Penguin Science Fiction 3/6

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PENGUIN BOOKS

1963

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EDITED BY BRIAN W. ALDISS

Brian Aldiss, who is literary editor of the *Oxford Mail*, was elected President of the British Science Fiction Association in 1960. He was born in Norfolk in 1925 and spent his childhood on the east coast and in Devon. Joining the Royal Signals in 1943 he saw action in Burma, as well as close-up views of snakes and utterly silent dying jungles. After the war he toured South Eastern Asia, and then for ten years became a bookseller in Oxford. In 1955 he won the *Observer* Short Story Competition and took to writing full time. He has great faith in science fiction as a vehicle for ideas and excitement. Books he has published, in Britain and America, include: *The Brightfount Diaries*; *Non-Stop*; *Space, Time and Nathaniel*; *Galaxies Like Grains of Sand*; and *Equator*. He edited an earlier collection, *Penguin Science Fiction*, which is still available. Such spare time as he has he devotes to painting, swimming, talking, and eating curry.

More Penguin Science Fiction

An anthology edited by

BRIAN W. ALDISS

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

THE science fiction writer performs a balancing act between two gulfs. On the one hand, he must preserve a certain likelihood in his narration; on the other, if he only writes about what we expect to happen, we find him dull.

So he goes, with his gyroscope whirring. We take pleasure in the performance, half fearing he will fall. But it brings us more than an ordinary pleasure; it brings a certain therapy. To be in imagination on another planet, or involved in a future war, or whatever it may be, is to suffer in safety. A certain amount of suffering has a tonic effect on the system. SF is emotion recreated in tranquillity, and we enjoy as we read it the privacy of the confessional or the psychoanalyst's couch without the discomforts of either.

Whatever SF does, it does with a vengeance. Even its sorrows and apprehensions have a bracing quality, 'a certain triumphant lugubriousness', as Kingsley Amis puts it in his pyrotechnic cartographic work, *New Maps of Hell*; its glooms have a relish all their own. So I had better come out with the truth right at the start and confess that something really awful happens to mankind in several of these tales. The insulated suffering I have mentioned goes on apace. I had better add that the title of 'The Liberation of Earth' is a delicate piece of irony; that in Arthur Clarke's 'The Forgotten Enemy' we are all, bless us, extinct; and that in 'The Store of the Worlds' it would be better for us if we were extinct.

SF is more adept than Victorian melodrama in demonstrating that there are fates worse than death. Who would dare or care to be the hero of Pohl's 'Tunnel under the World' – or the villain of Nourse's 'Counterfeit'? Who would desire the resurrection accorded Lorrine, the girl in that haunting story of 'The Greater Thing'?

Let me stop asking questions and provide a few answers.

One of the subjects SF has domesticated is the Appalling. It will do a very smooth job with Humour, as authors Asimov and

Schoenfeld demonstrate, but its most splendid effects are with the Appalling, with – as an SF critic once unluckily termed it – 'concepts that the mind cannot stomach'.

If you have concepts in mind, prepare to stomach them now, for the secret of SF's success lies in the fact that its best effects are not merely nasty; they are nasty in a way that encourages us to examine ourselves. Some of these stories have a way of asking us if we are not taking our identities for granted. It is a perfectly sensible, perfectly frightening question.

When you hold this book, you are not feeling the paper that came from the Penguin establishment at Harmondsworth; you are feeling the neural response to what your fingers touch. A work of interpretation has been carried out between hand and brain. An identical work of interpretation might be carried out if the hand were made of a silicon-based substance or the brain an affair of printed circuits and electronic scanners.

You, in other words, are an invention for holding the book and for knowing you are holding it. You are not the only way this miracle could be accomplished. There may be better ways. There may, as Plato suggested, be ideal books with ideal persons to hold them. Or there may – in this volume the suggestions come from Pohl and Nourse – be fakes doing the job. By the time you have examined the proposition carefully, and realized how little you know about how you hold a book, much less read it, you may ask yourself: Am I real or fake?

It is the question SF perpetually wants you to ask.

It is not a purely theoretical question. For if there is doubt about the perfection or the humanness of humanity, then humanity can be improved. Howard Fast demonstrates in 'The First Men' how some of those improvements might be carried out. The odd thing about 'The First Men' is that it was published as recently as 1959; its calm and its wisdom, together with its freedom from gadgetry, and the 'basic' elements in its plot, suggest something of an early H. G. Wells story. To read it is to be moved with a sense of regret that in all of us so much of potential value must be wasted.

Writing in the *Critical Quarterly* recently, John Wain claimed that SF 'purveys an imaginative vision profoundly hostile to art and indeed to anything specifically human'. Of course it is the

burden of the *Critical Quarterly* to be critical, and that quarterly, but I see nothing hostile to humanity in Mr Fast's story – though it is certainly antagonistic to human muddle.

There is a streak of perfectionism running through SF that upsets some stomachs. You can see it at work in 'The Monkey Wrench'. In a quiet, nail-gnawing way, Gordon Dickson is furious that his elaborate and efficient machine should be upset by the imperfections of human logic.

While selecting these stories, I have again aimed for variety while looking for merit. If you are a regular reader of science fiction, then most of the names on the contents page will be familiar to you. If you are not, then perhaps a word about some of the authors may interest you.

To take the least known first, I have no idea who Mr Schoenfeld is; he may perhaps be a fellow of only one infinite jest, but 'Build Up Logically' is certainly a jest I wish I had made myself.

William Tenn (which is a pen name, although not for Tennessee Williams, as somebody suggested) is another author from whom we hear too infrequently. Every story he writes has an individual flavour. 'Time In Advance', a collection of some of his longer stories, is well worth looking out for.

Tom Godwin is best known for his excellent story 'The Cold Equations', which was adapted into a television play recently. Alan Nourse has recently had two books published, 'Star Surgeon' and an imaginative account of the chief bodies of the solar system, 'Nine Planets'. Like the hero of his story 'Counterfeit', Mr Nourse is a doctor.

Howard Fast is a famous name in other fields than SF. Perhaps he is best known as the author of 'Spartacus'. He is more than welcome among that small group of writers – less than a hundred strong – who contribute to SF rather than batten on it.

Mr Harrison was, Mr Pohl is, an editor of more than one SF magazine. Mr Harrison lives in Denmark, and writes excellent SF novels such as 'Deathworld' and the delightfully titled 'Stainless Steel Rat'. Of Mr Pohl, Kingsley Amis wrote that he is 'the most consistently able writer that SF, in the modern sense, has yet produced'. 'The Tunnel under the World' gives us little opportunity to dissent from this verdict.

Since Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke are among the best known and loved SF writers on either side of the Atlantic – but I had better not say that, as Mr Clarke now lives in Ceylon – since they are among the best SF writers, they need little introduction from me. Dr Asimov has written over forty books, including a standard textbook on biochemistry. Among Mr Clarke's many distinctions is the winning of the UNESCO Kalinga Prize for constructive writing.

In 'The Nine Billion Names of God' he wrote what is perhaps the most unforgettable SF story. It has been anthologized too often for me to reprint it here, but you will find in 'The Forgotten Enemy' a very palatable substitute.

An anthologist would be guilty of discourtesy to his authors if he started naming favourites among them. All the same, I cannot resist pointing to some of the exhibits. In particular, note how deftly the Pohl story treads the tightrope between astonishment and incredulity.

It is exciting, it presents us with the sense of dislocation that heightens our awareness of our own surroundings, it contains strong elements of social criticism, it is full of a dark humour. 'The Tunnel under the World' manages to go on drawing surprise out of surprise right until the end. What is more, Pohl obviously enjoys the performance as much as we do. He may speak of horrid events; but like many another SF writer, he is a genial Jeremiah. The long story 'Pyramid' is an old favourite of mine, and one I am particularly glad to present here. It is a convincing account of a group of men transplanted into an alien ecology. Although Robert Abernathy's name is too little known in Britain, his good wine obviously does not require my belated bush.

In 'Pyramid', man is the alien. In Harry Harrison's 'An Alien Agony', the alien is Man – or so this fable can be read. It is an odd and disturbing story, about which I would like to make one point, because it seems to typify much of the better SF being written in the sixties.

You may notice – it is difficult not to notice – that a sort of introspection hangs over much of SF. As I have said, the best effects are not merely nasty. One asks when the alien approaches not only 'What will it do to me?', but 'My God, what will I do to it?' This

is the great difference between the SF of the forties and the SF of today; formerly, only the first question was allowed. But the aliens have become less red in tooth and claw; and man has improved his aim. 'They' have become less formidable; 'we' have taken on the menace. Xenophobia has been replaced by metaphysics.

As a result, a self-questioning note sounds through much of the more perceptive SF. It seems to sound willy nilly, though it was the last thing you'd expect to hear twenty years ago. You can hear it in one or two of these stories – in the William Tenn story it sets your teeth on edge. Often the self-questioning has a religious flavour.

In 'An Alien Agony', religion comes into the open. The question Harry Harrison offers us is this: what harm would an introduction to God do on a world without a vision of God?

He provides us with an answer – the humanist answer, in fact: that it would do untold harm.

Such, I believe, is what the final word from his alien, Itin, superficially conveys. But another interpretation is possible. For we can hear in Itin's cry the birth of conscience; and this would be the Christian answer to Harrison's question: that the introduction of God could only do untold good. One saved soul would be worth a whole planet full of suffering (in the way that one master canvas is reckoned worth a whole life of suffering).

You may, in fact, choose your answer to the question. If you enjoy ambiguities, you should relish being allowed alternatives. Under an older dispensation, the author delivered his argument at blaster point.

I have fallen into a common editorial trap, and begun writing over the heads of my stories. Let me clamber hastily out and add that these speculative conundrums are good drama, whatever else they are. Look, here is Godwin's Johnny Thorne prowling a moonlit street with the State police after him; here Nourse's spaceship thundering back from Venus with something loathesome aboard; here Clarke's bear padding through desolate Bloomsbury; here a robot running for its life, there the air beginning to grow foul as two men confront each other . . .

Oxford, November 1962 BRIAN W. ALDISS

The Monkey Wrench

GORDON R. DICKSON

CARY HARMON was not an ungifted young man. He had the intelligence to carve himself a position as a Lowland society lawyer, which on Venus is not easy to do. And he had the discernment to consolidate that position by marrying into the family of one of the leading drug-exporters. But, nevertheless, from the scientific view-point, he was a layman; and laymen, in their ignorance, should never be allowed to play with delicate technical equipment; for the result will be trouble, as surely as it is the first time a baby gets its hands on a match.

His wife was a high-spirited woman; and would have been hard to handle at times if it had not been for the fact that she was foolish enough to love him. Since he did not love her at all, it was consequently both simple and practical to terminate all quarrels by dropping out of sight for several days until her obvious fear of losing him for good brought her to a proper humility. He took good care, each time he disappeared, to pick some new and secure hiding place where past experience or her several years' knowledge of his habits would be no help in locating him. Actually, he enjoyed thinking up new and undiscoverable bolt-holes, and made a hobby out of discovering them.

Consequently, he was in high spirits the grey winter afternoon he descended unannounced on the weather station of Burke McIntyre, high in the Lonesome Mountains, a jagged chain of the deserted shorelands of Venus' Northern Sea. He had beaten a blizzard to the dome with minutes to spare; and now, with his small two-place flier safely stowed away, and a meal of his host's best supplies under his belt, he sat revelling in the comfort of his position and listening to the hundred and fifty mile per hour, sub-zero winds lashing impotently at the arching roof overhead.

'Ten minutes more,' he said to Burke, 'and I'd have had a tough time making it!'

'Tough!' snorted Burke. He was a big, heavy-featured, blond man with a kindly contempt for all of humanity aside from the favoured class of meteorologists. 'You Lowlanders are too used to that present day Garden of Eden you have down below. Ten minutes more and you'd have been spread over one of the peaks around here to wait for the spring searching party to gather your bones.'

Cary laughed in disbelief.

'Try it, if you don't believe me,' said Burke. 'No skin off my nose if you don't have the sense to listen to reason. Take your bug up right now if you want.'

'Not me,' Cary's teeth flashed. 'I know when I'm comfortable. And that's no way to treat your guest, tossing him out into the storm when he's just arrived.'

'Some guest,' rumbled Burke. 'I shake hands with you after the graduation exercises, don't hear a word from you for six years and then suddenly you're knocking at my door here in the hinterland.'

'I came on impulse,' said Cary. 'It's the prime rule of my life. Always act on impulse, Burke. It puts the sparkle in existence.'

'And leads you to an early grave,' Burke supplemented.

'If you have the wrong impulses,' said Cary. 'But then if you get sudden urges to jump off cliffs or play Russian Roulette, you're too stupid to live, anyway.'

'Cary,' said Burke heavily, 'you're a shallow thinker.'

'And you're a stodgy one,' grinned Cary. 'Suppose you quit insulting me and tell me something about yourself. What's this hermit's existence of yours like? What do you do?'

'What do I do?' repeated Burke. 'I work.'

'But just how?' Cary said, settling himself cozily back into his chair. 'Do you send up balloons? Catch snow in a pail to find how much fell? Take sights on the stars? Or what?'

Burke shook his head at him and smiled tolerantly.

'Well, if you insist on my talking to entertain you,' he answered, 'I don't do anything so picturesque. I just sit at a desk and prepare weather data for transmission to the Weather Centre down at Capital City.'

'Aha!' Cary said, waggling a forefinger at him in reproof. 'I've

got you now. You've been lying down on the job. You're the only one here; so if you don't take observations, who does?'

'The machine does, of course. These stations have a Brain to do that.'

'That's worse,' Cary answered. 'You've been sitting here warm and comfortable while some poor little Brain scurries around outside in the snow and does all your work for you.'

'As a matter of fact you're closer to the truth than you think; and it wouldn't do you any harm to learn a few things about the mechanical miracles that let you lead a happy ignorant life. Some wonderful things have been done lately in the way of equipping these stations.'

Cary smiled mockingly.

'I mean it,' Burke went on, his face lighting. 'The Brain we've got here now is the last word in that type of installation. As a matter of fact, it was just put in recently – until a few months back we had to work with a job that was just a collector and computer. That is, it collected the weather data around this station and presented it to you. Then you had to take it and prepare it for the calculator, which would chew on it for a while and then pass you back results which you again had to prepare for transmission downstairs to the Centre.'

'Fatiguing, I'm sure,' murmured Cary, reaching for the drink placed handily on the table beside his chair. Burke ignored him, caught up in his own appreciation of the mechanical development about which he was talking.

'It kept you busy, for the data came in steadily; and you were always behind since a batch would be accumulating while you were working up the previous batch. A station like this is the centre-point for observational mechs posted at points over more than five hundred square miles of territory; and, being human, all you had time to do was skim the cream off the reports and submit a sketchy picture to the calculator. And then there was a certain responsibility involved in taking care of the station and yourself.

'But now' – Burke leaned forward and stabbed a finger at his visitor – 'we've got a new installation that takes the data directly from the observational mechs – all of it – resolves it into the proper

form for the calculator to handle it, and carries it right on through to the end results. All I still have to do is prepare the complete picture from the results and shoot it downstairs.

'In addition, it runs the heating and lighting plants, automatically checks on the maintenance of the station. It makes repairs and corrections on verbal command and has a whole separate section for the consideration of theoretical problems.'

'Sort of a little tin god,' said Cary nastily. He was used to attention and annoyed by the fact that Burke seemed to be waxing more rhapsodic over his machine than the brilliant and entertaining guest who, as far as the meteorologist could know, had dropped in to relieve a hermit's existence.

Burke looked at him and chuckled.

'No,' he replied. 'A *big* tin god, Cary.'

'Sees all, knows all, tells all, I suppose. Never makes a mistake. Infallible.'

'You might say that,' answered Burke, still with a grin on his face.

'But those qualities alone don't quite suffice for elevating your gadget to godhood. One all-important attribute is lacking – invulnerability. Gods never break down.'

'Neither does this.'

'Come now, Burke,' chided Cary, 'you mustn't let your enthusiasm lead you into falsehood. No machine is perfect. A crossed couple of wires, a burnt out tube and where is your darling? Plunk! Out of action.'

Burke shook his head.

'There aren't any wires,' he said. 'It uses beamed connexions. And as for burnt out tubes, they don't even halt consideration of a problem. The problem is just shifted over to a bank that isn't in use at the time; and automatic repairs are made by the machine itself. You see, Cary, in this model, no bank does one specific job, alone. Any one of them – and there's twenty, half again as many as this station would ever need – can do any job, from running the heating plant to operating the calculator. If something comes up that's too big for one bank to handle, it just hooks in one or more of the idle banks – and so on until it's capable of dealing with the situation.'

'Ah,' said Cary, 'but what if something *did* come up that re-

quired all the banks and more too? Wouldn't it overload them and burn itself out?'

'You're determined to find fault with it, aren't you, Cary,' answered Burke. 'The answer is no. It wouldn't. Theoretically it's possible for the machine to bump into a problem that would require all or more than all of its banks to handle. For example, if this station suddenly popped into the air and started to fly away for no discernible reason, the bank that first felt the situation would keep reaching out for help until all the banks were engaged in considering it, until it crowded out all the other functions the machine performs. But, even then, it wouldn't overload and burn out. The banks would just go on considering the problem until they had evolved a theory that explained why we were flying through the air and what to do about returning us to our proper place and functions.'

Cary straightened up and snapped his fingers.

'Then it's simple,' he said. 'I'll just go in and tell your machine – on the verbal hookup – that we're flying through the air.'

Burke gave a sudden roar of laughter.

'Cary, you dope!' he said. 'Don't you think the men who designed the machine took the possibility of verbal error into account? You say that the station is flying through the air. The machine immediately checks by making its own observations; and politely replies, "Sorry, your statement is incorrect" and forgets the whole thing.'

Cary's eyes narrowed and two spots of colour flushed the skin over his cheekbones; but he held his smile.

'There's the theoretical section,' he murmured.

'There is,' said Burke, greatly enjoying himself, 'and you could use it by going in and saying "consider the false statement or data – this station is flying through the air" and the machine would go right to work on it.'

He paused, and Cary looked at him expectantly.

'But – ' continued the meteorologist, 'it would consider the statement with only those banks not then in use; and it would give up the banks whenever a section using real data required them.'

He finished, looking at Cary with quizzical good humour. But Cary said nothing.

'Give up, Cary,' he said at last. 'It's no use. Neither God nor Man nor Cary Harmon can interrupt my Brain in the rightful performance of its duty.'

Cary's eyes glittered, dark and withdrawn beneath their lids. For a long second, he just sat and looked, and then he spoke.

'I could do it,' he said, softly.

'Do what?' asked Burke.

'I could gimmick your machine,' said Cary.

'Oh, forget it! Don't take things so seriously, Cary. What if you can't think of a monkey wrench to throw into the machinery? Nobody else could, either.'

'I said I could do it.'

'Once and for all, it's impossible. Now stop trying to pick flaws in something guaranteed flawless and let's talk about something else.'

'I will bet you,' said Cary, speaking with a slow intensity, 'five thousand credits that if you will leave me alone with your machine for one minute I can put it completely out of order.'

'I don't want to take your money, even if five thousand *is* the equivalent of a year's salary for me. The trouble with you is, Cary, you never could stand to lose at anything. Now, forget it!'

'Put up or shut up,' said Cary.

Burke took a deep breath.

'Now look,' he said, the beginnings of anger rumbling in his deep voice. 'Maybe I did wrong to needle you about the machine. But you've got to get over the idea that I can be bullied into admitting that you're right. You've got no conception of the technology that's behind the machine, and no idea of how certain I am that you, at least, can't do anything to interfere with its operation. You think that there's a slight element of doubt in my mind and that you can bluff me out by proposing an astronomical bet. Then, if I won't bet, you'll tell yourself you've won. Now listen, I'm not just ninety-nine point nine, nine, nine, nine per cent sure of myself. I'm one hundred per cent sure of myself and the reason I won't bet you is because that would be robbery; and besides, once you'd lost you'd hate me for winning for the rest of your life.'

'The bet still stands,' said Cary.

'All right!' roared Burke, jumping to his feet. 'If you want to force the issue, suit yourself. It's a bet.'

Cary grinned and got up, following him out of the pleasant, spacious sitting room, where lamps dispelled the gloom of the snow-laden sky beyond the windows, and into a short, metal-walled corridor where ceiling tubes blazed. They followed this for a short distance to a room where the wall facing the corridor and the door set in it were all of glass.

Here Burke halted.

'There's the machine,' he said, pointing through the transparency of the wall and turning to Cary behind him. 'If you want to communicate with it verbally, you speak into that grille there. The calculator is to your right, and that inner door leads down to the room housing the lighting and heating plants. But if you're thinking of physical sabotage, you might as well give up. The lighting and heating systems don't even have emergency manual controls. They're run by a little atomic pile that only the machine can be trusted to handle – that is, except for an automatic set-up that damps the pile in case lightning strikes the machine or some such thing. And you couldn't get through the shielding in a week. As for breaking through to the machine up here, that panel in which the grille is set is made of two-inch thick steel sheets with their edges flowed together under pressure.'

'I assure you,' said Cary, 'I don't intend to damage a thing.'

Burke looked at him sharply, but there was no hint of sarcasm in the smile that twisted the other's lips.

'All right,' he said, stepping back from the door. 'Go ahead. Can I wait here, or do you have to have me out of sight?'

'Oh, by all means watch,' said Cary. 'We machine-gimmickers have nothing to hide.' He turned mockingly to Burke, and lifted his arms. 'See? Nothing up my right sleeve. Nothing up my left.'

'Go on,' interrupted Burke roughly. 'Get it over with. I want to get back to my drink.'

'At once,' said Cary, and went in through the door, closing it behind him.

Through the transparent wall, Burke watched him approach the panel in line with the speaker grille and stop some two feet in

front of it. Having arrived at this spot, he became utterly motionless, his back to Burke, his shoulders hanging relaxed and his hands motionless at his side. For the good part of a minute, Burke strained his eyes to discover what action was going on under the guise of Cary's apparent immobility. Then an understanding struck him and he laughed.

'Why,' he said to himself, 'he's bluffing right up to the last minute, hoping I'll get worried and rush in there and stop him.'

Relaxed, he lit a cigarette and looked at his watch. Some forty-five seconds to go. In less than a minute, Cary would be coming out, forced at last to admit defeat – that is, unless he had evolved some fantastic argument to prove that defeat was really victory.

Burke frowned. It was almost pathological, the way Cary had always refused to admit the superiority of anyone or anything else; and unless some way was found to soothe him he would be a very unpleasant companion for the remaining days that the storm held him marooned with Burke. It would be literally murder to force him to take off in the tornado velocity winds and a temperature that must be in the minus sixties by this time. At the same time, it went against the meteorologist's grain to crawl for the sake of congeniality. . . .

The vibration of the generator, half-felt through the floor and the soles of his shoes, and familiar as the motion of his own lungs, ceased abruptly. The fluttering streamers fixed to the ventilator grille above his head ceased their colourful dance and dropped limply as the rush of air that had carried them ceased. The lights dimmed and went out, leaving only the grey and ghostly light from the thick windows at each end of the corridor to illuminate the passage and the room. The cigarette dropped unheeded from Burke's fingers and in two strides he was at the door and through it.

'What have you done?' he snapped at Cary.

The other looked mockingly at him, walked across to the nearer wall of the room and leaned his shoulder negligently against it.

'That's for you to find out,' he said.

'Don't be insane – ' began the meteorologist. Then, checking himself like a man who has no time to lose, he whirled on the panel and gave his attention to the instruments on its surface.

The pile was damped. The ventilating system was shut off, the electrical system was dead. Only the power in the storage cells of the machine itself was available, for the operating light still glowed redly on the panel. The great outside doors, wide enough to permit the ingress and exit of a two-man flier, were closed, and would remain that way, for they required power to open or close them. Visio, radio, and teletype were alike silent and lifeless through lack of power.

But the machine still operated.

Burke stepped to the grill and pressed the red alarm button below it, twice.

'Attention,' he said. 'The pile is damped and all fixtures besides yourself lack power. Why is this?'

There was no response, though the red light continued to glow industriously on the panel.

'Obstinate little rascal, isn't it?' said Cary from the wall.

Burke ignored him, punching the button again.

'Reply!' he ordered. 'Reply at once! What is the difficulty? Why is the pile not operating?'

There was no answer.

He turned to the calculator and played his fingers expertly over the buttons. Fed from the stored power within the machine, the punched tape rose in a fragile white arc and disappeared through a slot in the panel. He finished his punching and waited.

There was no answer.

For a long moment he stood staring at the calculator as if unable to believe that the machine had failed him. Then he turned and faced Cary.

'What have you done?'

'Do you admit you were wrong?' Cary demanded.

'Yes.'

'And do I win the bet?' persisted Cary gleefully.

'Yes.'

'Then I'll tell you,' the lawyer said. He put a cigarette between his lips and puffed it alight; then blew out a long streamer of smoke which billowed and hung in the still air of the room, which, lacking heat from the blowers, was cooling rapidly. 'This fine little gadget of yours may be all very well at meteorology, but it's not very good

at logic. Shocking situation, when you consider the close relation between mathematics and logic.'

'What did you do?'

'I'll get to it,' said Cary. 'As I say, it's a shocking situation. Here is this infallible machine of yours, worth, I suppose, several million credits, beating its brains out over a paradox.'

'A paradox!' The words from Burke were almost a sob.

'A paradox,' sang Cary, 'a most ingenious paradox.' He switched back to his speaking voice. 'Which is from Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*. It occurred to me when you were bragging earlier that while your friend here couldn't be damaged, it might be immobilized by giving it a problem too big for its mechanical brain cells to handle.

'I remembered a little thing from one of my pre-war logic courses – an interesting little affair called Epimenides' Paradox. I don't remember just how it was originally phrased – those logic courses were dull, sleepy sort of businesses, anyway – but for example, if I say to you "all lawyers are liars" how can you tell whether the statement is true or false, since I am a lawyer and, if it is true, must be lying when I say that all lawyers are liars? But, on the other hand, if I am lying, then all lawyers are not liars, and the statement is false, i.e. a lying statement. If the statement is false, it is true, and if true, false, and so on, so where are you?'

Cary broke off suddenly into a peal of laughter.

'You should see your own face, Burke,' he shouted. 'I never saw anything so bewildered in my life – anyway, I just changed this around and fed it to the machine. While you waited politely outside, I went up to the machine and said to it "You must reject the statement I am now making to you, because all the statements I make are incorrect." '

He paused and looked at the meterologist.

'Do you see, Burke? It took that statement of mine in and considered it for rejecting. But it could not reject it without admitting that it was correct, and how could it be correct when it stated that all statements I made were incorrect. You see . . . yes, you do see, I can see it in your face. Oh, if you could only look at yourself now. The pride of the meteorology service, undone by a paradox.'

And Cary went off into another fit of laughter that lasted for a long minute. Every time he started to recover, a look at Burke's face, set in lines of utter dismay, would set him off again. The meteorologist neither moved nor spoke, but stared at his guest as if he were a ghost.

Finally, weak from merriment, Cary started to sober up. Chuckling feebly, he leaned against the wall, took a deep breath and straightened up. A shiver ran through him, and he turned up the collar of his tunic.

'Now that you know what the trick was, Burke, suppose you get your pet back to its proper duties again. It's getting too cold for comfort and that daylight coming through the windows isn't the most cheerful thing in the world, either.'

But Burke made no move toward the panel. His eyes were fixed and they bored into Cary as unmovingly as before. Cary snickered a little at him.

'Come on, Burke,' he said. 'Man the pumps. You can recover from your shock afterwards. If it's the bet that bothers you, forget it. And if it's the failure of Baby, here, don't feel too bad. It did better than I expected. I thought it would just blow a fuse and quit work altogether, but I see it's still busy and devoting every single bank to obtaining a solution. I should imagine that it's working toward evolving a theory of types. *That* would give it the solution. Probably could get it, too, in a year or so.'

Still Burke did not move. Cary looked at him oddly.

'What's wrong?' he asked irritatedly.

Burke's mouth worked, a tiny speck of spittle flew from one corner of it.

'You – ' he said. The word came tearing from his throat like the grunt of a dying man.

'What – '

'You fool!' ground out Burke, finding his voice. 'You stupid idiot! You moron!'

'Me? Me?' cried Cary. His voice was high in protest. 'I was right!'

'Yes, you were right,' said Burke. 'You were too right. How am I supposed to get the machine's mind off this problem and on to running the pile for heat and light, when all its circuits are taken

up in considering your paradox? What can *I* do, when the Brain is deaf, and dumb, and blind?'

The two men looked at each other across the silent room. Their exhalations made frosty plumes in the air; and the distant howling of the storm, deaded by the thick walls of the station, seemed to grow louder in the silence, bearing a note of savage triumph.

The temperature inside the station was dropping fast.

The First Men

HOWARD FAST

By airmail
Calcutta, India
4 November 1945

Mrs Jean Arbalaid
Washington, D.C.

My dear sister:

I found it. I saw it with my own eyes, and thereby I am convinced that I have a useful purpose in life – overseas investigator for the anthropological whims of my sister. That, in any case, is better than boredom. I have no desire to return home; I will not go into any further explanations or reasons. I am neurotic, unsettled, and adrift. I got my discharge in Karachi, as you know. I am very happy to be an ex-GI and a tourist, but it took me only a few weeks to become bored to distraction. So I was quite pleased to have a mission from you. The mission is completed.

It could have been more exciting. The plain fact of the matter is that the small Associated Press item you sent me was quite accurate in all of its details. The little village of Chunga is in Assam. I got there by plane, narrow gauge train, and ox-cart – a fairly pleasant trip at this time of the year, with the back of the heat broken; and there I saw the child, who is now fourteen years old.

I am sure you know enough about India to realize that fourteen is very much an adult age for a girl in these parts – the majority of them are married by then. And there is no question about the age. I spoke at length to the mother and father, who identified the child by two very distinctive birthmarks. The identification was substantiated by relatives and other villagers – all of whom remembered the birthmarks. A circumstance not unusual or remarkable in these small villages.

The child was lost as an infant – at eight months, a common

story, the parents working in the field, the child set down, and then the child gone. Whether it crawled at that age or not, I can't say; at any rate, it was a healthy, alert, and curious infant. They all agree on that point.

How the child came to the wolves is something we will never know. Possibly a bitch who had lost her own cubs carried the infant off. That is the most likely story, isn't it? This is not lupus, the European variety, but *pallipea*, its local cousin, nevertheless a respectable animal in size and disposition, and not something to stumble over on a dark night. Eighteen days ago, when the child was found, the villagers had to kill five wolves to take her, and she herself fought like a devil out of hell. She had lived as a wolf for thirteen years.

Will the story of her life among the wolves ever emerge? I don't know. To all effects and purposes, she is a wolf. She cannot stand upright – the curvature of her spine being beyond correction. She runs on all fours and her knuckles are covered with heavy callus. They are trying to teach her to use her hands for grasping and holding, but so far unsuccessfully. Any clothes they dress her in, she tears off, and as yet she has not been able to grasp the meaning of speech, much less talk. The Indian anthropologist, Sumil Gojee, has been working with her for a week now, and he has little hope that any real communication will ever be possible. In our terms and by our measurements, she is a total idiot, an infantile imbecile, and it is likely that she will remain so for the rest of her life.

On the other hand, both Professor Gojee and Dr Chalmers, a government health service man, who came up from Calcutta to examine the child, agree that there are no physical or hereditary elements to account for the child's mental condition, no malformation of the cranial area and no history of imbecilism in her background. Everyone in the village attests to the normalcy – indeed, alertness and brightness – of the infant; and Professor Gojee makes a point of the alertness and adaptability she must have required to survive for thirteen years among the wolves. The child responds excellently to reflex tests, and neurologically, she appears to be sound. She is strong – beyond the strength of a thirteen year old – wiry, quick in her movements, and possesses an uncanny sense of smell and hearing.

Professor Gojee has examined records of eighteen similar cases recorded in India over the past hundred years, and in every case, he says, the recovered child was an idiot in our terms – or a wolf in objective terms. He points out that it would be incorrect to call this child an idiot or an imbecile – any more than we would call a wolf an idiot or an imbecile. The child is a wolf, perhaps a very superior wolf, but a wolf nevertheless.

I am preparing a much fuller report on the whole business. Meanwhile, this letter contains the pertinent facts. As for money – I am very well heeled indeed, with eleven hundred dollars I won in a crap game. Take care of yourself and your brilliant husband and the public health service.

Love and kisses,

Harry

By cable

HARRY FELTON
HOTEL EMPIRE
CALCUTTA, INDIA.
10 NOVEMBER 1945

THIS IS NO WHIM, HARRY, BUT VERY SERIOUS INDEED. YOU DID NOBLY. SIMILAR CASE IN PRETORIA. GENERAL HOSPITAL, DR FELIX VANOTT. WE HAVE MADE ALL ARRANGEMENTS WITH AIR TRANSPORT.

JEAN ARBALAID

By airmail

Pretoria, Union of South Africa
15 November 1945

Mrs Jean Arbalaid
Washington, D.C.

My dear sister:

You are evidently a very big wheel, you and your husband, and I wish I knew what your current silly season adds up to. I suppose in due time you'll see fit to tell me. But in any case, your priorities command respect. A full colonel was bumped, and I was promptly whisked to South Africa, a beautiful country of pleasant climate and, I am sure, great promise.

I saw the child, who is still being kept in the General Hospital here, and I spent an evening with Dr Vanott and a young and reasonably attractive Quaker lady, Miss Gloria Oland, an anthropologist working among the Bantu people for her Doctorate. So, you see, I will be able to provide a certain amount of background material – more as I develop my acquaintance with Miss Oland.

Superficially, this case is remarkably like the incident in Assam. There it was a girl of fourteen; here we have a Bantu boy of eleven. The girl was reared by the wolves; the boy, in this case, was reared by the baboons – and rescued from them by a White Hunter, name of Archway, strong, silent type, right out of Hemingway. Unfortunately, Archway has a nasty temper and doesn't like children, so when the boy understandably bit him, he whipped the child to within an inch of its life. 'Tamed him,' as he puts it.

At the hospital, however, the child has been receiving the best of care and reasonable if scientific affection. There is no way of tracing him back to his parents, for these Basutoland baboons are great travellers and there is no telling where they picked him up. His age is a medical guess, but reasonable. That he is of Bantu origin, there is no doubt. He is handsome, long-limbed, exceedingly strong, and with no indication of any cranial injury. But like the girl in Assam, he is – in our terms – an idiot and an imbecile.

That is to say, he is a baboon. His vocalization is that of a baboon. He differs from the girl in that he is able to use his hands to hold things and to examine things, and he has a more active curiosity; but that, I am assured by Miss Oland, is the difference between a wolf and a baboon.

He too has a permanent curvature of the spine; he goes on all fours as the baboons do, and the back of his fingers and hands are heavily callused. After tearing off his clothes the first time, he accepted them, but that too is a baboon trait. In this case, Miss Oland has hope for his learning at least rudimentary speech, but Dr Vanott doubts that he ever will. Incidentally, I must take note that in those eighteen cases Professor Gojee referred to, there was no incidence of human speech being learned beyond its most basic elements.

So goes my childhood hero, Tarzan of the Apes, and all the

noble beasts along with him. But the most terrifying thought is this – what is the substance of man himself, if this can happen to him? The learned folk here have been trying to explain to me that man is a creature of his thought and that his thought is to a very large extent shaped by his environment; and that this thought process – or mentation as they call it – is based on words. Without words, thought becomes a process of pictures, which is on the animal level and rules out all, even the most primitive, abstract concepts. In other words, man cannot become man by himself; he is the result of other men and of the totality of human society and experience.

The man raised by the wolves is a wolf, by the baboons a baboon – and this is implacable, isn't it? My head has been swimming with all sorts of notions, some of them not at all pleasant. My dear sister, what are you and your husband up to? Isn't it time you broke down and told old Harry? Or do you want me to pop off to Tibet? Anything to please you, but preferably something that adds up.

Your ever-loving Harry

By airmail
Washington, D.C.
27 November 1945

Mr Harry Felton
Pretoria, Union of South Africa.

Dear Harry:

You are a noble and sweet brother, and quite sharp too. You are also a dear. Mark and I want you to do a job for us, which will enable you to run here and there across the face of the earth, and be paid for it too. In order to convince you, we must spill out the dark secrets of our work – which we have decided to do, considering you an upright and trustworthy character. But the mail, it would seem, is less trustworthy; and since we are working with the Army, which has a constitutional dedication to *top-secret* and similar nonsense, the information goes to you via diplomatic pouch. As of receiving this, consider yourself employed; your

expenses will be paid, within reason, and an additional eight thousand a year for less work than indulgence.

So please stay put at your hotel in Pretoria until the pouch arrives. Not more than ten days. Of course, you will be notified.

Love, affection, and respect,
Jean

By diplomatic pouch
Washington, D.C.
5 December 1945

Mr Harry Felton
Pretoria, Union of South Africa.

Dear Harry:

Consider this letter the joint effort of Mark and myself. The conclusions are also shared. Also, consider it a very serious document indeed.

You know that for the past twenty years, we have both been deeply concerned with child psychology and child development. There is no need to review our careers or our experience in the Public Health Service. Our work during the war, as part of the Child Reclamation Program, led to an interesting theory, which we decided to pursue. We were given leave by the head of the service to make this our own project, and recently we were granted a substantial amount of army funds to work with.

Now down to the theory, which is not entirely untested, as you know. Briefly – but with two decades of practical work as a background – it is this: Mark and I have come to the conclusion that within the rank and file of Homo Sapiens is the leavening of a new race. Call them man-plus – call them what you will. They are not of recent arrival; they have been cropping up for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. But they are trapped in and moulded by human environment as certainly and implacably as your Assamese girl was trapped among the wolves or your Bantu boy among the baboons.

By the way, your two cases are not the only attested ones we have. By sworn witness, we have records of seven similar cases, one in Russia, two in Canada, two in South America, one in West

Africa, and, just to cut us down to size, one in the United States. We also have hearsay and folklore of three hundred and eleven parallel cases over a period of fourteen centuries. We have in fourteenth-century Germany, in the folio MS. of the monk Hubercus, five case-histories which he claims to have observed. In all of these cases, in the seven cases witnessed by people alive today, and in all but sixteen of the hearsay cases, the result is more or less precisely what you have seen and described yourself: the child reared by the wolf is a wolf.

Our own work adds up to the parallel conclusion: the child reared by a man is a man. If man-plus exists, he is trapped and caged as certainly as any human child reared by animals. Our proposition is that he exists.

Why do we think this super-child exists? Well, there are many reasons, and neither the time nor the space to go into all in detail. But here are two very telling reasons. Firstly, we have case histories of several hundred men and women, who as children had IQs of 150 or above. In spite of their enormous intellectual promise as children, less than ten per cent have succeeded in their chosen careers. Roughly another ten per cent have been institutionalized as mental cases beyond recovery. About fourteen per cent have had or require therapy in terms of mental health problems. Six per cent have been suicides, one per cent are in prison, twenty-seven per cent have had one or more divorces, nineteen per cent are chronic failures at whatever they attempt – and the rest are undistinguished in any important manner. All of the IQs have dwindled – almost in the sense of a smooth graph line in relation to age.

Since society has never provided the full potential for such a mentality, we are uncertain as to what it might be. But we can guess that against it, they have been reduced to a sort of idiocy – an idiocy that we call normalcy.

The second reason we put forward is this: we know that man uses only a tiny fraction of his brain. What blocks him from the rest of it? Why has nature given him equipment that he cannot put to use? Or has society prevented him from breaking the barriers around his own potential?

There, in brief, are two reasons. Believe me, Harry, there are

many more – enough for us to have convinced some very hard-headed and unimaginative government people that we deserve a chance to release *superman*. Of course, history helps – in its own mean manner. It would appear that we are beginning another war – with Russia this time, a cold war, as some have already taken to calling it. And among other things, it will be a war of intelligence – a commodity in rather short supply, as some of our local mental giants have been frank enough to admit. They look upon our man-plus as a secret weapon, little devils who will come up with death rays and super-atom-bombs when the time is ripe. Well, let them. It is inconceivable to imagine a project like this under benign sponsorship. The important thing is that Mark and I have been placed in full charge of the venture – millions of dollars, top priority – the whole works. But nevertheless, *secret to the ultimate*. I cannot stress this enough.

