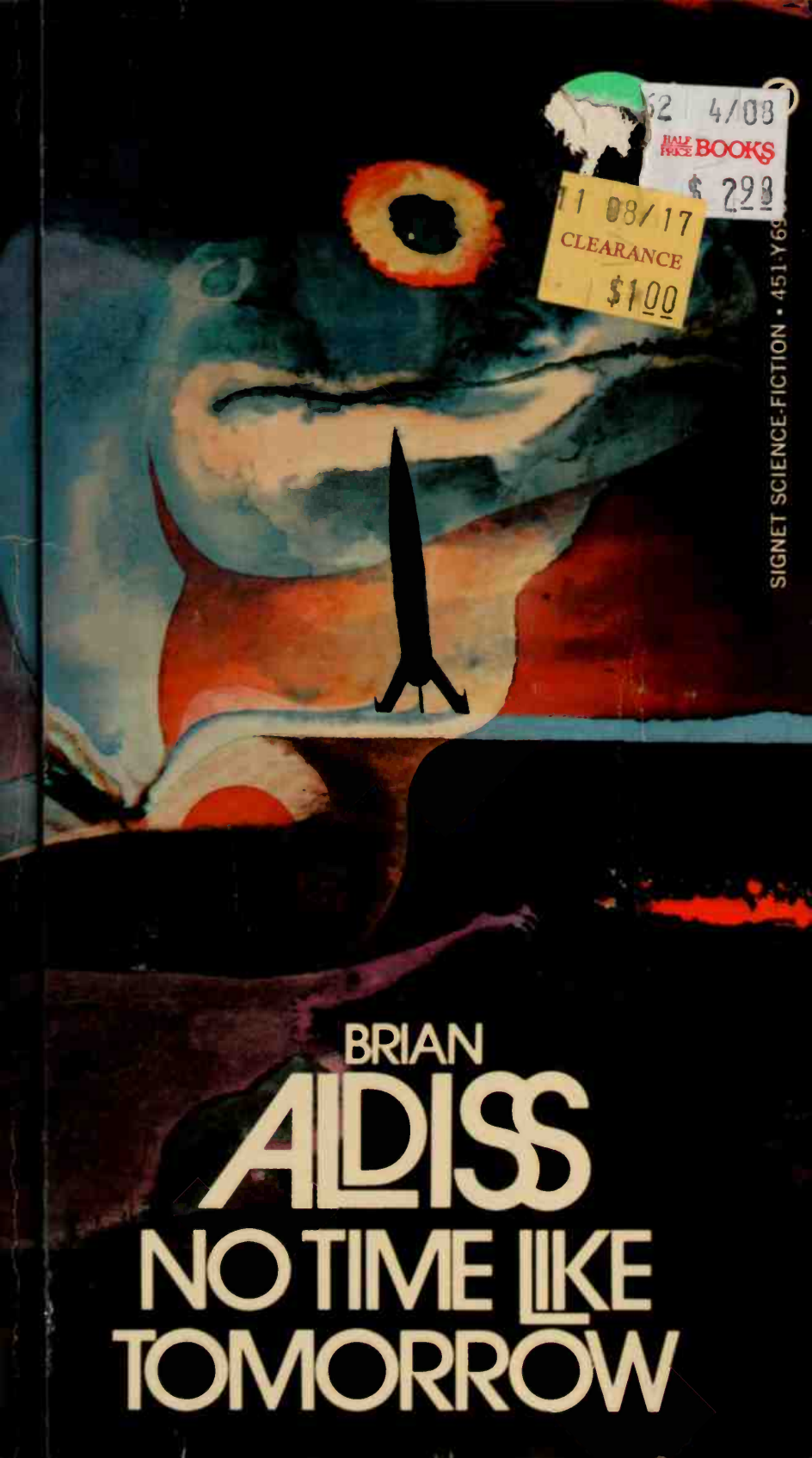
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all it meant,
all it still means

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CONTENTS

* T

By the time T was ten years old, his machine was already on the fringes of that galaxy. T was not his name—the laboratory never considered christening him—but it was the symbol on the hull of his machine and it will suffice for a name. And again, it was not his machine; rather, he belonged to it. He could not claim the honorable role of pilot, nor even the humbler one of passenger; he was a chattel whose seconds of utility lay two hundred years ahead.

He lay like a maggot in the heart of an apple at the center of the machine, as it fled through space and time. He never moved; the impulse to move did not present itself to him, nor would he have been able to obey if it had. For one thing, T had been created legless—his single limb was an arm. For another, the machine hemmed him in on all sides. It nourished him by means of pipes which fed into his body a thin stream of vitamins and proteins. It circulated his blood by a tiny motor that throbbed in the starboard bulkhead like a heart. It removed his waste products by a steady siphoning process. It produced his supply of oxygen. It regulated T so that he neither grew nor wasted. It saw that he would be alive in two hundred years.

T had one reciprocal duty. His ears were filled perpetually with an even droning note and before his lidless eyes there was a screen on which a dull red band traveled forever down a fixed green line. The drone represented (although not to T) a direction through space, while the red band indicated (although not to T) a direction in time. Occasionally, perhaps only once a decade, the drone changed pitch or the band faltered from its green line.

These variations registered in T's consciousness as acute discomforts, and accordingly he would adjust one of the two small wheels by his hand, until conditions returned to normal and the even tenor of monotony was resumed.

Although T was aware of his own life, loneliness was one of the innumerable concepts that his creators arranged he should never sense. He lay passive, in an artificial contentment. His time was divided not by night or day, or waking or sleeping, or by feeding periods, but by silence or speaking. Part of the machine spoke to him at intervals, short monologues on duty and reward, instructions as to the working of a simple apparatus that would be required two centuries ahead. The speaker presented T with a carefully distorted picture of his environs. It made no reference to the inter-galactic night outside, nor to the fast backward seepage of time. The idea of motion was not a factor to trouble an entombed thing like T. But it did refer to the Koax in reverent terms, speaking also—but in words filled with loathing—of that inevitable enemy of the Koax, Man. The machine informed T that he would be responsible for the complete destruction of Man.

T was utterly alone, but the machine which carried him had company on its flight. Eleven other identical machines—each occupied by beings similar to T—bore through the continuum. This continuum was empty and lightless and stood in the same relationship to the universe as a fold in a silk dress stands to the dress: when the sides of the fold touch, a funnel is formed by the surface of the material inside the surface of the dress. Or you may liken it to the negativity of the square root of minus two, which has a positive value. It was a vacuum inside a vacuum. The machines were undetectable, piercing the dark like light itself and sinking through the hovering millenia like stones.

The twelve machines were built for an emergency by a nonhuman race so ancient that they had abandoned the construction of other machinery eons before. They had progressed beyond the need of material assistance—beyond the need of corporal bodies—beyond the need at least of planets with which to associate their tenuous

egos. They had come finally, in their splendid maturity, to call themselves only by the name of their galaxy, Koax. In that safe island of several million stars they moved and had their being, and brooded over the coming end of the universe. But while they brooded, another race, in a galaxy far beyond the meaning of distance, grew to seniority. The new race, unlike the Koax, was extrovert and warlike; it tumbled out among the stars like an explosion, and its name was Man. There came a time when this race, spreading from one infinitesimal body, had multiplied and filled its own galaxy. For a while it paused, as if to catch its breath—the jump between stars is nothing to the gulf between the great star cities—and then the time/space equations were formulated; Man strode to the nearest galaxy armed with the greatest of all weapons, Stasis. The temporal mass/energy relationship that regulates the functioning of the universe, they found, might be upset in certain of the more sparsely starred galaxies by impeding their orbital revolution, causing, virtually, a fixation of the temporal factor—Stasis—whereby everything affected ceases to continue along the universal time-flow and ceases thereupon to exist. But Man had no need to use this devastating weapon, for as on its by-product, the Stasis drive, he swept from one galaxy to another, he found no rival, nor any ally. He seemed destined to be sole occupant of the universe. The innumerable planets revealed only that life was an accident. And then the Koax were reached.

The Koax were aware of Man before he knew of their existence, and their immaterial substance cringed to think that soon it would be torn through by the thundering drives of the Supreme Fleet. They acted quickly. Materializing onto a black dwarf, a group of their finest minds prepared to combat the invader with every power possible. They had some useful abilities, of which being able to alter and decide the course of suns was not the least. And so nova after nova flared into the middle of the Supreme Fleet. But Man came invincibly on, driving into the Koax like a cataclysm. From a small, frightened tribe a few hundred strong, roaming a hostile earth, he had swelled into an unquenchable multitude, ruling the

stars. But as the Koax wiped out more and more ships, it was decided that their home must be eliminated by Stasis, and ponderous preparations were begun. The forces of Man gathered themselves for a massive final blow.

Unfortunately, a Fleet Library Ship was captured intact by the Koax, and from it something of the long, tangled history of Man was discovered. There was even a plan of the Solar System as it had been when Man first knew it. The Koax heard for the first time of Sol and its attendants. Sol at this time, far across the universe, was a faintly radiating smudge with a diameter twice the size of the planetary system that had long ago girdled it. One by one, as it had expanded into old age, the planets had been swallowed into its bulk; now even Pluto was gone to feed the dying fires. The Koax finally developed a plan that would rid them entirely of their foes. Since they were unable to cope in the present with the inexhaustible resources of Man, they evolved in their devious fashion a method of dealing with him in the far past, when he wasn't even there. They built a dozen machines that would slip through time and space and annihilate Earth before Man appeared upon it; the missiles would strike, it was determined, during the Silurian Age and reduce the planet to its component atoms. So T was born.

"We will have them," one of the greatest Koax announced in triumph when the matter was thrashed out. "Unless these ancient Earth records lie, and there is no reason why they should, Sol originally supported nine planets, before its degenerate stage set in. Working inwards, in the logical order, these were—I have the names here, thanks to Man's sentimentality—Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Earth, Venus and Mercury. Earth, you see, is the seventh planet in, or the third that was drawn into Sol in its decline. That is our target, gentlemen, a speck remote in time and space. See that your calculations are accurate—that seventh planet *must* be destroyed."

There was no error. The seventh planet was destroyed. Man never had any chance of detecting and blasting T and his eleven dark companions, for he had never dis-

covered the mingled continuum in which they traveled. Their faint possibility of interception varied inversely with the distance they covered, for as they neared Man's first galaxy, time was rolled back to when he had first spiraled tentatively up to the Milky Way. The machines bore in and back. It was growing early. The Koax by now was a young race without the secret of deep space travel, dwindling away across the other side of the universe. Man himself had only a few old-type fluid fuel ships patrolling half a hundred systems. T still lay in his fixed position, waiting. His two centuries of existence—the long wait—were almost ended. Somewhere in his cold brain was a knowledge that the climax lay close now. Not all of his few companions were as fortunate, for the machines, perfect when they set out, developed flaws over the long journey (the two hundred years represented a distance in space/time of some ninety-five hundred million light-years). The Koax were natural mathematical philosophers, but they had long ago given up as mechanics—otherwise they would have devised relay systems to manage the job that T had to do.

The nutrition feed in one machine slowly developed an increasing rate of supply, and the being died not so much from overeating as from growing pains—which were very painful indeed as he swelled against a steel bulkhead and finally sealed off the air vents with his own bulging flesh. In another machine, a valve blew, shorting the temporal drive; it broke through into real space and buried itself in an M-type variable sun. In a third, the guide system came adrift and the missile hurtled on at an increasing acceleration until it burned itself out and fried its occupant. In a fourth, the occupant went quietly and unpredictably mad, and pulled a little lever that was not then due to be pulled for another hundred years. His machine erupted into fiery, radioactive particles and destroyed two other machines as well.

When the Solar System was only a few light-years away, the remaining machines switched off their main drive and appeared in normal space/time. Only three of them had completed the journey, T and two others. They found themselves in a galaxy now devoid of life. Only

the great stars shone on their new planets, fresh, comparatively speaking, from the womb of creation. Man had long before sunk back into the primeval mud, and the suns and planets were nameless again. Over Earth, the mists of the early Silurian Age hovered, and in the shallows of its waters mollusks and trilobites were the only expression of life. Meanwhile T concentrated on the seventh planet. He had performed the few simple movements necessary to switch his machine back into the normal universe; now all that was left for him to do was to watch a small pressure dial. When the machine entered the atmospheric fringes of the seventh planet, the tiny hand on the pressure dial would begin to climb. When it reached a clearly indicated line on the dial, T would turn a small wheel (this would release the dampers —but T needed to know the How, not the Why). Then two more gauges would begin to register. When they both read the same, T had to pull down the little lever. The speaker had explained it all to him regularly. What it did not explain was what happened after; but T knew very well that then Man would be destroyed, and that that would be good.

The seventh planet swung into position ahead of the blunt bows of T's machine, and grew in apparent magnitude. It was a young world, with a future that was about to be wiped forever off the slate of probability. As T entered its atmosphere, the hand began to climb the pressure dial. For the first time in his existence, something like excitement stirred in the fluid of T's brain. He neither saw nor cared for the panorama spreading below him, for the machine had not been constructed with ports. The dim instrument dials were all his eyes had ever rested on. He behaved exactly as the Koax had intended. When the hand reached the top, he turned the damper wheel, and his other two gauges started to creep. By now he was plunging down through the stratosphere of the seventh planet. The load was planned to explode before impact, for as the Koax had no details about the planet's composition they had made certain that it went off before the machine struck and T was killed. The safety factor had been well devised. T pulled his last lit-

tle lever twenty miles up. In the holocaust that immediately followed, he went out in a sullen joy.

T was highly successful. The seventh planet was utterly obliterated. The other two machines did less brilliantly. One missed the Solar System entirely and went on into the depths of space, a speck with a patiently dying burden. The other was much nearer target. It swung in close to T and hit the sixth planet. Unfortunately, it detonated too high, and that planet, instead of being obliterated, was pounded into chunks of rock that took up erratic orbits between the orbits of the massive fifth planet and the eighth, which was a small body encircled by two tiny moons. The ninth planet, of course, was quite unharmed; it rolled serenely on, accompanied by its pale satellite and carrying its load of elementary life forms.

The Koax achieved what they had set out to do. They had calculated for the seventh planet and hit it, annihilating it utterly. But that success, of course, was already recorded on the only chart they had had to go by. If they had read it aright, they would have seen. . . . So, while the sixth was accidentally shattered, the seventh disappeared—Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, the Asteroid planet; T's planet, Mars, Earth, Venus, Mercury —the seventh disappeared without trace.

On the ninth planet, the mollusks moved gently in the bright, filtering sunlight.

* Not for an Age

A bedspring groaned and pinged, mists cleared, Rodney Furnell awoke. From the bathroom next door came the crisp sound of shaving; his son was up. The bed next to his was empty; Valerie, his second wife, was up. Guiltily, Rodney also rose, and performed several timid exercises to flex his backbone. Youth! When it was going it had to be husbanded. He touched his toes.

The audience had its first laugh there.

By the time Rodney had got into his Sunday suit, Valerie's cuckoo clock was chuckling nine, followed by the more sardonic notes of his ormolu chimer. Valerie and Jim (Rodney had conscientiously shunned a literary name for his only offspring) were already at the cornflakes when he entered their gay little kitchenette.

More laughter at the first sight of that antiquated twentieth-century modernity.

"Hello, both! Lovely morning," he boomed, kissing Valerie's forehead. The September sun, in fact, was making a fair showing through damp mist; a man of forty-two instinctively arms himself with enthusiasm when facing a wife fifteen years younger.

The audience always loved the day's meals, murmuring with delight as each quaint accessory—toaster, teapot, sugar tongs—was used.

Valerie looked fresh and immaculate. Jim sported an open-necked shirt and was attentive to his stepmother. At nineteen he was too manly and too attentive. . . . He shared the Sunday paper companionably with her, chatting about the theater and books. Sometimes Rodney could join in about one of the books. Under the notion

that Valerie disliked seeing him in spectacles, he refrained from reading at breakfast.

How the audience roared later when he slipped them on in his study! How he hated that audience! How fervently he wished that he had the power to raise even one eyebrow in scorn of them!

The day wore on exactly as it had for over a thousand times, unable to deviate in the slightest from its original course. So it would go on and on, as meaningless as a cliché, or a tune endlessly repeated, for the benefit of these fools who stood on all four sides and laughed at the silliest things.

At first, Rodney had been frightened. This power to snatch them all as it were from the grave had seemed something occult. Then, becoming accustomed to it, he had been flattered. That these wise beings had wanted to review *his* day, disinter *his* modest life. But it was balm only for a time; Rodney soon discovered he was simply a glorified side-show at some latter-day fair, a butt for fools and not food for philosophers.

He walked in the tumble-down garden with Valerie, his arm around her waist. The north Oxford air was mild and sleepy; the neighbors' radio was off.

"Have you *got* to go and see that desiccated old Regius Professor, darling?" she asked.

"You know I must." He conquered his irritation and added: "We'll go for a drive after lunch—just you and I."

Unfailingly, each day's audience laughed at that. Presumably "a drive after lunch" had come to mean something dubious. Each time Rodney made that remark, he dreaded the reaction from those half-glimpsed countenances that pressed on all sides; yet he was powerless to alter what had once been said.

He kissed Valerie, he hoped elegantly; the audience tittered, and he stepped into the garage. His wife returned to the house, and Jim. What happened in there he would never know, however many times the day was repeated. There was no way of confirming his suspicion that his son was in love with Valerie and she attracted to him. She should have enough sense to prefer a mature man to a stripling of nineteen; besides, it was only eighteen months

since he had been referred to in print as "one of our promising young men of *litterae historicae*."

Rodney could have walked around to Septuagint College. But because the car was new and something that his don's salary would hardly stretch to, he preferred to drive. The watchers, of course, shrieked with laughter at the sight of his little automobile. He occupied himself, as he polished the windshield, with hating the audience and all inhabitants of this future world.

That was the strange thing. There was room in the corner of the old Rodney mind for the new Rodney ghost. He depended on the old Rodney—the Rodney who had actually lived that fine, autumn day—for vision, motion, all the paraphernalia of life; but he could occupy independently a tiny cell of his consciousness. He was a helpless observer carried over and over in a cockpit of the past.

The irony of it lay there. He would have been spared all this humiliation if he did not know what was happening. But he did know, trapped though he was in an unknowing shell.

Even to Rodney, a history man and no scientist, the broad outline of what had happened was obvious enough. Somewhere in the future, man had ferreted out the secret of literally reclaiming the past. Bygone years lay in the rack of antiquity like film spools in a library. Like film spools, they were not amenable to change, but might be played over and over on a suitable projector. Rodney's autumn day was being played over and over.

He had reflected helplessly on the situation so often that the horror of it had worn thin. That day had passed, quietly, trivially, had been forgotten; suddenly, long afterwards, it had been whipped back among the things that were. Its actions, even its thoughts, had been reconstituted, with only Rodney's innermost ego to suffer from the imposition. How unsuspecting he had been then! How inadequate every one of his gestures seemed now, performed twice, ten, a hundred, a thousand times!

Had he been as smug every day as he was that day? And what had happened after that day? Having, naturally, no knowledge of the rest of his life then, he had none

now. If he had been happy with Valerie for much longer, if his recently published work on feudal justice had been acclaimed—these were questions he could pose without answering.

A pair of Valerie's gloves lay on the back seat of the car; Rodney threw them into a locker with an éclat quite divorced from his inner impotence. She, poor dear bright thing, was in the same predicament. In that they were united, although powerless to express the union in any slightest flicker of expression.

He drove slowly down Banbury Road. As ever, there were four subdivisions of reality. There was the external world of Oxford; there were Rodney's original abstracted observations as he moved through the world; there were the ghost thoughts of the "present-I," bitter and frustrated; there were the half-seen faces of the future which advanced or receded aimlessly. The four blended indefinably, one becoming another in Rodney's moments of near-madness. (What would it be like to be insane, trapped in a sane mind? He was tempted by the luxury of letting go.)

Sometimes he caught snatches of talk from the onlookers. They at least varied from day to day. "If he knew what he looked like!" they would exclaim. Or: "Do you see her hair-do?" Or: "Can you beat that for a slum!" Or: "Mummy, what's that funny brown thing he's eating?" Or—how often he heard that one: "I just wish he knew we were watching him!"

Church bells were solemnly ringing as he pulled up outside Septuagint and switched off the ignition. Soon he would be in that fusty study, taking a glass of something with the creaking old Regius Professor. For the *n*th time he would be smiling a shade too much as the grip of ambition outreached the hand of friendship. His mind leaped ahead and back and ahead and back again in a frenzy. Oh, if he could only *do* something! So the day would pass. Finally, the night would come—one last gust of derision at Valerie's nightgown and his pajamas!—and then oblivion.

Oblivion . . . that lasted an eternity but took no time at

all. . . . And *they* wound the reel back and started it again, all over again.

He was pleased to see the Regius Professor. The Regius Professor was pleased to see him. Yes, it was a nice day. No, he hadn't been out of college since, let's see, it must be the summer before last. And then came that line that drew the biggest laugh of all; Rodney said, inevitably: "Oh, we must all hope for some sort of immortality."

To have to say it again, to have to say it not a shade less glibly than when it had first been said, and when the wish had been granted already in such a ludicrous fashion! If only he might die first, if only the film would break down!

And then the film did break down.

The universe flickered to a standstill and faded into dim purple. Temperature and sound slid down to zero. Rodney Furnell stood transfixed, his arms extended in the middle of a gesture, a wineglass in his right hand. The flicker, the purple, the zeroness cut down through him; but even as he sensed himself beginning to fade, a great fierce hope was born within him. With a burst of avidity, the ghost of him took over the old Rodney. Confidence flooded him as he fought back the negativity.

The wineglass vanished from his hand. The Regius Professor sank into twilight and was gone. Blackness reigned. Rodney turned around. It was a voluntary movement; *it was not in the script;* he was alive, free.

The bubble of twentieth-century time had burst, leaving him alive in the future. He stood in the middle of a black and barren area. There had evidently been a slight explosion. Overhead was a crane-like affair as big as a locomotive with several funnels protruding from its underside; smoke issued from one of the funnels. Doubtless the thing was a time-projector or whatever it might be called, and obviously it had blown a fuse.

The scene about him engaged all Rodney's attention. He was delighted to see that his late audience had been thrown into mild panic. They shouted and pushed and—in one quarter—fought vigorously. Male and female alike, they wore featureless, transparent bags which en-

cased them from neck to ankle—and they had the impertinence to laugh at his pajamas!

Cautiously, Rodney moved away. At first the idea of liberty overwhelmed him, he could scarcely believe himself alive. Then the realization came: his liberty was precious—how doubly precious after that most terrible form of captivity!—and he must guard it by flight. He hurried beyond the projection area, pausing at a great sign that read:

CHRONOARCHEOLOGY LTD PRESENTS—
THE SIGHTS OF THE CENTURIES
COME AND ENJOY THE ANTICS OF YOUR ANCESTORS!
YOU'LL LAUGH AS YOU LEARN

And underneath: Please Take One.

Shaking, Rodney seized a gaudy folder and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he ran.

His guess about the fair-ground was correct, and Valerie and he had been merely a glorified peepshow. Gigantic booths towered on all sides. Gay crowds sauntered or stood, taking little notice as Rodney passed. Flags flew, silvery music sounded; nearby, a flashing sign begged: TRY ANTI-GRAV AND REALIZE YOUR DREAMS

Farther on, a banner proclaimed:

THE SINISTER VENUSIANS ARE *HERE!*

Fortunately, a gateway was close. Dreading a detaining hand on his arm, Rodney made for it as quickly as possible. He passed a towering structure before which a waiting line of people gazed impatiently up at the words:

SAVOR THE EROTIC POSSIBILITIES OF FREE-FALL

and came to the entrance.

An attendant called and tried to stop him. Rodney broke into a run. He ran down a satin-smooth road until exhaustion overcame him. A metal object shaped vaguely like a shoe but as big as a small bungalow stood at the curb. Through its windows, Rodney saw couches and no human beings. Thankful at the mute offer of rest and concealment, he climbed in.

As he sank panting onto yielding rubber-foam, he realized what a horrible situation he was in. To be stranded

centuries ahead of his own lifetime—and death—in a world of supertechnology and barbarism!—for so he visualized it. However, it was a vast improvement on the repetitive nightmare he had recently endured. Chiefly, now, he needed time to think quietly.

"Are you ready to proceed, sir?"

Rodney jumped up, startled by a voice so near him. Nobody was in sight. The interior resembled a coach's, with wide, soft seats, all of which were empty.

"Are you ready to proceed, sir?" There it was again.

"Who is that?" Rodney asked.

"This is Auto-moto Seven Six One at your service, sir, awaiting instructions to proceed."

"You mean away from here?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Yes, please!"

At once the structure glided smoothly forward. No noise, no vibration. The gaudy fair-ground fell back and was replaced by other buildings, widely spaced, smokeless, built of a substance which looked like curtain fabric; they flowed by without end.

"Are you—are we heading for the country?" Rodney asked.

"This is the country, sir. Do you require a city?"

"No, I don't. What is there beside city and country?"

"Nothing, sir—except of course the sea fields."

Dropping that line of questioning, Rodney, who was instinctively addressing a busy control board at the front of the vehicle, inquired: "Excuse my asking, but are you a—er, robot?"

"Yes, sir, Auto-moto Seven Six One. New on this route, sir."

Rodney breathed a sigh of relief. He could not have faced a human being but irrationally felt superior to a mere mechanical. Pleasant voice it had, no more grating certainly than the Professor of Anglo-Saxon at his old college . . . however long ago that was.

"What year *is* this?" he asked.

"Circuit Zero, Epoch Eighty-two, new style. Year Two Thousand Five Hundred Anno Domini, old style."

It was the first direct confirmation of all his suspicions; there was no gainsaying that level voice.

"Thanks," he said hollowly. "Now if you don't mind I've got to think."

Thought, however, yielded little in comfort or results. Possibly the wisest course would be to throw himself on the mercy of some civilized authority—if there were any civilized authorities left. And would the wisest course in a twentieth-century world be the wisest in a—um, twenty-sixth-century world?

"Driver, is Oxford in existence?"

"What is Oxford, sir?"

A twinge of anxiety as he asked: "This is England?"

"Yes, sir. I have found Oxford in my directory, sir. It is a motor and spaceship factory in the Midlands, sir."

"Just keep going."

Dipping into his pocket, he produced the fun-fair brochure and scanned its bright lettering, hoping for a clue to action.

"Chronoarcheology Ltd. presents a staggering series of Peeps into the Past. Whole days in the lives of (a) A Mother Dinosaur, (b) William the Conqueror's Wicked Nephew, (c) A Citizen of Crazed, Plague-Ridden Stuart London, (d) A Twentieth-Century Teacher in Love.

"Nothing expurgated, nothing added! Better than the Feelies! All in glorious 4D—no stereos required."

Fuming at the description of himself, Rodney crumpled the brochure in his hand. He wondered bitterly how many of his own generation were helplessly enduring this gross irreverence in peepshows all over the world. When the sense of outrage abated slightly, curiosity reasserted itself; he smoothed out the folder and read a brief description of the process which "will give you history-sterics as it brings each era nearer."

Below the heading "It's Fabulous—It's Pabulous!" he read: "Just as anti-gravity lifts a man against the direction of weight, chrono-grab can lift a machine out of the direction of time and send it speeding back over the dark centuries. It can be accurately guided from the present to scoop up a fragment from the past, slapping that fragment—all unknown to the people in it—right into your

lucky laps. The terrific expense of this intricate operation need hardly be emphas—"

"Driver!" Rodney screamed. "Do you know anything about this time-grabbing business?"

"Only what I have heard, sir."

"What do you mean by that?"

"My built-in information center contains only facts relating to my duty, sir, but since I also have learning circuits I am occasionally able to collect gossip from passengers which—"

"Tell me this, then: can human beings as well as machines travel back in time?"

The buildings were still flashing by, silent, hostile in the unknown world. Drumming his fingers wildly on his seat, Rodney awaited an answer.

"Only machines, sir. Humans can't live backwards."

For a long time he lay and cried comfortably. The automoto made solacing cluck-cluck noises, but it was a situation with which it was incompetent to deal.

At last, Rodney wiped his eyes on his sleeve, the sleeve of his Sunday suit, and sat up. He directed the driver to head for the main offices of Chronoarcheology, and slumped back in a kind of stupor. Only at the headquarters of that fiendish invention might there be people who could—if they would—restore him to his own time.

Rodney dreaded the thought of facing any creature of this unscrupulous age. He pressed the idea away, and concentrated instead on the peace and orderliness of the world from which he had been resurrected. To see Oxford again, to see Valerie. . . . Dear, dear Valerie. . . .

Would they help him at Chronoarcheology? Or—*supposing the people at the fair-ground repaired their devilish apparatus before he got there*. . . . What would happen then he shuddered to imagine.

"Faster, driver," he shouted.

The wide-spaced buildings became a wall.

"Faster, driver," he screamed.

The wall became a mist.

"We are doing mach 2.3, sir," said the driver calmly.

"Faster!"

The mist became a scream.

"We are about to crash, sir."

They crashed. Blackness, merciful, complete.

A bedspring groaned and pinged and the mists cleared. Rodney awoke. From the bathroom next door came the crisp, repetitive sound of Jim shaving. . . .

* Poor Little Warrior!

Claude Ford knew exactly how it was to hunt a bronto-saurus. You crawled heedlessly through the mud among the willows, through the little primitive flowers with petals as green and brown as a football field, through the beauty-lotion mud. You peered out at the creature sprawling among the reeds, its body as graceful as a sock full of sand. There it lay, letting the gravity cuddle it diaper-damp to the marsh, running its big rabbit-hole nostrils a foot above the grass in a sweeping semi-circle, in a snoring search for more sausagy reeds. It was beautiful; here horror had reached its limits, come full circle and finally disappeared up its own sphincter. Its eyes gleamed with the liveliness of a week-dead corpse's big toe, and its compost breath and the fur in its crude aural cavities were particularly to be recommended to anyone who might otherwise have felt inclined to speak lovingly of the work of Mother Nature.

