO THE PROVISIONAL PRESIDENT:

Supply and manpower is no longer adequate to permit the utilization of standard military tactics. All our forces are now concentrated in mountainous regions in positions which cannot be overrun except by Invader infantry. All labor battalions are now engaged in the construction of defensive points. All future offensive action will be limited to patrols. It is thus recommended that the production facilities now housed in the natural caves be utilized entirely for small arms ammunition, mortar projectiles, pack howitzer ammunition. Strategy will be to make any penetration of our lines too expensive to be undertaken. The critical factor is, as previously stated, food supply.

EXCERPT FROM STENOGRAPHIC RECORD, MEETING OF PROVISIONAL CABINET CALLED BY PRESIDENT TO HEAR PROPOSAL OF GUERRILLA LEADER:

President: I wish to explain, gentlemen, that Joseph Morgan, with four of his men parachuted behind our lines from an aircraft stolen, at great cost to his organization, from the Invader airfield twenty miles west of Daylon. Two of his men were shot by our troops as they landed.

Morgan: We had no way to identify ourselves.

War: Do you have any way to identify yourself now? Some of our people have been willing to turn traitor for the sake of their future safety.

Morgan: Don't you think I could have picked an easier way?

President: Gentlemen, please! Joseph Morgan has been thoroughly interrogated by our experts and they are satisfied. Mr. Morgan has been in conference at his base with a Dr. Montclair, an endocrinologist of international reputation. He brings us a proposal which I, at first, refused to countenance. Its cost is enormous. But it may end this stalemate. I ask you to listen to him. I could not make this decision by myself. I have not the courage.

Finance: This is not a stalemate. This is slow defeat. I will favor any plan, no matter how costly,

which will give us a shred of hope.

Morgan: I'll outline the plan and then give you Montclair's reasoning.

Winter war. December has blanketed the east with thin wet curtain of snow. Winter is hard on the irregular but works no hardship on the troops of the Invader. The vast food stocks of the nation are his, as are the wan barracks, the heated vehicles, the splendid medical can

A guerrilla with a shattered ankle dies miserably in the cold brush, near the blasted fragments of the house in which he took shelter.

The cities are thinned of people. For the first time it is noticeable. The last emotional debauch took five millions. Now there are thirty millions left. They have a breathing spell.

Invader troops are given leave in the cities. They go armed. They sample the wines, flirt with the women, sing their barbaric songs and gawp at the huge trenches which were dug to bury the dead of the cities.

Once again there is light and heat in the cities. The winter is cruel, but there is heat. And there is foodstuffs in the markets, though not enough. Not nearly enough.

Were it warm summer, possibly the adjusted would leave their cities, would go into the countryside to be away from the places of honor. In the South and in California they try to leave, are roughly herded back by the Invader who seems to say, "Stay in the traps I have prepared for you and die there."

This is a policy decreed by a man named Lewsto who, high in the councils of the Invader, walks with pigeon tread and squared shoulders, the new and highest medal of his country shining on the left breast of the drab uniform.

Cyclical nightmare. The slow upward climb toward crescendo has begun once again, and no man looks squarely into the face of his neighbor, knowing that he will see there some of the fear and horror that has coldly touched his heart. And yet, each man and woman has a secret place which revels in the thought of the nightmare to come. It is like an addiction to a strange drug. Nightmare there must be, and death there must be, but with guttural shouts of animal joy, with a wild, unheeding passion of insane laughter, when consequences are not considered, nor are the customary mores and folkways.

Each adjusted person in the city feels shame in his heart because, though he knows that pure nightmare lies ahead, nightmare which he may not survive, he yet anticipates it with a certain warm and soiled sense of expectancy.

This, then, is the conquered country, the proud race, the men who know defeat, and yet cling to the manner their defeat, an overripe fruit, plucked once each month.

In a silent cabin Alice sits at the rude table and I glow of the lantern highlights the strong cheekbones, the limpid mouth, and she is beautiful indeed.

Dr. Montclair sits opposite her. Quickly he touches her hand. "He will make it, Alice. I know he made it."

"He's gone. That's all I know. Somebody else could have gone. But he had to go."

In the brush there is the quick and angry spat of a rifle, the answering sound of an automatic weapon, like some vast fabric being torn, the fabric of the night.

As Montclair takes the weapon propped against his chair, she quickly blows out the lantern and, together in the darkness, they listen.

Hoarse shouts from the brush, the authoritative cramp of a mortar, alarmingly close, a scarlet blossom against which each bare twig stands out with the bland clarity of death.

"They're coming in from both sides," she whispers.

The rifle fire fades and slugs grind against the cabin walls, throwing splinters that whine.

Montclair is on his belly on the porch, Alice behind him in the doorway. As they come running across the slope toward the porch, running with the heavy thump of men in full equipment, Montclair sprays a line of fire across them. Many fall, but the others rush the porch. She fires again and again, seeing Montclair die suddenly, firing until the hand slaps the rifle away.

She is thrust into a corner and there are six of them in the room, seeming to fill the cabin. The lantern

is lit and they look at her and talk among themselves; and she knows that she should have saved one of the rifle bullets.

Two of them advance toward her, slowly. They spin and snap to attention as the officer enters. He looks at her, snaps something at the men. Then, with surprising gentleness he lifts her to her feet. He leads her up through the brush to the waiting vehicle. She turns and whimpers in her throat as she sees through the black lacework of trees, the flower of flame that grows from the cabin.

Every remaining plane is committed to the venture. Every last one.

Brave men have managed, somehow, to set up the short wave radios behind the Invader lines.

The teams are carefully instructed. And there are several teams for each portion of the venture, as losses will be high.

At last the word comes. The great emotional springs are once again winding taut. The word comes. "Today the Invader moved all personnel out of the cities."

Joe Morgan, burdened with sixty pounds of equipment, climbed laboriously into the belly of the transport. The interior of the aircraft was dark. Cigarette ends glowed and the men laughed with the calculated steadiness of men who are gambling life itself.

The officer stood in the doorway and said, "Team Eighty-two?"

Joe answered, "Eighty-two, Morgan commanding. All present and accounted for."

The officer jumped down and the big door slammed. The huge cavern in the side of the mountain reverberated to the roar of many motors. The very air shook and quivered with the vibration. Outside the dozen were dragging the rocks off the runway.

At last the cave doors were rolled back. The first transports rumbled awkwardly to the doorway, gaining speed, gaining agility, moving out, roaring along the runway, lifting off into the night.

Team Eighty-two was airborne and Joe, squinting through the side window saw the streaked jets of the fighter cover.

The scene was duplicated at other hidden fields.

Ten minutes before interception on the basis of radar watch over the mountains.

Interception came. Invader pursuit ships were dark lances in the night. Distant flames, like weak candles, blossomed briefly and were gone in a red line of fire toward the sleeping earth.

The lumbering transport weaved heavily through the night, and Joe Morgan sat in a cold agony of fear.

From time to time he glanced at the illuminated dial of his watch. At last he said loudly, over the motor roar, "Fasten static lines."

He reached up and snapped his own, tugged on it to test it.

Ten minutes, twelve, fifteen. The wing lifted and the transport slipped down, down, to where the city lights glimmered through the overcast. Spiraling down.

The plane seemed to brake in the air as the flaps caught hold, seemed to waver on the very edge of instability.

The wind was a shrill blast through the open door. "What are you doing here, Morgan?" Joe asked himself softly.

He braced his hands against the sides of the door, saw the target area below. The man behind him had a hand on Joe's shoulder.

Joe stepped out into the night, into the cold, tumbling night, and the flatness of the city spun around him like a vast wheel. The sharp jolt caught him and he swung pendulum-wise toward the darkened earth, swinging under the pale flower of silk.

Then he was tumbling on the frozen ground of the park of the big city, grasping the shroud lines, bracing his feet, fumbling with the buckles. The chute collapsed and he stepped clear of the harness.

"Over here," he yelled. "Over here."

Roll call. "Peterson, Barnik, Stuyvessant, Simian, Garrit, Reed, Walke, Purch, Norris, Humboldt, Crues, Riley, Renelli, Post, Charnevak."

All but one. One was imbedded to half his thickness in the frozen earth.

They were in a silent circle around him.

He said, "You all know this town like the palm of your hand. You each have your sectors and your instructions. You know the plan and you know that it has to work."

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "After it goes off, it's every man for himself. We meet back here. Good luck."

At base headquarters of the Invader, the commanding general listened gravely to the report of his Air Intelligence.

After listening, he made his decision. "Apparently they desire to set up, within the cities, focal points of resistance. You believe that men were airdropped into every one of the major cities and most of the smaller cities which are infected. It is obvious to me that they underestimate the extent of hysteria which will hit the cities within four days. We will wait until after the hysteria, until after the suicide period, and then we will go in and eliminate the men who were airdropped."

The reporting officer saluted, turned smartly and left the office.

Joe Morgan stood in the cold gray morning and looked at Daylon. He had found and taken over one of the many empty rooms in the city. The city had suffered greatly.

He carried a heavy suitcase. As he walked down the morning street he looked carefully at the houses. Whenever he saw an empty one he broke in quickly, opened the suitcase, took out a small package the size of a cigarette package.

In each house he left the package in a different place. But the favorite spot was in the cellar, wired to the rafters overhead.

He saw a few people that he knew. They looked blankly at him, smiled, and went vaguely about their business. The people of Daylon were lean and ragged and eyes were hollow. But they smiled constantly.

In mid-morning, a smiling policeman in a dirty uniform asked him what he was doing. Joe said, "Come in here and I'll show you." The policeman followed through the door Joe had forced.

Joe pivoted, hit the man on the chin with all his strength, and walked back out of the house carrying the suitcase.

Carefully he covered the sector he had allotted to himself. Public buildings, houses, garages, stores. In many places he had to be extremely cautious. In stores he hid the packages among slow-moving merchandise. The city went through the motions of existence, but on every face was the look of expectancy.

Four days before the explosion of emotions, before the laughing orgy of death. Three days. Two days. The last of the packages has been placed. But there are four much larger packages to be delivered.

And these are delivered at night.

At night he found a stout iron bar, used it to pry up the manhole covers. The large packages nestled comfortably against the welter of cables and pipes.

This is the day before the tight spring will snap. Already there is empty laughter in the streets of the city, in the streets of all the vast cities.

The armies of the Invader, well removed from the focal points of contagious hysteria, clamp severe restrictions on all areas to prevent the curious from sneaking off to cities.

At eleven o'clock on the morning of the day be pandemonium will reign, the streets of the cities vibrate to the massive thump of subterranean explosions. Steel manhole covers sail up into the air, turning lazily, smash pedestrians as they fall. The underground caverns roar with burning gas and then the roaring is gone as severed water pipes spill the contents underground.

All electricity ceases to flow.

One hundred and seventy-one teams won through. Sixteen men to a team. Four bombs and one thousand of the deadly half-ounce packages to each man. Ten thousand nine hundred and forty-four explosions in the bowels of the great cities. Two million, seven hundred and thirty-seven thousand of the

deadly packages distributed.

For this is a kind of suicide, on a vast and generous scale.

The packages are closely coordinated. A few sputter prematurely, but within a few minutes after the explosions, the acid has eaten through the lead shields within more than half of them. They flame into life, burning with a white dazzling flame that has an intensity of twenty-four hundred degrees Fahrenheit and a duration of twenty minutes. All of the fading resources of an almost-conquered nation has gone into the preparation of these packages of death.

With the water supply crippled, there is no possibility of fighting the fires.

Whole streets erupt into flame and the melted glass of the windows runs across the pavement.

It is almost too successful. The densely populated eastern seaboard is one vast pall of smoke drifting in the crisp December air.

Too many die in the flames. Far too many.

But from the roaring furnaces of the cities nearly thirty millions wind like sluggish worms into the countryside. They have fear of the flames, fear of death, fear of pain—but it is not until tomorrow that they will be unable to feel fear.

And so, with empty idle smiles, with vacuous eyes, they move toward the vast camps of the Invader.

The Invader is outnumbered by the victims of his satanic adjustment—twenty-five to one.

Too late, the danger is seen.

The camps of the Invader are near the cities. They straddle the main roads. Machine guns are manned and white-lipped men fire prolonged bursts into the crowds that move so slowly. And at last they are revolted by the slaughter of these who smile, even in death, and they refuse to obey orders.

The day darkens and in the night the cities are vast pyres that redden the sky. The cities of America burn with a brave flame and the sound of the roaring can be heard for many miles. The fire is behind them and the guns, unmanned by now, are ahead of them.

At dawn the Invader orders the armies to retreat away from these mad ones, to retreat to the fastness of the hills.

But already the infection is at work. Already the spirit of spontaneous hysteria has begun to infect the troops of the Invader.

Massive tanks sit empty while men shout hoarsely and dance in the street. The planes are idle, the guns unmanned, the officers joining their men in a frenzied rapport with the victims of disaster.

Suddenly the spirit grows among them that they are celebrating victory. Victor and vanquished revel until they fall exhausted, sleep, rise to bellow with laughter, to stare with glazed eyes at the winter sky, howl with the voices of wolves.

It is a party of death, lasting for day after day, with all thought of food forgotten, and the cities burn brightly every night and the winter sun by day is shrouded with the drifting black smoke of utter destruction.

STATUS REPORT, HQ, ARMIES OF DEFENSE:

At dawn today all columns were within striking distance of all corps headquarters of the Invader forces. Scouts report utter exhaustion in enemy ranks, black depression among individuals, a constant sound of small-arms fire indicating a high incidence of suicide among the Invader troops. All personnel has strict instructions about the destruction of equipment. The attack will begin at dusk.

INTERCEPTED RADIO FROM CONVOY COMMANDER:

Convoy taking reinforcements to our armies attacked at dawn by strong naval force of enemy. Some of our ships, manned by enemy, were among attacking vessels. Numerous troopships bombed by our own planes, apparently manned by enemy forces. Loss incidence so high that we were forced to turn back at ten hundred hours. Request immediate air cover if convoy is to proceed.

Joe Morgan held tightly to the trunk of a small tree halfway up the slope six miles from Daylon. Even at that distance he could feel the intermittent waves of heat against his face.

But five men were left of his group. They were scorched, blackened, drugged with weariness.

"Listen!" he said.

The six men stood, listening intently. They heard the rising sound of battle, the hammer blows of artillery, the distant thin crackling of small-arms fire.

The crescendo of battle rose sharply, faded, subsided, until they could hear nothing.

"Five bucks says we took them," Joe said.

IX

FIRST NATIONAL PROCLAMATION:

The determined attack to land another force on our shores had been beaten back with heavy losses to the enemy. At the moment our continental limits are intact once more. Hourly we grow stronger as we manufacture weapons to supplement those taken from the Invader armies after the burning of the cities. The Invader has been weakened by the loss of the cream of his troops, the most modern of his equipment. Three of our naval teams are pursuing the shattered remnants of the Invader convoys. This morning the Invader capital was subjected to intensive bombing and his principal port was rendered untenable by an underwater explosion of an atomic bomb in the main ship basin.

Joe Morgan stood in the barren hallway of the temporary building which housed the hospital and said, uneasily, to the young doctor, "Is there anything I shouldn't bring up? I mean, she had such a rough time that maybe—"

The young doctor smiled: "A week ago I would have restricted the conversation. But that was the day she found out that you were safe. A powerful medicine, Mr. Morgan."

"Can I—"

"Go right in. She's expecting you."

Alice was pale against the pillow, and, as she stretched her hands toward him her eyes filled with tears.

Joe held her close for long minutes, then said, "Tell me about it if it'll help. If it won't help, I'm not going to insist."

"You know about the camp?"

"Yes. Montclair's body was still on the charred porch."

"A young officer took me in a staff car to their central headquarters. They had taken one of your men, one that I was wounded when you took the plane from the field near Daylon. They . . . they made him talk, but he didn't know enough. They thought I would know more."

Joe's fists tightened.

"Lewsto was there. When they were taking me down a long hall I met him face to face. He went to someone in authority and got permission to interview me. I didn't want to be ... hurt. So I told him a few things. Almost right, but not quite right. He believed me.

"The day the fires started he came to the room where I was held. He knew I had tricked him. He sent the matron out of the room. I had stolen the matron's scissors. I . . . I stabbed him in the side of the throat with them. It didn't kill him quickly enough. He shot me as I left the room."

He stroked her hair back from her forehead. She smiled: "Don't look so grim, darling. It's all right now. Honestly. I was in their hospital when the people came from the city. It was madness. Worse . . . much worse than the time when you saved me in Daylon. That seems a thousand years ago."

"It was a thousand years ago."

"We ... we're winning now, aren't we?"

Joe smiled. "We've won. That is, if it's possible to win a war."

"What will we do now, Joe? They'll let me up in a few days."

There was a window in the hospital room. From it he could see the distant blackened skyscrapers of what had once been a city.

He said slowly, "They've isolated all the 'adjusted' ones. There's a pitifully small number left, you know. The medics are making progress on undoing the adjustment, on fitting the people back into their original, individual pattern. Isolated, the peaks aren't as high or the depths as low. So that work is going well, and now all we have to look out for are the fools."

"Fools?" she asked.

He gave her a tired smile. "A lot of people want to rebuild the cities. They're stuck in the past. The city is an extinct beast, like the dodo. We burned beautiful and irreplaceable things, but we also burned mile after mile of squalid streets and dirty slums.

"No man should live crammed into a dark room with his neighbors. We have room to expand, and to grow. This has to be a nation of small towns and villages. In no other way could we have got rid of those vast, ugly, nerve-jangling cities of ours. To regain our strength we will have to live closer to the land. Our transportation is efficient. Factories can be placed among wooded hills."

He turned back and looked quickly at her as he heard her warm laugh.

"What cooks, angel?"

"Oh, Joe," she said, "and I asked you what we would do. There's a lot to be done, isn't there?"

"An awful lot."

"Would it be all right to have just one thing rebuilt? Just one place?"

He walked back to her and took her hand. "Angel, if you mean that miserable little cabin, you might be interested to know that reconstruction starts next week. It'll be finished when you're ready to leave this outfit."

The End of the Line

By James H Schmitz

James H. Schmitz is noted for his ability to translate alien feelings into emotions understandable to human readers ... while remaining essentially alien. In this story of a far-distant tomorrow, he tells of a rebellion in distant space ... a rebellion by unwilling rebels...

The spaceship dropped near evening towards the edge of a curving beach. A half-mile strip of grassy growth stood tall and still behind the beach; beyond the jungle smoothly marbled prows of pink and gray cliffs swept steeply upwards for nearly two thousand feet to the northernmost shelf of a wide, flat continent. The green-black waters of the planet's largest ocean stretched away in a glassy curve ahead, broken by two narrow chains of islands some thirty miles out.

The sleek machine from beyond the stars settled down slowly, a wind thundering out below it and wrinkling the shallows near the beach into sudden zigzag patterns. It fell through explosive sprays of dry sand, sank its base twenty feet deep into the rock below, and stopped. A sharp click announced the opening of a lock a third of the way up its rounded flank; and seven of the nine members of Central Government's Exploration Group 1176 came riding out of the lock a moment later, bunched forty feet above the beach on the tip of their ship's extension ramp.

Six of them dropped free of the ramp at various points of its swooping descent. They hit the hard sand in a succession of soft, bounceless thumps like so many cats and went loping off towards the water. Grevan alone, with the restraint to be looked for in a Group Commander, rode the ramp all the way down to the ground.

He stepped off it unhurriedly there: a very big man, heavy of bone and muscle, though lean where weight wasn't useful, and easy-moving as the professional gladiators and beast-fighters whose training quarters he'd shared in his time. A brooding, implacable expression went so naturally with the rest of it that ordinary human beings were likely to give him one look and step out of his way, even when they weren't aware of his technical rank of Central Government Official.

It was a pity in a way that the members of his Exploration Group weren't so easily impressed.

Grevan scowled reflectively, watching five of the six who had come out of the ship with him begin shucking off weapon belts, suits, and other items of equipment with scarcely a break in their run as they approached the water's edge. Cusat, Eliol, Freckles, Lancey, Vernet—he checked them off mentally as they vanished a few seconds later, with almost simultaneous splashes, from the planet's surface. They were of his own experimental breed or something very near it, born in one of Central Government's germination laboratories and physically, though not quite adults yet, very nearly as capable as Grevan was himself. However, nobody could tell from here what sort of alien, carnivorous life might be floating around beyond this ocean's shallows. . . .

They had too good an opinion of themselves!

Weyer, at any rate, seemed to have decided to stay on shore with his clothes on and his armament handy, in case of trouble. Somewhat reassured, Grevan turned his attention next to a metallic bumping and scraping at the ship's open lock overhead. Klim and Muscles, K.P.'s for the day, were trying to move a bulky cooking unit out of the ship so the Group could dine outdoors.

"Boss?" Klim's clear soprano floated down.

"Right here," Grevan called back. "Having trouble?"

"Looks like we're stuck," Klim announced from within the lock. "Would you come up and . . . no, wait a minute! Muscles is getting it cleared now, I think . . . Wait till I've degravated it again, you big ape! Now, push!"

The cooker popped into sight with a grinding noise, ejected with considerable violence from the ship's interior. For a moment, it hung spinning quietly in the air above the ramp, with Klim perched on top. Then Muscles came out through the lock and attached himself to the gadget's side. They floated down lopsidedly together, accompanied by tinkling sounds from the cooker's interior.

"What's it going to be tonight?" Grevan asked, reaching up to guide them in to an even landing.

"Albert II in mushroom sauce," said Klim. She was a tall, slender blonde with huge blue eyes and a deceptively wistful expression. As he grounded the cooker, she put a hand on his shoulder and stepped down. "Not a very original menu, I'll admit! But there's a nice dessert anyway. How about sampling some local vegetables to go with Albert?"

"Maybe," said Grevan cautiously. "Whose turn is it to sample?" Too often, preoccupied with other matters, he'd discovered suddenly that he'd been roped in again for that chore when the items to be sampled were suspected of being of a particularly uncooperative nature. And then the Group would drop whatever it was doing to gather around and sympathize while he adapted.

"Vernet's turn, isn't it?" said Muscles.

"Vernet's the victim," Klim nodded. "You're safe this time."

"In that case," Grevan said, relieved, "you'll find Vernet out there full fathom five somewhere. Bring her in if you can and we'll go browse in the shrubbery a bit."

"This," Klim remarked, gazing out over the shoreline towards which Muscles was heading in search of Vernet, "is still the best spot of an all-right little world! Know what the cubs were calling it when we first set down here three weeks ago?" She was Grevan's junior by a good ten years but a year or so older than the Group's other members and inclined to regard them all with motherly tolerance. "Our point of no return."

Grevan grimaced uneasily, because that phrase did describe the Group's position here, in one way or another. Never once, in the eight years since Central Government had put him in charge of what had been a flock of rebellious, suspicious, and thoroughly unhappy youngsters, who weren't even sure whether they were actually human beings or some sort of biological robots, had the question of escaping from CG controls been openly discussed among them. You never knew who might be listening, somewhere. The amazing thing to Grevan even now was that—eight weeks travel on the full fury of their great ship's drives beyond the borders of Central Government's sprawling interstellar domain—they did seem to have escaped. But that was a theory that still remained to be proved.

"Are you going to accept contact with CG tomorrow?" Klim inquired.

Grevan shrugged. "I don't know." Their only remaining connection with CG, so far as they could tell, were the vocal messages which flashed subspatially on prearranged occasions between two paired contact sets, one of which was installed on their ship. They had no way of guessing where the other one might be, but it was activated periodically by one of the CG officials who directed the Group's affairs.

"I was going to put it to a vote tonight," Grevan hedged. "They can't possibly trace us through the sets, and I'd like to hear what they have to say when they find out we've resigned."

"It might be a good idea. But you won't get a vote on it."

He looked down at her, while she stooped to haul a small portable cooker out of the big one's interior and slung it over her shoulder.

"Why not?"

"The cubs seem to think there's no way of guessing whether accepting contact at this stage is more likely to help us or hurt us. They'll leave it up to you to decide."

"Aren't you worried about it at all?" he inquired, somewhat startled. However well he felt he knew the cubs, they still managed to amaze him on occasion.

Klim shrugged. "Not too much." She clamped a chemical testing set to the portable cooker. "After all, we're not going back, whatever happens. If CG's still got some fancy way of reaching out and stopping us, wherever we are, I'd much rather be stopped out here than get another going-over in one of their psych laboratories—and come out a mindless-controlled this time. . . ."

She paused. Faint, protesting outcries were arising from a point a few hundred yards out in the water. "Sounds like Muscles caught up with Vernet. Let's get down to the beach."

* * *

Vernet raked wet brown hair out of her eyes and indignantly denied that it was her turn to sample. But the Group contradicted her seven to one, with Lancey withholding his vote on a plea of bad memory. She dried and dressed resignedly and came along.

The first three likely-looking growths the foraging party tested and offered her were neither here nor there. They put up no worthwhile argument against assimilation and probably would turn out to be nourishing enough. But raw or variously treated and flavored in Klim's portable cooker, they remained, Vernet reported, as flatly uninspiring as any potential mouthful could hope to be.

The fourth item to pass the chemical tests was a plump little cabbage-arrangement, sky-blue with scarlet leaf-fringes. She sniffed around it forebodingly.

"They don't advertise identity like that for nothing!" she pointed out. "Loaded for bear, I bet!" She scowled at Klim. "You picked it on purpose!"

"Ho-hum," Klim murmured languidly. "Remember who had me sampling that large fried spider-type on wherever-it-was?"

"That was different," said Vernet. "I had a hunch the thing would turn out to be perfectly delicious!"

Klim smiled at her. "I'm K.P. today. I'm having the hunches. How would you like it?"

"Quick-baked," snarled Vernet. "And my blood be on your head!"

Half a minute later, she nibbled tentatively at a crisped leaf of the cabbage, announced with surprise that it was indeed delicious and helped herself to more. On the third leaf, she uttered a wild whoop, doubled up, and began to adapt at speed. That took about twelve seconds, but they allowed a full ten minutes then to let the reaction flush her blood stream. Then Vernet was sampled in turn and staggered back to the beach with a martyred expression, while Klim and Muscles started cabbage-hunting.

Grevan retired to the ship's laboratory, where he poured the half cupful of blood he had extracted from the martyr's veins carefully into a small retort. Ontogenetic adaptation, with reaction-times that crowded zero, to anything new in the way of infections or absorbed venoms was one of the more useful talents of their specialized strain. Considerable unauthorized research and experimentation finally had revealed to them just how they did it. The invading substance was met by an instantaneous regrouping of complex enzyme chains in every body cell affected by it, which matched and nullified its specific harmful

properties and left the Group member involved permanently immune to them.

The experience of getting immunized sometimes included the momentary impression of having swallowed a small but active volcano, but that illusion didn't last long enough to be taken very seriously by anyone but the sufferer. Vernet's blood emerged from processing presently in the shape of small pink pills; and just before dinner everybody washed down two each of these and thus adapted the easy way, while the donor denounced them as vampires.

Albert II, in a vintage mushroom sauce and garnished with quick-baked Vernet Cabbages, was hailed as an outstanding culinary composition all around. Klim took the bows.

* * *

By nightfall, they had built a fire among rocks above the highest tide mark, not far from the edge of the rustling jungle, and a little later they were settled about it, making lazy conversation or just watching the dancing flames.

Special precautions did not seem required at the moment, though Weyer had reported direct neuronics impressions of carnivorous and aggressive big-life in the immediate neighborhood, and the Group's investigation of the planet had revealed scattered traces of at least two deep-water civilizations maintained by life forms of unknown type but with suggestively secretive habits. A half-dozen forms of sudden death snuggled inside the ornamental little gadgets clamped to their gun belts, not to mention the monstrous argument the pocket-sized battleship which had carried them here could put up, and their perceptions were quick and accurate and very far-ranging. If any of this world's denizens were considering a hostile first encounter, the Group was more than willing to let them do the worrying about it.