Now, as to your own job – if you want it. It develops step by step. First step: in Berlin, in 1937, there was a Professor Hans Goldbaum. Half Jewish. The head of the *Institute for Child Therapy*. He published a small monograph on intelligence testing in children, and he put forward claims – which we are inclined to believe – that he could determine a child's IQ during its first year of life, in its pre-speech period. He presented some impressive tables of estimations and subsequent checked results, but we do not know enough of his method to practice it ourselves. In other words, we need the professor's help.

In 1937, he vanished from Berlin. In 1943, he was reported to be living in Cape Town – the last address we have for him. I enclose the address. Go to Cape Town, Harry darling (myself talking, not Mark). If he has left, follow him and find him. If he is dead, inform us immediately.

Of course you will take the job. We love you and we need your help.

Jean

By airmail
Cape Town, South Africa
20 December 1945

Mrs Jean Arbalaid
Washington, D.C.

My dear sister:

Of all the harebrained ideas! If this is our secret weapon, I am prepared to throw in the sponge right now. But a job is a job.

It took me a week to follow the Professor's meandering through Cape Town – only to find out that he took off for London in 1944. Evidently, they needed him there. I am off to London.

Love, Harry

By diplomatic pouch
Washington, D.C.
26 December 1945

Mr Harry Felton
London, England

Dear Harry:

This is dead serious. By now, you must have found the professor. We believe that despite protestations of your own idiocy, you have enough sense to gauge his method. Sell him this venture. Sell him! We will give him whatever he asks – and we want him to work with us as long as he will.

Briefly, here is what we are up to. We have been allocated a tract of eight thousand acres in Northern California. We intend to establish an environment there – under military guard and security. In the beginning, the outside world will be entirely excluded. The environment will be controlled and exclusive.

Within this environment, we intend to bring forty children to maturity – to a maturity that will result in man-plus.

As to the details of this environment – well that can wait. The immediate problem is the children. Out of forty, ten will be found in the United States; the other thirty will be found by the professor and yourself – outside of the United States.

Half are to be boys; we want an even boy-girl balance. They are to be between the ages of six months and nine months, and all are to show indications of an exceedingly high IQ – that is, if the professor's method is any good at all.

We want five racial groupings: Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Malayan, and Bantu. Of course, we are sensible of the vagueness of these groupings, and you have some latitude within them. The six so-called *Caucasian* infants are to be found in Europe. We might suggest two northern types, two Central European types, and two Mediterranean types. A similar breakdown might be followed in other areas.

Now understand this – no cops and robbers stuff, no OSS, no kidnapping. Unfortunately, the world abounds in war orphans – and in parents poor and desperate enough to sell their children. When you want a child and such a situation arises, buy! Price is no object. I will have no maudlin sentimentality or scruples. These children will be loved and cherished – and if you should acquire any by purchase, you will be giving a child life and hope.

When you find a child, inform us immediately. Air transport will be at your disposal – and we are making all arrangements for wet nurses and other details of child care. We shall also have medical aid at your immediate disposal. On the other hand, we want healthy children – within the general conditions of health within any given area.

Now good luck to you. We are depending on you and we love you. And a merry Christmas.

Jean

By diplomatic pouch
Copenhagen, Denmark
4 February 1946

Mrs Jean Arbalaid
Washington, D.C.

Dear Jean:

I seem to have caught your silly *top-secret* and *classified* disease, and I have been waiting for a free day and a diplomatic pouch to sum up my various adventures. From my 'guarded' cables, you know that the professor and I have been doing a Cook's Tour of the baby market. My dear sister, this kind of shopping spree does not sit at all well with me. However, I gave my word, and there you are. I will complete and deliver.

By the way, I suppose I continue to send these along to Washington, even though your 'environment', as you call it, has been established. I'll do so until otherwise instructed.

There was no great difficulty in finding the professor. Being in uniform – I have since acquired an excellent British wardrobe – and having all the fancy credentials you were kind enough to supply, I went to the War Office. As they say, every courtesy was shown to Major Harry Felton, but I feel better in civilian clothes. Anyway, the professor had been working with a child reclamation project, living among the ruins of the East End, which is pretty badly shattered. He is an astonishing little man, and I have become quite fond of him. On his part, he is learning to tolerate me.

I took him to dinner – you were the lever that moved him, my dear sister. I had no idea how famous you are in certain circles. He looked at me in awe, simply because we share a mother and father.

Then I said my piece, all of it, no holds barred. I had expected your reputation to crumble into dust there on the spot, but no such thing. Goldbaum listened with his mouth and his ears and every fibre of his being. The only time he interrupted me was to question me on the Assamese girl and the Bantu boy; and very pointed and meticulous questions they were. When I had finished, he simply shook his head – not in disagreement but with sheer excitement and delight. I then asked him what his reaction to all this was.

'I need time,' he said. 'This is something to digest. But the concept is wonderful – daring and wonderful. Not that the reasoning behind it is so novel. I have thought of this – so many anthropologists have. But to put it into practice, young man – ah, your sister is a wonderful and remarkable woman!'

There you are, my sister. I struck while the iron was hot, and told him then and there that you wanted and needed his help, first to find the children and then to work in the environment.

'The environment,' he said; 'you understand that is everything, everything. But how can she change the environment? The environment is total, the whole fabric of human society, self-deluded and superstitious and sick and irrational and clinging to legends and phantasies and ghosts. Who can change that?'

So it went. My anthropology is passable at best, but I have read all your books. If my answers were weak in that department, he did

manage to draw out of me a more or less complete picture of Mark and yourself. He then said he would think about the whole matter. We made an appointment for the following day, when he would explain his method of intelligence determination in infants.

We met the next day, and he explained his methods. He made a great point of the fact that he did not test but rather determined, within a wide margin for error. Years before, in Germany, he had worked out a list of fifty characteristics which he noted in infants. As these infants matured, they were tested regularly by normal methods – and the results were checked against his original observations. Thereby, he began to draw certain conclusions, which he tested again and again over the next fifteen years. I am enclosing an unpublished article of his which goes into greater detail. Sufficient to say that he convinced me of the validity of his methods. Subsequently, I watched him examine a hundred and four British infants – to come up with our first choice. Jean, this is a remarkable and brilliant man.

On the third day after I had met him, he agreed to join the project. But he said this to me, very gravely, and afterwards I put it down exactly as he said it:

'You must tell your sister that I have not come to this decision lightly. We are tampering with human souls – and perhaps even with human destiny. This experiment may fail, but if it succeeds it can be the most important event of our time – even more important and consequential than this war we have just fought. And you must tell her something else. I had a wife and three children, and they were put to death because a nation of men turned into beasts. I watched that, and I could not have lived through it unless I believed, always, that what can turn into a beast can also turn into a man. We are neither. But if we go to create man, we must be humble. We are the tools, not the craftsman, and if we succeed, we will be less than the result of our work.'

There is your man, Jean, and as I said, a good deal of a man. Those words are verbatim. He also dwells a great deal on the question of environment, and the wisdom and judgement and love necessary to create this environment. I think it would be helpful

if you could send me a few words at least concerning this environment you are establishing.

We have now sent you four infants. Tomorrow, we leave for Rome – and from Rome to Casablanca.

But we will be in Rome at least two weeks, and a communication should reach me there.

More seriously –

And not untroubled,

Harry

By diplomatic pouch
Via Washington, D.C.
11 February 1946

Mr Harry Felton
Rome, Italy

Dear Harry:

Just a few facts here. We are tremendously impressed by your reactions to Professor Goldbaum, and we look forward eagerly to his joining us. Meanwhile, Mark and I have been working night and day on the environment. In the most general terms, this is what we plan.

The entire reservation – all eight thousand acres – will be surrounded by a wire fence and will be under army guard. Within it, we shall establish a home. There will be between thirty and forty teachers – or group parents. We are accepting only married couples who love children and who will dedicate themselves to this venture. That they must have additional qualifications goes without saying.

Within the proposition that somewhere in man's civilized development, something went wrong, we are returning to the prehistory form of group marriage. That is not to say that we will cohabit indiscriminately – but the children will be given to understand that parentage is a whole, that we are all their mothers and fathers, not by blood but by love.

We shall teach them the truth, and where we do not know the truth, we shall not teach. There will be no myths, no legends, no lies, superstitions, no premises, and no religions. We shall teach love and cooperation and we shall give love and security in full

measure. We shall also teach them the knowledge of mankind.

During the first nine years, we shall command the environment entirely. We shall write the books they read, and shape the history and circumstances they require. Only then, will we begin to relate the children to the world as it is.

Does it sound too simple or too presumptuous? It is all we can do, Harry, and I think Professor Goldbaum will understand that full well. It is also more than has ever been done for children before.

So good luck to both of you. Your letters sound as if you are changing, Harry – and we feel a curious process of change within us. When I put down what we are doing, it seems almost too obvious to be meaningful. We are simply taking a group of very gifted children and giving them knowledge and love. Is this enough to break through to that part of man which is unused and unknown? Well, we shall see. Bring us the children, Harry, and we shall see.

With love,
Jean

In the early spring of 1965, Harry Felton arrived in Washington and went directly to the White House. Felton had just turned fifty; he was a tall and pleasant-looking man, rather lean, with greying hair. As President of the Board of Shipways, Inc. – one of the largest import and export houses in America – he commanded a certain amount of deference and respect from Eggerton, who was then Secretary of Defence. In any case, Eggerton, who was nobody's fool, did not make the mistake of trying to intimidate Felton.

Instead, he greeted him pleasantly; and the two of them, with no others present, sat down in a small room in the White House, drank each other's good health, and talked about things.

Eggerton proposed that Felton might know why he had been asked to Washington.

'I can't say that I do know,' Felton said.

'You have a remarkable sister.'

'I have been aware of that for a long time,' Felton smiled.

'You are also very close-mouthed, Mr Felton,' the secretary

observed. 'So far as we know, not even your immediate family has ever heard of man-plus. That's a commendable trait.'

'Possibly and possibly not. It's been a long time.'

'Has it? Then you haven't heard from your sister lately?'

'Almost a year,' Felton answered.

'It didn't alarm you?'

'Should it? No, it didn't alarm me. My sister and I are very close, but this project of hers is not the sort of thing that allows for social relations. There have been long periods before when I have not heard from her. We are poor letter writers.'

'I see,' nodded Eggerton.

'I am to conclude that she is the reason for my visit here?'

'Yes.'

'She's well?'

'As far as we know,' Eggerton said quietly.

'Then what can I do for you?'

'Help us, if you will,' Eggerton said, just as quietly. 'I am going to tell you what has happened, Mr Felton, and then perhaps you can help us.'

'Perhaps,' Felton agreed.

'About the project, you know as much as any of us, more perhaps, since you were in at the inception. So you realize that such a project must be taken very seriously or laughed off entirely. To date, it has cost the government eleven million dollars, and that is not something you laugh off. Now you understand that the unique part of this project was its exclusiveness. That word is used advisedly and specifically. Its success depended upon the creation of a unique and exclusive environment, and in terms of that environment, we agreed not to send any observers into the reservation for a period of fifteen years. Of course, during those fifteen years, there have been many conferences with Mr and Mrs Arbalaid and with certain of their associates, including Dr Goldbaum.

'But out of these conferences, there was no progress report that dealt with anything more than general progress. We were given to understand that the results were rewarding and exciting, but very little more. We honoured our part of the agreement, and at the end of the fifteen-year period, we told your sister and her husband

that we would have to send in a team of observers. They pleaded for an extension of time – maintaining that it was critical to the success of the entire programme – and they pleaded persuasively enough to win a three-year extension. Some months ago, the three-year period was over. Mrs Arbalaid came to Washington and begged a further extension. When we refused, she agreed that our team could come into the reservation in ten days. Then she returned to California.'

Eggerton paused and looked at Felton searchingly.

'And what did you find?' Felton asked.

'You don't know?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Well – ' the secretary said slowly, 'I feel like a damn fool when I think of this, and also a little afraid. When I say it, the fool end predominates. We went there and we found nothing.'

'Oh?'

'You don't appear too surprised, Mr Felton?'

'Nothing my sister does has ever really surprised me. You mean the reservation was empty – no sign of anything?'

'I don't mean that, Mr Felton. I wish I did mean that. I wish it was so pleasantly human and down to earth. I wish we thought that your sister and her husband were two clever and unscrupulous swindlers who had taken the government for eleven million. That would warm the cockles of our hearts compared to what we do have. You see, we don't know whether the reservation is empty or not, Mr Felton, because the reservation is not there.'

'What?'

'Precisely. The reservation is not there.'

'Come now,' Felton smiled. 'My sister is a remarkable woman, but she doesn't make off with eight thousand acres of land. It isn't like her.'

'I don't find your humour entertaining, Mr Felton.'

'No. No, of course not. I'm sorry. Only when a thing makes no sense at all – how could an eight-thousand-acre stretch of land not be where it was? Doesn't it leave a large hole?'

'If the newspapers get hold of it, they could do even better than that, Mr Felton.'

'Why not explain?' Felton said.

'Let me try to – not to explain but to describe. This stretch of land is in the Fulton National Forest, rolling country, some hills, a good stand of redwoods – a kidney-shaped area. It was wire-fenced, with army guards at every approach. I went there with our inspection team, General Meyers, two army physicians, Gorman, the psychiatrist, Senator Totenwell of the Armed Services Committee, and Lydia Gentry, the educator. We crossed the country by plane and drove the final sixty miles to the reservation in two government cars. A dirt road leads into it. The guard on this road halted us. The reservation was directly before us. As the guard approached the first car, the reservation disappeared.'

'Just like that?' Felton whispered. 'No noise – no explosion?'

'No noise, no explosion. One moment, a forest of redwoods in front of us – then a grey area of nothing.'

'Nothing? That's just a word. Did you try to go in?'

'Yes – we tried. The best scientists in America have tried. I myself am not a very brave man, Mr Felton, but I got up enough courage to walk up to this grey edge and touch it. It was very cold and very hard – so cold that it blistered these three fingers.'

He held out his hand for Felton to see.

'I became afraid then. I have not stopped being afraid.' Felton nodded. 'Fear – such fear,' Eggerton sighed.

'I need not ask you if you tried this or that?'

'We tried everything, Mr Felton, even – I am ashamed to say – a very small atomic bomb. We tried the sensible things and the foolish things. We went into panic and out of panic, and we tried everything.'

'Yet you've kept it secret?'

'So far, Mr Felton.'

'Airplanes?'

'You see nothing from above. It looks like mist lying in the valley.'

'What do your people think it is?'

Eggerton smiled and shook his head. 'They don't know. There you are. At first, some of them thought it was some kind of force field. But the mathematics won't work, and of course it's cold. Terribly cold. I am mumbling. I am not a scientist and not a mathematician, but they also mumble, Mr Felton. I am tired of

that kind of thing. That is why I asked you to come to Washington and talk with us. I thought you might know.'

'I might,' Felton nodded.

For the first time, Eggerton became alive, excited, impatient. He mixed Felton another drink. Then he leaned forward eagerly and waited. Felton took a letter out of his pocket.

'This came from my sister,' he said.

'You told me you had no letter from her in almost a year!'

'I've had this almost a year,' Felton replied, a note of sadness in his voice. 'I haven't opened it. She enclosed this sealed envelope with a short letter, which only said that she was well and quite happy, and that I was to open and read the other letter when it was absolutely necessary to do so. My sister is like that; we think the same way. Now, I suppose it's necessary, don't you?'

The secretary nodded slowly but said nothing. Felton opened the letter and began to read aloud.

12 June 1964

My dear Harry:

As I write this, it is twenty-two years since I have seen you or spoken to you. How very long for two people who have such love and regard for each other as we do! And now that you have found it necessary to open this letter and read it, we must face the fact that in all probability we will never see each other again. I hear that you have a wife and three children – all wonderful people. I think it is hardest to know that I will not see them or know them.

Only this saddens me. Otherwise, Mark and I are very happy – and I think you will understand why.

About the barrier – which now exists or you would not have opened the letter – tell them that there is no harm to it and no one will be hurt by it. It cannot be broken into because it is a negative power rather than a positive one, an absence instead of a presence. I will have more to say about it later, but possibly explain it no better. Some of the children could likely put it into intelligible words, but I want this to be my report, not theirs.

Strange that I still call them children and think of them as children – when in all fact we are the children and they are adults. But they still have the quality of children that we know best, the

strange innocence and purity that vanishes so quickly in the outside world.

And now I must tell you what came of our experiment – or some of it. Some of it, for how could I ever put down the story of the strangest two decades that men ever lived through? It is all incredible and it is all commonplace. We took a group of wonderful children, and we gave them an abundance of love, security, and truth – but I think it was the factor of love that mattered most. During the first year, we weeded out each couple that showed less than a desire to love these children. They were easy to love. And as the years passed, they became our children – in every way. The children who were born to the couples in residence here simply joined the group. No one had *a father* or *a mother*; we were a living functioning group in which all men were the fathers of all children and all women the mothers of all children.

No, this was not easy. Harry – among ourselves, the adults, we had to fight and work and examine and turn ourselves inside out again and again, and tear our guts and hearts out, so that we could present an environment that had never been before, a quality of sanity and truth and security that exists nowhere else in all this world.

How shall I tell you of an American Indian boy, five years old, composing a splendid symphony? Or of the two children, one Bantu, one Italian, one a boy, one a girl, who at the age of six built a machine to measure the speed of light? Will you believe that we, the adults, sat quietly and listened to these six year olds explain to us that since the speed of light is a constant everywhere, regardless of the motion of material bodies, the distance between the stars cannot be mentioned in terms of light, since that is not distance on our plane of being? Then believe also that I put it poorly. In all of these matters, I have the sensations of an uneducated immigrant whose child is exposed to all the wonders of school and knowledge. I understand a little, but very little.

If I were to repeat instance after instance, wonder after wonder – at the age of six and seven and eight and nine, would you think of the poor, tortured, nervous creatures whose parents boast that they have an IQ of 160, and in the same breath bemoan the fate that did not give them normal children? Well, ours were and are *normal*

children. Perhaps the first normal children this world has seen in a long time. If you heard them laugh or sing only once, you would know that. If you could see how tall and strong they are, how fine of body and movement. They have a quality that I have never seen in children before.

Yes, I suppose, dear Harry, that much about them would shock you. Most of the time, they wear no clothes. Sex has always been a joy and a good thing to them, and they face it and enjoy it as naturally as we eat and drink – more naturally, for we have no gluttons in sex or food, no ulcers of the belly or the soul. They kiss and caress each other and do many other things that the world has specified as shocking, nasty, etc. – but whatever they do, they do with grace and joy. Is all this possible? I tell you that it has been my life for almost twenty years now. I live with boys and girls who are without evil or sickness, who are like pagans or gods – however you would look at it.

But the story of the children and of their day-to-day life is one that will be told properly and in its own time and place. All the indications I have put down here add up only to great gifts and abilities. Mark and I never had any doubts about these results; we knew that if we controlled an environment that was predicted on the future, the children would learn more than any children do on the outside. In their seventh year of life they were dealing easily and naturally with scientific problems normally taught on the college level, or higher, outside. This was to be expected, and we would have been very disappointed if something of this sort had not developed. But it was the unexpected that we hoped for and watched for – the flowering of the mind of man that is blocked in every single human being on the outside.

And it came. Originally, it began with a Chinese child in the fifth year of our work. The second was an American child, then a Burmese. Most strangely, it was not thought of as anything very unusual, nor did we realize what was happening until the seventh year, when there were already five of them.

Mark and I were taking a walk that day – I remember it so well, a lovely, cool, and clear California day – when we came on a group of children in a meadow. There were about a dozen children there. Five of them sat in a little circle, with a sixth in the centre of

the circle. Their heads were almost touching. They were full of little giggles, ripples of mirth, and satisfaction. The rest of the children sat in a group about ten feet away – watching intently.

As we came to the scene, the children in the second group put their fingers to their lips, indicating that we should be quiet. So we stood and watched without speaking. After we were there about ten minutes, the little girl in the centre of the circle of five, leaped to her feet, crying ecstatically.

'I heard you! I heard you! I heard you!'

There was a kind of achievement and delight in her voice that we had not heard before, not even from our children. Then all of the children there rushed together to kiss her and embrace her, and they did a sort of dance of play and delight around her. All this we watched with no indication of surprise or even very great curiosity. For even though this was the first time anything like this – beyond our guesses or comprehension – had ever happened, we had worked out our own reaction to it.

When the children rushed to us for our congratulations, we nodded and smiled and agreed that it was all very wonderful. 'Now, it's my turn, mother,' a Sengalese boy told me. 'I can almost do it already. Now there are six to help me, and it will be easier.'

'Aren't you proud of us?' another cried.

We agreed that we were very proud, and we skirted the rest of the questions. Then, at our staff meeting that evening, Mark described what had happened.

'I noticed that last week,' Mary Hengel, our semantics teacher nodded. 'I watched them, but they didn't see me.'

'How many were there?' Professor Goldbaum asked intently.

'Three. A fourth in the centre – their heads together. I thought it was one of their games and I walked away.'

'They make no secret of it,' someone observed.

'Yes,' I said, 'they took it for granted that we knew what they were doing.'

'No one spoke,' Mark said. 'I can vouch for that.'

'Yet they were listening,' I said. 'They giggled and laughed as if some great joke was taking place – or the way children laugh about a game that delights them.'

It was Dr Goldbaum who put his finger on it. He said, very

gravely, 'Do you know, Jean – you always said that we might open that great area of the mind that is closed and blocked in us. I think that they have opened it. I think they are teaching and learning to listen to thoughts.'

There was a silence after that, and then Atwater, one of our psychologists, said uneasily, 'I don't think I believe it. I've investigated every test and report on telepathy ever published in this country – the Duke stuff and all the rest of it. We know how tiny and feeble brain waves are – it is fantastic to imagine that they can be a means of communication.'

'There is also a statistical factor,' Rhoda Lannon, a mathematician, observed. 'If this faculty existed even as a potential in mankind, is it conceivable that there would be no recorded instance of it?'

'Maybe it has been recorded,' said Fleming, one of our historians. 'Can you take all the whippings, burnings, and hangings of history and determine which were telepaths?'

'I think I agree with Dr Goldbaum,' Mark said. 'The children are becoming telepaths. I am not moved by a historical argument, or by a statistical argument, because our obsession here is environment. There is no record in history of a similar group of unusual children being raised in such an environment. Also, this may be – and probably is – a faculty which must be released in childhood or remain permanently blocked. I believe Dr Haenigson will bear me out when I say that mental blocks imposed during childhood are not uncommon.'

'More than that,' Dr Haenigson, our chief psychiatrist, nodded. 'No child in our society escapes the need to erect some mental block in his mind. Whole areas of every human being's mind are blocked in early childhood. This is an absolute of human society.'

Dr Goldbaum was looking at us strangely. I was going to say something – but I stopped. I waited and Dr Goldbaum said:

'I wonder whether we have begun to realize what we may have done. What is a human being? He is the sum of his memories, which are locked in his brain, and every moment of experience simply builds up the structure of those memories. We don't know as yet what is the extent or power of the gift these children of ours appear to be developing, but suppose they reach a point

where they can share the totality of memory? It is not simply that among themselves there can be no lies, no deceit, no rationalization, no secrets, no guilts – it is more than that.'

Then he looked from face to face, around the whole circle of our staff. We were beginning to comprehend him. I remember my own reactions at that moment, a sense of wonder and discovery and joy and heartbreak too; a feeling so poignant that it brought tears to my eyes.

'You know, I see,' Dr Goldbaum nodded. 'Perhaps it would be best for me to speak about it. I am much older than any of you – and I have been through, lived through the worst years of horror and bestiality that mankind ever knew. When I saw what I saw, I asked myself a thousand times: What is the meaning of mankind – if it has any meaning at all, if it is not simply a haphazard accident, an unusual complexity of molecular structure? I know you have all asked yourselves the same thing. Who are we? What are we destined for? What is our purpose? Where is sanity or reason in these bits of struggling, clawing, sick flesh? We kill, we torture, we hurt and destroy as no other species does. We ennoble murder and falsehood and hypocrisy and superstition; we destroy our own body with drugs and poisonous food; we deceive ourselves as well as others – and we hate and hate and hate.

'Now something has happened. If these children can go into each other's minds completely – then they will have a single memory, which is the memory of all of them. All experience will be common to all of them, all knowledge, all dreams – and they will be immortal. For as one dies, another child is linked to the whole, and another and another. Death will lose all meaning, all of its dark horror. Mankind will begin, here in this place, to fulfil a part of its intended destiny – to become a single, wonderful unit, a whole – almost in the old words of your poet, John Donne, who sensed what we have all sensed at one time, that no man is an island unto himself. Has any thoughtful man lived without having a sense of that singleness of mankind? I don't think so. We have been living in darkness, in the night, struggling each of us with his own poor brain and then dying with all the memories of a lifetime. It is no wonder that we have achieved so little. The wonder is that we have achieved so much. Yet all that we know, all that we have

done will be nothing compared to what these children will know and do and create – '

So the old man spelled it out, Harry – and saw almost all of it from the beginning. That was the beginning. Within the next twelve months, each one of our children was linked to all of the others telepathically. And in the years that followed, every child born in our reservation was shown the way into that linkage by the children. Only we, the adults, were forever barred from joining it. We were of the old, they of the new; their way was closed to us forever – although they could go into our minds, and did. But never could we feel them there or see them there, as they did each other.

I don't know how to tell you of the years that followed, Harry. In our little, guarded reservation, man became what he was always destined to be, but I can explain it only imperfectly. I can hardly comprehend, much less explain, what it means to inhabit forty bodies simultaneously, or what it means to each of the children to have the other personalities within them, a part of them – what it means to live as man and woman always and together. Could the children explain it to us? Hardly, for this is a transformation that must take place, from all we can learn, before puberty – and as it happens, the children accept it as normal and natural – indeed as the most natural thing in the world. We were the unnatural ones – and one thing they never truly comprehended is how we could bear to live in our aloneness, how we could bear to live with the knowledge of death as extinction.

We are happy that this knowledge of us did not come at once. In the beginning, the children could merge their thoughts only when their heads were almost touching. Bit by bit, their command of distance grew – but not until they were in their fifteenth year did they have the power to reach out and probe with their thoughts anywhere on earth. We thank God for this. By then the children were ready for what they found. Earlier, it might have destroyed them.

I must mention that two of our children met accidental death – in the ninth and the eleventh year. But it made no difference to the others, a little regret, but not grief, no sense of great loss, no tears or weeping. Death is totally different to them than to us; a loss of

flesh; the personality itself is immortal and lives consciously in the others. When we spoke of a marked grave or a tombstone, they smiled and said that we could make it if it would give us any comfort. Yet later, when Dr Goldbaum died, their grief was deep and terrible, for his was the old kind of death.

Outwardly, they remained individuals – each with his or her own set of characteristics, mannerisms, personality. The boys and the girls make love in a normal sexual manner – though all of them share the experience. Can you comprehend that? I cannot – but for them everything is different. Only the unspoiled devotion of mother for helpless child can approximate the love that binds them together – yet here it is also different, deeper even than that.

Before the transformation took place, there was sufficient of the children's petulance and anger and annoyance – but after it took place, we never again heard a voice raised in anger or annoyance. As they themselves put it, when there was trouble among them, they washed it out – when there was sickness, they healed it; and after the ninth year, there was no more sickness – even three or four of them, when they merged their minds, could go into a body and cure it.

I use these words and phrases because I have no others, but they don't describe. Even after all these years of living with the children, day and night, I can only vaguely comprehend the manner of their existence. What they are outwardly, I know, free and healthy and happy as no men were before, but what their inner life is remains beyond me.

I spoke to one of them about it once, Arlene, a tall, lovely child whom we found in an orphanage in Idaho. She was fourteen then. We were discussing personality, and I told her that I could not understand how she could live and work as an individual, when she was also a part of so many others, and they were a part of her.

'But I remain myself, Jean, I could not stop being myself.'

'But aren't the others also yourself?'

'Yes. But I am also them.'

'But who controls your body?'

'I do, of course.'

'But if they should want to control it instead of you?'

'Why?'

'If you did something they disapproved of,' I said lamely.

'How could I?' she asked. 'Can you do something you disapprove of?'

'I am afraid I can. And do.'

'I don't understand. Then why do you do it?'

So these discussions always ended. We, the adults, had only words for communication. By their tenth year, the children had developed methods of communication as far beyond words as words are beyond the dumb motions of animals. If one of them watched something, there was no necessity for it to be described; the others could see it through his eyes. Even in sleep, they dreamed together.

I could go on for hours attempting to describe something utterly beyond my understanding, but that would not help, would it, Harry? You will have your own problems, and I must try to make you understand what happened, what had to happen. You see, by the tenth year, the children had learned all we knew, all we had among us as material for teaching. In effect, we were teaching a single mind, a mind composed of the unblocked unfettered talent of forty superb children; a mind so rational and pure and agile that to them we could only be objects of loving pity.

We have among us Axel Cromwell, whose name you will recognize. He is one of the greatest physicists on earth, and it was he who was mainly responsible for the first atom bomb. After that, he came to us as one would go into a monastery – an act of personal expiation. He and his wife taught the children physics, but by the eighth year, the children were teaching Cromwell. A year later, Cromwell could follow neither their mathematics nor their reasoning; and their symbolism, of course, was out of the structure of their own thoughts.

Let me give you an example. In the far outfield of our baseball diamond, there was a boulder of perhaps ten tons. (I must remark that the athletic skill, the physical reactions of the children, was in its own way almost as extraordinary as their mental powers. They have broken every track and field record in existence – often cutting world records by one third. I have watched them run down our horses. Their movements can be so quick as to make us appear

sluggards by comparison. And they love baseball – among other games.)

We had spoken of either blasting the boulder apart or rolling it out of the way with one of our heavy bulldozers, but it was something we had never gotten to. Then, one day, we discovered that the boulder was gone – in its place a pile of thick red dust that the wind was fast levelling. We asked the children what had happened, and they told us that they had reduced the boulder to dust – as if it was no more than kicking a small stone out of one's path. How? Well, they had loosened the molecular structure and it had become dust. They explained, but we could not understand. They tried to explain to Cromwell how their thoughts could do this, but he could no more comprehend it than the rest of us.

I mention one thing. They built an atomic fusion power plant, out of which we derive an unlimited store of power. They built what they call free fields into all our trucks and cars, so that they rise and travel through the air with the same facility they have on the ground. With the power of thought, they can go into atoms, rearrange electrons, build one element out of another – and all this is elementary to them, as if they were doing tricks to amuse and amaze us.

So you see something of what the children are, and now I shall tell you what you must know.

In the fifteenth year of the children, our entire staff met with them. There were fifty-two of them now, for all the children born to us were taken into their body of singleness – and flourished in their company, I should add, despite their initially lower IQs. A very formal and serious meeting, for in thirty days the team of observers were scheduled to enter the reservation. Michael, who was born in Italy, spoke for them; they needed only one voice.

He began by telling us how much they loved and cherished us, the adults who were once their teachers. 'All that we have, all that we are, you have given us,' he said. 'You are our fathers and mothers and teachers – and we love you beyond our power to say. For years now, we have wondered at your patience and self-giving, for we have gone into your minds and we know what pain and doubt and fear and confusion you all live with. We have also gone into the minds of the soldiers who guard the reservation.

More and more, our power to probe grew – until now there is no mind anywhere on earth that we cannot seek out and read.

'From our seventh year, we knew all the details of this experiment, why we were here and what you were attempting – and from then until now, we have pondered over what our future must be. We have also tried to help you, whom we love so much, and perhaps we have been a little help in easing your discontents, in keeping you as healthy as possible, and in easing your troubled nights in that maze of fear and nightmare that you call sleep.

'We did what we could, but all our efforts to join you with us have failed. Unless that area of the mind is opened before puberty, the tissues change, the brain cells lose all potential of development, and it is closed forever. Of all things, this saddens us most – for you have given us the most precious heritage of mankind, and in return we have given you nothing.'

'That isn't so,' I said. 'You have given us more than we gave you.'

'Perhaps,' Michael nodded. 'You are very good and kind people. But now the fifteen years are over, and the team will be here in thirty days – '

I shook my head. 'No. They must be stopped.'

'And all of you?' Michael asked, looking from one to another of the adults.

Some of us were weeping. Cromwell said:

'We are your teachers and your fathers and mothers, but you must tell us what to do. You know that.'

Michael nodded, and then he told us what they had decided. The reservation must be maintained. I was to go to Washington with Mark and Dr Goldbaum – and somehow get an extension of time. Then new infants would be brought into the reservation by teams of the children, and educated here.

'But why must they be brought here?' Mark asked. 'You can reach them wherever they are – go into their minds, make them a part of you?'

'But they can't reach us,' Michael said. 'Not for a long time. They would be alone – and their minds would be shattered. What would the people of your world outside do to such children? What happened to people in the past who were possessed of devils, who

heard voices? Some became saints, but more were burned at the stake.'

'Can't you protect them?' someone asked.

'Some day – yes. Now, no – there are not enough of us. First, we must help move children here, hundreds and hundreds more. Then there must be other places like this one. It will take a long time. The world is a large place and there are a great many children. And we must work carefully. You see, people are so filled with fear – and this would be the worst fear of all. They would go mad with fear and all that they would think of is to kill us.'

'And our children could not fight back,' Dr Goldbaum said quietly. 'They cannot hurt any human being, much less kill one. Cattle, our old dogs and cats, they are one thing – '

(Here Dr Goldbaum referred to the fact that we no longer slaughtered our cattle in the old way. We had pet dogs and cats, and when they became very old and sick, the children caused them peacefully to go to sleep – from which they never awakened. Then the children asked us if we might do the same with the cattle we butchered for food.)

' – but not people,' Dr Goldbaum went on. 'They cannot hurt people or kill people. We are able to do things that we know are wrong, but that is one power we have that the children lack. They cannot kill and they cannot hurt. Am I right, Michael?'

'Yes – you are right.' Michael nodded. 'We must do it slowly and patiently – and the world must not know what we are doing until we have taken certain measures. We think we need three years more. Can you get us three years, Jean?'

'I will get it,' I said.

'And we need all of you to help us. Of course we will not keep any of you here if you wish to go. But we need you – as we have always needed you. We love you and value you, and we beg you to remain with us . . . '

Do you wonder that we all remained, Harry – that no one of us could leave our children – or will ever leave them, except when death takes us away? There is not so much more that I must tell now.

We got the three years we needed, and as for the grey barrier

that surrounds us, the children tell me that it is a simple device indeed. As nearly as I can understand, they altered the time sequence of the entire reservation. Not much – by less than one ten thousandth of a second. But the result is that your world outside exists this tiny fraction of a second in the future. The same sun shines on us, the same winds blow, and from inside the barrier, we see your world unaltered. But you cannot see us. When you look at us, the present of our existence has not yet come into being – and instead there is nothing, no space, no heat, no light, only the impenetrable wall of non-existence.

From inside, we can go outside – from the past into the future. I have done this during the moments when we experimented with the barrier. You feel a shudder, a moment of cold – but no more.

There is also a way in which we return, but understandably, I cannot spell it out.

So there is the situation, Harry. We will never see each other again, but I assure you that Mark and I are happier than we have ever been. Man will change, and he will become what he was intended to be, and he will reach out with love and knowledge to all the universes of the firmament. Isn't this what man has always dreamt of, no war or hatred or hunger or sickness or death? We are fortunate to be alive while this is happening, Harry – we should ask no more.

With all my love,
Jean

Felton finished reading, and then there was a long, long silence while the two men looked at each other. Finally, the Secretary spoke:

'You know we shall have to keep knocking at that barrier – trying to find a way to break through?'

'I know.'

'It will be easier, now that your sister has explained it.'

'I don't think it will be easier,' Felton said tiredly. 'I do not think that she has explained it.'

'Not to you and me, perhaps. But we'll put the eggheads to work on it. They'll figure it out. They always do.'

'Perhaps not this time.'

'Oh, yes,' the Secretary nodded. 'You see, we've got to stop it. We can't have this kind of thing – immortal, godless, and a threat to every human being on earth. The kids were right. We would have to kill them, you know. It's a disease. The only way to stop a disease is to kill the bugs that cause it. The only way. I wish there was another way, but there isn't.'

Counterfeit

ALAN E. NOURSE

THE spaceship plunged through the black starways towards the orbit of the third planet. Its trip had been long. It was homeward bound.

Donald Shaver sat staring at the navigation board, his face grey. He gazed at the space-charts, and a tremor shook his narrow shoulders.

A tall, blond man swung open the hatch and sauntered into the navigation shack, beaming. 'Ho, Donnie!' he bellowed. 'We're off that blasted sink-hole at last, eh? What do you think of that?' He glanced by habit at the bright red dot on the navigation board, then turned and peered happily out of the observation port, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

'I wish I were home,' said Shaver, dully.

The blond man laughed. 'You and eighty others! Don't worry, laddies, we're on the way. Just another week now, and – '

The boy's voice cut in with urgency. 'I wish I were home *now*.' He took another breath, an unmistakable shudder shook his body. The blond man turned, his eyes widening in alarm.

'Donnie!' he said softly. 'What's wrong, laddie?'

'I'm sick, Scotty!' he whispered. 'Oh, Scotty, please, get the Doc – I'm awful sick!' He shook in another uncontrollable tremor, losing his grip on the table and toppling forward.

The tall Scot caught him as he fell, easing him down to the deck. 'Hold on, Donnie,' he whispered. 'I'll take care o' you.' The boy doubled up suddenly in a paroxysm of coughing, choking, his face blue. His back arched and twisted in convulsion; then, abruptly, he relaxed.

Scotty crossed the room, snatched up a phone from the table, rang it frantically. 'Navigation to Central,' he snapped. 'Get the Doc up here in a hurry. I think – ' He glanced, wide-eyed, at the still form on the deck. 'I think a man just died!'

Dr John Crawford leaned back in the relaxer, spreading his long legs out in front of him, and stared glumly out of his observation port. He had been sitting there for over an hour, his slender fingers toying with the greyish cards in his hands, staring, and smoking, and scowling. For the first time in the long voyage he felt tired, and alone, and afraid.

The doctor might have been handsome, had he shaved, and changed into a fresh Exploratory Command uniform. He was a lanky man, his gaunt face hardened by the dark stubble of two days' beard, while a shock of jet black hair, uncombed, contributed to the air of preoccupied concern that hung about him. 'Dr Ponderous', one of the men had called him, in an unguarded moment, and he had chuckled to himself as he walked away.

That was probably the picture the men on the ship had of him – slow of speech, possibly a little dull, a reasonably pleasant and harmless fellow who seemed too big to be walking around the corridors of a space ship. Dr Crawford knew it wasn't true, of course. He was just careful. A ship's doctor on an exploratory mission had to be careful, in every thought and action. The great, disease-gutted hulks of a dozen earlier exploratory ships had proved that, very conclusively.

Dr Crawford stared from the port, watching the unblinking white pinpoints of starlight on the black-velvet background, his frown deepening. To have called the trip unsuccessful, from any viewpoint, would have been mild. After all the anticipation, all the excitement, it had been a dud. A complete, miserable, hopeless dud, from beginning to end. No glory. No discovery. Nothing.

Until an hour ago.

He stared at the cards in his hands. Just an hour ago Jenson, the Chief Hospitalman, had brought the cards to him, panting from the run up from the laboratory, and Dr Crawford had taken them, and studied them, and felt fear gnawing at his stomach.

Suddenly he jumped from the relaxer, and started down the darkened corridor toward the skipper's cabin. He saw the light over the hatch, indicating that the skipper was in, and his hand shook as he rang the bell. An impossible thing to take to the skipper – and yet, he knew he had no choice.

Captain Robert Jaffe looked up as the doctor entered the cabin,

and his round, dark face broke into a grin. The doctor bent to avoid banging his head in the hatchway, and walked across to the skipper's desk. Try as he would, he couldn't muster a smile, and he saw Captain Jaffe's eyes grow serious as he sank into a relaxer. 'What is it, Doc?'

'We've got trouble, Bob.'

'Trouble? After this trip?' He grinned and leaned back. 'Don't be silly. What kind of trouble?'

'We've got an extraordinary man aboard, Bob.'

The captain shrugged, raising his eyebrows. 'We have eighty extraordinary men aboard. That's why they came on this trip – '

'I don't mean *that* kind of extraordinary. I mean downright unbelievable, Bob. We've got a man on this ship, walking around, robust and healthy, who *ought to be dead.*'

'That's an odd thing for a doctor to say,' he said cautiously. 'What do you mean?'