But as you—little mammal with opposed digit and .65 self-loading, semi-automatic, dual-barreled, digitally-computed, telescopically-sighted, rustless, high-powered rifle gripped in your otherwise defenseless paws—slide along under the bygone willows, what primarily attracts you is the thunder-lizard's hide. It gives off a smell as deeply resonant as the bass note of a piano. It makes the elephant's epidermis look like a thin sheet of crinkled paper. It is gray as the Viking seas, daft-deep as cathedral foundations. What contact possible to bone could allay the fever of that flesh? Over it scamper—you can see them from here!—the little brown lice that live in those gray walls and canyons, gay as ghosts, cruel as crabs. If

one of them jumped on you, it would very likely break your back. And when one of those parasites stops to cock its leg against one of the bronto's vertebrae, you can see it carries in its turn its own crop of easy-livers, each as big as a lobster, for you're near now, oh, so near that you can hear the monster's primitive heart-organ knocking, as the ventricle keeps miraculous time with the auricle.

Time for listening to the oracle is past; you're beyond the stage for omens, you're now headed in for the kill, yours or his; superstition has had its little day for today, from now on only this windy nerve of yours, this shaky conglomeration of muscle entangled untraceably beneath the sweat-shiny carapace of skin, this bloody little urge to slay the dragon, is going to answer all your orisons.

You could shoot now. Just wait till that tiny steam-shovel head pauses once again to gulp down a quarry-load of bulrushes, and with one inexpressibly vulgar bang you can show the whole indifferent Jurassic world that it's standing looking down the business end of evolution's sex-shooter. You know why you pause, even as you pretend not to know why you pause: that old worm conscience, long as a baseball pitch, long-lived as a tortoise, is at work; through every sense it slides, more monstrous than the serpent. Through the passions: saying here is a sitting duck, O Englishman! Through the intelligence: whispering that boredom, the kite-hawk who never feeds, will settle again when the task is done. Through the nerves: sneering that when the adrenalin currents cease to flow the vomiting begins. Through the maestro behind the retina: plausibly forcing the beauty of the view upon you.

Spare us that poor old slipper-slopper of a word, *beauty;* holy mom, is this a travelogue! *"Perched now on this titanic creature's back, we see a round dozen—and, folks, let me stress that 'round'—gaudily plumaged birds, exhibiting among them all the color you might expect to find on lovely, fabled Copacabana Beach. They're so round because they feed on the droppings that fall from the rich man's table. Watch this lovely shot now! See the bronto's tail lift. . . . Yep, a couple of haystacks-full at least emerging from his nether end. That sure was a beauty, folks, delivered straight from consumer to con-*

sumer. The birds are fighting over it now. Hey, you, there's enough to go 'round, and anyhow, you're round enough already. . . . And nothing to do now but hop back up onto the old rump steak and wait for the next round. And now as the sun stinks in the Jurassic West, we say 'Fare well on that diet. . . .'"

No, you're procrastinating, and that's a lifework. Shoot the beast and put it out of your agony. Taking your courage in your hands, you raise it to shoulder level and squint down its sights. There is a terrible report; you are half stunned. Shakily, you look about you. The monster still munches, relieved to have broken enough wind to unbecalm the Ancient Mariner.

Angered (or is it some subtler emotion?), you now burst from the bushes and confront it, and this exposed condition is typical of the straits into which your consideration for yourself and others continually pitches you. Consideration? Or again something subtler? Why should you be confused just because you come from a confused civilization? But that's a point to deal with later, if there is a later, as these two hog-wallow eyes pupiling you all over from spitting distance tend to dispute. Let it not be by jaws alone, O monster, but also by huge hoofs and, if convenient to yourself, by mountainous rollings upon me! Let death be a saga, sagacious, Beowulfate.

Quarter of a mile distant is the sound of a dozen hippos springing boisterously in gymsuits from the ancestral mud, and next second a walloping great tail as long as Sunday and as thick as Saturday night comes slicing over your head. You duck as duck you must, but the beast missed you anyway because it so happens that its co-ordination is no better than yours would be if you had to wave the Woolworth Building at a tarsier. This done, it seems to feel it has done its duty. It forgets you. You just wish you could forget yourself as easily; that was, after all, the reason you had to come the long way here. *Get Away from It All,* said the time travel brochure, which meant for you getting away from Claude Ford, a husbandman as futile as his name with a terrible wife called Maude. Maude and Claude Ford. Who could not adjust to themselves, to each other, or to the world they were born in. It was the

best reason in the as-it-is-at-present-constituted world for coming back here to shoot giant saurians—if you were fool enough to think that one hundred and fifty million years either way made an ounce of difference to the muddle of thoughts in a man's cerebral vortex.

You try and stop your silly, slobbering thoughts, but they have never really stopped since the coca-collaborating days of your growing up; God, if adolescence did not exist it would be unnecessary to invent it! Slightly, it steadies you to look again on the enormous bulk of this tyrant vegetarian into whose presence you charged with such a mixed death-life wish, charged with all the emotion the human orga(ni)sm is capable of. This time the bogeyman is real, Claude, just as you wanted it to be, and this time you really have to face up to it before it turns and faces you again. And so again you lift Ole Equalizer, waiting till you can spot the vulnerable spot.

The bright birds sway, the lice scamper like dogs, the marsh groans, as bronto sways over and sends his little cranium snaking down under the bile-bright water in a forage for roughage. You watch this; you have never been so jittery before in all your jittered life, and you are counting on this catharsis wringing the last drop of acid fear out of this system forever. OK, you keep saying to yourself insanely over and over, your million-dollar twenty-second-century education going for nothing, OK, OK. And as you say it for the umpteenth time, the crazy head comes back out of the water like a renegade express and gazes in your direction.

Grazes in your direction. For as the champing jaw with its big blunt molars like concrete posts works up and down, you see the swamp water course out over rimless lips, lipless rims, splashing your feet and sousing the ground. Reed and root, stalk and stem, leaf and loam, all are intermittently visible in that masticating maw and, struggling, straggling or tossed among them, minnows, tiny crustaceans, frogs—all destined in that awful, jawfull movement to turn into bowel movement. And as the glump-glump-glumping takes place, above it the slime-resistant eyes again survey you.

These beasts live up to two hundred years says the

time travel brochure, and this beast has obviously tried to live up to that, for its gaze is centuries old, full of decades upon decades of wallowing in its heavyweight thoughtlessness until it has grown wise on twitterpatedness. For you it is like looking into a disturbing misty pool; it gives you a psychic shock, you fire off both barrels at your own reflection. Bang-bang, the dum-dums, big as paw-paws, go.

With no indecision, those century-old lights, dim and sacred, go out. These cloisters are closed till Judgment Day. Your reflection is torn and bloodied from them forever. Over their ravaged panes nictitating membranes slide slowly upwards, like dirty sheets covering a cadaver. The jaw continues to munch slowly, as slowly the head sinks down. Slowly, a squeeze of cold reptile blood toothpastes down the wrinkled flank of one cheek. Everything is slow, a creepy Secondary Era slowness like the drip of water, and you know that if you had been in charge of creation you would have found some medium less heart-breaking than Time to stage it all in.

Never mind! Quaff down your beakers, lords, Claude Ford has slain a harmless creature. Long live Claude the Clawed!

You watch breathless as the head touches the ground, the long laugh of neck touches the ground, the jaws close for good. You watch and wait for something else to happen, but nothing ever does. Nothing ever would. You could stand here watching for a hundred and fifty million years, Lord Claude, and nothing would ever happen here again. Gradually, your bronto's mighty carcass, picked loving clean by predators, would sink into the slime, carried by its own weight deeper; then the waters would rise, and old Conqueror Sea come in with the leisurely air of a card-sharp dealing the boys a bad hand. Silt and sediment would filter down over the mighty grave, a slow rain with centuries to rain in. Old bronto's bed might be raised up and then set down again perhaps half a dozen times, gently enough not to disturb him, although by now the sedimentary rocks would be forming thick around him. Finally, when he was wrapped in a tomb finer than any Indian rajah ever boasted, the powers of the Earth would raise him high on their shoulders until, sleeping

still, bronto would lie in a brow of the Rockies high above the waters of the Pacific. But little any of that would count with you, Claude the Sword; once the midget maggot of life is dead in the creature's skull, the rest is no concern of yours.

You have no emotion now. You are just faintly put out. You expected dramatic thrashing of the ground, or bellowing; on the other hand, you are glad the thing did not appear to suffer. You are like all cruel men, sentimental; you are like all sentimental men, squeamish. You tuck the gun under your arm and walk around the dinosaur to view your victory.

You prowl past the ungainly hoofs, around the septic white of the cliff of belly, beyond the glistening and how-thought-provoking cavern of the cloaca, finally posing beneath the switch-back sweep of tail-to-rump. Now your disappointment is as crisp and obvious as a visiting card: the giant is not half as big as you thought it was. It is not one-half as large, for example, as the image of you and Maude is in your mind. Poor little warrior, science will never invent anything to assist the titanic death you want in the contraterrene caverns of your fee-fi-fo-fumblingly fearful id!

Nothing is left to you now but to slink back to your time-mobile with a belly full of anticlimax. See, the bright dung-consuming birds have already cottoned on to the true state of affairs; one by one, they gather up their hunched wings and fly disconsolately off across the swamp to other hosts. They know when a good thing turns bad, and do not wait for the vultures to drive them off; all hope abandon, ye who entrail here. You also turn away.

You turn, but you pause. Nothing is left but to go back, no, but 2181 A.D. is not just the home date; it is Maude. It is Claude. It is the whole, awful, hopeless, endless business of trying to adjust to an overcomplex environment, of trying to turn yourself into a cog. Your escape from it into *the Grand Simplicities of the Jurassic,* to quote the brochure again, was only a partial escape, now over.

So you pause, and as you pause, something lands socko on your back, pitching you face forward into tasty mud. You struggle and scream as lobster claws tear at your

neck and throat. You try to pick up the rifle but cannot, so in agony you roll over, and next second the crab-thing is greedying it on your chest. You wrench at its shell, but it giggles and pecks your fingers off. You forgot when you killed the bronto that its parasites would leave it, and that to a little shrimp like you they would be a deal more dangerous than their host.

You do your best, kicking for at least three minutes. By the end of that time there is a whole pack of the creatures on you. Already they are picking your carcass loving clean. You're going to like it up there on top of the Rockies; you won't feel a thing.

* The Failed Men

"It's too crowded here!" he exclaimed aloud. "It's too crowded! It's too CROWDED!"

He swung around, his mouth open, his face contorted like a squeezed lemon, nearly knocking a passer-by off the pavement. The passer-by bowed, smiled forgivingly and passed on, his eyes clearly saying: "Let him be—it's one of the poor devils off the ship."

"It's too crowded," Surrey Edmark said again at the retreating back. It was night. He stood hatless under the glare of the New Orchard Road lights, bewildered by the flowing cosmopolitan life of Singapore about him. People: thousands of 'em, touchable; put out a hand gently, feel alpaca, silk, nylon, satin, plain, patterned, or crazily flowered; thousands within screaming distance. If you screamed, just how many of those dirty, clean, pink, brown, desirable or offensive convoluted ears would scoop up your decibels?

No, he told himself, no screaming, please. These people who swarm like phantoms about you are real; they wouldn't like it. And your doctor, who did not consider you fit to leave the observation ward—he's real enough; he wouldn't like it if he learned you had been screaming in a main street. And you yourself—how real were you? How real was *anything* when you had recently had perfect proof that all was finished? Really finished: rolled up and done with and discarded and forgotten.

That dusty line of thought must be avoided. He needed somewhere quiet, a place to sit and breathe deeply. Everyone must be deceived; he must hide the fused, dead feeling inside; then he could go back home. But he had

also to try and hide the deadness from himself, and that needed more cunning. Like alpha particles, a sense of futility had riddled him, and he was mortally sick.

Surrey noticed a turning just ahead. Thankfully he went to it and branched out of the crowds into a dim, narrow thoroughfare. He passed three women in short dresses smoking together; farther on a fellow was being sick into a privet hedge. And there was a café with a sign saying "The Iceberg." Deserted chairs and tables stood outside on an ill-lit veranda; Surrey climbed the two steps and sat wearily down. This was luxury.

The light was poor. Surrey sat alone. Inside the café several people were eating, and a girl sang, accompanying herself on a stringed, lute-like instrument. He couldn't understand the words, but it was simple and nostalgic, her voice conveying more than the music; he closed his eyes, letting the top spin within him, the top of his emotions. The girl stopped her singing suddenly, as if tired, and walked onto the veranda to stare into the night. Surrey opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Come and talk to me," he called.

She turned her head haughtily to the shadows where he sat, and then turned it back. Evidently, she had met with that sort of invitation before. Surrey clenched his fists in frustration; here he sat, isolated in space and time, needing comfort, needing . . . oh, nothing could heal him, but salves existed. . . . The loneliness welled up inside, forcing him to speak again.

"I'm from the ship," he said, unable to hold back a note of pleading.

At that, she came over and took a seat facing him. She was Chinese, and wore the timeless slit dress of her race, big daisies chasing themselves over the gentle contours of her body.

"Of course I didn't know," she said. "But I can see in your eyes . . . that you are from the ship." She trembled slightly and asked: "May I get you a drink?"

Surrey shook his head. "Just to have you sitting there . . ."

He was feeling better. Irrationally, a voice inside said: "Well, you've been through a harsh experience, but now

that you're back again you can recover, can't you, go back to what you were?" The voice frequently asked that, but the answer was always No; the experience was still spreading inside, like cancer.

"I heard your ship come in," the Chinese girl said. "I live just near here—Bukit Timah Road, if you know it, and I was at my window, talking with a friend."

He thought of the amazing sunshine and the eternal smell of cooking fats and the robshaws clacking by and this girl and her friend chattering in a little attic—and the orchestral crash as the ship arrived, making them forget their sentences; but all remote, centuries ago.

"It's a funny noise it makes," he said. "The sound of a time ship breaking out of the time barrier."

"It scares the chickens," she said.

Silence. Surrey wanted to produce something else to say, to keep the girl sitting with him, but nothing would dissolve into words. He neglected the factor of her own human curiosity, which made her keen to stay; she inquired again if he would like a drink, and then said: "Would it be good for you if you told me something about it?"

"I'd call that a leading question."

"It's very—*bad* ahead, isn't it? I mean, the papers say . . ." She hesitated nervously.

"What do they say?" he asked.

"Oh, you know, they say that it's bad. But they don't really explain; they don't seem to understand."

"That's the whole key to it," he told her. "We don't seem to understand. If I talked to you all night, you still wouldn't understand. *I* wouldn't understand. . . ."

She was beautiful, sitting there with her little lute in her hand. And he had traveled far away beyond her lute and her beauty, far beyond nationality or even music; it had all gone into the dreary dust of the planet, all gone—final—nothing left—except degradation. And puzzlement.

"I'll try and tell you," he said. "What was that tune you were just singing? Chinese song?"

"No, it was Malayan. It's an old song, very old, called 'Terang Boelan.' It's about—oh, moonlight, you know, that kind of thing. It's sentimental."

"I didn't even know what language it was in, but perhaps in a way I understood it."

"You said you were going to tell me about the future," she told him gently.

"Yes. Of course. It's a sort of tremendous relief work we're doing. You know what they call it: The Intertemporal Red Cross. It's accurate, but when you've actually been . . . ahead, it seems a silly, flashy, title. I don't know, perhaps not. I'm not sure of anything any more."

He stared out at the darkness; it was going to rain. When he began to speak again, his voice was firmer.

The I.R.C. is really organized by the Paulls (he said to the Chinese girl). They call themselves the Paulls; we should call them the technological *élite* of the Three Thousand, One Hundred and Fifty-seventh Century. That's a terribly long way ahead—we, with our twenty-four centuries since Christ, can hardly visualize it. Our ship stopped there, in their time. It was very austere: the Paulls are austere people. They live only on mountains overlooking the oceans, and have moved mountains to every coast for their own edification.

The Paulls are unlike us, yet they are brothers compared with the men we are helping, the Failed Men.

Time travel had been invented long before the age of the Paulls, but it is they who perfected it, they who accidentally discovered the plight of the Failed Man, and they who manage the terrific business of relief. For the world of the Paulls, rich as it is—will be—has insufficient resources to cope with the task without vitiating its strength. So it organized the fleet of time ships, the I. R. C., to collect supplies from different ages and bear them out ahead to the Failed Men.

Five different ages are co-operating on the project, under the Paull leadership. There are the Middle People, as the Paulls call them. They are a race of philosophers, mainly pastoral, and we found them haughty; they live about twenty thousand centuries ahead of the Paulls. Oh, it's a long time. . . . And there are—but never mind that! They had little to do with us, or we with them.

We—this present day, was the only age without time

travel of the five. The Paulls chose us because we happen to have peace and plenty. And do you know what they call us? The Children. The Children! We, with all our weary sophistication. . . . Perhaps they're right; they have a method of Gestalt reasoning absolutely beyond our wildest pretensions.

You know, I remember once on the voyage out ahead, I asked one of the Paulls why they had never visited our age before; and he said: "But we have. We broke at the nineteenth century and again at the twenty-sixth. That's pretty close spacing! And that's how we knew so much about you."

They have so much *experience,* you see. They can walk around for a day in one century and tell you what'll be happening the next six or seven. It's a difference of outlook, I suppose; something as simple as that.

I suppose you'll remember better than I when the Paulls first broke here, as you are actually on the spot. I was at home then, doing a peaceful job; if it hadn't been so peaceful I might not have volunteered for the I.R.C. What a storm it caused! A good deal of panic in with the excitement. Yes, we proved ourselves children then, *and* in the adulation we paid the Paulls while they toured the world's capitals. During the three months they waited here while we organized supplies and men, they must have been in a fury of impatience to be off; yet they revealed nothing, giving their unsensational lectures on the plight of the Failed Men and smiling for the three-dee cameras.

All the while money poured in for the cause, and the piles of canned food and medical supplies filled the holds of the big ship. We were like kids throwing credits to street beggars; all sorts of stuff of no earthly use went into that ship. What would a Failed Man do with a launderer or a cycloview machine? At last we were off, with all the world's bands playing like mad and the ship breaking with noise enough to drown all bands and startle your chickens —off for the time of the Failed Men!

"I think I'd like that drink you offered me now," Surrey said to the Chinese girl, breaking off his narrative.

"Certainly," She snapped her fingers at arm's length,

her hand in the light from the restaurant, her face in the gloom, eyes fixed on his eyes.

"The Paulls had told you it was going to be tough," she said.

"Yes. We underwent pretty rough mental training from them before leaving the here and now. Many of the men were weeded out. But I got through. They elected me Steersman. I was top of their first class."

Surrey was silent a moment, surprised to hear pride in his own voice. Pride left, after that experience! Yet there was no pride in him; it was just the voice running in an old channel, the naked soul crouching in an ancient husk of character.

The drink arrived. The Chinese girl had one too, a long one in a misty glass; she put her lute down to drink it. Surrey took a sip of his and then resumed the story.

We were traveling ahead! It was a schoolboy's dream come true. Yet our excitement soon became blunted by monotony. There is nothing simultaneous in time travel, as people have imagined. It took us two ship's months to reach the Paulls' age, and there all but one of them left us to continue on alone into the future.

They had the other ages to supervise, and many organizational problems to attend to; yet I sometimes wonder if they did not use those problems as an excuse, to save their having to visit the age of the Failed Men. Perhaps they thought us less sensitive, and therefore better fitted for the job.

And so we went ahead again. The office of Steersman was almost honorary, entailing merely the switching off of power when the journey was automatically ended. We sat about and talked, we chosen few, reading or viewing in the excellent libraries the Paulls had installed. Time passed quickly enough, yet we were glad when we arrived.

Glad!

The age of the Failed Men is far in the future: many hundred millions of years ahead, or thousands of millions; the Paulls would never tell us the exact number. Does it matter? It was a long time. . . . There's plenty of time—too much—more than anyone will ever need.

We stepped out onto that day's Earth. I had childishly expected—oh, to see the sun stuck at the horizon, or turned purple, or the sky full of moons, or something equally dramatic; but there was not even a shadow over the fair land, and the earth had not aged a day. Only man had aged.

The Failed Men differed from us anatomically and spiritually; it was the former quality which struck us first. They looked like a group of dejected oddities sitting among piles of supplies, and we wanted to laugh. The humorists among us called them "the Zombies" at first —but in a few days there were no humorists left among us.

The Failed Men had no real hands. From their wrists grew five long and prehensile fingers, and the middle digit touched the ground lightly when they walked, for their spines curved in an arc and their heads were thrust far forward. To counter this, their skulls had elongated into boat shapes, scaphocephalic fashion. They had no eyebrows, nor indeed a brow at all, nor any hair at all, although the pores of their skin stood out flakily, giving them a fluffy appearance from a distance.

When they looked at you their eyes held no meaning; they were blanked with a surfeit of experience, as though they had now regained a horrible sort of innocence. When they spoke to you, their voices were hollow and their sentences as short and painful as a child's toothache. We could not understand their language, except through the electronic translator banks given us by the Paulls.

They looked a mournful sight, but at first we were not too disturbed; we didn't, you see, quite grasp the nature of the problem. Also, we were very busy, reclaiming more Failed Men from the ground.

Four great aid centers had been established on the earth. Of the other four races in the I.R.C., two managed sanitoria construction and equipment; another, nursing, feeding and staffing; and the fourth, communication, rehabilitation and liaison between centers. And we—"the Children!"—our job was to exhume the Failed Men and bring them to the centers: a job for the simple group!

Between us we all had to get the race of man started again—back into harness.

All told, I suppose there are only about six million Failed Men spread over the earth. We had to go out and dig them up. We had specially made tractors with multiple blades on the front which dug slowly and gently into the soil.

The Failed Men had "cemetery areas"; we called them that, although they had not been designed as cemeteries. It was like a bad dream. Working day and night, we trundled forward, furrowing up the earth as you strip back a soiled bed. In the mold, a face would appear, an arm with the long fingers, a pair of legs, tumbling into the light. We would stop the machine and get down to the body, digging with trowels around it. So we would exhume another man or woman—it was hard to tell which they were.

They would be in coma. Their eyes would open, staring like peek-a-boo dolls, then close again with a click. We'd patch them up with an injection, stack them on stretchers and send them back in a load to base. It was a harrowing job, and no pun intended.

When the corpses had had some attention and care, they revived. Within a month they would be up and walking, trundling about the hospital grounds in that round-shouldered way, their great boat-heads nodding at every step. And then it was I talked to them and tried to understand.

The translator banks, being Paull-made, were the best possible. But their limitations were the limitations of our own language. If the Failed Men said their word for "sun," the machine said "sun" to us, and we understood by that the same thing the Failed Men intended. But away from the few concrete, common facts of our experience, the business was less easy. Less synonyms, more overtones; it was the old linguistic problem, but magnified here by the ages which lay between us.

I remember tackling one old woman on our first spell back at the center. I say old, but for all I know she was sweet sixteen; they just looked ancient.

"I hope you don't mind being dug—er, rescued?" I asked politely.

"Not at all. A pleasure," the banks said for her. Polite stereotypes. No real meaning in any language, but the best machine in the world makes them sound sillier than they are.

"Would you mind if we discussed this whole thing?"

"What object?" the banks asked for her.

I'd asked the wrong question. I did not mean thing-object, but thing-matter. That sort of trip-up kept getting in the way of our discussion; the translator spoke better English than I.

"Can we talk about your problem?" I asked her, trying again.

"I have no problem. My problem has been resolved."

"I should be interested to hear about it."

"What do you require to know about it? I will tell you anything."

That at least was promising. Willing if not co-operative; they had long ago forgotten the principle of co-operation.

"You know I come from the distant past to help you?" The banks translated me undramatically.

"Yes. It is noble of you all to interrupt your lives for us," she said.

"Oh no; we want to see the race of man starting off again on a right track. We believe it should not die away. We are glad to help, and are sorry you took the wrong track."

"When we started, we were on a track others before us—you—had made." It was not defiant, just a fact being stated.

"But the deviation was yours. You made it by an act of will. I'm not condemning; obviously you would not have taken that way had you known it would end in failure."

She answered. I gathered she was just faintly angry, probably burning all the emotion in her. Her hollow voice spanged and doomed away, and the translator banks gave out simultaneously in fluent English. Only it didn't make sense.

It went something like this: "Ah, but what you do not

realize, because your realizing is completely undeveloped and unstarted, is how to fail. Failing is not failing unless it is defeat, and this defeat of ours—if you realize it *is* a failing—is only a failure. A final failure. But as such, it is only a matter of a result, because in time this realization tends to breed only the realization of the result of failure; whereas the resolution of our failure, as opposed to the failure—"

"Stop!" I shouted. "No! Save the modern poetry or the philosophical treatise for later. It doesn't mean anything to me, I'm sorry. We'll take it for granted there was some sort of a failure. Are you going to be able to make a success of this new start we're giving you?"

"It is not a new start," she said, beginning reasonably enough. "Once you have had the result, a start is no longer a result. It is merely in the result of failing and all that is in the case is the start or the failure—depending, for us, on the start, for you on the failure. And you can surely see that even here failure depends abnormally on the beginning of the result, which concerns us more than the failure, simply because it is the result. What you don't see is the failure of the result of the result's failure to start a result—"

"Stop!" I shouted again.

I went to the Paull commander. I told him the thing was beginning to become an obsession with me.

"It is with all of us," he replied.

"But if only I could grasp a fraction of their problem! Look, we come out here all this way ahead to help them —and still we don't know what we're helping them *from*."

"We know *why* we're helping them, Edmark. The burden of carrying on the race, of breeding a new and more stable generation, is on them. Keep your eye on that, if possible."

Perhaps his smile was a shade too placating; it made me remember that to him we were "the Children."

"Look," I said pugnaciously. "If those shambling failures can't tell us what's happened to them, you can. Either you tell me, or we pack up and go home. Our fellows have the creeps, I tell you! Now what—*explicitly*—is or was wrong with these Zombies?"

The commander laughed.

"We don't know," he said. "We don't know, and that's all there is to it."

He stood up then, austere, tall. He went and looked out of the window, hands behind his back, and I could tell by his eyes he was looking at Failed Men, down there in the pale afternoon.

He turned and said to me: "This sanatorium was designed for Failed Men. But we're filling up with relief staff instead; they've let the problem get them by the throats."

"I can understand that," I said. "I shall be there myself if I don't get to the root of it, racing the others up the wall."

He held up his hand.

"That's what they *all* say. But there is no root of it to get at, or none we can comprehend, or else we are part of the root ourselves. If you could only *categorize* their failure it would be something: religious, spiritual, economic. . . ."

"So it's got *you* too!" I said.

"Look," I said suddenly. "You've got the time ships. Go back and *see* what the problem was!"

The solution was so simple I couldn't think how they had overlooked it; but of course they hadn't overlooked it.

"We've been," the commander said briefly. "A problem of the mind—presuming it was a mental problem—cannot be seen. All we *saw* was the six million of them singly burying themselves in these shallow graves. The process covered over a century; some of them had been under for three hundred years before we rescued them. No, it's no good; the problem from our point of view is linguistic."

"The translator banks are no good," I said sweepingly. "It's all too delicate a job for a machine. Could you lend me a human interpreter?"

He came himself, in the end. He didn't want to, but he wanted to. And how would a machine cope with that statement? Yet to you and me it's perfectly comprehensible.

A woman, one of the Failed Men, was walking slowly across the courtyard as we got outside. It might have been the one I had already spoken to, I don't know. I didn't recognize her and she gave no sign of recognizing me. Anyhow, we stopped her and tried our luck.

"Ask her why they buried themselves, for a start," I said.

The Paull translated and she doomed briefly in reply.

"She says it was considered necessary, as it aided the union before the beginning of the attempt," he told me.

"Ask her what union."

Exchange of dooms.

"The union of the union that they were attempting. Whatever that means."

"Did both 'unions' sound the same to you?"

"One was inflected, as it was in the possessive case," the Paull said. "Otherwise they seemed just alike."

"Ask her—ask her if they were all trying to change themselves into something other than human—you know, into spirits or fairies or ghosts."

"They've only got a word for spirit. Or rather, they've got four words for spirit: spirit of soul; spirit of place; spirit of a non-substantive, such as 'spirit of adventure'; and another sort of spirit I cannot define—we haven't an exact analogy for it."

"Hell's bells! Well, try her with spirit of soul."

Again the melancholy rattle of exchange. Then the commander, with some surprise, said: "She says, Yes, they were striving to attain spirituality."

"Now we're getting somewhere!" I exclaimed, thinking smugly that it just needed persistence and a twenty-fifth-century brain.

The old woman clanged again.

"What's that?" I asked eagerly.

"She says they're still striving after spirituality."

We both groaned. The lead was merely a dead end.

"It's no good," the Paull said gently. "Give up."

"One last question! Tell the old girl we cannot understand the nature of what has happened to her race. Was it a catastrophe and what was its nature?"

"Can but try. Don't imagine this hasn't been done before, though—it's purely for your benefit."

He spoke. She answered briefly.

"She ways it was an 'antwerto.' That means it was a catastrophe to end all catastrophes."

"Well, at least we're definite on that."

"Oh yes, they failed all right, whatever it was they were after," the Paull said somberly.

"The nature of the catastrophe?"

"She just gives me an innocent little word, 'struback.' Unfortunately, we don't know what it means."