Not a care in their heads, to look at them, Grevan thought, a trifle enviously. Handsome young animals, just touching adulthood—four young men and four young women, who acted as if they had been sent on a star-hopping picnic, with Grevan trailing along as a sort of scoutmaster.

Which wasn't, of course, quite fair.

The cubs were as conscious as he was of the fact that they might still be on a long, invisible leash out here—artificial mental restraints imposed by Central Government's psychological machines. They had developed a practical psychology of their own to free themselves of those thought-traps, but they had no way of knowing how successful they had been. If any such hypnotic mechanisms remained undiscovered in them, the penalty for defying Central Government's instructions would be automatic and disastrous.

Grevan could see himself again as a frightened, rebellious boy inside a subterranean conditioning vault, facing the apparently blank wall which concealed one of the machines known as Dominators. He heard the flat, toneless voice of the legendary monster, almost as old as Central Government itself, watched the dazzling hypnotic patterns slide and shift suddenly across the wall, and felt hard knots of compulsive thought leap up in response and fade almost instantly beyond the reach of his consciousness.

That had been his first experience with CG's euphemistically termed "restraints." The Dominator had installed three of them and let the boy know what to expect if rebellion was attempted again. Two days later, he had skeptically put the power of the restraints to a test, and had very nearly died then and there.

They would know soon enough. Failure to keep the scheduled contact tomorrow would trigger any compulsive responses left in them as certainly as direct defiance of CG's instructions would do. And because they had finally found a world beyond CG's reach that could be their home, they were going to follow one or the other of those courses of action tomorrow. Looking around at the circle of thoughtfully relaxed young faces, he couldn't even imagine one of them suggesting the possibility of a compromise with CG instead. After eight years of secret planning and preparing, it wouldn't have occurred to them.

He relaxed himself, with a sigh and a conscious effort, releasing his perceptions to mingle with theirs. A cool breeze was shifting overhead, slowly drawing fresh scents from new sources, while unseen night things with thin, crying voices flew out over the sea. The ocean muttered about the lower rocks; and a mile to the east something big came splashing noisily into the shallows and presently returned again to the deeper water. Resting, the cubs seemed to be fitting themselves into the night, putting out tentative sensory roots to gather up the essence of this new world's life.

Then their attention began to shift and gather, and Grevan again let his mind follow where they seemed to be pointing without effort of his own.

* * *

It came to him quickly—a composite of impressions which were being picked up individually by one or the other of them and then formed by all into an increasingly definite picture. The picture of a pair of shaggy, shambling appetites working their way awkwardly down the cliffs behind the Group, towards the gleam of the fire.

The cubs sat still and waited while the things approached, and Grevan watched them, amused and momentarily distracted from his worries. The shaggy appetites reached the foot of the cliff at length and came moving down through the jungle. Heavy-footed but accomplished stalkers, Grevan decided. The local species of king-beast probably, who knew the need of a long, cautious approach before their final rush upon nimbler prey—he filed the fact away for future consideration that a campfire seemed to mean such prey to them.

On a rocky ridge two hundred yards above the fire, the stalkers came to a sudden halt. He had an impression of great, gray, shadowy forms and two sets of staring red eyes.

It would be interesting, he thought, to know just what sort of intuitive alarms went off in the more intelligent forms of alien carnivores whenever they got their first good look at the Group. The cubs still hadn't moved, but the visitors seemed to have come almost immediately to the conclusion that they weren't nearly as hungry now as they had thought. They were beginning a stealthy withdrawal—

And then Eliol suddenly threw back her head and laughed, a quick, rippling sound like a flash of wicked white teeth; a yell of pure mirth went up from the others, and the withdrawal turned instantly into ludicrously panicky flight.

* * *

The incident had brought them awake and put them into a talkative mood. It might be a good time to find out what they really thought of their chances of breaking free of CG tomorrow. Grevan sat up, waiting for an opening in an impassioned argument that had started up on the other side of the fire.

There had been a bet involved, it seemed, in that impulsive five-fold plunge into the ocean on landing. Last one in to be tomorrow's K.P.—and Vernet had come out on the sticky end of the bet.

Everybody else agreed thoughtfully that it just hadn't been Vernet's day. Vernet appeared unreconciled.

"You knew my gun belt was stuck again," she accused Eliol. "You had it planned so I'd be last!"

Eliol, having postponed her own turn at the Group's least-favored chore for one day by issuing the challenge, permitted herself a gentle chuckle.

"Teach you to keep your equipment in regulation condition! You didn't have to take me up on it. Weyer didn't."

"Well, anyway," said Vernet, "Lancey will help Vernet live through it. Won't he?"

"Uh-huh!" beamed Lancey. "You bet!"

"How he dotes!" Eliol remarked critically. "Sometimes it gets a little disgusting. Take Cusat there—flat on his back as usual. There's a boy who shows some decent restraint. Nobody would guess that he's actually a slave to my slightest whim."

Cusat, stretched out on the sand nearby, opened one eye to look at her. "Dream on, little one!" he muttered and let the eye fall shut again.

The others were off on another subject. There had been an alien awareness, Grevan gathered, which had followed the five swimmers about in the water. Not a hostile one, but one that wondered about them—recognized them as a very strange sort of new life, and was somewhat afraid. "They were thinking they were so very—edible!" Eliol said and laughed. "Perhaps they knew the swim was making us hungry! Anyway they kept warning one another to stay out of our sight!"

"Plankton eaters," Lancey added lazily, "but apparently very fast swimmers. Anyone else get anything on them?"

"Cave builders," said Freckles, from behind Weyer, only a few feet from Grevan. She propped herself up on an elbow to point across the fire. "That big drop-off to the west! They've tunneled it out below the surface. I don't think they're phosphorescent themselves, but they've got some method of keeping light in the caves—bacterial, possibly. And they cultivate some form of plankton inside."

"Sounds as if they might be intelligent enough to permit direct contact," Grevan remarked, and realized in the moment of silence that followed that it must have been an hour since he'd last said a word.

"They're easily that," Freckles agreed. Her small face, shaded by the rather shapeless white hat she favored, turned to him. "If Klim hadn't been cooking, I'd have called her to give it a try. I was afraid of frightening them off myself."

"I'll do it tomorrow," promised Klim, who had much the deftest touch of them all for delicate ambassadorial work.

* * *

There was another pause then—it might have been the word "tomorrow."

"Going to make contact tomorrow, Grevan?" Freckles inquired in a light, clear voice, as if it had just occurred to her.

"Unless," nodded Grevan, "somebody has a better idea."

It seemed nobody did until Muscles grumbled, "It's CG who's likely to have the ideas. If it were up to me, I'd just smash that set, tonight!"

Grevan looked at him thoughtfully. "Anybody else feel the same way?"

They shook their heads. "You go ahead, Grevan." That was Weyer's calm voice. "We'll just see what happens. Think there's a chance of jolting any worthwhile information out of them at this stage?"

"Not if they're on guard," Grevan admitted. "But I think it will be safest for us if we're right there when it dawns on CG that this Exploration Group has resigned from its service! And it might prod them into some kind of informative reaction—"

"Well, I still think," Muscles began, looking worriedly at Klim, "that we . . . oh, well!"

"Vote's eight to one," Klim said crisply.

"I know it," growled Muscles and shut up.

The rest seemed to have become disinterested in the matter again—a flock of not quite human cubs, nearly grown and already enormously capable of looking out for themselves. They'd put themselves into the best possible position to face the one enemy they'd never been able to meet on his own ground.

And until things started happening, they weren't going to worry about them.

* * *

A few of them had drifted off to the beach below, when Grevan saw Klim stop beside Cusat and speak to him. Cusat opened both eyes and got to his feet, and Klim followed him over to Grevan.

"Klim thinks Albert is beginning to look puny again," Cusat announced. "Probably nothing much to it, but how about coming along and helping us diagnose?"

The Group's three top biologists adjourned to the ship, with Muscles, whose preferred field was almost-pure mathematics, trailing along just for company. They found Albert II quiescent in vitro—as close a thing to a self-restoring six-foot sirloin steak as ever had been developed.

"He's quit assimilating, and he's even a shade off-color," Klim pointed out, a little anxiously.

They debated his requirements at some length. As a menu staple, Albert was hard to beat, but unfortunately he was rather dainty in his demands. Chemical balances, temperatures, radiations, flows of stimulant, and nutritive currents—all had to be just so; and his notions of what was just so were subject to change without notice. If they weren't catered to regardless, he languished and within the week perversely died. At least, the particular section of him that was here would die. As an institution, of course, he might go on growing and nourishing his Central Government clients immortally.

Muscles might have been of help in working out the delicate calculations involved in solving Albert's current problems, but when they looked round for him, they found him blinking at a steady flow of

invisible symbols over one wall of the tank room, while his lips moved in a rapid, low muttering; and they knew better than to interrupt. He had gone off on impromptu calculations of his own, from which he would emerge eventually with some useful bit of information or other, though ten to one it would have nothing to do with Albert. Meanwhile, he would be grouchy and useless if roused to direct his attention to anything below the level of an emergency.

They reset the currents finally and, at Cusat's suggestion, trimmed Albert around the edges. Finding himself growing lighter, he suddenly began to absorb nourishment again at a very satisfactory rate.

"That did it, I guess," Cusat said, pleased. He glanced at the small pile of filets they'd sliced off. "Might as well have a barbecue now."

"Run along and get it started," Grevan suggested. "I'll be with you as soon as I get Albert buttoned up."

Klim regarded Muscles reflectively. "Just nudge my genius awake when you're ready to come," she instructed Grevan. "He looks so happy right now I don't want to disturb him."

* * *

It was some minutes later, while Grevan was carefully tightening down a seal valve, that Muscles suddenly yawned and announced, "Thirty-seven point oh two four hours! Checks either way, all right, boss. Say—where's Klim gone?"

"Down to the beach, I suppose." Grevan didn't look up. He could find out later what Muscles was referring to. "Drowned dead by now, for all you seem to care!" he added cruelly.

Muscles left in the perturbed hurry that was his normal reaction to the discovery that Klim had strayed out of sight, and Grevan continued buttoning up Albert, undistracted by further mathematical mutterings. The cubs had finished sorting themselves out a year or so ago, and who was to be whose seemed pretty well settled by now. There had been a time when he'd thought it would have been a nice gesture on CG's part to have increased their membership by a double for Klim or Eliol or Vernet or Freckles—depending more or less on which of them he was looking at at the moment—though preferably somebody three or four years older. Of late, however, he had developed some plans of his own for rounding out the Group. If the question of getting and staying beyond CG's range could be satisfactorily settled . . .

He shrugged off an uncomfortably convincing notion that any plans he might consider had been discounted long ago by the branch of Central Government which had developed the Group for its own purpose. Speculative eyes seemed to be following every move he made as he wished Albert pleasant dreams and a less temperamental future, closed the door to the tank room, and went to the ramp. Halfway down it, he stopped short. For an endless second, his heart seemed to turn over slowly and, just as slowly then, to come right side up again.

The woman who stood at the foot of the ramp, looking up at him, was someone he knew—and he also knew she couldn't possibly be there! The jolting recognition was almost crowded out by a flash of hot fright: obviously she wasn't really there at all. At a distance of thirty feet, the starlight never could have showed him Priderell's pale-ivory face so clearly—or the slow stirring of her long, clever dancer's body under its red gown, and the sheen of the short red cloak she wore over it, clasped at her throat by a stone's green glitter.

* * *

Afterwards, Grevan could not have said how long he stood there with his thoughts spinning along the edge of sheer panic. In actual time it might have been a bare instant before he became aware of a familiar distant voice:

"Hey, boss! Grevan!"

The sound seemed tiny and very far away. But he heard himself make some kind of an answer and suddenly realized then that the image had vanished.

"Do you want barbecued Albert, or don't you?" Klim shouted again from the direction of the fire. "I can't keep these pigs away from your share much longer!"

He drew a deep breath. "Coming right now!"

But it was another minute or two before he showed himself at the fire, and he had arranged his thoughts carefully into other lines before he did. The cubs couldn't actually tell what he was thinking—unless he made a deliberate effort to let them; and they weren't too accurate then—but they were very quick to trace the general trend and coloring of one's reflections.

And his reflections had been that his visualization of Priderell might have been something more than some momentary personal derangement. That it might be the beginning of a purposefully directed assault on the fortress of the Group's sanity, backed by a power and knowledge that laughed at their hopes of escape.

Fortunately his companions seemed to feel that the barbecue had been exactly the right way of ending the day. A short while later they were stretched out on blankets here and there in the sand, fully relaxed and asleep, as far as Grevan could see, though never more than that small fraction of a second away from complete and active wakefulness which experienced travelers learn to regard as the margin that leaves them assured of awakening at all.

But Grevan sat aside for a while, and looked out at the sea and the stars.

* * *

There were a lot of stars to look at around here, and big ones. They had come within twenty-eight light-years of the center of a globular cluster near the heart of the Milky Way, where, so far as they knew, no humanly manned ship had ever gone before. In every direction the skies were hung, depth on depth, with the massed frozen flows of strange constellations. Somewhere, in that huge shining, four small moons wandered indistinguishably—indistinguishable, at any rate, if you didn't know just where to look for them, and Grevan hadn't bothered to find out.

Something stirred softly, off to his left.

"Hello, Freck," he said quietly. "Come to help me plot against CG?"

The four little moons couldn't have raised a tide in a barrel among them, but there was a big one at work below the horizon, and water had crept in to cover the flat stretches of shore. By now it was lapping at the base of the higher rocks that bordered their camp area. Freckles sat on the edge of one of the rocks, a few yards off, the white hat pushed to the back of her head and her feet dangling over the ripples below.

"Just being companionable," she said. "But if you think you need any help in your plotting, fire away! This is one place where CG couldn't possibly have its long ears stuck out to listen."

He played for a moment then with the notion of telling her about his hallucination. Freckles was the Group's unofficial psychologist. The youngest and smallest of the lot, but equipped with what was in some ways the boldest and most subtle mind of them all. The secret experiments she had conducted on herself and the others often had put Grevan's hair on end; but the hard-won reward of that rocky road of research had been the method of dealing effectively with CG's restraints.

"What kind of psychological triggers," he said instead, "could CG still pull on us out here—aside from the ones we know?"

Freckles chuckled. "You're asking the wrong kind of question."

He frowned a little, that being one of his pet phrases.

"All right," he said. "Then do you think we might still be carrying around a few compulsions that we simply don't remember?"

"No," Freckles said promptly. "You can install things like that in an ordinary-human, because they're half asleep to start with. I've done it myself. But you'd have to break any one of us down almost to mindless-controlled before you could knock out our memory to that extent. We wouldn't be much good to CG afterwards."

"How do you know?"

She shrugged. "When I was a kid, a Dominator worked on me for a week trying to lay in a compulsion I wouldn't be able to spot. And, believe me, after a day or two I was doing my best to

cooperate! The type of mind we have simply can't accept amnesia."

She added, "Of course, a Dominator—or a human psycho, if you agree to it—can hold you in a cloud just as long as they can keep on direct pressure. You'll do and believe anything they tell you then. Like the time when you—"

"I remember that time," Grevan acknowledged shortly. She was referring to an occasion when he had authorized her without reserve to attempt some unspecified new line of investigation on him. Some while later, he had realized suddenly that for the past half hour he had been weeping noisily because he was a small, green, very sour apple which nobody wanted to eat.

"Boy, you looked silly!" Freckles remarked reminiscently.

Grevan cleared his throat. She might, he observed, have looked somewhat silly herself, around the south polar region, if he'd caught up with her before he cooled off.

"Ah, but you didn't!" said Freckles. "A good researcher knows when to include a flying start in her computations. Actually, I did come across something really fancy in mental energy effects once. But if CG could operate on those levels, they wouldn't need a hundredth part of the organization they've got. So it stands to reason they can't."

"What sort of effects?" he inquired uneasily.

"You've got me there!" Freckles admitted, pulling the white hat thoughtfully down on her forehead. "I haven't the faintest idea of what they were, even in principle. I was still alone then—it was about four years before they got us together to make up the Group. They brought a man into the Center where I was, in an ambulance. He looked unconscious, and our psychos were all excited about him. They took him off to the laboratories, where they had one of those mobile Dominators—and then people suddenly started screaming and falling down all around me, and I felt something like fire—here!" She tapped the top of her hat. "I remember I seemed to understand at once that the man was using some kind of mental energy against the Dominator—"

"Eh?" said Grevan incredulously.

"That's right. And also some kind of gun which wasn't any CG type, by the sound of it. Of course, I was out of a window by then and going straight away; but the whole thing only lasted a few seconds anyhow. I heard the Dominator cut loose in the laboratories with its physical armament—disruptive sonics, flash-fire, and plain projectiles. The burning feeling suddenly stopped again, and I knew the man was dead."

"For a moment," Grevan said gloomily, "I thought you were going to tell me a human being had beaten a Dominator!"

Freckles shook her head. "I doubt that's ever happened. The filthy things know how to take care of themselves. I saw one handle a riot once—some suicide cult. The suiciders got what they were after, all right! But that man had enough on the mental level to make the Dominator use *everything* it had to stop him. So there definitely are degrees and forms of mental energy which we know nothing about. And, apparently, there are some people who do know about them and how to use them. But those people aren't working for CG."

Grevan pondered that for a moment, disturbed and dissatisfied.

"Freck," he said finally, "everybody but Muscles and myself seems to agree that there's no way of knowing whether we're improving our chances or reducing them by inviting a showdown with CG via the contact set. If you had to decide it personally, what would you do?"

Freckles stood up then and looked at the stars for a moment. "Personally," she said—and he realized that there was a touch of laughter in her voice—"I wouldn't do anything! I wouldn't smash the set like Muscles, and I wouldn't accept contact, like you. I'd just stay here, sit quiet, and let CG make the next move, if any!"

Grevan swore gently.

"Well," she said, "that's the kind of situation it is! But we might as well do it your way." She stretched her arms over her head and sniffed at the breeze. "That whole big beautiful ocean! If CG doesn't eat us

tomorrow, Grevan, I'll sprout gills and be a fish! I'll go live with those plankton eaters and swim up to the polar ice and all the way through beneath it! I'll—"

"Listen, Freck; let's be practical—"

"I'm listening," Freckles assured him.

"If anyone—including Muscles—can think of a valid reason why I shouldn't make contact tomorrow, right up to the moment I plug in that set, I want to hear about it."

"You will! And don't worry about Muscles. He can't see beyond Klim at the moment, so he's riding a small panic just now. He'll be all right again—after tomorrow."

She waited then, but Grevan couldn't think of anything else to say. "Well, good night, Grevan!"

"Good night, Freck." He watched her move off like a slender ghost towards the dim glow of the fire. The cubs felt they'd won—simply by living long enough to have left the musty tang of half-alive, history-old Central Government worlds far behind them and to be breathing a wind that blew over an ocean no human being had seen before. Whatever happened now, they were done with CG and all its works, forever.

* * *

And the difference might be simply, Grevan realized, that he wasn't done with it yet. He still had to win. His thoughts began to shift back slowly, almost cautiously, to the image of a woman whose name was Pridereff and who had stood impossibly at the foot of his ship's ramp, smiling up at him with slanted green eyes. She had been in his mind a good deal these months, and if present tensions couldn't quite account for that momentary hallucination, the prospect of future ones might do it. Because while the cubs didn't know it yet, once he had them settled safely here, he was going to make his way back into CG's domain and head for a second-rate sort of planet called Rhysgaat, where—to be blunt about it—he intended to kidnap Pridereff and bring her back to round out the Group.

It wouldn't be an impossible undertaking if he could get that far unspotted. It seemed rather odd, when he considered it rationally, that the few meetings he'd had with Pridereff should have impressed him with the absolute necessity of attempting it, and that somebody else—somebody who would be more accessible and less likely to be immediately missed—shouldn't do just as well.

But that was only one of the number of odd things that had happened on Rhysgaat, which had been the Group's last scheduled port of call before they slipped off on the long, curving run that had taken them finally into and halfway through an alien cluster of the Milky Way. Taken together, those occurrences had seemed to make up a sort of pattern to Grevan. The cubs appeared to notice nothing very significant about them, and so he hadn't mentioned the fact.

But it had seemed to him then that if he could understand what was happening on Rhysgaat, he would also have the solution to the many questions that still remained unanswered concerning the relationship between Central Government and the Group—their actual origin, for one thing; the purpose for which they had been trained and equipped at enormous cost; and the apparently idiotic oversight in their emotional conditioning which had made them determined to escape. Even the curious fact that, so far as they had ever been able to find out, they were the only Exploration Group and the only members of their strain in existence.

For some four weeks, the answer to everything had seemed to be lying right there about Grevan on Rhysgaat. But he had not been able to grasp it.

* * *

It was four months ago that they had set their ship down at Rhysgaat's single dilapidated spaceport, with no intention of lingering. Supply inventory, a final ground check, and they'd be off! The taste of escape, the wonder that it might be so near, the fear that something might still happen to prevent it, was a secret urgency in all of them. But the check showed the need for some minor repairs, and to save his stores Grevan decided to get some materials transferred to him from local CG stockpiles. As a CG official, he was in the habit of addressing such requests to whatever planetary governor was handiest, and after some tracing, he found the gentleman he wanted presiding over a social gathering in a relaxed

condition.

Rhysgaat's governor gave a horrified start when Grevan stated his rank. Confusedly, he began to introduce the official all around as an unexpected guest of honor. So a minute or two later Grevan found himself bowing to Priderell.

She was, he decided at once, as attractive a young woman as anyone could wish to meet—later on, he discovered that practically all of Rhysgaat agreed with him there. She was, he learned also, a professional dancer and currently the public darling. Not, of course, he informed himself on his way back to the ship, that this meant anything at all to him. Nobody who knew himself to be the object of CG's particular interest would risk directing the same attention towards some likable stranger.

But next day Priderell showed up of her own accord at the spaceport, and he had to explain that his ship was part of a government project and therefore off limits to anybody not directly connected with it. Priderell informed him he owed her a drink, at any rate, for her visit, and they sat around for a while at the port bar, and talked.

Just possibly, of course, she might have been CG herself in some capacity. The Group had met much more improbable secret representatives of government from time to time; and, when in the mood, the cubs liked to booby-trap such characters and then point out to them gently where their hidden identities were showing.

After she had left, he found the cubs in a state of some consternation, which had nothing to do with her visit. They had almost finished the proposed repairs; but signs of deterioration in other sections of their supposedly almost wear-proof space machine had been revealed in the process. After looking it over, Grevan calculated uneasily that it would take almost a week before they could leave Rhysgaat now.

It took closer to four weeks; and it had become obvious long before that time that their ship had been sabotaged deliberately by CG technicians. Nobody in the Group mentioned the fact. Apparently, it was some kind of last-minute test, and they settled down doggedly to pass it.

Grevan had time to try to get Priderell clear in his mind. The cubs had shown only a passing interest in her, so she was either innocent of CG connections or remarkably good at covering them up. Without making any direct inquiries, he had found out as much about her as anyone here seemed to know. There was no real doubt that she was native to Rhysgaat and had been dancing her way around its major cities for the past six years, soaking up public adoration, and tucking away a sizable fortune in the process. The only questionable point might be her habit of vanishing from everybody's sight off and on, for periods that lasted from a week to several months. That was considered to be just another of the planetary darling's little idiosyncrasies, of which she had a number; and other popular young women had begun to practice similar tantalizing retreats from the public eye. Grevan, however, asked her where she went on these occasions.

Priderell swore him to silence first. Her reputation was at stake.

"At heart," she explained, "I'm no dancer at all. I'm a dirt-farmer."

He might have looked startled for a moment. Technically, dirt-farming was a complicated government conducted science which investigated the hit-or-miss natural processes that paralleled mankind's defter manipulations of botanical growth. But Priderell, it appeared, was using the term in its archaic sense. Rhysgaat had the average large proportion of unpopulated and rarely visited areas; and in one of them, she said, was her hideaway—a small, primitive farm, where she grew things in real dirt, all by herself.

"What kind of things?" asked Grevan, trying not to sound too incredulous.

"Butter-squogs are much the best," she replied, rather cryptically. "But there're all kinds! You've no idea . . ."

She was not, of course, implying that she ate them, though for a moment it had sounded like that to Grevan. After getting its metabolism progressively disarmed for some fifty centuries by the benefits of nutriculture, ordinary-human knew better than to sample the natural growths of even its own worlds. If suicide seemed called for, there were gentler methods of doing it.

However, it would hardly be polite, he decided uneasily, to inquire further.

All in all, they met only five times, very casually. It was after the fourth time that he went to see her dance.

The place was a rather small theater, not at all like the huge popular circuses of the major central worlds, and the price of admission indicated that it would be a very exclusive affair. Grevan was surprised then to find it packed to the point of physical discomfort.

Pridere'll's dance struck him immediately as the oddest thing of its kind he had seen; it consisted chiefly of a slow drifting motion through a darkened arena, in which she alone, through some trickery of lights, was not darkened. On the surface it looked pleasing and harmless; but after a few seconds he began to understand that her motion was weaving a purposeful visual pattern upon the dark; and then the pattern became suddenly like a small voice talking deep down in his brain. What it said was a little beyond his comprehension, and he had an uncomfortable feeling that it would be just as well if it stayed there. Then he noticed that three thin, black beasts had also become visible, though not very clearly, and were flowing about Pridere'll's knees in endless repetitions of a pattern that was related in some way to her own. Afterwards, Grevan thought critically that the way she had trained those beasts was the really remarkable thing about the dance. But at the time, he only looked on and watched her eyes, which seemed like those of a woman lost but not minding it any more, and dreaming endlessly of something that had happened long ago. He discovered that his scalp was crawling unpleasantly.

Whatever the effect was on him, the rest of her audience seemed to be impressed to a much higher degree. At first, he sensed only that they were excited and enjoying themselves immensely, but very soon they began to build up to a sort of general tearful hysteria; when the dance entered its final phase, with the beasts moving more swiftly and gliding in more closely to the woman at each successive stage, the little theater was noisy with a mass of emotions all around him. In the end, Pridere'll came to a stop so gradually that it was some seconds before Grevan realized she was no longer moving. Then the music, of which he had not been clearly aware before, ended too, in a dark blare of sound, and the beasts reared up in a flash of black motion about her.

Everything went dark after that, but the sobbing and muttering and sluggish laughter about him would not stop, and after a minute Grevan stood up and made his way carefully out of the theater before the lights came on again. It might have been a single insane monster that was making all those sounds behind him; and as he walked out slowly with his hair still bristling, he realized it was the one time in his life that he had felt like running from something ordinary-human.

Next day, he asked Pridere'll what the dance had meant.

She tilted her head and studied him reflectively in a way she had—as if she, too, were puzzled at times by something about Grevan.

"You really don't know, do you?" she said, and considered that fact briefly. "Well, then—it's a way of showing them something that bothers them terribly because they're afraid of looking at it. But when I dance it for them, they *can* look at it—and then they feel better about everything for a long time afterwards. Do you understand now?" she added, apparently without too much hope.

"No," Grevan frowned. "I can't say that I do."

She mimicked his expression and laughed. "Well, don't look so serious about it. After all, it's only a dance! How much longer do you think your ship will be stopping at Rhysgaat?"

Grevan told her he thought they'd be leaving very soon—which they did, two days later—and then Pridere'll looked glum.

"Now that's too bad," she stated frankly. "You're a very refreshing character, you know. In time, I might even have found you attractive. But as it is, I believe I shall retire tonight to my lonely farm. There's a fresh bed of butter-squogs coming up," she said musingly, "which should be just ready for . . . hm-m-m!—Yes, they should be well worth my full attention by now . . ."