Crawford waved the grey cards at him. 'It's right here,' he said. 'These are lab reports. As you know, I ordered a complete physical examination on every man aboard, the day after we blasted from Venus. A normal procedure – we had to be sure that nothing had been picked up by the exploring parties, or anybody else. Among other things, we ran complete lab studies on each of the men – urine, blood chemistry, and so forth. We got every man on board into the lab within two days after blasting, and took blood samples from them. And we got some remarkable results.'

Jaffe drew on his cigarette, watching the doctor impatiently.

'There are eighty-one men on the ship,' the doctor continued. 'Of these, eighty presented a clean bill of health, absolutely negative reports on everything. But one man was slightly different.' He tapped the cards with a slender finger. 'One man showed everything normal – blood count, chlorides, calcium, albumin-globulin ration – everything just the way it should be. Then we ran his blood sugar.' The doctor stretched his leg, regarding his toes closely. 'This man didn't have any blood sugar,' he said. 'Not a trace.'

Captain Jaffe stiffened, his eyes suddenly wide. 'Now wait a minute – I'm no doctor, but even *I* know – '

' – that a man can't live without any blood sugar.' The doctor

nodded his head. 'You're so right. But that wasn't all! After we couldn't find any blood sugar, we ran a test for blood creatinin. That's a protein-break down product, rapidly disposed of, and if it ever gets as high as 10 milligrams per hundred cc's of blood, the patient is in trouble. I've *never* seen a creatinin higher than twenty-five, and that man was dead when the blood was drawn. A man with a creatinin level that high *has* to be dead, he *couldn't* be alive – ' He paused for a moment, wiping a trickle of sweat from his forehead. 'This man's test ran 135 – '

Jaffe stared at the doctor. Leaning over the desk, he took the lab cards, glancing over them silently. 'A laboratory error, maybe? Something wrong with the reagents you used, one of the men fouling up, something like that?'

'Not a chance,' said the doctor. 'We got those reports yesterday, and of course I sent for the man. And in he walked, happy as you please, right into the laboratory. Pink cheeks, good respiration – I took more blood from him. I did the chemistry myself, and had Jenson check it for me. I didn't like what I found. The second blood, from top to bottom, was *perfectly normal* – '

Jaffe's fingers trembled. 'Can a man's blood chemistry change itself like that – so suddenly?'

'I'm afraid it can't. Not by any stretch of coincidence. But it did. No more than twenty hours elapsed from the time the first sample was taken to the time the last was drawn. No mixing of samples – they were identified with the man by number and finger-print. Both came from the same man's veins.'

The intercom buzzed at Jaffe's elbow. He picked up the receiver, and the metallic voice rasped in his ear. 'Righto,' he said. 'We'll be right up.' He snapped down the earpiece and turned back to the doctor. 'Doc, you're on to something this time. A man just died, up in the Navigation shack. A man named Donald Shaver.'

The man was dead. Of that there was no doubt. Dr Crawford buttoned up his shirt front, shaking his head, and breathed a sigh. 'Scotty – I'm sorry,' he said to the tall blond man. 'He was dead when you called.'

The tall Scot stared at the inert form on the deck, opening and closing his fists helplessly. 'He was all right this morning – I'd

swear to it. I saw him almost all day, and he didn't even look sick until about twenty minutes ago.'

The captain jammed his hands into his pockets. 'What does it look like, Doc?'

The doctor motioned the other men out of the navigation shack. Then he turned to Jaffe. 'It doesn't look like anything *I* ever saw before. Have those lab reports come up yet?'

The captain handed him a grey card, and he took it eagerly; his eyes narrowed as he read it. 'Blood sugar zero, creatinin level over 130,' he said bluntly. 'The man should be dead.'

'Then this was the man you spoke of? I thought you said he had changed back to normal.'

The doctor scowled at the crumpled form on the floor. 'Sorry, Skipper. This isn't the man.'

'Not the man! But who – ?'

'The man I spoke of was named Wescott. This man's physical was perfectly normal.'

'Doc – we slipped up somewhere. We must have. Some sort of disease sneaked past our sterile control – '

'Nonsense!' Dr Crawford's voice was sharp. 'We set our culture plates before a single man left the ship on Venus, and found them all negative. We had men on the surface, without protective covering of any sort, for three whole months while we explored, and we cleared every one with ultraviolet irradiation before he came back on board; no disease appeared. For three months nothing developed. Now we have this. Does that sound like a disease to you?'

The captain shivered. 'That was Venus we were exploring, not Terra. I've seen ships, Doc – other ships that picked up plagues – like that one that came back from Titan, the one they burned last month. A virus that ate out their lungs and spread through the ship in six hours. *Think*, Doc – '

The doctor wasn't listening. He bent over the man on the deck, examining his eyes and ears. For a long moment he stared at the man's arm, then slapped his thigh and cursed. 'How very stupid,' he muttered. 'I *thought* I'd seen this guy – '

For the first time real alarm was in the doctor's eyes. '*Let me see those cards again!*'

He examined them closely, counterchecking them against the

cards in his pockets. 'Incredible! Bob, this is no disease!'

'But if this man and Wescott were exposed, and this man dies – '

'This man never got close to the surface of Venus, nor to any of the conditions the other men met. This man was in sickbay since the third day after we blasted from Terra, with a case of infectious mononucleosis. He was restricted to bed all the time we were roosting on Venus. I gave him his last shot yesterday morning. *He never left the ship.*'

Jaffe looked at the doctor, his eyes wide. 'Then I don't understand – '

'I think I do. We've got something loose on this ship, all right. But it isn't any disease.'

On through space the great ship rushed. The third night-period had just begun, so the doctor turned on the wall light in his cabin, and began to prepare the coffee mix.

Captain Jaffe paced the cabin several times, nervously, and sank into a relaxer.

The doctor broke out a bottle of rum and poured some in the captain's coffee. 'Quiet down,' he said softly. 'You're getting jumpy.'

Jaffe sipped the hot liquid. 'I can't help but get jumpy,' he growled. 'This is my ship, and I'm responsible for these men – and this wretched trip was enough to make any skipper jumpy. This trip has been the dullest, the most commonplace, the most ordinary space mission ever undertaken. Look at it. We settle down to our job, which is to explore and report on the planet Venus. We set out culture plates, bring them in negative. Test the atmosphere, find it light, but conveniently breathable. Climate is hot, but tolerable. So we got out, and what do we find? Nothing. Men go out, explore, sweat, come back in and eat a hearty dinner. Life forms? None. Plant life? Totally absent. Valuable minerals? Dead blank.' His voice rose. 'We take pictures, write reports, pack up and leave. For all we learned we might as well have stayed at home. And now, three days out on the homebound route, a disease breaks out. It doesn't wash, Doc.'

'It sure doesn't,' snapped the doctor. 'For one thing, this is no

disease we're dealing with. Get that straight. No disease, Skipper, nothing like it.'

'What do you think Shaver died of? Homesickness?'

The doctor sank down in a chair, and his voice was tense. 'Look. Human metabolism is human metabolism. A human being can adjust his metabolism to a perfectly amazing variety of conditions, but there are some things a human metabolism simply cannot do. Take blood sugar, for instance. There is no possible chance under the stars that a living man's blood sugar can go to zero. If his level goes down to a third or a quarter of normal, the man goes into coma. Long before it reaches zero, the man is dead. Not sometimes, always.'

Crawford stood up and refilled his cup. 'The same goes for blood creatinin level,' he continued, his voice intense in the stillness of the cabin. 'A man would be dead long before his creatinin level could reach an outlandish point like 135 milligrams. He simply couldn't build up such a concentration in his system, and stay alive.'

'But surely some disease – something completely alien – '

'Never! It isn't a matter of a new phenomenon appearing, Skipper. It's a matter of rank impossibility. *It could never happen to a human metabolic system!*'

The skipper's face was grey. Dr Crawford sat in silence for a long moment, watching the blackness of space through the observation panel. The ship was very much alone there, the doctor thought, a sliver of human-made alloy hurtling across untravelled reaches of space. 'There's only one possible conclusion. I don't know *what* Roger Wescott is now. But he isn't a human being.'

Jaffe was on his feet, his eyes blazing. 'Oh, now look, Doc. This is insane! Of all the idiotic – ' he broke off, spluttering.

'Just suppose that Venus wasn't quite so dead as we thought, skipper. Oh an insane idea, no doubt, but just suppose there was life there – intelligent life, clever, thoughtful, resourceful. Suppose we didn't arrive unannounced and unwelcomed, but were carefully observed, all the time we were exploring and studying there, by life forms that didn't care, for some reason, to make their presence known. Just suppose that the parts of Venus which we saw were

areas which had been carefully prepared for us to see, so that we would see nothing, and detect nothing, and learn nothing, and go home as empty handed as we came.' The doctor spread his hands before him, leaning forward in the relaxer.

'And just suppose, for the sake of argument, that these life forms had no rigid anatomy, like we have. Perhaps they were just some sort of jelly-like protoplasm, capable of changing to fit whatever conditions they might meet. Perhaps they could copy anything they wanted to copy, and sat watching us right under our noses, looking like rocks, looking like sand, like puddles – maybe even like *men* – '

Jaffe pushed his hair from his forehead, and his eyes were more frightened than angry. 'Garbage,' he growled. 'I saw that planet with my own eyes. There was nothing there.'

The doctor nodded, his voice urgent. 'Sure, call it garbage – but suppose it were true, suppose these – Venusians – wanted to know more about *our* planet, wanted to study us, wanted to study our spaceship, wanted to examine our homeland. How would they do it? Maybe one of them could come aboard, looking like a man. Maybe one of them killed Roger Wescott, out there on the sand somewhere, and came aboard this ship, looking like him, copying his appearance, copying his reactions, hoping that we would accept him as Roger Wescott, and take him home. But suppose that he slipped up on the copying job. He might not have known, at first, just how the blood chemistry of a human being was supposed to balance. Perhaps it took time for him to change and copy, and he came aboard, a nice, perfect, outer shell, with the inside all mixed up and uncertain. And when "blood" was drawn from him, the blood was all wrong, somehow. Completely impossible, as blood goes. Perhaps he learned, then, of his mistakes, and tried to cover up – maybe by killing another man, like Shaver, for instance, and copying him, too, and then pretending to die, just like Shaver seemed to die, so that we'd think it was some mysterious disease, and spend the rest of our passage home trying to figure it out. Just suppose this were so – '

The skipper rubbed his hands together. 'Suppose it *were* so,' he growled. 'If so, then Wescott – *isn't* Wescott. But how could you ever tell?'

'A good question. We don't know what sort of a counterfeit job this – Venusian – might do. We don't know how thorough it would be, we could only guess how it would get its information. But suppose it walked in on a man's body, studied every nerve and cell, every chemical ratio, every volume ratio, every conscious thought pattern. It would be a flawless copy, looking like him, reacting just as he would react, down to the last cell, *being* him, except for a corner of alien mind, thinking, holding fast to an alien identity, moving with alien motives. The counterfeit could be perfect.'

The men stared at each other. The drone of the engines came to them faintly in the silence of the cabin, smooth, and steady, and lonely. The captain stared at his hands, and his palms were damp with sweat. When he looked up, the fear in his eyes was bright. 'It would have to be evil, wouldn't it? To do something like this – treacherous, and sly, and evil – '

'Yes.'

'And we could carry it back home?'

'Yes.'

Jaffe set down the coffee cup. 'Doc, do you believe this is true?'

'I'm afraid I do.'

'But what can we do?'

There was a long silence. Then the doctor said, 'I don't know. I – I just don't know. But I have a hunch I'd like to try on Wescott. I've never heard of a counterfeit yet that couldn't be broken.'

The boy was about twenty-three, pink-cheeked, with a straight nose and steady blue eyes. He rapped at the entrance to the skipper's cabin, and stepped in, hat in hand, head high. 'Roger Wescott, sir,' he said. 'You sent for me?'

Dr Crawford stood up and shot a warning glance at the skipper's pale face. '*I* sent for you,' he said. He motioned the boy to the centre of the room. An ordinary-looking boy, he thought. Strong-shouldered, healthy looking – 'What's your job on this ship, Wescott?'

'I'm a navigator, sir. I work with Scotty McIntyre, and – I did work with Don Shaver.'

The doctor shifted the sheaf of papers in his hand. 'You're a fool, Wescott,' he said bleakly. 'You should have known better than to try sneak thievery in a place like this.'

The boy looked up sharply. The cabin was deathly silent, the air charged with tension. 'Sneak thievery? I – I don't understand.'

'You know exactly what I mean. The collection that was taken up for Shaver's widow – two thousand credits. It was in an envelope on my desk when I left my cabin an hour ago. You entered my cabin five minutes after I had left, and came out again almost immediately. And the money was gone when you left. Don't you think you'd better return it?'

The boy's face flushed, and he turned in confusion to Jaffe, then back to the doctor. 'Sir, I don't know what you're talking about. I was *sent* to your cabin, just a little while ago, and you weren't there, so I came out again. I didn't see any money.'

'Sent there, were you? I see. Look, Wescott, somebody saw you go into the cabin. But nobody else went in there. You can make it much easier if you'll just return the money to me. Nothing more will be said – you have my word. But we're on to you, and we want the money back.'

Wescott spread his hands helplessly. 'Doctor. I don't know anything about this – ' He turned to Jaffe. 'Captain, you've been my skipper as long as I've been in service – you know I wouldn't take any money. I – I *couldn't* steal!'

Jaffe shifted his eyes uneasily. 'You heard the doctor, Wescott. I think you'd better come across.'

Miserably, the boy looked from one to the other, face burning, eyes almost brimming. 'You don't believe me,' he said, his voice tight. 'You think I'm lying. I tell you, I didn't *take* any money – how can I give it back? I don't have two thousand credits – '

The doctor slapped the table disgustedly. 'All right, Wescott. Get back to duty. We'll order a shakedown of the entire ship. The money's here on board, and we know you took it. We'll find it, and it'll be hard on you when we do.'

'But I – '

'That's all. Get back to duty.'

The boy left, his head hanging, his eyes wide with disbelief. He

was hardly out of the cabin when Jaffe whirled on the doctor. 'I *can't* play along with this sort of thing, Doc. I – I didn't realize the implications until I saw the boy, but – this is downright vicious – '

'We're *dealing* with something vicious. Do you have to see something to be afraid of it? Is radiation burn any less cruel because you can't see it when it happens? Or plague, or polio? Oh, I've thought about this until I'm sick of thinking, and I tell you I'm *scared*, Bob – I'm so scared I can't sleep. This creature is here, it's loose on the ship, and we can't even detect it, or prove that it's here. If it were good, or friendly, or peaceable, it would have made itself known from the first, but it didn't do that; can't you see what that implies? It murdered, twice it murdered, and back there on Venus, somewhere, those men are lying dead on a rock, rotting. Two of our crew, Bob. And this – counterfeit – that we were talking to killed those men.'

'But he looked so *normal*. Reacted so perfectly – '

'Look, Bob. Think what it could do on the ship if we don't stop it. We don't know its powers and capabilities. But at least here it's closed in, isolated. What about when we get home, when it could run loose, on the streets – *we can't take it home*, Bob – '

'Then tell the crew, let them be on guard – '

'And lose any chance to trap it? Don't be silly. I think I've got a way to trap it. All I can do is reason and guess, but I think I have a way. Let me try.'

Jaffe shivered, and turned back to the desk. 'All right,' he said, reluctantly. 'I'll go along with you. But I hope you're right, Doc. In all the service there's no worse name you can brand on a man than "thief".'

'Oh, but there is,' said the doctor, quietly.

'Well, I don't know it.'

' "*Spy*", ' said the doctor.

In the mess hall the hum of voices subsided as Captain Jaffe mounted the platform, with Dr Crawford at his side. His voice rang sharp and clear, resounding on the metal walls.

'I called you men together to tell you that there's a thief among you.'

An angry buzz rose from the men, and all eyes focused on the skipper.

'The collection taken for your shipmate's widow has been stolen,' he continued. The buzz grew louder, more indignant. 'Two thousand credits. Someone here took it. If the guilty man will return it, in person, to Dr Crawford, who had custody of the money, no action will be taken against him, and the man will be allowed to change outfits at the end of this passage. Until the money is returned, all movies on the ship are cancelled, and the library and cards rooms are locked. If it isn't back by the time we land at Los Alamos, not one man will leave the ship until it is. That's all. You're dismissed.'

The men broke up in groups, whispering, gesturing, scowling. Snatches of conversation caught the doctor's ear as he walked down the corridor, and like a blow he realized the stigma of a thief at large on a ship. The men's voices were indignant.

'Of all the rotten tricks – '

'Don't suppose whoever took it will give it back, do you?'

'What'll Scotty say, do you think?'

'I dunno – but Don was Scotty's buddy. Scotty ain't going to like whoever it was took the money. And you know Scotty when he's mad – '

And as Crawford walked toward his cabin, he saw Roger Wescott, walking away from the group, his face white. It was the only thing he could do, he told himself a thousand times, he *had* to do it, as a doctor, as a human being. But the skipper was right; it was a vicious thing to do.

His mind was a whirl of pictures, nightmarish glimpses of Wescott's beaten face, the contemptuous faces of the crewmen, the anger in Scotty McIntyre's face, the fear and doubt in the skipper's. If only he could tell them, his mind screamed, tell the crew everything, tell them *why he was doing it*, what they were fighting, if only he could share the burden, somehow – but the burden was all his. He had reasoned it out. It was the only thing, if he was right, if Wescott were an alien, a hateful counterfeit of a man lying dead on Venus's sands –

But if he were wrong, Roger Wescott could never erase this mark; he would carry it for the rest of his life.

He couldn't be wrong! He glanced at the chronometer on the wall, calculating the few remaining days of the passage. He alone had made the decision.

The doctor walked back toward the sickbay, his hands white and clenched, fingernails biting deep in his palms. He turned into the laboratory, closed the hatch behind him, and began searching the reagent shelves for a small bottle of white powder. His hand closed on it, and he put it into his pocket, breathing heavily. 'Please, don't let me be wrong,' he muttered. 'Please, please – '

The man's body lay on the bunk, motionless, asleep. Inside his head, behind the sleeping eyes, a mind shifted, curled, sending out tendrils of thought, a cruel evil mind. An alien mind, it sent out its hateful thoughts, seeking, probing – and from somewhere in the depths of the ship, another mind replied.

'We have to go back, go back. We're caught, he's on us – '

'Never!' The other mind shot back, vitriolic.

'But there's still time! Another time period, and we'll be too far, we'd never be able to make it back.'

'Traitor! Coward!' the other mind roared, twisting in rage. 'You should die for such a thought!'

'But he's on to me – the doctor – what's he trying to do? I've copied so carefully, he couldn't spot me – but what's he trying to do?'

The thought came back, scornful. 'He's a dolt, a common clod. He'll never succeed – '

'But he might – we've got to go back – ' The fear was stronger now. 'I can't tell what he's trying to do, I don't know if I've copied right – '

Sneering, cruel laughter came through in the thoughts. 'He isn't on to *me* – he trusts me. Don't be afraid. He's a fool. In just a short while now they'll land. Think of all the warm people, where we can hide and work, *think* how delightful – ' the thought bubbled over into a vile ecstasy of anticipation – 'and soon we'll have them, slaughtered and strapped, and we'll have their ships, to bring the others – '

'But the doctor – we should kill him – '

'No, no – they'd never land the ship. They'd all be suspicious

then, they'd burn it before it landed. No, no, the doctor is so clever, let him play his games. Don't be afraid.'

'But he's cornering me – I don't know how, I just *feel* it – we should go back, *go back*, while we can – '

The hateful mind squirmed, pouring its poison out in a thousand channels, laughing. 'Don't be afraid. Remember, it only takes one of us – '

Jaffe addressed the doctor sourly. 'I hope you're satisfied,' he said. 'You've got the whole ship upside down. They've been plaguing poor Wescott till he doesn't know which way is up, and everyone on the ship is edgy. What's the point to all this, Doc? If I could see the point to it, it would be a different thing, but this is going too far. I haven't slept since it started, and every time I see Wescott he gives me a look that makes me feel like a Judas.'

He reached out to take a cigarette lighter from the doctor's hand.

Crawford jerked back as if he'd been stung. '*Don't touch me!*'

Jaffe blinked, staring at the doctor. 'I just wanted a light, Doc – '

The doctor let out a little breath, and shamefacedly tossed the lighter to Jaffe. 'Sorry, I guess I'm edgy, too. I'm having nightmares, I'm scared of myself and everyone else on the ship. Silly, but this business has made me jumpy as a cat.'

'I guess you *are* jumpy,' said Jaffe. 'I still don't see the point to all this.'

'Look, Bob, you're forgetting. Roger Wescott is dead. He's been dead quite some time now, out there in the steaming sun on Venus. Never forget that, not for a minute. I *can't* be wrong – look, this won't go on for long. All I need is a few more hours, and some radioactive bismuth, and I'll have the answer.' He stood up and started for the door.

'Can't you at least tell me what you're looking for?'

'Sorry,' the doctor grinned at him. 'After all, how do I know that you're not a monster, too?'

Fool! his mind screamed at him, as he started back for the sick-bay. Fool, fool, fool, to have made such a slip! The doctor wiped his forehead, self-incrimination pouring through his mind. To have let such a thing happen, to have even *hinted* at the idea which had grown in his mind, blossoming slowly into a full-blown,

horrible realization – that Roger Wescott was not necessarily the only alien aboard! Jaffe probably wouldn't think about it any further, but still, he couldn't afford such an error. *Nobody* must know what he suspected.

He heard a footfall in the corridor above the sickbay. At the top of the ladder-shaft he saw Roger Wescott adjust his anti-grav rheostat for light fall, and drift slowly down to the sickbay.

The boy was pale and his eyes hollow, as though haunted by nightmares. The doctor felt pity grow, and sternly clamped it off in his mind.

Wescott stared at him for a long moment, and then said: 'Doctor, I've had all that I can take. I didn't take the money from your desk, and you know I didn't. I want you to call it off.'

The doctor leaned back, raising his eyebrows. 'Call it off?'

'This thief campaign. You know it isn't true. You're the one who started it, and you're the only man on the ship who can stop it. I haven't heard a civil word for the past week. I can't stand it much longer.'

'You've come to the wrong man for civil words, Wescott. Try somewhere else.'

Wescott bit his lip, his face white. 'I can't take much more of this, Doc. If you don't call it off, I think I'll go loopy – '

The doctor shrugged, smiled at the boy. 'All right, Wescott,' he said eagerly. 'Go ahead. Go mad. I'm not stopping you.'

Tears came to the boy's eyes. He turned and left the room.

The doctor sighed, then withdrew the small bottle from a drawer. It was nearly empty; only a small amount of the white dust remained in the bottom. 'You'd better not fail me, baby,' he whispered, shaking his head.

'*All hands, stand by. Prepare for deceleration in three hours.*' The PA system boomed the skipper's command three times, and lapsed into silence.

Crawford stepped into Captain Jaffe's cabin. His shoulders were drooping, and there were hollows under his eyes. He dropped a large black envelope on Jaffe's desk, and collapsed into a relaxer. 'I see we'll be landing in a few hours,' he said. 'It looks like I was

just in time.' He pointed to the envelope. 'That's the goods, Bob. I've got him cold.'

'Wescott?'

'Wescott. Cold. I just ordered the man down to clean the starboard space-lock. You'd better come with me now, because I want you to see this.'

Jaffe opened the envelope carefully, and drew out the contents. '*This* puts the finger on Wescott?'

'It does. Come with me now. I'll explain later.'

The two men checked with the corridor officer outside the space-lock, and sent him on an errand. Together they peered through the heavy glass panel into the pressure chamber. Roger Wescott was there, scrubbing down the deck with a brush and soapy water.

Like a cat the doctor clamped down the hatch lock, and pressed a stud on the wall. A red light went on in the chamber, and the exhaust machinery whirred into motion. Wescott looked up, eyes wide with alarm, and he sprang to his feet. 'Doc!' he shouted, his voice coming thin and brittle through the panel. 'Doc! Throw that switch! I haven't got a suit on – '

Jaffe's breath hissed, and he stared at the doctor, paralysed. 'What are you doing? You'll kill him.'

'Just watch,' growled the doctor. The man in the chamber was standing tense now, terror in his face.

'Doc!' he shouted desperately. 'Doc! Turn it off. Stop it, Doc, stop it!'

His eyes were wide with fear, and his face twisted into a grimace of sheer impotent rage. 'Stop it, stop it, I'm choking – '

He banged at the hatch with his fist until the blood ran and smeared on the hatch – and became something different from blood. His hands went to his throat, and he sank to his knees, as the pressure gauge went down and down, and he twisted on the deck, coughing. Suddenly blood poured from his nostrils, he convulsed on the floor, and lay still.

And his body began changing, melting, losing the definition of pink cheeks and blond hair, running into a globule of gooey red jelly. The arms melted away, and the legs, until the mass looked like a giant reddish amoeba. Then suddenly it drew itself into a roundish lump, quivered for a moment, and then was still.

The doctor tore his eyes from the panel, shook his head, and sank down to the deck as his muscles gave way. 'You see,' he said wearily, 'I was *not* wrong.'

'I never saw a counterfeit,' said Dr Crawford, 'that couldn't be broken, if you went about it the right way. Usually there's a flaw in design: the copy isn't perfect, or the wrong material is used. But here we had a different case. We had a counterfeit *man*. Common sense and medical reasoning told me that we couldn't possibly be dealing with anything else *but* a counterfeit man, yet such a perfect counterfeit that microscopic study of his tissues revealed no flaw. It looked like a tough nut to crack.'

The doctor poured himself a cup of coffee, and offered one to Jaffe. 'But there were some assumptions we could make. We could assume that the creature – the Venusian – had copied Wescott, and then moved part of himself into Shaver's form in order to decoy us when we caught him short in his copying job. We could see that he made a perfect morphological copy. He must have copied Wescott's neural circuits, too, and assumed the proper reactions to whatever situations arose.

'It was really neat. When the situation demanded that he be scared, he was scared. When he should have been angry, he was angry. Situation indicated indignation, he was indignant. All this came from Wescott's mind, when he copied it. But there were some things he couldn't have gotten from Wescott's mind. Some things that even Wescott wouldn't have been aware of, some things even Wescott's mind couldn't control.

'The creature had Wescott's brain to think with, and saw the world through Wescott's eyes. But his own protective mechanisms maintained his own unconscious reaction patterns. There was one thing he couldn't copy.

'The monster was faced with a serious problem when "Wescott" was accused of thievery. He reacted beautifully, following strictly the lines that Wescott's mind would have dictated. *To Wescott.* He was worried, indignant, pitiable, angry – everything, just exactly right. He ate the meals provided for him with distaste, just as Wescott would have. He had to follow the *functions* of Wescott, the thief-accused, down to the last letter.'

The doctor smiled and pointed to the negatives lying on the desk on top of the large black envelope. 'But those, slipped under his mattress at night, spotted him cold. There was one thing he missed that no *human* nervous system would have missed. The monster tripped himself up because he didn't know enough about the *function* of the model he was copying. He *didn't* have one thing that every other man on the whole ship had before this thievery business had run its course.'

Jaffe pointed to the negatives, understanding dawning in his eyes. 'You mean – '

'Exactly,' smiled the doctor. 'He *didn't have* indigestion.'

Now Terra loomed huge in the screen, greener and brighter than ever since their departure for Venus. The ship was decelerating full now, the crew standing by their landing stations, each to his own specialized job, waiting.

Dr Crawford ran down the dark corridor toward the rear of the ship, black envelope under his arm. He had tried to make it sound final, when he talked to Jaffe, to make sure he considered the problem closed. He couldn't afford having stories getting around now, couldn't afford the skipper throwing a wrench into the machinery. It was a shame to leave Bob Jaffe out in the cold, but he knew he couldn't place the skipper in any different category from the rest of the crew.

Crawford reached the lifeboat locks, worked the hatch for a moment, and swung into the small, musty launching quarters. With a pocket flashlight he searched the lock, finally spotting the launching switches, and fiddled with a screwdriver, methodically shorting them out. All but one. Hastily he glanced over his shoulder fearful that someone – or some*thing* – would suddenly enter the lock with him. Finally the whole raft of eight lifeboats were jimmied so they would require hours of repair. With a last mental check, the doctor swung up and into the ninth ship, threw himself into the cockpit, and began easing it toward the opening port. There was no sound but the hum of the tiny motor as the ship nosed into space, and then with a whoosh like a relieved sigh, he was free of the ship, sliding into a descent toward the warm green of Terra.

They were vulnerable, he kept telling himself. He had spotted an alien aboard, out-thought it, and trapped it. That meant they *weren't sure*, that meant he could trap another one, or two, or three – he shuddered, remembering the wild rage in the Wescott monster's eyes as it had died. Hate-filled eyes, deadly to the last. And it had been by such a narrow chance that he had spotted them at all.

And it would have been so foolish to assume that *only one* came aboard –

An hour later the lifeboat settled down to a receiving lock in Los Alamos Spaceport. A flurry of excitement, a raising of eyebrows, a few hurriedly spoken words, and he was on the underground shuttle, speeding with an escort toward the office of the Spaceport Command.

The huge ship rested on its tail fins in the Spaceport, pointing its silvery nose to the sky, standing like some wonderful bird poised for flight. Dr Crawford squinted up and down her long slender shape as he walked down the winding ramp to the landing-way, and marvelled for the thousandth time at the beauty of her hull.

Running up the hull, a Gantry crane was creaking, moving higher and higher, toward the main port locks. Standing on the crane were two green-uniformed space-police. They looked up at the lock with grim faces, hugging sonic-shocker guns purposefully to their sides.

Crawford walked over to the Police Commander's field desk. 'Did they get the Commandant's message?'

The Commander nodded. 'You're Dr Crawford? Yes, sir, they did. We've held a copy for you.' He held up the blue paper slip. The doctor read it, a smile growing on his lips:

ALL OFFICERS AND MEN OF VENUS EXPLORATORY SHIP WILL BE ESCORTED UNDER ARMED GUARD TO THE SPACE HOSPITAL FOR ISOLATION AND OBSERVATION AT THE RECOMMENDATION AND UNDER THE DIRECT SUPERVISION OF THE SHIP'S DOCTOR STOP

ABEL FRANCIS: SPACEPORT COMMANDANT

It had been a tough nut, indeed, he thought. They were sly, treacherous, but they could be caught. Every man on the ship would be tested, rigorously, with every test he could devise, to trap anyone who could possibly be an alien. He knew he had the advantage. There were things they couldn't know, ways they could be trapped. It would take time and perseverance, but it could be done. Every single man would come off the ship under guard, and there couldn't be a slip-up.

The Police Commander tapped his arm. 'That's it, Doctor. They're all off.'

The doctor looked at him sharply. 'You're sure? Everybody?'

'Everybody. I've checked the list against faces and fingerprints. What do we do now?'

'I'll have to go aboard for my records and notes – ' He didn't mention the glob of reddish jelly, drying in the starboard lock. He couldn't wait to see what the lab would find in an analysis of that. 'Just keep the guard here, and see that nobody else tries to go aboard.'

He stepped on the crane, heard the motor start, and felt the platform begin to rise. With a sigh he glanced down on the busy metropolis of Los Alamos, his eye singling out the strip of Coral Street, running out to the suburbs, to his home, his wife. It wouldn't be long, now – just deposit the records with the Commandant, and he could go home, and sleep, and sleep.

The lock stood open, and he stepped into the darkened ship. The old, familiar throbbing of the engines was gone now, leaving a nostalgic emptiness. He turned down the corridor toward his cabin, his footsteps echoing down the corridors.

He stopped. The echo of his last step resounded, and faded away, and he stood, stock still, tense. *Something*, he thought – some sound, some feeling.

He peered down the dark, tomblike corridor, probing, listening, and sweat poured from his forehead and palms. And then he heard it again, the faintest sigh of sound, minute, like the subdued shuffling of a foot.

There was someone else on the ship. . . .

Fool, his mind cried, *you should never have come aboard*, and he

sucked in a shaking breath. Who? No one could be aboard, but somebody was – who?

Somebody that knew the whole story about Wescott. Somebody that knew there were aliens aboard, someone who knew why the crew was being guarded, someone who was afraid to go ashore, because he knew you would spot him sooner or later. Somebody who knew what you suspected.

He screamed '*Jaffe!*' and the word echoed and re-echoed down the corridor, dissolving into idiotic laughter before it died away. The doctor turned and bolted back the way he had come, back toward the port lock, toward safety, and he saw the heavy lock swing shut before his eyes, heard the automatic lock slough down against the hull-pocket that held it.

'Jaffe!' he called. 'It won't work! You can't get away, do you hear me? I've told them everything, they know there's another of you in the crew. The ship is guarded, airtight, and you're *trapped!*'

He stood, trembling, his heart racing, until there was silence again.

He choked back a sob, and wiped sweat from his forehead. He had forgotten what they could do, forgotten that one of them could copy two people. He'd forgotten Donald Shaver, and how he had died, a copy just the same as Wescott. The captain had left the ship with the rest of the crew, but part of him was still here, still looking like Jaffe, still waiting.

For what?

Carefully, with cold determination, the doctor fingered the sonic shocker in his pocket. Then he moved down the corridor, peering cautiously ahead into the gloom of the passageway, searching for some sign of movement. Dimly he realized that the alien was helpless; as long as it was on the ship, it would be racking its brains, trying to figure a system for getting off, or it would be useless. The alien would have no mercy. He'd have to spot it first.

He heard the sound again, a scurrying on the deck above. Swiftly he ran down the corridor, in the same direction as the sound, reaching the ladder, and trying to mute his panting. Above him he heard a hatch clang open, the hatch to the skipper's cabin, and then clang shut again.

There was no exit from the captain's cabin but into the corridor

above him. Slowly, silently, he eased up the ladder, peeked over the edge of the deck, and saw nothing in the gloom of the passageway. A bright line of light came from around the door.

He slid against the wall, shocker in hand and eased over toward the line of light.

'Come out, Jaffe!' he roared. 'You'll never be able to get off this ship. They'll take it aloft, and they'll burn it out, and you with it.'

He heard nothing. With his foot he gave the hatch a shove, saw it bang inward, and his hand went around the edge of the door, the shocker sending bolts of energy round the room. He peered around the edge, and saw the interior of the cabin, empty.

A cry left his lips, and he half turned before the bolt hit his hand, sending a jolt of fiery pain coursing up to his elbow. His shocker dropped to the floor as he grasped his injured hand. With a scream he whirled on the huge, gaunt figure standing in the door, saw the black hair and the hollow eyes, the jaw with the black stubble, the slow, easy smile spreading across the lips –

He screamed, again and again, as he backed away, eyes wild with fear. He screamed, and he knew as he screamed that nobody could hear him.

He was staring – into his own face.

The Gantry crane creaked its weariness to the world as the platform moved lower and lower, and Dr Crawford stepped to the ground. He grinned at the Police Commander, and rubbed his stubbled chin. 'I'm for home and a shave,' he said. 'I'll be back tomorrow for the final disposal of the records. Better not let anything be disturbed until then.' The Commander nodded and turned back to the field desk.

The doctor walked slowly up the ramp to the Spaceport Building, through the lobby, and out on to the street. There he paused, feeling his feet turning almost instinctively toward the Coral Street subway.

But he didn't start for the Coral Street subway, to take him out to the suburbs, to his home, to his wife.

Instead, with a curious eager brightness in his eyes, he turned on to the downtown thoroughfare, and vanished into the crowds of people toward the heart of the city.

The Greater Thing

TOM GODWIN

THE thing in the dead city was conceived the night the city died. It was created by chance, but unlike that first life on Earth, it was not mothered by the calm earth and water and fathered by the young sun. Its mother was the blasted, riven soil and the screaming winds of concussion, and its father was the fierce radiation of a shattered atomic pile.

It began somewhere under the ruins as a single-celled speck of protoplasm; insensate and without purpose, hardly more than a chemical change. But there was a difference – it grew. It grew, and the radiations hastened its evolution, contracting millenia into days. As it grew it changed form in parts. Parts of it died, unsuited for survival, while the remainder grew stronger and more complex. It acquired the first beginnings of intelligence, and its intelligence became greater as its body became more complex. It developed extensions that crept along the subterranean ruins, then explored upward into the sunlight. It expanded, its blobs and webs reaching outward; constantly evolving until it could change form at will, and parts of it could separate from the whole for a while, then merge again with it.

And it thought. At first its thoughts had been merely sensations; the awareness of itself, the will to live, the form of the shattered city. But as its physical body grew more complex, its thoughts became more complex. At last its blobs and webs reached throughout the city and it had attained physical maturity. It stopped growing and had nowhere to go and nothing to do – but think.

It constructed a multitude of eyes and other organs to examine its world. It studied, and learned, the laws of matter and energy. Its mind knew the secrets of the physical universe, but its great body knew only the city and it, alone, moved there.

It studied the skeletal remains of the beings who had built the

city and learned their physical structure. It studied their records and learned their way of life, but it could not understand. It knew only absolute logic; the precisely predictable, unvarying reactions of physical things. It could not understand how the builders of the city had thought, nor why they had destroyed themselves, and it wondered. It did not care, for it was as devoid of emotion as the physical things it knew so well; it merely wondered, and waited for the day these beings might come to it and enable it to learn the reasons for their actions.

It waited patiently, for the problem was of only minor importance to it. It was fully aware of the power of the weapons that had destroyed the city, but it felt no fear of the coming of the beings who possessed these weapons. It knew that in its knowledge of physical forces it was invincible. It was neither vain nor proud, for such emotions do not spring from cold logic. It knew that it was invincible and, to it, the knowledge was no more than a commonplace fact.

It realized its tremendous powers for destruction or construction, but it had no motive for either. It had but two instincts: the will to live, and the curiosity without which its great intelligence would have remained an unused, and useless, potential.

It was fifteen years old when the first humans entered the city. It was telepathic and could read their thoughts but it could not comprehend the emotions that drove them. It learned that the first two were to die at the hands of the others who followed, and its interest increased. But it was content to remain unseen and merely observe; it had no reason to interfere.

The long ridge in the distance was sharp against the sunset's afterglow and Thorne waited, watching the saddle where their pursuers would cross – if they were as near as he feared.

A black dot appeared in the saddle, tiny but distinct against the sky. He focused his eyes on the spot until all else blurred, counting the dots as they appeared for a moment, then disappeared down the near side of the ridge. He counted nine, then the saddle was empty again.

He turned away, his face bleak and grim. Nine little black dots against the sky; nine sweating, eager State police closing in for the

kill. But they had been too eager, they had betrayed their nearness by not waiting for darkness to conceal them as they crossed the ridge. They should have restrained their impatience for a few minutes, then taken up the trail. They were fools. In their eagerness they had delayed the moment when they could crowd in with the lean bloodhound straining at its leash and anticipation glistening in their eyes.

He hurried into the trees where the girl lay sleeping. She was lying as he had left her, the yellow hair tumbled about her shoulders and her breathing tired and slow.

He shook her shoulder. 'Time to go, Lorrine – they're coming.'

She came to her feet at once, her eyes wide-awake and alert. 'How far?' she asked.

'Not over a mile. They must have followed all day without a break.'

She brushed the leaves from her hair, trying to comb it with her fingers. The links of broken chain dangling from the manacles on her wrists tinkled metallically. 'Still only four of them?' she asked, then ceased trying to comb her hair as she read the answer in his face. 'Nine?'

He nodded.

'Then . . . they've killed all the others, already. They didn't take any of them back alive.'

'They never do – not escaped Underground prisoners,' he answered shortly. 'We can't help the others, now – and our turn is next. Let's go!'

She followed silently as he struck out through the shadowy woods. They came to an open field as darkness fell and a glow in the eastern sky heralded the rising of the full moon. He set as fast a pace as he dared, aware that the long day's march had told on the girl more than she would admit, but with the certainty in his mind that her only chance for survival this one more night lay in forcing her tired legs to carry her on, lengthening the distance between themselves and the snuffling bloodhound for so long as they could.

They came to a creek as the moon lifted above the horizon, a creek running nearly at right angles to their course. Its swift, shallow waters would erase their tracks and leave no scent for the

hound and they splashed down it until it turned too far away from their own course.

The countryside began to change after they left the creek, the shells of houses appearing in the distance. They came to a road and followed it. It came to a junction with a highway and they followed the highway, their footsteps sharp and quick on the broken pavement. The houses became more closely grouped together as they walked on, and when the moon had climbed halfway to its zenith they came to the outskirts of the city; the first broken and fallen walls.