"I see. Ask her if it has something to do with evolution."

"My dear man, this is all a waste of time! I know the answers, as far as they exist, without speaking to this woman at all."

"Ask her if 'struback' means something to do with a possible way they were evolving or meaning to evolve," I persisted.

He asked her. The ill-matched three of us stood there for a long time while the old woman moaned her reply. At last she was silent.

"She says struback has some vague connection with evolution," the commander told me.

"Is that *all?*"

"Far from it, but that's what it boils down to! 'Time impresses itself on man as evolution,' she says."

"Ask her if the nature of the catastrophe was at least partly religious."

When she had replied, the commander laughed shortly and said: "She wants to know what 'religious' means. And I'm sorry but I'm not going to stand here while you tell her."

"But just because she doesn't know what it means doesn't mean to say the failure, the catastrophe, wasn't religious in essence."

"Nothing means to say anything here," the commander said angrily. Then he realized he was only talking to one of the Children; he went on more gently: "Suppose that instead of coming ahead, we had gone back in time. Suppose we met a prehistoric tribe of hunters. We learn their language. We want to use the word 'luck.' In their

superstitious minds the concept—and consequently the word—does not exist. We have to use a substitute they can accept: 'accident,' or 'good-happening,' or 'bad-happening,' as the case may be. They understand that all right, but by it they mean something entirely different from our intention. We have not broken through the barrier at all, merely become further entangled in it. The same trap is operating here.

"And now, please excuse me."

Struback. A long, hollow syllable, followed by a short click. Night after night, I turned that word over in my tired mind. It became the symbol of the Failed Men, but never anything more.

Most of the others caught the worry. Some drifted away in a kind of trance, some went into the wards. The tractors became undermanned. Reinforcements, of course, were arriving from the present. The present! I could not think of it that way. The time of the Failed Men became my present, and my past and future, too.

I worked with the translator banks again, unable to accept defeat. I had this idea in my head that the Failed Men had been trying—and possibly involuntarily—to turn into something superior to man, a sort of super-being, and I was intensely curious about this.

"Tell me," I demanded of an old man, speaking through the banks, "when you all first had this idea, or when it came to you, you were all glad then?"

His answer came: "Where there is failure there is only degradation. You cannot understand the degradation, because you are not of us. There is only degradation and misery and you do not comprehend—"

"Wait! I'm *trying* to comprehend! Help me, can't you? Tell me *why* it was so degrading, why you failed, how you failed."

"The degradation was the failure," he said. "The failure was the struback, the struback was the misery."

"You mean there was *just* misery, even at the beginning of the experiment?"

"There was no beginning, only a finish, and that was the result."

I clutched my head.

"Wasn't burying yourself a beginning?"

"No."

"What was it?"

"It was only a part of the attempt."

"What attempt?"

"You are so stupid. Can you not see? The attempt we were making for the resolution of the problematical problem in the result of our united resolve to solve the problem."

"Which problem?"

"*The* problem," he said wearily. "The problem of the resolution of this case into the start of failure. It does not matter how the resolution is accomplished provided all the cases are the same, but in a diversity of cases the start determines the resolution and the finish arbitrarily determines the beginning of the case. But the arbitrary factor is itself inherent in the beginning of the case, and of the case itself. Consequently our case is in the same case, and the failure was because of the start, the start being our resolution."

It was hopeless. "You are really trying to explain?" I asked weakly.

"No, young man," he said. "I am telling you about the failure. You are the struback."

And he walked away.

Surrey looked hopelessly across at the Chinese girl. She tapped her fingers on the table.

"What did he mean, 'You are the struback'?" she asked.

"Anything or nothing," he said wildly. "It would have been no good asking him to elucidate—I shouldn't have understood the elucidation. You see it's all either too complex or too simple for us to grasp."

"But *surely*—" she said, and then hesitated.

"The Failed Men could only think in abstractions," he said. "Perhaps that was a factor involved in their failure —I don't know. You see, language is the most intrinsic product of any culture; you can't comprehend the language till you've understood the culture—and how do you understand a culture till you know its language?"

Surrey looked helplessly at the girl's little lute with its own trapped tongue. Suddenly, the hot silence of the night was shattered by a great orchestral crash half a mile away.

"Another cartload of nervous wrecks coming home," he told her grimly. "You'd better go and see to your chickens."

* Carrion Country

The great sea of grass rippled and then stood silent again. A breeze rose momentarily and died. A flock of birds rose startled into the air, dived about the ship, and then returned once more to their perches. The landing of the PEST craft had caused only a momentary diversion.

"Quite an innocent-looking spot," young Tim Anderson commented, as the three ecologists climbed down into the open.

"Innocent's a nice word," Barney Brangwyn agreed. "In this case, it means nothing but running water to drink!"

The discovery team which had found Lancelyn II had made a rapid stratospheric survey and reported a complete absence of civilization. It looked like an easy planet to crack, from the point of view of Barney and the other two members of the Planetary Ecological Survey Team (known for short as PEST).

"Let's take the usual preliminary ride-around before we split up," Craig Hodges, leader of the team, said. "Get the first overlander out, Tim."

As the boy turned obediently back to the ship, Barney remarked to his old friend, "We've seldom run up against such a quiet place."

It was a remark which might have been taken two ways, since Barney did not say whether he found quiet soothing or bad for the nerves. As first men on Lancelyn II—men on the lookout for threats to the colonists who would follow them—they had every right to be wary. Suspicion was their stock in trade.

Not that Barney, or Craig for that matter, looked the nervous type. Which was because Barney's black, flowing

beard, his barrel chest, his massive stature, were more striking than his neatly manicured nails or the gentleness of his mouth.

When the overlander arrived out of the ship, he took over the wheel from Tim Anderson and gunned her hard as Craig scrambled aboard.

As Barney had said, it was quiet. From an ecologist's point of view, that could be bad. They drove across a gently undulating plain toward a ridge of high ground. Bright flowers grew in the grass, birds sang overhead. Occasional groves of graceful trees added variety to the landscape. Coming in to land in the spaceship, they had noted how this same gentle landscape filled most of Lancelyn II.

"Evolution must have been sitting on its haunches not to raise a dominant species in a likely spot like this," Tim commented. If he felt slightly unsure, this was only his second trip with PEST.

Craig said nothing. As chief ecologist, he did not waste words but sat alertly looking out.

As they began to climb the high ground, more of the peaceful country was revealed on either side. Then they came across the first corpses.

Without fuss, Tim slid his express rifle onto his knee. The corpses rapidly became more frequent. They lay everywhere, silent in the waving grass. Barney braked the overlander; it was impossible to go further without running over the carcasses. The ecologists sat there with the engine barely turning, looking out of the windows, each with his private speculations.

Now there could be no doubt about the quiet everywhere. It was not peaceful; it was sinister.

The corpses belonged to creatures like centaurs, with bodies the size of Shetland ponies and, in place of a horse's head and neck, a head and torso which looked—as far as one could judge, considering the corpses' advanced state of decomposition—remarkably human. The torso was covered with a thick brown coat which extended over the rest of the body; there were no signs of arms or hands.

Their coats, once glossy, were now bedraggled and

slimed with putrescence. The flesh had rotted or been torn from their faces to reveal skull and cheekbones. Their chests appeared to have been savaged; black and green traceries of putrescence grew in the mutilated skin, flowering outward like tar. Only their feet, which were hoofless, showed no sign of corruption.

"Not a pretty sight," Craig remarked.

"There must be at least two hundred head of them lying here," Barney said. "All killed at the same time. Been dead a week maybe."

"But what could have struck down a whole herd of them at once like this?" Tim demanded.

"It's a problem right up our alley, isn't it?" Craig said dryly. "Back her out, Barney, and let's get back to the ship. The sooner the three of us start work as planned, the better."

Bumping back the way they had come, they soon lost sight of the rotting bodies, lying peacefully on their sides as if in life they had never done anything better. The thought of them was not so easily lost.

"They must have been surrounded by a pack of fast-running predators," Tim said. This was his first field job; it appalled him to think that in an hour the three of them would go their separate ways. That was the way PEST set its teams to work.

"Predators, no doubt," Barney replied. "Wolves maybe. Yet I fancy they would not need to be as fast-moving as you think to catch up with our dead friends back there. Though their lower bodies were shaped roughly like ponies, I doubt whether they could cover ground as rapidly as a pony. Their limbs were too clumsy, their feet too spongy. I'd say they were plodders all."

"Whatever killed them," Craig said, in his unemphatic way, "did not do it for food. Those bodies were not eaten. The slaughter, for my money, was carried out for pleasure. . . ."

Back at the spaceship, they drove out the other two overlanders. PEST procedure was observed, based on centuries of investigation of strange planets. The ancient idea of a primary exploration party, which battered its

way across the new world, giving all concerned warning of its coming, had long ago been abandoned. Nowadays, the three ecologists simply established three points eighty miles apart, the ship at one of the points of the equilateral triangle so formed; they then sat tight and observed the network of life about them, disturbing as little as possible. That way, it rarely took an experienced team more than one day to find trouble—or three to lick it!

As usual on these occasions, lots were drawn to see who remained in the vicinity of the ship. Barney Brangwyn won.

"Lucky devil!" Tim remarked enviously. "All home comforts for you, while Craig and I rough it in the bush. Well, don't forget to keep the radio watch open."

As Barney saw the others into their overlanders, which were already loaded with supplies, Craig turned to him.

You knew instinctively that Craig Hodges was a man to be reckoned with. A specialist in parasitology, he was of average height, solidly built, without much neck; thin hair emphasized the massiveness of his skull. His appearance suggested physical power; but when he moved—even if only to take a cigarette or lace his boots—when he looked at you, and above all when he spoke, you were conscious of a controlling mind as muscular as his body.

"I'm sorry to be leaving this interesting strip of country," he said. "Eighty miles away, there may only be butterflies to look at. The key to Lancelyn lies here, to my way of thinking."

"Sure, these are the happy hunting grounds—God's little acre!" Barney exclaimed, grinning. "I hereby christen this neck of the woods Carrion Country."

Barney Brangwyn was alone.

He selected a hollow in the ground on the edge of a small wood, parking his vehicle and inflating his "igloo" in it. He sawed down small trees for light camouflage, and settled in peacefully to observe. It was an ideal site. The ship was only some five hundred yards away, easily visible from the overlander's observation blister. In the mild afternoon sun it looked surprisingly at home with the gentle surroundings.

Barney's way of working was simple. Zipping on a warm oversuit, he strapped himself into a harness of specimen containers, buckled on his blaster and belt, and commenced a tour of a small adjacent area of ground. Carefully, he noted all it contained. This was his Plot.

The Plot, not more than half an acre in extent, contained the hollow in one corner, a slender stream gurgling among stones, a number of trees which at one spot merged into a thicket, shrubs, broken ground, tall and short grass, small boulders, a rotting log. To a non-specialist there would have been nothing particular about the Plot. They might have failed to observe the moss growing all around the boles of the trees, indicating lack of any strong prevailing wind; or the ivy-type climber whose end-tendrils, fine as a spider's thread, lifted on a light breeze and enabled it to climb from tree to tree; or, among the bush roots, a line of assorted gravel which suggested a moraine, which in its turn suggested a past ice age.

Barney noticed these and other details, and would later make a tape-report on them, with his observations. But what chiefly interested him was the Plot's content of insect and animal life.

To him, the Plot was a microcosm of Lancelyn II. As a good PEST man, he believed that the only way to find out anything valuable about a whole planet was to look carefully at one acre of its ground.

Accordingly, when he had made the superficial survey, Barney settled himself on the bank of the little stream with all the excitement of a big-game hunter stalking rogue elephant. Yet Barney expected to see nothing bigger than a frog.

As an ecologist whose knowledge had been drawn from practical PEST work on thousands of worlds, Barney knew that, given time, the whole structure of animate life on a planet could be deduced from its humblest members. His very first discovery of minute life was a thread-like creature, not an inch long, worming its way under a flat stone. Barney levered it up with a spatula, examining it under a magnifying glass before dropping it into a specimen box. It was a green and gray leech which looked as if it had been sprinkled with black pepper. Undoubtedly, *proto-*

clepsis tesselata of the family Glossiphonidae, a duck-leech which established the presence of ducks on Lancelyn, for these birds are the leech's only hosts.

The grass on which he lay was short where it should have been long; that meant that herbivores were about. Poking in the rubbish of a water-side burrow, he turned up the tiny remains of eyeless fleas, indicating that the water-going creature (he suspected a rat, from the formation of the nest) on which the fleas lived was very probably nocturnal in its habits. Bit by bit, a picture of the vast, multi-faceted existence of Lancelyn II grew in Barney's mind. He was engrossed.

He was so engrossed that the centaur was nearly on him before he chanced to look up and see it.

Jumping up with a cry of surprise, Barney caught his heel on loose gravel, slipped, and fell backwards. When he scrambled up again, the centaur had gone.

"Hi! Come back! I'm not going to hurt you!" Barney shouted. His reaction, when he had overcome his shock, was pleasure to think that his Plot had this large mammalian life form on or near it. He stood there waiting, stroking his beard with one hand and his bruised posterior with the other.

"It can't have gone far," Barney muttered, remembering his notion about the centaur's poor turn of speed.

With his blaster in his hand for safety's sake, he went forward, wondering if the centaur were crouching behind the dead tree trunk at the edge of the Plot. Barney jumped on top of it and looked down. Nothing there. Then, a few yards to one side, he saw something.

Beneath a thick, oleander-like bush, lay a dead and decaying centaur.

It looked just like the bodies the PEST party had found previously on the high ground. But around this one —and not only because Barney was now alone—lurked the authentic tang of fear.

Barney had been afraid before; the sensation, it can be said without paradox, did not frighten him. He stood on the log, a light breeze ruffling his beard, trying to analyze just why the new corpse scared him. Finally, he decided

his reasons stemmed from divergent facts which hardly seemed to make sense together.

This corpse had not been here an hour ago, when Barney had surveyed the Plot. It must therefore be connected in some way with the live centaur, who had now vanished. To Barney's scientifically trained, connection-making mind, this implied human motivation—and consequently human intelligence—in the centaurs. What animal would drag a putrifying member of its own species about?

The motivation implied was either that the living centaur had been undergoing, or was about to undergo, some sort of religious rite with the dead creature, or that the two were murderer and murdered. Barney had a momentary picture of the wrongdoer with the putrifying corpse on its back, galloping about looking for a place to dispose of the evidence.

None of these thoughts pleased him.

"Bloodthirsty centaurs!" he exclaimed to himself. "Perhaps the dead herd we saw on the hill killed each other in battle."

He rejected this idea as soon as it occurred to him. The nasty chest wounds on the other bodies had hardly looked like the kind of injury a centaur could inflict. He wanted to examine the corpse under the oleanders, to see if its pads concealed claws, to determine by the teeth whether the beasts were carnivorous or not. Seized by a belated caution, however, he would not go near the carcass, just in case it was intended as a decoy for him.

Dropping down onto hands and knees on the other side of the log, Barney prepared to wait to see if anything happened. Nursing the blaster, he looked cautiously about him.

The peaceful, parklike country seemed to have changed its character. Evening was creeping on; Lancelyn was low behind thick cloud. The hush had malevolence in it. Barney scratched one hairy arm and sniffed. He knew of old how one hint of the strange, one suspicion that hostile intelligence might be lurking near, was sufficient to change one's whole attitude to a new environment. That sub-

conscious safeguard, handed down from prehistoric ancestors, had been one of man's great aids on alien planets.

It helped Barney now.

He saw the puma as soon as it broke from the woods and headed in his direction.

Apart from a gray tuft at the end of its tail, the puma was all black.

Its head was feline, but the rest of it lacked any such grace. It most resembled a stubby-legged ox. It might have been laughable, but for its formidable armory of teeth and claws. As it slunk forward in predatory fashion, Barney rose to his feet, keeping the blaster ready.

The puma had already seen him. Its yellow eyes bored at him.

When it ran at Barney, its comparatively slow turn of speed lent it a disconcerting air of confidence.

"Sorry to do this!" Barney said, and fired.

Taking the faint blue bolt smack in the chest, the creature heeled over, kicked vigorously with its hindpaws, and lay still. Barney went over to it, shaking his head; he hated taking life, but even more he hated losing his own. Standing near—but not too near—to the body, he produced from his equipment a long-armed scoop with automatic shutter, and began to collect the puma's parasites as they left their cooling refuge. He would study them later. Of all the sciences, parasitology offers the space ecologist the quickest "Open Sesame" to a new planet's mysteries.

When the body was clear of its fellow-travelers, Barney threw a loop of webbed rope around its neck and dragged it over to his H.Q. for examination. Then, struck by another thought, he ran back to where he had been crouching by the log. The decomposing body of the centaur had gone; confused footprints by the oleander bush told him nothing.

Swearing colorfully, using esoteric terms picked up in taverns on a dozen planets, Barney returned to the overlander and shut himself in.

It was dark. A scintillating chip of icy moon rose in the east, filling Lancelyn II with arabesques of mystery.

Barney Brangwyn had worked for two hours dissecting the puma. He had paused only once to go to the window and watch a herd of centaurs gallop by about half a mile away.

The sight had been curiously stirring. Outlining themselves against the sky, the creatures, about fifty in number, had poured over a ridge, down a disused waterway, and disappeared into a sparse wood. As they went, they called to each other in high, cat voices.

The light had been too poor for Barney to discern any details. One thing was clear: their turn of speed was mediocre. Their fastest pace appeared to be a rather shambling trot. This made them natural prey for the puma, who, although no record-breaker, had done better than that.

The puma would never have been a fleet-footed Mercury. Barney found that its cardio-vascular system was primitive, its lung capacity small. Apart from that, it had only one peculiarity to set it markedly apart from a terrestrial mammal. It had no sense of smell. Its nose consisted of a pair of simple breathing tubes, without olfactory nerves. For a beast of prey this was odd, but its eyes, particularly adapted to far sight, were a compensation; they had developed a type of long-range binocular vision Barney had not seen before.

Retaining its eyes in preserving fluid, Barney shot the rest of the carcass into the disposal chute, disinfected his hands and arms, and went to get himself supper.

He ate slowly and pleasurably, sipping an Aldebaran wine between mouthfuls, although without allowing his enjoyment to interrupt his thinking. Particularly, he was interested in the puma's lack of a sense of smell, for he knew some such apparently insignificant fact might relate to the larger problem of what had killed the centaurs, and why.

Barney had observed, before he was interrupted, that the small flowers growing on his Plot were brightly colored but lacking perfume. That might well be relevant, even though pumas did not go about smelling flowers. Smell . . . Scent . . .

"My God!" Barney exclaimed, slopping wine into his

lap. "I'm a prize idiot! Why did I not note that consciously before? The centaur carrion did not stink! It should have been strong enough to knock over an ox. Yet I was standing down-wind of that last carcass and could not smell a thing. . . ."

Finishing his meal, he lit a cheroot and sat back abstractedly until nine o'clock, the time of the PEST group call.

Craig Hodges' voice came up first, slow and reassuring. Without wasting time on pleasantries, he asked for Barney's situation report.

Barney had played this game with Craig many times before. As experienced men, both knew what to report, what to hold back. Succinctly, Barney related all that had happened to him, without mentioning anything about smells or lack of them.

"I've been observing these pumas in action," Craig said. "They follow the centaurs. They move inefficiently. On Earth, they would not have survived for long at any period. Evolution moves at a kindlier, slower pace here on Lancelyn. What did you find in the belly of the puma you dissected? Any beetles?"

"That's the diet it would be condemned to on Earth; it'd be too slow to catch anything else," Barney said, smiling. "But it feeds on the centaurs all right. They are even slower-witted and slower-footed than it is. What's been happening with you, Craig?"

The leader paused for a moment, as if to collect his thoughts.

"I am established on the west side of a river forty yards wide," he stated. "There is plenty of cover all around me, mainly waist-high brush on this bank of the river. I have seen no centaurs since I arrived here, although I have heard them calling nearby. I also shot a puma which was stalking them, and have collected an amount of minute wild life from its body, which I shall soon investigate. I have trapped fish in the river, only two species so far, but the night nets are out. I have trapped birds, which have some interesting structural characteristics; I will tell you more when I have collated

a few more facts. Suffice it to say for the present that I suspect that a form of winged life might well be cock of the evolutionary walk here."

"Interesting," Barney commented. "Anything else?"

"One thing. There's an island downstream, just a small one. Between trees, I can see primitive buildings of some sort, carved out of rock, by the look of things. I shall be investigating tomorrow."

Craig asked Tim Anderson for his report. The young man's voice sounded more steady now than when he had first answered the group call. No doubt, Barney reflected, their prosaic reports had calmed him.

"I'm in a sort of dell," he said. "There's a small cliff at one end, cutting off the view. The dell's damp—lot of bright flowers, all odorless, lot of really ingenious climbers. And—and I've found out something about the centaurs! They must have some powerful parasites on them —micro-organisms. Craig, I'm frightened. . . . I was observing some ants, squatting down, quite still. The ants, by the way, move very slowly, like everything else here —except the micro-organisms. As I was squatting there, a centaur came around the little cliff at the end of the dell."

He paused. Both the older men caught the tension in his voice.

"About how far apart were you?" Craig asked gently.

"About . . . oh twenty-five yards, I suppose. Each of us was startled at the sight of the other. I got over the shock first—better reaction time, probably. I pulled my blaster and shot the creature down. That was a mistake, wasn't it?"

"If it was, we all make 'em," Craig replied reassuringly. "Carry on."

"I hit the creature," Tim's voice said. "After waiting for a couple of minutes, to make sure it was dead, I got up and went to it. It—she was a female: two breasts, udders, low on the torso, two pendants under the body. A healthy, young specimen, by the looks of her. When I had inspected it, I . . . I rolled it over with my foot. . . . Oh Lord, Craig—the underside of it, which had been

pressed against the ground, the underside was already well decayed. It—well, it just turned me sick!"

He paused. Both the others felt something of his sense of shock.

"What did you do then, Tim?" Barney asked.

"I'm afraid I turned tail. Panic. I shut myself in the overlander and took a disinfectant shower. It must have been something so *virulent,* you see, to wreak that amount of damage on a carcass within five minutes of death. The face . . . was all eaten away. And the underside of the breasts."

"Any . . . flies or suchlike about the body?" Craig inquired, in a detached tone.

"Not that I noticed," Tim said. "Perhaps it's something comes out of the ground."

"Have you been outside since the incident?" inquired Barney sharply.

"No," Tim confessed. "I'm sorry. I'll have pulled myself together by daylight."

"Don't worry, son. Get drunk! Remember we're only eighty miles away, if you want us. Next routine call, twelve noon tomorrow. Adios and out."

A subsidiary duty of the PEST fieldworkers was to send back full reports of their work to PEST H.Q. for more fully equipped scientists to use later as the basis of further study. Their main duty was to check on a planet's fitness for colonists. A planet, even if it was uninhabited by intelligent beings (according to galactic definition of that term), often had another species, known as the Plimsol Species, which made the world unsafe for peaceful farmers or their herds.

PEST's task was to discover if a Plimsol Species existed and, if so, suggest a way of eliminating it without upsetting the entire ecological balance of the world. This second part of the business was often the more difficult; it looked as if it were not going to be easy on Lancelyn II, Barney thought grimly, smoking his fifth successive cheroot and glancing out into the blue moonlight.

Sexton beetles? A virus? Bugs? If one of those three constituted a Plimsol Species, it could never be eradicated.

Suddenly he laughed harshly, spat his butt end aside, and got up to prepare a lasso for the morning. Then he threw himself contentedly onto his bunk.

He was up with the sun, standing at the door of his igloo, combing his beard, and sniffing the fresh air as dawn brightened. Behind him, frying liver and eggs smelled equally good.

It was an hour later, when Barney had finished his breakfast, that he observed some centaurs. Two males, a female, and a baby came slowly through the wood, cropping low bushes on their way. The female and the child were diverging further and further from the males. Owing to the thickness of the vegetation, when the female emerged onto the perimeter of the Plot, the two males were out of sight.

At his first glimpse of them, Barney seized up his tackle and ran like mad, bent low, to intercept them. As the female broke cover, he stood up only twenty feet from her. She stood frozen, staring at him without attempting to move, as he raised the blaster and fired; she dropped to the ground at once, without uttering a sound.

The child gave a bleat of puzzlement, circled its mother, and then began to head for the undergrowth, breaking into an uncertain jog-trot.

"Come back, you little dodger, I want you too!" Barney called, blundering after it.

He easily outpaced it, seized its shoulder, and turned it back toward the Plot. Taking a length of rope from one of the containers of his harness, Barney put a halter around the little thing's neck, whereupon it followed him docilely enough, mewing its bewilderment.

When they reached the mother again, Barney slipped his lasso over her head, paying out the line as he returned with the child to his igloo. There he drew the line tight and fixed it to an alarm system, after which he was free to examine the youngster he had caught.

"You're a pretty little beast," Barney said, "and no more than a couple of days old, I'm sure. Wait and I'll get you a lump of sugar. H'm, blind in one eye! Well, that's hard old Mother Nature for you. . . . Don't let it worry you."

He continued to talk gently and meditatively to the little animal. Its shivering stopped; it seemed to lose its fear. Standing no higher than Barney's massive knee, it looked more like a mixture of shaggy dog and monkey than pony and human: its little face was wrinkled; its teeth, just appearing through its gums, were the wide, blunt kind which indicates vegetarian habits. It had an instinctive way of springing sideways to Barney, presenting him with its good eye, but it turned about submissively enough when he handled it.

Highly pleased with his catch, Barney was still fondling the creature when his alarm bell rang. Dashing to the door, he was in time to see his corpse rising to its feet.

With a shout, he abruptly changed direction and headed for the overlander, where he sent out a call to Craig and Tim Anderson to come back to base at once.

Craig Hodges' leisurely voice responded within a matter of seconds. There was no reply from Tim, even after several minutes. Barney held the microphone as if he would wring its neck and swore into it.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked. "What's the boy doing? Why doesn't he answer?"

"Do you think those microbes he was afraid of have got him, Barney?" Craig asked.

Barney could detect the faint mockery in the other's voice. He knew if he answered "yes" his reputation would go down several notches; this made him wonder how much of the puzzle the leader of the expedition had already worked out for himself.

"There should be a simple explanation of why Tim doesn't answer," he said, with a hint of surliness. "He may be on his way back here now, in which case he would probably not have bothered to leave the line open."

"Check," Craig conceded. "A very large herd of centaurs passed near here in the night, heading in Tim's direction. Maybe he didn't like their company; personally, I don't think they are very agreeable creatures either."

"Have you seen any close by as yet, Craig?" Barney could not forbear to ask.

"No," Craig said, with a mysterious chuckle of triumph

in his voice. "Be with you inside two hours, Barney. Adios and out."

Ninety minutes later, Tim Anderson's overlander sped into view and drew up by the spaceship. Barney strolled over to meet it, hands in pockets. Tim sat in the driving cabin, windows closed, his face white as a sheet; only his nose had any color.

"Better stay away from me, Barney," he advised thickly, shouting through the window, "just in case you haven't caught the plague yet."

"Plague? What plague would that be?" Barney asked mildly.

"The plague that's carried by every centaur on Lancelyn II," Tim said. "I'm thick with it, better keep off!"

"If you've got the plague, why come back here?"

"I couldn't bear to die alone!"

"You're crazy, Tim! Come on, get out of that buggy. There's nothing more the matter with you than a common cold. Fresh air's what you need!"

The boy made a despairing gesture behind the glass.

"I tell you I've got something I caught off the centaurs," he persisted. "Listen, Barney, early this morning a terrific herd of centaurs passed over the downs just beyond my dell. When I flashed the headlights onto them, all the ones touched by the beam dropped down dead. I didn't hang around to examine them, but obviously they are infected by a parasite in the nervous system which kills and then devours them when their adrenalin flow increases."

"You're off the beam, son," Barney said kindly. "Come out and let me show you something."

By the time he had finally persuaded Tim to climb out, Craig had also arrived. When he had heard Tim's protestations, he shook his head in disagreement.

"Well, I'm sure I'm right," Tim said, blowing his nose voluminously. "We came to find the leading Plimsol Species, and for my money the conqueror microbe is it. Best thing is to clear out and leave the planet entirely alone."

"No," Craig said. "Sorry, but you're wrong, son. I found

the predominant species this morning—only it no longer predominates. It's extinct, or nearly extinct. The buildings on the island I mentioned in my report last night were very primitive mud huts, erected by a race of winged creatures—flying monkeys. They were carrion eaters. In every hut, I found their bodies buried under the mud of the floor."

"Religious rite?" Barney inquired.

"No. Mass suicide. Piecing the evidence together, I found they had had some sort of mass self-murder pact. In every case, the deed had been done with sharp fish-bones piercing the eye and brain."

"I've never heard of such a thing before!" Tim exclaimed, temporarily diverted from his plague. "Oh, lemmings, of course. . . . But what made the flying monkeys do it?"

"The predominant species of a planet is generally unbalanced," Craig said slowly. "Man is a case in point. It seems to be nature's traditional penalty she extracts from the top dogs. However, before we go into all that, let's see what excited Barney enough to make him call us back here."

"This isn't pretty," Barney said, with relish, "but it will cure Tim of his plague."

He led them to the hollow, to his temporary H.Q.

The baby centaur was tethered by the overlander. Close by, tied to the vehicle so that she could only stand up, was the mother centaur. She rolled an eye at the three men and mewed hopelessly as they approached. The baby showed signs of pleasure at seeing Barney again.

"Come up, my beauty!" Barney said, patting the mother's flank. As she faced them, her coat was glossy and thick. Slowly, Barney pushed her around, away from the overlander, displaying her other side to Tim and Craig.