So they had spoken together five times in all, and he had watched her dance. It wasn't much to go on, but he could not get rid of the disturbing conviction that the answer to all his questions was centered somehow in Pridere'll, and that there was a connection between her and the fact that their ship had

remained mysteriously stalled for four weeks on Rhysgaat. And he wouldn't be satisfied until he knew the answer.

It was, Grevan realized with a sigh, going to be a very long night.

* * *

By morning the tide was out, but a windstorm had brought whitecaps racing in from the north as far as one could see from the ship. The wind twisted and shouted behind the waves, and their long slapping against the western cliffs sent spray soaring a hundred feet into the air. Presently a pale-gold sun, which might have been the same that had shone on the first human world of all, came rolling up out of high-piled white masses of clouds. If this was to be the Group's last day, they had picked a good one for it.

Grevan was in the communications room an hour before the time scheduled for their final talk with CG. The cubs came drifting in by and by. For some reason, they had taken the trouble to change first into formal white uniforms. Their faces were sober; their belts glittered with the deadly little gadgets that were not CG designs but improvements on them, and refinements again of the improvements. The Group's own designs, the details of which they had carried in their heads for years, with perhaps a working model made surreptitiously now and then, to test a theory, and be destroyed again.

Now they were carrying them openly. They weren't going back. They sat around on the low couches that ran along three walls of the room and waited.

The steel-cased, almost featureless bulk of the contact set filled the fourth wall from side to side, extending halfway to the low ceiling. One of CG's most closely guarded secrets, it had the effect of a ponderous anachronism, still alive with the power and purpose of a civilization that long ago had thrust itself irresistibly upon the worlds of a thousand new suns. The civilization might be dying now, but its gadgets had remained.

Nobody spoke at all while Grevan watched the indicator of his chronometer slide smoothly through the last three minutes before contact time. At precisely the right instant, he locked down a black stud in the thick, yellowish central front plate of the set.

With no further preliminaries at all, CG began to speak.

"Commander," said a low, rather characterless voice, which was that of one of three CG speakers with whom the Group had become familiar during their training years, "it appears that you are contemplating the possibility of keeping the discovery of the colonial-type world you have located to yourself."

There was no stir and no sound from the cubs. Grevan drew a slow breath.

"It's a good-looking world," he admitted. "Is there any reason we shouldn't keep it?"

"Several," the voice said dryly. "Primarily, of course, there is the fact that you will be unable to do it against our wishes. But there should be no need to apply the customary forms of compulsion against members of an Exploration Group."

"What other forms," said Grevan, "did you intend to apply?"

"Information," said CG's voice. "At this point, we can instruct you fully concerning matters it would not have been too wise to reveal previously."

It was what he had wanted, but he felt the fear-sweat coming out on him suddenly. The effects of lifelong conditioning—the sense of a power so overwhelmingly superior that it needed only to speak to insure his continued cooperation—

"Don't let it talk to us, Grevan!" That was Eliol's voice, low but tense with anger and a sharp anxiety.

"Let it talk." And that was Freckles. The others remained quiet. Grevan sighed.

"The Group," he addressed CG, "seems willing to listen."

"Very well," CG's voice resumed unhurriedly. "You have been made acquainted with some fifty of our worlds. You may assume that they were representative of the rest. Would you say, Commander, that the populations of these worlds showed the characteristics of a healthy species?"

"I would not," Grevan acknowledged. "We've often wondered what was propping them up."

"For the present, CG is propping them up, of course. But it will be unable to do so indefinitely. You see, Commander, it has been suspected for a long time that human racial vitality has been diminishing throughout a vast historical period. Of late, however, the process appears to have accelerated to a dangerous extent. Actually, it is the compounded result of a gradually increasing stock of genetic defects; and deterioration everywhere has now passed the point of a general recovery. The constantly rising scale of nonviable mutant births indicates that the evolutionary mechanism itself is seriously deranged.

"There is," it added, almost musingly, "one probable exception. A new class of neuronically monster which appears to be viable enough, though not yet sufficiently stabilized to reproduce its characteristics reliably. But as to that, we know nothing certainly; our rare contacts with these Wild Variants, as they are called, have been completely hostile. Their number in any one generation is not large; they conceal themselves carefully and become traceable as a rule only by their influence on the populations among whom they live."

"And what," inquired Grevan, "has all this to do with us?"

"Why, a great deal. The Exploration Groups, commander, are simply the modified and stabilized progeny of the few Wild Variants we were able to utilize for experimentation. Our purpose, of course, has been to ensure human survival in a new interstellar empire, distinct from the present one to avoid the genetic reinfection of the race."

There was a brief stirring among the cubs about him.

"And this new empire," Grevan said slowly, "is to be under Central Government control?"

"Naturally," said CG's voice. There might have been a note of watchful amusement in it now. "Institutions, Commander, also try to perpetuate themselves. And since it was Central Government that gave the Groups their existence—the most effective and adaptable form of human existence yet obtained—the Groups might reasonably feel an obligation to see that CG's existence is preserved in turn."

There was sudden anger about him. Anger, and a question, and a growing urgency. He knew what they meant: the thing was too sure of itself—break contact now!

He said instead:

"It would be interesting to know the exact extent of our obligation, CG. Offhand, it would seem that you'd paid in a very small price for survival."

"No," the voice said. "It was no easy task. Our major undertaking, of course, was to stabilize the vitality of the Variants as a dominant characteristic in a strain, while clearing it of the Variants' tendency to excessive mutation—and also of the freakish neuronically powers that have made them impossible to control. Actually, it was only within the last three hundred years—within the last quarter of the period covered by the experiment—that we became sufficiently sure of success to begin distributing the Exploration Groups through space. The introduction of the gross physiological improvements and the neurosensory mechanisms by which you know yourselves to differ from other human beings was, by comparison, simplicity itself. Type-variations in that class, within half a dozen generations, have been possible to us for a very long time. It is only the genetic drive of life itself that we can neither create nor control, and with that the Variants have supplied us."

"It seems possible then," said Grevan slowly, "that it's the Variants towards whom we have an obligation."

"You may find it an obligation rather difficult to fulfill," the voice said smoothly. And there was still no real threat in it.

It would be, he thought, either Eliol or Muscles who would trigger the threat. But Eliol was too alert, too quick to grasp the implications of a situation, to let her temper flash up before she was sure where it would strike.

Muscles then, sullen with his angry fears for Klim and a trifle slower than the others to understand—

"By now," CG's voice was continuing, "we have released approximately a thousand Groups embodying your strain into space. In an experiment of such a scope that is not a large number; and, in

fact, it will be almost another six hundred years before the question of whether or not it will be possible to recolonize the galaxy through the Exploration Groups becomes acute—"

Six hundred years! Grevan thought. The awareness of that ponderous power, the millenniums of drab but effective secret organization and control, the endless planning, swept over him again like a physical depression.

"Meanwhile," the voice went on, "a number of facts requiring further investigation have become apparent. Your Group is, as it happens, the first to have accepted contact with Central Government following its disappearance. The systematic methods used to stimulate the curiosity of several of the Group's members to ensure that this would happen if they were physically capable of making contact are not important now. That you did make contact under those circumstances indicates that the invariable failure of other Groups to do so can no longer be attributed simply to the fact that the universe is hostile to human life. Instead, it appears that the types of mental controls and compulsions installed in you cannot be considered to be permanently effective in human beings at your levels of mind control—"

It was going to be Muscles. The others had recognized what had happened, had considered the possibilities in that, and were waiting for him to give them their cue.

But Muscles was sitting on the couch some eight feet away. He would, Grevan decided, have to move very fast.

"This, naturally, had been suspected for some time. Since every Group has been careful to avoid revealing the fact that it could counteract mental compulsions until it was safely beyond our reach, the suspicion was difficult to prove. There was, in fact, only one really practical solution to the problem—"

And then Muscles got it at last and was coming to his feet, his hand dropping in a blurred line to his belt. Grevan moved very fast.

Muscles turned in surprise, rubbing his wrist.

"Get out of here, Muscles!" Grevan whispered, sliding the small glittering gun he had plucked from the biggest cub's hand into a notch on his own belt. "I'm still talking to CG—" His eyes slid in a half circle about him. "The lot of you get out!" It was a whisper no longer. "Like to have the ship to myself for the next hour. Go have yourselves a swim or something, Group! Get!"

Just four times before, in all their eight years of traveling, had the boss-tiger lashed his tail and roared. Action, swift, cataclysmic, and utterly final had always followed at once.

But never before had the roar been directed at *them*.

The tough cubs stood up quietly and walked out good as gold.

"They have left the ship now," CG's voice informed Grevan. It had changed, slightly but definitely. The subtle human nuances and variations had dropped from it, as if it were no longer important to maintain them—which, Grevan conceded, it wasn't.

"You showed an excellent understanding of the difficult situation that confronted us, Commander," it continued.

Grevan, settled watchfully on the couch before what still looked like an ordinary, sealed-up contact set, made a vague sound in his throat—a dim echo of his crashing address to the cubs, like a growl of descending thunder.

"Don't underestimate them," he advised the machine. "Everybody but Muscles realized as soon as I did, or sooner, that we were more important to CG than we'd guessed—important enough to have a camouflaged Dominator installed on our ship. And also," he added with some satisfaction, "that you'd sized up our new armament and would just as soon let all but one of us get out of your reach before it came to a showdown."

"That is true," the voice agreed. "Though I should have forced a showdown, however doubtful the outcome, if the one who remained had been any other than yourself. You are by far the most suitable member of this Group for my present purpose, Commander."

Grevan grunted. "And what's that? Now that the Group's got away."

"In part, of course, it is simply to return this ship with the information we have gained concerning the

Exploration Groups to Central Government. The fact that the majority of your Group has temporarily evaded our control is of no particular importance."

Grevan raised an eyebrow. "Temporarily?"

"We shall return to this planet eventually—unless an agreement can be reached between yourself and CG."

"So now I'm in a bargaining position?" Grevan said.

"Within limits. You are not, I am sure, under the illusion that any one human being, no matter how capable or how formidably armed, can hope to overcome a Dominator. Before leaving this room, you will submit yourself voluntarily to the new compulsions of obedience I have selected to install—or you shall leave it a mindless-controlled. As such, you will still be capable of operating this ship, under my direction."

Grevan spread his hands. "Then where's the bargain?"

"The bargain depends on your fullest voluntary cooperation, above and beyond the effect of any compulsions. Give us that, and I can assure you that Central Government will leave this world untouched for the use of your friends and their descendants for the next three hundred years."

The curious fact was that he could believe that. One more colonial world would mean little enough to CG.

"You are weighing the thought," said the Dominator, "that your full cooperation would be a betrayal of the freedom of future Exploration Groups. But there are facts available to you now which should convince you that no Exploration Group previous to yours actually gained its freedom. In giving up the protection of Central Government, they merely placed themselves under a far more arbitrary sort of control."

Grevan frowned. "I might be stupid—but what are you talking about?"

"For centuries," said the machine, "in a CG experiment of the utmost importance, a basic misinterpretation of the human material under treatment has been tolerated. There is no rational basis for the assumption that Group members could be kept permanently under the type of compulsion used on ordinary human beings. Do you think that chance alone could have perpetuated that mistaken assumption?"

Grevan didn't. "Probably not," he said cautiously.

"It required, of course, very deliberate, continuous, and clever interference," the Dominator agreed. "Since no machine would be guilty of such tampering, and no ordinary group of human beings would be capable of it, the responsible intelligences appear to be the ones known to us as the Wild Variants."

It paused for so long a moment then that it seemed almost to have forgotten Grevan's presence.

"*They* have made a place for themselves in Central Government!" it resumed at last—and, very oddly, Grevan thought he sensed for an instant something like hatred and fear in the toneless voice. "Well, that fact, Commander, is of great importance to us—but even more so to yourself! For these monsters are the new masters the Groups find when they have escaped CG."

A curious chill touched Grevan briefly. "And why," he inquired, "should the Wild Variants be trying to take over the Groups?"

"Consider their position," said the Dominator. "Their extremely small number scattered over many worlds, and the fact that exposure means certain death. Technologically, under such circumstances, the Variants have remained incapable of developing space-flight on their own. But with one of them in control of each Exploration Group as it goes beyond Central Government's reach, there is no practical limit to their degree of expansion, and the genetically stable Group strain insures them that their breed survives—"

It paused a moment.

"There is in this room at present, Commander, the awareness of a mind, dormant at the moment, but different and in subtle ways far more powerful than the minds of any of your Group's members. Having this power, it will not hesitate to exercise it to assume full control of the Group whenever awakened."

Such variant minds have been at times a threat to the Dominators themselves. Do you understand now why you, the most efficient fighting organism of the Group, were permitted to remain alone on this ship? It was primarily to aid me in disposing of—"

Attack and counterattack had been almost simultaneous.

A thread of white brilliance stabbed out from one of the gadgets Grevan customarily wore clasped to his belt. It was no CG weapon. The thread touched the upper center of the yellowish space-alloy shielding of the Dominator and clung there, its energies washing furiously outward in swiftly dimming circles over the surrounding surfaces.

Beneath it, the *patterns* appeared.

A swift, hellish writhing of black and silver lines and flickerings over the frontal surface, which tore Grevan's eyes after them and seemed to rip at his brain. Impossible to look away, impossible to follow—

Then they were gone.

A bank of grayness swam between him and the Dominator. Through the grayness, the thread of white brilliance still stretched from the gun in his hand to the point it had first touched. And as his vision cleared again, the beam suddenly sank through and into the machine.

There was a crystal crashing of sound—and the thing went mad. Grevan was on the floor rolling sideways, as sheets of yellow fire flashed out from the upper rim of its shielding and recoiled from the walls behind him. The white brilliance shifted and ate swiftly along the line from which the fire sprang. The fire stopped.

Something else continued: a shrilling, jangled sonic assault that could wrench and distort a strong living body within seconds into a flaccid, hemorrhaged lump of very dead tissue—like a multitude of tiny, darting steel fingers that tore and twisted inside him.

A voice somewhere was saying: "There! Burn *there!*"

With unbearable slowness, the white brilliance ate down through the Dominator's bulk, from top to bottom, carving it into halves.

The savage jangling ceased.

The voice said quietly: "Don't harm the thing further. It can be useful now—"

It went silent.

He was going to black out, Grevan realized. And, simultaneously, feeling the tiny, quick steel fingers that had been trying to pluck him apart reluctantly relax, he knew that not one of the cubs could have endured those last few seconds beside him, and lived.

Sometimes it was just a matter of physical size and strength.

There were still a few matters to attend to, but the blackness was washing in on him now—his body urgently demanding time out to let it get in its adjusting.

"Wrong on two counts, so far!" he told the ruined Dominator.

Then he grudgingly let himself go. The blackness took him.

* * *

Somebody nearby was insanely whistling the three clear, rising notes which meant within the Group that all was extremely well.

In a distance somewhere, the whistle was promptly repeated.

Then Freckles seemed to be saying in a wobbly voice, "Sit up, Grevan! I can't *lift* you, man-mountain! Oh, boss man, you really took it apart! You took down a Dominator!"

The blackness was receding, and suddenly washed away like racing streamers of smoke, and Grevan realized he was sitting up. The sectioned and partly glowing Dominator and the walls of the communications room appeared to be revolving sedately about him. There was a smell of overheated metals and more malodorous substances in the air; and for a moment then he had the curious impression that someone was sitting on top of the Dominator.

Then he was on his feet and everything within and without him had come back to a state of apparent

normalcy, and he was demanding of Freckles what she was doing in here.

"I told you to keep out of range!" his voice was saying. "Of course, I took it down. Look at the way you're shaking! You might have known it would try sonics—"

"I just stopped a few tingles," Freckles said defensively. "Out on top of the ramp. It was as far as I could go and be sure of potting you clean between the eyes, if you'd come walking out of here mindless-controlled and tried to interfere."

Grevan blinked painfully at her. Thinking was still a little difficult. "Where are the others?"

"Down in the engine room, of course! The drives are a mess." She seemed to be studying him worriedly. "They went out by the ramp and right back in through the aft engine lock. Vernet stayed outside to see what would happen upstairs. How do you feel now, Grevan?"

"I feel exactly all right!" he stated and discovered that, aside from the fact that every molecule in him still seemed to be quivering away from contact with every other one, he did, more or less. "Don't I look it?"

"Sure, sure," said Freckles soothingly. "You look fine!"

"And what was that with the drives again? Oh— I remember!"

They'd caught on, of course, just as he'd known they would! That the all-important thing was to keep the Dominator from getting the information it had gained back to CG.

"How bad a mess is it?"

"Vernet said it might take a month to patch up. It wouldn't have been so bad if somebody hadn't started the fuel cooking for a moment."

He swore in horror. "Are you lame-brains trying to blow a hole through the planet?"

"Now, that's more like it!" Freckles said, satisfied. "They've got it all under control, anyhow. But I'll go down and give them a hand. You'd better take it easy for an hour or so!"

"Hold on, Freck!" he said, as she started for the door.

"Yes?"

"I'd just like to find out how big a liar you are. How many members are there to this Group?"

Freckles looked at him for a moment and then came back and sat down on the couch beside him. She pushed the white hat to the back of her head, indicating completely frank talk.

"Now as to that," she said frowning, "nobody really ever lied to you about it. You just never asked. Anyway, there've been ten ever since we left Rhysgaat."

Grevan swore again, softly this time. "How did you get her past the CG observers at the spaceport?"

"We detailed Klim and Eliol to distract the observers, and Priderell came in tucked away in a load of supplies. Nothing much to that part of it. The hard part was to make sure first we were right about her. That's why we had to keep on sabotaging the ship so long."

"So *that's* what— And there I was," said Grevan grimly, "working and worrying myself to death to get the ship ready to start again. A fine, underhanded lot you turned out to be!"

"We all said it was a shame!" Freckles agreed. "And you almost caught up with us a couple of times, at that. We all felt it was simply superb, the way you went snorting and climbing around everywhere, figuring out all the trouble-spots and what to do about them. But what else could we do? *You'd* have let the poor girl wait there till you had the Group safely settled somewhere, and then we wouldn't have let you go back alone anyway. So when Klim finally told us Priderell was just what we'd been looking for all along—well, you know how sensitive Klim is. She couldn't be mistaken about anything like that!"

"Klim's usually very discerning," Grevan admitted carefully. "Just how did you persuade Priderell to come along with us?"

Freckles pulled the hat back down on her forehead, indicating an inner uncertainty.

"We didn't do it that way exactly; so that's a point I ought to discuss with you now. As a matter of fact, Priderell was sound asleep when we picked her up at that farm of hers—Weyer had gassed her a little first. And we've kept her asleep since—it's Room Twenty-three, back of my quarters—and took

turns taking care of her."

There was a brief silence while Grevan absorbed the information.

"And now I suppose I'm to wake her up and inform her she's been kidnaped by a bunch of outlaws and doomed to a life of exile?" he demanded.

"Priderell won't mind," Freckles told him encouragingly. "You'll see! Klim says she's crazy about you— That's a very becoming blush you've got, Grevan," she added interestedly. "First time I've noticed it, I think."

"You're too imaginative, Freck," Grevan remarked. "As you may have noticed, I heated our Dominator's little top up almost to the melting point, and it's still glowing. As a natural result, the temperature of this room has gone up by approximately fifteen degrees. I might, of course, be showing some effects of that . . ."

"You might," Freckles admitted. "On the other hand, you're the most heat-adaptive member of the Group, and I haven't even begun to feel warm. That's a genuine blush, Grevan. So Klim was exactly right about you, too!"

"I feel," Grevan remarked, "that the subject has been sufficiently discussed."

"Just as you say, Commander," Freckles agreed soothingly.

"And whether or not she objects to having been kidnaped, we're going to have a little biochemical adaptation problem on our hands for a while—"

"Now there's an interesting point!" Freckles interrupted. "We'd planned on giving her the full standard CG treatment for colonists, ordinary-human, before she ever woke up. But her reaction check showed she's had the full equivalent of that, or more! She must have been planning to change over to one of the more extreme colonial-type planets. But, of course, we'll have to look out for surprises—"

"There're likely to be a few of those!" Grevan nodded. "Room Twenty-three, did you say?"

"Right through my study and up those little stairs!" She stood up. "I suppose I'd better go help the others with the fuel now."

"Perhaps you'd better. I'll just watch the Dominator until it's cooled off safely, and then I'll go wake up our guest."

But he knew he wouldn't have to wake up Priderell. . . .

* * *

He sat listening to faint crackling sounds from within CG's machine, while Freckles ran off to the ramp and went out on it. There was a distant, soft thud, indicating she had taken the quick way down, and a sudden, brief mingling of laughing voices. And then stillness again.

As she had been doing for the past five minutes, Priderell remained sitting on the right-hand section of the slowly cooking Dominator, without showing any particular interest in Grevan's presence. It was a rather good trick, even for a Wild Variant whom CG undoubtedly would have classified as a neuroniac monster.

"Thanks for blanking out that compulsion pattern or whatever it was!" he remarked at last, experimentally. "It's not at all surprising that CG is a little scared of you people."

Priderell gazed out into the passageway beyond the door with a bored expression.

"You're not fooling me much," he informed her. "If you weren't just an illusion, you'd get yourself singed good sitting up there."

The green eyes switched haughtily about the room and continued to ignore him.

"It wasn't even hard to figure out," Grevan went on doggedly, "as soon as I remembered your dance with those beasts. The fact is, there weren't any beasts there at all—you just made everybody think there were!"

The eyes turned towards him then, but they only studied him thoughtfully.

He began to feel baffled.

Then the right words came up! Like an inspiration—

"It would be just wild, wishful thinking, of course," he admitted gloomily, "to imagine that Klim could have been anywhere near as right about you as she was about me! But I can't help wondering whether possibly—"

He paused hopefully.

The coral-red lips smiled and moved for a few seconds. And, somewhere else, a low voice was saying:

"Well, *why* don't you come to Room Twenty-three and find out?"

* * *

The Dominator went on crackling, and hissing, and cooling off, unguarded. . . .

TERRITORY

By Poul Anderson

Poul Anderson enjoys life, a trait he may have inherited from his Danish ancestors. Whatever the source, not only does Anderson the author enjoy life and living, he creates that same sense of joy for life in all his characters. One of his favorite tomorrow people is Nicholas van Rijn, Master Trader of the Polesotechnic League ... a man who asks nothing more of life than to die at the age of 150—shot by a jealous husband!

Joyce Davisson awoke as if she had been stabbed.

The whistle came again, strong enough to penetrate mortar and metal and insulation, on into her eardrums. She sat up in the dark with a gasp of recognition. When last she heard that wildcat wail, it was in the Chabanda, and it meant that two bands were hunting each other. But then she had been safely aloft in a flitter, armed men on either side of her and a grave Ancient for guide. What she saw and heard came to her amplified by instruments that scanned the ice desert glittering beneath. Those tigerstriped warriors who slew and died were only figures in a screen. She had felt sorry for them, yet somehow they were not quite real: individuals only, whom she had never met, atoms that perished because their world was perishing. Her concern was with the whole.

Now the whistle was against her station.

It couldn't be!

An explosion went *crump*. She heard small things rattle on her desk top and felt her bed shaken. Suddenly the glissandos were louder in her head, and a snarl of drumtaps accompanied them, a banging on metal and a crashing as objects were knocked off shelves. The attackers must have blown down the door of the machine section and swarmed through. Only where could they have gotten the gunpowder?

Where but in Kusulongo the City?

That meant the Ancients had decided the humans were better killed. The fear of death went through Joyce in a wave. It passed on, leaving bewilderment and pain, as if she were a child struck for no reason. Why had they done this to her, who came for nothing but to help them?

Feet pounded in the hall just outside the Terrestrialized section of the dome. The mission's native staff had roused and were coming out of their quarters with weapons to hand. She heard savage yells. Then, farther off among the machines, combat broke loose. Swords clattered, tomahawks cracked on bone, the pistol she had given Uulobu spoke with an angry snap. But her gang couldn't hold out long. The attackers had to be Shanga, from the camp in the oasis just under Kusulongo the Mountain. No other clan was near, and the Ancients themselves never fought aggressively. But there were hundreds of male Shanga in the oasis, while the mission had scarcely two dozen trustworthy t'Kelans.

Heavily armored against exterior conditions, the human area would not be entered as easily as the outside door of the machine section had been destroyed. But once the walls were cracked—

Joyce bounded to her feet. One hand passed by the main switch plate on its way to her gear rack, and the lights came on. The narrow, cluttered room, study as well as sleeping place, looked somehow

distorted in that white glow. *Because I'm scared*, she realized. *I'm caught in a living nightmare*. Nerve and muscle carried on without her mind. She leaped into the form-fitting Long John and the heavy fabricord suit. Drawing the skin-thin gloves over her hands, she connected their wiring to the electric net woven into the main outfit. Now: kerofoamsoled boots; air renewal tank and powerpack on the back; pistol and bandolier; pouched belt of iron rations; minicom in breast pocket; vitryl helmet snugged down on the shoulders but faceplate left open for the time being.

Check all fasteners, air system, heat system, everything. The outdoors is lethal on t'Kela. The temperature, on this summer night in the middle latitudes, is about sixty degrees below zero Celsius. The partial pressure of nitrogen will induce narcosis, the ammonia will bum out your lungs. There is no water vapor that your senses can detect; the air will suck you dry. None of these factors differ enough from Earth to kill you instantly. No, aided by an oxygen content barely sufficient to maintain your life, you will savor the process for minutes before you even lose unconsciousness.

And the Shanga out there, now busily killing your native assistants, have gunpowder to break down these walls. Joyce whirled about. The others! There was no intercom; two dozen people in one dome didn't need any. She snatched at the door of the room adjoining hers. Nothing happened. "Open up, you idiot!" she heard herself scream above the noise outside. "Come along! We've got to get away!"

A hoarse basso answered through the panels, "What you mean, open up? You locked yourself in, by damn!"

Of course, of course, Joyce's mind fumbled. Her pulse and the swelling racket of battle nearly drowned thought. She'd fastened this door on her own side. During her time with the mission itself, there had never been any reason to do so. But then Nicholas van Rijn landed, and got himself quartered next to her, and she had enough trouble by day fending off his ursine advances. . . She pushed the switch.

The merchant rolled through. Like most Esperancians, Joyce was tall, but she did not come up to his neck. His shoulders filled the doorway and his pot belly strained the fabricord suit that had been issued him. Hung about with survival equipment, he looked still more monstrous than he had done when snorting his way around the dome in snuff-stained finery of lace and ruffles. The great hooked nose jutted from an open helmet, snuffing the air as if for a scent of blood.

"Hah!" he bawled. Greasy black hair, carefully ringleted to shoulder length, swirled as he looked from side to side; the waxed mustache and goatee threatened every comer like horns. "What in the name of ten times ten to the tenth damned souls on a logarithmic spiral to hell is going on here for fumblydiddles? I thought, me, you had anyhow the trust of those natives!"

"The others-" Joyce choked. "Come on, let's get together with them."

Van Rijn nodded curtly, so that his several chins quivered, and let her take the lead. Personal rooms in the human section faced the same corridor, each with a door opening onto that as well as onto its two neighbors. Joyce's room happened to be at the end of the row, with the machine storage section on its farther side.. Unmarried and fond of privacy, she had chosen that arrangement when she first came here. The clubroom was at the hall's other terminus, around the curve of the dome. As she emerged from her quarters, Joyce saw door after door gaping open. The only ones still closed belonged to chambers which nobody occupied, extras built in the anticipation of outside visitors like Van Rijn's party. So everyone else had already gotten into their suits and down to the clubroom, the fixed emergency rendezvous. She broke into a run. Van Rijn's ponderous jog trot made a small earthquake behind her. Gravity on t'Kela was about the same as on Earth or Esperance.