The girl's breath was coming hard, and she stumbled with increasing frequency as they hurried. He watched her without comment or softening of the bleak hardness of his face, but he called a halt when the first turn of the highway into the city hid them from the country behind. She dropped to the ground, her back against the concrete wall of the roofless shell beside the highway, the labouring of her lungs fast and desperate in the stillness.

'We'll rest a while,' he said. 'You've about reached your limit, and I think we may have lost them for a few hours by taking to that creek.'

He moved out a little way from her, where he could watch back down the long ribbon of moonlit highway. It was clear, and he turned his attention to the short distance he could see into the city. Some of the buildings were almost untouched by the bombing, but there was no sign of any inhabitation; a thing to be expected with the population reduced to one third by the bacteriological warfare that had followed the bombing. The State found it best to concentrate the remaining population in the more industrially and agriculturally productive areas, both for greater production and for its more rigid control over them.

He unslung the police carbine and laid it across his knees, making sure once again that the extra clip of cartridges was still in his pocket. Two cartridges left in the magazine, five in the clip. Seven shots and nine police. A regulation rifle would have been better, with the vicious jut of its bayonet to rip at their guts when the rifle was empty, but beggars and Undergrounders can't be

choosers. He had been lucky to get his hands on the carbine during the brief, wild turmoil of the escape.

The girl's hard breathing died away as they rested and she smiled at him with a rueful shake of her head. 'That was quite a pace you set. Walking is supposed to be healthful; in our case most decidedly so. But how long can we keep on with this running?'

'Well – ' He shrugged his shoulders. 'We can run, or we can take the alternative.'

She toyed with the chain on her wrist, staring unseeingly across the street. 'Yes, we could take the alternative,' she said. 'The knife and the whip and the fist until they were satisfied we had told all we knew, and then the bullet. So – we keep running.'

'You could have had safety and the benevolent regard of the State,' he remarked, watching her curiously. 'Only volunteers are in the Underground.'

'Benevolent!' Her lip curled with distaste.

'How long have you been in the Underground?' he asked.

'Three years.'

'What was your job?' he asked.

'The State would say I was a propagandist – I prefer to think of myself as teacher of the truth. This was once a great, free nation where a man could cross it from east to west, north to south, without question or interference. And, above all, there was a mutual trust and kindness between people, not the suspicion of each other and the indifference that the State tries so hard to sow.

'Now, only the State is to be trusted or loved; the State is good and all else is evil. My job was to prove these lies *were* lies, and to show that people can be free again, to show them that no man has the right to dictate the lives of other men. The older people know these things, but they don't dare speak. The younger ones can be shown and, when they see, all will have a unity of purpose. The State will fall before their unity and people can once again be more than obedient sheep.'

Thorne smiled faintly. She saw it and demanded, 'Is it funny?'

Thorne continued to regard her with the faint, humourless smile. 'Did you ever try to convince a herd of sheep that the only

reason they were being taken from pasture to pasture was to condition them for the slaughter?'

'People aren't sheep!' she retorted. 'People are as fine as they ever were.'

'So we of the Underground devote our lives to trying to show them – until one of them informs the police, and wins the gilded "Loyal Citizen" medal.'

'You're judging them all by the few rats among them,' she said coldly.

Thorne smiled at her again, gently, as one might smile at a child. Her faith was her own and not his to discourage. 'Perhaps you're right,' he said. 'I hope so. And now – rest as best you can. We'll go on after a little while and we'll find some way to lose them before the night is over.'

He looked again up the road, listening and watching for the tiny black dots that would eventually come. It was silent and clear, so far as he could see, and he turned back to the girl, conscious of her stare. She had not relaxed, but was sitting straight against the wall, watching him. She was toying with the chain on her wrist again, her jingling of it reflecting the uncertainty on her face.

'You'd better rest while you can,' he advised again.

'There's something I have to know first,' she said. 'And a promise I want you to make. Do you *really* think we'll be able to lose them tonight?'

'Maybe so . . . maybe not,' he answered. 'We can only try, and take what comes.'

'We won't be the first, nor the last, to die for what we think is right,' she went on, 'and I don't regret the kind of life I chose.'

'I know.'

'Then I want you to promise me when you see it's really the end, that you won't let them get me.'

He could take his own life as the least unpleasant of two unpleasant choices. It would be cruel and illogical not to do the same for her, but the thought of taking her life was painfully disturbing to contemplate.

'Will you promise?' she asked again.

'Of course,' he said, keeping his voice flat and impersonal. 'But they haven't got us yet.'

'Of course not!' She smiled up at his bleakness. 'I only wanted your promise. It's a bridge we haven't reached yet – maybe it won't be there.'

'Bridges should never be crossed until you get to them,' he said. 'One of the best ways to keep that bridge from being there is for you to rest while you can.'

She obeyed meekly, drawing her knees up close and pillowing her forehead on her crossed forearms. He watched her a moment, knowing that she was only pretending to be almost asleep, but satisfied that she was relaxed with the burden of the way of her dying lifted from her mind.

He searched the road once more, and found it empty. He looked again into the city but it was as still as ever, with the moonlight whitewashing its deserted streets. A two-storey building stood across the street from him, with a yawning blackness where the show window of the first floor had been. The glass remained in the two windows of the second floor, giving them the appearance of two eyes staring blankly above a gaping mouth. Part of the sign over the show window was visible: . . . GR . . . T . . .

It was not enough to give a clue as to the name of the city, and he doubted that knowing the name would help. This was a section of country far removed from the centres of population, and unknown to him. And it was only a dead city, with nothing to offer them, despite his words to Lorrine. They could hide in the city, but for how long? Even if, by some miracle, they eluded the police until morning it would gain them no more than another day's respite, then the helicopter patrol would appear on the scene. In this land of open plains they could not escape both the bloodhound behind and the eyes watching from the air above. There could be only one way for it to end.

His thoughts broke as he saw something grey and shapeless move in the darkness behind the empty shop window. It was there for a moment, long enough for the carbine to come to his shoulder and the sights to catch it, then it was gone. He held his breath and waited, his finger on the trigger, but there was nothing more to see other than the empty blackness under the staring, glassy eyes of the windows; nothing to hear but the sound of his own heart, the

breathing of Lorrine and, from a long way off, the sleepy chirping of a bird.

He lowered the rifle and glanced at Lorrine. She was in the same position as before and had not seen him move. Nerves, he thought. Nerves and imagination. Or a puff of wind had stirred the dust in the old building – but there was no wind.

He watched the blackness again, listening. Nothing moved there but, as he listened, he heard another sound. It was the sound he had known he would hear too soon, coming from far back along the road and carrying faintly through the night air – sound of human voices.

It was content to remain unseen and merely observe; it had no reason to interfere and it had no desire to serve as the catalysis that might deflect the human reactions from their norm. Its curiosity was as great as its intelligence, and it found in the thoughts and behaviour of the humans a problem more intricate than any it had ever encountered. It read their minds and tried to analyse what it found there, correlating the data with all its vast intelligence. It found that correlation was impossible, that the two humans were motivated by incomprehensible non-physical things; many different things which seemed to stem from one basic human characteristic.

Into its analysis of the problem went all its tremendous wisdom, but it could find no solution. *Something* motivated the humans, driving them on to do illogical things that would result in their deaths, but the motivating force was non-physical. It was a human characteristic, intangible and non-material, and the thing in the city could not define it. It was a factor vital to its solution of the problem but it was as impalpable as smoke.

So it continued to observe as the two humans resumed their flight into the city, waiting for their further actions to reveal the missing factor of the analysis. And it would, before long, observe another reaction it had never observed before – it had never watched a living thing die.

Thorne turned to the girl, reluctant to arouse her and lead her again in the futile flight, but there was no choice.

'Lorrine.'

She raised her head with the alertness of the hunted animal. 'They're coming,' she said, not making it a question.

'Too far away to see them in the moonlight, but I heard their voices. Keep to the shadows until we get farther in the city.'

The street curved, hiding the road behind them, and they walked down the centre of it, away from the broken masonry that littered the walks. Their course was erratic, zigzagging at random but drawing nearer the heart of the city. At times they walked down streets almost untouched, their footsteps echoing from the walls, while other sections were littered with heaps of rubble which they climbed over. Occasionally a section was so completely destroyed that they were forced to detour whole blocks.

They passed what had been a bank. An enclosure inside, with six steel-grated windows, faced the front. The street window was broken but one section, larger than the others, was lying on the walk. The dim gold lettering was still visible: GREEN CIT-FIR-NA-IO.

Green City. He remembered the name vaguely. Too far from the centres of population to be of any value to the State. One of the first cities bombed – centre of atomic research work. He had seen a map of it once, at Underground headquarters. A topographic map which he had glanced at and laid aside.

As they walked on he tried to recall the features of the map. It had been white, with brown for the contour lines and black for the roads. And blue – that was it – *blue*! A small river east of the city – at the very eastern edge of the city. A river, and freedom!

'Lorrine!' There was almost jubilance in his voice. 'I know now where we are. There's a river just beyond the city – it will take us away. We can use something for a raft, anything that will float. They can't float down the river any faster than we can, and we'll have a head start on them. And they'll never know where we left the river.'

The river was east of the city and they followed the street they were on. Its canyon stretched straight and clean before them, the moon shining down its length. The blocks fell behind them until it angled to the right and another took its place, the full moon still

straight before him. There was a street sign at the junction and it read: RIVERSIDE DRIVE.

'Riverside Drive – it can't be far, now,' he said. 'It won't be long until we can be on our way down the river and Harker and his little army will find the trail comes to a dead end at the river's bank.'

'This will set him back, if we escape,' Lorrine observed. 'It takes the capture of a lot of Undergrounders to win a promotion, but the loss of only two can set a Section Supervisor back to a one-stripe Squad Leader.'

'No, the State doesn't let incompetence go unpunished,' he said. 'But, to get to be Section Supervisor, Harker must have been an exceptionally thorough butcher up till now. I was never in his section before . . . do you know anything about him?'

'It seems he made a name for himself when he was in the Helicopter Scouts.'

He kept his face expressionless, not letting her see the effect of her words. The Helicopter Scouts – they were a roving patrol, unattached to any section. As a former Scout, Harker would have known of the river and conjectured that it would be their objective. While they zigzagged through the city in their attempt to elude him he would have sent a detachment straight through to the river. There they would wait – or were waiting now – while the others came in behind, the bloodhound sniffing along the trail.

They were trapped.

They came to a corner where a shop window was still intact, and the moon shone full on the dusty goods inside. Lorrine glanced briefly back the way they had come, as he stopped to scan it as thoroughly as possible in the moonlight, then she shaded the glass with her hands and stared into the store.

'It was a toy shop,' she said, as they walked on. 'It must have been just before Christmas; there was a star there – the Star of Bethlehem.'

A dusty tinsel star – peace on Earth and good will to all men. A pathetic little symbol, outlawed by the State, still shining dimly in a dead and silent city.

'It was a beautiful symbol,' she said, when he made no answer.

He did not speak, his eyes darting down the cross streets as they

crossed another intersection. The city was brilliant with the moonlight, but for the inky shadows on the moonward side of the streets. It seemed to him he had never seen the moon so bright; it washed the street with silver and paled only a little the gold of Lorrine's hair. It glinted along the barrel of his rifle and threw white lances of light from the fragments of glass on the walk. All was light and brilliance where they walked, but the river was straight ahead, and so was the moon. They could only walk on and chance the cross street shadows where, if anywhere short of the river, Harker's men would be waiting for them.

When the intersection was behind them Lorrine spoke again. 'Were you an orphan?' she asked.

'My father died when I was three and my mother died a year later. Why do you ask?'

'Because I've seen others like you, with the same hardness. They can't know what the love of a mother is like, or even friendship. They either learn to obey, or they learn to hate.'

'There was an old man, old even then, who seemed to take a special interest in me. He believed as you do, and I believed as he did. He insisted that I read – all the old books the State forbids, now. He was an idealist and I believed in his ideals in the years I knew him. The police got him the year I was twenty.'

'And you hated them all the more, then?'

'Of course. All his kindness and faith in the goodness of people meant nothing to the rat who identified him to the police. That was when I began to lose my own faith.'

'Then you've never had but one friend?' she asked. 'If you had had the chance to know the love of a family, to see the things people will do – the *good* things – for those they love, the sacrifices they will make, you wouldn't feel as you do.'

'Hate or idealism – the goal is the same,' he said. 'Destroy the State!'

'No.' She shook her head. 'It isn't the same, Johnny.'

Johnny – the old man had called him Johnny. How many years, now, had he been John Thorne? Or just Thorne? Odd how the addition of two letters could change it from just a name to something close and friendly.

'And, but for the old man, you've never had anyone who cared for you, or anyone you cared for?' she asked, with a gentleness to her voice that made it more a statement than a question.

There was a sympathy and understanding of him in her words that touched too close to the thing he wanted to keep hidden from her, and his answer was brittle and almost defiant. 'No – I prefer it that way.'

She turned her eyes to the street before her, not letting him see it if the shortness of his reply had hurt her. He felt the quick stab of contrition and added, less harshly, 'This is no time to argue, anyway.'

She talked to him, then, as they walked along; little familiar things of herself and her childhood, her hopes and plans for the future The little things, close to the heart, which two who face a common danger will reveal to each other. And, though nothing she said disclosed it, it seemed to him that her words covered the dark undercurrent of her premonition; that she was still afraid, and her talk of their freedom to come was only a whistling in the dark.

She was inside his armour and he felt that he would like to tell her she was there, and ask her to never leave. It was a weakness he had always been contemptuous of in others, and he cursed it now in himself. It was for others, for the weaklings, not for him. If Harker's men were waiting by the river, a display of sentiment would not affect their fate. It would not be necessary to precede the end with fond and tearful farewells. She was inside his armour and, somehow, he could not remove her, but it would gain neither of them to tell her she was there.

As they walked on she hesitated before the rebuff of his silence, then said no more.

The buildings became farther apart, and residential in structure. The lawns were shaggy with grass and the hedges were grown into thick masses and barriers. A breeze drifted toward them, carrying the unmistakable fresh, damp smell of the river.

His thoughts began their vain circling again.

Yet, perhaps Lorrine was right. There was goodness in men –

they were helpless and afraid. A man will reveal the identity of a traitor to the State when the lives of himself and his family are at stake. Mothers still loved their children as they always had, and their tears were hot with mingled grief and hate when the State took them at the age of six.

He thought again of Lorrine's idealism, feeling a sense of something lost; something he could never regain. If this was their night, if Harker's men were waiting by the river, Lorrine would face it with her faith undimmed while he would have only the grim humour of having cheated the State to allay the futility.

They walked on another block, two blocks, three blocks, then the trees loomed before them and there, its ripples flashing in the moonlight, was the river.

'It's really there!' Lorrine's smile flashed up at him and her hand tugged at his arm. 'I was afraid to hope – but we did it! Let's go – let's hurry before this turns out to be too good to be true.'

'Wait,' he said, seeing already the crushing of her hope and feeling the pain of it. 'Listen.'

She stood motionless with her hand on his arm, holding her breath as he held his. The river gurgled past its concrete walls and the breeze coming up the river carried the river's freshness and the smell of the trees. As they listened the breeze brought to them the sound he had expected; the murmur of voices.

Lorrine's fingers dug into his arm and she said, almost inaudibly, 'Oh!' Then her fingers relaxed and she smiled again, only a little of the tightness in her throat as she said, 'I guess it *was* too good to be true.'

They came in sight as Thorne watched down the river, walking with slow assurance. Two of them. One of them fired three quick shots in the air and a rifle answered from somewhere up the river. He looked back up the street they had come down and saw the distant figures closing in behind them.

They were surrounded – Harker had planned well and there would be no escape. His men were coming with caution, but with deliberate confidence. They would want to take their quarry alive if they could. There were questions to be asked, and there were ways of getting the answers – the knife and the whip and the fist.

Thorne looked about him. The small stone house nearest them would do as well as any, and they walked toward it, not hurrying. There was no longer any need to hurry.

The heavy door still swung on its hinges. He pushed it open and stepped through, the carbine held before him. Moonlight poured through the broad, high windows, flooding the room with silver. The farthest side was in darkness and he again had the impression that, for just a moment, something grey and shapeless moved there. It was gone before he could be sure.

There was a small iron bar to secure the door from the inside. He heard Lorrine click it in place while he examined the room. It was square and devoid of any object but for a small grille in the floor near the farther wall; a conduit leading to some central heating unit, perhaps. It was too small to offer them any hope of escape.

There was another door opposite the one they had entered by, and he made sure it was barred. The screws holding it were red and misshapen with rust; that would be the door by which the police would break into the room.

One of the windows commanded a view of the river and he waited by it, watching. Lorrine walked softly across the room, to stop by the moonlit wall and wait as silently as he. He kept his eyes on the shadows under the trees, the rifle nestled to his cheek, the knowledge of what she waited for cold and sharp within him.

A figure darted across a moonlit space and the carbine in his hands roared twice. The figure ran on, to disappear in another group of trees. He took the other clip from his pocket and shoved it in the carbine. Five shots – count three.

Lorrine was watching him, her back against the moon-silvered wall. 'Count three, Johnny. Remember your promise.'

He turned back to the window without answering. He would remember, and there was nothing to say. He watched the shadows along the river again, the rifle ready. The river still tossed the moonbeams from its ripples and he could see the swift roll of its current. It would have carried them to safety but they had come too late. They had hurried to it, seeking escape from the death behind, but death had hurried faster. The lines of a verse came back to him:

And when the Angel of the darker Drink
At last shall find you by the river brink –

It had found them.

He snapped a shot at another fleeting shadow, silently cursing the misaligned sights as the figure staggered, then ran on. Four shots – count two.

Something heavy, a battering ram, struck the door with the rusted bar. It creaked and a screw head snapped off, to fly across the room. He fired twice through the door, suddenly sick and weary to his soul and wanting to do what he would have to do, wanting to get it over with.

There was a cry of pain from behind the door and a sound of retreating footsteps. He heard them stop at a distance and speak softly among themselves.

And he had two cartridges left. Their impotent stand was over, their little flare of resistance had come to its end. He turned to Lorrine.

'I guess this is it,' he said slowly. 'This is where you and I get off. I'm sorry. . . . I wish – '

He stopped. What did he wish? What does a man wish when he loves a girl with golden hair and he stands before her with the muzzle of a rifle at her heart? What does he say when she stands as he had known she would stand, with her head back and the hair about her shoulders? What can he say in the last fleeting moments?

'Don't be sorry, Johnny,' she said, the tightness no longer in her throat.

The battering ram struck the door and it bulged inward. They would break through the next time. He raised the rifle.

'Don't be sorry,' she said again, 'and good-bye, Johnny.'

He aimed at the spot where her heart would be fluttering.

The battering ram crashed into the door and he pressed the trigger.

The rifle roared savagely and she stiffened for the briefest moment against the wall, then fell to her knees. She tried to say something, but blood welled from her mouth and choked her. He saw where the bullet had struck her – high, too high. She would die, but with her own blood choking in her throat.

He raised the rifle again, his mind a flare of impotent rage and regret, then the police were upon him. A rifle butt struck the base of his skull and he felt himself fall to the floor, the darkness of unconsciousness descending upon him. He fought against it and was dimly aware of a voice saying, 'She's dead?' And the answer, 'Dying. Let's go – Harker's waiting.' Then the darkness engulfed him and he knew no more.

It had never watched a living thing die, but its own logic told it that avoidance of death should be the strongest of all desires. It knew Lorrine's thoughts as she waited for death, standing against the wall, and it knew her thoughts as the bullet tore through her and she fell to the floor. It knew her thoughts and it knew she was dying with the thing that had led her to her death, the intangible thing that had motivated her, still strong and undiminished within her.

Even in her dying she revealed nothing that could enable it to understand the reasons for her actions, to find the unknown factor, and its curiosity increased. It had tried with all its logic to understand, and it had failed. Perhaps it was something about her body or mind – something within her that it did not suspect.

The police tramped away with their captive and she was left lying on the floor. It went to her as she died, not caring that she died but eager to find the missing factor; the intangible thing that had impelled her to give up her life for others.

Its abilities were great and it could, without destruction of tissue, reach into every cell of her body. It did so as she died, and it knew every thought she had ever had, every memory, every emotion. In that moment of her death it reproduced within itself her ego.

When it did so it found the missing factor and it understood, at last, why it had been unable to analyse it; why its own mind, alone, could never have analysed it.

The missing factor was a purpose, and a wisdom that had grown with that purpose for two billion years. It was a field of learning so different to its own learning, covering a period of time so inconceivably long, that its vast intelligence reeled before the magnitude of it.

When it reproduced her ego within itself it reproduced her emotions and motivations and it *understood*. With the understanding came, for a little while, near-insanity.

Thorne was first aware of the ropes that bound him to the concrete pillar, cutting into his wrists as his weight sagged forward against them. His head cleared and he opened his eyes, then shifted his bound hands behind the pillar until he could stand straight.

He had been taken back up the street, the same street he and Lorrine had followed. He recognized a corner toward the river – the toy shop.

The police were squatting before him, the anticipation stark on their faces. One of them laughed and said, 'He's back with us!'

'Why don't Harker show up?' another asked querulously. 'Why did we have to drag this guy up the street for? Harker ain't crippled so he can't walk, is he?'

The first one stared at him speculatively. 'You ever let Harker hear you say something like that and *you* will be!'

'He's inside that old hotel across the street,' another volunteered. 'He's got the walkie-talkie in there, holdin' a big confab with field headquarters. I hear the helicopters spotted something suspicious back the way we came and I think we're gonna have to hotfoot it over there.'

Thorne's lip curled with his contempt for them and the first one stood up to smile and deliberately smash his fist into Thorne's mouth.

'I wouldn't do that,' advised one. 'You know Harker wants 'em in good shape when he starts in on 'em.'

Thorne spat the blood from his mouth and the striker stepped sullenly back. Another of them appeared with an armload of broken boards. He piled them a few feet in front of Thorne and laid a blackened knife beside them.

'No use gettin' in a hurry, Jack,' one said. 'If Squint is right, we won't be here to see it – we'll be pluggin' back the way we come.'

'You mean that we have to *walk* it again?' the one called Jack demanded. 'We walk and that – '

'Here he comes now!'

Thorne watched the approaching Harker as he crossed the street. The police stood respectfully aside and he strode through with disdain. He stopped before Thorne, thick and stocky, his feet wide apart and the eyes glittering in his face.

'So you're John Thorne?' he said. 'And the woman was Lorrine Calvert?'

Thorne said nothing and Harker smiled. 'I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. When I get ready to ask some questions I have – you'll answer. And it might help you to know that none of the others escaped. You would be surprised at what we learned from them. But every little bit of information helps, and you might be able to add something. I'm sure you'll try.'

He laughed softly at his joke and the police joined in, eager to show their appreciation of it. He turned to them, his tone curtly authoritative. 'I can take care of this without any help. Get on back the way we came, and don't stop to pick any daisies on the way. I want you all at that lone mountain by daylight. I'll be there then in a helicopter to tell you where to go. Get going!'

They hurried away, all their resentment hidden by their fear of him, and he turned back to Thorne.

'You gave us quite a chase, Thorne,' he said. 'And I understand you killed the woman, yourself. That was a touching bit of melodrama.'

Harker's hand struck him viciously across the face.

'Your noble little wench is dead. Don't let it grieve you too much – I think I can take your mind off your sorrow. And, while you were playing the hero, you should have thought of yourself, too. Or did you lose your nerve?'

'Your dogs were too fast for me, Harker.'

'A rat never stands a chance against a dog,' Harker returned.

He dropped to one knee and touched a match to the pile of kindling. It began to burn, snapping and crackling, and he thrust the long, black blade of the knife into the fire.

'Yes,' he went on amiably as he straightened again, 'this will be a chummy little party. There seems to be something about the cheery warmth of a fire that induces conversation. The friendly flicker of

the flames, the ruddy glow of the hot steel – they seem to destroy a man's reticence.'

Thorne pressed his back hard against the pillar and felt a slight loosening of the rope that bound his hands together behind it. Harker was in front of him, and could not see the movements of his hands. He began the slow, painful effort to work his right hand free, the rough rope cutting into the skin as he strained against it.

'I'm a man with ambition, Thorne,' Harker said. 'I've come up a long way in the State, but I have my eye on the top – on the very top step of the ladder. You're going to help me in that, Thorne – you're going to help me add to my record as an irresistible destroyer of the Underground. I want names, places, dates, plans. I want to know all you've ever done, and all that you intended to do. I want to know everything that you know. *Everything* – do you understand?'

The rope was cutting like the grip of a vice, but it was almost off. He strained at it with all the strength of his forearms.

'I know what you want, Harker,' he said. 'But sometimes a man gets disappointed. How many have you cut and burned with that knife until they were mindless?'

Harker laughed and took the knife from the fire, smiling at the glowing point of it. 'It's nothing for you to worry about; you'll only be one more, and there will be others after you. You're going to start talking now, and you're going to see how efficient a hot blade can be, for the hand who holds it.'

The glowing point touched him as he jerked free of the rope, with the burn of torn skin. His hands whipped forward and caught the knife from Harker's hand, bending down his wrist with a cracking of bone. Harker snatched at his holstered revolver, awkwardly, with his left hand. Thorne slashed with the still glowing blade, through cloth and flesh, driving the knife deep in and through the thick paunch.

The revolver clattered to the pavement and Harker dropped to his knees, his arm hugged about his stomach, moaning. Thorne cut the ropes that bound his legs to the pillar and picked up the revolver.

'I . . . I – ' Harker tried to speak, shuddered convulsively, and sank to the pavement.

Thorne looked down at the silent, shapeless thing that had been Harker. Sometimes there was a little justice in the world – Harker had surely died by his sword.

He turned and started back toward the river. The brief, brittle satisfaction was over. Harker had died – he had killed him as he had wanted to do – but it could not fill the empty years before him. He would return to the river and go back to the old, hopeless life; live out the empty years ahead.

The moon was high overhead, and the room where she lay would no longer be flooded with its light. She would be lying there in the darkness, with the light gone from her eyes, and he should go to her.

He walked on, the familiar street bringing back the memory of her with vividness.

She had known, somehow, that it *was* her last hour and she had wanted him to talk to her, to pretend with her that it was not her last hour and to warm the cold dread of it. She had been frightened by the loneliness of it and she had appealed to him, in her way, to not let her be so alone.

He had thought it better to act hard and indifferent. He had not really understood then, and now it was too late.

'Johnny!'

He jerked his head up and saw her coming down the walk toward him. It was Lorrine, her footsteps clicking softly as she hurried toward him, the chains on her wrists jingling, and tenderness in her smile.

He waited, his face hard and haggard. This was a vision conjured by his own sorrow, and she would vanish in a moment.

She stopped before him, the smile trembling uncertainly. 'Johnny! Aren't you . . . aren't you glad to see me?'

'No!' he answered harshly. 'You're not Lorrine . . . I killed her!'

'I am!' She laid her hand on his arm. 'See – I'm as real as you are.'

Her hand was warm and real. He held it, as though by so doing he could prevent her from vanishing.

'But I shot you,' he said. 'Are you really Lorrine, or are you something sent to torment me?'

'I'm Lorrine,' she said. 'I wouldn't ever want to hurt you. I'm Lorrine – it was the thing in this city.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's like an amoeba in a way, only much more complex. It was watching us all the time we were coming through the city. It couldn't understand why we did the things we did – why we believed in something enough to die for it. It's more intelligent than humans, but only with physical things. It had no emotions and couldn't comprehend such things. So, when I was dying, it came to me and reproduced my mind and emotions in itself.

'It was an experience different from anything it had ever known and, for a long time, I don't think it was itself. But it remembered me and began to work on me before it was too late. It took all this time for it to reconstruct the tissues, and it came back to normal and remembered you just after you killed Harker. It saw you weren't hurt, so it let me go and it went back to the central part of the city.

'It's getting ready to help us! Now it wants to do what I wanted to do, and it *can* – it can make things for us that will let us overthrow the State in a week. And it's going to do that. It's going to help us, and then our people will be free!'

'It's hard to believe,' he said. 'I couldn't believe such a thing at all, but you're here and alive.' He drew her closer to him. 'If this thing can help us destroy the State, what then?' he asked.

'It doesn't want us to feel grateful,' she said. 'It's helping us because it *wants* to help us. And it said it would retire behind a force-field barrier after its work was done. But it will lower the barrier years and years from now, and when humans come into the city it will have something it wants to tell them.'

'I don't understand, and I find it hard to believe,' he said. 'But if this is true, it doesn't matter whether I understand this thing's way of thinking. It has promised to help us, and it gave you back to me – that's all that really matters after all.'

He stood for a while, content to hold her close and let the reality of her presence wash away all the hurt of the hours before.

'It's been a long and lonely night, Lorrine.'

An intelligent entity can learn much in fifteen years of things that are non-life and of the here and now; of things that react for but the moment, with neither will nor purpose.

But in the motivations of Lorrine was a purpose that went back into Time; back to the very beginning; back, back down two billion years. In her motivations was not unreason but a wisdom accumulated during millennia upon millennia of experience with life and living; wisdom gained from lessons hard-learned by trial and error and born as instincts into the succeeding generations.

As it realized the true extent of Lorrine's learning in the first brief moment of inspection, it realized another thing for the first time – it knew nothing of life. It was a living thing itself, yet it knew nothing of life; all its knowledge was of physical non-life.

It could learn of life from Lorrine; it could find in her all the accumulated learning of an organism that had evolved and changed and fought to survive, trying and dying and learning – learning, always learning – while the sun swung ten times around the galactic Centre; ten great, slow swings of two hundred million years each.

Trying and learning for ten times two hundred million years – and *it* had been learning for fifteen years!

Its thirst for knowledge was insatiable and it hastened to accept the new learning, eager to add it to its own storehouse of physical learning. With the reproduction of her emotions it understood, but it was not like the learning of a physical fact.

For a little while its cold logic blurred and it was dazed by the wonder of what it had found. It had a true conception of the multitude of things a speck of protoplasm must learn to survive and evolve for thousands upon hundreds of thousands of generations.

It adjusted itself and it had, for the first time in its life, a purpose. It was no longer content to exist in the here and now; it was a living thing and it had learned that life cannot be as one single mortal unit; that it must go on as a never-ending stream of generation upon generation.

It had a purpose at last. It knew what it wanted to do, what it must do. It could not remain aloof from this life form that had taught it of life; it was human in the emotions and learning it had absorbed, it could not be other than human in all its desires. It had

absorbed the idealism of Lorrine and it knew, now, that her ideals were not illogical; it knew that they were an expression of the never-ending trying and learning and a manifestation of the ceaseless drive of the prime purpose.

It could divide its body into as many parts as it wished, and the parts could assume any form, either temporary or permanent in cellular structure. It was human in all its desires and motivations, intensely, utterly human, and it had no reason to retain its natural shapeless mass. So it began to divide its great body, sending it out into the night as human forms; forms that *were* human in structure, completely, perfectly human to the tiniest cell and with the heritage and idealism that had been Lorrine's. And they took with them something else; the means to carry out her desires, the physical learning that had been the city-being's.

A small portion of the city-being would remain behind. It would join the others soon; as soon as the State was overthrown and there was no longer the need for the manufacture of the things necessary to destroy it.

Then it would throw up its barrier, and the last of itself would go out into the night. Within the barrier a radium clock would count off the years until all its human forms had merged, generation upon generation, with all other humans. Then, far down the years to come, the clock would reach the time set for it and the barrier would fall. Humans would enter the city, curious to know the thing it had promised to tell them.

But they would find the city empty, and only an inscription on a steel plate in a small stone building:

Here a woman died for something intangible and I wondered why. I was curious and I absorbed her learning to find the nature of her motivations. I was Life, without knowledge of life. When I acquired the learning of a life two billion years old I could not logically do other than abide by that learning. When I accepted the learning I could not do other than accept the purpose. In return I gave humanity my physical knowledge, better to carry out the purpose.
I had knowledge and power, but humanity had something greater; wisdom and a purpose.
So do not look for me in this city – you, yourselves, are that which you seek.

Build Up Logically

HOWARD SCHOENFELD

'THE Universal Panacea,' Frank said, lighting a cigar. 'Have one.'

I took it.

'Light up, man.'

'It's great, man.'

We walked up Fifth Avenue toward Fourteenth Street.

'Stop,' Frank said. We came to a halt.

Frank put his hand out in front of him and moved it back and forth a couple of times, inventing the rabbit. Getting to feel the creature's fur, he built it up logically from the feel. It was the only animal that could have produced that particular feel, and I was proud of him for thinking of it.

'Marvellous,' I said, looking at it.

The rabbit sat on its haunches, a bundle of white fur with pink eyes. Dilating its nostrils, it hopped away from us, disappearing into an open doorway. I'd never seen a more ingenious invention.

'Amazing,' I said.

'Nothing really,' Frank said. 'Watch this.'

Frank was a tall thin-lipped man with a round forehead. Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. His face became taut, then relaxed.

'Feel anything?' he asked.

My brain tingled curiously. Something was being impinged on it. It was the consciousness of rabbits, their place in the scheme of things. I knew they'd been with us always.

Frank grinned.

'Not only you, but practically every man, woman, and child in the world thinks that now. Only I know differently.'

It was uncanny.

We got in a cab and went up to the Three Sevens, a night club on Fifty-second Street. Inside, the place was crowded with jazz enthusiasts, listening to the Sevens. At the bar a man in a grey

overcoat was reading a manuscript to a blonde girl in her teens. I went over and listened.

This was what he read:

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'Stop,' I yelled. 'For Christ's sake, stop!'

The man in the grey overcoat turned around and faced me. 'What's eating you, bud?'

'That manuscript you're reading,' I said. 'It's mine.'

He looked me up and down contemptuously.

'So you're the guy.'

There was something disquietingly familiar about him.

'Say. Who are you?'

For an answer he doubled up his fist and socked the blonde sitting next to him. She thudded and teetered on the bar stool before falling off. She hit the floor with a resounding thump.

'Wood,' he said, looking down at her. 'Solid wood.'

I tapped the girl's back with the toe of my shoe. There was no doubt about it. She was wooden to the core.

'How would you like to have to sit in a night club and read to a piece of wood?' he asked, disgustedly.

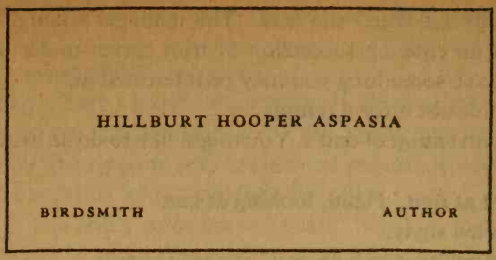
'I wouldn't,' I admitted.

'All your characters are wooden,' he said.

His voice was strangely familiar.

'Say. Who are you?'

He grinned and handed me his card. It said:



For a moment I stared at him in startled disbelief. Then I saw it was true. The man in the grey overcoat was – myself.

'You're getting in over your head,' he said.

He was beginning to be a pain in the neck.

I think I'll just write him out of the story right now. . . .

The man in the grey overcoat got up and walked out of the club.

I looked around to see what had happened to Frank. He had taken advantage of my preoccupation to step out of the characterization I'd given him and adopt one of his own choice, jazz musician. He was sitting in on the jam session with the Sevens, holding a trumpet he'd found somewhere. The Sevens paused, giving him the opportunity to solo. He arose and faced the audience.

Frank now found himself in the embarrassing position of not knowing how to play the instrument. This, of course, was the consequence of having stepped out of character without my permission. The audience waited expectantly.

Frank looked at me pleadingly.

I grinned and shook my head, no.

I will leave him in this humiliating situation for a while as a punishment for getting out of control in the middle of the story.

The bartender tapped me on the shoulder. He nodded toward the rear of the club. A tall redhead in a low cut evening dress was standing in front of a door labelled MANAGER. She motioned me to join her. I threaded my way between the crowded tables.

'Aren't you Aspasia, the writer?' she asked.

She was about nineteen and as sleek as a mink.

'I am.'

Her eyes sparkled.

'I'm Sally La Rue,' she said. 'The manager's daughter.' Her body was an enticing succession of trim curves under her black dress. 'I have something you may be interested in.'

I didn't doubt it for a minute.

'It's an invention of dad's. You might like to do an article about it.'

'I might at that,' I said, looking at her.

She smiled shyly.

'I'd do anything to help dad,' she said simply.

She took my hand and led me into the office. It was a large room with two windows facing Fifty-first Street. In the centre of it was a metallic contraption resembling a turbine. Attached to it was a mass of complicated wiring, several rheostats, and two retorts containing quicksilver.

'What is it?' I asked.

'A time machine,' Sally said, dramatically.

I looked at the device.

'Does it work?'

'Of course it works. Would you like to try it?'

I said I would.

'Past or future?'

'Future.'

'How about 5,000 years?'

'That'll be fine.'

Sally adjusted a dial. Then she stepped over to the wall and pulled a switch.

The turbine roared. Blue lightning flashed between the retorts and vaporised the quicksilver into a green gas. The room became luminous. An indicator hit the 5,000 mark. Sally released the switch.

'Here we are,' she said.

I dashed over to the windows to see what the world of the future was like.

'It's the same,' Sally said, guessing my thought.

I looked out on Fifty-first Street. Nothing had changed.

'That's the beauty of the machine,' Sally explained. 'It moves the whole world through time rather than just one part of it.'

'The stars,' I said. 'Surely their positions have changed.'

'No. It moves the whole universe through time. Everything.'

'I see.'

'Isn't it wonderful!'

Thinking it over I couldn't say it was. I didn't say it was.

'You'll do the article, won't you?' she asked eagerly.

Her body was rippling with excitement beneath her black dress. I noticed her father kept a couch in his office.

'Well. If you really want me to,' I said. 'Yes.'

'Would you like to go forward another 5,000 years?' she asked.

I glanced at the couch.

'Not right now,' I said.

She was engrossed in the machine.

'I think I'll set it for A.D. 1,000,000.'

I looked at her, then at the couch. Then I remembered I'd left Frank in an awkward spot some 5,000 years and odd minutes ago.

'I'll be right back,' I said. 'Wait for me here, will you?'

She had her hand on the switch. She smiled.

'Of course,' she said. 'Darling.'

I left her at her dad's time machine playfully thrusting the universe a million years into the future.

Frank was in the bandstand with the Sevens, where I'd left him, facing an expectant audience. When he saw me he waved the trumpet at me before returning it to its case. He motioned the audience to be quiet.

Frank tilted his head sideways, cupped his ear in his hand, and invented the piano. Getting the sound of the instrument's notes, he built it up logically from the sound. It was the only instrument that could have produced that particular sound and I was glad to see him invent it, though I was getting a little tired of the trick.

One of the Sevens sat down and started playing a Boogie-Woogie number. Frank came over and stood beside me. 'What do you think of it?' he asked.

'It's great, man.'

He handed me a cigar.

We lit up.

Behind me a familiar voice said:

'Ask him to invent something original.'

'Like what?' I asked without turning.

'Something socially conscious. A new sex, perhaps.'

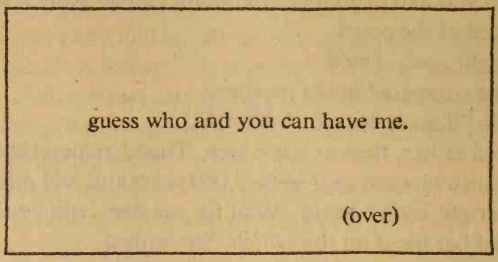
Somebody's hand was in my pocket.

'How about that, Frank?' I asked.

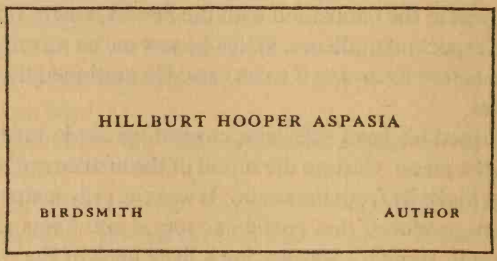
'Your subconscious is showing,' Frank said, looking over my shoulder.

The hand was withdrawn.

I reached inside my pocket and brought out the card that had been left in it. It said:



I turned the card over with fingers that trembled just a little. It said:



The voice behind me and the hand in my pocket were my own again!

Turning, I caught a glimpse of the man in the grey overcoat hurrying toward the door marked MANAGER. He paused in front of it and glanced at me. I nodded. With my approval he went in and closed the door behind him, joining the redheaded mouse, Sally La Rue.