Tim gasped. The bones of her skull, on this side, shone white and green amid putrescent flesh. Her torso was savaged and torn, the exposed skin giving every appearance of corruption. Where the other side of her had been sleek, on this side her coat was slimed and foul, her ribs mere ragged carrion.

"Camouflage," Barney explained. "If you look at her head-on, the effect is quite alarming. When you are right up close to her, looking hard, you can see it's all a fake—all the exposed bones and putrescence just a put-up job. Very ingenious."

Hesitantly, Tim went nearer.

"It's all right, she doesn't stink," Barney said. "She didn't carry protective mimicry that far; fortunately there was no need to. The puma, the centaur's natural foe, has no sense of smell. And since it is farsighted, it cannot detect the difference, close up, between a real and a fake corpse. So the centaurs have this ideal way of protection—as they can't run away, they just literally drop dead, bad side up, and get up again when they think danger is past. Fortunately, pumas won't touch decaying flesh."

"Whereas the flying monkeys lived on it," Craig interposed. "I think that's what drove them neurotic—every time they thought they'd found a rotting corpse, it got up and walked away."

"That can be shattering," Barney agreed. "I flushed a centaur yesterday, over by that dead log; when I went across and discovered what I thought was a corpse, I concluded two beasts were involved. It gave me nasty ideas about murderous centaurs, I tell you. I had not suspected the truth then."

Both Barney and Craig had noticed Tim's growing embarrassment. They turned smilingly to him as he said, "But the one I reported shooting in the dell yesterday—she fell camouflaged side down. That was when I began getting my plague theory."

Barney laughed.

"She couldn't choose which side she landed on," he said, "because she was dead. Now when I caught this prize girl here, I fired over her head, and she dropped instinctively, carrion-side up."

"The herd we came across first, when we arrived, were just shamming," Craig said. "We should have had quite a shock then if the slaughtered mass had got up and walked off!"

Color grew in Tim's cheeks. To hide it, he turned away

and petted the baby centaur, which now frisked contentedly by its mother's side.

"I'm sorry I've made such a fool of myself," he said. "I guess I was way off the beam."

"It happens to the best of us, especially at first," Barney replied. "Come on inside and have some coffee. It'll do your cold good."

"The centaur foal looks okay on both sides," Tim said, following them into the igloo. "I suppose the camouflage develops as the shaggy baby coat falls off?"

"It must be so," Barney agreed. "You notice it already has a nasty-looking dead eye on one side. And watch its trick of springing around so that an observer sees only its good side—like a card-player concealing his trump card as long as possible.

"Nature has some strange devices. . . . The centaurs are fairly close mammalian parallels to earthly flatfish —the flounder or the sole, for instance, which start life much like ordinary fish, with an eye on each side of their heads. As they develop, they flatten, and one eye actually travels across the forehead. If you've ever watched the transition filmed by high-speed photography, it's more impressive for a naturalist than a comet crossing the sky."

He served the coffee, handed around cheroots, and sat back, grinning across the table at Craig.

"Well then, old-timer," he said mock-pugnaciously, "you obviously aren't much impressed by my lucid exposition of the wonders of Carrion Country! I suppose you beat me to the punch, eh?"

Craig nodded his massive head and blew smoke from his nostrils, grinning in self-deprecation.

"While you were doing your trapper's hill-billy act," he remarked, "I was solving the problem by scientific deduction à la Sherlock Holmes. It's this fatal difference in our temperaments, Barney, which makes us the best PEST in the galaxy."

"No compliments, please," Barney begged. "They make my beard wither. Let's hear how you found out about these two-faced centaurs."

"I told you I shot a puma last night, and collected the

parasites from its body," Craig said. "Chief among these was a flea whose appearance strongly resembled the common rabbit flea, *spilopsyllus cuniculi*. Now the body temperature of the puma is low—only eighty-five degrees."

"Agreed," Barney said. "Its whole metabolism is low, by Earth standards."

"I found that by enclosing these fleas in a container at eighty-five, and then raising the temperature ten degrees, the fleas were forced into the next stage of their life-cycle. On my way back here just now, I trapped a centaur to check my results, and found its body temperature was ninety-five, as I had suspected. That proved to me that the bodies we had seen could not really have been dead."

Tim threw a lump of sugar to the small, inquiring nose thrust around the igloo door.

"This isn't my lucky day, Craig," he confessed. "How does that prove anything? I don't see it."

"Parasitology proves anything," Craig said, winking at Barney. "The fleas use pumas and centaurs as hosts. As you know, both sides of the predator-prey relationship are frequently utilized by parasites. These particular fleas transfer from one to the other at the moment when the puma is nuzzling disgruntledly around what it thinks is a dead, rotting body. They leave the pumas because their life-cycle impels them to seek a higher temperature—ninety-five degrees, in fact—for their next metamorphosis. Well, did you ever know a corpse to retain a temperature of ninety-five degrees? The fleas aren't fooled by the centaurs' act, even if the pumas are."

"The moral of which is, we are all looking for something different in life," said Barney.

"Well, it seems as if we've found what the colonists are looking for, after all," Tim remarked. "A nice, safe world with nothing very ferocious to scare them— once they've got used to the gruesome looks of the camouflage experts."

"The colonists are welcome to Lancelyn," Craig said, draining his coffee mug and rising. "Once you get to the bottom of it, it's a pretty dead-and-alive hole."

"Complete with a dead-and-alive animal," Barney agreed. "Depending on which way you look at it!"

* Judas Danced

It was not a fair trial.

You understand I was not inclined to listen properly, but it was not a fair trial. It had a mistrustful and furtive haste about it. Judge, counsel and jury all took care to be as brief and explicit as possible. I said nothing, but I knew why: everyone wanted to get back to the dances.

So it was not very long before the judge stood up and pronounced sentence:

"Alexander Abel Crowe, this court finds you guilty of murdering Parowen Scryban for the second time."

I could have laughed out loud. I nearly did.

He went on: "You are therefore condemned to suffer death by strangulation for the second time, which sentence will be carried out within the next week."

Around the court ran a murmur of excitement.

In a way, even I felt satisfied. It had been an unusual case: few are the people who care to risk facing death a second time; the first time you die makes the prospect worse, not better. For just a minute, the court was still; then it cleared with almost indecent haste. In a little while, only I was left there.

I, Alex Abel Crowe—or approximately he—came carefully down out of the prisoner's box and limped the length of the dusty room to the door. As I went, I looked at my hands. They weren't trembling.

Nobody bothered to keep a check on me. They knew they could pick me up whenever they were ready to execute sentence. I was unmistakable, and I had nowhere to go. I was the man with the clubfoot who could not dance; nobody could mistake me for anyone else. Only I could do that.

Outside in the dark sunlight, that wonderful woman stood waiting for me with her husband, waiting on the court steps. The sight of her began to bring back life and hurt to my veins. I raised my hand to her as my custom was.

"We've come to take you home, Alex," Husband said, stepping towards me.

"I haven't got a home," I said, addressing her.

"I mean *our* home," he informed me.

"Elucidation accepted," I said. "Take me away, take me away, take me away, Charlemagne. And let me sleep."

"You need sleep after all you have been through," he said. Why, he sounded nearly sympathetic.

Sometimes I called him Charlemagne, sometimes just Charley. Or Cheeps, or Jags, or Jaggers, or anything, as the mood took me. He seemed to forgive me. Perhaps he even liked it—I don't know. Personal magnetism takes you a long way; it has taken me so far I don't even have to remember names.

They stopped a passing taxi and we all climbed in. It was a tumbrel, they tell me. You know, French? Circa seventeen-eighty-something. Husband sat one side, Wife the other, each holding one of my arms, as if they thought I might get violent. I let them do it, although the idea amused me.

"Hallo, friends!" I said ironically. Sometimes I called them "parents," or "disciples," or sometimes "patients." Anything.

The wonderful woman was crying slightly.

"Look at her!" I said to Husband. "She's lovely when she cries, that I swear. I could have married her, you know, if I had not been dedicated. Tell him, you wonderful creature, tell him how I turned you down!"

Through her sobbing, she said, "Alex said he had more important things to do than sex."

"So you've got me to thank for Perdita!" I told him. "It was a big sacrifice, but I'm happy to see you happy." Often now I called her Perdita. It seemed to fit her. He laughed at what I had said, and then we were all laughing. Yes, it was good to be alive; I knew I made them feel

good to be alive. They were loyal. I had to give them something—I had no gold and silver.

The tumbrel stopped outside Charley's place—the Husband residence, I'd better say. On, the things I've called that place! Someone should have recorded them all. It was one of those inverted beehive houses: just room for a door and an elevator on the ground floor, but the fifth floor could hold a ballroom. Topply, topply. Up we went to the fifth. There was no sixth floor; had there been, I should have gone up there, the way I felt. I asked for it anyhow, just to see the wonderful woman brighten up. She liked me to joke, even when I wasn't in a joking mood. I could tell she still loved me so much it hurt her.

"Now for a miracle, ye pampered jades," I said, stepping forth, clumping into the living room.

I seized an empty vase from a low shelf and spat into it. Ah, the old cunning was still there! It filled at once with wine, sweet and bloody-looking. I sipped and found it good.

"Go on and taste it, Perdy!" I told her.

Wonderful w. turned her head sadly away. She would not touch that vase. I could have eaten every single strand of hair on her head, but she seemed unable to see the wine. I really believe she could not see that wine.

"Please don't go through all that again, Alex," she implored me wearily. Little faith, you see—the old, old story. (Remind me to tell you a new one I heard the other day.) I put my behind on one chair and my bad foot on another and sulked.

They came and stood by me . . . not too close.

"Come nearer," I coaxed, looking up under my eyebrows and pretending to growl at them. "I won't hurt you. I only murder Parowen Scryban, remember?"

"We've got to talk to you about that," Husband said desperately. I thought he looked as if he had aged.

"I think you look as if you have aged, Perdita," I said. Often I called him Perdita, too; why, man, they sometimes looked so worried you couldn't tell them apart.

"I cannot live forever, Alex," he replied. "Now try and concentrate about this killing, will you?"

I waved a hand and tried to belch. At times I can belch like a sinking ship.

"We do all we can to help you, Alex," he said. I heard him although my eyes were shut; can *you* do that? "But we can only keep you out of trouble if you co-operate. It's the dancing that does it; nothing else betrays you like dancing. You've got to promise you'll stay away from it. In fact, we want you to promise that you'll let us restrain you. To keep you away from the dancing. Something about that dancing . . ."

He was going on and on, and I could still hear him. But other things were happening. That word "dancing" got in the way of all his other words. It started a sort of flutter under my eyelids. I crept my hand out and took the wonderful woman's hand, so soft and lovely, and listened to that word "dancing" dancing. It brought its own rhythm, bouncing about like an eyeball inside my head. The rhythm grew louder. He was shouting.

I sat up suddenly, opening my eyes.

W. woman was on the floor, very pale.

"You squeezed too hard," she whispered.

I could see that her little hand was the only red thing she had.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I really wonder you two don't throw me out for good!" I couldn't help it, I just started laughing. I like laughing. I can laugh even when nothing's funny. Even when I saw their faces, I still kept laughing like mad.

"Stop it!" Husband said. For a moment he looked as if he would have hit me. But I was laughing so much I did not recognize him. It must have done them good to see me enjoying myself; they both needed a fillip, I could tell.

"If you stop laughing, I'll take you down to the club," he said, greasily bribing.

I stopped. I always know when to stop. With all humility, it is a great natural gift.

"The club's the place for me," I said. "I've already got a clubfoot—I'm halfway there!"

I stood up.

"Lead on, my loyal supporters, my liege lords," I ordered.

"You and I will go alone, Alex," Husband said. "The wonderful woman will stay here. She really ought to go to bed."

"What's in it for her?" I joked. Then I followed him to the elevator. He knows I don't like staying in any one place for long.

When I got to the club, I knew, I would want to be somewhere else. That's the worst of having a mission: it makes you terribly restless. Sometimes I am so restless I could die. Ordinary people just don't know what the word means. I could have married her if I had been ordinary. They call it destiny.

But the club was good.

We walked there. I limped there. I made sure I limped badly.

The club had a timescreen. That, I must admit, was my only interest in the club. I don't care for women. Or men. Not living women or men. I only enjoy them when they are back in time.

This night—I nearly said "this particular night," but there was nothing particularly particular about it—the timescreen had only been tuned roughly three centuries back into the past. At least, I guessed it was twenty-first-century stuff by the women's dresses and a shot of a power station. A large crowd of people was looking in as Perdita Caesar and I entered, so I started to pretend he had never seen one of the wall-screens before.

"The tele-eyes which are projected back over history consume a fabulous amount of power every second," I told him loudly in a voice which suggested I had swallowed a poker. "It makes them very expensive. It means private citizens cannot afford screens and tele-eyes, just as once they could not afford their own private motion pictures. This club is fortunately very rich. Its members sleep in gold leaf at night."

Several people were glancing around at me already. Caesar was shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

"The tele-eyes cannot get a picture further than twenty-

seven centuries back," I told him, "owing to the limitations of science. Science, as you know, is a system for taking away with one hand while giving with the other."

He could not answer cleverly. I went on: "It has also proved impossible, due to the aforesaid limitations, to send human beings further back in time than one week. And that costs so much that only governments can do it. As you may have heard, nothing can be sent ahead into time—there's no future in it!"

I had to laugh at that. It was funny, and quite spontaneous.

Many people were calling out to me, and Caesar Borgia was dragging at my arm, trying to make me be quiet.

"I wouldn't spoil anyone's fun!" I shouted. "You people get on with your watching; I'll get on with my speech."

But I did not want to talk to a lot of feather-bedders like them. So I sat down without saying another word, Boy Borgia collapsing beside me with a sigh of relief. Suddenly I felt very, very sad. Life just is not what it was; once upon a time, I could have married this husband's wife.

"Physically, you can go back one week," I whispered, "optically, twenty-seven centuries. It's very sad."

It was very sad. The people on the screen were also sad. They lived in the Entertainment Era, and appeared to be getting little pleasure from it. I tried to weep for them but failed because at the moment they seemed just animated history. I saw them as period pieces, stuck there a couple of generations before reading and writing had died out altogether and the fetters of literacy fell forever from the world. Little any of them cared for the patterns of history.

"I've had an idea I want to tell you about, Cheezer," I said. It was a good idea.

"Can't it wait?" he asked. "I'd like to see this scan. It's all about the European Allegiance."

"I must tell you before I forget."

"Come on," he said resignedly, getting up.

"You are too loyal to me," I complained. "You spoil me. I'll speak to St. Peter about it."

As meek as you like, I followed him into an anteroom. He drew himself a drink from an automatic man in one corner. He was trembling. I did not tremble, although at the back of my mind lurked many things to tremble about.

"Go on then, say whatever in hell you want to say," he told me, shading his eyes with his hand. I have seen him use that trick before; he did it after I killed Parowen Scryban the first time, I remember. There's nothing wrong with my memory, except in patches.

"I had this idea," I said, trying to recall it. "This idea —oh, yes. History. I got the idea looking at those twenty-first-century people. Mythology is the key to everything, isn't it? I mean, a man builds his life on a set of myths, doesn't he? Well, in our world, the so-called Western World, those accepted myths were religious until about mid-nineteenth century. By then, a majority of Europeans were literate, or within reach of it, and for a couple of centuries the myths became literary ones: tragedy was no longer the difference between grace and nature, but between art and reality."

Julius had dropped his hand. He was interested. I could see he wondered what was coming next. I hardly knew myself.

"Then mechanical aids—television, computers, scanners of every type—abolished literacy," I said. "Into the vacuum came the timescreens. Our mythologies are now historical: tragedy has become simply a failure to see the future."

I beamed at him and bowed, not letting him know I was beyond tragedy. He just sat there. He said nothing. Sometimes such terrible boredom descends on me that I can hardly fight against it.

"Is my reasoning sound?" I asked. (Two women looked into the room, saw me, and left again hurriedly. They must have sensed I did not want them, otherwise they would have come to me; I am young and handsome—I am not thirty-three yet.)

"You could always reason well," Marcus Aurelius Marconi said, "but it just never leads anywhere. God, I'm so tired."

"This bit of reasoning leads somewhere. I beg you to

believe it, Holy Roman," I said, flopping on my knees before him. "It's the state philosophy I've really been telling you about. That's why, although they keep the death penalty for serious crimes—like murdering a bastard called Parowen Scryban—they go back in time the next day and call off the execution. They believe you should die for your crime, you see? But more deeply they believe every man should face his true future. They've—we've all seen too many premature deaths on the timescreens. Romans, Normans, Celts, Goths, English, Israelis. Every race. Individuals—all dying too soon, failing to fulfil—"

Oh, I admit it, I was crying on his knees by then, although bravely disguising it by barking like a dog: a Great Dane. Hamlet. Not in our stars but in our selves. (I've watched W. S. write that bit.)

I was crying at last to think the police would come without fail within the next week to snuff me out, and then resurrect me again, according to my sentence. I was remembering what it was like last time. They took so long about it.

They took so long. Though I struggled, I could not move; those police know how to hold a man. My windpipe was blocked, as sentence of court demanded.

And then, it seemed, the boxes sailed in. Starting with small ones, they grew bigger. They were black boxes, all of them. Faster they came, and faster, inside me and out. I'm telling you how it felt, my God! And they blocked the whole, whole universe, black and red. With my lungs really crammed tight with boxes, out of the world I went. Dead!

Into limbo I went.

I don't say nothing happened, but I could not grasp what was happening there, and I was unable to participate. Then I was alive again.

It was abruptly the day before the strangulation once more, and the government agent had come back in time and rescued me, so that from one point of view I was not strangled. *But* I still remembered it happening, and the boxes, and limbo. Don't talk to me about paradoxes. The government expended several billion megavolts sending

that man back for me, and those megavolts account for all paradoxes. I was dead and then alive again.

Now I had to undergo it all once more. No wonder there was little crime nowadays; the threat of that horrible experience held many a likely criminal back. But I *had* to kill Parowen Scryban; just so long as they went back and resurrected him after I had finished with him, I had to go and do it again. Call it a moral obligation. No one understands. It is as if I were living in a world of my own.

"Get up, get up! You're biting my ankles."

Where had I heard that voice before? At last I could no longer ignore it. Whenever I try to think, voices interrupt. I stopped chewing whatever I was chewing, unblocked my eyes, and sat up. This was just a room; I had been in rooms before. A man was standing over me; I did not recognize him. He was just a man.

"You look as if you have aged," I told him.

"I can't live forever, thank God," he said. "Now get up and let's get you home. You're going to bed."

"What home?" I asked. "What bed? Who in the gentle name of anyone may you be?"

He looked sick.

"Just call me Adam," he said sickly.

I recognized him then and went with him. We had been in some sort of a club; he never told me why. I still don't know why we went to that club.

The house he took me to was shaped like a beehive upside down, and I walked there like a drunk. A club-footed drunk.

This wonderful stranger took me up in an elevator to a soft bed. He undressed me and put me in that soft bed as gently as if I had been his son. I am really impressed by the kindness strangers show me; personal magnetism, I suppose.

For as long as I could after he had left me, I lay in the bed in the inverted beehive. Then the darkness grew thick and sticky, and I could imagine all the fat, furry bodies, chitinously winged, of the bees on the ceiling. A minute more and I should fall headfirst into them. Stub-

bornly, I fought to sweat it out, but a man can stand only so much.

On hands and knees I crawled out of bed and out of the room. Quickly, softly, I clicked the door shut behind me; not a bee escaped.

People were talking in a lighted room along the corridor. I crawled to the doorway, looking and listening. The wonderful stranger talked to the wonderful woman; she was in night attire, with a hand bandaged.

She was saying: "You will have to see the authorities in the morning and petition them."

He was saying: "It'll do no good. I can't get the law changed. You know that. It's hopeless."

I merely listened.

Sinking onto the bed, he buried his face in his hands, finally looking up to say: "The law insists on personal responsibility. We've got to take care of Alex. It's a reflection of the time we live in; because of the time-screens, we've got—whether we like it or not—historical perspectives. We can see that the whole folly of the past was due to failures in individual liability. Our laws are naturally framed to correct that, which they do; it just happens to be tough on us."

He sighed and said, "The sad thing is, even Alex realizes that. He talked quite sensibly to me at the club about not evading the future."

"It hurts me most when he talks sensibly," the wonderful double-you said. "It makes you realize he is still capable of suffering."

He took her bandaged hand, almost as if they had a pain they hoped to alleviate by sharing it between them.

"I'll go and see the authorities in the morning," he promised, "and ask them to let the execution be final—no reprieve afterwards."

Even that did not seem to satisfy her.

Perhaps, like me, she could not tell what either of them was talking about. She shook her head miserably from side to side.

"If only it hadn't been for his clubfoot," she said. "If only it hadn't been for that, he could have danced the sickness out of himself."

Her face was growing more and more twisted.

It was enough. More.

"Laugh and grow fat," I suggested. I croaked because my throat was dry. My glands are always like bullets. It reminded me of a frog, so I hopped spontaneously into the room. They did not move; I sat on the bed with them.

"All together again," I said.

They did not move.

"Go back to bed, Alex," she of the wonderfulness said in a low voice.

They were looking at me; goodness knows what they wanted me to say or do. I stayed where I was. A little green clock on a green shelf said nine o'clock.

"Oh, holy heavens!" the double-you said. "What does the future hold?"

"Double chins for you, double-yous for me," I joked. That green clock said a minute past nine. I felt as if its little hand were slowly, slowly disemboweling me.

If I waited long enough, I knew I should think of something. They talked to me while I thought and waited; what good they imagined they were doing is beyond me, but I would not harm them. They mean well. They're the best people in the world. That doesn't mean to say I have to listen to them.

The thought about the clock arrived. Divine revelation.

"The dancing will be on now," I said, standing up like a jackknife.

"No!" Husband said.

"No!" Perdita said.

"You look as if you have aged," I told them. That is my favorite line in all speech.

I ran out of the room, slamming the door behind me, ran step-club-step-club down the passage, and hurled myself into the elevator. With infinitesimal delay, I chose the right button and sank to ground level. There, I wedged the lattice door open with a chair; that put the elevator out of action.

People in the street took no notice of me. The fools just did not realize who I was. Nobody spoke to me as I hurried along, so of course I replied in kind.

Thus I came to the dance area.

Every community has its dance area. Think of all that drama, gladiatorial contests, reading, and sport have ever meant in the past; now they are all merged into dance, inevitably, for only by dance—our kind of dance—can history be interpreted. And interpretation of history is our being, because through the timescreens we see that history is life. It lives around us, so we dance it. Unless we have clubfeet.

Many dances were in progress among the thirty permanent sets. The sets were only casually separated from each other, so that spectators or dancers, going from one to another, might get the sense of everything happening at once, which is the sense the timescreens give you.

That is what I savagely love about history. It is not past; it is always going on. Cleopatra lies forever in the sweaty arms of Anthony. Socrates continually gulps his hemlock down. You just have to be watching the right screen or the right dance.

Most of the dancers were amateurs—although the term means little where everyone dances out his role whenever possible. I stood among a crowd, watching. The bright movements have a dizzying effect; they excite me. To one side of me, Marco Polo sweeps exultantly through Cathay to Kubla Khan. Ahead, four children, who represent the satellites of Jupiter, glide out to meet the somber figure of Galileo Galilei. To the other side, the Persian poet Firdausi leaves for exile in Bagdad. Farther still, I catch a glimpse of Heyerdahl turning toward the tide.

And if I cross my eyes, raft, telescope, pagoda, palm, all mingle. That is meaning! If I could only dance it!

I cannot stay still. Here is my restlessness again, my only companion. I move, eyes unfocused. I pass around the sets or across them, mingling stiff-legged among the dancers. Something compels me, something I cannot remember. Now I cannot even remember who I am. I've gone beyond mere identity.

Everywhere the dancing is faster, matching my heart. I would not harm anyone, except one person who harmed

me eternally. It is he I must find. Why do they dance so fast? The movements drive me like whips.

Now I run into a mirror. It stands on a crowded set. I fight with the creature imprisoned in it, thinking it real. Then I understand that it is only a mirror. Shaking my head, I clear the blood from behind my eyes and regard myself. Yes, that is unmistakably me. And I remember who I am meant to be.

I first found who I was meant to be as a child, when I saw one of the greatest dramas of all. There it was, captured by the timescreens! The soldiers and centurions came, and a bragging multitude. The sky grew dark as they banged three crosses into the ground. And when I saw the Man they nailed upon the central cross, I knew I had His face.

Here it is now, that same sublime face, looking at me in pity and pain out of the glass. Nobody believes me; I no longer tell them who I think I am. But one thing I know I have to do. I have to do *it*.

So now I run again clump-trot-clump-trot, knowing just what to look for. All these great sets, pillars and panels of concrete and plastic, I run around them all, looking.

And here it is. Professionals dance out this drama, my drama, so difficult and intricate and sad. Pilate in dove-gray, Mary Magdalene moves in green. Hosts of dancers fringe them, representing the crowd who did not care. I care! My eyes burn among them, seeking. Then I have the man I want.

He is just leaving the set to rest out of sight until the cue for his last dance. I follow him, keeping behind cover like a crab in a thicket.

Yes! He looks just like me! He is my living image, and consequently bears That face. Yet it is now overlaid with make-up, pink and solid, so that when he comes out of the bright lights he looks like a corpse.

I am near enough to see the thick muck on his skin, with its runnels and wrinkles caused by sweat and movement. Underneath it all, the true face is clear enough to me, although the make-up plastered on it represents Judas.

To have That face and to play Judas! It is the most

terrible of all wickedness. But this is Parowen Scryban, whom I have twice murdered for this very blasphemy. It is some consolation to know that although the government slipped back in time and saved him afterwards, he must still remember those good deaths. Now I must kill him again.

As he turns into a restroom, I have him. Ah, my fingers slip into that slippery pink stuff; but underneath, the skin is firm. He is small, slender, tired with the strain of dancing. He falls forward with me on his back.

I kill him now, although in a few hours they will come back and rescue him and it will all not have happened. Never mind the shouting: squeeze. Squeeze, dear God!

When blows fall on my head from behind, it makes no difference. Scryban should be dead by now, the traitor. I roll off him and let many hands tie me into a strait jacket.

Many lights are in my eyes. Many voices are talking. I just lie there, thinking I recognize two of the voices, one a man's, one a woman's.

The man says: "Yes, Inspector, I *know* that under law parents are responsible for their own children. We look after Alex as far as we can, but he's mad. He's a throwback! I—God, Inspector, I *hate* the creature."

"You mustn't say that!" the woman cries. "Whatever he does, he's our son."

They sound too shrill to be true. I cannot think what they make such a fuss about. So I open my eyes and look at them. She is a wonderful woman but I recognize neither her nor the man; they just do not interest me. Scryban I do recognize.

He is standing rubbing his throat. He is a mess with his two faces all mixed in together like a Picasso. Because he is breathing, I know they have come back and saved him again. No matter; he will remember.

The man they call Inspector (and who, I ask, would want a name like that?) goes over to speak to Scryban.

"Your father tells me you are actually this madman's brother," he says to Scryban. Judas hangs his head, though he continues to massage his neck.

"Yes," he says. He is as quiet as the woman was shrill; strange how folks vary. "Alex and I are twin brothers. I changed my name years ago—the publicity, you know . . . harmful to my professional career . . ."

How terribly tired and bored I feel.

Who is whose brother, I ask myself, who mothers whom? I'm lucky; I own no relations. These people look like sad company. The saddest in the universe.

"I think you all look as if you have aged!" I shout suddenly.

That makes the Inspector come and stand over me, which I dislike. He has knees halfway up his legs. I manage to resemble one of the tritons on one of Benvenuto Cellini's salt-cellars, and so he turns away at last to speak to Husband.

"All right," he says. "I can see this is just one of those things nobody can be responsible for. I'll arrange for the reprieve to be countermanded. This time, when the devil is dead he stays dead."

Husband embraces Scryban. Wonderful woman begins to cry. Traitors all! I start to laugh, making it so harsh and loud and horrible it frightens even me.

What none of them understands is this: on the third time I shall rise again.

* Psyclops

Mmmm I.

First statement: I am I. I am everything. Everything, everywhere.

The universe is constructed of me, I am the whole of it. Am I? What is that throbbing that is not of me? That must be me too; after a while I shall understand it. All now is dim. Dim mmmm.

Even I am dim. In all this great strangeness and darkness of me, in all this universe of me, I am shadow. A memory of me. Could I be a memory of . . . not—me? Paradox: if I am everything, could there be a not-me?

Why am I having thoughts? Why am I not, as I was before, just mmmm?

Wake up! It's urgent!

No! Deny it! I am the universe. If you can speak to me you must be me, so I command you to be still. There must be only the soothing mmmm.

. . . you are not the universe! Listen!

Louder?

Can you hear at last?

Non-comprehension. I must be everything. Can there be a part of me, like the throbbing, which is . . . separate?

Am I getting through? Answer!

Who . . . are you?

Do not be frightened.

Are you another . . . universe?

I am not a universe. You are not a universe. You are in danger and I must help you.

Mmmm. Must be mmmm. . . .

. . . If only there were a psychofetalist within light-

years of here. . . . Well, keep trying. Wake up! You must wake up to survive!

Who are you?

I am your father.

Non-comprehension. Are you the throbbing which is not me?

No. I am a long way from you. Light-years away.

You bring me feelings of . . . pain.

Don't be afraid of it, but know there is much pain all about you. I am in constant pain.

Interest.

Good! First things first. You are most important.

I know that. All this is not happening. Somehow I catch these echoes, these dreams.

Try to concentrate. You are only one of millions like you. You and I are of the same species: human beings. I am born, you are unborn.

Meaningless.