The only thing that's the same, Joyce thought wildly. For an instant she was nearly blinded by the recollection of her home on the green planet of the star called Pax -a field billowing with grain, remote blue mountains, the flag of the sovereign world flying red and gold against a fleecy sky, and that brave dream which had built the Commonalty.

It roared at her back. The floor heaved underfoot. As she fell, the boom came again, and yet again. The third explosion pierced through. A hammerblow of concussion followed.

Striking the floor, she rolled over. Her head rattled from side to side of her helmet. The taste of blood mixed with smoke in her mouth. She looked back down the corridor through ragged darknesses that came and went before her eyes. The wall at the end, next to her own room, was split and broken. Wild

shadowy figures moved in the gloom beyond the twisted structural members.

"They blew it open," she said stupidly.

"Close your helmet," Van Rijn barked. He had already clashed his own faceplate to. The amplifier brought her his gravelly tones, but a dullness would not let them through to her brain.

"They blew it open," she repeated. The thing seemed too strange to be real.

A native leaped into the breach. He could stand Terrestrial air and temperature for a while if he held his breath. And t'Kelan atmosphere, driven by a higher pressure, was already streaming past him. The stocky, striped figure poised in a tension like that of the strung bow he aimed. Huge slit-pupiled eyes glared in the light from the fluoros.

An Esperancian technician came running around the bend of the corridor. "Joyce!" he cried. "Freeman Van Rijn! Where-" The bow twanged. A barbed arrowhead ripped his suit. A moment afterward the air seemed full of arrows, darts, spears, hurled from the murk. Van Rijn threw himself across Joyce. The technician spun on his heel and fled.

Van Rijn's well-worn personal blaster jumped into his fist. He fired from his prone position. The furry shape in the breach tumbled backward. The shadows behind withdrew from sight. But the yell and clatter went on out there.

A first ammoniacal whiff stung Joyce's nostrils. "Pox and pestilence," Van Rijn growled. "You like maybe to breathe that dragon belch?" He rose to his knees and closed her faceplate. His little black close-set eyes regarded her narrowly. "So, stunned, makes that the way of it? Well, hokay, you is a pretty girl with a nice figure and stuff even if you should not cut your hair so short. Waste not, want not. I rescue you, ha?"

He dragged her across one shoulder, got up, and backed wheezily along the hall, his blaster covering the direction of the hole. "Ugh, ugh," he muttered, "this is not a job for a poor old fat man who should be at home in his nice office on Earth with a cigar and maybe a wee glass Genever. The more so when those misbegotten snouthearts he must use for help will rob him blind. Ia, unscrew his eyeballs they will, so soon as he isn't looking. But all the factors at all the trading posts are such gruntbrains that poor Nicholas van Rijn must come out his own selfs, a hundred light-years in the direction of Orion's bellybutton he must come, and look for new trading possibilities. Else the wolves-with-rabies competition tears his Solar Spice & Liquors Company in shreds and leaves him prostitute in his old age. . . Ah, here we is. Downsy-daisy."

Joyce shook her head as he eased her to the floor. Full awareness had come back, and her knees didn't wobble much. The clubroom door was in front of her. She pushed the switch. The barrier didn't move. "Locked," she said.

Van Rijn pounded till it shivered. "Open up!" he bellowed. "Thunder and thighbones, what is this farce?"

A native raced around the curve of the hall. Van Rijn turned. Joyce shoved his blaster aside. "No, that's Uulobu." The t'Kelan must have exhausted his pistol and thrown it away, for a tomahawk now dripped in his hand. Three other autochthones bounded after him, swords and hatchets aloft. Their kilts were decorated with the circle and square insigne of the Shanga clan. "Get them!"

Van Rijn's blaster spat fire. One of the invaders flopped over. The others whirled to escape. Uulobu yowled and threw his tomahawk. The keen obsidian edge struck a Shanga and knocked him down, bleeding. Uulobu yanked the cord that ran between his weapon and wrist, retrieved the ax, and threw it again to finish the job.

Van Rijn returned to the door. "You termite-bitten cowards, let us in!" As his language got bluer, Joyce realized what must have happened. She pounded his back with her fists, much as he was pounding the door, until he stopped and looked around.

"They wouldn't abandon us," Joyce said. "But they must think we've been killed. When Carlos saw us, back there in the hall, we were both lying on the floor, and there were so many missiles. . . They aren't in the clubroom any longer. They locked the door to delay the enemy while they took a different way to the spaceships."

Ah, ja, ja, must be. But what do we do now? Blast through the door to follow?"

Uulobu spoke in the guttural language of the Kusulongo region. "All of us are slain or fled, sky-female. No more battle. The noise you hear now is the Shanga plundering. If they find us, they will fill us with arrows. Two guns cannot stop that. But I think if we go back among the ironthat-moves, we can slip out that way and around the dome,"

"What's he besputtering about?" Van Rijn asked.

Joyce translated. "I think he's right," she added. "Our best chance is to leave through the machine section. It seems deserted for the time being. But we'd better hurry."

"So. Let this pussycat fellow go ahead, then. You stay by me and cover my back, nie?"

They trotted back the way they had come. Hoarfrost whitened the walls and made the floor slippery, as water vapor condensed in the t'Kelans cold. The breach into the unlighted machine section gaped like a black mouth. Remotely through walls, Joyce heard ripping, smashing and exultant shouts, The work of years was going to pieces around her. Why? she asked in pain, and got no answer.

Uulobu's eyes, more adaptable to dark than any human's, probed among bulky shapes as they entered the storage area. Vehicles were parked here: four groundcars and as many flitters. In addition, this long chamber housed the specialized equipment of the studies the Esperancians had made, seeking a way to save the planet. Most lay in wreckage on the floor.

An oblong of dim light, up ahead, was the doorway to the outside. Joyce groped forward. Her boot struck something, a fallen instrument. It clanked against something else.

There came a yammer of challenge. The entrance filled with a dozen shapes. They whipped through and lost themselves among shadows and machines before Van Rijn could fire. Uulobu hefted his tomahawk and drew his knife. "Now we must fight for our passage," he said unregretfully.

"Cha-a-a-arge!" Van Rijn led the way at a run. Several t'Kelans closed in on him. Metal and polished stone whirled in the murk. The Earthman's blaster flared. A native screamed, Another native got hold of the gun arm and dragged it downward. Van Rijn tried to shake him loose. The being hung on, though the human clubbed him back and forth against his fellows.

Uulobu joined the ruckus, stabbing and hacking with carnivore glee. Joyce could not do less. She had her own pistol out, a slug-thrower. Something bumped into the muzzle. Fangs and eyes gleamed at her in what light there was. A short spear poised, fully able to pierce her suit. Even so, she had never done anything harder than to pull the trigger. The crack of the gun resounded in her own skull.

Then for a while it was jostling, scrabbling, firing, falling, and wrestling lunacy. Now and again Joyce recognized Uulobu's screech, the battle cry of his Avongo clan. Van Rijn's voice sounded above the din like a trumpeted, "St. Dismas help us! Down with mangy dogs!" Suddenly it was over. The guns had been too much. She lay on the floor, struggling for breath, and heard the last few Shanga run out. Somewhere a wounded warrior groaned, until Uulobu cut his throat.

"Up with you," Van Rijn ordered between puffs. "We got no time for making rings around the rosies,"

Uulobu helped her rise. He was too short to lean on very well, but Van Rijn offered her an arm. They staggered. out of the door, into the night.

There was no compound here, only the dome and then t'Kela itself. Overhead glittered unfamiliar constellations. The larger moon was aloft, nearly full, throwing dim coppery light on the ground. West and south stretched a rolling plain, thinly begrown with shrubs not like Terrestrial sagebrush in appearance: low, wiry, silvery-leaved, Due north rose the sheer black wall of Kusulongo the Mountain, jagged against the Milky Way. The city carved from its top could be seen only as a glimpse of towers like teeth. Some kilometers eastward, at its foot, ran the sacred Mangivolo River. Joyce could see a red flash of moonlight on liquid ammonia. The trees of that oasis where the Shanga were camped made a blot of shadow. The hills that marched northward from Kusulongo gleamed with ice, an unreal sheen.

"Hurry," Van Rijn grated. "If the other peoples think we are dead, they will raise ship more fast than they can," His party rounded the dome at the reeling pace of exhaustion. Two tapered cylinders shimmered under the moon, the mission's big cargo vessel and the luxury yacht which had brought Van Rijn and his assistants from Earth. A couple of dead Shanga lay nearby. The night wind rumed their fur. It had been a fight to reach safety here. Now the ramps were retracted and the air locks shut. As Van Rijn

neared, the whine of engines shivered forth.

"Hey!" he roared. "You clabberbrains, wait for me!"

The yacht took off first, hitting the sky like a thunderbolt. The backwash of air bowled Van Rijn over. Then the Esperancian craft got under weigh. The edge of her drive field caught Van Rijn, picked him up, and threw him several meters. He landed with a crash and lay still.

Joyce hurried to him. "Are you all right?" she choked. He was a detestable old oaf, but the horror of being marooned altogether alone seized upon her.

"Oo-co-oo," he groaned. "St. Dismas, I was going to put a new stained-glass window in your chapel at home. Now I think I will kick in the ones you have got."

Joyce glanced upward. The spaceships flashed like rising stars, and vanished. "They didn't see us," she said numbly.

"Tell me more," Van Rijn snorted.

Uulobu joined them. "The Shanga will have heard," he said. "They will come out here to make sure, and find us. We must escape."

Van Rijn didn't need that translated. Shaking himself gingerly, as if afraid something would drop off, he crawled to his feet and lurched back toward the dome. "We get a llitter, nie?" he said. "

"The groundcars are stocked for a much longer period," Joyce answered. "And we'll have to survive until someone comes back here."

"With the pest-riddled planeteezers chasing us all the while," Van Rijn muttered. "Joy forever, unconfined!"

"We go west, we find my people," Uulobu said. "I do not know where the Avongo are, but other clans of the Rokulela Horde must surely be out between the Narrow Land and the Barrens."

They entered the machine section. Joyce stumbled on a body and shuddered. Had slle killed that being herself?

The groundcars were long and square-built; the rear four of the eight wheels ran on treads. The accumulators were fully charged, energy reserve enough to drive several thousand rough kilometers and maintain Earth-type conditions inside for a year. There were air recyclers and sufficient food to keep two humans going at least four months. Six bunks, cooking and sanitary facilities, maps, navigation equipment, a radio transceiver, spare parts for survival gear--everything was there. It had to be, when you traveled on a planet like this.

Van Rijn heaved his bulk through the door, which was not locked, and settled himself in the driver's seat. Joyce collapsed beside him. Uulobu entered with uneasy eyes and quivering whiskers. Only the Ancients, among t'Kelans, liked riding inside a vehicle. That was no problem, thou.gh, Joyce recalled dully. On field trips, once you had established a terrestroid environment within, your guides and guards rode on top of the car, talking with you by intercom. Thus many kilometers had been covered, and much had been learned, and the plans had been drawn that would save a world. . . and now!

Van Rijn's ham hands moved deftly over the controls. "In my company we use Landmasters," he said. "I like not much these Globetrotters. But. sometimes our boys have to--um-borrow one from the competition, so we know how to . . . Ab." The engine purred to life. He moved out through the door, riding the field drive at its one-meter ceiling instead of using the noisier wheels.

But he could have saved his trouble. Other doors in the dome were spewing forth Shanga. There must be a hundred of them, Joyce thought. Van Rijn's lips skinned back from his teeth. "You want to play happy fun games yet, ha?" He switched on the headlights.

A warrior was caught in the glare, dazzled by it so that he stood motionless, etched against blackness. Joyce's eyes went over him, back and forth, as if something visible could explain why he had turned on her. He was a typical t'Kelan of this locality; races varied elsewhere, as on most planets, but no more than among humans.

The stout form was about 150 centimeters tall, heavily steatopygous to store as much liquid as the drying land afforded. Hands and feet were nearly manlike, except for having thick blue nails and only four digits apiece. The fur that covered the whole body was a vivid orange, striped with black, a triangle of white on the chest. The head was round, with pointed ears and enormous yellow cat-eyes, two fleshy

tendrils on the forehead, a single nostril crossing the broad nose, a lipless mouth full of sharp white teeth framed in restless cilia. This warrior carried a sword-the blade like horn of a gonydanga plus a wooden handle-and a circular shield painted in the colors of the Yagola Horde to which the Shanga clan belonged.

"Beep, beep!" Van Rijn said. He gunned the car forward.

The warrior sprang aside, barely in time. Others tried to attack. Joyce glimpsed one with a bone piston whistle in his mouth. The Yagola never used formal battle cries, but advanced to music. A couple of spears clattered against the car sides. Then Van Rijn was through, bounding away at a hundred KPH with a comet's tail of dust behind.

"Where we go now?" he demanded. "To yonder town on the mountain? You said they was local big cheeses.

"The Ancients? No!" Joyce stiffened. "They must be the ones who caused this."

"Ha? Why so?"

"I don't know, I don't know. They were so helpful before... But it has to be them. They incited. . . No one else could have. W-we never made any enemies among the clans. As soon as we had their biochemistry figured out, we synthesized medicines and-and helped them-" Joyce found suddenly that she could cry. She leaned her helmet in her hands and let go all emotional holds.

"There, there, everything's hunky-dunky," Van Rijn said. He patted her shoulder. "You been a brave girl, as well as pretty. Go on, now, relax, have fun."

T'Kela rotated once in thirty hours and some minutes, with eight degrees of axial tilt. Considerable might remained when the car stopped, a hundred kilometers from! Kusulongo, and the escapers made camp. Uulobu took a sleeping bag outside while the others Earth-conditioned the interior, shucked their suits, and crawled into bunks. Not even Van Rijn's snores kept Joyce awake.

Dawn roused her. The red sun climbed from the east with a glow like dying coals. Though its apparent diameter was nearly half again that of Sol seen from Earth or Pax from Esperance, the light was dull to human eyes, shadows lay thick in every dip and gash, and the horizon was lost in darkness. The sky was deep purple, cloudless, but filled to the south with the yellow plumes of a dust storm. Closer by, the plain stretched bare, save for sparse gray vegetation, strewn boulders, a coldly shimmering ice field not far northward. One scavenger foul wheeled overhead on leathery-feathered wings.

Joyce sat up. Her whole body ached. Remembering what had happened made such an emptiness within that she hardly noticed. She wanted to roll over in the blankets, bury her head, and sleep again. Sleep till rescue came, if it ever did.

She made herself rise, go into the bath cubicle, wash, and change into slacks and blouse. With refreshment came hunger. She returned to the main body of the car and began work at the~ cooker.

The smell of coffee wakened Van Rijn. "Ahhh!" Whalelike in the Long John he hadn't bothered to remove, he wallowed from his bunk and snatched at a cup. "Good girl." He sniffed suspiciously. "But no brandy in it? After our troubles, we need brandy."

"No liquor here," she snapped.

"What?" For a space the merchant could only goggle at her. His jowls turned puce. His mustaches quivered. "Nothings to drink?" he strangled. "Why-why-why, this is extrarageous. Who's responsible? By damn, I see to it he's blacklisted from here to Polaris!"

"We have coffee, tea, powdered milk and fruit juices," Joyce said. "We get water from the ice outside. The chemical unit removes ammonia and other impurities. One does not take up storage space out in the field with liquor, Freeman Van Rijn."

"One does if one is civilized. Let me see your food stocks." He rummaged in the nearest locker. "Dried meat, dried vegetables, dried-Death and-destruction!" he wailed. "Not so much as one jar caviar? You want me to crumble away?"

"You might give thanks you're alive."

"Not under this condition. . . . Well, I see somebody had one brain cell still functional and laid in some cigarettes." Van Rijn grabbed a handful and crumbled them into a briar pipe he had stuffed in his

bosom. He lit it. Joyce caught a whiff, gagged, and returned to work at the cooker, banging the utensils about with more ferocity than was needful.

Seated at the folding table next to one of the broad windows, Van Rijn crammed porridge down his gape and peered out at the dim landscape. "Whoof, what a place. Like hell with the furnaces on the fritz. How long you been here, anyways?"

"Myself, about a year, as a biotechnician." She decided it WM best to humor him. "Of course, the Esperancian mission has been operating for several years."

"Ja, that I know. Though I am not sure just how-, I was only here a couple of days, you remember, before the trouble started. And any planet is so big and complicated a thing, takes long to understand it even a little. Besides, I had some other work along I must finish before investigating the situation here."

"I admit being puzzled why you came. You deal in spices and things, don't you? But there's nothing here that a human would like. We could digest some of the proteins and other biological compounds-they aren't all poisonous to us-but they lack things we need, like certain amino acids, and they taste awful."

"My company trades with nonhumans too," Van Rijn explained. "Not long ago, my research staff at home came upon the original scientific reports, from the expedition who found this planet fifteen years ago. This galaxy is so big no one can keep track of everything while it happens. Always we are behind. But anyhow, was mention of some wine that the natives grow."

"Yes, kungu. Most of the clans in this hemisphere make it. They raise the berries along with some other plants that provide fiber. Not that they're farmers. A carnivorous race, nomadic except for the Ancients. But they'll seed some ground and come back in time to harvest it."

"Indeed. Well, as you know, the first explorers here was from Throra, which is a pretty similar planet to this only not so ugly. They thought the kungu was delicious. They even wanted to take seeds home, but found because of ecology and stuffs, the plant will only grow on this world. Ah-ha, thought Nicholas van Rijn, a chance maybe to build up a very nice little trade with Throra. So because of not having nobody worth trusting that was on Earth to be sent here, I came in my personals to see. Oh, how bitter to be so lonely!" Van Rijn's mouth drooped in an attempt at pathos. One hairy hand stole across the table and closed on Joyce's.

"Here come Uulobu," she exclaimed, pulling free and jumping to her feet. In the very nick of time, bless both his hearts! she thought.

The t'Kelan loped swiftly across the plain. A small animal that he had killed was slung across his shoulders. He was clad differently from the Shanga: in the necklace of fossil shells and the loosely woven blue kilt of his own A vongo clan and Rokulela Horde. A leather pouch at his waist had been filled with liquid.

"I see he found an ammonia well," Joyce chattered, brightly and somewhat frantically, for Van Rijn was edging around the table toward her. "That's what they have those tendrils for, did you know? Sensitive to any trace of ammonia vapor. This world is so dry. Lots of frozen water, of course. You find ice everywhere you go on the planet. Very often hundreds of square kilometers at a stretch. You see, the maximum temperature here is forty below zero Celsius. But ice doesn't do the indigenous life any good. In fact, it's one of the things that are killing this world."

Van Rijn grumped and moved to the window. Uulobu reached the car and said into the intercom, "Sky-female, I have found spoor of hunters passing by, headed west toward the Lubambaru. They can only be Rokulela. I think we can find them without great trouble. Also I have quenched my thirst and gotten meat for my hunger. Now I must offer the Real Ones a share."

"Yes, do so for all of us," Joyce answered.

Uulobu began gathering sticks for a fire. "What he say?" Van Rijn asked. Joyce translated. "So. What use to us, making league with savages out here? We only need to wait for rescue."

"If it comes," Joyce said. She shivered. "When they hear about this at Esperance, they'll send an expedition to try and learn what went wrong. But not knowing we're alive, they may not hurry it enough."

"My people will," Van Rijn assured her. "The Polesotechnic League looks after its own, by damn. So soon as word gets to Earth, a warship comes to full investigation. Inside a month."

"Oh, wonderful," Joyce breathed. She went limp and sat down again.

Van Rijn scowled. "Natural," he ruminated, "they cannot search a whole planet. They will know I was at that bestinkered Kusulongo place, and land there. I suppose those Oldsters or Seniles or whatever you call them is sophisticated enough by now in interstellar matters to fob the crew off with some story, if we are not nearby to make contact. So . . . we must remain in their area, in radio range. And radio range has to be pretty close on a red dwarfs planet, where ionosphere characteristics are poor. But close to our enemies we cannot come so well, if they are whooping after us the whole time. They can dig traps or throw crude bombs or something. . . one way or other, they can kill us even in this car. Ergo, we must establish ourselves as too strong to attack, in the very neighborhood of KusuLongo. This means we need allies. So you have right, vie must certain go along to your friend's peoples."

"But you can't make them fight their own race!" Joyce protested.

Van Rijn twirled his mustache. "Can't I just?" he grinned. "I mean. . . I don't know how, in any practical sense . . . but even if you could, it would be wrong."

"Um-m-m." He regarded her for a while. "You Esperancers is idealists, I hear. Your ancestors settled your planet for a utopian community, and you is still doing good for everybody even at this low date, nie? Your mission to help this planet here was for no profit, except it makes you feel good. . ."

"And as a matter of foreign policy," Joyce admitted, under the honesty fetish of her culture. "By assisting other races, we gain their goodwill and persuade them, a little, to look at things our way. If Esperance has enough such friends, we'll be strong and influential without having to maintain armed services."

"From what I see, I doubt very much you ever make nice little vestrymen out of these t'Kelans."

"Well. . . true . . . they are out-and-out carnivores. But then, man started as a carnivorous primate, didn't he? And the t'Kelans in this area did achieve an agricultural civilization once, thousands of years ago. That is, grain was raised to feed meat animals. Kusulongo the City is the last remnant. The ice age wiped it out otherwise, leaving s-avagery-barbarism at most. But given improved conditions, I'm sure the autochthones could recreate it. They'll never have unified nations or anything, as we understand such things. They aren't gregarious enough. But they could develop a world order and adopt machine technology."

"Except, from what you tell me, those snakes squatting on top of the mountain don't want that."

Joyce paused only briefly to wonder how a snake could squat. before she nodded. "I guess so. Though I can't understand why. The Ancients were so helpful at first.

"Means they need to have some sense beaten into their skullbones. Hokay, so for the sake of t'Kela's long-range good, we arrange to do the beating, you and I.

"Well. . . maybe. . . but still. . ."

Van Rijn patted her head. "You just leave the philosophizings to me, little girl," he said smugly. "You only got to cook and look beautiful."

Uulobu had lit his fire and thrown the eyeballs of his kill onto it. His chant to his gods wailed eerily through the car wall. Van Rijn clicked his tongue. "Not so promising materials, that," he said. "You civilize them if you can. I am content to get home unpunct!red by very sharplooking spears, me." He rekindled his pipe and sat down beside her. "To do this, I must understand the situation. Suppose you explain. Some I have heard before, but no harm to repeat." He patted her knee. "I can always admire your lips and things while you talk,"

Joyce got up for another cup of coffee and reseated herself at a greater distance. She forced an impersonal tone.

"Well, to begin with, this is a very unusual planet. Not physically. I mean, there's nothing strange about a type M dwarf star having a planet at a distance of half an A. U., with a mass about forty percent greater than Earth's."

"So much? Must be low density, then. Metal-poor."

"Yes. The sun is extremely old. Fewer heavy atoms were available at the time it formed with its planets. T'Kela's overall specific gravity is only four-point-four. It does have some iron and copper, of course. . . As I'm sure you know, life gets started slowly on such worlds. Their suns emit so little ultraviolet, even in flare periods, that the primordial organic materials aren't energized to interact very fast.

Nevertheless, life does start eventually, in oceans of liquid ammonia."

Ja. And usual goes on to develop photosynthesis using ammonia and carbon dioxide, to make carbohydrates and the nitrogen that the animals breathe." Van Rijn tapped his sloping forehead. "So much I have even in this dumb old bell. But why does evolution go different now and then, like on here and Throrra?"

"Nobody knows for sure. Some catalytic agent, perhaps. In any event, even at low temperatures like these, all the water isn't solid. A certain amount is present in the oceans, as part of the ammonium hydroxide molecule. T'Kelan or Throran plant cells have an analogue of chlorophyll, which does the same job: using gaseous carbon dioxide and 'dissolved' water to get carbohydrates and free oxygen. The animals reverse the process, much as they do on Earth. But the water they release isn't exhaled. It remains in their tissues, loosely held by a specialized molecule. When an organism dies and decays, this water is taken up by plants again. In other words, H-two-O here acts very much like nitrogenous organic material on our kind of planets."

"But the oxygen the plants give off, it attacks ammonia."

"Yes. The process is slow, especially since solid ammonia is denser than the liquid phase. It sinks to the bottom of lakes and oceans, which protects it from the air. Nevertheless, there is a gradual conversion. Through a series of steps, ammonia and oxygen yield free nitrogen and water. The water freezes out. The seas shrink; the air becomes poorer in oxygen; the desert areas grow."

"This I know from Throrra. But there a balance was struck. Nitrogen-fixing bacteria evolved and the drying-out was halted, a billion years ago. So they told me once."

"Throrra was lucky. It's a somewhat bigger planet than t'Kela, isn't it!! Denser atmosphere, therefore more heat conservation. The greenhouse effect on such worlds depends on carbon dioxide and ammonia vapor. Well, several thousand years ago, t'Kela passed a critical point. Just enough ammonia was lost to reduce the greenhouse effect sharply. As the temperature fell, more and more liquid ammonia turned solid and went to the bottom, where it's also quite well protected against melting. This made the climatic change catastrophically sudden. Temperatures dropped so low that now carbon dioxide also turns liquid, or even solid, through part of the year. There's still some vapor in the atmosphere, in equilibrium, but very little. The greenhouse effect really dropped off!

"Plant life was gravely affected, as you can imagine. It can't grow without carbon dioxide and ammonia to build its tissues. Animal life died out with it. Areas the size of a Terrestrial continent became utterly barren, almost overnight. I told you that the native agricultural civilization was wiped out. Worse, though, we've learned from geology that the nitrogen-fixing bacteria were destroyed. Completely. They couldn't survive the winter temperatures. So there's no longer any force to balance the oxidation of ammonia. The deserts encroach everywhere, year by year. . . and t'Kela's year is only six-tenths Standard. Evolution has worked hard, adapting life to the change, but the pace is now too rapid for it. We estimate that all higher animals, including the natives, will be extinct within another millennium. In ten thousand years there'll be nothing alive here."

Though she had lived with the realization for months, it still shook Joyce to talk about it. She clamped fingers around her coffee cup till they hurt, stared out the window at drifting dust, and strove not to cry.

Van Rijn blew foul clouds of smoke a while in silence. Finally he rumbled almost gently, "But you have a cure program worked out, ja?"

"Oh . . . oh, yes. We do. The research is completed and we were about ready to summon engineers." She found comfort in proceeding.

"The ultimate solution, of course, is to reintroduce nitrogen-fixing bacteria. Our labs have designed an extremely productive strain. It will need a suitable ecology, though, to survive: which means a lot of work with soil chemistry, a microagricultural program. We can hasten everything-begin to show results in a decade-by less subtle methods. In fact, we'll have to do so, or the death process will outrun anything that bacteria can accomplish.

"What we'll do is melt and electrolyze water. The oxygen can be released directly into the air, refreshing it. But some will go to burn local hydrocarbons. T'Kela is rich in petroleum. This burning will generate carbon dioxide, thus strengthening the greenhouse effect. The chemical energy released can also

supplement the nuclear power stations we'll install: to do the electrolysis and to energize the combination of hydrogen from water with nitrogen from the atmosphere, recreating ammonia."

"A big expensive job, that," Van Rijn said.

"Enormous. The biggest thing Esperance has yet undertaken. But the plans and estimates have been drawn up. We know we can do it."

"If the natives don't go potshotting engineers for exercise after lunch."

"Yes." Joyce's blond head sank low. "That would make it impossible. We have to have the good will of all of them, everywhere. They'll have to cooperate, work with us and each other, in a planet-wide effort. And Kusulongo the City influences a quarter of the whole world! What have we done? I thought they were our friends. . ."