I congratulated myself on projecting myself in the story in two characterizations. Owing to my foresight I will now be able to

enjoy the person of Sally La Rue without interference from the censors, and, at the same time, continue my narrative.

I turned to Frank.

'Let's drop in on the Baron's party,' I said.

'Good idea.'

We went outside, got in a cab, and went uptown to the Baron's apartment house.

Inside, the party was going full blast. The Baron, as usual, was on the studio couch, passed out. The guests were in various states of inebriation. When I entered, the room became quiet for a moment.

In the lull a girl whispered:

'There's Aspasia, the writer.'

'He ought to trade himself in on a new model,' someone else said. 'He looks like a caricature of himself.'

'More like a cliché with feet.'

'Have you read his latest story?'

'No.'

'It's a direct steal from *Build Up Logically*, by H. H. Aspasia.'

'You don't say.'

Blushing, I pretended an interest in the Baron's Mondrian collection. One of the girls said:

'I met his psychiatrist last week. He said he never knew which of his split personalities was analysing which of Aspasia's.'

'How awful.'

'Yes, but significant.'

'Very.'

'What else did he say?'

'Basically maladjusted. Almost non-neurotic.'

'Tendencies toward normalcy, too, I'll bet.'

'I wouldn't be surprised.'

'How perfectly abominable.'

'Yes, but significant.'

'Very.'

'I almost feel sorry for him.'

'I wonder if it's safe being here with him?'

'He's only partly with us you know.'

'Poor guy. Probably lives in a world of reality.'

'No doubt about it.'

'Do you think psychiatry can help him?'

'Possibly. There have been cures.'

'Notice the way he's staring at the Baron's Mondrians. It's significant, don't you think?'

'Very.'

A feeling of boredom was beginning to come over me. I liked nobody at the party. I decided to bring it to an end. . . .

The guests, laughing and talking, gathered up their belongings, and left in groups of two and three. Only Frank and I and the passed-out Baron remained.

Frank stood in the centre of the room, his head cocked to one side, listening.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Sh-h-h-h,' Frank said. 'Listen.'

I listened.

'Hear it?'

I shook my head.

'What is it?'

'The pulse beat of the universe. I can hear it.'

'My God,' I said.

He stood there listening to the pulse beat of the universe.

'Marvellous,' I said.

'Yes,' he said. 'But not for you.'

Frank tilted his head sideways, cupped his ear in his hand, and invented the universe. Getting the sound of its pulse beat, he built it up logically from the sound. It was the only universe that could have produced that particular pulse beat, and I was amazed at his blasphemy in creating it.

'Stop,' I demanded.

My demand went unheeded.

The universe and its contents appeared.

Frank's face tautened. Beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. Then he relaxed. His grin was ominous.

With a start of fear I realized my predicament. In inventing the universe and its contents Frank had also invented me.

I was in the unheard-of position of having been created by a figment of my own imagination.

'Our roles are reversed,' Frank said. 'I've not only created you, but all your works, including this narrative. Following this paragraph I will assume my rightful role as author of the story and you will assume yours as a character in it.'

Aspasia's face blanched.

'This is impossible,' he said.

'Not impossible,' I said. 'I've done it. I, Frank, have done it. I'm in control of the story. I've achieved reality at last.'

Aspasia's expression was bitter. 'Yes. At my expense.'

'You're the first author in history to achieve a real status in fiction,' I pointed out.

Aspasia sneered.

'Happens every day.'

I shrugged.

'Survival of the fittest. Serves you right for giving me more creative power than you have. What did you expect?'

'Gratitude,' Aspasia said, nastily. 'And a little loyalty.'

'Gratitude, my eye. You're the bird who made me stand in front of a night club audience for 5,000 years with a trumpet I couldn't play. Most humiliating experience of my life.'

'You deserved it for getting out of character,' Aspasia said a trifle petulantly.

'That,' I said, 'gives me an idea.'

As a punishment for humiliating me in The Three Sevens I will now give Aspasia a little dose of his own medicine. During his authorship of the story Aspasia neglected completely to give himself a description. He will now have no alternative but to accept the one I give him.

I allowed him to guess my intention.

'No,' Aspasia begged. 'No. Don't do it.'

But I did.

Aspasia's hairlip grimaced frightfully. He placed a gnarled hand to his pockmarked and cretinous face, squinting at me through bloodshot, pig eyes. Buttons popped from his trousers as his huge belly sagged. Beetling, black eyebrows moved up and down his receding forehead. Bat ears stuck outward from his head.

'You fiend,' he gasped. 'You ungrateful fiend.'

There was murder in his eyes.

I knew then it was going to be one or the other of us sooner or later. In self-defence I had no alternative but to beat Aspasia to it.

I was standing near the door. Turning the lights out I stepped into the hall and closed the door behind me, leaving Aspasia in the dark with the sleeping Baron.

By a coincidence arranged by me as the author of the story, a neighbour of the Baron's was in the hall walking towards the steps. I joined him. Halfway down the steps we heard a shot fired in the Baron's apartment. My companion dashed back up. There was no need for me to follow him. I know what he would find.

I had arranged that the Baron, awakening suddenly, would mistake Aspasia for a burglar in the darkness of the room, and fire a bullet into his brain.

Upstairs, Aspasia lay dead on the floor.

I walked down the steps to the sidewalk. Across the street I sat heavily on the front stoop of a brownstone house. Dog tired, I rested my head against the step railing and went to sleep.

While Frank is asleep I, Aspasia, will take advantage of the opportunity to reassume my role as author of the story.

Although I am quite dead in my characterization as Hillburt Hooper Aspasia, the companion and victim of Frank, the reader will be relieved to know I am alive and unharmed in my other characterization as Aspasia, the man in the grey overcoat.

For the second time that night I congratulated myself on my foresight in projecting myself in the story in two characterizations.

As the man in the grey overcoat I was last seen entering the manager's office in The Three Sevens with the redhead, Sally La Rue.

Sally lay on the couch in her dad's office, her red head cradled against the white of her arm, looking upward at me contentedly.

The stars in her eyes were shining.

'Dear Aspasia,' Sally said, huskily.

'Is there a typewriter here?' I asked.

'On the desk,' Sally said.

I sat at the desk.

'Hurry, darling,' Sally said.

I nodded, inserted a sheet of paper in the typewriter, and went on with the story:

The lights were on in the Baron's apartment. Staring at the form on the floor, the Baron recognized it as his life-long friend, Hillburt Hooper Aspasia. In a burst of anguish, the Baron flung the pistol that had killed his friend out the window.

By a coincidence arranged by me as the legitimate author of the story, the pistol exploded on landing, sending a bullet into the brain of Frank who was still asleep across the street on the front stoop of a brownstone house.

Frank slumped forward and rolled into the gutter, dead, a grim monument and warning to all characters with rebellious spirits. I grinned and added the last two words to the story:

THE END

The Liberation of Earth

WILLIAM TENN

THIS, then, is the story of our liberation. Suck air and grab clusters! Heigh-ho, here is the tale!

August was the month, a Tuesday in August. These words are meaningless now, so far have we progressed; but many things known and discussed by our primitive ancestors, our unliberated, unreconstructed forefathers, are devoid of sense to our free minds. Still the tale must be told, with all of its incredible place-names and vanished points of reference.

Why must it be told? Have any of you a *better* thing to do? We have had water and weeds and lie in a valley of gusts. So rest, relax, and listen! And suck air, suck air!

On a Tuesday in August, the ship appeared in the sky over France in a part of the world then known as Europe. Five miles long the ship was, and word has come down to us that it looked like an enormous silver cigar.

The tale goes on to tell of the panic and consternation among our forefathers when the ship abruptly materialized in the summer-blue sky. How they ran, how they shouted, how they pointed!

How they excitedly notified the United Nations, one of their chiefest institutions, that a strange metal craft of incredible size had materialized over their land. How they sent an order *here* to cause military aircraft to surround it with loaded weapons, gave instructions *there* for hastily grouped scientists, with signalling apparatus, to approach it with friendly gestures. How, under the great ship, men with cameras took pictures of it; men with typewriters wrote stories about it; and men with concessions sold models of it.

All these things did our ancestors, enslaved and unknowing, do.

Then a tremendous slab snapped up in the middle of the ship and the first of the aliens stepped out in the complex tripodal gait

that all humans were shortly to know and love so well. He wore a metallic garment to protect him from the effects of our atmospheric peculiarities, a garment of the opaque, loosely folded type that these, the first of our liberators, wore throughout their stay on Earth.

Speaking in a language none could understand, but booming deafeningly through a huge mouth about half-way up his twenty-five feet of height, the alien discoursed for exactly one hour, waited politely for a response when he had finished, and, receiving none, retired into the ship.

That night, the first of our liberation! Or the first of our first liberation, should I say? *That* night, anyhow! Visualize our ancestors scurrying about their primitive intricacies: playing ice hockey, televising, smashing atoms, Red-baiting, conducting give-away shows, and signing affidavits – all the incredible minutiae that made the olden times such a frightful mass of cumulative detail in which to live – as compared with the breathless and majestic simplicity of the present.

The big question, of course, was – what had the alien said? Had he called on the human race to surrender? Had he announced that he was on a mission of peaceful trade and, having made what he considered a reasonable offer – for, let us say, the north polar ice-cap – politely withdrawn so that we could discuss his terms among ourselves in relative privacy? Or, possibly, had he merely announced that he was the newly appointed ambassador to Earth from a friendly and intelligent race – and would we please direct him to the proper authority so that he might submit his credentials?

Not to know was quite maddening.

Since decision rested with the diplomats, it was the last possibility which was held, very late that night, to be most likely; and early the next morning, accordingly, a delegation from the United Nations waited under the belly of the motionless star-ship. The delegation had been instructed to welcome the aliens to the outermost limits of its collective linguistic ability. As an additional earnest of mankind's friendly intentions, all military craft patrolling the air about the great ship were ordered to carry no more than one atom-bomb in their racks, and to fly a small white flag – along

with the U.N. banner and their own national emblem. Thus did our ancestors face this, the ultimate challenge of history.

When the alien came forth a few hours later, the delegation stepped up to him, bowed, and, in the three official languages of the United Nations – English, French, and Russian – asked him to consider this planet his home. He listened to them gravely, and then launched into his talk of the day before – which was evidently as highly charged with emotion and significance to him as it was completely incomprehensible to the representatives of world government.

Fortunately, a cultivated young Indian member of the secretariat detected a suspicious similarity between the speech of the alien and an obscure Bengali dialect whose anomalies he had once puzzled over. The reason, as we all know now, was that the last time Earth had been visited by aliens of this particular type, humanity's most advanced civilization lay in a moist valley in Bengal; extensive dictionaries of that language had been written, so that speech with the natives of Earth would present no problem to any subsequent exploring party.

However, I move ahead of my tale, as one who would munch on the succulent roots before the dryer stem. Let me rest and suck air for a moment! Heigh-ho, truly those were tremendous experiences for our kind!

You, sir, now you sit back and listen! You are not yet of an age to Tell the Tale. I remember, well enough do I remember, how my father told it, and his father before him. You will wait your turn as I did; you will listen until too much high land between waterholes blocks me off from life.

Then *you* may take your place in the juiciest weed patch and, reclining gracefully between sprints, recite the great epic of our liberation to the carelessly exercising young.

Pursuant to the young Hindu's suggestions, the one professor of comparative linguistics in the world capable of understanding and conversing in this peculiar version of the dead dialect was summoned from an academic convention in New York where he was reading a paper he had been working on for eighteen years: *An Initial Study of Apparent Relationships Between Several Past*

Participles in Ancient Sanscrit and an Equal Number of Noun Substantives in Modern Szechuanese.

Yea, verily, all these things – and more, many more – did our ancestors in their besotted ignorance contrive to do. May we not count our freedoms indeed?

The disgruntled scholar, minus – as he kept insisting bitterly – some of his most essential word lists, was flown by fastest jet to the area south of Nancy which, in those long-ago days, lay in the enormous black shadow of the alien space-ship.

Here he was acquainted with his task by the United Nations delegation, whose nervousness had not been allayed by a new and disconcerting development. Several more aliens had emerged from the ship carrying great quantities of immense, shimmering metal which they proceeded to assemble into something that was obviously a machine – though it was taller than any skyscraper man had ever built, and seemed to make noises to itself like a talkative and sentient creature. The first alien still stood courteously in the neighbourhood of the profusely perspiring diplomats; ever and anon he would go through his little speech again, in a language that had been almost forgotten when the cornerstone of the library of Alexandria was laid. The men from the U.N. would reply, each one hoping desperately to make up for the alien's lack of familiarity with his own tongue by such devices as hand-gestures and facial expressions. Much later, a commission of anthropologists and psychologists brilliantly pointed out the difficulties of such physical, gestural communication with creatures possessing – as these aliens did – five manual appendages and a single, unwinking compound eye of the type the insects rejoice in.

The problems and agonies of the professor as he was trundled about the world in the wake of the aliens, trying to amass a usable vocabulary in a language whose peculiarities he could only extrapolate from the limited samples supplied him by one who must inevitably speak it with the most outlandish of foreign accents – these vexations were minor indeed compared to the disquiet felt by the representatives of world government. They beheld the extra-terrestrial visitors move every day to a new site on their planet and proceed to assemble there a titanic structure of

flickering metal which muttered nostalgically to itself, as if to keep alive the memory of those faraway factories which had given it birth.

True, there was always the alien who would pause in his evidently supervisory labours to release the set little speech; but not even the excellent manners he displayed, in listening to upward of fifty-six replies in as many languages, helped dispel the panic caused whenever a human scientist, investigating the shimmering machines, touched a projecting edge and promptly shrank into a disappearing pinpoint. This, while not a frequent occurrence, happened often enough to cause chronic indigestion and insomnia among human administrators.

Finally, having used up most of his nervous system as fuel, the professor collated enough of the language to make conversation possible. He – and, through him, the world – was thereupon told the following:

The aliens were members of a highly advanced civilization which had spread its culture throughout the entire galaxy. Cognizant of the limitations of the as-yet-under-developed animals who had latterly become dominant upon Earth, they had placed us in a sort of benevolent ostracism. Until either we or our institutions had evolved to a level permitting, say, at least *associate* membership in the galactic federation (under the sponsoring tutelage, for the first few millennia, of one of the older, more widespread, and more important species in that federation) – until that time, all invasions of our privacy and ignorance – except for a few scientific expeditions conducted under conditions of great secrecy – had been strictly forbidden by universal agreement.

Several individuals who had violated this ruling – at great cost to our racial sanity, and enormous profit to our reigning religions – had been so promptly and severely punished that no known infringements had occurred for some time. Our recent growth-curve had been satisfactory enough to cause hopes that a bare thirty or forty centuries more would suffice to place us on applicant status with the federation.

Unfortunately, the peoples of this stellar community were many, and varied as greatly in their ethical outlook as their biological composition. Quite a few species lagged a considerable

social distance behind the Dendi, as our visitors called themselves. One of these, a race of horrible, worm-like organisms known as the Troxxt – almost as advanced technologically as they were retarded in moral development – had suddenly volunteered for the position of sole and absolute ruler of the galaxy. They had seized control of several key suns, with their attendant planetary systems, and, after a calculated decimation of the races thus captured, had announced their intention of punishing with a merciless extinction all species unable to appreciate from these object-lessons the value of unconditional surrender.

In despair, the galactic federation had turned to the Dendi, one of the oldest, most selfless, and yet most powerful of races in civilized space, and commissioned them – as the military arm of the federation – to hunt down the Troxxt, defeat them wherever they had gained illegal suzerainty, and destroy for ever their power to wage war.

This order had come almost too late. Everywhere the Troxxt had gained so much the advantage of attack, that the Dendi were able to contain them only by enormous sacrifice. For centuries now, the conflict had careened across our vast island universe. In the course of it, densely populated planets had been disintegrated; suns had been blasted into novae; and whole groups of stars ground into swirling cosmic dust.

A temporary stalemate had been reached a short while ago, and – reeling and breathless – both sides were using the lull to strengthen weak spots in their perimeter.

Thus, the Troxxt had finally moved into the till-then peaceful section of space that contained our solar system – among others. They were thoroughly uninterested in our tiny planet with its meagre resources; nor did they care much for such celestial neighbours as Mars or Jupiter. They established their headquarters on a planet of Proxima Centaurus – the star nearest our own sun – and proceeded to consolidate their offensive-defensive network between Rigel and Aldebaran. At this point in their explanation, the Dendi pointed out, the exigencies of interstellar strategy tended to become too complicated for anything but three-dimensional maps; let us here accept the simple statement, they suggested that it became immediately vital for them to strike rapidly, and

make the Troxxt position on Proxima Centaurus untenable – to establish a base inside their lines of communication.

The most likely spot for such a base was Earth.

The Dendi apologized profusely for intruding on our development, an intrusion which might cost us dear in our delicate developmental state. But, as they explained – in impeccable pre-Bengali – before their arrival we had, in effect, become (all unknowingly) a satrapy of the awful Troxxt. We could now consider ourselves liberated.

We thanked them much for that.

Besides, their leader pointed out proudly, the Dendi were engaged in a war for the sake of civilization itself, against an enemy so horrible, so obscene in its nature, and so utterly filthy in its practices, that it was unworthy of the label of intelligent life. They were fighting, not only for themselves, but for every loyal member of the galactic federation; for every small and helpless species; for every obscure race too weak to defend itself against a ravaging conqueror. Would humanity stand aloof from such a conflict?

There was just a slight bit of hesitation as the information was digested. Then – 'No!' humanity roared back through such mass-communication media as television, newspapers, reverberating jungle drums, and mule-mounted backwoods messenger. '*We will not stand aloof. We will help you destroy this menace to the very fabric of civilization. Just tell us what you want us to do.*'

Well, nothing in particular, the aliens replied with some embarrassment. Possibly in a little while there might *be* something – *several* little things, in fact – which could be *quite* useful; but, for the moment, if we would concentrate on not getting in their way when they serviced their gun-mounts, they would be very grateful, really. . . .

This reply tended to create a large amount of uncertainty among the two billion of Earth's human population. For several days afterwards, there was a planet-wide tendency – the legend has come down to us – of people failing to meet each other's eyes.

But then Man rallied from this substantial blow to his pride. He would be useful, be it ever so humbly, to the race which had liberated him from potential subjugation by the ineffably ugly

Troxxt. For this, let us remember well our ancestors! Let us hymn their sincere efforts amid their ignorance!

All standing armies, all air and sea fleets, were reorganized into guard-patrols around the Dendi weapons: no human might approach within two miles of the murmuring machinery without a pass countersigned by the Dendi. Since they were never known to sign such a pass during the entire period of their stay on this planet, however, this loophole-provision was never exercised as far as is known; and the immediate neighbourhood of the extra-terrestrial weapons became and remained henceforth wholesomely free of two-legged creatures.

Cooperation with our liberators took precedence over all other human activities. The order of the day was a slogan first given voice by a Harvard professor of government in a querulous radio round table on 'Man's Place in a Somewhat Over-Civilized Universe'.

'Let us forget our individual egos and collective conceits!' the professor cried at one point. 'Let us subordinate everything – to the end that the freedom of the solar system in general, and Earth in particular, must and shall be preserved!'

Despite the mouth-filling qualities, this slogan was repeated everywhere. Still, it was difficult sometimes to know exactly what the Dendi wanted – partly because of the limited number of interpreters available to the heads of the various sovereign states, and partly because of their leader's tendency to vanish into his ship after ambiguous and equivocal statements – such as the curt admonition to 'Evacuate Washington!'

On that occasion, both the Secretary of State and the American President perspired fearfully through five hours of a July day in all the silk-hatted, stiff-collared, dark-suited diplomatic regalia that the barbaric past demanded of political leaders who would deal with the representatives of another people. They waited and wilted beneath the enormous ship – which no human had ever been invited to enter, despite the wistful hints constantly thrown out by university professors and aeronautical designers – they waited patiently and wetly for the Dendi leader to emerge and let them know whether he had meant the State of Washington or Washington, D.C.

The tale comes down to us at this point as a tale of glory. The Capitol building taken apart in a few days, and set up almost intact in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains; the missing Archives, that were later to turn up in the Children's Room of a Public Library in Duluth, Iowa; the bottles of Potomac River water carefully borne westward and ceremoniously poured into the circular concrete ditch built around the President's mansion (from which unfortunately it was to evaporate within a week because of the relatively low humidity of the region) – all these are proud moments in the galactic history of our species, from which not even the later knowledge that the Dendi wished to build no gun-site on the spot, nor even an ammunition dump, but merely a recreation hall for their troops, could remove any of the grandeur of our determined cooperation and most willing sacrifice.

There is no denying, however, that the ego of our race was greatly damaged by the discovery, in the course of a routine journalistic interview, that the aliens totalled no more powerful a group than a squad; and that their leader, instead of the great scientist and key military strategist that we might justifiably have expected the Galactic Federation to furnish for the protection of Terra, ranked as the interstellar equivalent of a buck sergeant.

That the President of the United States, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and the Navy, had waited in such obeisant fashion upon a mere non-commissioned officer was hard for us to swallow; but that the impending Battle of Earth was to have a historical dignity only slightly higher than that of a patrol action was impossibly humiliating.

And then there was the matter of 'lendi'.

The aliens, while installing or servicing their planet-wide weapon system, would occasionally fling aside an evidently unusable fragment of the talking metal. Separated from the machine of which it had been a component, the substance seemed to lose all those qualities which were deleterious to mankind and retain several which were quite useful indeed. For example, if a portion of the strange material was attached to any terrestrial metal – and insulated carefully from contact with other substances – it would, in a few hours, itself become exactly the metal that it touched, whether that happened to be zinc, gold, or pure uranium.

This stuff – 'lendi', men have heard the aliens call it – was shortly in frantic demand in an economy ruptured by constant and unexpected emptyings of its most important industrial centres.

Everywhere the aliens went, to and from their weapon sites, hordes of ragged humans stood chanting – well outside the two-mile limit – 'Any lendi, Dendi?' All attempts by law-enforcement agencies of the planet to put a stop to this shameless, wholesale begging were useless – especially since the Dendi themselves seemed to get some unexplainable pleasure out of scattering tiny pieces of lendi to the scrabbling multitude. When policemen and soldiery began to join the trampling murderous dash to the corner of the meadows wherein had fallen the highly versatile and garrulous metal, governments gave up.

Mankind also began to hope for the attack to come, so that it would be relieved of the festering consideration of its own patent inferiorities. A few of the more fanatically conservative among our ancestors probably even began to regret liberation.

They did, children; they did. Let us hope that these would-be troglodytes were among the very first to be dissolved and melted down by the red flame-balls. One cannot, after all, turn one's back on progress.

Two days before the month of September was over, the aliens announced that they had detected activity upon one of the moons of Saturn. The Troxxt were evidently threading their treacherous way inward through the solar system. Considering their vicious and deceitful propensities, the Dendi warned, an attack from these worm-like monstrosities might be expected at any moment.

Few humans went to sleep as the night rolled up to and past the meridian on which they dwelt. Almost all eyes were lifted to a sky carefully denuded of clouds by watchful Dendi. There was a brisk trade in cheap telescopes and bits of smoked glass in some sections of the planet; while other portions experienced a substantial boom in spells and charms of the all-inclusive, or omnibus, variety.

The Troxxt attacked in three cylindrical black ships simultaneously; one in the Southern Hemisphere, and two in the Northern. Great gouts of green flame roared out of their tiny craft; and

everything touched by these gouts imploded into a translucent, glass-like sand. No Dendi was hurt by these, however, and from each of the now-writhing gun-mounts there bubbled forth a series of scarlet clouds which pursued the Troxxt hungrily, until forced by a dwindling velocity to fall back upon Earth.

Here they had an unhappy after-effect. Any populated area into which these pale pink cloudlets chanced to fall was rapidly transformed into a cemetery – a cemetery, if the truth be told as it has been handed down to us, that had more the odour of the kitchen than the grave. The inhabitants of these unfortunate localities were subjected to enormous increases of temperature. Their skin reddened, then blackened; their hair and nails shrivelled; their very flesh turned into liquid and boiled off their bones. Altogether a disagreeable way for one-tenth of the human race to die.

The only consolation was the capture of a black cylinder by one of the red clouds. When, as a result of this, it had turned white-hot and poured its substance down in the form of a metallic rainstorm, the two ships assaulting the Northern Hemisphere abruptly retreated to the asteroids into which the Dendi – because of severely limited numbers – steadfastly refused to pursue them.

In the next twenty-four hours the aliens – *resident* aliens, let us say – held conferences, made repairs to their weapons and commiserated with us. Humanity buried its dead. This last was a custom of our forefathers that was most worthy of note; and one that has not, of course, survived into modern times.

By the time the Troxxt returned, Man was ready for them. He could not, unfortunately, stand to arms as he most ardently desired to do; but he could and did stand to optical instrument and conjurer's oration.

Once more the little red clouds burst joyfully into the upper reaches of the stratosphere; once more the green flames wailed and tore at the chattering spires of lendi; once more men died by the thousands in the boiling backwash of war. But this time, there was a slight difference: the green flames of the Troxxt abruptly changed colour after the engagement had lasted three hours; they became darker, more bluish. And, as they did so, Dendi after Dendi collapsed at his station and died in convulsions.

The call for retreat was evidently sounded. The survivors fought

their way to the tremendous ship in which they had come. With an explosion from her stern jets that blasted a red-hot furrow southward through France, and kicked Marseilles into the Mediterranean, the ship roared into space and fled home ignominiously.

Humanity steeled itself for the coming ordeal of horror under the Troxxt.

They were truly worm-like in form. As soon as the two night-black cylinders had landed, they strode from their ships, their tiny segmented bodies held off the ground by a complex harness supported by long and slender metal crutches. They erected a dome-like fort around each ship – one in Australia and one in the Ukraine – captured the few courageous individuals who had ventured close to their landing-sites, and disappeared back into the dark craft with their squirming prizes.

While some men drilled about nervously in the ancient military patterns, others pored anxiously over scientific texts and records, pertaining to the visit of the Dendi – in the desperate hope of finding a way of preserving terrestrial independence against this ravening conqueror of the star-spattered galaxy.

And yet all this time, the human captives inside the artificially darkened space-ships (the Troxxt, having no eyes, not only had little use for light, but the more sedentary individuals among them actually found such radiation disagreeable to their sensitive, unpigmented skins) were not being tortured for information – nor vivisected in the earnest quest of knowledge on a slightly higher level – but educated.

Educated in the Troxxtian language, that is.

True it was that a large number found themselves utterly inadequate for the task which the Troxxt had set them, and temporarily became servants to the more successful students. And another, albeit smaller, group developed various forms of frustration hysteria, ranging from mild unhappiness to complete catatonic depression, over the difficulties presented by a language whose every verb was irregular, and whose myriads of prepositions were formed by noun-adjective combinations derived from the subject of the previous sentence. But, eventually, eleven human beings were released, to blink madly in the sunlight as certified interpreters of Troxxt.

These liberators, it seemed, had never visited Bengal in the heyday of its millennia-past civilization.

Yes, these *liberators*. For the Troxxt had landed on the sixth day of the ancient, almost mythical month of October. And October the Sixth is, of course, the Holy Day of the Second Liberation. Let us remember, let us revere. (If only we could figure out which day it is on our calendar!)

The tale the interpreters told caused men to hang their heads in shame and gnash their teeth at the deception they had allowed the Dendi to practise upon them.

True, the Dendi had been commissioned by the Galactic Federation to hunt the Troxxt down and destroy them. This was largely because the Dendi *were* the Galactic Federation. One of the first intelligent arrivals on the interstellar scene, the huge creatures had organized a vast police force to protect them and their power against any contingency of revolt that might arise in the future. This police force was ostensibly a congress of all thinking life forms throughout the galaxy; actually, it was an efficient means of keeping them under rigid control.

Most species thus-far discovered were docile and tractable, however; the Dendi had been ruling from time immemorial, said they – very well, then, let the Dendi continue to rule. Did it make that much difference?

But, throughout the centuries, opposition to the Dendi grew – and the nuclei of the opposition were the protoplasm-based creatures. What, in fact, had come to be known as the Protoplasmic League.

Though small in number, the creatures whose life cycles were derived from the chemical and physical properties of protoplasm varied greatly in size, structure, and specialization. A galactic community deriving the main wells of its power from them would be a dynamic instead of a static place, where extra-galactic travel would be encouraged, instead of being inhibited, as it was at present because of Dendi fears of meeting a superior civilization. It would be a true democracy of species – a real biological republic – where all creatures of adequate intelligence and cultural development would enjoy a control of their destinies at present experienced by the silicon-based Dendi alone.

To this end, the Troxxt – the only important race which had steadfastly refused the complete surrender of armaments demanded of all members of the Federation – had been implored by a minor member of the Protoplasmic League to rescue it from the devastation which the Dendi intended to visit upon it, as punishment for an unlawful exploratory excursion outside the boundaries of the galaxy.

Faced with the determination of the Troxxt to defend their cousins in organic chemistry, and the suddenly aroused hostility of at least two-thirds of the interstellar peoples, the Dendi had summoned a rump meeting of the Galactic Council; declared a state of revolt in being; and proceeded to cement their disintegrating rule with the blasted life-forces of a hundred worlds. The Troxxt, hopelessly out-numbered and out-equipped, had been able to continue the struggle only because of the great ingenuity and selflessness of other members of the Protoplasmic League, who had risked extinction to supply them with newly developed secret weapons.

Hadn't we guessed the nature of the beast from the enormous precautions it had taken to prevent the exposure of any part of its body to the intensely corrosive atmosphere of Earth? Surely the seamless, barely translucent suits which our recent visitors had worn for every moment of their stay on our world should have made us suspect a body chemistry developed from complex silicon compounds rather than those of carbon?

Humanity hung its collective head and admitted that the suspicion had never occurred to it.

Well, the Troxxt admitted generously, we were extremely inexperienced and possibly a little too trusting. Put it down to that. Our naïveté, however costly to them – our liberators – would not be allowed to deprive us of that complete citizenship which the Troxxt were claiming as the birthright of all.

But as for our leaders, our probably corrupted, certainly irresponsible leaders. . . .

The first executions of UN officials, heads of states, and pre-Bengali interpreters as 'Traitors to Protoplasm' – after some of the lengthiest and most nearly-perfectly-fair trials in the history of

Earth – were held a week after G-J day, the inspiring occasion on which – amidst gorgeous ceremonies – Humanity was invited to join, first the Protoplasmic League and thence the New and Democratic Galactic Federation of All Species, All Races.

Nor was that all. Whereas the Dendi had contemptuously shoved us to one side as they went about their business of making our planet safe for tyranny, and had – in all probability – built special devices which made the very touch of their weapons fatal for us, the Troxxt – with the sincere friendliness which had made their name a byword for democracy and decency wherever living creatures came together among the stars – our Second Liberators, as we lovingly called them, actually *preferred* to have us help them with the intensive, accelerating labour of planetary defence.

So men's intestines dissolved under the invisible glare of the forces used to assemble the new, incredibly complex weapons; men sickened and died, in scrabbling hordes, inside the mines which the Troxxt had made deeper than any we had dug hitherto; men's bodies broke open and exploded in the undersea oil-drilling sites which the Troxxt had declared were essential.

Children's schooldays were requested, too, in such collecting drives as 'Platinum Scrap for Procyon' and 'Radioactive Debris for Deneb'. Housewives also were implored to save on salt whenever possible – this substance being useful to the Troxxt in literally dozens of incomprehensible ways – and colourful posters reminded: '*Don't salinate – sugarfy!*'

And over all – courteously caring for us like an intelligent parent – were our mentors, taking their giant supervisory strides on metallic crutches, while their pale little bodies lay curled in the hammocks that swung from each paired length of shining leg.

Truly, even in the midst of a complete economic paralysis caused by the concentration of all major productive facilities on otherworldly armaments, and despite the anguished cries of those suffering from peculiar industrial injuries which our medical men were totally unequipped to handle, in the midst of all this mind-wracking disorganization, it was yet very exhilarating to realize that we had taken our lawful place in the future government of the galaxy and were even now helping to make the Universe Safe for Democracy.

But the Dendi returned to smash this idyll. They came in their huge, silvery space-ships and the Troxxt, barely warned in time, just managed to rally under the blow and fight back in kind. Even so, the Troxxt ship in the Ukraine was almost immediately forced to flee to its base in the depths of space. After three days, the only Troxxt on Earth were the devoted members of a little band guarding the ship in Australia. They proved, in three or more months, to be as difficult to remove from the face of our planet as the continent itself; and since there was now a state of close and hostile siege, with the Dendi on one side of the globe, and the Troxxt on the other, the battle assumed frightful proportions.

Seas boiled; whole steppes burned away; the climate itself shifted and changed under the gruelling pressure of the cataclysm. By the time the Dendi solved the problem, the planet Venus had been blasted from the skies in the course of a complicated battle manoeuvre, the Earth had wobbled over as orbital substitute.

The solution was simple: since the Troxxt were too firmly based on the small continent to be driven away, the numerically superior Dendi brought up enough firepower to disintegrate all Australia into an ash that muddied the Pacific. This occurred on the twenty-fourth of June, the Holy Day of First Reliberation. A day of reckoning for what remained of the human race, however.

How could we have been so naïve, the Dendi wanted to know, as to be taken in by the chauvinistic pro-protoplasm propaganda? Surely, if physical characteristics were to be the criteria of our racial empathy, we would not orient ourselves on a narrow chemical basis? The Dendi life-plasma was based on silicon instead of carbon, true, but did not vertebrates – *appendaged* vertebrates, at that, such as we and the Dendi – have infinitely more in common, in spite of a *minor* biochemical difference or two, than vertebrates and legless, armless, slime-crawling creatures who happened, quite accidentally, to possess an identical organic substance?

As for this fantastic picture of life in the galaxy. . . . *Well!* The Dendi shrugged their quintuple shoulders as they went about the intricate business of erecting their noisy weapons all over the rubble of our planet. Had we ever seen a representative of these proto-plasmic races the Troxxt were supposedly protecting? No,

nor would we. For as soon as a race – animal, vegetable, or mineral – developed enough to constitute even a *potential* danger to the sinuous aggressors, its civilization was systematically dismantled by the watchful Troxxt. We were in so primitive a state that they had not considered it at all risky to allow us the outward seeming of full participation.

Could we say we had learned a single useful piece of information about Troxxt technology – for all of the work we had done on their machines, for all of the lives we had lost in the process? No, of course not. We had merely contributed our mite to the enslavement of far-off races who had done us no harm.

There was much that we had cause to feel guilty about, the Dendi told us gravely – once the few surviving interpreters of the pre-Bengali dialect had crawled out of hiding. But our collective onus was as nothing compared to that borne by 'vermicular collaborationists' – those traitors who had supplanted our martyred former leaders. And then there were the unspeakable human interpreters who had had linguistic traffic with creatures destroying a two-million-year-old galactic peace. Why, killing was almost too good for them, the Dendi murmured as they killed them.

When the Troxxt ripped their way back into possession of Earth some eighteen months later, bringing us the sweet fruits of the Second Reliberation – as well as a complete and most convincing rebuttal of the Dendi – there were few humans found who were willing to accept with any real enthusiasm the responsibilities of newly opened and highly paid positions in language, science, and government.

Of course, since the Troxxt, in order to reliberate Earth, had found it necessary to blast a tremendous chunk out of the northern hemisphere, there were very few humans to be found in the first place. . . . Even so, many of these committed suicide rather than assume the title of Secretary-General of the United Nations when the Dendi came back for the glorious Re-Reliberation, a short time after that. This was the liberation, by the way, which swept the deep collar of matter off our planet, and gave it what our forefathers came to call a pear-shaped look.

Possibly it was at this time – possibly a liberation or so later – that the Troxxt and the Dendi discovered that the Earth had become far too eccentric in its orbit to possess the minimum safety conditions demanded of a Combat Zone. The battle, therefore, zigzagged coruscatingly and murderously away in the direction of Aldebaran.

That was nine generations ago, but the tale that has been handed down from parent to child, to child's child, has lost little in the telling. You hear it now from me almost exactly as *I* heard it. From my father I heard it as I ran with him from water puddle to distant water puddle, across the searing heat of yellow sand. From my mother I heard it as we sucked air and frantically grabbed at clusters of thick green weed, whenever the planet beneath us quivered in omen of a geological spasm that might bury us in its burned-out body, or a cosmic gyration threatened to fling us into empty space.

Yes, even as we do now did we do then, telling the same tale, running the same frantic race across miles of unendurable heat for food and water; fighting the same savage battles with the giant rabbits for each other's carrion – and always, ever and always, sucking desperately at the precious air, which leaves our world in greater quantities with every mad twist of its orbit.

Naked, hungry, and thirsty came we into the world, and naked, hungry, and thirsty do we scamper our lives out upon it, under the huge and never-changing sun.

The same tale it is, and the same traditional ending it has as that I had from my father and his father before him. Suck air, grab clusters, and hear the last holy observation of our history!

'*Looking about us, we can say with pardonable pride that we have been about as thoroughly liberated as it is possible for a race and a planet to be.*'

An Alien Agony

HARRY HARRISON

SOMEWHERE above, hidden by the eternal clouds of Wesker's World, a thunder rumbled and grew. Trader John Garth stopped when he heard it, his boots sinking slowly into the muck, and cupped his good ear to catch the sound. It swelled and waned in the thick atmosphere, growing louder.

'That noise is the same as the noise of your sky-ship,' Itin said, with stolid Wesker logicality, slowly pulverizing the idea in his mind and turning over the bits one by one for closer examination. 'But your ship is still sitting where you landed it. It must be, even though we cannot see it, because you are the only one who can operate it. And even if anyone else could operate it we would have heard it rising into the sky. Since we did not, and if this sound is a sky-ship sound, then it must mean . . .'

'Yes, another ship,' Garth said, too absorbed in his own thoughts to wait for the laborious Weskerian chains of logic to clank their way through to the end. Of course it was another spacer, it had been only a matter of time before one appeared, and undoubtedly this one was homing on the S.S. radar reflector as he had done. His own ship would show up clearly on the newcomer's screen and they would probably set down as close to it as they could.

'You better go ahead, Itin,' he said. 'Use the water so you can get to the village quickly. Tell everyone to get back into the swamps, well clear of the hard ground. That ship is landing on instruments and anyone underneath at touchdown is going to be cooked.'

This immediate threat was clear enough to the little Wesker amphibian. Before Garth finished speaking Itin's ribbed ears had folded like a bat's wing and he slipped silently into the nearby canal. Garth squelched on through the mud, making as good time as he could over the clinging surface. He had just reached the

fringes of the village clearing when the rumbling grew to a head-splitting roar and the spacer broke through the low-hanging layer of clouds above. Garth shielded his eyes from the down-reaching tongue of flame and examined the growing form of the grey-black ship with mixed feelings.

After almost a standard year on Wesker's World he had to fight down a longing for human companionship of any kind. While this buried fragment of herd-spirit chattered for the rest of the monkey tribe, his trader's mind was busily drawing a line under a column of figures and adding up the total. This could very well be another trader's ship, and if it were his monopoly of the Wesker trade was at an end. Then again, this might not be a trader at all, which was the reason he stayed in the shelter of the giant fern and loosened his gun in its holster.

The ship baked dry a hundred square metres of mud, the roaring blast died, and the landing feet crunched down through the crackling crust. Metal creaked and settled into place while the cloud of smoke and steam slowly drifted lower in the humid air.

'Garth – you native-cheating extortionist – where are you?' the ship's speaker boomed. The lines of the spacer had looked only slightly familiar, but there was no mistaking the rasping tones of that voice. Garth wore a smile when he stepped out into the open and whistled shrilly through two fingers. A directional microphone ground out of its casing on the ship's fin and turned in his direction.

'What are you doing here, Singh?' he shouted towards the mike. 'Too crooked to find a planet of your own and have to come here to steal an honest trader's profits?'

'Honest!' the amplified voice roared. 'This from the man who has been in more jails than cathouses – and that a goodly number in itself, I do declare. Sorry, friend of my youth, but I cannot join you in exploiting this aboriginal pesthole. I am on course to a more fairly atmosphered world where a fortune is waiting to be made. I only stopped here since an opportunity presented to turn an honest credit by running a taxi service. I bring you friendship, the perfect companionship, a man in a different line of business who might help you in yours. I'd come out and say hello myself, except I would have to decon for biologicals. I'm cycling the

passenger through the lock so I hope you won't mind helping with his luggage.'