Listen! Your "universe" is inside another human being. Soon you will emerge into the real universe.

Still meaningless. Curious.

Keep alert. I will send you pictures to help you understand. . . .

Uh. . . ? Distance? Sight? Color? Form? Definitely do not like this. Frightened. Frightened of falling, insecure. . . . Must immediately retreat to safe mmmm. Mmmm.

Better let him rest! After all, he's only six months; at the Pre-natal Academies they don't begin rousing and education till seven and a half months. And then they're trained to the job. If only I knew—my leg, you blue swine!

That picture . . .

Well done! I'm really sorry to rouse you so early, but it's vital.

Praise for me, warm feelings. Good. Better than being alone in the universe.

That's a great step forward, son. I can almost realize how the Creator felt, when you say that.

Non-comprehension.

Sorry, my fault; let the thought slip by. Must be care-

ful. You were going to ask me about the picture I sent you. Shall I send again?

Only a little at once. Curious. Shape, color, beauty. Is that the real universe?

That was just Earth I showed you, where I was born, where I hope you will be born.

Non-comprehension. Show again . . . shapes, tones, scents. . . . Ah, this time not so strange. Different?

Yes, a different picture. Many pictures of Earth. Look.

Ah. . . . Better than my darkness. . . . I know only my darkness, sweet and warm, yet I seem to remember those —trees.

That's a race memory, son. Your faculties are beginning to work, now.

More beautiful pictures please.

We cannot waste too long on the pictures. I've got a lot to tell you before you get out of range. These blue devils—

Why do you cease sending so abruptly? Hello? . . . Nothing. Father? . . . Nothing. Was there ever anything, or have I been alone and dreaming?

Nothing in all my universe but the throbbing. Is someone here with me? No, no answer. I must ask the voice, if the voice comes back. Now I must mmmm. Am no longer content as I was before. Strange feelings. . . . I want more pictures; I want . . . to . . .

Mmmm.

Dreaming myself to be a fish, fin-tailed, flickering through deep, still water. All is green and warm and without menace, and I swim forever with assurance. . . . And then the water splits into lashing cords and plunges down, down, down a sunlit cliff. I fight to turn back, carried forward, fighting to return to the deep, sure dark—

—if you want to save yourself! Wake if you want to save yourself! I can't hold out much longer. Another few days across these mountains—

Go away! Leave me to myself. I can have nothing to do with you.

You must try and understand! I know it's agony for

you, but you must stir yourself and take in what I say. It is imperative.

Nothing is imperative here. And now my mind seems to clear. Yes! I exist in the darkness where formerly there was nothing. Yes, there are imperatives; that I can recognize. Father?

What are you trying to say?

Confused. Understanding better, trying harder, but so confused.

Do not worry about that. It is your twin sister. The Pollux II hospital diagnosed twins, one boy and one girl.

So many concepts I cannot grasp. I should despair but for curiosity prodding me on. I'm one of a pair?

There you have it. That is a little girl lying next to you: you can hear her heart beating. Your mother—

Stop, Stop! Too much to understand at once. Must think to myself about this.

Keep calm. There is something you must do for me—for us all. If you do that, there is no danger.

Tell me quickly.

As yet it is too difficult. In a few days you will be ready—if I can hang on that long.

Why is it difficult?

Only because you are small.

Where are you?

I am on a world like Earth which is ninety light-years from Earth and getting farther from you even as we communicate together.

Why? How? Don't understand. So much is now beyond my understanding; before you came everything was peaceful and dim.

Lie quiet and don't fret, son. You're doing well; you take the points quickly, you'll reach Earth yet. You are traveling toward Earth in a spaceship which left Mirone, planet where I am, sixteen days ago.

Send that picture of a spaceship again.

Coming up. . . .

It is a kind of enclosure for us all. That idea I can more or less grasp, but you don't explain distances to me satisfactorily.

These are big distances, what we call light-years. I can't

picture them for you properly because a human mind never really grasps them.

Then they don't exist.

Unfortunately they exist all right. But they are only comprehensible as mathematical concepts. OHHH! My leg. . . .

Why are you stopping? I remember you suddenly stopped before. You send a horrible pain thought, then you are gone. Answer.

Wait a minute.

I can hardly hear you. Now I am interested, why do you not continue? Are you there?

. . . this is all beyond me. We're all finished. Judy, my love, if only I could reach you. . . .

Who are you talking to? This is frustrating. You are so faint and your message so blurred.

Call you when I can. . . .

Fear and pain. Only symbols from his mind to mine, yet they have an uncomfortable meaning of their own—something elusive. Perhaps another race memory.

My own memory is not good. Un-used. I must train it. Something he said eludes me; I must try and remember it. Yet why should I bother? None of it really concerns me, I am safe here, safe forever in this darkness. This whole thing is imagination. I am talking to myself. Wait! I can feel projections coming back again. Do not trouble to listen. Curious.

. . . gangrene, without doubt. Shall be dead before these blue devils get me to their village. So much Judy and I planned to do. . . .

Are you listening, son?

No, no.

Listen carefully while I give you instructions.

Have something to ask you.

Please save it. The connection between us is growing attenuated; soon we will be out of mind range.

Indifferent.

My dear child, how could you be other than indifferent! I am truly sorry to have broken so early into your fetal sleep.

An unnamable sensation, half-pleasant: gratitude, love? No doubt a race memory.

It may be so. Try to remember me—later. Now, business. Your mother and I were on our way back to Earth when we stopped on this world Mirone, where I now am. It was an unnecessary luxury to break our journey. How bitterly now I wish we had never stopped.

Why did you?

Well, it was chiefly to please Judy—your mother. This is a beautiful world, around the North Pole, anyhow. We had wandered some way from the ship when a group of natives burst out upon us.

Natives?

People who live here. They are sub-human, blue-skinned and hairless—not pretty to look at.

Picture!

I think you'd be better without one. Judy and I ran for the ship. We were nearly up to it when a rock caught me behind the knee—they were pitching rocks at us—and I went down. Judy never noticed until she was in the air-lock, and then the savages were on me. My leg was hurt; I couldn't even put up a fight.

Please tell me no more of this. I want mmmm.

Listen, son! That's all the frightening part. The savages are taking me over the mountains to their village. I don't think they mean to harm me; I'm just a . . . curiosity to them.

Please let me mmmm.

You can go comatose as soon as I've explained how these little spacecraft work. Astrogating, the business of getting from one planet to another, is far too intricate a task for anyone but an expert to master. I'm not an expert; I'm a geohistorian. So the whole thing is done by a robot pilot. You feed it details like payload, gravities and destination, and it juggles them with the data in its memory banks and works out all the course for you—carries you home safely, in fact. Do you get all that?

This sounds complicated.

Now you're talking like your mother, boy. She's never bothered, but actually it's all simple; the complications

take place under the steel paneling where you don't worry about them. The point I'm trying to make is that steering is all automatic once you've punched in a few co-ordinates.

I'm tired.

So am I. Fortunately, before we left the ship that last time, I had set up the figures for Earth. OK?

If you had not, she would not have been able to get home?

Exactly it. Keep trying! She left Mirone safely and you are now heading for Earth—but you'll never make it. When I set the figures up, they were right; but my not being aboard made them wrong. Every split second of thrust the ship makes is calculated for an extra weight that isn't there. It's here with me, being hauled along a mountain.

Is this bad? Does it mean we reach Earth too fast?

No, son. IT MEANS YOU'LL NEVER REACH EARTH AT ALL. The ship moves in a hyperbola, and although my weight is only about one eight-thousandth of total ship's mass, that tiny fraction of error will have multiplied itself into a couple of light-years by the time you get adjacent to the solar system.

I'm trying, but this talk of distance means nothing to me. Explain it again.

Where you are there is neither light nor space; how do I make you feel what a light-year is? No, you'll just have to take it from me that the crucial point is, you'll shoot right past the Earth.

Can't we go on?

You will—if nothing is done about it. But landfall will be delayed some thousands of years.

You are growing fainter. Strain too much. Must mmmm.

The fish again, and the water. No peace in the pool now. Cool pool, cruel pool, pool. . . . The waters whirl toward the brink.

I am the fish-fetus. Have I dreamed? Was there a voice talking to me? It seems unlikely. Something I had to ask it, one gigantic fact which made nonsense of everything; something—cannot remember.

Perhaps there was no voice. Perhaps in this darkness I

have taken a wrong choice between sanity and non-sanity.

. . . thank heavens for hot spring water. . . .

Hello! Father?

How long will they let me lie here in this pool? They must realize I'm not long for this world, or any other.

I'm awake and answering!

Just let me lie here. Son, it's man's first pleasure and his last to lie and swill in hot water. Wish I could live to know you. . . . However. Here's what you have to do.

Am powerless here. Uable to do anything.

Don't get frightened. There's something you already do very expertly-telemit.

Non-comprehension.

We talk to each other over this growing distance by what is called telepathy. It's part gift, part skill. It happens to be the only contact between distant planets, except spaceships. But whereas spaceships take time to get anywhere, thought is instantaneous.

Understood.

Good. Unfortunately, whereas spaceships get anywhere in time, thought has a definite limited range. Its span is as strictly governed as—well, as the size of a plant, for instance. When you are fifty light-years from Mirone, contact between us will abruptly cease.

How far apart are we now?

At the most we have forty-eight hours more in contact.

Don't leave me. I shall be lonely!

I'll be lonely too—but not for long. But you, son, you are already halfway to Earth, or as near as I can estimate it you are. As soon as contact between us ceases, you must call TRE.

Which means?

Telepath Radial Earth. It's a general control and information center, permanently beamed for any sort of emergency. You can raise them. I can't.

They won't know me.

I'll give you their call pattern. They'll soon know you when you telemit. You can give them my pattern for identification if you like. You must explain what is happening.

Will they believe?

Of course.

Are they real?

Of course. Tell TRE what the trouble is; they'll send out a fast ship to pick Judy and you up before you are out of range.

I want to ask you—

Wait a minute, son. . . . You're getting faint . . . Can you smell the gangrene over all those light-years? . . . These blue horrors are lifting me out of the spring, and I'll probably pass out. Not much time . . .

Pain. Pain and silence. All like a dream.

. . . distance . . .

Father! Louder!

. . . too feeble. . . . Done all I could. . . .

Why did you rouse me and not communicate with my mother?

The village! We're nearly there. Just down the valley and then it's journey's end . . . Human race only developing telepathic powers gradually . . . Steady, you fellows!

The question, answer the question.

That is the answer. Easy down the slope, boys, don't burst this big leg, eh? Ah . . . I have telepathic ability but Judy hasn't; I couldn't call her a yard away. But you have the ability . . . Easy there! All the matter in the universe is in my leg . . .

You sound so muddled. Has my sister this power?"

Good old Mendelian theory. . . . You and your sister, one sensitive, one not. Two eyes of the giant and only one can see properly . . . the path's too steep to—whoa, Cyclops, steady, boy, or you'll put out that other eye.

Cannot understand!

Understand? My leg's a flaming torch—Steady, steady! Gently down the steep blue hill.

Father!

What's the matter?

I can't understand. Are you talking of real things?

Sorry, boy. Steady now. Touch of delirium; it's the

pain. You'll be OK if you get in contact with TRE. Remember?

Yes, I remember. If only I could . . . I don't know. Mother is *real* then?

Yes. You must look after her.

And is the giant real?

The giant? What giant? You mean the giant hill. The people are climbing up the giant hill. Up to my giant leg. Goodbye, son. I've got to see a blue man about a . . . a leg . . .

Father! Wait, wait, look, see, I can move. I've just discovered I can *turn*. Father!

No answer now. Just a stream of silence. I have got to call TRE.

Plenty of time. Perhaps if I *turn* first. . . . Easy. I'm only six months, he said. Maybe I could call more easily if I was outside, in the real universe. If I turn again.

Now if I *kick*. . . .

Ah, easy now. Kick again. Good. Wonder if my legs are blue.

Kick.

Something yielding.

Kick. . . .

* Outside

They never went out of the house.

The man whose name was Harley used to get up first. Sometimes he would take a stroll through the building in his sleeping suit—the temperature remained always mild, day after day. Then he would rouse Calvin, the handsome, broad man who looked as if he could command a dozen talents and never actually used one. He made as much company as Harley needed.

Dapple, the girl with gray eyes and black hair, was a light sleeper. The sound of the two men talking would wake her. She would get up and go to rouse May; together they would go down and prepare a meal. While they were doing that, the other two members of the household, Jagger and Pief, would be rousing.

That was how every "day" began: not with the inkling of anything like dawn, but just when the six of them had slept themselves back into wakefulness. They never exerted themselves during the day, but somehow when they climbed back into their beds they slept soundly enough.

The only excitement of the day occurred when they first opened the store. The store was a small room between the kitchen and the blue room. In the far wall was set a wide shelf, and upon this shelf their existence depended. Here, all their supplies "arrived." They would lock the door of the bare room last thing, and when they returned in the morning their needs—food, linen, a new washing machine—would be awaiting them on the shelf. That was just an accepted feature of their existence; they never questioned it among themselves.

On this morning, Dapple and May were ready with the meal before the four men came down. Dapple even

had to go to the foot of the wide stairs and call before Pief appeared, so that the opening of the store had to be postponed till after they had eaten; for although the opening had in no way become a ceremony, the women were nervous about going in alone. It was one of those things. . . .

"I hope to get some tobacco," Harley said as he unlocked the door. "I'm nearly out of it."

They walked in and looked at the shelf. It was all but empty.

"No food," observed May, hands on her aproned waist. "We shall be on short rations today."

It was not the first time this had happened. Once—how long ago now?—they kept little track of time—no food had appeared for three days and the shelf had remained empty. They had accepted the shortage placidly.

"We shall eat you before we starve, May," Pief said, and they laughed briefly to acknowledge the joke, although Pief had cracked it last time too. Pief was an unobstrusive little man, not the sort one would notice in a crowd. His small jokes were his most precious possession.

Two packets only lay on the ledge. One was Harley's tobacco, one was a pack of cards. Harley pocketed the one with a grunt and displayed the other, slipping the pack from its wrapping and fanning it towards the others.

"Anyone play?" he asked.

"Poker," Jagger said.

"Canasta."

"Gin rummy."

"We'll play later," Calvin said. "It'll pass the time in the evening." The cards would be a challenge to them; they would have to sit together to play, around a table, facing each other.

Nothing was in operation to separate them, but there seemed no strong force to keep them together, once the tiny business of opening the store was over. Jagger worked the vacuum cleaner down the hall, past the front door that did not open, and rode it up the stairs to clean the upper landings; not that the place was dirty, but cleaning was something you did anyway in the morning. The women sat with Pief, desultorily discussing how to man-

age the rationing, but after that they lost contact with each other and drifted away on their own. Calvin and Harley had already strolled off in different directions.

The house was a rambling affair. It had few windows, and such as there were did not open, were unbreakable, and admitted no light. Darkness lay everywhere; illumination from an invisible source followed one's entry into a room—the black had to be entered before it faded. Every room was furnished, but with odd pieces that bore little relation to each other, as if there was no purpose for the room. Rooms equipped for purposeless beings have that air about them.

No plan was discernible on first or second floor or in the long, empty attics. Only familiarity could reduce the mazelike quality of room and corridor. At least there was ample time for familiarity.

Harley spent a long while walking about, hands in pockets. At one point he met Dapple; she was drooping gracefully over a sketchbook, amateurishly copying a picture that hung on one of the walls—a picture of the room in which she sat. They exchanged a few words, then Harley moved on.

Something lurked in the edge of his mind like a spider in the corner of its web. He stepped into what they called the piano room, and then he realized what was worrying him. Almost furtively, he glanced around as the darkness slipped away, and then looked at the big piano. Some strange things had arrived on the shelf from time to time and had been distributed over the house; one of them stood on top of the piano now.

It was a model, heavy and about two feet high, squat, almost round, with a sharp nose and four buttressed vanes. Harley knew what it was. It was a ground-to-space ship, a model of the burly ferries that lumbered up to the spaceships proper.

That had caused them more unsettlement than when the piano itself had appeared in the store. Keeping his eyes on the model, Harley seated himself on the piano stool and sat tensely, trying to draw *something* from the rear of his mind . . . something connected with spaceships.

Whatever it was, it was unpleasant, and it dodged

backwards whenever he thought he had laid a mental finger on it. So it always eluded him. If only he could discuss it with someone, it might be teased out of its hiding place. Unpleasant; menacing, yet with a promise entangled in the menace.

If he could get at it, meet it boldly face to face, he could do . . . something definite. And until he had faced it, he could not even say what the something definite was he wanted to do.

A footfall behind him. Without turning, Harley deftly pushed up the piano lid and ran a finger along the keys. Only then did he look back carelessly over his shoulder. Calvin stood there, hands in pockets, looking solid and comfortable.

"Saw the light in here," he said easily. "I thought I'd drop in as I was passing."

"I was thinking I would play the piano awhile," Harley answered with a smile. The thing was not discussable, even with a near acquaintance like Calvin because . . . because of the nature of the thing . . . because one had to behave like a normal, unworried human being. That, at least, was sound and clear and gave him comfort: behave like a normal human being.

Reassured, he pulled a gentle tumble of music from the keyboard. He played well. They all played well, Dapple, May Pief . . . as soon as they had assembled the piano, they had all played well. Was that—natural? Harley shot a glance at Calvin. The stocky man leaned against the instrument, back to that disconcerting model, not a care in the world. Nothing showed on his face but an expression of bland amiability. They were all amiable, never quarreling together.

The six of them gathered for a scanty lunch, their talk was trite and cheerful, and then the afternoon followed on the same pattern as the morning, as all the other mornings: secure, comfortable, aimless. Only to Harley did the pattern seem slightly out of focus; he now had a clue to the problem. It was small enough, but in the dead calm of their days it was large enough.

May had dropped the clue. When she helped herself to jelly, Jagger laughingly accused her of taking more than

her fair share. Dapple, who always defended May, said: "She's taken less than you, Jagger."

"No," May corrected, "I think I *have* more than anyone else. I took it for an interior motive."

It was the kind of pun anyone made at times. But Harley carried it away to consider. He paced around one of the silent rooms. Interior, ulterior motives. . . . Did the others here feel the disquiet he felt? Had they a reason for concealing that disquiet? And another question:

Where was "here"?

He shut that one down sharply.

Deal with one thing at a time. Grope your way gently to the abyss. Categorize your knowledge.

One: Earth was getting slightly the worst of a cold war with Nitity.

Two: the Nititians possessed the alarming ability of being able to assume the identical appearance of their enemies.

Three: by this means they could permeate human society.

Four: Earth was unable to view the Nititian civilization from inside.

Inside . . . a wave of claustrophobia swept over Harley as he realized that these cardinal facts he knew bore no relation to this little world inside. They came, by what means he did not know, from outside, the vast abstraction that none of them had ever seen. He had a mental picture of a starry void in which men and monsters swam or battled, and then swiftly erased it. Such ideas did not conform with the quiet behavior of his companions; if they never spoke about outside, did they think about it?

Uneasily, Harley moved about the room; the parquet floor echoed the indecision of his footsteps. He had walked into the billiard room. Now he prodded the balls across the green cloth with one finger, preyed on by conflicting intentions. The red spheres touched and rolled apart. That was how the two halves of his mind worked. Irreconcilables: he should stay here and conform; he should . . . not stay here (remembering no time when he was not here, Harley could frame the second idea no more clearly than that). Another point of pain was that "here"

and "not here" seemed to be not two halves of a homogeneous whole, but two dissonances.

The ivory slid wearily into a pocket. He decided. He would not sleep in his room tonight.

They came from the various parts of the house to share a bedtime drink. By tacit consent the cards had been postponed until some other time; there was, after all, so much other time.

They talked about the slight nothings that comprised their day, the model of one of the rooms that Calvin was building and May furnishing, the faulty light in the upper corridor which came on too slowly. They were subdued. It was time once more to sleep, and in that sleep who knew what dreams might come? But they *would* sleep. Harley knew—wondering if the others also knew—that with the darkness which descended as they climbed into bed would come an undeniable command to sleep.

He stood tensely just inside his bedroom door, intensely aware of the unorthodoxy of his behavior. His head hammered painfully and he pressed a cold hand against his temple. He heard the others go one by one to their separate rooms. Pief called good-night to him; Harley replied. Silence fell.

Now!

As he stepped nervously into the passage, the light came on. Yes, it was slow—reluctant. His heart pumped. He was committed. He did not know what he was going to do or what was going to happen, but he was committed. The compulsion to sleep had been avoided. Now he had to hide, and wait.

It is not easy to hide when a light signal follows wherever you go. But by entering a recess which led to an unused room, opening the door slightly and crouching in the doorway, Harley found that the faulty landing light dimmed off and left him in the dark.

He was neither happy nor comfortable. His brain seethed in a conflict he hardly understood. He was alarmed to think he had broken the rules, and frightened of the creaking darkness about him. But the suspense did not last for long.

The corridor light came back on. Jagger was leaving his bedroom, taking no precaution to be silent. The door swung loudly shut behind him. Harley caught a glimpse of his face before he turned and made for the stairs; he looked noncommittal, but serene—like a man going off duty. He went downstairs in bouncy, jaunty fashion.

Jagger should have been in bed asleep. A law of nature had been defied.

Unhesitatingly, Harley followed. He had been prepared for something and something had happened, but his flesh crawled with fright. The light-headed notion came to him that he might disintegrate with fear. All the same, he kept doggedly on down the stairs, feet noiseless on the heavy carpet.

Jagger had rounded a corner. He was whistling quietly as he went. Harley heard him unlock a door. That would be the store—no other doors were locked. The whistling faded.

The store was open. No sound came from within. Cautiously, Harley peered inside. The far wall had swung open about a central pivot, revealing a passage beyond. For minutes Harley could not move, staring fixedly at this breach.

Finally, and with a sense of suffocation, he entered the store. Jagger had gone through—there. Harley also went through. Somewhere he did not know, somewhere whose existence he had not guessed. . . . Somewhere that wasn't the house. . . . The passage was short and had two doors, one at the end rather like a cage door (Harley did not recognize an elevator when he saw one), one in the side, narrow and with a window.

This window was transparent. Harley looked through it and then fell back, choking. Dizziness swept in and shook him by the throat.

Stars shone outside.

With an effort, he mastered himself and made his way back upstairs, lurching against the banisters. They had all been living under a ghastly misapprehension. . . .

He barged into Calvin's room and the light lit. A faint, sweet smell was in the air, and Calvin lay on his broad back, fast asleep.

"Calvin! Wake up!" Harley shouted.

The sleeper never moved. Harley was suddenly aware of his own loneliness and the eerie feel of the great house about him. Bending over the bed, he shook Calvin violently by the shoulders and slapped his face.

Calvin groaned and opened one eye.

"Wake up, man," Harley said. "Something terrible's going on here."

The other propped himself on one elbow, communicated fear rousing him thoroughly.

"Jagger's *left the house,*" Harley told him. "There's a way outside. We're—we've got to find out what we are." His voice rose to an hysterical pitch. He was shaking Calvin again. "We must find out what's wrong here. Either we are victims of some ghastly experiment—or we're all monsters!"

And as he spoke, before his staring eyes, beneath his clutching hands, Calvin began to wrinkle up and fold and blur, his eyes running together and his great torso contracting. Something else—something lively and alive—was forming in his place.

Harley only stopped yelling when, having plunged downstairs, the sight of the stars through the small window steadied him. He had to get out, wherever "out" was.

He pulled the small door open and stood in fresh night air.

Harley's eye was not accustomed to judging distances. It took him some while to realize the nature of his surroundings, to realize that mountains stood distantly against the starlit sky, and that he himself stood on a platform twelve feet above the ground. Some distance away, lights gleamed, throwing bright rectangles onto an expanse of tarmac.

There was a steel ladder at the edge of the platform. Biting his lip, Harley approached it and climbed clumsily down. He was shaking violently with cold and fear. When his feet touched solid ground, he began to run. Once he looked back; the house perched on its platform like a frog hunched on top of a rattrap.

He stopped abruptly then, in almost dark. Abhorrence jerked up inside him like retching. The high, crackling stars and the pale serration of the mountains began to spin, and he clenched his fists to hold on to consciousness. That house, whatever it was, was the embodiment of all the coldness in his mind. Harley said to himself: "Whatever has been done to me, I've been cheated. Someone has robbed me of something so thoroughly I don't even know what it is. It's been a cheat, a cheat. . . ." And he choked on the idea of those years that had been pilfered from him. No thought: thought scorched the synapses and ran like acid through the brain. Action only! His leg muscles jerked into movement again.

Buildings loomed about him. He simply ran for the nearest light and burst into the nearest door. Then he pulled up sharp, panting and blinking the harsh illumination out of his pupils.

The walls of the room were covered with graphs and charts. In the center of the room was a wide desk with vision-screen and loudspeaker on it. It was a business-like room with overloaded ashtrays and a state of ordered untidiness. A thin man sat alertly at the desk; he had a thin mouth.

Four other men stood in the room; all were armed, none seemed surprised to see him. The man at the desk wore a neat suit; the others were in uniform.

Harley leaned on the doorjamb and sobbed. He could find no words to say.

"It has taken you four years to get out of there," the thin man said. He had a thin voice.

"Come and look at this," he said, indicating the screen before him. With an effort, Harley complied; his legs worked like rickety crutches.

On the screen, clear and real, was Calvin's bedroom. The outer wall gaped, and through it two uniformed men were dragging a strange creature, a wiry, mechanical-looking being that had once been called Calvin.

"Calvin was a Nititian," Harley observed dully. He was conscious of a sort of stupid surprise at his own observation.

The thin man nodded approvingly.

"Enemy infiltrations constituted quite a threat," he said. "Nowhere on Earth was safe from them; they can kill a man, dispose of him, and turn into exact replicas of him. Makes things difficult. . . . We lost a lot of state secrets that way. But Nititian ships have to land here to disembark the Non-Men and to pick them up again after their work is done. That is the weak link in their chain.

"We interrupted one such shipload and bagged them singly after they had assumed human form. We subjected them to artificial amnesia and put small groups of them into different environments for study. This is the Army Institute for Investigation of Non-Men, by the way. We've learned a lot . . . quite enough to combat the menace. . . . Your group, of course, was one such."

Harley asked in a gritty voice: "Why did you put me in with them?"

The thin man rattled a ruler between his teeth before answering.

"Each group has to have a human observer in its very midst, despite all the scanning devices that watch from outside. You see, a Nititian uses a lot of energy maintaining a human form; once in that shape, he is kept in it by self-hypnosis which only breaks down in times of stress, the amount of stress bearable varying from one individual to another. A human on the spot can sense such stresses. . . . It's a tiring job for him; we get doubles always to work day on, day off—"

"But I've always been there—"

"Of your group," the thin man cut in, "the human was Jagger, or two men alternating as Jagger. You caught one of them going off duty."

"That doesn't make sense," Harley shouted. "You're trying to say that I . . ."

He choked on the words. They were no longer pronounceable. He felt his outer form flowing away like sand, as from the other side of the desk revolver barrels were leveled at him.

"Your stress level is remarkably high," continued the thin man, turning his gaze away from the spectacle. "But where you fail is where you all fail. Like Earth's insects which imitate vegetables, your cleverness cripples you.

You can only be carbon copies. Because Jagger did nothing in the house, all the rest of you instinctively followed suit. You didn't get bored—you didn't even try to make passes at Dapple—as personable a Non-Man as I ever saw. Even the model spaceship jerked no appreciable reaction out of you."

Brushing his suit down, he rose before the skeletal being which now cowered in a corner.

"The inhumanity inside always gives you away," he said evenly. "However human you are outside."

* Gesture of Farewell

Across this stretch of the planet Risim ran the big groove. It was ten miles wide and over a quarter of a mile deep. A cluster of mobile buildings dotted the road, which ran straight along the middle of the groove. Today, the buildings seemed to crouch closer to the ground, for above them raged the worst storm Risim had experienced in over a thousand years.

Lester Nixon's half-track swerved off the road and headed down a dirt trail for home, St. Elmo's fire dancing along its roof. The violent winds carried rain—not, by ordinary standards, very much rain, but by Risim standards a deluge. Lester smiled with pleasure over it as he plowed through puddles. He enjoyed the feel of a live planet about him.

Swerving up a steep incline, he came within sight of his house.

As befitted the home of Risim's Resident Governor, the building stood apart from all the others of Sector One, and was on high enough ground to possess a view right across the artificial valley. Its exposed position accounted for the fact that the garage was now flat; the gale had blown it over. The unexpected sight of it strewn over the ground was not dismaying enough to wipe the smile off Lester's broad face. Life on Risim was nothing but hard work; rebuilding a garage was a drop in the ocean; Lester was rebuilding a planet.

Lester's smile faded only when he climbed out of the half-track and noticed his wife, Ruthmary, standing in the long, low window of their house. Leaving the vehicle in the open, he limped across to the door and let himself

in, pushing through the airlock which was no longer needed.

"What's for supper?" he asked heartily, when she appeared in the hall.

You could not deflect Ruthmary as simply as that.

"Lester! I thought you were *never* coming home!" she exclaimed, pressing the palms of her hands together. "Oh, I've been so *scared!* You've no idea how awful it's been up here. I thought we'd all be blown away. Why are you so late?"

"Communications wanted help," Lester said, taking her hand. "They had a line down, and it'll be needed when Sector Six comes through tonight."

"A line down!" she said, staring into his face. "They had a line down, so you stayed to help them—never mind that we had a whole *garage* down!"

"Try and keep your sense of proportion, Rue," he said quietly, stripping off his oilskins and going over to the coal fire. "The garage can be re-erected at any time."

She fluttered before him like a bird. She was a good-looking forty, although just now her face was blotchy with strain.