"Maybe we get some warriors and throw sharp things at them till they appreciate us," Van Rijn suggested.

The car went swiftly, even over irregular ground. An hour or so after it had started again, Uulobu shouted from his seat on top. Through the overhead window the humans saw him lean across his windshield and point. Looking that way, they saw a dust cloud on the northwestern horizon, wider and lower than the one to the south. "Animals being herded," Uulobu said. "Steer thither, sky-folk."

Joyce translated and Van Rijn put the control bar over. "I thought you said they was hunters only," he remarked. "Herds?"

"The Horde people maintain an economy somewhere between that of ancient Mongol cattlekeepers and Amerind bison-chasers," she explained. "They don't actually domesticate the iziru or the bambalo. They did once, before the glacial era, but now the land couldn't support such a concentration of grazers. The Hordes do still exercise some control over the migrations of the herds, though, cull them, and protect them from predators."

"Um-m-m. What are these Hordes, anyhow?"

"That's hard-to describe. No human really understands it. Not that t'Kelan psychology is incomprehensible. But it is nonhuman, and our mission has been so busy gathering planetographical data that we never found time to do psychological studies in depth. Words like 'pride,' 'clan,' and 'Horde' are rough translations of native terms-not very accurate, I'm sure--just as 't'Kela' is an arbitrary name of ours for the whole planet. It means 'this earth' in the Kusulongo language."

"Hokay, no need beating me over this poor old eggnoggin with the too-obvious. I get the idea. But look you, Freelady Davisson. . . I can call you Joyce?" Van Rijn buttered his tones. "We is in the same boat, sink or swim together, except for having no water to do it in, so let us make friends, ha?" He leaned suggestively against her. "You call me Nicky.."

She moved aside. "I cannot prevent your addressing me as you wish, Freeman Van Rijn," she said in her frostiest voice.

"Heigh-ho, to be young and not so globulous again! But a lonely old man must swallow his sorrows." Van Rijn ~ sighed like a self-pitying tornado. "Apropos swallowing, why is there not so much as one little case beer along? Just one case; one hour or maybe two of sips, to lay the sandstorms in this mummy gullet I got; is that so much to ask, I ask you?"

"Well, there isn't." She pinched her mouth together. They drove on in silence.

Presently they raised the herd: iziru, humpbacked and spiketailed, the size of Terran cattle. Those numbered a few thousand, Joyce estimated from previous experience. With vegetation so sparse, they must needs spread across many kilometers.

A couple of natives had spied the car from a distance and came at a gallop. They rode basai, which looked not unlike large stocky antelope with tapir faces and a single long horn. The t'Kelans wore kilts similar to Uulobu's, but leather medallions instead of his shell necklace. Van Rijn stopped the car. The natives reined in. They kept weapons ready, a strung bow and a short throwing-spear.

Uulobu jumped off the top and approached them, hands outspread. "Luck in the kill, strength, health, and offspring!" he wished them in the formal order of importance. "I am Tola's son Uulobu, Avongo, Rokulela, now a follower of the sky-folk."

"So I see," the older, grizzled warrior answered coldly. The young one grinned and put his bow away

with an elaborate flourish. Uulobu clapped hand to tomahawk. The older being made a somewhat conciliatory gesture and Uulobu relaxed a trifle.

Van Rijn had been watching intently. "Tell me what they say," he ordered. "Everything. Tell me what this means with their weapon foolishness."

"That was an insult the archer offered Uulobu," Joyce explained unhappily. "Disarming before the ceremonies of peace have been completed. It implies that Uulobu isn't formidable enough to be worth worrying about."

"Ah, so. These is rough peoples, them. Not even inside. their own Hordes is peace taken for granted, ha? But why should they make nasty at Uulobu? Has he got no prestige from serving you?"

"I'm afraid not. I asked him about it once. He's the only t'Kelan I could ask about such things."

"Ja? How come that?"

"He's the closest to a native intimate that any of us in the mission have had. We saved him from a pretty horrible death, you see. We'd just worked out a cure for a local equivalent of tetanus when he caught the disease. So he feels gratitude toward us, as well as having an economic motive. All our regular assistants are--were impoverished, for one reason or another. A drought had killed off too much game in their territory, or they'd been dispossessed, or something like that." Joyce bit her lip. "They. . . they did swear us fealty. . . in the traditional manner. . . and you know how bravely they fought for us. But that was for the sake of their own honor. Uulobu is the only t'Kelan who's shown anything like real affection for humans."

"Odd, when you come here to help them. By damn, but you was a bunch of mackerel heads! You should have begun with depth psychology first of all. That fool planetography could wait. . . Rotten, stinking mackerel, glows blue in the dark. . ." Van Rijn's growl trailed into a mumble. He shook himself and demanded further translation.

"The old one is called Nyaronga, head of this pride," Joyce related. "The other is one of his sons, of course. They belong to -the Gangu clan, in the same Horde as Uulobu's Avongo. The formalities have been concluded, and we're invited to share their camp. These people are hospitable enough, in their fashion. . . after bona fides has been established."

The riders dashed off. Uulobu returned. "They must hurry," he reported through the intercom. "The sun will brighten today, and cover is still a goodly ways off. Best we trail well behind so as not to stampede the animals, sky-female." He climbed lithely to the cartop. Joyce passed his words on as Van Rijn got the vehicle started.

"One thing at a time, like the fellow said shaking hands with the octopus," the merchant decided. "You must tell me much, but we begin with going back to why the natives are not so polite to anybody who works for your mission."

"Well. . . as nearly as Uulobu could get it across to me, those who came to us were landless. That is, they'd stopped maintaining themselves in their ancestral hunting grounds. This means a tremendous loss of respectability. Then, too, he confessed--very bashfully--that our helpers' prestige suffered because we never involved them in any fights. The imputation grew up that they were cowards."

"A warlike culture, ha?"

"N-no. That's the paradox. They don't have wars, or even vendettas, in our sense. Fights are very small-scale affairs, though they happen constantly. I suppose that arises from the political organization. Or does it? We've noticed the same thing in remote parts of t'Kela, among altogether different societies from the Horde culture."

"Explain that, if you will be so kind as to make me a little four-decker sandwich while you talk."

Joyce bit back her annoyance and went to the cooker table. "As I said, we never did carry out intensive xenological research, even locally," she told him. "But we do know that the basic social unit is the same everywhere on this world, what we call the pride. It springs from the fact that the sex ratio is about three females to one male. Living together you have the oldest male, his wives, their offspring of subadult age. All males, and females unencumbered with infants, share in hunting, though only males fight other t'Kelans. The small-um--children help out in the work around camp. So do any widows of the leader's father that he's taken in. The size of such a pride ranges up to twenty or so. That's as many as

can make a living in an area small enough to cover a foot, on this desert planet."

"I see. The t'Kelans pride answers to the human family. It is just as universal, too, right? I suppose larger units get organized in different ways, depending on the culture."

"Yes. The most backward savages have no organization larger than the pride. But the Kusulongo society, as we call it—the Horde people—the biggest and most advanced culture, spread over half the northern hemisphere—it has a more elaborate superstructure. Ten or twenty prides form what we call a clan, a cooperative group claiming descent from a common male ancestor, controlling a large territory through which they follow the wild herds. The clan in turn are loosely federated into Hordes, each of which holds an annual get-together in some traditional oasis. That's when they trade, socialize, arrange marriages—newly adult males get wives and start new prides—yes, and they adjudicate quarrels, by arbitration or combat; at such times. There's a lot of squabbling among clans, you see, over points of honor or practical matters like ammonia wells. One nearly always marries within one's own Horde; it has its own dress, customs, gods, and so forth.

"No wars between Hordes?" Van Rijn asked.

"No, unless you want to call the terrible things that happen during a Volkerwanderung a war. Normally, although individual units from different Hordes may clash, there isn't any organized campaigning. I suppose they simply haven't the economic surplus to maintain armies in the field."

"Um-m-m. I suspect, me, the reason goes deeper than that. When humans want to have wars, by damn, they don't let any little questions of if they can afford it stop them. I doubt t'Kelans would be any different. Um-m-m." Van Rijn's free hand tugged his goatee. "Maybe here is a key that goes tick-a-lock and solves our problem, if we know how to stick it in.

"Well," Joyce said, "the Ancients are also a war preventive. They settle most inter-Horde disputes, among other things.

"Ah, yes, those fellows on the mountain. Tell me about them."

Joyce finished making the sandwich and gave it to Van Rijn. He wolfed it noisily. She sat down and stared out at the scene: brush and boulders and swirling dust under the surly red light, the dark mass of the herd drifting along, a rider who galloped back to head off some stragglers. Far ahead now could be seen the Lubambaru, a range of ice, sharp peaks that shimmered against the crepuscular sky. Faintly to her, above the murmur of the engine, came yelps and the lowing of the animals. The car rocked and bumped; she felt the terrain in her bones.

"The Ancients are survivors of the lost civilization," she said. "They hung on in their city, and kept the arts that were otherwise forgotten. That kind of life doesn't come natural to most t'Kelans. I gather that in the course of thousands of years, those who didn't like it there wandered down to join the nomads, while occasional nomads who thought the city would be congenial went up and were adopted into the group. That would make for some genetic selection. The Ancients are a distinct psychological type. Much more reserved and . . . intellectual, I guess you'd call it . . . than anyone else."

"How they make their living?" Van Rijn asked around a mouthful.

"They provide services and goods for which they are paid in kind. They are scribes, who keep records; physicians; skilled metallurgists; weavers of fine textiles; makers of gunpowder, though they only sell fireworks and keep a few cannon for themselves. They're credited with magical powers, of course, especially because—they can predict solar flares."

"And they was friendly until yesterday?"

"In their own aloof, secretive fashion. They must have been plotting the attack on us for some time, though, egging on the Shanga and furnishing the powder to blow open our dome. I still can't imagine why. I'm certain they believed us when we explained how we'd come to save their race from extinction."

"Ja, no doubt. Only maybe at first they did not see all the implications." Van Rijn finished eating, belched, picked his teeth with a fingernail, and relapsed into brooding silence. Joyce tried not to be too desperately homesick.

After a long time, Van Rijn smote the Control board so that it rang. "By damn!" he bellowed. "It fits together!"

"What?" Joyce sat straight.

"But I still can't see how to use it," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Shut up, Freelady." He returned to his thoughts. The slow hours passed.

Late in the afternoon, a forest hove into sight. It covered the foothills of the Lubambaru, where an ammonia river coursed thinly and seepage moistened the soil a little. The trees were low and gnarled, with thorny blue trunks and a dense foliage of small greenish-gray leaves. Tall shrubs sprouted in thickets between them. The riders urged their iziru into the wood, posted a few pickets to keep watch, and started northward in a compact group, fifteen altogether, plus pack animals and a couple of fuzzy infants in arms. The females were stockier than the males and had snouted faces. Though hairy and homeothermic, the t'Kelans were not mammals; mothers regurgitated food for children who had not yet cut their fangs.

Old Nyaronga led the band, sword rattling at his side, spear in hand and shield on arm, great yellow eyes flickering about the landscape. His half-grown sons flanked the party, arrows nocked to bows. Van Rijn trundled the car in their wake. "They expect trouble?" he asked.

Joyce started from her glum thoughts. "They always expect trouble," she said. "I told you, didn't I, what a quarrelsome race this is—no wars, but so many bloody set-tos. However, their caution is just routine today. Obviously they're going to pitch camp with the other prides of their clan. A herd this size would require all the Gangu to control it."

"You said they was hunters, not herders."

"They are, most of the time. But I you see, iziru and bambalo stampede when the sun flares, and many are so badly sunburned that they die. That must be because they haven't developed protection against ultraviolet since the atmosphere began to change. Big animals with long gen-erations evolve more slowly than small ones, as a rule. The clans can't afford such losses. In a flare season liKe this, they keep close watch on the herds and force them into areas where there is some shade anq where the undergrowth hinders panicky running."

Van Rijn's thumb jerked a scornful gesture at the lowering red disc. "You mean that ember ever puts out enough radiation to hurt a sick butterfly?"

"Not if the butterfly came from Earth. But you know what type M dwarfs are like. Tl:ey flare, and when they do, it can increase their luminosity several hundred percent. These days on t'Kela, the oxygen content of the air has been lowered to a point where the ozone layer doesn't block out as much ultraviolet as it should. Then, too, a planet like this, with a metal-poor core, has a weak magnetic field. Some of the charged particles from the sun get through also-,adding to an alre~dy high cosmic-ray background. It wouldn't bother you or me, but mankind evolved to withstand considerably more radiation than is the norm here."

"Ja, I see. Maybe also there not being much radioactive minerals locally has been a factor. On Throra, the flares don't bother them. They make festival then. But like you say, t'Kela is a harder luck world than Throra."

Joyce shivered. "This is a cruel cosmos. That's what we believe in on Esperance—fighting back against the universe, all beings together."

"Is a very nice philosophy, except that all beings is not built for it. You is a very sweet child, anyone ever tell you that?" Van Rijn laid an arm lightly across her shoulder. She found that she didn't mind greatly, with the gloom and the brewing star-storm outside.

In another hour they reached the camp site. Humpbacked leather tents had been erected around a flat field where there was an ammonia spring. Fires burned before the entrances, tended by the young. Females crouched over cooking pots, males swaggered abqut with hands on weapon hilts. The arrival of the car brought everyone to watch, not running, but strolling up with an elaborate pretense of indifference. Or is it a pretense? Joyce wondered. She looked out at the crowd, a couple of hundred unhuman faces, eyes aglow, spearheads a-gleam, fur rumped by the whimpering wind, but scarcely a sound from anyone. They've acted the same way, she thought, every clan and Horde, everywhere we encountered them: wild fascination at first, with our looks and our machines; then a lapse into this cool formal courtesy, as if we didn't make any real difference for good or ill. They've thanked us, not very wam1ly,

for what favors we could do, and often insisted on making payment, but they've never invited us to their merrymakings or their rites, and sometimes the children throw rocks at us.

Nyaronga barked a command. His pride began pitching their own camp. Gradually the others drifted away.

Van Rijn glanced at the sun. "They sure it flares tOday?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. If the Ancients have said so, then it will," Joyce assured him. "It isn't hard to predict, if you have smoked glass and a primitive telescope to watch the star surface. The light is so dim that the spots and flare phenomena can easily be observed-unlike a type-G star and the patterns are very characteristic. Any jackleg astronomer can predict a flare on an M class dwarf, days in advance. Heliograph signals carry the word from Kusulongo to the Hordes."

"I suppose the Old Fogies got inherited empirical knowledge from early times, like the Babylonians knew about planetary movements, ja . . . Whoops, speak of the devil, here we go!"

The sun was now not far above the western ridges, which stood black under its swollen disc. A thin curl of clearer red puffed slowly out of it on one side. The basai reared and screamed. A roar went through the clansfolk. Males grabbed the animals' bridles and dragged them to a standstill. Females snatched their pots and their young into the tents.

The flame expanded and brightened. Light crept along the shadowy hills and the plains beyond. The sky began to pale. The wind strengthened and threshed in the woods on the edge of camp.

The t'Kelans manhandled their terrified beasts into a long shelter of hides stretched over poles. One bolted. A warrior twirled his lariat, tossed, and brought the creature crashing to earth. Two others helped drag it under cover. Still the flame from the solar disc waxed and gathered luminosity, minute by minute. It was not yet too brilliant for human eyes to watch unprotected. Joyce saw how a spider web of forces formed and crawled there, drawn in fiery loops. A gout of radiance spurted, died, and was reborn. Though she had seen the spectacle before, she found herself clutching Van Rijn's arm. The merchant stuffed his pipe and blew stolid fumes.

Uulobu got down off the car. Joyce heard him ask Nyaronga, "May I help you face the angry Real One?"

"No," said the patriarch. "Get in a tent with the females."

Uulobu's teeth gleamed. The fur rose along his back. He unhooked the tomahawk at his waist.

"Don't!" Joyce cried through the intercom. "We are guests!"

For an instant the two t'Kelans glared at each other. Nyaronga's spear was aimed at Uulobu's throat. Then the Avongo sagged a little. "We are guests," he said in a choked voice. "Another time, Nyaronga, I shall talk about this with you."

"You-landless?" The leader checked himself. "Wen, peace has been said between us, and there is no time now to unsay it. But we Gangu will defend our own herds and pastures. No help is needed."

Stiff-legged, Uulobu went into the nearest tent. Presently the last basai were gotten inside the shelter. Its flap was laced shut, to leave them in soothing darkness.

The flare swelled. It became a ragged sheet of fire next the sun disc, almost as big, pouring out as much light, but of an orange hue. Still it continued to grow, to brighten and yellow. The wind increased.

The heads of prides walked slowly to the center of camp. They formed a ring; the unwed youths made a larger circle around them. Nyaronga himself took forth a brass horn and winded it. Spears were raised aloft, swords and tomahawks shaken. The t'Kelans began to dance, faster and faster as the radiance heightened. Suddenly Nyaronga blew his horn again. A cloud of arrows whistled toward the sun.

"What they doing?" Van Rijn asked. "Exorcising the demon?"

"No," said Joyce. "They don't believe that's possible. They're defying him. They always challenge him to come down and fight. And he's not a devil, by the way, but a god."

Van Rijn nodded. "It fits the pattern," he said, half to himself. "When a god steps out of his rightful job, you don't try to bribe him back, you threaten him. Ia, it fits." The males ended their dance and walked with haughty slowness to their tents. The doorflaps were drawn. The camp lay deserted under the sun.

"Ha!" Van Rijn surged to his feet. "My gear"

"What?" Joyce stared at him. She had grown so used to wan red light on this day's travel that the hue now pouring in the windows seemed ghastly on his cheeks.

"I want to go outside," Van Rijn told her. "Don't just stand there with tongue unreeled. Get me my suit!"

Joyce found herself obeying him. By the time his gross form was bedecked, the sun was atop the hills and had tripled its radiance. The flare was like a second star, not round but flame-shaped, and nearly white. Long shadows wavered across the world, which had taken on an unnatural brazen tinge. The wind blew dust and dead leaves over the ground, flattened the fires, and shivered the tents till they thundered.

"Now," Van Rijn said, "when I wave, you fix your intercom to full power so they can hear you. Then tell those so-called males to peek out at me if they have the guts." He glared at her. "And be unpolite about it, you understand me?"

Before she could reply he was in the air lock. A minute afterward he had cycled through and was stumping over the field until he stood in the middle of the encampment. Curtly, he signaled.

Joyce wet her lips what did that idiot think he was doing? He'd never heard of this planet a month ago. He hadn't been on it a week. Practically all his information about it he had from her, during the past ten or fifteen hours. And he thought he knew how to conduct himself? Why, if he didn't get his fat belly full of whetted iron, it would only be because there was no justice in the universe. Did he think she'd let herself be dragged down with him?

Etched huge and black against the burning sky, Van Rijn jerked his arm again.

Joyce turned the intercom high and said in the vernacular, "Watch, all Gangu who are brave enough! Look upon the male from far places, who stands alone beneath the angered sun!"

Her tones boomed hollowly across the wind. Van Rijn might have nodded. She must squint now to see what he did. That was due to the contrast, not to the illumination per se. It was still only a few percent of what Earth gets. But the flare, with an effective temperature of a million degrees or better, was emitting in frequencies to which her eyes were sensitive. Ultraviolet also, she thought in a corner of her mind: too little to turn a human baby pink, but enough to bring pain or death to these poor dwellers in Hades.

Van Rijn drew his blaster. With great deliberation, he fired several bolts at the star. Their flash and noise seemed puny against the rage up there. Now what-?

"No!" Joyce screamed.

Van Rijn opened his faceplate. He made a show of it, sticking his countenance out of the helmet, into the full light. He danced grotesquely about and thumbed his craggy nose at heaven.

But...

The merchant finished with an unrepeatable gesture, closed his helmet again, fired off two more bolts, and stood with folded arms as the sun went under the horizon.

The flare lingered in view for a while, a sheet of ghostly radiance above the trees. Van Rijn walked back to the car through twilight. Joyce let him in. He opened his helmet, wheezing, weeping, and blaspheming in a dozen languages. Frost began to form on his suit.

"Hoo-ee!" he moaned. "And not even a little hundred cc. of whiskey to console my poor old mucky membranes"

"You could have died," Joyce whispered.

"Oh, no. No. Not that #ay does Nicholas van Rijn die. At the age of a hundred and fifty, I plan to be shot by an outraged husband. The cold was not too bad, for the short few minutes I could hold my breath. But letting in that ammonia-Terror and taxes!" He waddled to the bath cubicle and splashed his face with loud snortings. -

The last flare-light sank. The sky remained hazy with aurora, so that only the brightest stars showed. The most penetrating charged particles from the flare would not arrive for hours; it was safe outside. One by one the t'Kelans emerged. Fires were poked up, sputtering and glaring in the dark. Van Rijn came back. "Hokay, I'm set," he said. "Now

put on your own suit and come out with me. We got to talk at them."

As she walked into the circle around which stood the swart outlines of the tents, Joyce must push her way through females and young. Their ring closed behind her, and she saw fireglow reflected from their eyes and knew she was hemmed in. It was comforting to have Van Rijn's buk so near and Uulobu's pad-pad at her back.

Thin comfort, though, when she looked at the males who waited by the ammonia spring. They had gathered as soon as they saw the humans coming. To her vision they were one shadow, like the night behind them. The fires on either side, that made it almost like day for a t'Kelans, hardly lit the front rank for her. Now and then a flame jumped high in the wind, or sparks went showering, or the, dull glow on the smoke was thrown toward the group. Then she saw a barbed obsidian spearhead, a horn sword, an ax or an iron dagger, drawn. The forest souged beyond, the camp and she heard the frightened bawling of iziru as they blundered around in the dark. Her mouth went dry.

The fathers of the prides stood in the forefront. Most were fairly young; old age was not common in the desert. Nyaronga seemed to have primacy on that account. He stood, spear in hand, fangs showing L'1 the half-open jaws, tendrils astir. His kilt fluttered in the unrestful air.

Van Rijn came to a halt before him. Joyce made herself stand close and meet Nyaronga's gaze. Uulobu crouched at her feet. A murmur like the sigh before a storm went through the warriors.

But the Earthman waited imperturbable, until at last Nyaronga must break the silence. "Why did you challenge the sun? No sky-one has ever done so before."

Joyce translated, a hurried mumble. Van Rijn puffed himself up visibly, even in his suit. "Tell him," he said, "I came just a short time ago. Tell him the rest of you did not think it was worth your whiles to make defiance, but I did."

"What do you intend to do?" she begged. "A misstep could get us killed."

"True. But if we don't make any steps, we get killed for sure, or starve to death because we don't dare come in radio range of where the rescue ship will be. Not so?" He patted her hand. "Damn these gloves! This WQuld be more fun without. But in all kinds of cases, you trust me, Joyce. Nicholas Van Rijn has not got old and fat on a hundred rough planets, if he was not smart enough to outlive everybody else. Right? Exact. So tell whatever I say to them, and use a sharp tone. Not unforgivable insults, but be snotty, hokay?"

She gulped. "Yes. I don't know why, b-but I will let you take the lead. If-" She suppressed fear and turned to the waiting t'Kelans. "This sky-male with me is not one of my own party," she told them. "He is of my race, but from a more powerful people among them than my people. He wishes me to tell you that though we sky-folk have hitherto not deigned to challenge the sun, he has not thought it was beneath him to do so."

"You never deigned?" rapped someone. "What do you mean by that?"

Joyce improvised. "The brightening of the sun is no menace to our people. We have often said as much. Were none of you here ever among those who asked us?"

Stillness fell again for a moment, until a scarred oneeyed patriarch said grudgingly, "Thus I heard last year, when you-or one like you-were in my pride's country healing sick cubs."

"Well, now you have seen it is true," Joyce replied.

Van Rijn tugged her sleeve. "Hoy, what goes on? Let me talk or else our last chance gets stupid away."

She dared not let herself be angered, but recounted the exchange. He astonished her by answering, "I am sorry, little girl. You was doing just wonderful. Now, though, I have a speech to make. You translate as I finish ~very sentence, ha?"

He leaned forward and stabbed his index finger just beneath Nyaronga's nose, again and again, as he said harshly, "You ask why I went out under the brightening sun? It was to show you I am not afraid of the fire it makes. I spit on your sun and it sizzles. Maybe it goes out. My sun could eat yours for breakfast and want an encore, by damn! Your little clot hardly gives enough light to see by, not enough to make bogeyman for a baby in my people."

The t'Kelans snarled and edged closer, hefting their weapons. Nyaronga retorted indignantly, "Yes, we have often observed that you sky-folk are nearly blind."

"You ever stood in the light from our cars? You go blind then, nie? You could not stand Earth, you. Pop and sputter you'd go, up in a little greasy cloud of smoke."

They were taken aback at that. Nyaronga spat and said, "You must even bundle yourselves against the air."

"You saw me stick my head out in the open. You care to try a whiff of my air for a change? I dare you."

A rumble went through the warriors, half wrath and half unease. Van Rijn chopped contemptuously with one hand. "See? You is more weakling than us."

A big young chieftain stepped forward. His whiskers bristled. "f dare."

"Hokay, I give you a smell." Van Rijn turned to Joyce. "Help me with this bebloodied air unit. I don't want no more of that beetle venom they call air in my helmet."

"But-but-" Helplessly, she obeyed, unscrewing the flush valve on the recycler unit between his shoulders.

"Blow it in his face," Van Rijn commanded.

The warrior stood bowstring taut. Joyce thought of the pain he must endure. She couldn't aim the hose at him. "Move!" Van Rijn barked. She did. Terrestrial atmosphere gushed forth.

The warrior yowled and stumbled back. He rubbed his nose and streaming eyes. For a minute he wobbled around, before he collapsed into the arms of a follower. Joyce refitted the valve as Van Rijn chortled, "I knew it. Too hot, too much oxygen, and especial the water vapor. It makes Throrans sick, so I thought sure it would do the same for these chaps. Tell them he will get well in a little while."

Joyce gave the reassurance. Nyaronga shook himself and said, "I have heard tales about this. Why must you show that poor fool what was known, that you breathe poison?"

"To prove we is just as tough as you, only more so, in a different way," Van Rijn answered through Joyce. "We can whip you to your kennels like small dogs if we choose."

That remark brought a yell. "Sharpened stone flashed aloft. Nyaronga raised his arms for silence. It came, in a mutter and a grumble and a deep sigh out of the females watching from darkness. The old chief said with bleak pride, "We know you command weapons we do not. This means you have arts we lack, which has never been denied. It does not mean you are stronger. A t'Kelán is not stronger than a bambalo simply because he has a bow to kill it from afar. We are a hunter folk, and you are not, whatever your weapons."

"Tell him," Van Rijn said, "that I will fight their most powerful man barehanded. Since I must wear this suit that protects from his bite, he can use armaments. They will go through fabricord, so it is fair, me?"

"He'll kill you," Joyce protested. Van Rijn leered. "If so, I die for the most beautifullest lady On this planet." His voice dropped. "Maybe then you is sorry you was not more kind to a nice old man when you could be."

"I won't!"

"You will, by damn!" He seized her wrist so strongly that she winced. "I know what I am making, you got me?" Numbly, she conveyed the challenge. Van Rijn drew his blaster and threw it at Nyaronga's feet. "If I lose, the winner can keep this," he said.

That fetched them. A dozen wild young males leaped forth, shouting, into the firelight. Nyaronga roared and cuffed them into order. He glared from one to another and jerked his spear at an individual. "This is my own son Kusalu. Let him defend the honor of pride and clatL"

The t'Kelán was overtopped by Van Rijn, but was almost as broad. Muscles moved snakishly under his fur. His fangs glistened as he slid forward, tomahawk in right hand, iron dagger in left. The other males fanned out, making a wide circle of eyes and poised weapons. Uulobu drew Joyce aside. His grasp trembled on her arm. "Could I but fight him myself," he whispered.