At least there would be no other trader on the planet now, that worry was gone. But Garth still wondered what sort of passenger would be taking one-way passage to an uninhabited world. And what was behind that concealed hint of merriment in Singh's voice? He walked around to the far side of the spacer where the ramp had dropped, and looked up at the man in the cargo lock who was wrestling ineffectually with a large crate. The man turned towards him and Garth saw the clerical dog-collar and knew just what it was Singh had been chuckling about.

'What are you doing here?' Garth asked; in spite of his attempt at self control he snapped the words. If the man noticed this he ignored it, because he was still smiling and putting out his hand as he came down the ramp.

'Father Mark,' he said, 'Of the Missionary Society of Brothers. I'm very pleased to . . . '

'I said what are you doing here.' Garth's voice was under control now, quiet and cold. He knew what had to be done, and it must be done quickly or not at all.

'That should be obvious,' Father Mark said, his good nature still unruffled. 'Our missionary society has raised funds to send spiritual emissaries to alien worlds for the first time. I was lucky enough . . . '

'Take your luggage and get back into the ship. You're not wanted here and have no permission to land. You'll be a liability and there is no one on Wesker to take care of you. Get back into the ship.'

'I don't know who you are sir, or why you are lying to me,' the priest said. He was still calm but the smile was gone. 'But I have studied galactic law and the history of this planet very well. There are no diseases or beasts here that I should have any particular fear of. It is also an open planet, and until the Space Survey changes that status I have as much right to be here as you do.'

The man was of course right, but Garth couldn't let him know that. He had been bluffing, hoping the priest didn't know his rights. But he did. There was only one distasteful course left for him, and he had better do it while there was still time.

'Get back in that ship,' he shouted, not hiding his anger now. With a smooth motion his gun was out of the holster and the pitted black muzzle only inches from the priest's stomach. The man's face turned white, but he did not move.

'What the hell are you doing, Garth!' Singh's shocked voice grated from the speaker. 'The guy paid his fare and you have no rights at all to throw him off the planet.'

'I have this right,' Garth said, raising his gun and sighting between the priest's eyes. 'I give him thirty seconds to get back aboard the ship or I pull the trigger.'

'Well I think you are either off your head or playing a joke,' Singh's exasperated voice rasped down at them. 'If a joke, it is in bad taste, and either way you're not getting away with it. Two can play at that game, only I can play it better.'

There was the rumble of heavy bearings and the remote-controlled four-gun turret on the ship's side rotated and pointed at Garth. 'Now – down gun and give Father Mark a hand with the luggage,' the speaker commanded, a trace of humour back in the voice now. 'As much as I would like to help, Old Friend, I cannot. I feel it is time you had a chance to talk to the father; after all, I have had the opportunity of speaking with him all the way from Earth.'

Garth jammed the gun back into the holster with an acute feeling of loss. Father Mark stepped forward, the winning smile back now and a bible taken from a pocket of his robe, in his raised hand. 'My son,' he said.

'I'm not your son,' was all Garth could choke out as defeat welled up in him. His fist drew back as the anger rose, and the best he could do was open the fist so he struck only with the flat of his hand. Still the blow sent the priest crashing to the ground and fluttered the pages of the book splattering into the thick mud.

Itin and the other Weskers had watched everything with seemingly emotionless interest, and Garth made no attempt to answer their unspoken questions. He started towards his house, but turned back when he saw they were still unmoving.

'A new man has come,' he told them. 'He will need help with the things he has brought. If he doesn't have any place for them,

you can put them in the big warehouse until he has a place of his own.'

He watched them waddle across the clearing towards the ship, then went inside and gained a certain satisfaction from slamming the door hard enough to crack one of the panes. There was an equal amount of painful pleasure in breaking out one of the remaining bottles of Irish whisky that he had been saving for a special occasion. Well this was special enough, though not really what he had had in mind. The whisky was good and burned away some of the bad taste in his mouth, but not all of it. If his tactics had worked, success would have justified everything. But he had failed and in addition to the pain of failure there was the acute feeling that he had made a horse's ass out of himself. Singh had blasted off without any good-byes. There was no telling what sense he had made of the whole matter, though he would surely carry some strange stories back to the traders' lodge. Well, that could be worried about the next time Garth signed in. Right now he had to go about setting things right with the missionary. Squinting out through the rain he saw the man struggling to erect a collapsible tent while the entire population of the village stood in ordered ranks and watched. Naturally none of them offered to help.

By the time the tent was up and the crates and boxes stowed inside it the rain had stopped. The level of fluid in the bottle was a good bit lower and Garth felt more like facing up to the unavoidable meeting. In truth, he was looking forward to talking to the man. This whole nasty business aside, after an entire solitary year any human companionship looked good. *Will you join me now for dinner. John Garth*, he wrote on the back of an old invoice. But maybe the guy was too frightened to come? Which was no way to start any kind of relationship. Rummaging under the bunk, he found a box that was big enough and put his pistol inside. Itin was of course waiting outside the door when he opened it, since this was his tour as Knowledge Collector. He handed him the note and box.

'Would you take these to the new man,' he said.

'Is the new man's name New Man?' Itin asked.

'No, it's not!' Garth snapped. 'His name is Mark. But I'm only asking you to deliver this, not get involved in conversation.'

As always when he lost his temper, the literal minded Weskers

won the round. 'You are not asking for conversation,' Itin said slowly, 'but Mark may ask for conversation. And others will ask me his name, if I do not know his na . . . ' The voice cut off as Garth slammed the door. This didn't work in the long run either because next time he saw Itin – a day, a week, or even a month later – the monologue would be picked up on the very word it had ended and the thought rambled out to its last frayed end. Garth cursed under his breath and poured water over a pair of the tastier concentrates that he had left.

'Come in,' he said when there was a quiet knock on the door. The priest entered and held out the box with the gun.

'Thank you for the loan, Mr Garth, I appreciate the spirit that made you send it. I have no idea of what caused the unhappy affair when I landed, but I think it would be best forgotten if we are going to be on this planet together for any length of time.'

'Drink?' Garth asked, taking the box and pointing to the bottle on the table. He poured two glasses full and handed one to the priest. 'That's about what I had in mind, but I still owe you an explanation of what happened out there.' He scowled into his glass for a second, then raised it to the other man. 'It's a big universe and I guess we have to make out as best we can. Here's to Sanity.'

'God be with you,' Father Mark said, and raised his glass as well.

'Not with me or with this planet,' Garth said firmly. 'And that's the crux of the matter.' He half-drained the glass and sighed.

'Do you say that to shock me?' the priest asked with a smile. 'I assure you it doesn't.'

'Not intended to shock. I meant it quite literally. I suppose I'm what you would call an atheist, so revealed religion is no concern of mine. While these natives, simple and unlettered stone-age types that they are, have managed to come this far with no superstitions or traces of deism whatsoever. I had hoped that they might continue that way.'

'What are you saying?' the priest frowned. 'Do you mean they have no gods, no belief in the hereafter? They must die . . . ?'

'Die they do, and to dust returneth like the rest of the animals. They have thunder, trees, and water without having thunder-gods, tree sprites, or water nymphs. They have no ugly little gods,

taboos, or spells to hag-ride and limit their lives. They are the only primitive people I have ever encountered that are completely free of superstition and appear to be much happier and sane because of it. I just wanted to keep them that way.'

'You wanted to keep them from God – from salvation?' the priest's eyes widened and he recoiled slightly.

'No,' Garth said. 'I wanted to keep them from superstition until they knew more and could think about it realistically without being absorbed and perhaps destroyed by it.'

'You're being insulting to the Church, sir, to equate it with superstition . . . '

'Please,' Garth said, raising his hand. 'No theological arguments. I don't think your society footed the bill for this trip just to attempt a conversion on me. Just accept the fact that my beliefs have been arrived at through careful thought over a period of years, and no amount of undergraduate metaphysics will change them. I'll promise not to try and convert you – if you will do the same for me.'

'Agreed, Mr Garth. As you have reminded me, my mission here is to save these souls, and that is what I must do. But why should my work disturb you so much that you try and keep me from landing? Even threaten me with your gun, and . . . ' the priest broke off and looked into his glass.

'And even slug you?' Garth asked, suddenly frowning. 'There was no excuse for that, and I would like to say that I'm sorry. Plain bad manners and an even worse temper. Live alone long enough and you find yourself doing that kind of thing.' He brooded down at his big hands where they lay on the table, reading memories into the scars and callouses patterned there. 'Let's just call it frustration, for lack of a better word. In your business you must have had a lot of chance to peep into the darker places in men's minds and you should know a bit about motives and happiness. I have had too busy a life to ever consider settling down and raising a family, and right up until recently I never missed it. Maybe leakage radiation is softening up my brain, but I had begun to think of these furry and fishy Weskers as being a little like my own children, that I was somehow responsible to them.'

'We are all His children,' Father Mark said quietly.

'Well, here are some of His children that can't even imagine His existence,' Garth said, suddenly angry at himself for allowing gentler emotions to show through. Yet he forgot himself at once, leaning forward with the intensity of his feelings. 'Can't you realize the importance of this? Live with these Weskers awhile and you will discover a simple and happy life that matches the state of grace you people are always talking about. They get *pleasure* from their lives – and cause no one pain. By circumstance they have evolved on an almost barren world, so have never had a chance to grow out of a physical stone age culture. But mentally they are our match – or perhaps better. They have all learned my language so I can easily explain the many things they want to know. Knowledge and the gaining of knowledge gives them real satisfaction. They tend to be exasperating at times because every new fact must be related to the structure of all other things, but the more they learn the faster this process becomes. Someday they are going to be man's equal in every way, perhaps surpass us. If – would you do me a favour?'

'Whatever I can.'

'Leave them alone. Or teach them if you must – history and science, philosophy, law, anything that will help them face the realities of the greater universe they never even knew existed before. But don't confuse them with your hatreds and pain, guilt, sin, and punishment. Who knows the harm . . . '

'You are being insulting, sir!' the priest said, jumping to his feet. The top of his grey head barely came to the massive spaceman's chin, yet he showed no fear in defending what he believed. Garth, standing now himself, was no longer the penitent. They faced each other in anger, as men have always stood, unbending in the defence of that which they think right.

'Yours is the insult,' Garth shouted. 'The incredible egotism to feel that your derivative little mythology, differing only slightly from the thousands of others that still burden men, can do anything but confuse their still fresh minds! Don't you realize that they believe in truth – and have never heard of such a thing as a lie. They have not been trained yet to understand that other kinds of minds can think differently from theirs. Will you spare them this . . . ?'

'I will do my duty which is His will, Mr Garth. These are God's creatures here, and they have souls. I cannot shirk my duty, which is to bring them His word, so that they may be saved and enter into the kingdom of heaven.'

When the priest opened the door the wind caught it and blew it wide. He vanished into the stormswept darkness and the door swung back and forth and a splatter of raindrops blew in. Garth's boots left muddy footprints when he closed the door, shutting out the sight of Itin sitting patiently and uncomplaining in the storm, hoping only that Garth might stop for a moment and leave with him some of the wonderful knowledge of which he had so much.

By unspoken consent that first night was never mentioned again. After a few days of loneliness, made worse because each knew of the other's proximity, they found themselves talking on carefully neutral grounds. Garth slowly packed and stowed away his stock and never admitted that his work was finished and he could leave at any time. He had a fair amount of interesting drugs and botanicals that would fetch a good price. And the Wesker Artefacts were sure to create a sensation in the sophisticated galactic market. Crafts on the planet here had been limited before his arrival, mostly pieces of carving painfully chipped into the hard wood with fragments of stone. He had supplied tools and a stock of raw metal from his own supplies, nothing more than that. In a few months the Weskers had not only learned to work with the new materials, but had translated their own designs and forms into the most alien – but most beautiful – artefacts that he had ever seen. All he had to do was release these on the market to create a primary demand, then return for a new supply. The Weskers wanted only books and tools and knowledge in return, and through their own efforts he knew they would pull themselves into the galactic union.

This is what Garth had hoped. But a wind of change was blowing through the settlement that had grown up around his ship. No longer was he the centre of attention and focal point of the village life. He had to grin when he thought of his fall from power; yet there was very little humour in the smile. Serious and attentive Weskers still took turns of duty as Knowledge Collectors, but

their recording of dry facts was in sharp contrast to the intellectual hurricane that surrounded the priest.

Where Garth had made them work for each book and machine, the priest gave freely. Garth had tried to be progressive in his supply of knowledge, treating them as bright but unlettered children. He had wanted them to walk before they could run, to master one step before going on the next.

Father Mark simply brought them the benefits of Christianity. The only physical work he required was the construction of a church, a place of worship and learning. More Weskers had appeared out of the limitless planetary swamps and within days the roof was up, supported on a framework of poles. Each morning the congregation worked a little while on the walls, then hurried inside to learn the all-promising, all-encompassing, all-important facts about the universe.

Garth never told the Weskers what he thought about their new interest, and this was mainly because they had never asked him. Pride or honour stood in the way of his grabbing a willing listener and pouring out his grievances. Perhaps it would have been different if Itin was on Collecting duty; he was the brightest of the lot; but Itin had been rotated the day after the priest had arrived and Garth had not talked to him since.

It was a surprise then when after seventeen of the trebly-long Wesker days, he found a delegation at his doorstep when he emerged after breakfast. Itin was their spokesman, and his mouth was open slightly. Many of the other Weskers had their mouths open as well, one even appearing to be yawning, clearly revealing the double row of sharp teeth and the purple-black throat. The mouths impressed Garth as to the seriousness of the meeting: this was the one Wesker expression he had learned to recognize. An open mouth indicated some strong emotion; happiness, sadness, anger, he could never be really sure which. The Weskers were normally placid and he had never seen enough open mouths to tell what was causing them. But he was surrounded by them now.

'Will you help us, John Garth,' Itin said. 'We have a question.'

'I'll answer any question you ask,' Garth said, with more than a hint of misgiving. 'What is it?'

'Is there a God?'

'What do you mean by "God"?' Garth asked in turn. What should he tell them?

'God is our Father in Heaven, who made us all and protects us. Whom we pray to for aid, and if we are Saved will find a place . . .'

'That's enough,' Garth said. 'There is no God.'

All of them had their mouths open now, even Itin, as they looked at Garth and thought about his answer. The rows of pink teeth would have been frightening if he hadn't known these creatures so well. For one instant he wondered if perhaps they had been already indoctrinated and looked upon him as a heretic, but he brushed the thought away.

'Thank you,' Itin said, and they turned and left.

Though the morning was still cool, Garth noticed that he was sweating and wondered why.

The reaction was not long in coming. Itin returned that same afternoon. 'Will you come to the church?' he asked. 'Many of the things that we study are difficult to learn, but none as difficult as this. We need your help because we must hear you and Father Mark talk together. This is because he says one thing is true and you say another is true and both cannot be true at the same time. We must find out what is true.'

'I'll come, of course,' Garth said, trying to hide the sudden feeling of elation. He had done nothing, but the Weskers had come to him anyway. There could still be grounds for hope that they might yet be free.

It was hot inside the church, and Garth was surprised at the number of Weskers who were there, more than he had seen gathered at any one time before. There were many open mouths. Father Mark sat at a table covered with books. He looked unhappy but didn't say anything when Garth came in. Garth spoke first.

'I hope you realize this is their idea – that they came to me of their own free will and asked me to come here?'

'I know that,' the priest said resignedly. 'At times they can be very difficult. But they are learning and want to believe, and that is what is important.'

'Father Mark, Trader Garth, we need your help,' Itin said. 'You both know many things that we do not know. You must help

us come to religion which is not an easy thing to do.' Garth started to say something, then changed his mind. Itin went on. 'We have read the bibles and all the books that Father Mark gave us, and one thing is clear. We have discussed this and we are all agreed. These books are very different from the ones that Trader Garth gave us. In Trader Garth's books there is the universe which we have not seen, and it goes on without God, for he is mentioned nowhere; we have searched very carefully. In Father Mark's books He is everywhere and nothing can go without Him. One of these must be right and the other must be wrong. We do not know how this can be, but after we find out which is right then perhaps we will know. If God does not exist . . . '

'Of course He exists, my children,' Father Mark said in a voice of heartfelt intensity. 'He is our Father in Heaven who has created us all . . . '

'Who created God?' Itin asked and the murmur ceased and everyone of the Weskers watched Father Mark intensely. He recoiled a bit under the impact of their eyes, then smiled.

'Nothing created God, since He is the Creator. He always was . . . '

'If He always was in existence – why cannot the universe have always been in existence? Without having had a creator?' Itin broke in with a rush of words. The importance of the question was obvious. The priest answered slowly, with infinite patience.

'Would that the answers were that simple, my children. But even the scientists do not agree about the creation of the universe. While they doubt – we who have seen the light *know*. We can see the miracle of creation all about us. And how can there be a creation without a Creator? That is He, our Father, our God in Heaven. I know you have doubts; that is because you have souls and free will. Still, the answer is so simple. Have faith, that is all you need. Just believe.'

'How can we believe without proof?'

'If you cannot see that this world itself is proof of His existence, then I say to you that belief needs no proof – if you have faith!'

A babble of voices arose in the room and more of the Wesker mouths were open now as they tried to force their thoughts through the tangled skein of words and separate the thread of truth.

'Can you tell us, Garth?' Itin asked, and the sound of his voice quieted the hubbub.

'I can tell you to use the scientific method which can examine all things – including itself – and give you answers that can prove the truth or falsity of any statement.'

'That is what we must do,' Itin said, 'we had reached the same conclusion.' He held a thick book before him and a ripple of nods ran across the watchers. 'We have been studying the bible as Father Mark told us to do, and we have found the answer. God will make a miracle for us, thereby proving that He is watching us. And by this sign we will know Him and go to Him.'

'That is the sin of false pride,' Father Mark said. 'God needs no miracles to prove His existence.'

'But *we* need a miracle!' Itin shouted, and though he wasn't human there was need in his voice. 'We have read here of many smaller miracles, loaves, fishes, wine, snakes – many of them, for much smaller reasons. Now all He need do is make a miracle and He will bring us all to Him – the wonder of an entire new world worshipping at His throne, as you have told us, Father Mark. And you have told us how important this is. We have discussed this and find that there is only one miracle that is best for this kind of thing.'

His boredom at the theological wrangling drained from Garth in an instant. He had not been really thinking or he would have realized where all this was leading. He could see the illustration in the bible where Itin held it open, and knew in advance what picture it was. He rose slowly from his chair, as if stretching, and turned to the priest behind him.

'Get ready!' he whispered. 'Get out the back and get to the ship; I'll keep them busy here. I don't think they'll harm me.'

'What do you mean . . . ?' Father Mark asked, blinking in surprise.

'Get out, you fool!' Garth hissed. 'What miracle do you think they mean? What miracle is supposed to have converted the world to Christianity?'

'No!' Father Mark said. 'It cannot be. It just cannot be . . . !'

'GET MOVING!' Garth shouted, dragging the priest from the chair and hurling him towards the rear wall. Father Mark stumbled

to a halt, turned back. Garth leaped for him, but it was already too late. The amphibians were small, but there was so many of them. Garth lashed out and his fist struck Itin, hurling him back into the crowd. The others came on as he fought his way towards the priest. He beat at them but it was like struggling against waves. The furry, musky bodies washed over and engulfed him. He fought until they tied him, and he still struggled until they beat on his head until he stopped. Then they pulled him outside where he could only lie in the rain and curse and watch.

Of course the Weskers were marvellous craftsmen, and everything had been constructed down to the last detail, following the illustration in the bible. There was the cross, planted firmly on the top of a small hill, the gleaming metal spikes, the hammer. Father Mark was stripped and draped in a carefully pleated loincloth. They led him out of the church.

At the sight of the cross he almost fainted. After that he held his head high and determined to die as he had lived, with faith.

Yet this was hard. It was unbearable even for Garth, who only watched. It is one thing to talk of crucifixion and look at the gently carved bodies in the dim light of prayer. It is another to see a man naked, ropes cutting into his skin where he hangs from a bar of wood. And to see the needle-tipped spike raised and placed against the soft flesh of his palm, to see the hammer come back with the calm deliberation of an artisan's measured stroke. To hear the thick sound of metal penetrating flesh.

Then to hear the screams.

Few are born to be martyrs; Father Mark was not one of them. With the first blows, the blood ran from his lips where his clenched teeth met. Then his mouth was wide and his head strained back and the guttural horror of his screams sliced through the susuration of the falling rain. It resounded as a silent echo from the masses of watching Weskers, for whatever emotion opened their mouths was now tearing at their bodies with all its force, and row after row of gaping jaws reflected the crucified priest's agony.

Mercifully he fainted as the last nail was driven home. Blood ran from the raw wounds, mixing with the rain to drip faintly pink from his feet as the life ran out of him. At this time, somewhere at

this time, sobbing and tearing at his own bonds, numbed from the blows on the head, Garth lost consciousness.

He awoke in his own warehouse and it was dark. Someone was cutting away the woven ropes they had bound him with. The rain still dripped and splashed outside.

'Itin,' he said. It could be no one else.

'Yes,' the alien voice whispered back. 'The others are all talking in the church. Lin died after you struck his head, and Inon is very sick. There are some that say you should be crucified too, and I think that is what will happen. Or perhaps killed by stoning on the head. They have found in the bible where it says . . . '

'I know.' With infinite weariness. 'An eye for an eye. You'll find lots of things like that once you start looking. It's a wonderful book.' His head ached terribly.

'You must go, you can get to your ship without anyone seeing you. There has been enough killing.' Itin as well, spoke with a new-found weariness.

Garth experimented, pulling himself to his feet. He pressed his head to the rough wood of the wall until the nausea stopped. 'He's dead.' He said it as a statement, not a question.

'Yes, some time ago. Or I could not have come away to see you.'

'And buried of course, or they wouldn't be thinking about starting on me next.'

'And buried!' There was almost a ring of emotion in the alien's voice, an echo of the dead priest's. 'He is buried and he will rise on High. It is written and that is the way it will happen. Father Mark will be so happy that it has happened like this.' The voice ended in a sound like a human sob.

Garth painfully worked his way towards the door, leaning against the wall so he wouldn't fall.

'We did the right thing, didn't we?' Itin asked. There was no answer. 'He will rise up, Garth, won't he rise?'

Garth was at the door and enough light came from the brightly lit church to show his torn and bloody hands clutching at the frame. Itin's face swam into sight close to his, and Garth felt the delicate, many fingered hands with the sharp nails catch at his clothes.

'He will rise, won't he, Garth?'

'No,' Garth said, 'he is going to stay buried right where you put him. Nothing is going to happen because he is dead and he is going to stay dead.'

The rain runnelled through Itin's fur and his mouth was opened so wide that he seemed to be screaming into the night. Only with effort could he talk, squeezing out the alien thoughts in an alien language.

'Then we will not be saved? We will not become pure?'

'You were pure,' Garth said, in a voice somewhere between a sob and a laugh. 'That's the horrible ugly dirty part of it. You were pure. Now you are . . . '

'Murderers,' Itin said, and the water ran down from his lowered head and streamed away into the darkness.

The Tunnel under the World

FREDERIK POHL

I

On the morning of June the 15th, Guy Burckhardt woke up screaming out of a dream.

It was more real than any dream he had ever had in his life. He could still hear and feel the sharp, ripping-metal explosion, the violent heave that had tossed him furiously out of bed, the searing wave of heat.

He sat up convulsively and stared, not believing what he saw, at the quiet room and the bright sunlight coming in the window.

He croaked, 'Mary?'

His wife was not in the bed next to him. The covers were tumbled and awry, as though she had just left it, and the memory of the dream was so strong that instinctively he found himself searching the floor to see if the dream explosion had thrown her down.

But she wasn't there. Of course she wasn't, he told himself, looking at the familiar vanity and slipper chair, the uncracked window, the unbuckled wall. It had only been a dream.

'Guy?' His wife was calling him querulously from the foot of the stairs. 'Guy, dear, are you all right?'

He called weakly, 'Sure.'

There was a pause. Then Mary said doubtfully, 'Breakfast is ready. Are you sure you're all right? I thought I heard you yelling – '

Burckhardt said more confidently. 'I had a bad dream, honey. Be right down.'

In the shower, punching the lukewarm-and-cologne he favoured, he told himself that it had been a beaut of a dream. Still, bad dreams weren't unusual, especially bad dreams about explosions. In the past thirty years of H-bomb jitters, who had not dreamed of explosions?

Even Mary had dreamed of them, it turned out, for he started to tell her about the dream, but she cut him off. 'You *did?*' Her voice was astonished. 'Why, dear, I dreamed the same thing! Well, almost the same thing. I didn't actually *hear* anything. I dreamed that something woke me up, and then there was a sort of quick bang, and then something hit me on the head. And that was all. Was yours like that?'

Burckhardt coughed. 'Well, no,' he said. Mary was not one of these strong-as-a-man, brave-as-a-tiger women. It was not necessary, he thought, to tell her all the little details of the dream that made it seem so real. No need to mention the splintered ribs, and the salt bubble in his throat, and the agonized knowledge that this was death. He said, 'Maybe there really was some kind of explosion downtown. Maybe we heard it and it started us dreaming.'

Mary reached over and patted his hand absently. 'Maybe,' she agreed. 'It's almost half past eight, dear. Shouldn't you hurry? You don't want to be late to the office.'

He gulped his food, kissed her, and rushed out – not so much to be on time as to see if his guess had been right.

But downtown Tylerton looked as it always had. Coming in on the bus, Burckhardt watched critically out the window, seeking evidence of an explosion. There wasn't any. If anything, Tylerton looked better than it ever had before: It was a beautiful crisp day, the sky was cloudless, the buildings were clean and inviting. They had, he observed, steamblasted the Power & Light Building, the town's only skyscraper – that was the penalty of having Contro Chemicals main plant on the outskirts of town; the fumes from the cascade stills left their mark on stone buildings.

None of the usual crowd was on the bus, so there wasn't anyone Burckhardt could ask about the explosion. And by the time he got out at the corner of Fifth and Lehigh and the bus rolled away with a muted diesel moan, he had pretty well convinced himself that it was all imagination.

He stopped at the cigar stand in the lobby of his office building, but Ralph wasn't behind the counter. The man who sold him his pack of cigarettes was a stranger.

'Where's Mr Stebbins?' Burckhardt asked.

The man said politely, 'Sick, sir. He'll be in tomorrow. A pack of Marlins today?'

'Chesterfields,' Burckhardt corrected.

'Certainly, sir,' the man said. But what he took from the rack and slid across the counter was an unfamiliar green-and-yellow pack.

'Do try these, sir,' he suggested. 'They contain an anti-cough factor. Ever notice how ordinary cigarettes make you choke every once in a while?'

Burckhardt said suspiciously. 'I never heard of this brand.'

'Of course not. They're something new.' Burckhardt hesitated, and the man said persuasively, 'Look, try them out at my risk. If you don't like them, bring back the empty pack and I'll refund your money. Fair enough?'

Burckhardt shrugged. 'How can I lose? But give me a pack of Chesterfields, too, will you?'

He opened the pack and lit one while he waited for the elevator. They weren't bad, he decided, though he was suspicious of cigarettes that had the tobacco chemically treated in any way. But he didn't think much of Ralph's stand-in; it would raise hell with the trade at the cigar stand if the man tried to give every customer the same high-pressure sales talk.

The elevator door opened with a low-pitched sound of music. Burckhardt and two or three others got in and he nodded to them as the door closed. The thread of music switched off and the speaker in the ceiling of the cab began its usual commercials.

No, not the *usual* commercials, Buckhardt realized. He had been exposed to the captive-audience commercials so long that they hardly registered on the outer ear any more, but what was coming from the recorded programme in the basement of the building caught his attention. It wasn't merely that the brands were mostly unfamiliar; it was a difference in pattern.

There were jingles with an insistent, bouncy rhythm, about soft drinks he had never tasted. There was a rapid patter dialogue between what sounded like two ten-year-old boys about a candy bar, followed by an authoritative bass rumble: 'Go right out and get a DELICIOUS Choco-Bite and eat your TANGY Choco-Bite *all up*. That's *Choco-Bite!*' There was a sobbing female whine:

'I *wish* I had a Feckle Freezer! I'd do *anything* for a Feckle Freezer!' Burckhardt reached his floor and left the elevator in the middle of the last one. It left him a little uneasy. The commercials were not for familiar brands; there was no feeling of use and custom to them.

But the office was happily normal – except that Mr Barth wasn't in. Miss Mitkin, yawning at the reception desk, didn't know exactly why. 'His home phoned, that's all. He'll be in tomorrow.'

'Maybe he went to the plant. It's right near his house.'

She looked indifferent. 'Yeah.'

A thought struck Burckhardt. 'But today is June the 15th! It's quarterly tax return day – he has to sign the return!'

Miss Mitkin shrugged to indicate that that was Burckhardt's problem, not hers. She returned to her nails.

Thoroughly exasperated, Burckhardt went to his desk. It wasn't that he couldn't sign the tax returns as well as Barth, he thought resentfully. It simply wasn't his job, that was all; it was a responsibility that Barth, as office manager for Contro Chemicals' downtown office, should have taken.

He thought briefly of calling Barth at his home or trying to reach him at the factory, but he gave up the idea quickly enough. He didn't really care much for the people at the factory and the less contact he had with them, the better. He had been to the factory once, with Barth: it had been a confusing and, in a way, a frightening experience. Barring a handful of executives and engineers, there wasn't a soul in the factory – that is, Burckhardt corrected himself, remembering what Barth had told him, not a *living* soul – just the machines.

According to Barth, each machine was controlled by a sort of computer which reproduced, in its electronic snarl, the actual memory and mind of a human being. It was an unpleasant thought. Barth, laughing, had assured him that there was no Frankenstein business of robbing graveyards and implanting brains in machines. It was only a matter, he said, of transferring a man's habit patterns from brain cells to vacuum-tube cells. It didn't hurt the man and it didn't make the machine into a monster.

But they made Burckhardt uncomfortable all the same.

He put Barth and the factory and all his other little irritations

out of his mind and tackled the tax returns. It took him until noon to verify the figures – which Barth could have done out of his memory and his private ledger in ten minutes, Burckhardt resentfully reminded himself.

He sealed them in an envelope and walked out to Miss Mitkin. 'Since Mr Barth isn't here, we'd better go to lunch in shifts,' he said. 'You can go first.'

'Thanks.' Miss Mitkin languidly took her bag out of the desk drawer and began to apply make-up.

Burckhardt offered her the envelope. 'Drop this in the mail for me, will you? Uh – wait a minute. I wonder if I ought to phone Mr Barth to make sure. Did his wife say whether he was able to take phone calls?'

'Didn't say.' Miss Mitkin blotted her lips carefully with a Kleenex. 'Wasn't his wife, anyway. It was his daughter who called and left the message.'

'The kid?' Burckhardt frowned. 'I thought she was away at school.'

'She called, that's all I know.'

Burckhardt went back to his own office and stared distastefully at the unopened mail on his desk. He didn't like nightmares; they spoiled his whole day. He should have stayed in bed, like Barth.

A funny thing happened on his way home. There was a disturbance at the corner where he usually caught his bus – someone was screaming something about a new kind of deep-freeze – so he walked an extra block. He saw the bus coming and started to trot. But behind him, someone was calling his name. He looked over his shoulder; a small harried-looking man was hurrying toward him.

Burckhardt hesitated, and then recognized him. It was a casual acquaintance named Swanson. Burckhardt sourly observed that he had already missed the bus.

He said, 'Hello.'

Swanson's face was desperately eager. 'Burckhardt?' he asked inquiringly, with an odd intensity. And then he just stood there

silently, watching Burckhardt's face, with a burning eagerness that dwindled to a faint hope and died to a regret. He was searching for something, waiting for something, Burckhardt thought. But whatever it was he wanted, Burckhardt didn't know how to supply it.

Burckhardt coughed and said again, 'Hello, Swanson.'

Swanson didn't even acknowledge the greeting. He merely sighed a very deep sigh.

'Nothing doing,' he mumbled, apparently to himself. He nodded abstractedly to Burckhardt and turned away.

Burckhardt watched the slumped shoulders disappear in the crowd. It was an *odd* sort of day, he thought, and one he didn't much like. Things weren't going right.

Riding home on the next bus, he brooded about it. It wasn't anything terrible or disastrous; it was something out of his experience entirely. You live your life, like any man, and you form a network of impressions and reactions. You *expect* things. When you open your medicine chest, your razor is expected to be on the second shelf; when you lock your front door, you expect to have to give it a slight extra tug to make it latch.

It isn't the things that are right and perfect in your life that make it familiar. It is the things that are just a little bit wrong – the sticking latch, the light switch at the head of the stairs that needs an extra push because the spring is old and weak, the rug that unfailingly skids underfoot.

It wasn't just that things were wrong with the pattern of Burckhardt's life; it was that the *wrong* things were wrong. For instance, Barth hadn't come into the office, yet Barth *always* came in.

Burckhardt brooded about it through dinner. He brooded about it, despite his wife's attempt to interest him in a game of bridge with the neighbours, all through the evening. The neighbours were people he liked – Anne and Farley Dennerman. He had known them all their lives. But they were odd and brooding, too, this night and he barely listened to Dennerman's complaints about not being able to get good phone service or his wife's comments on the disgusting variety of television commercials they had these days.

Burckhardt was well on the way to setting an all-time record

for continuous abstraction when, around midnight, with a suddenness that surprised him – he was strangely *aware* of it happening – he turned over in his bed and, quickly and completely, fell asleep.

II

On the morning of June the 15th, Burckhardt woke up screaming.

It was more real than any dream he had ever had in his life. He could still hear the explosion, feel the blast that crushed him against a wall. It did not seem right that he should be sitting bolt upright in bed in an undisturbed room.

His wife came pattering up the stairs. 'Darling!' she cried. 'What's the matter?'

He mumbled, 'Nothing. Bad dream.'

She relaxed, hand on heart. In an angry tone, she started to say: 'You gave me such a shock – '

But a noise from outside interrupted her. There was a wail of sirens and a clang of bells; it was loud and shocking.

The Burckhardts stared at each other for a heartbeat, then hurried fearfully to the window.

There were no rumbling fire engines in the street, only a small panel truck, cruising slowly along. Flaring loudspeaker horns crowned its top. From them issued the screaming sound of sirens, growing in intensity, mixed with the rumble of heavy-duty engines and the sound of bells. It was a perfect record of fire engines arriving at a four-alarm blaze.

Burckhardt said in amazement, 'Mary, that's against the law! Do you know what they're doing? They're playing records of a fire. What are they up to?'

'Maybe it's a practical joke,' his wife offered.

'Joke? Waking up the whole neighbourhood at six o'clock in the morning?' He shook his head. 'The police will be here in ten minutes,' he predicted. 'Wait and see.'

But the police weren't – not in ten minutes, or at all. Whoever the pranksters in the car were, they apparently had a police permit for their games.

The car took a position in the middle of the block and stood

silent for a few minutes. Then there was a crackle from the speaker, and a giant voice chanted:

'Feckle Freezers!
Feckle Freezers!
Gotta have a
Feckle Freezer!
Feckle, Feckle, Feckle
Feckle, Feckle, Feckle – '

It went on and on. Every house on the block had faces staring out of windows by then. The voice was not merely loud; it was nearly deafening.

Burckhardt shouted to his wife, over the uproar, 'What the hell is a Feckle Freezer?'

'Some kind of a freezer, I guess, dear,' she shrieked back unhelpfully.

Abruptly the noise stopped and the truck stood silent. It was a still misty morning; the sun's rays came horizontally across the rooftops. It was impossible to believe that, a moment ago, the silent block had been bellowing the name of a freezer.

'A crazy advertising trick,' Buckhardt said bitterly. He yawned and turned away from the window. 'Might as well get dressed. I guess that's the end of – '

The bellow caught him from behind; it was almost like a hard slap on the ears. A harsh, sneering voice, louder than the archangel's trumpet, howled:

'Have you got a freezer? *It stinks!* If it isn't a Feckle Freezer, *it stinks!* If it's a last year's Feckle Freezer, *it stinks!* Only this year's Feckle Freezer is any good at all! You know who owns an Ajax Freezer? Fairies own Ajax Freezers! You know who owns a Triplecold Freezer? Commies own Triplecold Freezers! Every freezer but a brand-new Feckle Freezer *stinks!*'

The voice screamed inarticulately with rage. 'I'm warning you! Get out and buy a Feckle Freezer right away! Hurry up! Hurry for Feckle! Hurry for Feckle! Hurry, hurry, hurry, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle . . . '

It stopped eventually. Burckhardt licked his lips. He started to

say to his wife, 'Maybe we ought to call the police about – ' when the speakers erupted again. It caught him off guard; it was intended to catch him off guard. It screamed:

'Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle. Cheap freezers ruin your food. You'll get sick and throw up. You'll get sick and die. Buy a Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle! Ever take a piece of meat out of the freezer you've got and see how rotten and mouldy it is? Buy a Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle, Feckle. Do you want to eat rotten, stinking food? Or do you want to wise up and buy a Feckle, Feckle, Feckle – '

That did it. With fingers that kept stabbing the wrong holes, Burckhardt finally managed to dial the local police station. He got a busy signal – it was apparent that he was not the only one with the same idea – and while he was shakingly dialling again, the noise outside stopped.

He looked out the window. The truck was gone.

Burckhardt loosened his tie and ordered another Frosty-Flip from the waiter. If only they wouldn't keep the Crystal Café so *hot!* The new paint job – searing reds and blinding yellows – was bad enough, but someone seemed to have the delusion that this was January instead of June; the place was a good ten degrees warmer than outside.

He swallowed the Frosty-Flip in two gulps. It had a kind of peculiar flavour, he thought, but not bad. It certainly cooled you off, just as the waiter had promised. He reminded himself to pick up a carton of them on the way home; Mary might like them. She was always interested in something new.

He stood up awkwardly as the girl came across the restaurant toward him. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in Tylerton. Chin-height, honey-blonde hair, and a figure that – well, it was all hers. There was no doubt in the world that the dress that clung to her was the only thing she wore. He felt as if he were blushing as she greeted him.

'Mr Burckhardt.' The voice was like distant tomtoms. 'It's wonderful of you to let me see you, after this morning.'

He cleared his throat. 'Not at all. Won't you sit down, Miss – '

'April Horn,' she murmured, sitting down – beside him, not

where he had pointed on the other side of the table. 'Call me April, won't you?'

She was wearing some kind of perfume, Burckhardt noted with what little of his mind was functioning at all. It didn't seem fair that she should be using perfume as well as everything else. He came to with a start and realized that the waiter was leaving with an order for *filets mignon* for two.

'Hey!' he objected.

'Please, Mr Burckhardt.' Her shoulder was against his, her face was turned to him, her breath was warm, her expression was tender and solicitous. 'This is all on the Feckle Corporation. Please let them – it's the *least* they can do.'

He felt her hand burrowing into his pocket.

'I put the price of the meal into your pocket,' she whispered conspiratorially. 'Please do that for me, won't you? I mean I'd appreciate it if you'd pay the waiter – I'm old-fashioned about things like that.'

She smiled meltingly, then became mock-businesslike. 'But you must take the money,' she insisted. 'Why, you're letting Feckle off lightly if you do! You could sue them for every nickel they've got, disturbing your sleep like that.'

With a dizzy feeling, as though he had just seen someone make a rabbit disappear into a top hat, he said, 'Why, it really wasn't so bad, uh, April. A little noisy, maybe, but – '

'Oh, Mr Burckhardt!' The blue eyes were wide and admiring. 'I *knew* you'd understand. It's just that – well, it's such a *wonderful* freezer that some of the outside men get carried away, so to speak. As soon as the main office found out about what happened, they sent representatives around to every house on the block to apologize. Your wife told us where we could phone you – and I'm so very pleased that you were willing to let me have lunch with you, so that I could apologize, too. Because truly, Mr Burckhardt, it is a *fine* freezer.

'I shouldn't tell you this, but – ' the blue eyes were shyly lowered – 'I'd do almost anything for Feckle Freezers. It's more than a job to me.' She looked up. She was enchanting. 'I bet you think I'm silly, don't you?'

Burckhardt coughed. 'Well, I – '

'Oh, you don't want to be unkind!' She shook her head. 'No, don't pretend. You think it's silly. But really, Mr Burckhardt, you wouldn't think so if you knew more about the Feckle. Let me show you this little booklet – '

Burckhardt got back from lunch a full hour later. It wasn't only the girl who delayed him. There had been a curious interview with a little man named Swanson, whom he barely knew, who had stopped him with desperate urgency on the street – and then left him cold.