"I'm keeping my sense of proportion," she said. "You're losing yours, Lester. You're letting this planet become your life. While you were putting that line up, I don't suppose you once thought of me, did you?"

She interpreted his silence correctly.

"No . . ." she said, in a wounded tone. "It's getting to be Risim first and last with you. You love the place. You think of it as yours! You keep forgetting what kind of people the Risimians were. You keep forgetting they must have left a booby trap for us. . . . This isn't a planet to love; it's a planet to hate."

He heard, but for a long while did not reply; he was looking out of the window. Most of the land along the ten-mile-wide groove was now under cultivation, semi-outdoor cultivation. Some of the old airtight domes were still being used for more experimental crops. Trees and wheatfields and acres of root vegetables met Lester's eye; he could see some Shorthorns on Darbie's farm being driven in to milk. The uplands beyond the groove were

thatched here and there with green. It was all good to look upon. The vista Lester's inward eye saw was something different. It had no green anywhere about it. When Lester had arrived on Risim, as a junior member of the Reclamation Force advance party, all this landscape had been white with CO_2 rime. Bare earth, bare rock, stretched everywhere. Nothing grew. Planetary atmosphere was about a foot deep.

That was fifteen years ago. The RF had made the rock flower.

"It is a planet to love," Lester Nixon said, turning back to his wife as a fresh cascade of rain swept the windows.

Ruthmary was staring out too. He did not need telling what she saw. She saw only the arbitrary miles-wide furrow chopped out by the giant excavators, the humble quarters of Sector One, the jagged background of unreclaimed land, pitted still by a thousand years of falling meteorites. Certainly, Risim was as yet not a woman's world; Ruthmary's expression told Lester she might have been looking over the wastes of Hell.

"Love!" she said, making it sound like a dirty word. "Risim's a desert, and a few blades of grass won't conceal the fact. It killed little Alec; it has swallowed up our youth. And if you can say you love it, you must be mad."

"I asked you never to mention Alec, Rue," he said, mildly enough. Talk of his dead son reminded him of his daughter. "Where's Jackie?"

"Upstairs," she said shortly.

As Lester started to go, Ruthmary caught his arm.

"You know the real reason why I hate Risim, Lester," she half-whispered.

"Yes. You're afraid it may blow up at any minute," he said steadily, refusing to look into her eyes.

"Not at *any* minute," she said. "At *every* minute. I'm always afraid—not just for myself: for Jackie, for you, even for the convicts. Angagulalatun blew up. So did Cobatt II. So did Vicinzo. The Reclamation Forces on all of them were destroyed."

"We may be luckier," he said curtly, for this was something he had no wish to discuss. "Don't think of it."

Her nails were biting into his sleeve. She was shouting now, to make herself heard above the wind.

"I can't stop thinking of it!" she said. "Can't you see, Lester, I'm asking you to let me go back to Earth. I just can't bear it here any longer. I've got to go!"

"Alone?" he asked.

"Why not? You—" she cried, then stopped, reading the look on his face, realizing what she had just said.

"Oh, Lester . . ." she began, suddenly cold. She could see how deeply she had hurt him by her indifference. It came back to her that she knew Lester very well; always living with someone makes us forget they are not strangers. He was an odd man, with a sensitive side to his nature which could never find expression in words. Now he staggered as if she had sunk a pickax into him.

"Lester, my dear, I didn't mean—" she started. But he went out, slamming the door in her face, not waiting for her explanation. And what was there to explain? They had abruptly stopped loving each other; it was inexplicable. Ruthmary leaned against the door; she listened to its slamming over and over again in her mind, dreading its implications. Lester did not slam doors. He was the kind who always left them open.

The daylight grew weirder now. Lester, as he ran up the stairs to Jackie, glanced out at the purple glare; Risim had never looked like this before. All around the sun floated pale sun-dogs, phantoms of the real thing, and behind them wavered the aurora—the new aurora. The garish effect, when it could be glimpsed through cloud, was of polka dots imposed on shot silk.

Before he opened her door, Lester could hear Jackie sobbing. He went in and found her lying across the bed, her toes stubbing the floor, rucking up the bedside rug. She did not look up when he spoke her name. Sitting beside her, Lester rested his hands on her thin shoulders. He thought: perhaps our worst troubles come when we are thirteen years old, when we've lost the resilience of childhood and have yet to gain the strength of an adult.

"You're a big girl to be scared by a little storm," he said aloud.

She looked up then, her face tear-stained.

"Mummy says the planet may blow up at any minute," she said.

That, of course, would be it. The anger came up like choking fumes in Lester's throat. He coughed it down and said, "Now listen, Jackie girl, what's going on outside has nothing to do with anywhere blowing up. That's just one of your mother's silly stories, and I'm going to tell you a far nicer one."

"What's yours about?" she asked suspiciously, flinching as the room was deluged in lightning.

"My story's about why the air is behaving so funnily outside," he said. "I want to tell you why it's a good thing and not a bad thing. You see, when you were born, lying in your cradle in this selfsame room, you could look out of the window and see space coming right down and touching the bare land. Well, maybe by then there was air in the groove, but there was not much to spread about elsewhere. You could see the stars come right down and touch those distant mountains, even by day.

"But every month, the view changed just a little. As you grew up, so did Risim. As you put on weight, it put on air. You two have grown up together.

"Now it seems as if Risim is coming of age. Why, the air's breatheable almost half a mile up—it will soon be settled enough for us to be able to use planes and helicopters. You've seen how in every sector the land's coming back to life again; now the air's doing the same. It's not just so many thousand cubic yards of released oxygen and carbon dioxide any more; it's a planetary atmosphere. An ionosphere is in the process of establishing itself. That's what all the noise and color is about."

"I don't think I want to live on a planet with an 'onosphere,' " Jackie said, making bubbly noises into a handkerchief.

"It should soon settle down," Lester replied. "Then we won't notice it any more. In fact, it'll be a great help to us for radio and suchlike. At present, the ultra-violet from the sun is charging all the gas particles in the sky; and, although it may sound and look rather alarming, it's really a sign that all our work here is being blessed."

Jackie cocked her head on one side to peer into his solemn face.

"Mummy says you've got a creator complex," she announced. "What is a creator complex, Daddy?"

It was not a time when Lester Nixon wanted personal troubles. His schedules for the next few days were even busier than usual. On the morrow he had to drive over to Sector Three, Tod Clitheroe's sector, and officiate at the ocean seeding. Sector Six, as Lester had reminded Ruthmary, was advancing to its new territories in the night; he would have to visit them within the next two or three days to see that the basic planning jobs were carried out efficiently.

Tired, Lester went early to bed. Usually, he allowed himself twenty minutes of constructive thought before sliding smoothly into sleep. Tonight, the thoughts were not constructive, nor would they let him rest. He worried about Jackie, he worried about Ruthmary. The unfortunate thing was that he could see his wife's point of view; she cared for the refinements of life, which were scarce on Risim. Even her beloved music tapes were few and well worn. And although she could, in her fashion, appreciate the mighty transformation of Risim, she discounted it with the thought that it might all blow to Kingdom Come at any day.

So she blamed all her troubles on Lester, who had brought her here as a bride. She believed he thought himself a god, bringing light where there was only darkness, and she had begun to hate him for it.

"Now she's trying to win Jackie over to her ideas," Lester muttered aloud. Brushing his hair back from his forehead, he sat up in bed. Ruthmary's breathing came steadily from the other side of the room. Beyond the shutters, the aurora still fluttered.

Lester got out of bed, dressed, went downstairs. It was nearly midnight. He had never felt less like sleep.

After some indecision, he put on thick clothes and boots, slung an oxygen mask over his shoulder in case it should be needed, and let himself into the night air.

The cold knocked his cheekbones. Twenty degrees of

frost, he estimated. It would be sharper than that before morning, under the thin air-blanket. Lester could remember when evening brought dips of two hundred degrees below freezing. He was getting old; he could remember too much.

Without bothering to drag out the half-track, he walked down into the center of the groove. It was a fine night. The rain, the thin cloud, had gone; only the aurora remained, flapping overhead like a gigantic mauve bat. In the distance, the combined wheels of Sector Six could be heard, moving up the highway. You couldn't hear a thing on Risim in the old days.

For this special occasion, Sector One's only filling station was open and ablaze with light. Lester limped over to it, greeting its owner and standing with him by the pumps as the leading vehicles of the big convoy appeared down the road.

These RF vehicles were leviathans. They towered like ships as they lumbered by. Bulldozers, eledozers, rock-snorkers, grabs, drills, furnaces, and pounders; some tracked, some on balloon tires as high as a house, some on trailers, they began to growl majestically past the garage. Machines had ruined Risim over a thousand years ago; now machines—these machines—were patching her up again.

Behind the RF vehicles came the smaller traffic, mainly mobile living quarters. It would be twelve hours before they had all passed.

A landrover swerved into the garage, and a squat man swaddled in furs jumped out.

"I thought that was you, Governor!" he exclaimed. "How're you doing?"

Lester shook hands warmly with him. This was Brandy Mireball, Commander of Sector Six, and an old friend of Lester's.

They talked eagerly together for some minutes, swinging their arms to keep warm, until Lester said, "Your convoy looks as if it could forge on without you to wet-nurse it for an hour or two. Come on up to the house for a warm-up and a gossip."

At once a look of reserve passed over Brandy's big, square face.

"Er—well, no, I'd better be moving, Governor," he said. "Besides, you don't want to trouble your wife at this time of night."

Or at any other time, Lester thought grimly. He had forgotten that Brandy was, officially, a convict; now he recalled the frosty reception Ruthmary had given him the last and only time they had met. Brandy had too much pride in him to welcome a repetition of that meeting.

Ruthmary, unlike Lester, had never failed once in the last fifteen years to remember that ninety-nine per cent of the men under her husband were the offerings of other planets' jails. He preferred to think of himself as the creator of a world, rather than the governor of a penal settlement. But of course only criminals could be expected to operate on a planet that might disintegrate at any time.

"There's a room ahind my office you like to borrer," the owner of the garage volunteered.

"Thanks," Lester said.

The room was comfortable and had a good coal fire burning; coal was the cheapest fuel in Sector One, wood the dearest. Lester meditated briefly on what a fine thing it was that he had to bring a friend here to entertain him. Even a governor was inescapably governed.

Brandy was full of information about the new territory Sector Six was taking over. It was nothing but shop, and Lester listened with interest. The territory would not be easy to lick into shape; preliminary surveys had indicated that it was mainly high ground, broken and fissured by a thousand years of extremes of heat and cold.

"And it contains the ruins of the chief city of Risim," said Brandy, looking hard at Lester.

Lester shrugged.

"It'll all have to go," he said. "Those are always RF orders: obliterate every trace of the enemy civilization."

"I know that. I'm not worried about that," Brandy said. "I think you know, too, what I'm driving at, Governor. If there's a booby trap anywhere on Risim, waiting to blow us to bits, chances are it'll be in the capital city."

"It wasn't in the capital on Cobatt II."

"It was on Angagulalatun. And on Vicinzo."

Silence drifted like ice between the two men.

"I've got some drink here, Governor," Brandy said, sheepishly bringing a flask out of his pocket. "Have a swig."

Lester accepted gratefully. He had not had a drink since the last time he and Brandy had met. The stuff was supposed to be prohibited, but the more settled the planet became, the more drink there was about. Some of the men seemed to have stills working as soon as they pitched camp.

"Just how seriously do you take this booby trap business, Brandy?" Lester asked.

"I don't let it rule my life," Brandy said cautiously.

"But do you seriously believe the Risimians would stoop to such a thing? They were an old and cultured race."

Brandy laughed harshly. "What a question!" he said. "Men'll stoop to anything. Besides, look at it from the Risimians' point of view. They were our enemies. Right? That galactic bust-up, the Hub Wars, was about the toughest thing that's ever happened. And the Gobblers that won the war for us were about the nastiest weapons ever invented. Right? They could make a planet uninhabitable within an hour—as they did here. Now: if you think your planet's going to be made uninhabitable, what do you say to yourself? You say: Right, then it stays uninhabitable; if we can't live on it, no other ———'s going to, either.

"And it's a simple enough matter, if you're as advanced as Cobatt or Vicinzo—or Risim—was, to plant a little device that will be triggered off when the enemy finally gets to it."

They argued the point back and forward, as every man on Risim had done ever since the RF landed, fifteen years ago. The trouble was, that the vital issue—whether or not the Risimians had planned a revenge—would always remain open: until Risim blew up or a booby trap was discovered.

A second bottle was produced and drunk between them before Brandy got up to go.

"Give my regards to Clitheroe when you see him," he said, adding, as Lester attempted to rise, "Don't bother to come outside."

"Right," Lester replied, rather thickly. "I'll be over to see how you're getting on in two or three days, Brandy. Keep your fingers crossed."

When the other had gone, he did try to rise from his chair, but he was heavy with the unaccustomed drink. Leaning back before the fire, he fell fast asleep.

Cold fury boiled in him when he woke and found it was nearly eight o'clock in the morning. His days began at six. The owner of the filling station would have seen him; Lester could almost hear the whisper spreading around the community: "The Governor was in a drunken stupor!" This would never have happened if he had felt free to take Brandy home.

He went out into the bitter morning, peevishly buttoning his coat. The wind was as spiteful as ever, the aurora still up to its silly tricks. The convoy of Sector Six still poured by; Lester could see sleepy men at the steering wheels. A girl smiled at him through a trailer window.

He arrived home to find his wife and Jackie starting breakfast. Frosty looks greeted his explanations and apologies; he felt his neck grow red.

"I'm not feeling humble this morning, Rue," he said, "so don't make too much capital out of the incident."

"You never feel humble these days," she said indistinctly.

A thousand years of silence seemed to lumber in from outside and engulf them. Lester helped himself unhappily to breakfast. Ruthmary was probably right; he had the sort of occupation to make men overbearing—which did not make the truth any more palatable. It would do Ruthmary no harm to be humbled, either.

"I'm going to drive over to see Clitheroe in Sector Three in half an hour," he said, addressing himself to Jackie. "How about your taking a day off and coming with me, eh?"

"She's got to go to school," Ruthmary said before Jackie could answer.

"A visit to the sea would be equally instructive," Lester said, looking only at his daughter.

"It's her music day," Ruthmary said. "And you know she has an exam coming soon."

Yes, Lester knew. And in another year, when Jackie was fourteen, she was going back to Earth, to Milan, to learn music properly. And then he would have lost touch irrevocably with her, for Lester expressed himself even more haltingly in letters than he did in speech. So he had to win her to his side before she went; he was shrewd enough to see that from now on there were going to be sides, and only sides.

"Well, Jackie, would you like to come?" he asked temptingly. "It'll be an historic occasion for Risim, you know; more important than when we released the micro-organisms into the soil here."

It was painful to see her looking from one to the other of her parents, like a trapped animal. Young as she was, she sensed that a lot hung on her decision. Her cheeks colored with resentment.

"I suppose I ought to go to school, oughtn't I?" she asked them, pleading for a helpful answer.

"They wouldn't miss you for one day," Lester said.

"You must make up your own mind," Ruthmary said.

The little girl stared at them desperately. All of a sudden, she burst into tears and ran from the room.

"That was entirely your fault," Ruthmary said.

Perhaps it was the way she said it that made Lester do what he ever afterwards regretted. When he drove off to Sector Three in the half-track, Jackie rode delightedly beside him, her tears forgotten. He had crept upstairs and brought her down without her mother knowing; even at the time it was not a trick he felt particularly proud of.

To Lester's mind, it was a good day for a drive. The morning's snow, as the temperature rose rapidly, fell for only ten minutes. The sun shone blindingly among the drapes of the aurora. St. Elmo's fire flickered on every protuberance of their vehicle.

They turned out of the groove onto a minor road which cut away from the highway at right angles. This portion of the huge RF checker-board had yet to be leap-frogged over by one of the Reclamation sectors; consequently, it was still in much the same state that the Gobblers had left, ten centuries ago. Once, dark under the eerie sky, a furnace swung into view and dropped behind them, its funnel-like chimneys continuously pouring hot oxygen into the atmosphere.

Establishing these mighty furnaces regularly over the face of Risim had been the RF's first task. The furnaces were automatic. Tunneling further and further below them into the rock were the mechanical miners. In a screaming inferno of heat and dust, tireless drills ferreted coal, ores, and oxides out of the ground, shuttled them into lifts, and rocketed them up to the furnaces, where they were pulverized and baked. As the great detritus hills grew to mountains outside the plants, so more vital gas was liberated.

Already, as Lester happily pointed out to Jackie, nature was helping the artificial processes in her own way. For a considerable distance around the black bulk of the furnace, green showed. Near the walls were bushes, even a few stunted conifers, which gave place further out to grass or lichen.

"It's wonderful what a little air and continuous heat will do," Lester remarked. "All that foliage is self-sown, from spores and seed, in the ground which has endured a thousand years of space conditions. It just goes to show that nature's on our side."

"And which side are the Risimians on?" Jackie asked.

"You are developing a bad habit of asking irrelevant questions, young lady!" he exclaimed. "Don't forget *we're* the Risimians now."

After three hours of fast driving, without once seeing another vehicle, they dipped down into another groove, ten miles across, a quarter-mile deep—standard RF measurements. The air was noticeably better to breathe in the depression.

This was Sector Three.

Lester asked their way to Tod Clitheroe's building, and soon the lanky commander was shaking their hands. They all ate a good meal while Clitheroe told them his plans for the afternoon's ceremony.

Sector Three was generally regarded as one of the softest stations on Risim; a rather sour wine set on the table confirmed that opinion. No other sector could afford to grow vines. Lester had a momentary sense of unease at this cool infringement of planetary law, but banished it. It was one of those human problems which has to be tackled when the time is ripe.

"Are you sure you want me to make a speech to them?" Lester asked, when Clitheroe broached the idea.

"Sure," Clitheroe said. "We've got to have a real ceremony."

"I'm not the kind who makes a very good speech," Lester protested. "And our boys aren't the kind who make very good listeners."

"They'll listen. They've got to realize they aren't just working gangs and wives any more; they're citizens of an up-and-coming planet."

That also made Lester uncomfortable. He was not happy with personal problems. He was a Reclamation man, an engineer. The trouble was, he had no precedents to guide him; the other reclaimed planets, Vicinzo and the rest, had blown up before this stage. But obviously—just as the time had come when their air was no longer simply measurable quantities of gas, but an atmosphere—the day was dawning when he had, not a number of task forces, but a population on his hands. It sounded frightening to Lester.

Nevertheless, he made a good speech.

He spoke in a barrack-like warehouse—the only warehouse—by the water's edge. Outside, the wind screamed. Inside, some three hundred men, women, and children had drifted from their work to hear him talk. Jackie stood at the front of the crowd, admiring her father.

"From today on," he began, without preliminaries, "a new trade is open on Risim: fisherman, though, to begin with, the fishers will put fish in the sea instead of pulling them out. This town of Clitheroeville is on the way up.

After the fishermen'll come the sailors, then the ship-builders, then the dockers, then the customs men—but we hope we'll never need them!—then the millionaires." They laughed at that.

"You people have now got a sea on your hands. It's only a little one, but it'll grow. It's like all the processes we've started in this barren land: once you start it, it goes on of its own accord. Before you know it, there'll be an ocean where you had a puddle. But it's not just going to be wet water. It's going to live; before we're done it's going to be full to the brim with crabs and shrimps and fish and mighty big blowing whales. It's going to be a howling success, like everything else we've done here.

"That's why Commander Clitheroe and I are going down with the Biology Corps now, to stock the waters with plankton, so that in several years' time you can all have caviar in your lunch packs!"

Their cheering buoyed him all the way down to the jetty. Braving wind and fresh rain, most of the crowd followed the official party as far as the cliffs.

"The cliffs" were the sides of an enormous M-bomb crater which had been blasted into existence perhaps only a few days before the Gobblers did their deadly work on Risim. They fell steeply for two hundred tawny feet; the party spanned this distance in an open lift, which swayed furiously in the gusty up-drafts playing along the cliffs.

Below, protruding from a ledge of rock, was the jetty, a temporary affair since the water level was expected to be rising for the next century. Against the jetty a cumbrous amphibian, Risim's only boat, slumped and lifted on the waves. On its bow was painted its name: "Old Greedy Guts." Against boat and jetty smacked the full force of the new sea.

Roughly rectangular, the sea was at present only one mile wide by five long. Old ocean beds to the south, whose waters had evaporated when the atmosphere went, would take its continued expansion. Started six years ago by a spring, one of many rising unsummoned from the reviving ground, the sea was now fed by several small streams.

For such a baby stretch of water, the sea looked

menacing enough. It was dark and it was rough. Every wave seemed blacker than the one before, breaking without foam against the tall cliffs.

"Are you going to like this, Jackie?" Lester asked, with some misgivings.

"I'm going to make a movie of it!" she replied, waving her cinecamera eagerly.

Willing hands helped them aboard. Lester caught Jackie looking almost skittishly at the young biologist who pulled her up. He thought: perhaps Rue's right; we don't want the girl messing about with a lot of criminals—it's best for her to go to Earth now that she is growing up. And then he rebuked himself bitterly for the thought. He was getting old; the strain was telling on him.

Dismissing all but the present from his mind, Lester followed Clitheroe over to the biologists. "Old Greedy Guts" cast off, her engines throbbing, and began to wallow out toward mid-ocean. The few spectators in the jetty turned their backs to the cutting wind and hurried for shelter.

The seeding ceremony was outwardly unimpressive. Four great tanks full of water containing laboratory-reared plankton stood along the decks of the amphibian; pipes led from them over the side of the vessel; when they reached mid-ocean, the cocks would be opened and the microscopic life released into the open waters.

"I think it's too rough to reach what for want of a better term we must call mid-ocean," the chief biologist told Clitheroe and Lester. "If it's all the same to you, we'll release our load and turn back at once."

Looking pretty sick, he stared anxiously into other green faces, in search of agreement.

"I'm all for it," Clitheroe said. "We're not meant to be sailors. As the Governor says, they'll come later."

The cocks were opened. Everyone peered over the side; Jackie leaned dangerously out, filming the dark waters. Yet there was nothing to see. The tanks emptied under the surface, and the additional billions to Risim's inhabitants, being invisible, gave no sign of their presence. At an impatient sign from the chief biologist, the skipper

leaned against the wheel, swinging "Old Greedy Guts" about.

The deck lurched, a fresh gust of wind buffeted them. Dropping her cinecamera, Jackie, caught off balance, snatched at the low side and missed it. She screamed briefly as she hit the vinegar-dark sea.

Lester was actually the third to dive in after her. Two young members of the biology team beat him to it.

Every molecule of water ached with cold. The bite of it was like cruel jaws, penetrating down to the marrow. Before Lester surfaced, he could feel it beginning to kill him; he came up gasping for help and splashing toward the ship's side.

As Clitheroe and others dragged him out, he saw, half-fainting, that crimson stained the threshing water by the propellers. Sun-dogs seemed to leap at his throat as he lost consciousness.

"So you've come at last, Brandy," Lester said, trying to conceal the irritation he felt.

"I only came here because I had to," Brandy Mireball said. He spoke uneasily, looking around the Governor's room as if he expected Ruthmary to burst in, and seldom glancing at Lester.

"It was two days ago that I phoned you," Lester said, twitching at the rug wrapped about his knees.

"We were busy," Brandy said. "I was sorry about your daughter, Governor. Hope your wife didn't take it too hard?"

Perhaps even as he spoke, Brandy guessed that Ruthmary had taken it hard. He might have read it in the atmosphere of Lester's house, or on Lester's face. No doubt he could hear, through the intervening doors, the stormy music issuing from the study. Lester could picture his wife standing entranced before the tape machine, palms pressed together, eyes shut, trying—what was she trying to do? It baffled Lester. She drew something from music he could never find. Now she was playing "The Atomics" from Dinkuhl's *Managerial Suite;* it was one of her favorites. She seemed to find in it the something Lester had found when listening to the wind cutting

across the new sea before—before little Jackie was churned into the propellers.

Ruthmary had taken the news as a personal insult. When Lester returned, dosed against pneumonia, to tell her of the accident, she had wailed like a Greek tragedy. First Alec, crushed long ago in a collapsing dome, now Jackie! Risim was against them all; Risim would kill them all! She turned her misery into a triumph.

Wearily, Lester tried to direct his thoughts away from his wife. She was, of course, right; it was all his fault. Now he must make her what amends he could.

"There's something I had to tell you, Brandy," he said, looking up from under his heavy eyebrows. "Come next month, you are Resident Governor of Risim, in my place."

The great purgatorial chords ascended in the stillness; she was playing that thing too damn loud.

"What do you mean, Lester?" Brandy asked. "What's happening to you?"

"I'm going . . ." He choked on the words.

"Going home?"

"This is home, Brandy. I'm going back to Earth."

There was time to listen to the frantic cellos again before Brandy said, "You run Risim, boss! You can't clear out on us now, not before the Twenty Year Plan is finished. I can't believe it! Nobody'll believe it!"

Lester made a testy gesture.

"It's true," he said shortly. "You'll have to get used to it. The people will follow you—you're their kind."

"Yes . . . a convict. I know." Brandy put his hands to his head, then lowered them again. "Why are you quitting on us like this, Governor?" he asked softly. "It's not just because of the little girl, is it?"

Lester shook his head.

"I promised my wife . . ." he said.

He sat there inarticulately. He wanted to explain that a man's duty before all else is to his wife, that she must be considered before even life-long companions—certainly before a planet that might at any time unlock violently into its individual atoms. He wanted to explain all the

complex loops of reasoning he had staggered through alone. But he just sat there enduring the other's scorn. He could tell it was scorn; Brandy had no patience with the whims of women.

"Thanks for the promotion, anyhow," Brandy said at last. "It looks as if you're getting out of Risim just in time."

"What do you mean?" Lester asked.

"I was not coming over here to hear what you had to say, but to tell you my news. Care to hear it now?"

Lester looked up questioningly.

"We've found Risim's booby trap, we think," Brandy said. "I'd come to fetch you to have a look at it."

He watched Lester's face with interest as the Governor stood up, the rug flopping about his feet.

"You can sit down again," Brandy said. "We'll manage this ourselves."

In those cold words, Lester saw the kind of reputation he was in danger of leaving behind him on the planet he had made. When they spoke of him at all, they would speak of him as a coward. They were not subtle people here; they were as harsh as the world around them and would—could—only soften as it softened. Under their code of behavior, a thing was either black or white: if Governor Lester Nixon did not go to see the booby trap, it was because Governor Lester Nixon was scared. Nobody realized that more clearly than Lester himself.

"I'm coming with you, Mireball," he said. "Next month's a month away."

"Lester!"

Both men turned at the cry. Ruthmary had come unnoticed into the room. From the expression on her face, they realized she had heard Brandy's news. Her countenance was the color of dirty snow.

"My husband is on the verge of a breakdown, Mr. Mireball," she said stiffly.

"So's Risim," Brandy replied, buttoning up his coat with brisk fingers.

Without a word, Lester went over and kissed Ruthmary on the forehead. Pulling his outdoor clothes from a peg, he followed Brandy into the hall. Ruthmary stood

where she was, transfixed, long after the outer door had slammed.

Brandy had a two-tonner with self-hauling grabs standing ready before the house, a driver lounging at its wheel. It was a typical, ugly, self-sufficient RF machine, and it did Lester's heart good to see it as he climbed into the back beside Brandy.

"Sure you're well enough for this?" Brandy asked.

"Start her up," Lester said tensely.

It was a long haul into the territory Sector Six had just taken over. When they left the settled limits of Sector One, the change in landscape was very noticeable. Though the road continued, the ten-mile-wide groove ended; geonivorous machines were chewing out an extension of it now, working in a hell of pulverized rock particles. Beyond the geonivores, it was more peaceful, but bleaker. The two-tonner climbed snarling into low mountains which, on their shattered and sad flanks, bore witness to their exposure to space. Even here, the vital air-furnaces had been built, crouching among their hills of ash. As the vehicle climbed, the air grew thinner, the heavens darker. The wind died to tooth-comb fineness. Yet even here, Lester noticed, life was limping back to sheltered ridges, showing green among the slate-grays.

They echoed their way through a pass and began to descend. Before them, in a valley, lay the remnants of the capital city of old Risim. It lay split open, like a beached whale, with the massed impedimenta of Sector Six all around it in a wide circle. There was something wrong with the picture.

"You've got an unusual grouping down there," Lester commented to Brandy, as they looked out of the observation blister.

"It's not from choice," Brandy said. "Our stuff is spread around in such a wide circle just because they can't get in any farther. There's something in the middle of the city stopping them: a power-damper field, extending half a mile in all directions. It must come from the booby trap the Risimians left."

"Must?"

Brandy turned to face his superior squarely.

"What else would it be?" he asked. "I've never really understood your attitude to this business, Governor. Angagulalatun, Vicinzo and Cobatt II were booby-trapped; Risim, in its heyday, was as much Earth's enemy as they were—don't you think it would have laid the same sort of trap for us as our other enemies?"

"Perhaps I've never really faced up to the problem in all the years we've been here," Lester said. "I enjoyed RF work; I've never thought of Risim as an enemy planet."

"You'll have to face it now."

"Risim may be different from the other worlds."

"Why should it be?" Brandy asked bluntly.

"Because every world is different," Lester said, "and every race is different, just as every man is different. The traps on Angagulalatun and Cobatt and Vicinzo were themselves all different. Cobatt blew almost as soon as the RF set foot on it. On Angagulalatun, nothing happened until an air pressure of five pounds had been established at sea level. And the trap on Vicinzo must have had some kind of encephalic trigger; the place blew after the RF had been there thirteen years and the population numbered twenty thousand."