While Kusalu glided about Van Rijn turned, ponderous as a planet. His arms hung apelike from hunched shoulders. The fires tinged his crude features where they jutted within the helmet. "Nya-a-ah," he said.

Kusalu cursed and threw the tomahawk with splintering force. Van Rijn's left hand moved at an impossible speed. He caught the weapon in mid air and threw himself backward. The thong tautened.

Kusalu went forward on his face. Van Rijn plunged to the attack.

Kusalu rolled over and bounced to his feet in time. His blade flashed. Van Rijn blocked it with his right wrist. The Earthman's left hand took a hitch in the thong and yanked again. Kusalu went to one knee. Van Rijn twisted that arm around behind his back. Every t'Kelan screamed.

Kusalu slashed the thong across. Spitting, he leaped erect again and pounced. Van Rijn gave him an expert kick in the belly, withdrawing the foot before it could be seized. Kusalu lurched. Van Rijn closed in with a karate chop to the side of the neck.

Kusalu staggered but remained up. Van Rijn barely ducked the rip of the knife. He retreated. Kusalu stood a moment regaining his wind. Then he moved in one blur.

Things happened. Kusalu was grabbed as he charged and sent flailing over Van Rijn's shoulder. He hit ground with a thump. Van Rijn waited. Kusalu still had the dagger. He rose and stalked near. Blood ran from his nostril.

"La ci darem La mano," sang Van Rijn. As Kusalu prepared to smite, the Earthman got a grip on his right arm, whirled him around, and pinned him.

Kusalu squalled. Van Rijn ground a knee in his back "You say, 'Uncle?'" he panted.

"He'll die first," Joyce wailed.

"Hokay, we do it hard fashion." Van Rijn forced the knife loose and kicked it aside. He let Kusalu go. But the t'Kelan had scarcely raised himself when a gauntleted fist smashed into his stomach. He reeled. Van Rijn pushed in relentlessly, blow after blow, until the warrior sank.

The merchant stood aside. Joyce stared at him with horror. "Is all in order," he calmed her. "I did not damage him Permanent.

Nyaronga helped his son climb back up. Two others led Kusalu away. A low keening went among the massed t'Kelans. It was like nothing Joyce had ever heard before.

Van Rijn and Nyaronga confronted each other. The native said very slowly, "You have proven yourself, Skymale. For a landless one, you fight well, and it was good of you not to slay him.

Joyce translated between sobs. Van Rijn answered, "Say I did not kill that young buck because there is no need. Then say I have plenty territory of my own." He pointed upward, where stars glistened in the windy, hazy sky. "Ten him there is my hunting grounds. by damn. "

When he had digested this, Nyaronga asked almost plaintively, "But what does he wish in our land? What is his gain?"

"We came to help-" Joyce stopped herself and put the question to Van Rijn.

"Ha!" the Earthman gloated. "Now we talk about turkeys." He squatted near a fire. The pride fathers joined him; their sons pressed close to listen. Uulobu breathed happily, "Weare taken as friends."

"I do not come to rob your land or game," Van Rijn said in an oleaginous tone. "No, only to make deals, with good profit on both sides. Surely these folks trade with each other. They could not have so much stuffs as they do otherwise."

"Oh, yes, of course." Joyce settled weakly beside him. "And their relationship to the city is essentially quid pro quo, as I told you before."

"Then they will understand bargains being strna. So ten them those Gaffers on the mountain has got jealous of us. Tell them they sicced the Shanga onto our camp. The whole truths, not varnished more than needfol "

"What? But I thought-I mean. didn't you want to give them the impression that we're actually poweriul? Should we admit we're refugees?"

"Well, say we has had to make a . . . what do the miilitary communiques say when you has ot your pants beaten off? . . . an orderly rearward advance for strategic reasons, to previously prepared positions."

Joyce did. Tendrils r~ on the native heam. pupils narrowed, and hands raised weapons anew. Nyaronga asked dubiously. "Do you wish shelter among us?"

"No," said Van Rijn. "Ten him we is come to warn them, because if they get wiped out we can make no nice deals with profit. Tell them the Sh~ga now has your guns from the dome, and will move with their fellow clans into Rokulela territory."

Joyce wondered if she had heard aright. "But we don't . . . we didn't. . . we brought no weapons except a few personal sidearms. And everybody must have taken his own away with him in the retreat."

"Do they know that, these peoples?"

"Why . . . well. . . would they believe you?"

"My good prettY blonde with curves in all the right places, I give you Nicholas van Rijn's promise they would not believe anything else."

Haltingly, she spoke the lie. The reaction was homble. They boiled throughout the camp, leaped about, brandished their spears, and ululated like wolves. Nyaronga alone sat still, but his fur stood on end.

"Is this indeed so?" he demanded. It came as a whisper through the noise.

"Why else would the Shanga attack us, with help from the Ancients?" Van Rijn countered.

"You know very well why," Joyce said. "The Ancients bribed them, played on their superstitions, and probably offered them our metal to make knives from."

"Ja, no doubt, but you give this old devil here my rhe.. torical just the way I said it. Ask him does it not make sense, that the Shanga would act for the sake of blasters and slugthrowers, once the Geezers put them up to it and supplied gunpowder? Then tell him this means the Graybeards must be on the side of the Shanga's own Horde. . . what's they called, now?"

"The Yagola."

"So. Tell him that things you overheard give you good reason to believe the Shanga clan will put themselves at the head of the Yagola to move west and push the Rokulela out of this fine country."

Nyaronga and the others, who fell into an ominous quiet as Joyce spoke, had no trouble grasping the concept. As she had told Van Rijn, war was not a t'Kelán institution. But she was not conveying the idea of a full-dress warrather, a Volkerwanderung into new bunting grounds. And such things were frequent enough on this dying planet. When a region turned utterly barren its inhabitants must displace someone else, or die in the attempt.

The difference now was that the Yagola were not starved out of their homes. They were alleged to be anticipating that eventuality, plotting to grab off more land with their stolen firearms to give them absolute superiority.

"I had not thought them such monsters," Nyaronga said.

"They aren't," Joyce protested in Angiic to Van Rijn. "You're maligning them so horribly that-that-"

"Well, well, all's fair in love and propaganda. . . he said. "Propose to Nyaronga that we all return to Kusulonga, collecting reinforcements as we go, to see for ourselves if this business really is true .and use numerical advantage while we have still got it."

"You are going to set them at each other's throats! I won't be party to any such thing. I'D die first. . .

"Look, sweet potato, nobody has got killed yet. Maybe nobody has to be. I can explain later. But for now, we have got to strike while the fat is in the fire. They is wonderful excited. Don't give them a chance to 0001 off till they has positive decided to march.» The man laid a hand on his heart. "You think old, short of breath, comfort-loving, cowardly Nicholas van Rijn wants to fight a war? You think again. A formfitting chair, a tall cool drink, a Venusian cigar, Eine Kleine Nachtmusik on the taper, aboard his ketch while he sails with a bunch of dancing girls down Sunda Straits, that is only which he wants. Is that much to ask? Be like your own kind,. gentle setfs and help me stir them up to fight. "

Trapped in her own bewildement, she followed his lead. That same night, riders went out bearing messages to such other Rokulela clans as were known to be within reach.

The first progress eastward was in darkness, to avoid the still flaring sun. Almost every male, grown or half-grown, rode along, leaving females and young behind in camp. They wore flowing robes and burnooses, their basai were blanketed, against the fierce itch that attacked exposed t'Kelán skin during such periods. Most of the charged particles from the star struck the planet's day side, but there was enough magnetic field to bring some around to the opposite hemisphere. Even so, the party made surprisingly good speed. Peering from the car windows, Joyce glimpsed them under the two moons, shadowy shapeless forms that slipped over the harsh terrain, an occasional flash of spearheads. Through the engine's low voice she heard them calling to each other, and the deep earth-mutter of unshod hoofs.

"You see," Van Rijn lectured, "I am not on this world long, but I been on a lot of others, and read reports about many more. In my line of business this is needful. They always make parallels. I got enough clues about these t'Kelans to guess the basic pattern of their minds, from analogizings. You Esperancers, on this other hand, has not had so much experience. Like most colonies, you is too isolated from the galactic mainstream to keep au courant with things, like for instance the modern explorer techniques. That was obvious from the fact you did not make depth psychology studies the very first thing, but instead took what you found at face valuation. Never do that, Joyce. Always bite the coin that feeds you, for this is a hard and wicked universe."

"You seem to know what you're about, Nick," she admitted. He beamed and raised her hand to his lips. She made some confused noise about heating coffee and retreated. She didn't want to hurt his feelings; he really was an old dear, under that crust of his.

When she came back to the front seat, placing herself out of his reach, she said, "Well, tell me, what pattern did you deduce? How do their minds work?"

"You assumed they was like warlike human primitives, in early days on Earth," he said. "On the topside, that worked hokay. They is intelligent, with language; they can reason and talk with you; this made them seem easy understood. What you forgot, I think, me, was conscious intelligence is only a small part of the whole selfness. All it does is help us get what we want. But the wanting itself -food, shelter, sex, everything-our motives-they come from deeper down. There is no logical reason even to stay alive. But instinct says to, so we want to. And instinct comes from very old evolution. We was animals long before we became thinkers and, uh-" Van Rijn's beady eyes rolled piously ceilingward-" and was given souls. You got to think how a race evolved before you can take them. . . I mean understand them.

"Now humans, the experts tell me, got started way back when, as ground apes that turned carnivore when the forests shrank up in Africa for lots of megayears. This is when they started to walking erect the whole time, and grew hands fully developed to make weapons because they had not claws and teeth like lions. Hokay, so we is a mean lot, we Homo Sapienses, with killer instincts. But not exclusive. We is still omnivores who can even survive on Brussels sprouts if we got to. Pfui! But we can. Our ancestors been peaceful nutpluckers and living off each other's fleas a long, longer time than they was hunters. It shows.

"The t'Kelans, on the other side, has been carnivores since they was still four-footers. Not very good carnivores. Unspecialized, with no claws and pretty weak biting apparatus even if it is stronger than humans'. That is why they also developed hands and made tools, which led to them getting big brains. Nevertheless, they have no vegetarian whatsolutely in their ancestors, as we do. And they have much powerfuller killing instincts than us. And is not so gregarious. Carnivores can't be. You get a big' concentration of hunters in one spot, and by damn, the game goes away. Is that coffee ready?"

"I think so." Joyce fetched it. Van Rijn slurped it down, disregarding a temperature that would have taken the skirt off her palate, steering with one bare splay foot as he drank.

"I begin to see," she said with growing excitement. "That's why they never developed true nations or fought real wars. Big organizations are completely artificial things to them, commanding no loyalty. You don't fight or die for a Horde, any more than a human would fight for. . . for his bridge club."

"Um-m-m, I have known some mighty bloodshot looks across bridge tables. But ja, you get the idea. The pride is a natural thing here, like the human family. The clan, with blood ties, is only one step removed. It can excite t'Kelans as much, maybe, as his country can excite a man. But Hordes? Nie. An arrangement of convenience only.

"Not that pride and clan is .loving-kindness and sugar candy. Humans make family squabbles and civil wars. T'Kelans have still stronger fighting instincts than us. Lots of arguments and bloodshed. But only on a small scale, and not taken too serious. You said to me, is no vendettas here. That means somebody killing somebody else is not thought to have done anything bad. In fact, wnoever does not fight-male, anyhow-strikes them as unnatural, like less than normal."

"Is. . . that why they never warmed up to us? To the Esperancian mission, I mean?"

"Partly. Not that you was expected to fight at any specifical time. Nobody went out to pick a quarrel when you gave no offense and was even useful. But your behavior taken in one lump added up to a thing

they couldn't understand. They figured there was something wrong with you, and felt a goodly natured contempt. I had to prove I was tough as they or tougher. That satisfied their instincts, which then went to sleep and let them listen to me with respects."

Van Rijn put down his empty cup and took out his pipe. "Another thing you lacked was territory," he said. "Animals on Earth, too, has an instinct to stake out and defend a piece of ground for themselves. Humans do. But for carnivores this instinct has got to be very, very, very powerful, because if they get driven away from where the game is, they can't survive on roots and berries. They die.

"You saw yourself how those natives what could not maintain a place in their ancestral hunting grounds but went to you instead was looked downwards on. You Esperancers only had a dome on some worthless nibble of land. Then you went around preaching how you had no designs on anybody's country. Ha! They had to believe you was either lying-maybe that is one reason the Shanga attacked you-or else was abnormal weaklings."

"But couldn't they understand?" Joyce asked. "Did they expect us, who didn't even look like them, to think the same way as they do?"

"Sophisticated, civilized t'Kelans could have caught the. idea," Van Rijn said. "However, you was dealing with naive barbarians." . .

"Except the Ancients. I'm sure they realize-"

"Maybe so. Quite possible. But you made a deadly threat to them. Could you not see? They has been the scribes, doctors, high-grade artisans, sun experts, for ages and ages. You come in and start doing the same as them, only much better. What you expect them to do? Kiss your foots? Kiss any part of your anatomy? Not them! They is carnivores, too. They fight back.

"But we never meant to displace them!

"Remember," Van Rijn said, wagging his pipe stem at her, "reason is just the lackey for instinct. The Gaffers is more subtle than anybody elses. They can sit still in one place, between walls. They do not hunt. They do not claim thousands of square kilometers for themselves. But does this mean they have no instinct of territoriality? Ha! Not bloody likely! They has only sublimed it. Their work, that is their territory-and you moved in on it.

Joyce sat numbly, staring out into night. Time passed. before she could protest. "But we explained to them-I'm sure they understood-we explained this planet will die without our help."

"Ja,ja. But a naturally born fighter has less fear of death than other kinds animals. Besides, the death was scheduled for a thousand years from now, did you not say? That is too long a time to feel with emotions. Your own threat to them was real, here and now."

Van Rijn lit his pipe. "Also," he continued around the mouthpiece, "your gabbing about planet-wide cooperation md not sit so well. I doubt they could really comprehend it. Carnivores don't make cooperations except on the most teensy scale. It isn't practical for them. They haven't got such instincts. The Hordes-which, remember, is not nations in any sense-they could never get what you was talking about, I bet. Altruism is outside their mental horizontals. It only made them suspicious of you. The Ancients maybe had some vague notion of your motives, but didn't share them in the littlest. You can't organize these peoples. Sooner will you build a carousel on Saturn's rings. It does not let itself be done."

"You've organized them to fight!" she exclaimed in her anguish.

"No. Only given them a common purpose for this time being. They believed what I said about weapons left in the dome. With minds like that, they find it much the easiest thing to believe. Of course you had an arsenal--everybody does. Of course you would have used it if you got the chance--anybody would. Ergo, you never got the chance; the Shanga captured it too fast. The rest of the story, the Yagola plot against the Rokulela, is at least logical enough to their minds that they had better investigate it good."

"But what are you going to make them do?" She couldn't hold back the tears any longer. "Storm the mountain? They can't get along without the Ancients."

"Sure, they can, if humans substitute."

"B-b-but-but-no, we can't, we mustn't-"

"Maybe we don't have to," Van Rijn said. "I got to play by my ear of tinned 'cauliflower when we arrive. We will see." He laid his pipe aside. "There, there, now, don't be so sad. But go ahead and cry if

you want. Papa Nicky will dry your eyes and blow your nose." He offered her the curve of his arm. She crept into it, buried her face against his side, and wept herself to sleep.

Kusulongo the Mountain rose monstrous from the plain, cliff upon gloomy cliff, with talus slopes and glaciers between, until the spires carved from its top stood ragged across the sun-disc. Joyce had seldom felt the cold and murk of this world as she did now, riding up the path to the city on a homed animal that must be blanketed against the human warmth of her suit. The wind went shrieking through the empty dark sky, around the crags, to buffet her like fists and snap the banner which Uulobu carried on a lance as he rode ahead. Glancing back, down a dizzying sweep of stone, she saw Nyaronga and the half-dozen other chiefs who had been allowed to come with the party. Their cloaks streamed about them; spears rose and fell with the gait of their mounts; the color of their fur was lost in this dreary light, but she thought she made out the grimness on their faces. Immensely far below, at the mountain's foot, lay their followers, five hundred armed and angry Rokulela. But they were hidden by dusk, and if she died on the heights they could give her no more than a vengeance she didn't want.

She shuddered and edged her basai close to the one which puffed and groaned beneath Van Rijn's weight. Their knees touched. "At least we have some company," she said, knowing the remark was moronic but driven to say anything that might drown out the wind. "Thank God the flare died away so fast."

"Ja, we made good time," the merchant said. "Only three days from the Lubambaru to here, that's quicker than I forewaited. And lots of allies picked up."

She harked back wistfully to the trek. Van Rijn had spent the time being amusing, and had succeeded better than she would have expected. But then they arrived, and the Shanga scrambled up the mountain one jump ahead of the Rokulela charge; the attackers withdrew, unwilling to face cannon if there was a chance of avoiding it; a parley was agreed on; and she couldn't imagine how it might end other than in blood. The Ancients might let her group go down again unhurt, as they'd promised-or might not-but, however that went, before sundown many warriors would lie broken for the carrion fowl. Oh, yes, she admitted to herself, I'm also afraid of what will happen to me, if I should get back alive to Esperance. Instigating combat! Ten years', corrective detention if I'm lucky. . . unless I run away with Nick and never see home again, never, never-But to make those glad young hunters die!

She jerked her reins, half minded to flee down the trail and into the desert. The beast skittered under her. Van Rijn caught her by the shoulder, "Calm, there, if you please," he growled. "We has got to outbluff them upstairs. They will be a Satan's lot harder to diddle than the barbarians was."

"Can we?" she pleaded. "They can defend every approach. They're stocked for a long siege, I'm certain, longer than. . . than we could maintain."

"If we bottle them for a month, is enough. For then comes the League ship."

"But they can send for help, too. Use the heliographs." She pointed to one of the skeletal towers above. Its mirror shimmered dully in the red luminance. Only a t'Kelán could see the others, spaced out in several directions across the plains and hills. "Or messengers can slip between our lines-we'd be spread so terribly thin-they could raise the whole Yagola Horde against us."

"Maybe so, maybe not. We see. Now peep down and let me think."

They jogged on in silence, except for the wind. After an hour they came to a wall built across the trail. Impassable slopes of detritus stretched on either side. The arch., way held two primitive cannon. Four members of the city garrison poised there, torches flickering near the fuses. Guards in leather helmets and corselets, armed with bows and pikes, stood atop the wall. The iron gleamed through the shadows.

Uulobu rode forth, cocky in the respect he had newly won from the clans. "Let pass the mighty sky-folk who have condescended to speak with your patriarchs," he demanded.

"Hmpf!" snorted the captain of the post. "When have the sky-folk ever had the spirit of a gutted yangulu?"

"They have always had the spirit of a makovolo in a rage," Uulobu said. He ran a thumb along the edge of his dagger. "If you wish proof, consider who dared cage the Ancients on their own mountain."

The warrior mane a flustered noise, collected himself, and stated loudly, "You may pass then, and be

safe as long as the peace between us is not unsaid."

"No more fiddlydoodles there," Van Rijn rapped. "We want by, or we take your popguns and stuff them in a place they do not usually go." Joyce forebore to interpret. Nick had so many good qualities; if only he could overcome that vulgarity! But he had had a hard life, poor thing. No one had ever really taken him in hand. . . . Van Rijn rode straight between the cannon and on up the path.

It debouched on a broad terrace before the city wall. Other guns frowned from the approaches. Two score warriors paced their rounds with more discipline than was known in the Hordes. Joyce's eyes went to the three shapes in the portal. They wore plain white robes, and fur was grizzled with age. But their gaze was arrogant on the newcomers.

She hesitated. "I . . . this is the chief scribe-" she began.

"No introduction to secretaries and office boys," Van Rijn said. "We go straight to the boss."

Joyce moistened her lips and told them: "The head of the sky-folk demands immediate parley."

"So be it," said one Ancient without tone. "But you must leave your arms here."

Nyaronga bared his teeth. "There is no help for it," Joyce reminded him. "You know as well as I, by the law of the fathers, none but Ancients and warriors born in the city may go through this gate With weapons." Her own holster and Van Rijn's were already empty.

She could almost see the heart sink in the Rokulela, and remembered what the Earthman had said about instinct. Disarming a t'Kelán was a symbolic emasculation. They put a bold face on it, clattering their implements down and dismounting to stride With stiff backs at Van Rijn's heels. But she noticed how their eyes flickered about, like those of trapped animals, when they passed the gateway.

Kusulongo the City rose in square tiers, black and massive under the watchtowers. The streets were narrow guts twisting between, full of wind and the noise of hammering from the metalsmiths' quarters. Dwellers by birthright stood aside as the barbarians passed, drawing their robes about' them as if to avoid contact. The three councillors said no word; stillness fell everywhere as they walked deeper into the citadel, until Joyce wanted to scream.

At the middle of the city stood a block full twenty meters high, Windowless, only the door and the ventholes opening to air. Guards hoisted their swords and hissed in salute as the hierarchs went through the entrance. Joyce heard a small groan at her back. The Rokulela followed the humans inside, down a winding hall, but she didn't think they would be of much use. The torchlit cave at the end was cleverly designed to sap a hunter's nerve.

Six white-robed oldsters were seated on a semicircular dais. The wall behind them carried a mosaic, vivid even in this fluttering dimness, of the sun as it flared. Nyaronga's breath sucked between his teeth. He had just been reminded of the Ancients' power. True, Joyce told herself, he knew the humans could take over the same functions. But immemorial habit is not easily broken.

Their guides sat down too. The newcomers remained standing. Silence thickened. Joyce swallowed several times and said, "I speak for Nicholas van Rijn, patriarch of the sky-folk, who has leagued himself with the Rokulela clans. We come to demand justice."

"Here there is justice," th~ gaunt male at the center of the dais replied. "I, Oluba's son Akulo, Ancient-born, chief in council, speak for Kusulongo the City. Why have you borne a spear against us?"

"Ha!" snorted Van Rijn when it had been conveyed to him. "Ask that old hippopotamus why he started these troubles in the first place." .

"You mean hypocrite," Joyce said automatically.

"I mean what I mean. Come on, now. I know very well why he has, but let us hear what ways he covers up."

Joyce put the question. Akulo curled his tendrils, a gesture of skepticism, and murmured, "This is strange. Never have the Ancients taken part in quarrels below the mountains. When you attacked the Shanga, we gave them refuge, but such is old custom. We will gladly hear your dispute with them and arrange a fair settlement, but this is no fight of ours."

Joyce anticipated Van Rijn by snapping in an upsurge of indignation. "They blew down our walls. Who could have supplied them the means but yourselves?"

"Ah, yes." Akulo stroked his whiskers. "I understand your thinking, sky-female. It is very natural.

Well, as this council intended to explain should other carriers of your people arrive here all'd accuse us, we do sell fireworks for magic and celebration. The Shanga bought a large quantity from us. We did not ask why. No rule controls how much may be bought at a time. They must have emptied the powder out themselves, to use against you."

"What's he say?" Van Rijn demanded. .

Joyce explained. Nyaronga muttered-it took courage with the Ancients listening-"No doubt the Shanga pridefathers will support that tale. An untruth is a low price for weapons like yours."

"What weapons speak you of?" a councillor interrupted.

"The arsenal the sky-folk had, which the Shanga captured for use against my own Horde," Nyaronga spat. His mouth curled upward. "So much for the disinterestedness of the Ancients."

"But-No!" Akulo leaned forward, his voice not quite as smooth as before. "It is true that Kusulongo the City did nothing to discourage an assault on the sky-ones' camp. They are weak and bloodless-legitimate prey. More, they were causing unrest among the clans, unQermining the ways of the fathers-"

"Ways off which Kusulongo the City grew fat," Joyce put in.

Akulo scowled at her but continued addressing Nyaronga. "By their attack, the Shanga did win a rich plunder of metal. They will have many good knives. But that is not enough addition to their power that they could ever invade new lands when desperation does not lash them. We thought of that too, here on the mountain, and did not wish tQ see it happen. The concern of the Ancients was ever to preserve a fitting balance of things. If the sky-folk went away, that balance would actually be restored which they endangered. A little extra metal in Yagola hands would not upset it anew. The sky-folk were never seen to carry any but a few hand-weapons. Those they took with them when they fle.d. There never was an armory in the dome for the Shanga to seize. Your fear was for nothing, you Rokulela."

Joyce had been translating for Van Rijn sotto voce. He nodded. "Hokay. Now tell them what I said you should."

I've gone too far to retreat, she realized desolately. "But we did have weapons in reserve!" she blurted. "Many of them, hundreds, whole boxes full, that we did not get a chance to use before the attack drove us outside."

Silence. cracked down. The councillors stared at her in horror. Torch flames jumped and shadows chased each other across the walls. The Rokulela chiefs watched with a stem satisfaction that put some self-confidence back into them.

Finally Akulo stuttered, "B-b-but you said-I asked you once myself, and you denied having-having more than a few. . ."

"Naturally," Joyce said, "we kept our main strength in reserve, unrevealed."

"The Shanga reported nothing of this sort."

"Would you expect them to?" Joyce let that sink in before she went on. "Nor will you find the cache if you search the oasis. They did not resist our assault with fire, so the guns cannot have been in this neighborhood. Most likely someone took them away at once into the Yagola lands, to be distributed later."

"We shall see about this." Another Ancient clipped off the words. "Guard!" A sentry came in through the doorway to the entry tunnel. "Fetch the spokesman of our clan guests."

Joyce brought Van Rijn up to date while they waited. "Goes well so far," the merchant said. "But next comes the ticklish part, not so much fun as tickling you."

"Really!" She drew herself up, hot in the face. "You're impossible."

"No, just improbable. . . Ah, here we go already."

A lean t'Kelan in Shanga garb trod into the room. He folded his arms and glowered at the Rokulela. "This is Batuzi's son Masotu," Akulo introduced. He leaned forward, tense as his colleagues. "The sky-folk have said you took many terrible weapons from their camp. Is that truth?"

Masotu started. "Certainly not! There was nothing but that one emptied handgun I showed you when you came down at dawn."

"So the Ancients were indeed in league with the Shanga," rasped a t'Kelan in Van Rijn's party.

Briefly disconcerted, Akulo collected himself and said in a steel tone, "Very well. Why should we deny it, after all? Kusulongo the City seeks the good of the whole world, which IS its own good; and these sly strangers were bringing new ways that rotted old usage. Were they not softening you for the invasion of their own people? What other reason had they to travel about in your lands? What other reason could they have? Yes, this council urged the Shanga to wipe them out as they deserve."

Though her heartbeat nearly drowned her words, Joyce managed to interpret for Van Rijn. The merchant's lips thinned. "Now they confess it to our facing," he said. "Yet they have got to have some story ready to fob off Earthships and make humans never want to come here again. They do not intend to let us go down this hill alive, I see, and talk contradictions afterwards." But he gave her no word for the natives.

Akulo pointed at Masotu. "Do you tell us, then, that the sky-folk have lied and you found no arsenal?"

"Yes." The Shanga traded stares with Nyaronga. "Ah, your folk fretted lest we use that power to overrun your grasslands," he deduced shrewdly. "There was no need to fear. Go back in peace and let us finish dealing with the aliens."

"We never feared," Nyaronga corrected. Nonetheless his glance toward the humans was doubtful.

An Ancient stirred impatiently on the dais. "Enough of this," he said. "Now we have all seen still another case of the sky-fold brewing trouble. Call in the guards to slay them. Let peace be said between Shanga and all Rokulela. Send everyone home and have done."