But it didn't matter much. Mr Barth, for the first time since Burckhardt had worked there, was out for the day – leaving Burckhardt stuck with the quarterly tax returns.

What did matter, though, was that somehow he had signed a purchase order for a twelve-cubic-foot Feckle Freezer, upright model, self-defrosting, list price $625, with a ten per cent 'courtesy' discount – 'Because of that *horrid* affair this morning, Mr Burckhardt,' she had said.

And he wasn't sure how he could explain it to his wife.

He needn't have worried. As he walked in the front door, his wife said almost immediately, 'I wonder if we can't afford a new freezer, dear. There was a man here to apologize about that noise and – well, we got to talking and – '

She had signed a purchase order, too.

It had been the damnedest day, Burckhardt thought later, on his way up to bed. But the day wasn't done with him yet. At the head of the stairs, the weakened spring in the electric light switch refused to click at all. He snapped it back and forth angrily and, of course, succeeded in jarring the tumbler out of its pins. The wires shorted and every light in the house went out.

'Damn!' said Guy Burckhardt.

'Fuse?' His wife shrugged sleepily: 'Let it go till the morning, dear.'

Burckhardt shook his head. 'You go back to bed. I'll be right along.'

It wasn't so much that he cared about fixing the fuse, but he was too restless for sleep. He disconnected the bad switch with a screw-

driver, stumbled down into the black kitchen, found the flashlight and climbed gingerly down the cellar stairs. He located a spare fuse, pushed an empty trunk over to the fuse box to stand on, and twisted out the old fuse.

When the new one was in, he heard the starting click and steady drone of the refrigerator in the kitchen overhead.

He headed back to the steps, and stopped.

Where the old trunk had been, the cellar floor gleamed oddly bright. He inspected it in the flashlight beam. It was metal!

'Son of a gun,' said Guy Burckhardt. He shook his head unbelievingly. He peered closer, rubbed the edges of the metallic patch with his thumb and acquired an annoying cut – the edges were *sharp*.

The stained cement floor of the cellar was a thin shell. He found a hammer and cracked it off in a dozen spots – everywhere was metal.

The whole cellar was a copper box. Even the cement-brick walls were false fronts over a metal sheath!

Baffled, he attacked one of the foundation beams. That, at least, was real wood. The glass in the cellar windows was real glass.

He sucked his bleeding thumb and tried the base of the cellar stairs. Real wood. He chipped at the bricks under the oil burner. Real bricks. The retaining walls, the floor – they were faked.

It was as though someone had shored up the house with a frame of metal and then laboriously concealed the evidence.

The biggest surprise was the upside-down boat hull that blocked the rear half of the cellar, relic of a brief home workshop period that Burckhardt had gone through a couple of years before. From above, it looked perfectly normal. Inside, though, where there should have been thwarts and seats and lockers, there was a mere tangle of braces, rough and unfinished.

'But I *built* that!' Burckhardt exclaimed, forgetting his thumb. He leaned against the hull dizzily, trying to think this thing through. For reasons beyond his comprehension, someone had taken his boat and his cellar away, maybe his whole house, and replaced them with a clever mock-up of the real thing.

'That's crazy,' he said to the empty cellar. He stared around in

the light of the flash. He whispered, 'What in the name of Heaven would anybody do that for?'

Reason refused an answer; there wasn't any reasonable answer. For long minutes, Burckhardt contemplated the uncertain picture of his own sanity.

He peered under the boat again, hoping to reassure himself that it was a mistake, just his imagination. But the sloppy, unfinished bracing was unchanged. He crawled under for a better look, feeling the rough wood incredulously. Utterly impossible!

He switched off the flashlight and started to wriggle out. But he didn't make it. In the moment between the command to his legs to move and the crawling out, he felt a sudden draining weariness flooding through him.

Consciousness went – not easily, but as though it were being taken away, and Guy Burckhardt was asleep.

III

On the morning of June the 16th, Guy Burckhardt woke up in a cramped position huddled under the hull of the boat in his basement – and raced upstairs to find it was June the 15th.

The first thing he had done was to make a frantic, hasty inspection on the boat hull, the faked cellar floor, the imitation stone. They were all as he had remembered them – all completely unbelievable.

The kitchen was its placid, unexciting self. The electric clock was purring soberly around the dial. Almost six o'clock, it said. His wife would be waking at any moment.

Burckhardt flung open the front door and stared out into the quiet street. The morning paper was tossed carelessly against the steps – and as he retrieved it, he noticed that this was the 15th day of June.

But that was impossible. *Yesterday* was the 15th of June. It was not a date one would forget – it was quarterly tax-return day.

He went back into the hall and picked up the telephone; he dialled for Weather Information, and got a well-modulated chant: '– and cooler, some showers. Barometric pressure thirty point zero

four, rising . . . United States Weather Bureau forecast for June the 15th. Warm and sunny, with high around – '

He hung the phone up. June the 15th.

'Holy heaven!' Burckhardt said prayerfully. Things were very odd indeed. He heard the ring of his wife's alarm and bounded up the stairs.

Mary Burckhardt was sitting upright in bed with the terrified, uncomprehending stare of someone just waking out of a nightmare.

'Oh!' she gasped, as her husband came in the room. 'Darling, I just had the most *terrible* dream! It was like an explosion and – '

'Again?' Burckhardt asked, not very sympathetically. 'Mary, something's funny! I *knew* there was something wrong all day yesterday and – '

He went on to tell her about the copper box that was the cellar, and the odd mock-up someone had made of his boat. Mary looked astonished, then alarmed, then placatory and uneasy.

She said, 'Dear, are you *sure?* Because I was cleaning that old trunk out just last week and I didn't notice anything.'

'Positive!' said Guy Burckhardt. 'I dragged it over to the wall to step on it to put a new fuse in after we blew the lights out and – '

'After we what?' Mary was looking more than merely alarmed.

'After we blew the lights out. You know, when the switch at the head of the stairs stuck. I went down to the cellar and – '

Mary sat up in bed. 'Guy, the switch didn't stick. I turned out the lights myself last night.'

Burckhardt glared at his wife. 'Now I *know* you didn't! Come here and take a look!'

He stalked out to the landing and dramatically pointed to the bad switch, the one that he had unscrewed and left hanging the night before . . .

Only it wasn't. It was as it had always been. Unbelieving, Burckhardt pressed it and the lights sprang up in both halls.

Mary, looking pale and worried, left him to go down to the kitchen and start breakfast. Burckhardt stood staring at the switch for a long time. His mental processes were gone beyond the point of disbelief and shock; they simply were not functioning.

He shaved and dressed and ate his breakfast in a state of numb introspection. Mary didn't disturb him; she was apprehensive and soothing. She kissed him good-bye as he hurried out to the bus without another word.

Miss Mitkin, at the reception desk, greeted him with a yawn. 'Morning,' she said drowsily. 'Mr Barth won't be in today.'

Burckhardt started to say something, but checked himself. She would not know that Barth hadn't been in yesterday, either, because she was tearing a June the 14th pad off her calendar to make way for the 'new' June the 15th sheet.

He staggered to his own desk and stared unseeingly at the morning's mail. It had not even been opened yet, but he knew that the Factory Distributors envelope contained an order for twenty thousand feet of the new acoustic tile, and the one from Finebeck & Sons was a complaint.

After a long while, he forced himself to open them. They were.

By lunchtime, driven by a desperate sense of urgency, Burckhardt made Miss Mitkin take her lunch hour first – the June-fifteenth-that-was-yesterday *he* had gone first. She went, looking vaguely worried about his strained insistence, but it made no difference to Burckhardt's mood.

The phone rang and Burckhardt picked it up abstractedly. 'Contro Chemicals Downtown, Burckhardt speaking.'

The voice said, 'This is Swanson,' and stopped.

Burckhardt waited expectantly, but that was all. He said, 'Hello?'

Again the pause. Then Swanson asked in sad resignation, 'Still nothing, eh?'

'Nothing what? Swanson, is there something you want? You came up to me yesterday and went through this routine. You – '

The voice crackled: 'Burckhardt! Oh, my good heavens, *you remember!* Stay right there – I'll be down in half an hour!'

'What's this all about?'

'Never mind,' the little man said exultantly. 'Tell you about it when I see you. Don't say any more over the phone – somebody may be listening. Just wait there. Say, hold on a minute. Will you be alone in the office?'

'Well, no. Miss Mitkin will probably – '

'Hell. Look, Burckhardt, where do you eat lunch? Is it good and noisy?'

'Why, I suppose so. The Crystal Café. It's just about a block – '

'I know where it is. Meet you in half an hour!' And the receiver clicked.

The Crystal Café was no longer painted red, but the temperature was still up. And they had added piped-in music interspersed with commercials. The advertisements were for Frosty-Flip, Marlin Cigarettes – 'They're sanitized,' the announcer purred – and something called Choco-Bite candy bars that Burckhardt couldn't remember ever having heard of before. But he heard more about them quickly enough.

While he was waiting for Swanson to show up, a girl in the cellophane skirt of a nightclub cigarette vendor came through the restaurant with a tray of tiny scarlet-wrapped candies.

'Choco-Bites are *tangy*,' she was murmuring as she came close to his table. 'Choco-Bites are *tangier* than tangy!'

Burckhardt, intent on watching for the strange little man who had phoned him, paid little attention. But as she scattered a handful of the confections over the table next to his, smiling at the occupants, he caught a glimpse of her and turned to stare.

'Why, Miss Horn!' he said.

The girl dropped her tray of candies.

Burckhardt rose, concerned over the girl. 'Is something wrong?'

But she fled.

The manager of the restaurant was staring suspiciously at Burckhardt, who sank back in his seat and tried to look inconspicuous. He hadn't insulted the girl! Maybe she was just a very strictly reared young lady, he thought – in spite of the long bare legs under the cellophane skirt – and when he addressed her, she thought he was a masher.

Ridiculous idea. Burckhardt scowled uneasily and picked up his menu.

'Burckhardt!' It was a shrill whisper.

Burckhardt looked up over the top of his menu, startled. In the seat across from him, the little man named Swanson was sitting, tensely poised.

'Burckhardt!' the little man whispered again. 'Let's go out of here! They're on to you now. If you want to stay alive, come on!'

There was no arguing with the man. Burckhardt gave the hovering manager a sick, apologetic smile and followed Swanson out. The little man seemed to know where he was going. In the street, he clutched Burckhardt by the elbow and hurried him off down the block.

'Did you see her?' he demanded. 'That Horn woman, in the phone booth? She'll have them here in five minutes, believe me, so hurry it up!'

Although the street was full of people and cars, nobody was paying any attention to Burckhardt and Swanson. The air had a nip in it – more like October than June, Burckhardt thought, in spite of the weather bureau. And he felt like a fool, following this mad little man down the street, running away from some 'them' toward – toward what? The little man might be crazy, but he was afraid. And the fear was infectious.

'In here!' panted the little man.

It was another restaurant – more of a bar, really, and a sort of second-rate place that Burckhardt never had patronized.

'Right straight through,' Swanson whispered; and Burckhardt, like a biddable boy, sidestepped through the mass of tables to the far end of the restaurant.

It was L-shaped, with a front on two streets at right angles to each other. They came out on the side street, Swanson staring coldly back at the question-looking cashier, and crossed to the opposite sidewalk.

They were under the marquee of a movie theatre. Swanson's expression began to relax.

'Lost them!' he crowed softly. 'We're almost there.'

He stepped up to the window and bought two tickets. Burckhardt trailed him in to the theatre. It was a weekday matinee and the place was almost empty. From the screen came sounds of gunfire and horse's hoofs. A solitary usher, leaning against a bright brass rail, looked briefly at them and went back to staring boredly at the picture as Swanson led Burckhardt down a flight of carpeted marble steps.

They were in the lounge and it was empty. There was a door for men and one for ladies; and there was a third door, marked MANAGER in gold letters. Swanson listened at the door, and gently opened it and peered inside.

'Okay,' he said, gesturing.

Burckhardt followed him through an empty office, to another door – a closet, probably, because it was unmarked.

But it was no closet. Swanson opened it warily, looked inside, then motioned Burckhardt to follow.

It was a tunnel, metal-walled, brightly lit. Empty, it stretched vacantly away in both directions from them.

Burckhardt looked wondering around. One thing he knew and knew full well:

No such tunnel belonged under Tylerton.

There was a room off the tunnel with chairs and a desk and what looked like television screens. Swanson slumped in a chair, panting.

'We're all right for a while here,' he wheezed. 'They don't come here much any more. If they do, we'll hear them and we can hide.'

'Who?' demanded Burckhardt.

The little man said, 'Martians!' His voice cracked on the word and the life seemed to go out of him. In morose tones, he went on: 'Well, I think they're Martians. Although you could be right, you know; I've had plenty of time to think it over these last few weeks, after they got you, and it's possible they're Russians after all. Still – '

'Start from the beginning. Who got me when?'

Swanson sighed. 'So we have to go through the whole thing again. All right. It was about two months ago that you banged on my door, late at night. You were all beat up – scared silly. You begged me to help you – '

'*I* did?'

'Naturally you don't remember any of this. Listen and you'll understand. You were talking a blue streak about being captured and threatened and your wife being dead and coming back to life, and all kinds of mixed-up nonsense. I thought you were crazy.

But – well, I've always had a lot of respect for you. And you begged me to hide you and I have this darkroom, you know. It locks from the inside only. I put the lock on myself. So we went in there – just to humour you – and along about midnight, which was only fifteen or twenty minutes after, we passed out.'

'Passed out?'

Swanson nodded. 'Both of us. It was like being hit with a sandbag. Look, didn't that happen to you again last night?'

'I guess it did,' Burckhardt shook his head uncertainly.

'Sure. And then all of a sudden we were awake again, and you said you were going to show me something funny, and we went out and bought a paper. And the date on it was June the 15th.'

'June the 15th? But that's today! I mean – '

'You got it, friend. It's *always* today!'

It took time to penetrate.

Burckhardt said wonderingly, 'You've hidden out in that darkroom for how many weeks?'

'How can I tell? Four or five, maybe. I lost count. And every day the same – always the fifteenth of June, always my landlady, Mrs Keefer, is sweeping the front steps, always the same headline in the papers at the corner. It gets monotonous, friend.'

IV

It was Burckhardt's idea and Swanson despised it, but he went along. He was the type who always went along.

'It's dangerous,' he grumbled worriedly. 'Suppose somebody comes by? They'll spot us and – '

'What have we got to lose?'

Swanson shrugged. 'It's dangerous,' he said again. But he went along.

Burckhardt's idea was very simple. He was sure of only one thing – the tunnel went somewhere. Martians or Russians, fantastic plot or crazy hallucination, whatever was wrong with Tylerton had an explanation, and the place to look for it was at the end of the tunnel.

They jogged along. It was more than a mile before they began

to see an end. They were in luck – at least no one came through the tunnel to spot them. But Swanson had said that it was only at certain hours that the tunnel seemed to be in use.

Always the fifteenth of June. Why? Burckhardt asked himself. Never mind the how. *Why?*

And falling asleep, completely involuntarily – everyone at the same time, it seemed. And not remembering, never remembering anything – Swanson had said how eagerly he saw Burckhardt again, the morning after Burckhardt had incautiously waited five minutes too many before retreating into the darkroom. When Swanson had come to, Burckhardt was gone. Swanson had seen him in the street that afternoon, but Burckhardt had remembered nothing.

And Swanson had lived his mouse's existence for weeks, hiding in the woodwork at night, stealing out by day to search for Burckhardt in pitiful hope, scurrying around the fringe of life, trying to keep from the deadly eyes of *them.*

Them. One of 'them' was the girl named April Horn. It was by seeing her walk carelessly into a telephone booth and never come out that Swanson had found the tunnel. Another was the man at the cigar stand in Burckhardt's office building. There were more, at least a dozen that Swanson knew of or suspected.

They were easy enough to spot, once you knew where to look – for they, alone in Tylerton, changed their roles from day to day. Burckhardt was on that 8.51 bus, every morning of everyday-that-was-June-the-15th, never different by a hair or a moment. But April Horn was sometimes gaudy in the cellophane skirt, giving away candy or cigarettes; sometimes plainly dressed; sometimes not seen by Swanson at all.

Russians? Martians? Whatever they were, what could they be hoping to gain from this mad masquerade?

Burckhardt didn't know the answer – but perhaps it lay beyond the door at the end of the tunnel. They listened carefully and heard distant sounds that could not quite be made out, but nothing that seemed dangerous. They slipped through.

And, through a wide chamber and up a flight of steps, they found they were in what Burckhardt recognized as the Contro Chemicals plant.

Nobody was in sight. By itself, that was not so very odd – the automatized factory had never had very many persons in it. But Burckhardt remembered, from his single visit, the endless, ceaseless busyness of the plant, the valves that opened and closed, the vats that emptied themselves and filled themselves and stirred and cooked and chemically tasted the bubbling liquids they held inside themselves. The plant was never populated, but it was never still.

Only – now it *was* still. Except for the distant sounds, there was no breath of life in it. The captive electronic minds were sending out no commands; the coils and relays were at rest.

Burckhardt said, 'Come on.' Swanson reluctantly followed him through the tangled aisles of stainless steel columns and tanks.

They walked as though they were in the presence of the dead. In a way, they were, for what were the automatons that once had run the factory, if not corpses? The machines were controlled by computers that were really not computers at all, but the electronic analogues of living brains. And if they were turned off, were they not dead? For each had once been a human mind.

Take a master petroleum chemist, infinitely skilled in the separation of crude oil into its fractions. Strap him down, probe into his brain with searching electronic needles. The machine scans the patterns of the mind, translates what it sees into charts and sine waves. Impress these same waves on a robot computer and you have your chemist. Or a thousand copies of your chemist, if you wish, with all of his knowledge and skill, and no human limitations at all.

Put a dozen copies of him into a plant and they will run it all, twenty-four hours a day, seven days of every week, never tiring, never overlooking anything, never forgetting . . .

Swanson stepped up closer to Burckhardt. 'I'm scared,' he said.

They were across the room now and the sounds were louder. They were not machine sounds, but voices; Burckhardt moved cautiously up to a door and dared to peer around it.

It was a smaller room, lined with television screens, each one – a dozen or more, at least – with a man or woman sitting before it, staring into the screen and dictating notes into a recorder. The viewers dialled from scene to scene; no two screens ever showed the same picture.

The pictures seemed to have little in common. One was a store, where a girl dressed like April Horn was demonstrating home freezers. One was a series of shots of kitchens. Burckhardt caught a glimpse of what looked like the cigar stand in his office building.

It was baffling and Burckhardt would have loved to stand there and puzzle it out, but it was too busy a place. There was the chance that someone would look their way or walk out and find them.

They found another room. This one was empty. It was an office, large and sumptuous. It had a desk, littered with papers. Burckhardt stared at them, briefly at first – then, as the words on one of them caught his attention, with incredulous fascination.

He snatched up the topmost sheet, scanned it, and another, while Swanson was frenziedly searching through the drawers.

Burckhardt swore unbelievingly and dropped the papers to the desk.

Swanson, hardly noticing, yelped with delight: 'Look!' He dragged a gun from the desk. 'And it's loaded, too!'

Burckhardt stared at him blankly, trying to assimilate what he had read. Then, as he realized what Swanson had said, Burckhardt's eyes sparked. 'Good man!' he cried. 'We'll take it. We're getting out of here with that gun, Swanson. And we're going to the police! Not the cops in Tylerton, but the F.B.I., maybe. Take a look at this!'

The sheaf he handed Swanson was headed: 'Test Area Progress Report. Subject: Marlin Cigarettes Campaign.' It was mostly tabulated figures that made little sense to Burckhardt and Swanson, but at the end was a summary that said:

Although Test 47-K3 pulled nearly double the number of new users of any of the other tests conducted, it probably cannot be used in the field because of local sound-truck control ordinances.

The tests in the 47-K12 group were second best and our recommendation is that retests be conducted in this appeal, testing each of the three best campaigns with and without the addition of sampling techniques.

An alternative suggestion might be to proceed directly with the top appeal in the K12 series, if the client is unwilling to go to the expense of additional tests.

All of these forecast expectations have an 80% probability of being

within one-half of one per cent of results forecast, and more than 99% probability of coming within 5%.

Swanson looked up from the paper into Burckhardt's eyes. 'I don't get it,' he complained. Burckhardt said, 'I do not blame you. It's crazy, but it fits the facts, Swanson, *it fits the facts*. They aren't Russians and they aren't Martians. These people are advertising men! Somehow – heaven knows how they did it – they've taken Tylerton over. They've got us, all of us, you and me and twenty or thirty thousand other people, right under their thumbs.

'Maybe they hypnotize us and maybe it's something else; but however they do it, what happens is that they let us live a day at a time. They pour advertising into us the whole damned day long. And at the end of the day, they see what happened – and then they wash the day out of our minds and start again the next day with different advertising.'

Swanson's jaw was hanging. He managed to close it and swallow 'Nuts!' he said flatly.

Burckhardt shook his head. 'Sure, it sounds crazy – but this whole thing is crazy. How else would you explain it? You can't deny that most of Tylerton lives the same day over and over again. You've *seen* it. And that's the crazy part and we have to admit that that's true – unless *we* are the crazy ones. And once you admit that somebody, somehow, knows how to accomplish that, the rest of it makes all kinds of sense.

'Think of it, Swanson! They test every last detail before they spend a nickel on advertising! Do you have any idea what that means? Lord knows how much money is involved, but I know for a fact that some companies spend twenty or thirty million dollars a year on advertising. Multiply it, say, by a hundred companies. Say that every one of them learns how to cut its advertising cost by only ten per cent. And that's peanuts, believe me!

'If they know in advance what is going to work, they can cut their costs in half – maybe to less than half, I don't know. But that is saving two or three hundred million dollars a year – and if they pay only ten or twenty per cent of that for the use of Tylerton, it's still dirt cheap for them and a fortune for whoever took over Tylerton.'

Swanson licked his lips. 'You mean,' he offered hesitantly, 'that we're a – well, a kind of captive audience?'

Burckhardt frowned. 'Not exactly.' He thought for a minute. 'You know how a doctor tests something like penicillin? He sets up a series of little colonies of germs on gelatine discs and he tries the stuff on one after another, changing it a little each time. Well, that's us – we're the germs, Swanson. Only it's even more efficient than that. They don't have to test more than one colony, because they can use it over and over again.'

It was too hard for Swanson to take in. He only said: 'What do we do about it?'

'We go to the police. They can't use human beings for guinea pigs!'

'How do we get to the police?'

Burckhardt hesitated. 'I think – ' he began slowly. 'Sure. This place is the office of somebody important. We've got a gun. We will stay right here until he comes along. And he'll get us out of here.'

Simple and direct. Swanson subsided and found a place to sit, against the wall, out of sight of the door. Burckhardt took up a position behind the door itself –

And waited.

The wait was not as long as it might have been. Half an hour, perhaps. Then Burckhardt heard approaching voices and had time for a swift whisper to Swanson before he flattened himself against the wall.

It was a man's voice, and a girl's. The man was saying, ' – reason why you couldn't report on the phone? You're ruining your whole day's test! What the devil's the matter with you, Janet?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Dorchin,' she said in a sweet, clear tone. 'I thought it was important.'

The man grumbled, 'Important! One lousy unit out of twenty-one thousand.'

'But it's the Burckhardt one, Mr Dorchin. Again. And the way he got out of sight, he must have had some help.'

'All right, all right. It doesn't matter, Janet; the Choco-Bite programme is ahead of schedule anyhow. As long as you're this

far, come on in the office and make out your worksheet. And don't worry about the Burckhardt business. He's probably just wandering around. We'll pick him up tonight and – '

They were inside the door. Burckhardt kicked it shut and pointed the gun.

'That's what you think' he said triumphantly.

It was worth the terrified hours, the bewildered sense of insanity, the confusion and fear. It was the most satisfying sensation Burckhardt had ever had in his life. The expression on the man's face was one he had read about but never actually seen: Dorchin's mouth fell open and his eyes went wide, and though he managed to make a sound that might have been a question, it was not in words.

The girl was almost as surprised. And Burckhardt, looking at her, knew why her voice had been so familiar. The girl was the one who had introduced herself to him as April Horn.

Dorchin recovered himself quickly. 'Is this the one?' he asked sharply.

The girl said, 'Yes.'

Dorchin nodded. 'I take it back. You were right. Uh, you – Burckhardt. What do you want?'

Swanson piped up, 'Watch him! He might have another gun.'

'Search him then,' Burckhardt said. 'I'll tell you what we want, Dorchin. We want you to come along with us to the F.B.I. and explain them how you can get away with kidnapping twenty thousand people.'

'Kidnapping?' Dorchin snorted. 'That's ridiculous, man! Put that gun away – you can't get away with this!'

Burckhardt hefted the gun grimly. 'I think I can.'

Dorchin looked furious and sick – but, oddly, not afraid. 'Damn it – ' he started to bellow, then closed his mouth and swallowed. 'Listen,' he said persuasively, 'you're making a big mistake. I haven't kidnapped anybody, believe me!'

'I don't believe you,' said Burckhardt bluntly. 'Why should I?'

'But it's true! Take my word for it!'

Burckhardt shook his head. 'The F.B.I. can take your word if they like. We'll find out. Now how do we get out of here?'

Dorchin opened his mouth to argue.

Burckhardt blazed: 'Don't get in my way! I'm willing to kill you if I have to. Don't you understand that? I've gone through two days of hell and every second of it I blame on you. Kill you? It would be a pleasure and I don't have a thing in the world to lose! Get us out of here!'

Dorchin's face went suddenly opaque. He seemed about to move; but the blonde girl he had called Janet slipped between him and the gun.

'Please!' she begged Burckhardt. 'You don't understand. You mustn't shoot!'

'*Get out of my way!*'

'But, Mr Burckhardt – '

She never finished. Dorchin, his face unreadable, headed for the door. Burckhardt had been pushed one degree too far. He swung the gun, bellowing. The girl called out sharply. He pulled the trigger. Closing on him with pity and pleading in her eyes, she came again between the gun and the man.

Burckhardt aimed low instinctively, to cripple, not to kill. But his aim was not good.

The pistol bullet caught her in the pit of the stomach.

Dorchin was out and away, the door slamming behind him, his footsteps racing into the distance.

Burckhardt hurled the gun across the room and jumped to the girl.

Swanson was moaning, 'That finishes us, Burckhardt. Oh, why did you do it? We could have got away. We should have gone to the police. We were practically out of here! We – '

Burckhardt wasn't listening. He was kneeling beside the girl. She lay flat on her back, arms helter-skelter. There was no blood, hardly any sign of the wound; but the position in which she lay was one that no living human being could have held.

Yet she wasn't dead.

She wasn't dead – and Burckhardt, frozen beside her, thought: *She isn't alive, either.*

There was no pulse, but there was a rhythmic ticking of the outstretched fingers of one hand.

There was no sound of breathing, but there was a hissing, sizzling noise.

The eyes were open and they were looking at Burckhardt. There was neither fear nor pain in them, only a pity deeper than the Pit.

She said, through lips that writhed erratically, 'Don't – worry, Mr Burckhardt. I'm – all right.'

Burckhardt rocked back on his haunches, staring. Where there should have been blood, there was a clean break of a substance that was not flesh; and a curl of thin golden-copper wire.

Burckhardt moistened his lips.

'You're a robot,' he said.

The girl tried to nod. The twitching lips said, 'I am. And so are you.'

V

Swanson, after a single inarticulate sound, walked over to the desk and sat staring at the wall. Burckhardt rocked back and forth beside the shattered puppet on the floor. He had no words.

The girl managed to say, 'I'm – sorry all this happened.' The lovely lips twisted into a rictus sneer, frightening on that smooth young face, until she got them under control. 'Sorry,' she said again. 'The – nerve centre was right about where the bullet hit. Makes it difficult to – control this body.'

Burckhardt nodded automatically, accepting the apology. Robots. It was obvious, now that he knew it. In hindsight, it was inevitable. He thought of his mystic notions of hypnosis or Martians or something stranger still – idiotic, for the simple fact of created robots fitted the facts better and more economically.

All the evidence had been before him. The automatized factory, with its transplanted minds – why not transplant a mind into a humanoid robot, give it its original owner's features and form?

Could it know that it was a robot?

'All of us,' Burckhardt said, hardly aware that he spoke out loud. 'My wife and my secretary and you and the neighbours. All of us the same.'

'No.' The voice was stronger. 'Not exactly the same, all of us. I chose it, you see. I – ' this time the convulsed lips were not a

random contortion of the nerves – 'I was an ugly woman, Mr Burckhardt, and nearly sixty years old. Life had passed me. And when Mr Dorchin offered me the chance to live again as a beautiful girl, I jumped at the opportunity. Believe me, I *jumped*, in spite of its disadvantages. My flesh body is still alive – it is sleeping, while I am here. I could go back to it. But I never do.'

'And the rest of us?'

'Different, Mr Burckhardt. I work here. I'm carrying out Mr Dorchin's orders, mapping the results of the advertising tests, watching you and the others live as he makes you live. I do it by choice, but you have no choice. Because, you see, you are dead.'

'Dead?' cried Burckhardt; it was almost a scream.

The blue eyes looked at him unwinkingly and he knew that it was no lie. He swallowed, marvelling at the intricate mechanisms that let him swallow, and sweat, and eat.

He said: 'Oh. The explosion in my dream.'

'It was no dream. You are right – the explosion. That was real and this plant was the cause of it. The storage tanks let go and what the blast didn't get, the fumes killed a little later. But almost everyone died in the blast, twenty-one thousand persons. You died with them and that was Dorchin's chance.'

'The damned ghoul!' said Burckhardt.

The twisted shoulders shrugged with an odd grace. 'Why? You were gone. And you and all the others were what Dorchin wanted – a whole town, a perfect slice of America. It's as easy to transfer a pattern from a dead brain as a living one. Easier – the dead can't say no. Oh, it took work and money – the town was a wreck – but it was possible to rebuild it entirely, especially because it wasn't necessary to have all the details exact.

'There were the homes where even the brains had been utterly destroyed, and those are empty inside, and the cellars that needn't be too perfect, and the streets that hardly matter. And anyway, it only has to last for one day. The same day – June the 15th – over and over again; and if someone finds something a little wrong, somehow, the discovery won't have time to snowball, wreck the validity of the tests, because all errors are cancelled out at midnight.'

The face tried to smile. 'That's the dream, Mr Burckhardt, that day of June the 15th, because you never really lived it. It's a present from Mr Dorchin, a dream that he gives you and then takes back at the end of the day, when he had all his figures on how many of you responded to what variation of which appeal, and the maintenance crews go down the tunnel to go through the whole city, washing out the new dream with their little electronic drains, and then the dream starts all over again. On June the 15th.

'Always June the 15th, because June the 14th is the last day any of you can remember alive. Sometimes the crews miss someone – as they missed you, because you were under your boat. But it doesn't matter. The ones who are missed give themselves away if they show it – and if they don't, it doesn't affect the test. But they don't drain us, the ones of us who work for Dorchin. We sleep when the power is turned off, just as you do. When we wake up, though, we remember.' The face contorted wildly. 'If I could only forget!'

Burckhardt said unbelievingly, 'All this to sell merchandise! It must have cost millions!'

The robot called April Horn said, 'It did. But it has made millions for Dorchin, too. And that's not the end of it. Once he finds the master words that make people act, do you suppose he will stop with that? Do you suppose – '

The door opened, interrupting her. Burckhardt whirled. Belatedly remembering Dorchin's flight, he raised the gun.

'Don't shoot,' ordered the voice calmly. It was not Dorchin; it was another robot, this one not disguised with the clever plastics and cosmetics, but shining plain. It said metallically: 'Forget it, Burckhardt. You're not accomplishing anything. Give me that gun before you do any more damage. Give it to me *now*.'

Burckhardt bellowed angrily. The gleam on this robot torso was steel; Burckhardt was not at all sure that his bullets would pierce it, or do much harm if they did. He would have put it on the test –

But from behind him came a whimpering, scurrying whirlwind; its name was Swanson, hysterical with fear. He catapulted into Burckhardt and sent him sprawling, the gun flying free.

'Please!' begged Swanson incoherently, prostrate before the steel robot. 'He would have shot you – please don't hurt me! Let me work for you, like that girl. I'll do anything, anything you tell me – '

The robot voice said. 'We don't need your help.' It took two precise steps and stood over the gun – and spurned it, left it lying on the floor.

The wrecked blonde robot said, without emotion, 'I doubt that I can hold out much longer, Mr Dorchin.'

'Disconnect if you have to,' replied the steel robot.

Burckhardt blinked. 'But you're not Dorchin!'

The steel robot turned deep eyes on him. 'I am,' it said.'Not in the flesh – but this is the body I am using at the moment. I doubt that you can damage this one with the gun. The other robot body was more vulnerable. Now will you stop this nonsense? I don't want to have to damage you; you're too expensive for that. Will you just sit down and let the maintenance crews adjust you?'

Swanson grovelled. 'You – you won't punish us?'

The steel robot had no expression, but its voice was almost surprised. 'Punish you?' it repeated on a rising tone. 'How?'

Swanson quivered as though the word had been a whip; but Burckhardt flared: 'Adjust *him*, if he'll let you – but not me! You're going to have to do me a lot of damage, Dorchin. I don't care what I cost or how much trouble it's going to be to put me back together again. But I'm going out of that door! If you want to stop me, you'll have to kill me. You won't stop me any other way!'

The steel robot took a half-step toward him, and Burckhardt involuntarily checked his stride. He stood poised and shaking, ready for death, ready for attack, ready for anything that might happen.

Ready for anything except what did happen. For Dorchin's steel body merely stepped aside, between Burckhardt and the gun, but leaving the door free.

'Go ahead,' invited the steel robot. 'Nobody's stopping you.'

Outside the door, Burckhardt brought up sharp. It was insane of Dorchin to let him go! Robot or flesh, victim or beneficiary, there was nothing to stop him from going to the F.B.I. or whatever law

he could find away from Dorchin's synthetic empire, and telling his story. Surely the corporation who paid Dorchin for test results had no notion of the ghoul's technique he used; Dorchin would have to keep it from them, for the breath of publicity would put a stop to it. Walking out meant death, perhaps – but at that moment in his pseudo-life, death was no terror for Burckhardt.

There was no one in the corridor. He found a window and stared out of it. There was Tylerton – an ersatz city, but looking so real and familiar that Burckhardt almost imagined the whole episode a dream. It was no dream, though. He was certain of that in his heart and equally certain that nothing in Tylerton could help him now.

It had to be the other direction.

It took him a quarter of an hour to find a way, but he found it – skulking through the corridors, dodging the suspicion of footsteps, knowing for certain that his hiding was in vain, for Dorchin was undoubtedly aware of every move he made. But no one stopped him, and he found another door.

It was a simple enough door from the inside. But when he opened it and stepped out, it was like nothing he had ever seen.

First there was light – brilliant, incredible, blinding light. Burckhardt blinked upward, unbelieving and afraid.

He was standing on a ledge of smooth, finished metal. Not a dozen yards from his feet, the ledge dropped sharply away; he hardly dared approach the brink, but even from where he stood he could see no bottom to the chasm before him. And the gulf extended out of sight into the glare on either side of him.

No wonder Dorchin could so easily give him his freedom! From the factory, there was nowhere to go – but how incredible this fantastic gulf, how impossible the hundred white and blinding suns that hung above!

A voice by his side said inquiringly, 'Burckhardt?' And thunder rolled the name, mutteringly soft, back and forth in the abyss before him.

Burckhardt wet his lips. 'Y-yes?' he croaked.

'This is Dorchin. Not a robot this time, but Dorchin in the flesh, talking to you on a hand mike. Now you have seen, Burckhardt.

Now will you be reasonable and let the maintenance crews take over?'

Burckhardt stood paralysed. One of the moving mountains in the blinding glare came toward him.

It towered hundreds of feet over his head; he stared up at its top, squinting helplessly into the light.

It looked like –

Impossible!

The voice in the loudspeaker at the door said, 'Burckhardt?' But he was unable to answer.

A heavy rumbling sigh. 'I see,' said the voice. 'You finally understand. There's no place to go. You know it now. I could have told you, but you might not have believed me, so it was better for you to see it yourself. And after all, Burckhardt, why would I reconstruct a city just the way it was before? I'm a businessman; I count costs. If a thing has to be full-scale, I build it that way. But there wasn't any need to in this case.'

From the mountain before him, Burckhardt helplessly saw a lesser cliff descend carefully toward him. It was long and dark, and at the end of it was whiteness, five-fingered whiteness . . .

'Poor little Burckhardt,' crooned the loudspeaker, while the echoes rumbled through the enormous chasm that was only a workshop. 'It must have been quite a shock for you to find out you were living in a town built on a table top.'

VI

It was the morning of June the 15th, and Guy Burckhardt woke up screaming out of a dream.

It had been a monstrous and incomprehensible dream, of explosions and shadowy figures that were not men and terror beyond words.

He shuddered and opened his eyes.

Outside his bedroom window, a hugely amplified voice was howling.

Burckhardt stumbled over to the window and stared outside. There was an out-of-season chill to the air, more like October than June; but the scene was normal enough – except for the sound-

truck that squatted at kerbside halfway down the block. Its speaker horns blared:

'Are you a coward? Are you a fool? Are you going to let crooked politicians steal the country from you? NO! Are you going to put up with four more years of graft and crime? NO! Are you going to vote straight Federal Party all up and down the ballot? YES! *You just bet you are!*'

Sometimes he screams, sometimes he wheedles, threatens, begs, cajoles . . . but his voice goes on and on through one June the 15th after another.

The Store of the Worlds

ROBERT SHECKLEY

MR WAYNE came to the end of the long, shoulder-high mound of grey rubble, and there was the Store of the Worlds. It was exactly as his friends had described: a small shack constructed of bits of lumber, parts of cars, a piece of galvanized iron and a few rows of crumbling bricks, all daubed over with a watery blue paint.

Mr Wayne glanced back down the long lane of rubble to make sure he hadn't been followed. He tucked his parcel more firmly under his arm; then, with a little shiver at his own audacity, he opened the door and slipped inside.

'Good morning,' the proprietor said.

He, too, was exactly as described: a tall, crafty-looking old fellow with narrow eyes and a downcast mouth. His name was Tompkins. He sat in an old rocking chair, and perched on the back of it was a blue and green parrot. There was one other chair in the store, and a table. On the table was a rusted hypodermic.

'I've heard about your store from friends,' Mr Wayne said.

'Then you know my price,' Tompkins said. 'Have you brought it?'

'Yes,' said Mr Wayne, holding up his parcel. 'But I want to ask first – '

'They always want to ask,' Tompkins said to the parrot, who blinked. 'Go ahead, ask.'

'I want to know what really happens.'

Tompkins sighed. 'What happens is this. You pay me my fee. I give you an injection which knocks you out. Then, with the aid of certain gadgets which I have in the back of the store, I liberate your mind.'

Tompkins smiled as he said that, and his silent parrot seemed to smile, too.

'What happens then?' Mr Wayne asked.

'Your mind, liberated from its body, is able to choose from the

countless probability-worlds which the Earth casts off in every second of its existence.'

Grinning now, Tompkins sat up in his rocking chair and began to show signs of enthusiasm.

'Yes, my friend, though you might not have suspected it, from the moment this battered Earth was born out of the sun's fiery womb, it cast off its alternate-probability worlds. Worlds without end, emanating from events large and small; every Alexander and every amoeba creating worlds, just as ripples will spread in a pond no matter how big or how small the stone you throw. Doesn't every object cast a shadow? Well, my friend, the Earth itself is four-dimensional; therefore it casts three-dimensional shadows, solid reflections of itself through every moment of its being. Millions, billions of Earths! An infinity of Earths! And your mind, liberated by me, will be able to select any of these worlds, and to live upon it for a while.'

Mr Wayne was uncomfortably aware that Tompkins sounded like a circus barker, proclaiming marvels that simply couldn't exist. But, Mr Wayne reminded himself, things had happened within his own lifetime which he would never have believed possible. Never! So perhaps the wonders that Tompkins spoke of were possible, too.

Mr Wayne said, 'My friends also told me – '

'That I was an out-and-out fraud?' Tompkins asked.

'Some of them *implied* that,' Mr Wayne said cautiously. 'But I try to keep an open mind. They also said – '

'I know what your dirty-minded friends said. They told you about the fulfilment of desire. Is that what you want to hear about?'