"All right, we die a different way," Brandy said gloomily. "It'll feel the same . . . "

"But we've got some kind of a chance here, don't you see," Lester said. "On the other RF planets, they never knew what hit them. Here we have something we can tackle."

While they were talking, the two-tonner had rolled down to the outskirts of the town. Traffic police directed them amid a chaos of camping; among silent vehicles, tents had been pitched, and silent women stood about in groups. They bumped over rock and rubble to a parking space.

"Another hundred yards forward and the engine would have conked," Brandy said, offering Lester a hand down. "Nothing functions in the anti-power field."

The stillness was eerie. The ionosphere having established itself, the days-long storm had died and the aurora

faded into the sky. Now temperatures were falling toward night.

"We'll tackle the booby trap in the morning," Brandy said. "Right now, let's get a drink."

"I'd like to see it now," Lester said.

Brandy shrugged.

"As you like," he said.

They walked forward together. Beyond the stalled vehicles, the power-damper field began. It manifested itself faintly on their body electricity, making their skins itch. Lester's head swam and his lame leg dragged, but he knew that only his own physical condition was to blame for that.

The city closed around them. Of its might, little was left but stone and rubble; great pyramids of crumbling debris told of the millennium in which space, that great sea, had had its high tide over the land. And already on the pyramids, like scraggy hens pecking out a living, weeds grew and a toad crawled. Picking their way through the destruction, Brandy and Lester came to the booby trap.

Clusters of men stood beside it, eyeing it without speaking. Their faces were stiff with tension; their expressions seemed to have been written indelibly across their skulls.

Once, before the defeat of Risim, the booby trap had stood in an open square; now rubble covered half of it. It was a featureless dome, rising at its highest point to less than eight feet. It looked no more impressive than an eskimo's igloo.

The grim-faced men were turning to go.

"We'd better be going, too," Brandy said. "There's nothing else to see. We'll tackle the problem tomorrow."

They followed the silent groups back through the dusk. Everyone was hurrying now; even torches would not burn in the power-damper field. Tomorrow, men would come with spades and uncover the rest of the dome, seeking an entrance. And then . . . and then it was anybody's guess what happened, Lester thought.

Despite all his other worries, he found himself thinking of the way he had left Ruthmary, with matters unresolved between them. He did not want to be blown to hell with their affairs in that state. At the time, Lester's leaving

home with Brandy had seemed fine: he was going to show them all he was no coward; now, in among the ruins, he knew he would have been braver to have stayed with Ruthmary and let everyone else think what he would.

He climbed early into the bunk Brandy provided in his four-room trailer, hoping for sleep to cover his weakness. Sleep did not come. Instead, his mind floated back to the last days of the Risimians, and he pictured the terrible weapon with which Earth had crushed them. The Gobblers: that was the universal name for what were officially called aerdetergands; half a dozen of them could wipe an atmosphere clean off a planet in half an hour.

The Gobblers were big. At the height of the Hub Wars, Earth owned no more than six of them; but six were all that were needed. They hurtled in upon their victims on low, intra-atmospheric orbits. They leeched air through their great bodies, dis-bonding it as it went, and spraying it far out into space, whence it could never return. This implacable and terrifying ingestion of atmosphere produced the typical Gobbler noise, a sustained belch, audible all around the globe. When the belch rose to a howl and the howl to a scream and the scream to an echo of a shriek, the Gobblers had finished their ugly meal—and a planet lay dead beneath them.

The Gobblers were the most evil weapon ever produced. They won the Hub Wars for Earth; but the harvest of hatred they sowed had still to be fully reaped. No wonder most of the vanquished enemy races had seen to it that any world the Gobblers stripped remained forever uninhabitable.

After the Wars, Earth herself had been so weakened that a thousand years had lapsed before she could stretch forth her hand and touch the fruits of her victory—only to find them fruits of death.

In the blind dark, hopelessness gripped Lester. For fifteen years, he had been putting this vision away from him. So busy had he been recreating a world, he had not realized on what it was he built. Others, less absorbed, had known all along—and feared.

Ruthmary had feared.

He had been so obtuse. He remembered how clumsily he had tried to console her for Jackie's death. He had said: "From the sea comes life. Now Jackie is there, as imperishable as the plankton, starting a whole new chain of life."

At that, Ruthmary had wept more bitterly, and Lester had not understood why.

He was glad when the frozen dawn came and he climbed out of bed to escape from the past.

The ambiguous dome lay exposed to the sky. About it, shuffling uneasily on the rubble they had cleared, stood a crowd of RF men; a hopeless instinct for flight competed in them with curiosity.

The dome was featureless. Built of a strange, semi-translucent metal, it was untouched by time or heat or cold. Lester limped around it twice and then returned to Brandy. They stood silent. Silence lay like a malediction over everything.

Brandy licked his numb lips.

"Looks as if it won't hurt us if we don't hurt it," he said, speaking in a low voice. "How about evacuating this sector for good? We've got the rest of the planet to work on."

"As long as this remains," Lester said, "we've got nothing. It would always mock our safety."

"Right, Governor, tell us what we do about it then," Brandy said. "Don't forget, as long as it transmits this power-damper, we can't bring up anything more ferocious than a spade against it."

"The damper field must be there for something more than just to draw our attention to the dome," Lester said thoughtfully. He fell silent, trying to work it out. This thing, he knew, was something different from that which the other RF worlds had yielded; this was no efficient but crude time bomb, such as had shattered the ill-fated Angagulalatun and Vicinzo. The Risimians had been more subtle in their gesture of farewell.

Obviously, they had intended that no power should be used to break open the dome. What, then, was the key required to open what a thousand years of silence had kept locked?

There could be only one answer. . . .

Lester turned to the anxious phalanxes of men. He had no need to attract their attention; every eye was on him. Stiffly, he raised his right hand above his head.

"When I drop my hand," he said in a clear voice, "I want you all to shout 'Hey' as loudly as possible. Right?"

He dropped his hand.

The response, from two hundred choked throats, was negligible.

"Louder!" Lester called. "We've got to waken the dead!"

He raised his hand and dropped it again.

The answering shout was frighteningly loud.

A section of the dome slid open.

A great sigh rose from the crowd. Brandy gripped Lester's arm as if he would break it.

"You see," Lester said, "the Risimians had this place ready for emergencies. The bellowing of the Gobblers closing in overhead would activate the power-damper field and lock the dome in readiness. Outside, silence would fall forever—or until another atmosphere was established. Then another sound was needed to unlock the door."

Brandy nodded blankly, almost as if he had not heard. He was shaking like a leaf.

"N—now what?" he managed to ask.

"Now we go in," Lester said.

He looked around. The onlookers had vanished. Silently, ashamedly, they had scrambled away. The inherited impulses of fear had been too much for them. Only the Commander of Sector Six and the Resident Governor stood under the iron sky; but a woman was approaching them. It had, of course, been an easy matter for her to follow Lester; a Resident Governor's wife can appropriate any vehicle in an emergency.

"Aren't you afraid, Rue?" Lester asked huskily.

"The doctor says you ought to be at home in bed!" she exclaimed, as she came up to him.

At Lester's side, Brandy Mireball began to laugh, fitfully and without humor. In a crisis, anything that is not the crisis releases laughter. But Lester thought he understood: Rue was concentrating on him, as he had

previously concentrated on the reclamation, to exclude the chilling threat of reality. Taking her hand, he led her into the dome.

Immediately, the movable section of wall swung back into place, imprisoning them. The two of them were alone —as they had always been.

A soft yellow light illuminated the interior of the dome. The room seemed tiny, and was as featureless as the exterior, apart from a small grille five feet from the floor; and below the grille, projecting from the wall, was an open cube large enough for a man to poke his head into.

Husband and wife had barely had time to look around before a voice spoke to them through the grille. Though it was clear, it had the quality of a recording. It spoke slowly, in Prime Galactic.

"You are the new possessors of Risim," it said. "You walk on our world. It was our world, and we loved it. But all that we loved—so it must be if you hear our voice—is now gone, obliterated. Our enemies have terrible powers; our enemies are evil. But to every race falls a time of evil and a time of good, a time of weakness and a time of strength, a time for destruction and a time for construction.

"We are prepared to leave what remains of our loved planet even to our enemies if, by the time they hear our voice, they have turned from their old ways. Accordingly, we have devised this test, to see if they are fit to possess Risim. For know that it was fair and can be made fair again.

"But we would rather that our world were dissolved into its component molecules than that it became a stronghold of evil. So we have arranged that, far below this dome, mighty engines of retribution lie ever ready to split our once fair world into the atoms from which it was created.

"The closing of the door behind you activated those engines. Even now, miles below your feet, critical conditions are slowly building up.

"This is the simple test we have devised. Five seconds —five seconds only—after our voice has stopped, the

engines of retribution will be geared so that nothing whatsoever can keep them from destroying Risim. But the fusion will not take place until twenty-eight days from today. We make that humane delay so that everybody now on Risim will have time to escape—but Risim will not escape. Its end is foredoomed five seconds after our voice ceases *unless someone present loves this World enough to lay down his life for it immediately.*

"We must have a sacrifice for the wrong done us.

"If a head is placed in the metal box below this grille within five seconds, it will be instantly pulverized; but Risim will be preserved to grow beautiful again, and the engines of destruction stopped forever."

The voice ceased—and before it had done so, Ruthmary was clinging to Lester.

"You can't do it!" she screamed. "No, Lester, no, you're all I've got left now! I love you, Lester! For God's sake, Lester—Lester, no, let's all leave this damned—"

His clothes ripped as he pulled himself away from her. Something about not deserting Jackie, something about a man's lifework . . .

Instantly after the flash which neatly sliced his neck, the grille announced, coolly, "Risim is yours now. Tend it lovingly. Farewell!"

The section of wall slid open again. Choking with tears, Ruthmary hardly saw Brandy on his knees outside, or, far behind him, the ravaged slopes with their touch of green.

* The New Father Christmas

Little old Roberta took the clock down off the shelf and put it on the hotplate; then she picked up the kettle and tried to wind it. The clock was almost boiling before she realized what she had done. Shrieking quietly, so as not to wake old Robin, she snatched up the clock with a dustcloth and dropped it onto the table. It ticked furiously. She looked at it.

Although Roberta wound the clock every morning when she got up, she had neglected to look at it for months. Now she looked and saw it was seven-thirty on Christmas Day, 2388.

"Oh dear," she exclaimed. "It's Christmas Day already! It seems to have come very soon after Lent this year."

She had not even realized it was 2388. She and Robin had lived in the factory so long. The idea of Christmas excited her, for she liked surprises—but it also frightened her, because she thought about the New Father Christmas and that was something she preferred not to think about. The New Father Christmas was reputed to make his rounds on Christmas morning.

"I must tell Robin," she said. But poor Robin had been very touchy lately; it was conceivable that having Christmas suddenly forced upon him would make him cross. Roberta was unable to keep anything to herself, so she would have to go down and tell the tramps. Apart from Robin, there were only the tramps.

Putting the kettle on the stove, she left their living quarters and went into the factory, like a little mouse emerging from its mince-pie-smelling nest. Roberta and Robin lived right at the top of the factory and the tramps

had their illegal home right at the bottom. Roberta began tiptoeing down many, many steel stairs.

The factory was full of the sort of sounds Robin called "silent noise." It continued day and night, and the two humans had long ago ceased to hear it; it would continue when they had become incapable of hearing anything. This morning the machines were as busy as ever, and looked not at all Christmassy. Roberta noticed in particular the two machines she hated most: the one with loom-like movements which packed impossibly thin wire into impossibly small boxes, and the one which thrashed about as if it were struggling with an invisible enemy and did not seem to be producing anything.

The old lady walked delicately past them and down into the basement. She came to a gray door and knocked at it. At once she heard the three tramps fling themselves against the inside of the door and press against it, shouting hoarsely to each other.

Roberta was unable to shout, but she waited until they were silent and then called through the door as loudly as she could, "It's only me, boys."

After a moment's hush, the door opened a crack. Then it opened wide. Three seedy figures stood there, their faces anguished: Jerry, the ex-writer, and Tony and Dusty, who had never been and never would be anything but tramps. Jerry, the youngest, was forty, and so still had half his life to drowse through, Tony was fifty-five, and Dusty had heat rash.

"We thought you were the Terrible Sweeper!" Tony exclaimed.

The Terrible Sweeper swept right through the factory every morning. Every morning, the tramps had to barricade themselves in their room, or the Sweeper would have bundled them and all their tawdry belongings into the disposal chutes.

"You'd better come in," Jerry said. "Excuse the mess."

Roberta entered and sat down on a crate, tired after her journey. The tramps' room made her uneasy, for she suspected them of bringing Women in here occasionally; also, there were pants hanging in one corner.

"I had something to tell you all," she said. They

waited politely, expectantly. Jerry cleaned his nails with a tack.

"I've forgotten now just what it is," she confessed.

The tramps sighed with relief. They feared anything which threatened to disturb their tranquillity. Tony became communicative.

"It's Christmas Day," he said, looking around furtively.

"Is it really!" Roberta exclaimed. "So soon after Lent?"

"Allow us," Jerry said, "to wish you a safe Christmas and a persecution-free New Year."

This courtesy brought Roberta's latent fears to the surface at once.

"You—you don't believe in the New Father Christmas, do you?" she asked them. They made no answer, but Dusty's face went the color of lemon peel and she knew they did believe. So did she.

"You'd better all come up to the flat and celebrate this happy day," Roberta said. "After all, there's safety in numbers."

"I can't go through the factory; the machines bring on my heat rash," Dusty said. "It's a sort of allergy."

"Nevertheless, we will go," Jerry said. "Never pass a kind offer by."

Like heavy mice, the four of them crept up the stairs and through the engrossed factory. The machines pretended to ignore them.

In the flat, they found pandemonium. The kettle was boiling over and Robin was squeaking for help. Officially bed-ridden, Robin could get up in times of crisis; he stood now just inside the bedroom door, and Roberta had to remove the kettle before going to placate him.

"And why have you brought those creatures up here?" he demanded in a loud whisper.

"Because they are our friends, Robin," Roberta said, struggling to get him back to bed.

"They are no friends of mine!" he said. He thought of something really terrible to say to her; he trembled and wrestled with it and did not say it. The effort left him weak and irritable. How he loathed being in her power! As caretaker of the vast factory, it was his duty to see that no undesirables entered, but as matters were at pres-

ent he could not evict the tramps while his wife took their side. Life was exasperating.

"We came to wish you a safe Christmas, Mr. Proctor," Jerry said, sliding into the bedroom with his two companions.

"Christmas, and I got heat rash!" Dusty said.

"It isn't Christmas," Robin whined as Roberta pushed his feet under the sheets. "You're just saying it to annoy me." If they could only know or guess the anger that stormed like illness through his veins.

At that moment, the delivery chute pinged and an envelope catapulted into the room. Robin took it from Roberta, opening it with trembling hands. Inside was a Christmas card from the Minister of Automatic Factories.

"This proves there are other people still alive in the world," Robin said. These other fools were not important enough to receive Christmas cards.

His wife peered nearsightedly at the Minister's signature.

"This is done by a rubber stamp, Robin," she said. "It doesn't prove anything."

Now he was really enraged. To be contradicted in front of these scum! And Roberta's cheeks had grown more wrinkled since last Christmas, which also annoyed him. As he was about to flay her, however, his glance fell on the address on the envelope: it read, "Robin Proctor, A.F.X10."

"But this factory isn't X10!" he protested aloud. "It's S.C. 541."

"Perhaps we've been in the wrong factory for thirty-five years," Roberta said. "Does it matter at all?"

The question was so senseless that the old man pulled the bedclothes out of the bottom of the bed.

"Well, go and find out, you silly old woman!" he shrieked. "The factory number is engraved over the output exit. Go and see what it says. If it does not say S.C. 541, we must leave here at once. Quickly!"

"I'll come with you," Jerry told the old lady.

"You'll all go with her," Robin said. "I'm not having you stay here with me. You'd murder me in my bed!"

Without any particular surprise—although Tony

glanced regretfully at the empty teapot as he passed it—they found themselves again in the pregnant layers of factory, making their way down to the output exit. Here, conveyor belts transported the factory's finished product outside to waiting vehicles.

"I don't like it much here," Roberta said uneasily. "Even a glimpse of outside aggravates my agoraphobia."

Nevertheless, she looked where Robin had instructed her. Above the exit, a sign said "X10."

"Robin will never believe me when I tell him," she wailed.

"My guess is that the factory changed its own name," Jerry said calmly. "Probably it has changed its product as well. After all, there's nobody in control; it can do what it likes. Has it always been making these eggs?"

They stared silently at the endless, moving line of steel eggs. The eggs were smooth, and as big as ostrich eggs; they sailed into the open, where robots piled them into trucks and drove away with them.

"Never heard of a factory laying eggs before," Dusty laughed, scratching his shoulder. "Now we'd better get back before the Terrible Sweeper catches up with us."

Slowly they made their way back up the many, many steps.

"I think it used to be television sets the factory made," Roberta said once.

"If there are no more men—there'd be no more need for television sets," Jerry said grimly.

"I can't remember for sure. . . ."

Robin, when they told him, was ill with irritation, rolling out of bed in his wrath. He threatened to go down and look at the name of the factory himself, only refraining because he had a private theory that the factory itself was merely one of Roberta's hallucinations.

"And as for *eggs* . . ." he stuttered.

Jerry dipped into a torn pocket, produced one of the eggs, and laid it on the floor. In the silence that followed, they could all hear the egg ticking.

"You shouldn't have done that, Jerry," Dusty said hoarsely. "That's . . . interfering." They all stared at

Jerry, the more frightened because they did not entirely know what they were frightened about.

"I brought it because I thought the factory ought to give us a Christmas present," Jerry told them dreamily, squatting down to look at the egg. "You see, a long time ago, before the machines declared all writers like me redundant, I met an old robot writer. And this old robot writer had been put out to scrap, but he told me a thing or two. He told me that, as machines took over man's duties, so they took over his myths too. Of course, they adapt the myths to their own beliefs, but I think they'd like the idea of handing out Christmas presents."

Dusty gave Jerry a kick which sent him sprawling.

"That's for your idea!" he said. "You're mad, Jerry boy! The machines'll come up here to get that egg back. I don't know what we ought to do."

"I'll put the tea on for some kettle," Roberta said brightly.

The stupid remark made Robin explode.

"Take the egg back, all of you!" he shrieked. "It's stealing, that's what it is, and I won't be responsible. And then you tramps must leave the factory!"

Dusty and Tony looked at him helplessly, and Tony said, "But we've got nowhere to go."

Jerry, who had made himself comfortable on the floor, said without looking up, "I don't want to frighten you, but the New Father Christmas will come for you, Mr. Proctor, if you aren't careful. That old Christmas myth was one of the ones the machines took over and changed; the New Father Christmas is all metal and glass, and instead of leaving new toys he takes away old people and machines."

Roberta, listening at the door, went as white as a sheet. "Perhaps that's how the world has grown so depopulated recently," she said. "I'd better get us some tea."

Robin had managed to shuffle out of bed, a ghastly irritation goading him on. As he staggered toward Jerry, the egg hatched.

It broke cleanly into two halves, revealing a pack of neat machinery. Four tiny, busy mannikins jumped out

and leaped into action. In no time, using minute welders, they had forged the shell into a double dome; sounds of hammering came from underneath.

"They're going to build another factory right in here, the fresh things!" Roberta exclaimed. She brought the kettle crashing down on the dome and failed even to dent it. At once a thin chirp filled the room.

"My heavens, they are broadcasting for help!" Jerry exclaimed. "We've got to get out of here at once!"

They got out, Robin twittering with rage, and the New Father Christmas caught them all on the stairs.

* Blighted Profile

Yalleranda sat in the Vale of Apple Trees, watching the old man on a horse. She was eight, and rode the treetop branch as gracefully as the old man sat the white stallion. Spying became her; when she was looking at the old man, unsuspected tensions added maturity to her face; an indefinable, alarming, compelling expression of agelessness showed through her childish prettiness. She was in love with something she had only just found, something she saw in the old man, that nobody else in the world could see.

His name was Turan Hwa. This much Yalleranda had heard from the people of the village. Anything else she knew about him, she knew only through observation.

The white stallion had climbed Blighted Profile every morning of the last week, picking its way among boulders still seared by the ancient heat of devastation. It climbed until the black stretch dropped away to one side, while on the other, a hollow wave full of sweetness, rose the Vale. Here the stallion halted, cropping grass, leaving Turan Hwa perched in the big saddle like a pulpit, able to look over the two worlds of good and bad earth.

On these occasions, Yalleranda climbed higher up the slope, moving as silently as blue moonlight among the apple trees, until she came to the last apple tree, whose embryo fruits, as yet no bigger than tonsils, were the loftiest in the Vale. Here she was so near to the old figure cut out of the blue sky above the Profile that she could hear his robes rustle in the breeze. She could almost hear his thoughts.

Young men think about the women they will love, old men about the women they have loved; but Turan

Hwa was older than that, and he thought about Philosophy.

"I have lived ninety years," he thought, "and my bones are growing thin as smoke. Yet something remains to be done. An essence of me still remains inside: my innermost heart; and that is as it was when I was a child. It is wonderful to think that after all the wars and cataclysms of my life, I am yet myself; a continuity has been preserved. Yet what am I? How can I know? I only know that when I think of what I am, I am disturbed and dissatisfied. If only I could round off my life properly . . ."

He looked about him, screwing up his withered cheeks to assist the stiff muscles of his eyes.

Falling away to his left lay the Vale of Apple Trees. Turan Hwa saw the stream at the bottom of it, pushing brooks like snail trails up the slope; a village grew and twittered and slumbered beside the stream. This, Turan Hwa liked to think of as the present.

Falling away to his right were the burned lands, and these he thought of as the past. The naturally fertile landscape had had the fertility burned irreparably out of it, as the bottom is burned out of a pot. The weapons of man had become as fearsome as the Hand of God. Nothing lived, except two giant machines which had met in the black valley; they lay now, locked together, sides streaked with rust, each slowly and hatelessly demolishing the other.

This was the good thing for which Turan Hwa rode to sit on the very nose of Blighted Profile; he could see from here both past and present. It was like looking at the two sides of the nature of man, the black and the green.

"Existence has become too terrible," he thought. "The bad side must never emerge again. Never."

But he had no means of knowing how long "never" might be. That was why he wanted to go into the future.

So he sat there for a long time, wondering about life and death. The little girl watched him, like a bird looking at a stone, wondering why it is a stone.

There is no answer to the bird's problem.

Turan Hwa eventually ate a small meal from porcelain bowls packed in a china box.

"Hup, now, Leg of Leather!" he called, when he had packed the bowls away, and the stallion began at once to carry him back home. The Vale sank below the high ridge. They jogged down the black side of Blighted Profile, jogged among the hard-boiled boulders, through the little landslides of dust and crystals, down, down, onto the arid plain.

The ground was like a scab. Occasionally Leg of Leather's hoofs went through the crust. Skirting the machines locked in frigid battle, the stallion crossed the width of desolation, climbed a low slope, and came among trees. Far behind—cautiously and involuntarily—Yalleranda followed. This was the first time she had ever left the Vale of the Apple Trees so far behind.

"Nearly home now, Leg of Leather," Turan Hwa said, as they emerged from the wood.

Ahead, the country grew green, parkland as trim and bright as a sunshade. When Turan Hwa approached, a a section of it about an acre in extent appeared to change. Curious illusions grew in the air, shapes formed, mists moved. Curtains of molecules lifted higher and higher into the air, like fountains newly switched on; the molecules twisted, misted, glittered, frosted—and formed mirrors, one behind the other, interpenetrating, weaving, defining the rooms of Turan Hwa's summer home.

He could see himself on fifty planes, approaching himself on his own white horse.

By the time he came up to the house, all of its walls were entirely opaque, as they would appear to any visitor. Coaxing the stallion, Turan Hwa rode in. Without pausing at his own quarters, he rode slowly through the house to see his wife, Wangust Ilsont.

She was busily integrating with two servants when he appeared. Dismissing them, she came toward him as they clicked off. Her leopard, Coily, was beside her; she rested a hand on it for support. Age had her in its web. Only her eyes were not gray.

"I have not seen you for a week, husband," she said gently, taking the bridle in her hand as Coily and Leg of

Leather touched muzzles. "At our time of life, that is too long. What have you been doing?"

"Thinking, my love, only thinking and regretting. In this weather, it's an agreeable enough pastime."

"Please dismount, Hwa," Wangust said anxiously.

When he had climbed down beside her, she said, "You are unsettled in yourself. This should never be, now. We have no reason or time to be anything but at peace with ourselves. For a decade, we have had only tranquillity; you must allow me to do what I can to remedy the change in you."

Turan Hwa led her to a bank which shaped itself comfortably about them as they sat down.

"There has never been a woman like you in any age, Wangust," he said gently. "What we have been to each other can never be told. I can speak out to you now as freely as ever, because we shall not allow ourselves to drift away from each other just because we sense the approaching hounds of death."

He had no way of guessing how these words played on a hidden listener, the small girl who had felt compelled to follow him across the plain.

"My dear, I feel we have been too absorbed in each other," Turan Hwa said gravely. "It is a fault."

"We live in a difficult time," his wife replied. "Our love has always been our strength."

"Yes; the blind man sees no danger. I have spent the last few mornings up on Blighted Profile, overlooking my own life. I discover that I have been a refugee from reality. Your life has been an inspiration, an adventure; mine has been a walk in your shadow. In your time machines, you went back to the period before the great war, rescuing animals and plants—and me. You almost certainly saved my life by transporting me from my own terrible age. You worked heroically, while I . . . hid . . . hid . . . from the first obligation of man, which is to face the evil of his own time—in which evil he must always be to some extent involved."

"*This* has become your time," Wangust said. "Besides, a man has no obligations, except to fulfil the

best side of his nature. Who would have instructed our ten children if you had not done so? Where would I have drawn the strength to do what I have done, if not from you? We have worked together, my husband, accomplishing much."

"If I have been of use, it has been accidentally," Turan Hwa said, a note of querulousness in his voice. "You cannot deceive me, Wangust, however lovingly you try. While I still have breath, I must justify myself. Though I am old, there must still be something I can grasp. I am a poor thing in my own eyes."

He stood before her, his feet apart, hands clasped behind his back. Wangust recalled his standing like that when his hair was black, long ago. The attitude, she thought, expressed something steadfast in him; she wanted to tell him, "You are Turan Hwa; you do not have to *do,* only be," but she knew that in his present mood he would dismiss this with scorn. Men could be harder than leopards to handle.

She stood up.

"Come with me," she said simply, laying a hand on his arm.

Bidding the leopard stay where it was, she led Turan Hwa through the house to their flying machine. She coaxed him in.

"We are going to fly," she said, smiling.

He shook his head impatiently, still rather petulant. "You know I wish to talk, my dear. I have not even told you what I am intending to do. I intend to try and travel into the future."

She sighed. "One can only travel into the past, and come back only to the present. There is no future; it is unmade, a bridge unbuilt. Tomorrow does not exist until tomorrow. This has been proven."

He set his lips. The Solites, the tribe into which he had married, could be a stubborn people. But he could be stubborn too; it was, he found, one of the few abilities which did not fade with age.

"I shall visit the future," he repeated.

Wangust laughed. "Let us fly a little before you go."

On Yalleranda, listening, Turan Hwa's statement had a different effect. She slid discreetly but excitedly away. Now she knew how to catch her marvelous old man when next he rode over to Blighted Profile. As she hurried off, the flying machine rose silently into the air.

It rose vertically, like an elevator.

As Wangust and Turan Hwa watched, the great house faded beneath them, ebbing into invisibility. More and more landscape came to view. In a moment they were stationary, five miles up. To one side, the square of green below them was chopped by the black tract of the burned lands, but to the other, a stretch of fertile land extended into the distance.

Wangust pointed down at the fertile landscape.

"That is our work," she said quietly. "When we came here, that land was virtually dead. Do you remember it, as black as desert? In the midst of it, we established seeds, insects, birds, animals. Slowly they have carried that green wave farther and farther out. Death has been turned into life. *We* turned it. One day soon, that green fringe will join with the green fringe from the coast, where the new city is. Looking at it, can you still say we have accomplished nothing? Could we have accomplished anything better?"

He said nothing. Suddenly he felt tired and peevish.

Knowing him well enough not to press him, Wangust moved away, sighing. At once, as she had anticipated, he turned to her and apologized for his rudeness.

"Let there be no breach between us," Wangust said. "Look, a ship is coming up from the coast!"

They watched through unkeen eyes the oblate spheroid which grew in the sky. It flashed a recognition signal at them, flicked into a change of course, dived, and unrolled behind it one long, white vapor breaker down the clean air. Then it touched them, and was motionless.

Next second, Cobalt Illa projected herself before her grandparents. They were merely irritated by her exhibition of airmanship.

"I was on my way to visit you," Cobalt declared, kissing the topmost wrinkle on Turan Hwa's forehead.

"Then why not come decently by transmatter, instead of indulging in acrobatics?" Turan Hwa asked.

"Flying's all the rage in New Union, granf," Cobalt said airily. She was thirty. She was beautiful, but with the unforgiving look of an actress who has played Cleopatra too often.

"How's the city coming along?" Wangust asked dutifully.

"You should come and see for yourself," replied Cobalt sternly, relenting at once to add, "because it is going to be so fine; it will be the greatest city in the world. The bad days are gone. The Solites can cease to think of themselves as savages; by the end of this season, the first reading schools will be in operation."

Turan Hwa turned sadly away. It seemed he had spent his life turning sadly away, but now all the confidence and drive manifest in his granddaughter daunted him.

"Reading is a two-edged weapon," he muttered.

"Our people must read," Cobalt said. "Less than one per cent of the population is literate."