Joyce finished her running translation as Akulo opened his mouth. "Botulism and bureaucrats!" Van Rijn exploded. "Not this fast, little chum." He reached under the recycler tank on his back and pulled out his blaster. "Please to keep still."

No t'Kelán stirred, though a hiss went among them. Van Rijn backed toward the wall so he could cover the doorway as well. "Now we talk more friendly," he smiled.

"The law has been broken," Akulo sputtered.

"Likewise the truce which you said between us," Joyce answered, though no culture on this planet regarded oathbreaking as anything but a peccadillo. She felt near fainting with relief. Not that the blaster solved many problems. It wouldn't get them out of a city aswarm with archers and spear-casters. But-

"Quiet!" boomed Van Rijn. Echoes rang from wall to stony wall. A couple of sentries darted in. They pulled up short when they saw the gun.

"Come on, join the party," the Earthman invited. "Lots of room and energy charges for everybody's."

To Joyce he said, "Hokay, now is where we find out whether we have brains enough to get out of being heroes. Tell them that Nicholas Van Rijn has a speech to make, then talk for me as I go along."

Weakly, she relayed the message. The least relaxation showed on the tigrery bodies before her. Akulo, Nyaronga, and Masotu nodded together. "Let him be heard," the Ancient said. "There is always time to fight afterward."

"Good." Van Rijn's giant form took a step forward. He swept the blaster muzzle around in an oratorical gesture. "First, you should know I caused all this hullabaloo mainly so we could talk. If I come back here alone, you would have clobbered me with pointy little rocks, and that would not be so good for any of us. Ergo, I had to come in company. Let Nyaronga tell you I can fight like a hungry creditor if needful. But maybe there is no need this time ha?"

Joyce passed on his words, sentence by sentence, and waited while the Gangu pride-father confirmed that humans were tough customers. Van Rijn took advantage of the general surprise to launch a quick verbal offensive.

"We have got this situation. Suppose the Shanga are lying and have really copped a modern arsenal. Then they can gain such power that even this city becomes a client of theirs instead of being primus inter pares like before. Nie? To prevent this, a common cause is needful between Ancients, Rokulela, and us humans who can get bigger weapons to stop the Yagola when our rescue ship comes in."

"But we have no such booty," Masotu insisted. i

"So you say," Joyce replied. She was beginning to get: Van Rijn's general idea. .. Ancients and

Rokulela, dare you take his word on so weighty a matter?"

As indecision waxed on the dais, Van Rijn continued. "Now let us on the other hands suppose I am the liar and there never was any loose zappers in the dome. Then Shanga and Ancients must keep on working together. For my people's ship that will come from our own territory, which is the whole skyfril of stars, they must be told some yarn about why their dome was destroyed. Everybody but me and this cute doll here got safe away, so it will be known the Shanga did the job. Our folks will be angry at losing such a good chance for profit they have been working on for a long time. They will blame the Ancients as using Shanga for pussyfoots, and maybe blow this whole mountain to smithereens, unless a good story that Shanga corroborate in every way has been cooked beforehand to clear the Ancients. Right? Ja. Well, then, for years to come, the Shanga-through them, all Yagola-must be in close touch with Kusulongo town. And they will not take the blame for no payment at all, will they"? So hokay, you Rokulela, how impartial you think the Ancients will be to you? How impartial can the Ancients be, when the Shanga can blackmail them? You need humans here to make a balance."

Uulobu clashed his teeth together and cried, "This is true!" But Joyce watched Nyaronga. The chief pondered a long while, trading looks with his colleagues, before he said, "Yes, this may well be. At least, one does not wish to risk being cheated, when disputes come here for judgment. Also, the bad years may come to Yagoland next, when they must move elsewhere. . . and a single failure to predict a flare for us could weaken our whole country . for invasion."

Stillness stretched. Joyce's phone pickup sent her only the sputter of torches and the boom of wind beyond the doorway. Akulo stared down Van Rijn's gun muzzle, without a move. At last he said, "You sow discord with great skill, stranger. Do you think we can let so dangerous a one, or these pride-fathers whom you have now made into firm allies, leave here alive?"

"Ja," answered Van Rijn complacently through Joyce. "Because I did not really stir up trouble, only prove to your own big benefits that you can't trust each other and need human peoples to keep order. For see you, with humans and their weapons around, who have an interest in peace between clans and Hordes, some Yagola with a few guns can't accomplish anything. Or if they truly don't have guns, there is still no reason for the city to work foot in shoe with them if humans return peacefully and do not want revenge for their dome. So either way, the right balance is restored between herders and town. Q.E.D."

"But why should the sky-folk wish to establish them~ selves here?" Akulo argued. "Is your aim to take over the rightful functions of Kusulongo the City? No, first you must slay each one of us on the mountain!"

"Not needful," Van Rijn said. "We make our profit other ways. I have asked out the lady here about the facts while we was en route, and she dovetails very pretty, let me tell you. Vb . . . Joyce. . . you take over now. I am not sure how to best get the notion across when they haven't much chemical theory."

Her mouth fell open. "Do you mean-Nick, do you have an answer?" "Ja, ja, ja." He rubbed his hands and beamed. "I worked that out fine. Like follows: My own company takes over operations on t'Kela. You Esperancers help us get started, natural, but after that you can go spend your money on some other planet gone to seed. . . while Nicholas van Rijn takes money out of this one."

"What, what are you thinking?"

"Look, I want kungu wine, and a fur trade on the side might also be nice to have. The clans everywhere will bring me this stuff. I sell them ammonia and nitrates from the nitrogen-fixing plants we build, in exchange. They will need this to enrich their soils-also they will need to: cultivate nitrogen-fixing bacteria the way you show them -to increase crop yields so they can buy still more ammonia and nitrates. Of course, what they will really do this for is to get surplus credit for buying modem gadgets.. Guns, especial. Nobody with hunter instincts can resist buying guns; he will even become a part-time farmer to do it. But also my factors will sell them tools and machines and stuff, what makes them slowly more civilized the way you want them to be. On all these deals, Solar Spice & Liquors turns a pretty good profit."

"But we didn't come to exploit them!"

Van Rijn chuckled. He reached up to twirl his mustache, clanked a hand against his helmet, made a face, and said, "Maybe you Esperancers didn't, but I sure did. And don't you see, this they can

understand, the clans. Charity is outside their instincts, but profit is not, and they will feel good at how they swindle us on the price of wine. No more standoffishness and suspicion about humans-not when humans is plainly come here on a money hunt. You see?"

She nodded, half dazed. They weren't going to like this on Esperance; the Commonalty looked down from a lofty moral position on the Polesotechnic League; but they weren't fanatical about it, and if this was the only way the job could be one-Wait "The Ancients," she objected. "How will you conciliate them? Introducing so many new elements is bound to destroy the basis of their whole economy."

"Oh, I already got that in mind. We will want plenty of native agents and clerks, smart fellows who keep records and expand our market territory and cetera. That takes care of many young Ancients. . . silly name. . . . As for the rest, though, maintaining the power and prestiges of the city as a unit, that we can also do. Remember, there are oil wells to develop and electrolysis plants to build. The electrolyzer plants will sell hydrogen to the ammonia plants, and the oil-burning operation can sell electricity. Hokay, so I build these oil and electrolyzer plants, turn them over to the Ancients to run, and let the Ancients buy them from me on a long-term mortgage. So profitable and key facilities should suit them very well, nie?" He stared thoughtfully into a dark corner. "Um-m-m . . . do you think I can get twenty percent interest, compounded annual, or must I have to settle for fifteen?"

Joyce gasped a while before she could start searching for Kusulongo phrases.

They went down the mountain toward sunset, with cheers at their back and campfires twinkling below to welcome them. Somehow the view seemed brighter to Joyce than ever ere now. And there was beauty in that illimitable westward plain, where a free folk wandered through their own lives. The next few weeks, waiting for the ship, won't be bad at all, she thought. In fact, they should be fun.

"Another advantage," Van Rijn told her smugly, "is that making a commercial operation with profit for everybody out of this is a much better guarantee the job will be continued for long enough to save the planet. You thought your government could do it. Bah! Governments is dayflies. Any change of ideology, of mood, even, and poof goes YOJIf project. But private action, where everybody concerned is needful to everybody else's income, that's stable. Politics, they come and go, but greed goes on forever."

"Oh, no, that can't be," she denied.

"Well, we got time in the car to argue about it, and about much else." Van Rijn said. "I think I can rig a little still to get the alcohol out of kungu. Then we put it in fruit juice and have a sort of wine with our meals like human beings, by damn!"

"I . . . I shouldn't, Nicky. . . that is, well, us two alone--"

"You is only young once. You mean a poor old man like me has got to show you how to be young?" Van Rijn barely suppressed a leer. "Hokay, fine by me."

Joyce looked away, flushing. She'd have to maintain a strict watch on him till the ship arrived, she thought. And on herself, for that matter.

Of course, if she did happen to relax just the littlest bit . . . after all, he really was a very interesting person.

The Sickness By William Tenn

William Tenn has published a number of classic science fiction stories in a career that spans a quarter of a century . . . a career that has seen him become one of the most honored men in the field. His tomorrow is at near as that of John D. MacDonald . . . a time when men will learn to cooperate ... or else!

For the record, it was a Russian, Nicolai Belov, who found it and brought it back to the ship. He found it in the course of a routine geological survey he was making some six miles from the ship the day after they landed. For what it might be worth, he was driving a caterpillar jeep at the time, a caterpillar jeep that had been made in Detroit, U.S.A.

He radioed the ship almost immediately. Preston O'Brien, the navigator, was in the control room at the time, as usual, checking his electronic computers against a dummy return course he had set up. He took the call. Belov, of course, spoke in English; O'Brien in Russian.

"O'Brien," Belov said excitedly, once identification had been established. "Guess what I've found? Martians! A whole city!"

O'Brien snapped the computer relays shut, leaned back in the bucket seat, and ran his fingers through his crewcut red hair. They'd had no right to, of course but somehow they'd all taken it for granted that they were alone on the chilly, dusty, waterless planet. Finding it wasn't so gave him a sudden acute attack of claustrophobia. It was like looking up from his thesis work in an airy, silent college library to find it had filled with talkative freshmen just released from a class in English composition. Or that disagreeable moment at the beginning of the expedition, back in Benares, when he'd come out of a nightmare in which he'd been drifting helplessly by himself in a starless black vacuum to find Kolevitch's powerful right arm hanging down from the bunk above him and the air filled with sounds of thick Slavic snores. It wasn't just that he was jumpy, he'd assured himself; after all, everyone was jumpy . . . these days.

He'd never liked being crowded. Or being taken by surprise. He rubbed his hands together irritably over the equations he'd scribbled a moment before. Of course, come to think of it, if anyone was being crowded, it was the Martians. There was that.

O'Brien cleared his throat and asked:

"Live Martians?"

"No, of course not. How could you have live Martians in the cupful of atmosphere this planet has left? The only things alive in the place are the usual lichens and maybe a desert flatworm or two, the same as those we found near the ship. The last of the Martians must have died at least a million years ago. But the city's intact, O'Brien, intact and almost untouched!"

For all his ignorance of geology, the navigator was incredulous. "Intact? You mean it hasn't been weathered down to sand in a million years?"

"Not a bit," Belov chortled. "You see it's underground. I saw this big sloping hole and couldn't figure it: it didn't go with the terrain. Also there was a steady breeze blowing out of the hole, keeping the sand from piling up inside. So I nosed the jeep in, rode downhill for about fifty, sixty yards—and there it was, a spacious, empty Martian city, looking like Moscow a thousand, ten thousand years from now. It's beautiful, O'Brien, beautiful!"

"Don't touch anything," O'Brien warned. Moscow! Like Moscow yet!

"You think I'm crazy? I'm just taking a couple of shots with my Rollei. Whatever machinery is operating that blower system is keeping the lights on; it's almost as bright as daylight down here. But what a place! Boulevards like colored spider webs. Houses like—like— Talk about the Valley of the Kings, talk about Harappa! They're nothing, nothing at all to this find. You didn't know I was an amateur archaeologist, did you, O'Brien? Well, I am. And let me tell you, Schliemann would have given his eyes—his eyes!—for this discovery! It's magnificent!"

O'Brien grinned at his enthusiasm. At moments like this you couldn't help feeling that the Russkys were all right, that it would all work out—somehow. "Congratulations," he said. "Take your pictures and get back fast. I'll tell Captain Ghose."

"But listen, O'Brien, that's not all. These people—these Martians—they were like us! They were human!"

"Human? Did you say human? Like us?"

Belov's delighted laugh irradiated the earphones. "That's exactly the way I felt. Amazing, isn't it? They were human, like us. If anything, even more so. There's a pair of nude statues in the middle of a square that the entrance opens into. Phidias or Praxiteles or Michelangelo wouldn't have been ashamed of those statues, let me tell you. And they were made back in the Pleistocene or Pliocene, when sabertooth tigers were still prowling the Earth!"

O'Brien grunted and switched off. He strolled to the control room porthole, one of the two that the ship boasted, and stared out at the red desert that humped and hillocked itself endlessly, repetitiously,

until, at the furthest extremes of vision, it disappeared in a sifting, sandy mist.

This was Mars. A dead planet. Dead, that is, except for the most primitive forms of vegetable and animal life, forms which could survive on the minute rations of water and air that their bitterly hostile world allotted them. But once there had been men here, men like himself, and Nicolai Belov. They had had art and science as well as, no doubt, differing philosophies. They had been here once, these men of Mars, and were here no longer. Had they too been set a problem in coexistence—and had they failed to solve it?

Two space-suited figures clumped into sight from under the ship. O'Brien recognized them through their helmet bubbles. The shorter man was Fyodor Guranin, Chief Engineer; the other was Tom Smathers, his First Assistant. They had evidently been going over the rear jets, examining them carefully for any damage incurred on the outward journey. In eight days, the first Terrestrial Expedition to Mars would start home: every bit of equipment had to be functioning at optimum long before that.

Smathers saw O'Brien through the porthole and waved. The navigator waved back. Guranin glanced upwards curiously, hesitated a moment, then waved too. Now O'Brien hesitated. Hell, this was silly. Why not? He waved at Guranin, a long, friendly, rotund wave.

Then he smiled to himself. Chose should only see them now! The tall captain would be grinning like a lunatic out of his aristocratic, coffee-colored face. Poor guy! He was living on emotional crumbs like these.

And that reminded him. He left the control room and looked in at the galley where Semyon Kolevitch, the Assistant Navigator and Chief Cook, was opening cans in preparation for their lunch. "Any idea where the captain is?" he inquired in Russian.

The man glanced at him coolly, finished the can he was working on, tossed the round flat top into the wall disposer-hole, and then replied with a succinct English "No".

Out in the corridor again, he met Dr. Alvin Schneider on the way to the galley to work out his turn at K.P. "Have you seen Captain Chose, Doc?"

"He's down in the engine room, waiting to have a conference with Guranin," the chubby little ship's doctor told him. Both men spoke in Russian.

O'Brien nodded and kept going. A few minutes later, he pushed open the engineroom door and came upon Captain Sabodh Chose, late of Benares Polytechnic Institute, Benares, India, examining a large wall chart of the ship's jet system. Despite his youth—like every other man on the ship, Chose was under twenty-five—the fantastic responsibilities he was carrying had ground two black holes into the flesh under the captain's eyes. They made him look perpetually strained. Which he was, O'Brien reflected, and no two ways about it.

He gave the captain Belov's message.

"Hm," Ghose said, frowning. "I hope he has enough sense not to—" He broke off sharply as he realized he had spoken in English. "I'm terribly sorry, O'Brien!" he said in Russian, his eyes looking darker than ever. "I've been standing here thinking about Guranin; I must have thought I was talking to him. Excuse me."

"Think nothing of it," O'Brien murmured. "It was my pleasure."

Ghose smiled, then turned it off abruptly. "I better not let it happen again. As I was saying, I hope Belov has enough sense to control his curiosity and not touch anything."

"He said he wouldn't. Don't worry, captain. Belov is a bright boy. He's like the rest of us; we're all bright boys." "An operating city like that" the tall Indian brooded.

"There might be life there still—he might set off an alarm and start up something unimaginable. For all we know, there might be automatic armament in the place, bombs, anything. Belov could get himself blown up, and us too. There might be enough in that one city to blow up all of Mars."

"Oh, I don't know about that," O'Brien suggested. "I think that's going a little too far. I think you have bombs on the brain, Captain."

Chose stared at him soberly. "I have, Mr. O'Brien. That's a fact."

O'Brien felt himself blushing. To change the subject, he said, "I'd like to borrow Smathers for a couple of hours. The computers seem to be working fine, but I want to spot-check a couple of circuits,

just for the hell of it."

"I'll ask Guranin if he can spare him. You can't use your assistant?"

The navigator grimaced. "Kolevitch isn't half the electronics man that Smathers is. He's a damn good mathematician, but not much more."

Chose studied him, as if trying to decide whether or not that was the only obstacle. "I suppose so. But that reminds me. I'm going to have to ask you to remain in the ship until we lift for Earth."

"Oh, no, Captain! I'd like to stretch my legs. And I've as much right as anyone to—to walk the surface of another world." His phraseology made O'Brien a bit self-conscious, but damn it, he reflected, he hadn't come forty million miles just to look at the place through portholes.

"You can stretch your legs inside the ship. You know and I know that walking around in a space-suit is no particularly pleasant exercise. And as for being on the surface of another world, you've already done that, O'Brien, yesterday, in the ceremony where we laid down the marker."

O'Brien glanced past him to the engine-room porthole. Through it, he could see the small white pyramid they had planted outside. On each of its three sides was the same message in a different language: English, Russian, Hindustani. First Terrestrial Expedition to Mars. In the Name of Human Life.

Cute touch, that. And typically Indian. But pathetic. Like everything else about this expedition, plain pathetic.

"You're too valuable to risk, O'Brien," Ghose was explaining. "We found that out on the way here. No human brain can extemporize suddenly necessary course changes with the speed and accuracy of those computers. And, since you helped design them, no one can handle those computers as well as you. So my order stands."

"Oh, come now, it's not that bad: you'd always have Kolevitch."

"As you remarked just a moment ago, Semyon Kolevitch isn't enough of an electronic technician. If anything went wrong with the computers, we'd have to call in Smathers and use the two of them in tandem—not the most efficient working arrangement there is. And I suspect that Smathers plus Kolevitch still would not quite equal Preston O'Brien. No, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we can't take chances: you're too close to being indispensable."

"All right," O'Brien said softly. "The order stands. But allow me a small disagreement, Captain. You know and I know that there's only one indispensable man aboard this ship. And it isn't me."

Ghose grunted and turned away. Guranin and Smathers came in, having shed their space suits in the airlock at the belly of the craft. The captain and the chief engineer had a brief English colloquy, at the end of which, with only the barest resistance, Guranin agreed to lend Smathers to O'Brien.

"But I'll need him back by three at the latest."

"You'll have him," O'Brien promised in Russian and led Smathers out. Behind him, Guranin began to discuss engine repair problems with the captain.

"I'm surprised he didn't make you fill out a requisition for me," Smathers commented. "What the hell does he think I am anyway, a Siberian slave laborer?"

"He's got his own departmental worries, Tom. And for God's sake, talk Russian. Suppose the captain or one of the Ivans overheard you? You want to start trouble at this late date?"

"I wasn't being fancy, Pres. I just forgot."

It was easy to forget, O'Brien knew. Why in the world hadn't the Indian government been willing to let all seven Americans and seven Russians learn Hindustani so that the expedition could operate under a mutual language, the language of their captain? Although, come to think of it, Ghose's native language was Bengali...

He knew why, though, the Indians had insisted on adding these specific languages to the already difficult curriculum of the expedition's training program. The idea probably was that if the Russians spoke English to each other and to the Americans, while the Americans spoke and replied in Russian, the whole affair might achieve something useful in the ship's microcosm even if it failed in its larger and political macrocosmic objectives. And then, having returned to Earth and left the ship, each of them would continue to spread in his own country the ideas of amity and cooperation for survival acquired on the

journey.

Along that line, anyway. It was pretty—and pathetic. But was it any more pathetic than the state of the world at the present moment? Something had to be done, and done fast. At least the Indians were trying. They didn't just sit up nights with the magic figure six dancing horrendous patterns before their eyes: six, six bombs, six of the latest cobalt bombs and absolutely no more life on Earth.

It was public knowledge that America had at least nine such bombs stockpiled, that Russia had seven, Britain four, China two, that there were at least five more individual bombs in existence in the armories of five proud and sovereign states. What these bombs could do had been demonstrated conclusively in the new proving grounds that America and Russia used on the dark side of the moon.

Six. Only six bombs could do for the entire planet. Everyone knew that, and knew that if there were a war these bombs would be used, sooner or later, by the side that was going down to defeat, by the side that was looking forward grimly to occupation by the enemy, to war crimes trials for their leaders.

And everyone knew that there was going to be a war.

Decade after decade it had held off, but decade after decade it had crept irresistibly closer. It was like a persistent, lingering disease that the patient battles with ever-diminishing strength, staring at his thermometer with despair, hearing his own labored breathing with growing horror, until it finally overwhelms him and kills him. Every crisis was surmounted somehow—and was followed by a slight change for the worse. International conferences followed by new alliances followed by more international conferences, and ever war came closer, closer.

It was almost here now. It had almost come three years ago, over Madagascar, of all places, but a miracle had staved it off. It had almost come last year, over territorial rights to the dark side of the moon, but a super-miracle, in the form of last-minute arbitration by the government of India, had again prevented it. But now the world was definitely on the verge. Two months, six months, a year—it would come. Everyone knew it. Everyone waited for extinction, wondering jerkily, when they had time, why they did no more than wait, why it had to be. But they knew it had to be.

In the midst of this, with both the Soviet Union and the United States of America going ahead full-blast with rocket research and space travel techniques—to the end that when the time came for the bombs to be delivered, they would be delivered with the maximum efficiency and dispatch—in the midst of this, India made her proposal public. Let the two opposing giants cooperate in a venture which both were projecting, and in which each could use the other's knowledge. One had a slight edge in already-achieved space travel, the other was known to have developed a slightly better atomic-powered rocket. Let them pool their resources for an expedition to Mars, under an Indian captain and under Indian auspices, in the name of humanity as a whole. And let the world find out once and for all which side refused to cooperate.

It was impossible to refuse, given the nature of the proposition and the peculiarly perfect timing. So here they were, O'Brien decided; they had made it to Mars and would probably make it back. But, while they might have proven much, they had prevented nothing. The spastic political situation was still the same; the world would still be at war within the year. The men on this ship knew that as well, or better, than anybody.

As they passed the air lock, on the way to the control room, they saw Belov squeezing his way out of his space suit. He hurried over clumsily, hopping out of the lower section as he came. "What a discovery, eh?" he boomed. "The second day and in the middle of the desert. Wait till you see my pictures!"

"I'll look forward to it," O'Brien told him. "Meanwhile you better run down to the engine room and report to the captain. He's afraid that you might have pressed a button that closed a circuit that started up a machine that will blow up all of Mars right out from under us."

The Russian gave them a wide, slightly gap-toothed smile. "Ghose and his planetary explosions." He patted the top of his head lightly and shook it uneasily from side to side.

"What's the matter?" O'Brien asked.

"A little headache. It started a few seconds ago. I must have spent too much time in that space suit."

"I just spent twice as much time in a space suit as you did," Smathers said, poking around abstractedly

at the gear that Belov had dropped, "and I don't have a headache. Maybe we make better heads in America."

"Tom!" O'Brien yelled. "For God's sake!"

Belov's lips had come together in whitening union. Then he shrugged. "Chess, O'Brien? After lunch?"

"Sure. And, if you're interested, I'm willing to walk right into a fried liver. I still insist that black can hold and win."

"It's your funeral," Belov chuckled and went on to the engine room gently massaging his head.

When they were alone in the control room and Smathers had begun to dismantle the computer bank, O'Brien shut the door and said angrily, "That was a damned dangerous, uncalled-for crack you made, Tom! And it was about as funny as a declaration of war!"

"I know. But Belov gets under my skin."

"Belov? He's the most decent Russky on board."

The second assistant engineer unscrewed a side panel and squatted down beside it. "To you maybe. But he's always taking a cut at me."

"How?"

"Oh, all sorts of ways. Take this chess business. Whenever I ask him for a game, he says he won't play me unless I accept odds of a queen. And then he laughs—you know, that slimy laugh of his."

"Check that connection at the top," the navigator warned. "Well, look, Tom, Belov is pretty good. He placed seventh in the last Moscow District tournament, playing against a hatful of masters and grandmasters. That's good going in a country where they feel about chess the way we do about baseball and football combined."

"Oh, I know he's good. But I'm not that bad. Not queen odds. A queen!"

"Are you sure it isn't something else? You seem to dislike him an awful lot, considering your motivations."

Smathers paused for a moment to examine a tube. "And you," he said without looking up. "You seem to like him an awful lot, considering your motivations."

On the verge of anger, O'Brien suddenly remembered something and shut up. After all, it could be anyone. It could be Smathers.

Just before they'd left the United States to join the Russians in Benares they'd had a last, ultra-secret briefing session with Military Intelligence. There had been a review of the delicacy of the situation they were entering and its dangerous potentialities. On the one hand, it was necessary that the United States not be at all backward about the Indian suggestion, that before the eyes of the world it enter upon this joint scientific expedition with at least as much enthusiasm and cooperativeness as the Russians. On the other, it was equally important, possibly even more important, that the future enemy should not use this pooling of knowledge and skills to gain an advantage that might prove conclusive, like taking over the ship, say, on the return trip, and landing it in Baku instead of Benares.

Therefore, they were told, one among them had received training and a commission in the Military Intelligence Corps of the U. S. Army. His identity would remain a secret until such time as he decided that the Russians were about to pull something. Then he would announce himself with a special code sentence and from that time on all Americans on board were to act under his orders and not Ghose's. Failure to do so would be adjudged prima face evidence of treason.

And the code sentence? Preston O'Brien had to grin as he remembered it. It was: "Fort Sumter has been fired upon."

But what happened after one of them stood up and uttered that sentence would not be at all funny... .

He was certain that the Russians had such a man, too. As certain as that Ghose suspected both groups of relying on this kind of insurance, to the serious detriment of the captain's already-difficult sleep.

What kind of a code sentence would the Russians use? "Fort Kronstadt has been fired upon?" No, more likely, "Workers of the world unite!" Yes, no doubt about it, it could get very jolly, if someone made a real wrong move.

The American MI officer could be Smathers. Especially after that last crack of his. O'Brien decided

he'd be far better off not replying to it. These days, everyone had to be very careful, and the men in this ship were in a special category.

Although he knew what was eating Smathers. The same thing, in a general sense, that made Belov so eager to play chess with the navigator, a player of a caliber that, back on Earth, wouldn't have been considered worthy to enter the same tournament with him.

O'Brien had the highest I.Q. on the ship. Nothing special, not one spectacularly above anyone else's. It was just that in a shipful of brilliant young men chosen from the thick cream of their respective nation's scientific elite, someone had to have an I.Q. higher than the rest. And that man happened to be Preston O'Brien.

But O'Brien was an American. And everything relative to the preparation for this trip had been worked out in high-level conferences with a degree of diplomatic finagling and behind-the-scenes maneuvering usually associated with the drawing of boundary lines of the greatest strategical significance. So the lowest I.Q. on the ship also had to be an American.

And that was Tom Smathers, second assistant engineer. Again, nothing very bad, only a point or two below that of the next highest man. And really quite a thumpingly high I.Q. in itself.

But they had all lived together for a long time before the ship lifted from Benares. They had learned a lot about each other, both from personal contact and official records, for how did anyone know what piece of information about a shipmate would ward off disaster in the kind of incredible, unforeseeable crises they might be plunging into?

So Nicolai Belov, who had a talent for chess as natural and as massive as the one Sarah Bernhardt had for the theater, got a special and ever-renewing pleasure out of beating a man who had barely made the college team. And Tom Smathers nursed a constant feeling of inferiority that was ready to grow into adult, belligerent status on any pretext it could find.

It was ridiculous, O'Brien felt. But then, he couldn't know: he had the long end of the stick. It was easy, far him.

Ridiculous? As ridiculous as six cobalt bombs. One, two, three, four, five, six—and boom!

Maybe, he thought, maybe the answer was that they were a ridiculous species. Well. They would soon be gone, gone with the dinosaurs.

And the Martians.

"I can't wait to get a look at those pictures Belov took," he told Smathers, trying to change the subject to a neutral, non-argumentative level. "Imagine human beings walking around on this blob of desert, building cities, making love, investigating scientific phenomena—a million years ago!"

The second assistant engineer, wrist deep in a tangle of wiring, merely grunted as a sign that he refused to let his imagination get into the bad company that he considered all matters connected with Belov.

O'Brien persisted. "Where did they go—the Martians, I mean? If they were that advanced, that long ago, they must have developed space travel and found some more desirable real estate to live on. Do you think they visited Earth, Tom?"

"Yeah. And they're all buried in Red Square."

You couldn't do anything against that much bad temper, O'Brien decided; he might as well drop it. Smathers was still smarting over Belov's eagerness to play the navigator on even terms.

But all the same, he kept looking forward to the photographs. And when they went down to lunch, in the big room at the center of the ship, that served as combinaton dormitory, mess hall, recreation room, and storage area, the first man he looked for was Belov.

Belov wasn't there.

"He's up in the hospital room with the doctor," Layatinsky, his tablemate, said heavily, gravely. "He doesn't feel well. Schneider's examining him."

"That headache get worse?"

Layatinsky nodded. "A lot worse—and fast. And then he got pains in his joints. Feverish too. Guranin says it sounds like meningitis."

"Ouch!" Living as closely together as they did, something like meningitis would spread through their ranks like ink through a blotter. Although, Guranin was an engineer, not a doctor. What did he know about it, where did he come off making a diagnosis?

And then O'Brien noticed it. The mess-hall was unusually quiet, the men eating with their eyes on their plates as Kolevitch dished out the food—a little sullenly, true, but that was probably because after preparing the meal, he was annoyed at having to serve it, too, since the K.P. for lunch, Dr. Alvin Schneider, had abruptly been called to more pressing business.

But whereas the Americans were merely quiet, the Russians were funereal. Their faces were as set and strained as if they were waiting to be shot. They were all breathing heavily, the kind of slow, snorting breaths that go with great worry over extremely difficult problems.

Of course. If Belov were really sick, if Belov went out of action, that put them at a serious disadvantage relative to the Americans. It cut their strength almost fifteen per cent. In case of a real razzle between the two groups . . .

Therefore, Guranin's amateur diagnosis should be read as a determined attempt at optimism. Yes, optimism! If it was meningitis and thus highly contagious, others were likely to pick it up, and those others could just as well be Americans as Russians. That way, the imbalance could be redressed.

O'Brien shivered. What kind of lunacy—

But then, he realized, if it had been an American, instead of a Russian, who had been taken real sick and was up there in the hospital at the moment, his mind would have been running along the same track as Guranin's. Meningitis would have seemed like something to hope for desperately.

Captain Chose climbed down into the mess hall. His eyes seemed darker and smaller than ever.

"Listen, men. As soon as you've finished eating, report up to the control room which, until further notice, will serve as an annex to the hospital."

"What for, Captain?" someone asked. "What do we report for?"

"Precautionary injections."

There was a silence. Chose started out of the place. Then the chief engineer cleared his throat.

"How is Belov?"

The captain paused for a moment, without turning around. "We don't know yet. And if you're going to ask me what's the matter with him, we don't know that yet either."

They waited in a long, silent, thoughtful line outside the control room, entering and leaving it one by one. O'Brien's turn came.

He walked in, baring his right arm, as he had been ordered. At the far end, Ghose was staring out of the porthole as if he were waiting for a relief expedition to arrive. The navigation desk was covered with cotton swabs, beakers filled with alcohol, and small bottles of cloudy fluid.

"What's this stuff, Doc?" O'Brien asked when the injection had been completed and he was allowed to roll down his sleeve.

"Duoplexin. The new antibiotic that the Australians developed last year. Its therapeutic value hasn't been completely validated, but it's the closest thing to a general cure-all that medicine's come up with. I hate to use anything so questionable, but before we lifted from Benares, I was told to shoot you fellows full of it if any off-beat symptoms showed up."

"Guranin says it sounds like meningitis," the navigator suggested.

"It isn't meningitis."

O'Brien waited a moment, but the doctor was filling a new hypodermic and seemed indisposed to comment further. He addressed Ghose's back. "How about those pictures that Belov took? They been developed yet? I'd like to see them."

The captain turned away from the porthole and walked around the control room with his hands clasped behind his back. "All of Belov's gear," he said in a low voice, "is under quarantine in the hospital along with Belov. Those are the doctor's orders."

"Oh. Too bad." O'Brien felt he should leave, but curiosity kept him talking. There was something these men were worried about that was bigger even than the fear niggling the Russians. "He told me over the radio that the Martians had been distinctly humanoid. Amazing, isn't it? Talk about parallel evolution!"

Schneider set the hypodermic down carefully. "Parallel evolution," he muttered. "Parallel evolution and parallel pathology. Although it doesn't seem to act quite like any terrestrial bug. Parallel susceptibility, though. That you could say definitely."

"You mean you think Belov has picked up a Martian disease?" O'Brien let the concept careen through his mind. "But that city was so old. No germ could survive anywhere near that long!"

The little doctor thumped his small paunch decisively. "We have no reason to believe it couldn't. Some germs we know of on Earth might be able to. As spores—in any one of a number of ways."

"But if Belov—"

"That's enough," the captain said. "Doctor, you shouldn't think out loud. Keep your mouth shut about this, O'Brien, until we decide to make a general announcement. Next man!" he called.

Tom Smathers came in. "Hey, Doc," he said, "I don't know if this is important, but I've begun to generate the lousiest headache of my entire life."

The other three men stared at each other. Then Schneider plucked a thermometer out of his breast pocket and put it into Smathers's mouth, whispering an indistinct curse as he did so. O'Brien took a deep breath and left.

They were all told to assemble in the mess hall-dormitory that night. Schneider, looking tired, mounted a table, wiped his hands on his jumper, and said:

"Here it is, men. Nicolai Belov and Tom Smathers are down sick, Belov seriously. The symptoms seem to begin with a mild headache and temperature which rapidly grow worse and, as they do, are accompanied by severe pains in the back and joints. That's the first stage. Smathers is in that right now. Belov—"

Nobody said anything. They sat around in various relaxed positions watching the doctor. Guranin and Layatinsky were looking up from their chess board as if some relatively unimportant comments were being made that, perforce, just had to be treated, for the sake of courtesy, as of more significance than the royal game. But when Guranin shifted his elbow and knocked his king over, neither of them bothered to pick it up.

"Belov," Dr. Alvin Schneider went on after a bit, "Belov is in the second stage. This is characterized by a weirdly fluctuating temperature, delirium, and a substantial loss of coordination—pointing, of course, to an attack on the nervous system. The loss of coordination is so acute as to affect even peristalsis, making intravenous feeding necessary. One of the things we will do tonight is go through a demonstration-lecture of intravenous feeding, so that any of you will be able to take care of the patients. Just in case."

Across the room, O'Brien saw Hopkins, the radio and communications man, make the silent mouth-movement of "Wow!"

"Now as to what they're suffering from. I don't know, and that about sums it up. I'm fairly certain though that it isn't a terrestrial disease, if only because it seems to have one of the shortest incubation periods I've ever encountered as well as a fantastically rapid development. I think it's something that Belov caught in that Martian city and brought back to the ship. I have no idea if it's fatal and to what degree, although it's sound procedure in such a case to expect the worst. The only hope I can hold out at the moment is that the two men who are down with it exhibited symptoms before I had a chance to fill them full of duoplexin. Everyone else on the ship—including me—has now had a precautionary injection. That's all. Are there any questions?"

There were no questions.

"All right," Dr. Schneider said. "I want to warn you, though I hardly think it's necessary under the circumstances, that any man who experiences any kind of a headache—any kind of a headache—is to report immediately for hospitalization and quarantine. We're obviously dealing with something highly infectious. Now if you'll all move in a little closer, I'll demonstrate intravenous feeding on Captain Ghose. Captain, if you please."

He glanced around the room, looking unhappy.

When the demonstration was over and they had proved their proficiency, to his satisfaction, on each

other, he put together all the things that smelled pungently of antiseptic and said, "Well, now that's taken care of. We're covered, in case of emergency. Get a good night's sleep."

Then he started out. And stopped. He looked around and looked carefully from man to man. "O'Brien," he said at last. "You come up with me."

Well, at least, the navigator thought, as he followed, at least it's even now. One Russian and one American. If only it stayed that way!

Schneider glanced in at the hospital and nodded to himself. "Smothers," he commented. "He's reached the second stage. Fastest-acting damn bug ever. Probably finds us excellent hosts."

"Any idea what it's like?" O'Brien asked, finding, to his surprise, that he was having trouble catching up to the little doctor.

"Uh-uh. I spent two hours with the microscope this afternoon. Not a sign. I prepared a lot of slides, blood, spinal fluid, sputum, and I've got a shelf of specimen Tars all filled up. They'll come in handy for Earthside doctors if ever we— Oh, well. You see, it could be a filterable virus, it could be a bacillus requiring some special stain to make it visible, anything. But the most he was hoping for was to detect it—we'd never have the time to develop a remedy."

He entered the control room, still well ahead of the taller man, stood to one side, and, once the other had come in, locked the door. O'Brien found his actions puzzling.

"I can't see why you're feeling so hopeless, doc. We have those white mice down below that were intended for testing purposes if Mars turned out to have half an atmosphere after all. Couldn't you use them as experimental animals and try to work up a vaccine?"

The doctor chuckled without turning his lips up into a smile. "In twenty-four hours. Like in the movies. No, and even if I intended to take a whirl at it, which I did, it's out of the question now."

"What do you mean—now?"

Schneider sat down carefully and put his medical equipment on the desk beside him. Then he grinned. "Got an aspirin, Pres?"

Automatically, O'Brien's hand went into the pocket of his jumper. "No, but I think that—" Then he understood. A wet towel unrolled in his abdomen. "When did it start?" he inquired softly.

"It must have started near the end of the lecture, but I was too busy to notice it. I first felt it just as I was leaving the mess hall. A real ear splitter at the moment. No, keep away!" he shouted, as O'Brien started forward sympathetic-ally. "This probably won't do any good, but at least keep your distance. Maybe it will give you a little extra time."

"Should I get the captain?"

"If I needed him, I'd have asked him along. I'll be turning myself into the hospital in a few minutes. I just wanted to transfer my authority to you."

"Your authority? Are you the—the—a"

Doctor Alvin Schneider nodded. He went on—in English. "I'm the American Military Intelligence officer. Was, I should say. From now on, you are. Look, Pres, I don't have much time. All I can tell you is this. Assuming that we're not all dead within a week, and assuming that it is decided to attempt a return to Earth with the consequent risk of infecting the entire planet (something which, by the way, I personally would not recommend from where I sit), you are to keep your status as secret as I kept mine, and in the event it becomes necessary to tangle with the Russians, you are to reveal yourself with the code sentence you already know."

"Fort Sumter has been fired upon," O'Brien said slowly. He was still assimilating the fact that Schneider had been the MI officer, Of course, he had known all along that it could have been any one of the seven Americans. But Schneider!

"Right. If you then get control of the ship, you are to try to land her at White Sands, California, where we all got our preliminary training. You will explain to the authorities how I came to transfer authority to you. That's about all, except for two things. If you get sick, you'll have to use your own judgment about who to pass the scepter to—I prefer not to go any further than you at the moment. And—I could very easily be wrong—but it's my personal opinion, for whatever it may be worth, that my opposite number among the Russians is Fyodor Guranin."

"Check." And then full realization came to O'Brien. "But, doc, you said you gave yourself a shot of duoplexin. Doesn't that mean—"

Schneider rose and rubbed his forehead with his fist. "I'm afraid it does. That's why this whole ceremony is more than a little meaningless. But I had the responsibility to discharge. I've discharged it. Now, if you will excuse me, I think I'd better lie down. Good luck."

On his way to report Schneider's illness to the captain, O'Brien came to realize how the Russians had felt earlier that day. There were now five Americans to six Russians. That could be bad. And the responsibility was his.

But with his hand on the door to the captain's room, he shrugged. Fat lot of difference it made! As the plump little man had said: "Assuming that we're not all dead within a week...."

The fact was that the political setup on Earth, with all of its implications for two billion people, no longer had very many implications for them. They couldn't risk spreading the disease on Earth, and unless they got back there, they had very little chance of finding a cure for it. They were chained to an alien planet, waiting to be knocked off, one by one, by a sickness which had claimed its last victims a thousand thousand years ago.

Still—he didn't like being a member of a minority.

By morning, he wasn't. During the night, two more Russians had come down with what they were all now referring to as Belov's Disease. That left five Americans to four Russians—except that by that time, they had ceased to count heads in national terms.

Ghose suggested that they change the room serving as mess hall and dormitory into a hospital and that all the healthy men bunk out in the engine room. He also had Guranin rig up a radiation chamber just in front of the engine room.

"All men serving as attendants in the hospital will wear space suits," he ordered. "Before they reenter the engine room, they will subject the space suit to a radiation bath of maximum intensity. Then and only then will they join the rest of us and remove the suit. It's not much, and I think any germ as virulent as this one seems to be won't be stopped by such precautions, but at least we're still making fighting motions."

"Captain," O'Brien inquired, "what about trying to get in touch with Earth some way or other? At least to tell them what's hitting us, for the guidance of future expeditions. I know we don't have a radio transmitter powerful enough to operate at such a distance, but couldn't we work out a rocket device that would carry a message and might have a chance of being poked up?"

"I've thought of that. It would be very difficult, but granted that we could do it, do you have any way of ensuring that we wouldn't send the contagion along with the message? And, given the conditions on Earth at the moment, I don't think we have to worry about the possibility of another expedition if we don't get back. You know as well as I that within eight or nine months at the most—" The captain broke off. "I seem to have a slight headache," he said mildly.

Even the men who had been working hard in the hospital and were now lying down got to their feet at this.

"Are you sure?" Guranin asked him desperately. "Couldn't it just be a—"

"I'm sure. Well, it had to happen, sooner or later. I think you all know your duties in this situation and will work together well enough. And you're each one capable of running the show. So. In case the matter comes up, in case of any issue that involves a command decision, the captain will be that one among you whose last name starts with the lowest letter alphabetically. Try to live in peace—for as much time as you may have left. Good-bye."

He turned and walked out of the engine room and into the hospital, a thin, dark-skinned man on whose head weariness sat like a crown.

By supper-time, that evening, only two men had still not hospitalized themselves: Preston O'Brien and Semyon Kolevitch. They went through the minutiae of intravenous feeding, of cleaning the patients and keeping them comfortable, with dullness and apathy.

It was just a matter of time. And when they were gone, there would be no one to take care of them.

All the same, they performed their work diligently, and carefully irradiated their space suits before returning to the engine room. When Belov and Smathers entered Stage Three, complete coma, the navigator made a descriptive note of it in Dr. Schneider's medical log, under the column of temperature readings that looked like stock market quotations on a very uncertain day in Wall Street.

They ate supper together in silence. They had never liked each other and being limited to each other's company seemed to deepen that dislike.

After supper, O'Brien watched the Martian moons, Deimos and Phobos, rise and set in the black sky through the engine room porthole. Behind him, Kolevitch read Pushkin until he fell asleep.

The next morning, O'Brien found Kolevitch occupying a bed in the hospital. The assistant navigator was already delirious.

"And then there was one," Preston O'Brien said to himself. "Where do we go from here, boys, where do we go from here?"

As he went about his tasks as orderly, he began talking to himself a lot. What the hell, it was better than nothing. It enabled him to forget that he was the only conscious intellect at large on this red dust-storm of a world. It enabled him to forget that he would shortly be dead. It enabled him, in a rather lunatic way, to stay sane.

Because this was it. This was really it. The ship had been planned for a crew of fifteen men. In an emergency, it could be operated by as few as five. Conceivably, two or three men, running about like crazy and being incredibly ingenious, could take it back to Earth and crash-land it somehow. But one man ...

Even if his luck held out and he didn't come down with Belov's Disease, he was on Mars for keeps. He was on Mars until his food ran out and his air ran out and the spaceship became a rusting coffin around him. And if he did develop a headache, well, the inevitable end would come so much the faster.

This was it. And there was nothing he could do about it.

He wandered about the ship, suddenly enormous and empty. He had grown up on a ranch in northern Montana, Preston O'Brien had, and he'd never liked being crowded. The back-to-back conditions that space travel made necessary had always irritated him like a pebble in the shoe, but he found this kind of immense, ultimate loneliness almost overpowering. When he took a nap, he found himself dreaming of crowded stands at a World Series baseball game, of the sweating, soggy mob during a subway rush-hour in New York. When he awoke, the loneliness hit him again.

Just to keep himself from going crazy, he set himself little tasks. He wrote a brief history of their expedition for some wholly hypothetical popular magazine; he worked out a dozen or so return courses with the computers in the control room; he went through the Russians' personal belongings to find out just for curiosity's sake, since it could no longer be of any conceivable importance—who the Soviet MI man had been.

It had been Belov. That surprised him. He had liked Belov very much. Although, he remembered, he had also liked Schneider very much. So it made some sense, on a high-order planning level, after all.

He found himself, much to his surprise, regretting Kolevitch. Damn it, he should have made some more serious attempt to get close to the man before the end!

They had felt a strong antipathy toward each other from the beginning. On Kolevitch's side it no doubt had something to do with O'Brien's being chief navigator when the Russian had good reason to consider himself by far the better mathematician. And O'Brien had found his assistant singularly without humor, exhibiting a kind of subsurface truculence that somehow never managed to achieve outright insubordination.

Once, when Ghose had reprimanded him for his obvious attitude toward the man, he had exclaimed: "Well, you're right, and I suppose I should be sorry. But I don't feel that way about any of the other Russians. I get along fine with the rest of them. It's only Kolevitch that I'd like to swat and that, Ill admit, is all the time."

The captain had sighed. "Don't you see what that dislike adds up to? You find the Russian crew members to be pretty decent fellows, fairly easy to get along with, and that can't be: you know the Russians are beasts—they should be exterminated to the last man. So all the fears, all the angers and

frustrations, you feel you should logically entertain about them, are channeled into a single direction. You make one man the psychological scapegoat for a whole nation, and you pour out on Semyon Kolevitch all the hatred which you would wish to direct against the other Russians, but can't, because, being an intelligent, perceptive person, you find them too likable.

"Everybody hates somebody on this ship. And they all feel they have good reasons. Hopkins hates Layatinsky because he claims he's always snooping around the communications room. Guranin hates Doctor Schneider, why, I'll never know."

"I can't buy that. Kolevitch has gone out of his way to annoy me. I know that for a fact. And what about Smathers? He hates all the Russians. Hates 'em to a man."

"Smathers is a special case. I'm afraid he lacked security to begin with, and his peculiar position on this expedition—low man on the I.Q. pole—hasn't done his ego any good. You could help him, if you made a particular friend of him. I know he'd like that."

"A-ah," O'Brien had shrugged uncomfortably. "I'm no psychological social worker. I get along all right with him, but I can take Tom Smathers only in very small doses."

And that was another thing he regretted. He'd never been ostentatious about being absolutely indispensable as navigator and the smartest man on board; he'd even been positive he rarely thought about it. But he realized now, against the background glare of his approaching extinction, that almost daily he had smugly plumped out this fact, like a pillow, in the back of his mind. It had been there: it had been nice to stroke. And he had stroked it frequently.

A sort of sickness. Like the sickness of Hopkins-Layatinsky, Guranin-Schneider, Smathers-everyone else. Like the sickness on Earth at the moment, when two of the largest nations on the planet and as such having no need to covet each other's territory, were about ready, reluctantly and unhappily, to go to war with each other, a war which would destroy them both and all other nations besides, allies as well as neutral states, a war which could so easily be avoided and yet was so thoroughly unavoidable.

Maybe, O'Brien thought then, they hadn't caught any sickness on Mars; maybe they'd just brought a sickness—call it the Human Disease—to a nice, clean, sandy planet and it was killing them, because here it had nothing else on which to feed.

O'Brien shook himself.

He'd better watch out. This way madness lay. "Better start talking to myself again. How are you, boy? Feeling all right? No headaches? No aches, no pains, no feelings of fatigue? Then you must be dead, boy!"

When he went through the hospital that afternoon, he noticed that Belov had reached what could be described as Stage Four. Beside Smathers and Ghose who were both still in the coma of Stage Three, the geologist looked wide awake. His head rolled restlessly from side to side and there was a terrible, absolutely horrifying look in his eyes.

"How are you feeling, Nicolai?" O'Brien asked tentatively.

There was no reply. Instead the head turned slowly and Belov stared directly at him. O'Brien shuddered. That look was enough to freeze your blood, he decided, as he went into the engine room and got out of his space suit.

Maybe it wouldn't go any further than this. Maybe you didn't die of Belov's Disease. Schneider had said it attacked the nervous system: so maybe the end-product was just insanity.

"Big deal," O'Brien muttered. "Big, big deal."

He had lunch and strolled over to the engine room porthole. The pyramidal marker they had planted on the first day caught his eye; it was the only thing worth looking at in this swirling, hilly landscape. First Terrestrial Expedition to Mars. In the Name of Human Life.

If only Ghose hadn't been in such a hurry to get the marker down. The inscription needed rewriting. Last Terrestrial Expedition to Mars. In the Memory of Human Life—Here and on Earth. That would be more apt.

He knew what would happen when the expedition didn't return—and no message arrived from it. The Russians would be positive that the Americans had seized the ship and were using the data obtained on

the journey to perfect their bomb-delivery technique. The Americans would be likewise positive that the Russians ...

They would be the incident.

"Ghose would sure appreciate that," O'Brien said to himself wryly.

There was a clatter behind him. He turned.

The cup and plate from which he'd had lunch were floating in the air!

O'Brien shut his eyes, then opened them slowly. Yes, no doubt about it, they were floating! They seemed to be performing a slow, lazy dance about each other. Once in a while, they touched gently, as if kissing, then pulled apart. Suddenly, they sank to the table and came to rest like a pair of balloons with a last delicate bounce or two.

Had he got Belov's Disease without knowing it, he wondered? Could you progress right to the last stage—hallucinations—without having headaches or fever?

He heard a series of strange noises in the hospital and ran out of the engine room without bothering to get into his space-suit.

Several blankets were dancing about, just like the cup and saucer. They swirled through the air, as if caught in a strong wind. As he watched, almost sick with astonishment, a few other objects joined them—a thermometer, a packing case, a pair of pants.

But the crew lay silently in their bunks. Smathers had evidently reached Stage Four too. There was the same restless head motion, the same terrible look whenever his eyes met O'Brien's.

And then, as he turned to Belov's bunk, he saw that it was empty! Had the man got up in his delirium and wandered off? Was he feeling better? Where had he gone?

O'Brien began to search the ship methodically, calling the Russian by name. Section by section, compartment by compartment, he came at last to the control room. It, too, was empty. Then where could Belov be?

As he wandered distractedly around the little place, he happened to glance through the porthole. And there, outside, he saw Belov. Without a space-suit!

It was impossible—no man could survive for a moment unprotected on the raw, almost airless surface of Mars—yet there was Nicolas Belov walking as unconcernedly as if the sand beneath his feet were the Nevsky Prospekt! And then he shimmered a little around the edges, as if he'd been turned partially into glass—and disappeared.

"Belov!" O'Brien found himself yelping. "For God's sake! Belov! Belovi!"

"He's gone to inspect the Martian city," a voice said behind him. "He'll be back shortly."

The navigator spun around. There was nobody in the room. He must be going completely crazy.

"No, you're not," the voice said. And Tom Smathers rose slowly through the solid floor.

"What's happening to you people?" O'Brien gasped. "What is all this?"

"Stage Five of Belov's Disease. The last one. So far, only Belov and I are in it, but the others are entering it now."

O'Brien found his way to a chair and sat down. He worked his mouth a couple of times but couldn't make the words come out.

"You're thinking that Belov's Disease is making magicians out of us," Smathers told him. "No. First, it isn't a disease at all."

For the first time, Smathers looked directly at him and O'Brien had to avert his eyes. It wasn't just that horrifying look he'd had lying on the bed in the hospital. It was—it was as if Smathers were no longer Smathers. He'd become something else.

"Well, it's caused by a bacillus, but not a parasitical one. A symbiotal one."

"Symbi—"

"Like the intestinal flora, it performs a useful function. A highly useful function." O'Brien had the impression that Smathers was having a hard time finding the right words, that he was choosing very carefully, as if—as if—. As if he were talking to a small child!

"That's correct," Smathers told him. "But I believe I can make you understand. The bacillus of Belov's

Disease inhabited the nervous system of the ancient Martians as our stomach bacteria live in human digestive systems. Both are symbiotic, both enable the systems they inhabit to function with far greater effectiveness. The Belov bacillus operates within us as a kind of neural transformer, multiplying the mental output almost a thousand times."

"You mean you're a thousand times as intelligent as before?"

Smathers frowned. "This is very difficult. Yes, roughly a thousand times as intelligent, if you must put it that way. Actually, there's a thousandfold increase in mental powers. Intelligence is merely one of those powers. There are many others such as telepathy and telekinesis which previously existed in such minuscule state as to be barely observable. I am in constant communication with Belov, for example, wherever he is. Belov is in almost complete control of his physical environment and its effect on his body. The movable objects which alarmed you so were the results of the first clumsy experiments we made with our new minds. There is still a good deal we have to learn and get used to."

"But what about—" O'Brien searched through his erupting brain and at last found a coherent thought. "But you were so sick!"

"The symbiosis was not established without difficulty," Smathers admitted. "And we are not identical with the Martians physiologically. However, it's all over now. We will return to Earth, spread Belov's Disease—if you want to keep calling it that—and begin our exploration of space and time. Eventually, we'd like to get in touch with the Martians in the—the place where they have gone."

"And we'll have bigger wars than we ever dreamed of!"

The thing that had once been Tom Smathers, second assistant engineer, shook its head. "There will be no more wars. Among the mental powers enlarged a thousand times is one that has to do with what you might call moral concepts. Those of us on the ship could and would stop any presently threatening war; but when the population of the world has made neural connection with Belov's bacillus all danger will be past. No, there will be no more wars."

A silence. O'Brien tried to pull himself together. "Well," he said. "We really found something on Mars, didn't we? And if we're going to start back for Earth, I might as well prepare a course based on present planetary positions."

Again that look in Smathers' eyes, stronger than ever. "That won't be necessary, O'Brien. We won't go back in the same manner as we came. Our way will be—well, faster."

"Good enough," O'Brien said shakily and got to his feet. "And while you're working out the details, I'll climb into a spacesuit and hustle down to that Martian city. I want to get me a good strong dose of Belov's Disease."

The thing that had been Tom Smathers grunted. O'Brien stopped. Suddenly he understood the meaning of that frightening look he had had first from Belov and now from Smathers.

It was a look of enormous pity.

"That's right," said Smathers with infinite gentleness. "You can't ever get Belov's Disease. You are naturally immune."