"A semi-literate population falls prey to any petty dictator who arises," Turan Hwa said.

"An illiterate population falls prey to itself," Cobalt said.

She stood confronting him, feet slightly apart, hands clasped behind her back, in an unconscious imitation of one of his attitudes. "She might look impressive to anyone who did not know her," the old man thought. Of all his granddaughters, this was the one he found most trying—for this was the one who had most of himself in her.

"You are mouthing parroted phrases," he said. "The Solites are a happy people, Cobalt."

"New Union will be a happy city—creatively happy. We are barbarians with inherited machines; should we try to be nothing more?" She turned to her grandmother for agreement. "What do you say? Haven't we all vegetated long enough? Someone must rebuild the world."

"Don't bring me into it, dear," Wangust said. "The future is with your generation. You must decide."

"We have decided. Power has been with the indolent

for too long. In New Union, everyone will live, and learn —and dance!"

"Then let us go home and not argue," Wangust said.

They went home, but they argued. It was a time of transition. Between the generations lay gulfs of age and outlook. The old thought that the young were reckless; the young, that the old were hidebound. The same pattern had appeared down the ages. No agreement was possible, only truce; change was in the air, manifesting itself as discomfort.

"But I understand, and young Cobalt doesn't!" Turan Hwa cried out to himself that evening; "Wangust brought me from the time before the catastrophe, so that I have standards of comparison. I know there is nothing so precious as peace, in which a man may tend his own affairs. . . ."

He slept little that night, waking discomforted. With dawn, he took a hurried and lonely meal, afterwards going to find Leg of Leather, saddling him with the pulpit saddle. Like a phantom, he rode off into the misty groves, unwilling to bandy words any more; he suspected that Cobalt's ideas were second-hand, and newly acquired at that. It made her impervious to reasoning. He was too ancient for anything but the heady lullaby of riding.

Unthinkingly turning in the old direction, he rode across the burned lands. One ruined machine still picked with stiff daintiness at the carcass of another. In a few minutes, the white stallion was climbing the slopes of Blighted Profile. As they neared the top, the first green leaves of the apple trees waved above the ridge. Then they gained the highest point, midway between green and black worlds.

She saw him perched in his usual position from her mother's cottage. Thin and sweet as celery, her legs carried her twinkling up the slope, dodging, ducking climbing, around the apple trees. Yalleranda was the snake sliding toward its victim, the seducer coming, the blade falling, as she whipped through the knee-high grasses.

A few yards from him, concealed, she halted. He was

magnificent. She saw him as nobody else would have seen him; something like a snowman ready to melt back to the water from which it was formed. For her, an emanation blew from him like a breeze; and it carried the desire for death. She savored it. It intoxicated. It was as real as molasses.

Turan Hwa sat nodding in the saddle, nodding in concord with the cropping of the stallion, seeing neither the bad land on his left nor the good land on his right.

He was thinking that if he could go into the future, he could find there proof that Cobalt's policies, and the policies of her generation, would bring forth evil fruit. But of course he would never get there; it was a silly old man's silly dream. Although he could not see why visiting the future should be impossible, mathematicians and scientists had long ago proved it impossible. About that, he could do nothing. He was fit for nothing but reveries—the skin-thin reveries that dotage stretches over its bare bones. He was ripe for dying.

Fearfully, Turan Hwa shook his head, sitting up straight, hurt by his own thoughts.

A small, dark-eyed girl, with hair wild and tawny as a lion's mane, stood with her hand on the horse's bridle.

"You were nearly asleep," she said.

"I was dreaming," he said, thinking how savage, how beautiful, she was. This was a generation even beyond Cobalt.

"You were dreaming of visiting the future," she said.

Turan Hwa was hardly surprised. He recalled local talk about wild people with wild talents, people with contaminated blood, strange abilities, and unnatural desires: sports of the after-effects of high-radiation war. Wangust had warned him of them, and he had laughed. Now he laughed again, wheezily, without knowing why.

"A man dreams many things," he said. "What do you dream about, young lady?"

"My name is Yalleranda, and I dream about . . . oh, sunshine all muddy on my body while I eat the little worms in apples, or about the hard stones in the middle of clouds."

"Where do you live?" he asked sharply, disliking her answer.

Instead of replying, she twirled savagely around Leg of Leather, coming to the opposite stirrup and grasping Turan Hwa's shoe. Her mustard hair touched his white garment.

"I know where there is a machine that will send you into the future," she said, darkling her eyes up at him.

As he followed her down over the high ridge, down Blighted Profile, he felt no wonderment. He was an old hand at accepting the world's oddities. All he did was cling to the saddle pommels, letting the girl lead the stallion. In a shower of loose cobbles underfoot, they came to a cave set high on the savage slope, looking across the desolation below.

"It's in here," Yalleranda said, ducking into the gloom.

"Well, and why not?" Turan Hwa asked himself sleepily, not moving, not dismounting. "Before the catastrophe, technology reached its climax. Many weapons were secret . . . It could have been left here, forgotten . . . found by this child. Why not?"

While he waited outside on the horse, Yalleranda flicked around in the twilight of the cave, busy about her machine. She had found it abandoned; nobody else knew of it—except the other people who had entered its powerful beam, and they were in no position to say anything.

Darting to one side, nimble as pony tails, she pressed down one little red switch. A murmur grew, then dwindled. Out through the mouth of the cave went a beam like a gray mist, like the tongue of a searchlight licking through thin cloud. This was the disintegrator beam which had formed the burned valley below.

Yalleranda slid around its edges, slipped out of the cave. Leg of Leather pawed the ground, eyeing the fog uneasily.

"There you are!" Yalleranda cried, throwing up her arms. "Ride into that beam and you'll be carried into the future. Go on, spur your horse!"

Turan Hwa was puzzled. But the girl's eyes were oddly

commanding. He spoke to the stallion. Leg of Leather bridled, tossed up his head, then went forward smartly.

Her face wizened as if yearning were as sharp as sloe juice, Yalleranda watched her old prize ride into the disintegrator beam. Its surface was smooth, calm as an inland sea. It lapped up greedily around horse and rider, that cruel sea took them atom by atom, annihilating them absolutely. Like a man riding under a stretch of water, Turan Hwa rode without crying out or looking back—into the infinite future.

* Our Kind of Knowledge

It was a glorious day for exploring the Arctic Circle. The brief and violent spring had exploded over the bleak lands with a welter of life. The wilderness was a wilderness of flowers. Flocks of tern and golden plover, with the world to sport in, stood here leg-deep in blossom. Acres of blue ice crocus stretched away into the distance like shallow pools reflecting the clear skies. And on the near horizon rose a barrier of snow-covered mountains, high and harmless.

Five of them constituted the exploring party: the Preacher, Aprit, Woebee, Calurmo and Little Light—the Preacher ahead as usual. They moved to the top of a rise, and there was the valley stretched before them, washed and brilliant. There, too, was the spaceship.

Calurmo cried out in excitement and darted down among the flowers. The others saw instantly what was in his mind and followed fast behind, calling and laughing.

To them it was the most obvious feature of the colorful plain. Calurmo touched it first, and then they crowded around looking at it. The Preacher bent down and sniffed it.

"Yes," he said. "Definitely wood sorrel: *Oxalis acetosella.* How clever of it to grow up here." His thoughts held a pious tinge; they always did; it was for that he bore the name Preacher.

Only afterwards did they notice the spaceship. It was very tall and sturdy and took up a lot of ground that might more profitably have been used by the flowers. It was also very heavy, and during the time it had stood there its stern had sunk into the thawing earth.

"A nice design," Woebee commented, circling it. "What do you think it is?"

High above their heads it towered. On the highest point sat a loon, preening itself in the sun and uttering occasionally its cry, the cry of emptiness articulate. Around the shadowed side of the ship, a shriveled heap of snow rested comfortably against the metal. The metal was wonderfully smooth, but dark and unshining.

"However bulky it is down here, it manages to turn into a spire at the top," the Preacher said, squinting into the sun.

"But what is it?" Woebee repeated; then he began to sing, to show that he did not mind being unaware of what it was.

"It was *made,*" Aprit said cautiously. This was not like dealing with wood sorrel; they had never thought about spaceships before.

"You can get into it here," Little Light said, pointing. He rarely spoke, and when he did he generally pointed as well.

They climbed into the airlock, all except Calurmo, who still stooped over the wood sorrel. Its fragrant pseudo-consciousness trembled with happiness in the fresh warmth of the sun. Calurmo made a slight churring noise, persistent and encouraging, and after a minute the tiny plant broke loose of the soil and crawled onto his hand.

He brought it up to his great eyes and let his thoughts slide gently in through the roots. Slowly they radiated up a stalk and into one of the yellow-green trefoils, probing, exploring the sappy being of the leaf. Calurmo brought pressure to bear. Reluctantly, then with excitement, the plant yielded, and among its pink-streaked blossoms formed another, with five sepals, five petals, ten stamens and five stigmas, identical with the ones the plant had grown unaided.

The taste of oxalic acid still pleasant in his thoughts, Calurmo sat back and smiled. To create a freak—that was nothing; but to create something just like the originals—how the others would be pleased!

"Calurmo!" It was Aprit, conspiratorial, almost guilty. "Come and see what we've found."

Knowing it would not be as delightful as the sorrel, nevertheless Calurmo jumped up, eager to share an interest. He climbed into the airlock and followed Aprit through the ship, carrying his flower carefully.

The others were drifting interestedly around the control room, high in the nose.

"Come and look at the valley!" invited Little Light, pointing out at the spread of bright land which shone all around them. From here, too, they could see a wide river, briefly shorn of ice and sparkling full of spawning fish.

"It's beautiful," Calurmo said simply.

"We have indeed discovered a strange object," remarked the Preacher, stroking a great upholstered seat. "How old do you think it all is? It has the feel of great age."

"I can tell you how long it has stood here," said Woebee. "The door through which we entered was open for the snow to drift in. When the snow melts it can never run away. I scanned it, and the earliest drops of it fell from the sky twelve thousand seasons ago."

"What? Three thousand years?" exclaimed Aprit.

"No. Four thousand years—you know I don't count winter as a season."

A line of geese broke V-formation to avoid the nose of the ship, and joined faultlessly again on the other side. Aprit caught their military thoughts as they sailed by.

"We should have come up this way more often," said Calurmo regretfully, gazing at his sorrel. The tiny flowers were so very beautiful.

The next thing to decide was what they had discovered. Accordingly, they walked slowly around the control room, registering in unison, blithely unaware of the upper-level reasoning that lay behind their almost instinctive act. It took them five minutes, five minutes after starting completely from scratch; for the ship represented a fragment of a technology absolutely unknown to them. Also, it was a deep-spacer, which meant a corresponding complexity in drive, accommodation and equipment; but the particular pattern of its controls—repeated only in a few ships

of its own class—designated unfailingly the functions and intentions of the vessel. At least, it did to Calurmo and party, as easily as one may distinguish certain features of a hand from finding a lost glove.

Little surprise was wasted on the concept of a spaceship. As Aprit remarked, they had their own less cumbrous methods of covering interplanetary distances. But several other inferences fascinated them.

"Light is the fastest thing in our universe and the slowest in the dimension through which this ship travels," said Woebee. "It was made by a clever race."

"It was made by a race incapable of carrying power in their own bodies," said Little Light.

"Nor could they orient very efficiently," the Preacher added, indicating the astro-navigational equipment.

"So there are planets attending other stars," said Calurmo thoughtfully, his mind probing the possibilities.

"And sensible creatures on those planets," said Aprit.

"Not sensible creatures," said Little Light, pointing to the gunnery cockpit with its banks of switches. "Those are to control destruction."

"All creatures have some sense," said the Preacher.

They switched on. The old ship seemed to creak and shudder, as if it had experienced too much time and snow ever to move again.

"It was content enough without stars," muttered Woebee.

"Rain water must have got into the hydrogen," Aprit said.

"It's a very funny machine indeed to have made," said the Preacher sternly. "I don't wonder someone went away and left it."

The boredom of manual control was not for them; they triggered the necessary impulses directly to the motors. Below them, the splendid plain tilted and shrunk to a green penny set between the white and blue of land and sea. The edge of the ocean curved and with a breath-catching distortion became merely a segment of a great ball dwindling far beneath. The further they got, the brighter it shone.

"Most noble view," commented the Preacher.

Aprit was not looking. He had climbed into the computer and was feeding one of his senses along the relays and circuits of the memory bank and inference sector. He clucked happily as data drained to him. When he had it all he spat it back and returned to the others.

"Very ingenious," he said, explaining it. "But built by a race of behaviorists. Their souls were obviously trapped by their actions, consequently their science was trapped by their beliefs; they did not know where to look for real progress."

"It's very noisy, isn't it?" remarked the Preacher, as if producing a point that confirmed what had just been said.

"That noise should not be," said Calurmo coolly. "It is an alarm bell, and indicates something is wrong."

The sound played about them unceasingly until Aprit cut it off.

"I expect we are doing something wrong," he sighed. "I'll go and see what it is. But why make the bell ring here, and not where the trouble is?"

As Aprit left the control room, Little Light pointed into the huge celestial globe in which the stars of the galaxy were embalmed like diamonds in amber. "Let's go there," he suggested, rattling the calibrations until a tangential course lit up between Earth and a cluster of worlds in the center of the galaxy. "I'm sure it will be lovely there. I wonder if sorrel will grow in those parts; it won't grow on Venus, you know."

While he spoke he spun the course integrator dial, read off the specifications of flight, and fed the co-ordinates as efficiently into the computer as if he had just undergone a training course.

Aprit returned smiling.

"I've fixed it," he said. "Silly of us. We left the door open when we came in—there wasn't any air in here. That was why the bell was ringing."

They were picked up on Second Empire screens about two parsecs from the outpost system of Kyla. An alert-beetle pinpointed them and flashed their description simultaneously to Main Base on Kyla I and half a dozen other interested points—a term including the needle fleet hovering two light-years out from Kyla system.

Main Base to G.O.C. Pointer, Needle Fleet 305A: Unidentified craft, mass 40,000 tons, proceeding outskirts system toward galaxy center. Estimated speed, 20 S.L.U. Will you intercept?

G.O.C. Pointer to Main Base, Kyla I: Am already on job.

Main Base to G.O.C. Pointer: Alien acknowledges no signals, despite calls on all systems.

Pointer to Main Base: Quiet type. Appears to be heading from region Omega Y76 W592. Is this correct?

Main Base to Pointer: Correct.

Pointer to Main Base: Earth?

Main Base to Pointer: Looks like it.

Pointer to Main Base: Standing by for trouble.

Main Base to Pointer: Could be enemy stratagem, of course.

Pointer to Main Base: Of course. Going in. Out.

Officer Commanding needleship "Pointer" was Grand-Admiral Rhys-Barley. He was still a youngish man, the Everlasting War being very good for promotion, but nevertheless thirty-four years of vacuum-busting lay behind him, sapping at his humanity. He stood now, purple of face under 4G's, peering into the forward screens and snapping at Deeping.

Confusedly, Deeping flicked through the hand-view, trying to ignore the uniform that towered over him. On the hand-view, ship after ship appeared, only to be rejected by the selector. Here was trouble; the approaching alien, slipping in from a quarantined sector of space, could not be identified. The auto-view did not recognize it, and now old records were being checked on the hand-view; they, too, seemed to be drawing a blank.

Sweating, the unhappy Deeping glanced again at the image of the alien. Definitely not human; equally definitely, not Boux—or was it an enemy ruse, as Base suggested? The "Pointer" was only half a parsec away from it now. They were within hitting distance, and the unidentified craft might hit first.

Fear, thought Deeping. My stomach is sick of the taste of fear; it knows all its nuances, from the numb terror of

man's ancient enemy, the Boux, to the abject dread of Rhys-Barley's tongue. He flicked desperately. Suddenly the hand-view beeped.

The Grand-Admiral pounced, struck down the specificator bar and pulled out the emergent sheet. Even as he read it, a prolonged scrunching sound from the bowels of the ship announced that traction beams from "Pointer" and a sister ship had interlocked on the speeding alien. The gravitics wavered for a moment under the extra load and then came back to normal.

"By Vega!" Rhys-Barley exclaimed, flourishing the flimsy under Captain Hardick's nose. "What do you make of it? Tell Intake to go easy with our prize out there; they've got a bit of history on their hands. It's a First Empire ship, built something like four thousand seven hundred years ago on Luna, the satellite of Earth. Windsor class, with a Spannell XII Light Drive. Ever hear of a Spannell Drive, Captain?"

"Before my day, I'm afraid, sir."

"Deeping, get Communications to have Kyla I send us details of all ships of Windsor class, dates of obsolescence, etc. I think there's something queer. . . . Where'd it come from, I'd like to know."

Interest made Rhys-Barley hop in front of the screens with less dignity than the Grand-Admiral usually mustered. Deeping relaxed enough to wink covertly at a friend on Bombardment Panel.

The alien was already visible through the ports as a gleaming chip a mile away, its terrific velocity killed by the traction beams. Now the tiny alert-beetle which had first discovered it headed toward the "Pointer." The beetle gleamed pale red, scarcely visible against the regal profusion of Central stars. A beetle from the "Pointer" shot out to meet it, bearing a cable. The beetles connected and floated back across the narrowing void. They touched the Windsor-class ship and instantly it was surrounded by the pale amber glow of a force shield.

Everyone on the "Pointer" breathed more easily then. No energy whatsoever could break through that shield.

"Haul her in," the Captain said.

Intake acknowledged the order and gradually the little ship was drawn closer.

Rhys-Barley cast an eye again at the encephalophone reading on the bulkhead panel. Reading still "Nil." But the Nil wavered as if it was unsure of itself. Maybe they had caught a dead ship; thought waves should have registered before now, whether Boux or human.

Tension heightened again as the alien was drawn aboard. Matching velocities was a tricky business, and the maneuver always entailed a great deal of noise audible throughout the ship. A pity that super-science had never come up with a competent sound-absorber, Rhys-Barley thought morosely. The deck under him swayed a little.

Deeping handed him a slip from Kyla records. There had been four ships of the Windsor class. Three had gone to the scrap yards over three thousand years ago. The fourth had been abandoned for lack of fuel during the great Boux invasion waves that had resulted in the collapse of the First Empire. Its name: "Regalia."

"That must be our pigeon. Let's get down to Interrogation Bay, Captain," Rhys-Barley suggested. Together the pair adjusted their arm-synchs and stepped into the teleport.

They reappeared instantly beside their captive. Aliens Officer was already there, enjoying a brief spell of glory, supervising the batteries of every type of recorder, scanner, probe and what-have-you the ship possessed in concealed positions about the "Regalia." The latter looked like a small whale stranded in a large cave.

The Preacher came first out of the airlock because he always went ahead anywhere. Then followed Calurmo and Aprit, stopping to examine the crystalline formations clinging to the lock doors. After them came Woebee and Little Light. Together they gazed at the severe functionalism and gray metal that surrounded them.

"This is not a pretty planet," the Preacher observed.

"It is not the one Little Light chose," Woebee explained.

"Don't be silly, the pair of you," Calurmo said, a little sternly. "This is not a planet. It is *made*. Use your senses."

"Let's speak to those beings over there," said Little Light, pointing. "The ones behind the invisibility screen."

He wandered over to Rhys-Barley and tapped his rediffusion shield.

"I can see you," he said. "Can you see me?"

"All right, cut rediffusion," snarled Rhys-Barley. The crimson on his face was no longer produced by the forces of gravity.

"No evidence of any energy or explosive weapons, sir," Aliens Officer reported. "Permission to interview?"

"O.K."

Aliens Officer wore a black uniform. His hair was white, his face was gray. He had a square jaw. The Preacher liked the look of him and approached.

"Are you the captain of this ship?" asked the Aliens Officer.

"That question does not mean anything to me, I'm sorry," said the Preacher.

"Who commands this ship, the 'Regalia'?"

"I don't understand that one either. What do you think he means, Calurmo?"

Calurmo was scanning the immense room in which they stood. His attention flicked momentarily to the little brain glands in the ceiling, that computed the lung power present and co-ordinated the air supply accordingly. Then he explored all the minute currents and pulses that plied ceaselessly in the walls and floor, adjusting temperature and gravity, guarding against strain and metal fatigue; he swept the air itself, chemically pure and microbe-proof, rendered non-conductive. Nowhere did he find life, and for a moment he recalled the land they had left, with the fish spawning in its rivers and the walrus sporting in its seas.

He dismissed the vision and tried to answer the Preacher's question.

"If he means who made the ship go, we all did," he said. "Little Light did the direction, Woebee and I did the fuel—"

"I don't like it in here, Calurmo," Aprit interrupted. "These beings smell of something odd. . . ."

"It's fear," said Calurmo, happy to be interrupted by a friend. "Intellectual and physical fear. I'll tell you about it later. They've got some sort of inertia barrier up and their emotions don't come through, but their thoughts are clear enough."

"Too clear!" said Woebee with a laugh. "They are afraid of anyone who does not look like themselves, and if anyone *does* look like them—they are suspicious! I say, let's get back to the snows; that was a more interesting place to explore."

He made a move toward the ship. Instantly an arrangement of duralum bars and R-rays descended from the roof and held them in five separate cells. They stood temporarily disconcerted in glowing cages.

The Aliens Officer walked among them grimly. "Now you're going to answer questions," he said. "I'm sorry we are forced to use these methods to secure your attention. The speech-pattern separators that allow us to talk together work through the floor here and are relayed out to me via Main Base. I don't imagine you can do us much harm over such a system. And nothing can get through the electronic barricade we've brought up against you. In other words, you're trapped. Now let's have straight answers, please."

"Here's a straight answer for your speech-pattern separator," said Aprit. Just for a second he wore a look of concentration. At once smoke rose from the floor of the bay. A dozen different alerts clicked and whirred, relentlessly bearing witness to ruined equipment.

Base signaled a two-day repair job required on language circuits.

"Now we'll use our system of communicating," Aprit said, mollified.

"You shouldn't be destructive," the Preacher reproved. "Havoc becomes a habit." Delighted with the chime of his maxim, he repeated it to himself.

Aliens Officer went a little paler. He recognized a show of force when he saw one. Also, he was still hearing them perfectly despite the smoldering failure of his

speech-pattern separators. A subordinate hurried up and conferred with him for a moment. Then the officer looked up and said to the prisoners: "At that act of destruction you released typical Boux configurations of thought. Do you admit your origins?"

Pointing to the R-rays, Little Light said: "I am beginning to become uneasy, friends. This gadget surrounding us is as impervious as he claims."

"I think it would be very wise to withdraw," the Preacher agreed. "Shall we not have left the Arctic?"

"That seems the only way," agreed Calurmo doubtfully. Redature always upset his stomach.

Grand-Admiral Rhys-Barley pushed roughly forward. He was dissatisfied with the conduct of the interrogation. Also, he was worried. There was standard procedure for dealing with Boux; man's deadly enemy, originating on fast-rotating planets with high-velocity winds, were fluid in form and could easily assume the shape of men. A Boux-man loose on a planet like Kyla I could do an infinite amount of damage—and Bouxmen were not easy to detect. Therefore, once Main Base was satisfied there were Boux aboard "Pointer," they were quite likely to signal the flagship to proceed into the nearest sun. Rhys-Barley had other ideas about his future.

He halted pugnaciously before Aprit.

"What's your real shape?" he demanded.

Aprit was puzzled. "You mean my metaphysical shape?" he asked.

"No, I do not. I mean that my instruments register close to the Boux end of the brain impulse-scale. And Boux can masquerade as anything they like, over limited periods of time. What I'm asking is, who or what are you?"

"We are brothers," said Aprit mildly. "As you are our brother. Only you are a very bad-tempered brother."

The stun was shot into Aprit's enclosure from the still-smoking floor. It struck with frightening suddenness. Pressure built instantaneously to a peak that would have spread a man uniformly over the walls of the enclosure in a pink paste. It would have forced a genuine Boux

into one of his primary shapes. Aprit merely dropped unconscious to the deck.

Little Light pointed crossly at the Grand-Admiral. "For that, the instant Aprit returns we shall not have left Arctic at all," he said.

"It was a stupid and ignorant act," agreed the Preacher.

Nobody had noticed Deeping. When the Captain and the Admiral had come through the teleport, he had been left to take the long, physical route down to Interrogation Bay. One does not waste six million volts on junior ranks.

Now he walked straight up to Calurmo and said, peering anxiously through the vibrating wall that separated them: "I am very sorry we have not made you more welcome here, but we are at war."

"Please don't apologize," said Calurmo. "It must be very upsetting for you to have a difference with someone. How long has this been happening?"

"Thousands of years," said Deeping bitterly.

"March that man to the disintegrators," Rhys-Barley bellowed. Two guards moved smartly toward Deeping.

"If you will pardon my venturing to suggest it," Aliens Officer said, wobbling at the knees as he spoke, "but just possibly, sir, this new approach might . . . might be effective."

Faint with his own temerity, he saw Rhys-Barley's hand flicker and stay the guards.

"—a difference we can never settle until we vanquish the enemy," Deeping was saying. He was still pale, but stood stiff and resolute, almost as if he drew strength from these strange beings.

"Oh yes, you can settle it," Calurmo said. "But you've been going about it the wrong way."

"Don't talk nonsense," Rhys-Barley chimed in. "You don't know the problem—unless you are a race of Boux we have not met before."

"My friends are learning of the problem now," murmured Calurmo, glancing at Little Light and Woebee, who were unusually quiet. But the Grand-Admiral went ruthlessly on.

"The enemy has inestimable advantages over Man. It

has only been by exerting his military might up to the hilt, by standing continually on his toes, by having one finger perpetually on the trigger, that Man has kept the Boux out of his systems."

"That really is the truth," said Deeping earnestly. "If you have a super-weapon you could let us know about we would be very grateful."

"Don't humor me, please," Calurmo said. He turned to Little Light and Woebee, who smiled and nodded. At the same time Aprit opened his eyes and stood up.

"I had such a funny dream," he said. "Do we go home now?"

"We want to readjust these people first," the Preacher said. The five of them conferred together for a minute, while Rhys-Barley walked rapidly up and down and Deeping sneezed once or twice; R-rays had that effect on his nose.

Finally Woebee motioned to Deeping and said: "You must forgive me if I say your people appear full of contradictions to us, but it is so. One contradiction, however, we could not understand. You pen us in here with impenetrable R-rays, as you term your inertia field, and also with duralum bars. The bars are quite superfluous unless—they are not what they seem; they are another of the machines you so delight in. They are, in fact, categorizing grids that transmit almost comprehensive records of the five of us back to your nearest planet. An excellent device! Entire blueprints of us, psychologically and physiobiologically, are fed back to your biggest brain units. You really need complimenting on the efficiency of this machine. It is so good, in fact, that Little Light and I have explored Main Base by it, have sent the rest of your fleet packing, and have broadcast directions to your vice-captain or whatever you call him up in the controls; as a result of which, you are now traveling where we want you to go and this Interrogation Bay is cut off from the rest of the ship."

He had not finished speaking before Rhys-Barley had flung himself behind a shield and given the Emergency Destruction order. Nothing happened. Buttons, switches, valves, all were dead.

"You merely waste your time," Little Light said, pointing at the Grand-Admiral and stepping through the dying R-rays. "The power has gone. Did I not explain that clearly enough?"

"Where are you taking us?" Deeping whispered.

"You are taking *us,*" Woebee corrected.

"Not—not to Earth?"

Woebee smiled. "I feel that the word 'Earth' has some emotional value for you."

"Why, yes, of course. Don't you see, it's the only planet we ever lost to the Boux, right at the beginning of our troubles with them. But Man came from there, Earth is Man's birth planet, and when it fell—that was the end of the First Empire. Since then we've grown stronger—but all that old peripheral region of space is dead ground to us now."

Woebee nodded carelessly. "We learned that from our investigation of Main Base. The area is now abandoned by the Boux too."

"How awful to think of it stagnating all this time!" Deeping said.

"Really, you are as foolish as the rest," said the Preacher reprovingly. "The stagnation has been *here*. Why, you're still clinging to machinery to support you."

He led his four friends back toward the "Regalia." "We'll do the rest of the journey on our own," he told them. "These soldiers will want to go back to their duties. It's really none of our concern to hinder them!"

In the lock they paused. The personnel trapped in the Interrogation Bay looked bemused and helpless. Rhys-Barley sat on a step staring at the wall. The Captain bit his nails in an absorbed fashion.

Aliens Officer came forward and said: "You have so much you could have taught us."

"There's one piece of knowledge, unlike most of our kind of knowledge, that might be useful to you," Aprit said casually. "In Man's hurry to leave Earth because one or two Boux had arrived, some few men and women were left behind. They had no defense against the Boux, so the Boux had no need to attack them. In other words, there was an opportunity for—intermarriage."

"Intermarriage!" echoed Aliens Officer.

"Yes," the Preacher said solemnly. "Neither you nor your machines seemed able to diagnose that. So you see our origins are a mixture of Man's and Boux's. . . ."

"That is a priceless piece of knowledge," Deeping reflected.

Calurmo smiled a valedictory smile that included even the deflated Admiral.

"I'm delighted if it proves so," he said, "but it is only a just return for Man's priceless gift to the Boux who were our distant ancestors: the gift of rigid form. Fluidity has proved a curse to the Boux. Intermarriage has recommendations for both sides. May I suggest you arrange —a love-match?"

This time he remembered to close the airlock doors. The "Regalia" slid, apparently of its own volition, into the great lock of the "Pointer" and out into space. By the time it was heading home, the flagship's captain was busy roaring at his bridge officers and Grand-Admiral Rhys-Barley was speaking apologetically to Base.

Deeping was staring at something that had materialized in his hand: wood sorrel, *Oxalis acetosella.* A flower from Earth.

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