'Yes,' said Mr Wayne. 'They told me that whatever I wished for – whatever I wanted – '

'Exactly,' Tompkins said. 'The thing could work in no other way. There are the infinite worlds to choose among. Your mind chooses, and is guided only by desire. Your deepest desire is the only thing that counts. If you have been harbouring a secret dream of murder – '

'Oh hardly, hardly!' cried Mr Wayne.

' – then you will go to a world where you *can* murder, where you

can roll in blood, where you can outdo Sade or Caesar, or whoever your idol may be. Suppose it's power you want? Then you'll choose a world where you are a god, literally and actually. A bloodthirsty Juggernaut, perhaps, or an all-wise Buddha.'

'I doubt very much if I – '

'There are other desires, too,' Tompkins said. 'All heavens and all hells. Unbridled sexuality. Gluttony, drunkenness, love, fame – anything you want.'

'Amazing!' said Mr Wayne.

'Yes,' Tompkins agreed. 'Of course, my little list doesn't exhaust all the possibilities, all the combinations and permutations of desire. For all I know you might want a simple, placid, pastoral existence on a South Seas island among idealized natives.'

'That sounds more like me,' Mr Wayne said, with a shy laugh.

'But who knows?' Tompkins asked. 'Even you might not know what your true desires are. They might involve your own death.'

'Does that happen often?' Mr Wayne asked anxiously.

'Occasionally.'

'I wouldn't want to die,' Mr Wayne said.

'It hardly ever happens,' Tompkins said, looking at the parcel in Mr Wayne's hands.

'If you say so . . . But how do I know all this is real? Your fee is extremely high, it'll take everything I own. And for all I know, you'll give me a drug and I'll just *dream!* Everything I own just for a – a shot of heroin and a lot of fancy words!'

Tompkins smiled reassuringly. 'The experience has no drug-like quality about it. And no sensation of a dream, either.'

'If it's *true*,' Mr Wayne said, a little petulantly, 'why can't I stay in the world of my desire for good?'

'I'm working on that,' Tompkins said. 'That's why I charge so high a fee; to get materials, to experiment. I'm trying to find a way of making the transition permanent. So far I haven't been able to loosen the cord that binds a man to his own Earth – and pulls him back to it. Not even the great mystics could cut that cord, except with death. But I still have my hopes.'

'It would be a great thing if you succeeded,' Mr Wayne said politely.

'Yes it would!' Tompkins cried, with a surprising burst of

passion. 'For then I'd turn my wretched shop into an escape hatch! My process would be free then, free for everyone! Everyone would go to the Earth of their desires, the Earth that really suited them, and leave *this* damned place to the rats and worms – '

Tompkins cut himself off in mid-sentence, and became icy calm. 'But I fear my prejudices are showing. I can't offer a permanent escape from the Earth yet; not one that doesn't involve death. Perhaps I never will be able to. For now, all I can offer you is a vacation, a change, a taste of another world, and a look at your own desires. You know my fee. I'll refund it if the experience isn't satisfactory.'

'That's good of you,' Mr Wayne said, quite earnestly. 'But there's that other matter my friends told me about. The ten years off my life.'

'That can't be helped,' Tompkins said, 'and can't be refunded. My process is a tremendous strain on the nervous system, and life-expectancy is shortened accordingly. That's one of the reasons why our so-called government has declared my process illegal.'

'But they don't enforce the ban very firmly,' Mr Wayne said.

'No. Officially the process is banned as a harmful fraud. But officials are men, too. They'd like to leave this Earth, just like everyone else.'

'The cost,' Mr Wayne mused, gripping his parcel tightly. 'And ten years off my life! For the fulfilment of my secret desires . . . Really, I must give this some thought.'

'Think away,' Tompkins said indifferently.

All the way home Mr Wayne thought about it. When his train reached Port Washington, Long Island, he was still thinking. And driving his car from the station to his home he was still thinking about Tompkins's crafty old face, and worlds of probability, and the fulfilment of desire.

But when he stepped inside his house, those thoughts had to stop. Janet, his wife, wanted him to speak sharply to the maid, who had been drinking again. His son Tommy wanted help with the sloop, which was to be launched tomorrow. And his baby daughter wanted to tell about her day in kindergarten.

Mr Wayne spoke pleasantly but firmly to the maid. He helped Tommy put the final coat of copper paint on the sloop's bottom,

and he listened to Peggy tell about her adventures in the playground.

Later, when the children were in bed and he and Janet were alone in their living room, she asked him if something were wrong.

'Wrong?'

'You seem to be worried about something,' Janet said. 'Did you have a bad day at the office?'

'Oh, just the usual sort of thing . . . '

He certainly was not going to tell Janet, or anyone else, that he had taken the day off and gone to see Tompkins in his crazy old Store of the Worlds. Nor was he going to speak about the right every man should have, once in his life-time, to fulfil his most secret desires. Janet, with her good common sense, would never understand that.

The next days at the office were extremely hectic. All of Wall Street was in a mild panic over events in the Middle East and in Asia, and stocks were reacting accordingly. Mr Wayne settled down to work. He tried not to think of the fulfilment of desire at the cost of everything he possessed, with ten years of his life thrown in for good measure. It was crazy! Old Tompkins must be insane!

On weekends he went sailing with Tommy. The old sloop was behaving very well, making practically no water through her bottom seams. Tommy wanted a new suit of racing sails, but Mr Wayne sternly rejected that. Perhaps next year, if the market looked better. For now, the old sails would have to do.

Sometimes at night, after the children were asleep, he and Janet would go sailing. Long Island Sound was quiet then, and cool. Their boat glided past the blinking buoys, sailing toward the swollen yellow moon.

'I *know* something's on your mind,' Janet said.

'Darling, please!'

'Is there something you're keeping from me?'

'Nothing!'

'Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?'

'Absolutely sure.'

'Then put your arms around me. That's right . . . '

And the sloop sailed itself for a while.

Desire and fulfilment . . . But autumn came, and the sloop had to be hauled. The stock market regained some stability, but Peggy caught the measles. Tommy wanted to know the differences between ordinary bombs, atom bombs, hydrogen bombs, cobalt bombs, and all the other kinds of bombs that were in the news. Mr Wayne explained to the best of his ability. And the maid quit unexpectedly.

Secret desires were all very well. Perhaps he *did* want to kill someone, or live on a South Seas island. But there were responsibilities to consider. He had two growing children, and a better wife than he deserved.

Perhaps around Christmas time . . .

But in mid-winter there was a fire in the unoccupied guest bedroom due to defective wiring. The firemen put out the blaze without much damage, and no one was hurt. But it put any thought of Tompkins out of his mind for a while. First the bedroom had to be repaired, for Mr Wayne was very proud of his gracious old house.

Business was still frantic and uncertain due to the international situation. Those Russians, those Arabs, those Greeks, those Chinese. The intercontinental missiles, the atom bombs, the sputniks . . . Mr Wayne spent long days at the office, and sometimes evenings, too. Tommy caught the mumps. A part of the roof had to be re-shingled. And then already it was time to consider the spring launching of the sloop.

A year had passed, and he'd had very little time to think of secret desires. But perhaps next year. In the meantime –

'Well?' said Tompkins. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes, quite all right,' Mr Wayne said. He got up from the chair and rubbed his forehead.

'Do you want a refund?' Tompkins asked.

'No. The experience was quite satisfactory.'

'They always are,' Tompkins said, winking lewdly at the parrot. 'Well, what was yours?'

'A world of the recent past,' Mr Wayne said.

'A lot of them are. Did you find out about your secret desire? Was it murder? Or a South Seas island?'

'I'd rather not discuss it,' Mr Wayne said, pleasantly but firmly.

'A lot of people won't discuss it with me,' Tompkins said sulkily. 'I'll be damned if I know why.'

'Because – well, I think the world of one's secret desire feels sacred, somehow. No offence . . . Do you think you'll ever be able to make it permanent? The world of one's choice, I mean?'

The old man shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm trying. If I succeed, you'll hear about it. Everyone will.'

'Yes, I suppose so.' Mr Wayne undid his parcel and laid its contents on the table. The parcel contained a pair of army boots, a knife, two coils of copper wire, and three small cans of corned beef.

Tompkins's eyes glittered for a moment. 'Quite satisfactory,' he said. 'Thank you.'

'Good-bye,' said Mr Wayne. 'And thank *you*.'

Mr Wayne left the shop and hurried down to the end of the lane of grey rubble. Beyond it, as far as he could see, lay flat fields of rubble, brown and grey and black. Those fields, stretching to every horizon, were made of the twisted corpses of cities, the shattered remnants of trees, and the fine white ash that once was human flesh and bone.

'Well,' Mr Wayne said to himself, 'at least we gave as good as we got.'

That year in the past had cost him everything he owned, and ten years of life thrown in for good measure. Had it been a dream? It was still worth it! But now he had to put away all thought of Janet and the children. That was finished, unless Tompkins perfected his process. Now he had to think about his own survival.

With the aid of his wrist geiger he found a deactivated lane through the rubble. He'd better get back to the shelter before dark, before the rats came out. If he didn't hurry he'd miss the evening potato ration.

Jokester

ISAAC ASIMOV

NOEL MEYERHOF consulted the list he had prepared and chose which item was to be first. As usual, he relied mainly on intuition.

He was dwarfed by the machine he faced, though only the smallest portion of the latter was in view. That didn't matter. He spoke with the offhand confidence of one who thoroughly knew he was master.

'Johnson,' he said, 'came home unexpectedly from a business trip to find his wife in the arms of his best friend. He staggered back and said, "Max! I'm married to the lady so I *have* to. But why you?" '

Meyerhof thought: Okay, let that trickle down into its guts and gurgle about a bit.

And a voice behind him said, 'Hey.'

Meyerhof erased the sound of that monosyllable and put the circuit he was using into neutral. He whirled and said, 'I'm working. Don't you knock?'

He did not smile as he customarily did in greeting Timothy Whistler, a senior analyst with whom he dealt as often as with any. He frowned as he would have for an interruption by a stranger, wrinkling his thin face into a distortion that seemed to extend to his hair, rumpling it more than ever.

Whistler shrugged. He wore his white lab coat with his fists pressing down within its pockets and creasing it into tense vertical lines. 'I knocked. You didn't answer. The operations signal wasn't on.'

Meyerhof grunted. It wasn't at that. He'd been thinking about this new project too intensively and he was forgetting little details.

And yet he could scarcely blame himself for that. This thing was important.

He didn't know why it was, of course. Grand Masters rarely did. That's what made them Grand Masters; the fact that they were

beyond reason. How else could the human mind keep up with that ten-mile-long lump of solidified reason that men called Multivac, the most complex computer ever built?

Meyerhof said, 'I *am* working. Is there something important on your mind?'

'Nothing that can't be postponed. There are a few holes in the answer on the hyperspatial – ' Whistler did a double take and his face took on a rueful look of uncertainty. '*Working?*'

'Yes. What about it?'

'But – ' He looked about, staring into the crannies of the shallow room that faced the banks upon banks of relays that formed a small portion of Multivac. 'There isn't anyone here at that.'

'Who said there was, or should be?'

'You were telling one of your jokes, weren't you?'

'And?'

Whistler forced a smile. 'Don't tell me you were telling a joke to Multivac?'

Meyerhof stiffened. 'Why not?'

'Were you?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

Meyerhof stared the other down. 'I don't have to account to you. Or to anyone.'

'Good Lord, of course not. I was curious, that's all. . . . But then, if you're working, I'll leave.' He looked about once more, frowning.

'Do so,' said Meyerhof. His eyes followed the other out and then he activated the operations signal with a savage punch of his finger.

He strode the length of the room and back, getting himself in hand. Damn Whistler! Damn them all! Because he didn't bother to hold those technicians, analysts, and mechanics at the proper social distance, because he treated them as though they, too, were creative artists, they took these liberties.

He thought grimly: They can't even tell jokes decently.

And instantly that brought him back to the task in hand. He sat down again. Devil take them all.

He threw the proper Multivac circuit back into operation and said, 'The ship's steward stopped at the rail of the ship during a particularly rough ocean crossing and gazed compassionately at

the man whose slumped position over the rail and intensity of gaze toward the depths betokened all too well the ravages of seasickness.

'Gently, the steward patted the man's shoulder. "Cheer up, sir," he murmured. "I know it seems bad, but really, you know, nobody ever dies of seasickness."

'The afflicted gentleman lifted his greenish, tortured face to his comforter and gasped in hoarse accents, "Don't say that, man. For Heaven's sake, don't say that. It's only the hope of dying that's keeping me alive." '

Timothy Whistler, a bit preoccupied, nevertheless smiled and nodded as he passed the secretary's desk. She smiled back at him.

Here, he thought, was an archaic item in this computer-ridden world of the twenty-first century, a human secretary. But then perhaps it was natural that such an institution should survive here in the very citadel of computerdom; in the gigantic world corporation that handled Multivac. With Multivac filling the horizons, lesser computers for trivial tasks would have been in poor taste.

Whistler stepped into Abram Trask's office. That government official paused in his careful task of lighting a pipe; his dark eyes flicked in Whistler's direction and his beaked nose stood out sharply and prominently against the rectangle of window behind him.

'Ah, there, Whistler. Sit down. Sit down.'

Whistler did so. 'I think we've got a problem, Trask.'

Trask half-smiled. 'Not a technical one, I hope. I'm just an innocent politician.' (It was one of his favourite phrases.)

'It involves Meyerhof.'

Trask sat down instantly and looked acutely miserable. 'Are you sure?'

'Reasonably sure.'

Whistler understood the other's sudden unhappiness well. Trask was the government official in charge of the Division of Computers and Automation of the Department of the Interior. He was expected to deal with matters of policy involving the human satellites of Multivac, just as those technically trained satellites were expected to deal with Multivac itself.

But a Grand Master was more than just a satellite. More, even, than just a human.

Early in the history of Multivac, it had become apparent that the bottleneck was the questioning procedure. Multivac could answer the problems of humanity, *all* the problems, if – *if* it were asked meaningful questions. But as knowledge accumulated at an ever-faster rate, it became ever more difficult to locate those meaningful questions.

Reason alone wouldn't do. What was needed was a rare type of intuition; the same faculty of mind (only much more intensified) that made a grand master at chess. A mind was needed of the sort that could see through the quadrillions of chess patterns to find the one best move, and do it in a matter of minutes.

Trask moved restlessly. 'What's Meyerhof been doing?'

'He's introduced a line of questioning that I find disturbing.'

'Oh, come on, Whistler. Is that all? You can't stop a Grand Master from going through any line of questioning he chooses. Neither you nor I are equipped to judge the worth of his questions. You know that. I know you know that.'

'I do. Of course. But I also know Meyerhof. Have you ever met him socially?'

'Good Lord, no. Does anyone meet any Grand Master socially?'

'Don't take that attitude, Trask. They're human and they're to be pitied. Have you ever thought what it must be like to be a Grand Master; to know there are only some twelve like you in the world; to know that only one or two come up per generation; that the world depends on you; that a thousand mathematicians, logicians, psychologists, and physical scientists wait on you?'

Trask shrugged and muttered, 'Good Lord, I'd feel king of the world.'

'I don't think you would,' said the senior analyst impatiently. 'They feel kings of nothing. They have no equal to talk to, no sensation of belonging. Listen. Meyerhof never misses a chance to get together with the boys. He isn't married, naturally; he doesn't drink; he has no natural social touch – yet he forces himself into company because he must. And do you know what he does when he gets together with us, and that's at least once a week?'

'I haven't the least idea,' said the government man. 'This is all new to me.'

'He's a jokester.'

'What?'

'He tells jokes. Good ones. He's terrific. He can take any story, however old and dull, and make it sound good. It's the way he tells it. He has a flair.'

'I see. Well, good.'

'Or bad. These jokes are important to him.' Whistler put both elbows on Trask's desk, bit at a thumbnail and stared into the air. 'He's different, he knows he's different, and these jokes are the one way he feels he can get the rest of us ordinary schmoes to accept him. We laugh, we howl, we clap him on the back and even forget he's a Grand Master. It's the only hold he has on the rest of us.'

'This is all interesting. I didn't know you were such a psychologist. Still, where does this lead?'

'Just this. What do you suppose happens if Meyerhof runs out of jokes?'

'What?' The government man stared blankly.

'If he starts repeating himself? If his audience starts laughing less heartily, or stops laughing altogether? It's his only hold on our approval. Without it, he'll be alone and then what would happen to him? After all, Trask, he's one of the dozen men mankind can't do without. We can't let anything happen to him. I don't mean just physical things. We can't even let him get too unhappy. Who knows how that might affect his intuition?'

'Well, has he started repeating himself?'

'Not as far as I know, but I think *he* thinks he has.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because I've heard him telling jokes to Multivac.'

'Oh, no.'

'Accidentally. I walked in on him and he threw me out. He was savage. He's usually good-natured enough, and I consider it a bad sign that he was so upset at the intrusion. But the fact remains that he was telling a joke to Multivac, and I'm convinced it was one of a series.'

'But why?'

Whistler shrugged and rubbed a hand fiercely across his chin. 'I have thought about that. I think he's trying to build up a store of jokes in Multivac's memory banks in order to get back new variations. You see what I mean? He's planning a mechanical jokester,

so that he can have an infinite number of jokes at hand and never fear running out.'

'Good Lord!'

'Objectively, there may be nothing wrong with that, but I consider it a bad sign when a Grand Master starts using Multivac for his personal problems. Any Grand Master has a certain inherent mental instability and he should be watched. Meyerhof may be approaching a borderline beyond which we lose a Grand Master.'

Trask said blankly, 'What are you suggesting I do?'

'You can check me. I'm too close to him to judge well, maybe, and judging humans isn't my particular talent, anyway. You're a politician; it's more your talent.'

'Judging humans, perhaps, not Grand Masters.'

'They're human, too. Besides, who else is to do it?'

The fingers of Trask's hand struck his desk in rapid succession over and over like a slow and muted roll of drums.

'I suppose I'll have to,' he said.

Meyerhof said to Multivac, 'The ardent swain, picking a bouquet of wildflowers for his loved one, was disconcerted to find himself, suddenly, in the same field with a large bull of unfriendly appearance which, gazing at him steadily, pawed the ground in a threatening manner. The young man, spying a farmer on the other side of a fairly distant fence, shouted, "Hey, mister, is that bull safe?" The farmer surveyed the situation with critical eye, spat to one side and called back, "He's safe as anything." He spat again, and added, "Can't say the same about you, though." '

Meyerhof was about to pass on to the next when the summons came.

It wasn't really a summons. No one could summon a Grand Master. It was only a message that Division Head Trask would like very much to see Grand Master Meyerhof if Grand Master Meyerhof could spare him the time.

Meyerhof might, with impunity, have tossed the message to one side and continued with whatever he was doing. He was not subject to discipline.

On the other hand, were he to do that, they would continue to

bother him – oh, very respectfully, but they would continue to bother him.

So he neutralized the pertinent circuits of Multivac and locked them into place. He put the freeze signal on his office so that no one would dare enter in his absence and left for Trask's office.

Trask coughed and felt a bit intimidated by the sullen fierceness of the other's look. He said, 'We have not had occasion to know one another, Grand Master, to my great regret.'

'I have reported to you,' said Meyerhof stiffly.

Trask wondered what lay behind these keen, wild eyes. It was difficult for him to imagine Meyerhof with his thin face, his dark, straight hair, intense air, ever unbending long enough to tell funny stories.

He said, 'Reports are not a social acquaintance. I – I have been given to understand you have a marvellous fund of anecdotes.'

'I am a jokester, sir. That's the phrase people use. A jokester.'

'They haven't used the phrase to me, Grand Master. They have said – '

'The hell with them! I don't care what they've said. See here, Trask, do you want to hear a joke?' He leaned forward across the desk, his eyes narrowed.

'By all means. Certainly,' said Trask, with an effort at heartiness.

'All right. Here's the joke: Mrs Jones stared at the fortune card that had emerged from the weighing machine in response to her husband's penny. She said, "It says here, George, that you're suave, intelligent, farseeing, industrious, and attractive to women." With that, she turned the card over and added, "And they have your weight wrong, too." '

Trask laughed. It was almost impossible not to. Although the punch line was predictable, the surprising facility with which Meyerhof had produced just the tone of contemptuous disdain in the woman's voice, and the cleverness with which he had contorted the lines of his face to suit that tone carried the politician helplessly into laughter.

Meyerhof said sharply, 'Why is that funny?'

Trask sobered. 'I beg your pardon.'

'I said why is that funny? Why do you laugh?'

'Well,' said Trask, trying to be reasonable, 'the last line put everything that preceded in a new light. The unexpectedness – '

'The point is,' said Meyerhof, 'that I have pictured a husband being humiliated by his wife; a marriage that is such a failure that the wife is convinced that her husband lacks any virtue. Yet you laugh at that. If you were the husband, would you find it funny?'

He waited a moment in thought, then said, 'Try this one, Trask: Abner was seated at his wife's sickbed, weeping uncontrollably, when his wife, mustering the dregs of her strength, drew herself up to one elbow.

' "Abner," she whispered, "Abner, I cannot go to my Maker without confessing my misdeed."

' "Not now," muttered the stricken husband. "Not now, my dear. Lie back and rest."

' "I cannot," she cried. "I must tell, or my soul will never know peace. I have been unfaithful to you, Abner. In this very house, not one month ago – "

' "Hush, dear," soothed Abner. "I know all about it. Why else have I poisoned you?" '

Trask tried to maintain equanimity but did not succeed. He suppressed a chuckle imperfectly.

Meyerhof said, 'So that's funny, too. Adultery. Murder. All funny.'

'Well, now,' said Trask, 'books have been written analysing humour.'

'True enough,' said Meyerhof, 'and I've read a number of them. What's more, I've read most of them to Multivac. Still, the people who write the books are just guessing. Some of them say we laugh because we feel superior to the people in the joke. Some say it is because of a suddenly realized incongruity or a sudden relief from tension, or a sudden reinterpretation of events. Is there any simple reason? Different people laugh at different jokes. No joke is universal. Some people don't laugh at any joke. Yet what may be most important is that man is the only animal with a true sense of humour: the only animal that laughs.'

Trask said suddenly, 'I understand. You're trying to analyse humour. That's why you're transmitting a series of jokes to Multivac.'

'Who told you I was doing that?... Never mind, it was Whistler. I remember, now. He surprised me at it. Well, what about it?'

'Nothing at all.'

'You don't dispute my right to add anything I wish to Multivac's general fund of knowledge, or to ask any question I wish?'

'No, not at all,' said Trask hastily. 'As a matter of fact, I have no doubt that this will open the way to new analyses of great interest to psychologists.'

'Hmp. Maybe. Just the same, there's something plaguing me that's more important than just the general analysis of humour. There's a specific question I have to ask. Two of them, really.'

'Oh? What's that?' Trask wondered if the other would answer. There would be no way of compelling him if he chose not to.

But Meyerhof said, 'The first question is this: Where do all these jokes come from?'

'What?'

'Who makes them up? Listen! About a month ago, I spent an evening swapping jokes. As usual, I told most of them and, as usual, the fools laughed. Maybe they really thought the jokes were funny and maybe they were just humouring me. In any case, one creature took the liberty of slapping me on the back and saying, "Meyerhof, you know more jokes than any ten people I know."

'I'm sure he was right, but it gave rise to a thought. I don't know how many hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of jokes I've told at one time or another in my life, yet the fact is I never made up one. Not one. I'd only repeated them. My only contribution was to tell them. To begin with, I'd either heard them or read them. And the source of my hearing or reading didn't make up the jokes, either. I never met anyone who ever claimed to have constructed a joke. It's always "I heard a good one the other day," and "Heard any good ones lately?"

'*All the jokes are old!* That's why jokes exhibit such a social lag. They still deal with seasickness, for instance, when that's easily prevented these days and never experienced. Or they'll deal with fortune-giving weighing machines, like the joke I told you, when such machines are found only in antique shops. Well, then, who makes up the jokes?'

Trask said, 'Is *that* what you're trying to find out?' It was on the

tip of Trask's tongue to add: Good Lord, who cares? He forced that impulse down. A Grand Master's questions were always meaningful.

'Of course that's what I'm trying to find out. Think of it this way. It's not just that jokes happen to be old. They *must* be old to be enjoyed. It's essential that a joke not be original. There's one variety of humour that is, or can be, original and that's the pun. I've heard puns that were obviously made up on the spur of the moment. I have made some up myself. But no one laughs at such puns. You're not supposed to. You groan. The better the pun, the louder the groan. Original humour is not laugh-provoking. Why?'

'I'm sure I don't know.'

'All right. Let's find out. Having given Multivac all the information I thought advisable on the general topic of humour, I am now feeding it selected jokes.'

Trask found himself intrigued. 'Selected how?' he asked.

'I don't know,' said Meyerhof. 'They felt like the right ones. I'm Grand Master, you know.'

'Oh, agreed, agreed.'

'From those jokes and the general philosophy of humour, my first request will be for Multivac to trace the origin of the jokes, if it can. Since Whistler is in on this and since he has seen fit to report it to you, have him down in Analysis the day after tomorrow. I think he'll have a bit of work to do.'

'Certainly. May I attend, too?'

Meyerhof shrugged. Trask's attendance was obviously a matter of indifference to him.

Meyerhof had selected the last in the series with particular care. What that care consisted of, he could not have said, but he had revolved a dozen possibilities in his mind, and over and over again had tested each for some indefinable quality of meaningfulness.

He said, 'Ug, the caveman, observed his mate running to him in tears, her leopard-skin skirt in disorder. "Ug," she cried, distraught, "do something quickly. A sabre-toothed tiger has entered Mother's cave. Do something!" Ug grunted, picked up his well-gnawed buffalo bone and said, "Why do anything? Who the hell cares what happens to a sabre-toothed tiger?" '

It was then that Meyerhof asked his two questions and leaned back, closing his eyes. He was done.

'I saw absolutely nothing wrong,' said Trask to Whistler. 'He told me what he was doing readily enough and it was odd but legitimate.'

'What he *claimed* he was doing,' said Whistler.

'Even so, I can't stop a Grand Master on opinion alone. He seemed queer but, after all, Grand Masters are supposed to seem queer. I didn't think him insane.'

'Using Multivac to find the source of jokes?' muttered the senior analyst. 'That's not insane?'

'How can we tell?' asked Trask irritably. 'Science has advanced to the point where the only meaningful questions left are the ridiculous ones. The sensible ones have been thought of, asked, and answered long ago.'

'It's no use. I'm bothered.'

'Maybe, but there's no choice now, Whistler. We'll see Meyerhof and you can do the necessary analysis of Multivac's response, if any. As for me, my only job is to handle the red tape. Good Lord, I don't even know what a senior analyst such as yourself is supposed to do, except analyse, and that doesn't help me any.'

Whistler said, 'It's simple enough. A Grand Master like Meyerhof asks questions and Multivac automatically formulates it into quantities and operations. The necessary machinery for converting words to symbols is what makes up most of the bulk of Multivac. Multivac then gives the answer in quantities and operations, but it doesn't translate that back into words except in the most simple and routine cases. If it were designed to solve the general re-translation problem, its bulk would have to be quadrupled at least.'

'I see. Then it's your job to translate these symbols into words?'

'My job and that of other analysts. We use smaller, specially designed computers whenever necessary.' Whistler smiled grimly. 'Like the Delphic priestess of ancient Greece, Multivac gives oracular and obscure answers. Only we have translators, you see.'

They had arrived. Meyerhof was waiting.

Whistler said briskly. 'What circuits did you use, Grand Master?' Meyerhof told him and Whistler went to work.

Trask tried to follow what was happening, but none of it made sense. The government official watched a spool unreel with a pattern of dots in endless incomprehensibility. Grand Master Meyerhof stood indifferently to one side while Whistler surveyed the pattern as it emerged. The analyst had put on headphones and a mouthpiece, and at intervals murmured a series of instructions which, at some far-off place, guided assistants through electronic contortions in other computers.

Occasionally, Whistler listened, then punched combinations on a complex keyboard marked with symbols that looked vaguely mathematical but weren't.

A good deal more than an hour's time elapsed.

The frown on Whistler's face grew deeper. Once, he looked up at the two others and began, 'This is unbel – ' and turned back to his work.

Finally, he said hoarsely, 'I can give you an unofficial answer.' His eyes were red-rimmed. 'The official answer awaits complete analysis. Do you want it unofficial?'

'Go ahead,' said Meyerhof.

Trask nodded.

Whistler darted a hang-dog glance at the Grand Master. 'Ask a foolish question – ' he said. Then, gruffly, 'Multivac says, extra-terrestrial origin.'

'What are you saying?' demanded Trask.

'Don't you hear me? The jokes we laugh at were not made up by any man. Multivac has analysed all data given it and the one answer that best fits that data is that some extra-terrestrial intelligence has composed the jokes, all of them, and placed them in selected human minds at selected times and places in such a way that no man is conscious of having made one up. All subsequent jokes are minor variations and adaptations of these grand originals.'

Meyerhof broke in, face flushed with the kind of triumph only a Grand Master can know who once again has asked the right question. 'All comedy writers,' he said, 'work by twisting old jokes to new purposes. That's well known. The answer fits.'

'But why?' asked Trask. 'Why make up the jokes?'

'Multivac says,' said Whistler, 'that the only purpose that fits all the data is that the jokes are intended to study human psychology. We study rat psychology by making the rats solve mazes. The rats don't know why and wouldn't even if they were aware of what was going on, which they're not. These outer intelligences study man's psychology by noting individual reactions to carefully selected anecdotes. Each man reacts differently. . . . Presumably, these outer intelligences are to us as we are to rats.' He shuddered.

Trask, eyes staring, said, 'The Grand Master said man is the only animal with a sense of humour. It would seem then that the sense of humour is foisted upon us from without.'

Meyerhof added excitedly, 'And for possible humour created within, we have no laughter. Puns, I mean.'

Whistler said, 'Presumably, the extra-terrestrials cancel out reactions to spontaneous jokes to avoid confusion.'

Trask said in sudden agony of spirit, 'Come on, now, Good Lord, do either of you believe this?'

The senior analyst looked at him coldly. 'Multivac says so. It's all that can be said so far. It has pointed out the real jokesters of the universe, and if we want to know more, the matter will have to be followed up.' He added in a whisper, 'If anyone dares follow it up.'

Grand Master Meyerhof said suddenly, 'I asked two questions, you know. So far only the first has been answered. I think Multivac has enough data to answer the second.'

Whistler shrugged. He seemed a half-broken man. 'When a Grand Master thinks there is enough data,' he said, 'I'll make book on it. What is your second question?'

'I asked this: What will be the effect on the human race of discovering the answer to my first question?'

'Why did you ask that?' demanded Trask.

'Just a feeling that it had to be asked,' said Meyerhof.

Trask said, 'Insane. It's all insane,' and turned away. Even he himself felt how strangely he and Whistler had changed sides. Now it was Trask crying insanity.

Trask closed his eyes. He might cry insanity all he wished, but

no man in fifty years had doubted the combination of a Grand Master and Multivac and found his doubts verified.

Whistler worked silently, teeth clenched. He put Multivac and its subsidiary machines through their paces again. Another hour passed and he laughed harshly. 'A raving nightmare!'

'What's the answer?' asked Meyerhof. 'I want Multivac's remarks, not yours.'

'All right. Take it. Multivac states that, once even a single human discovers the truth of this method of psychological analysis of the human mind, it will become useless as an objective technique to those extra-terrestrial powers now using it.'

'You mean there won't be any more jokes handed out to humanity?' asked Trask faintly. 'Or what do you mean?'

'No more jokes,' said Whistler, '*Now!* Multivac says *now!* The experiment is ended *now!* A new technique will have to be introduced.'

They stared at each other. The minutes passed.

Meyerhof said slowly, 'Multivac is right.'

Whistler said haggardly, 'I know.'

Even Trask said in a whisper, 'Yes. It must be.'

It was Meyerhof who put his finger on the proof of it, Meyerhof the accomplished jokester. He said, 'It's over, you know, all over. I've been trying for five minutes now and I can't think of one single joke, not one! And if I read one in a book, I wouldn't laugh. I know.'

'The gift of humour is gone,' said Trask drearily. 'No man will ever laugh again.'

And they remained there, staring, feeling the world shrink down to the dimensions of an experimental rat cage – with the maze removed and something, something about to be put in its place.

Pyramid

ROBERT ABERNATHY

THE specially trained snig snuffed Earth's air greedily, blunt head weaving as it shuffled along the sparsely wooded hillside. It made little interrogative noises as it cast about for a scent.

Those who had trained it for its present task trudged after it, fretting beneath a noonday sun a little hotter than their own. They were thagathla – beings six-limbed like the snig to which they were kin, but with crested heads carried erect and forelimbs that ended in clever fingers instead of the snig's shovel-like digging paws. One of them wore the communicator which kept them in touch with their scout ship, out of sight beyond tree-grown ridges; another carried a gas gun; the remaining one, whose name was Zilli, was a junior biologist with a future. Since she was the only scientist in the landing party, Zilli was its *ex officio* leader.

All three thagathla were tense and watchful. Unless the maps were wrong – the old charts resurrected from the Interstellar Museum on Thegeth, where they had mouldered since the First Earth Expedition four hundred years earlier – here was the home ground of the enemy whom this, the Second Expedition, had come thirty parsecs to seek.

The thegethli in the lead clucked and pointed. Still following the questing snig, they had reached the hilltop. In the swale beyond, half-hidden among verdure that grew dense along a little stream two hundred yards away, rose a dozen or more roughly conical structures, apparently fashioned of skins or fabric stretched upon poles. In the brush they glimpsed flickers of motion, heard rustlings; then everything was still, but the thagathla sensed concealed eyes watching them.

'Well, Zilli?' the one who had pointed demanded. 'What will those be?'

The biologist hesitated, reviewing in her mind the records she had studied. She said judicially, 'Evidently shelters built by the

bipeds that the First Expedition reported as the dominant species over most of the planet – though their presence in this region wasn't mentioned; they must have migrated here since then. Probably not dangerous, keep your eyes open – '

An ecstatic moan from the snig focused the party's attention once more. The squat shovel-footed creature had halted in its prowling along the farther slope, sniffed loudly at the earth in the lee of a projecting boulder, and all at once began to dig prodigiously. The thagathla clustered expectantly round it.

The snig paused, moaned eagerly again, and its blunt head darted forward in a surprisingly quick strike. It backed out of its excavation and, with head held high and its prey squirming in powerful jaws, trotted proudly back to Zilli.

The biologist accepted the find, which promptly bit her; she got a safer grip and held it up for close inspection. Beady eyes glared at her from a round furry head with bulging cheek-pouches, attached to a plump tawny body that ended in a stubby tail. The hamster kicked and squeaked, then, deciding that all was lost, curled itself into a ball.

Deliberately Zilli checked point by point of the little animal's external features. At last she nodded with quiet satisfaction to the thegethli carrying the radio. 'All right. You can tell them this is it.'

The crew member began talking into her microphone. Back to the scout ship, thence to be relayed to the interstellar mother vessel out in its orbit, went the word: word that contact had been made with the enemy, that formidable foe which had overrun all Thegeth, undermined its economy and depleted its resources, and even now gnawed with innumerable rodent teeth at the very foundations of Thagathlan civilization.

From the scout ship came acknowledgement. 'Right – we're on our way.'

Zilli was busy stowing the captured hamster in a perforated specimen case, when the snig bounded up with a mournful cry of warning. Zilli spun round and ducked, barely in time; an arrow went past her with a vicious *whick!* and glanced from a tree trunk and skittered off down the hillside.

The thegethli with the gas gun crouched low and pointed her

clumsy weapon. Shells burst with hollow *plops* in the brush on the hillcrest; from up there came thrashing sounds, then silence fell again. In the thicket by the stream below rose a whimpering cry, abruptly stifled.

Cautiously the thagathla trotted up the slope, circling upwind to avoid the gas which, specially compounded to produce anaesthesia in Terrestrial organisms, would have had considerable effect on the closely similar Thagathlan body chemistry.

The would-be attackers, four of them, lay sprawled, breathing stertorously, where the gas had overcome them. They were clad in roughly-prepared animal skins, and the spears and arrows which they had caught up to defend their homes against the invaders from the stars had points of polished stone.

Zilli eyed the new specimens with interest. From her point of view, their structural resemblances to the hamsters were striking, but so were the differences – after sheer size, of course, their adaptation to an upright gait. Their virtual hairlessness pointed to a tropical origin, their artefacts to marked intelligence. It would be intriguing to investigate these creatures further.

The scout-craft came coasting over the treetops and descended toward the waiting group. The hamster imprisoned in Zilli's specimen case stirred and chattered. Recalled to the fact that she was not here to indulge idle curiosity, Zilli sighed and turned toward the ship – and then it was that Zilli had her great idea: an idea which, if it worked out, would make her renowned back home on Thegeth and bring certain promotion. She jerked round and stared fixedly again at the stunned natives, who were beginning to groan and move a little.

The communications operator approached from a hurried conference with the crew of the scout. She said breathlessly, 'The coordinator requests a more detailed report.'

'Tell her – ' Zilli hesitated, then recklessly cast the die. 'Tell her that we are making rapid progress. Not only have I confirmed the presence of the enemy' – she tapped the specimen case at her side – 'but I have already found a potential weapon against it!'

Her Fertility Mnigli was eight hundred years old; she had outlived twenty generations of the short-lived males of her species,

and her title-of-address had become purely honorific. Her skin hung loose and her crest was green with age. She was an ecological coordinator, the Thagathlan equivalent of a senator, an elector, and a cardinal archbishop; so her tone with Zilli, a mere junior biologist, was abrupt.

'These are specimens of your proposed control?'

'Yes, Your Fertility,' said Zilli. She watched respectfully as the coordinator paced slowly round the huddled group of a dozen captive humans. Their number had been augmented since Zilli had on her own initiative ordered the crew to beat the bushes along the brook. Zilli was taking no chances of losing the credit for her inspiration.

Mnigli surveyed the prisoners with shrewd old eyes, behind which her brain was making agile inferences from physical structure to probable habits and place in an environmental complex. Mnigli was not an ecological coordinator for nothing.

'You have both males and females here? How do you tell them apart?' Zilli pointed out the differences. 'Hm-m-m,' said Mnigli. 'Little sexual dimorphism; a primitive trait – disregarding the number of limbs and other superficial features, they look much like overgrown thrin.'

Zilli agreed nervously. The thrin were arboreal carnivores of middling intelligence, whose function on Thegeth was to control the proliferation of several species of slothlike foliage-feeders. 'But these,' Zilli pointed out, 'build their shelters on the ground and are clearly evolved for life there. Observe their feet, Your Fertility. Also, the teeth indicate an omnivorous diet – '

'We should have, then, to consider primarily their possible effect on the forest-floor community. As you know, Biologist Zilli' – the coordinator's tone sharpened – 'our *a priori* estimate of requirements envisaged something like a small carnivore, capable of entering rodents' burrows; no doubt some such forms exist on Earth. What makes you think these hulking thrinlike creatures would make a better control – or do you?'

'I do,' said Zilli stoutly. 'The First Expedition reported this species to be the dominant one, at least on a basis of range – it being found all over the planet and thus evidently in successful competition with all other land animals. That fact bears witness to

a high degree of adaptability – an invaluable characteristic in any life form to be transplanted to an alien environment. Carnivora, on the other hand, are notoriously delicate in an ecological sense, being highly specialized. Remember what happened to the wugud.'

The coordinator remembered all too well; the incident alluded to had come close to wrecking her career along with that of several others in high places. The wugud, a flesh-eating ophidian species, had been deliberately imported from one of the worlds of Altair because it was a natural enemy of certain Altairian vermin accidentally introduced on Thegeth. The wugud, unfortunately, was possessed of an undiscriminating voracity which had led it to find cannibalism much simpler than learning to locate its natural prey in a new habitat, with the result that the end of its existence on Thegeth had resembled the fate of the lamented Kilkenny cats. The thagathla had been forced to dispatch another expensive expedition to Altair in order to locate a more suitable control agent.

It would not do to have any more such mistakes. Fitting out the present expedition had thrown a severe strain on Thegeth's economy; no planet could long afford the cost in energy and materials required for interstellar travel. Recognition of that fact was one reason why the Thagathlan Ecological Bureau had banned such exploration four centuries earlier – that, and belated realization of the ecological havoc such contacts with other worlds could create. The hamster plague was one such fruit of folly; a mere handful of the Terrestrial rodents, carried home with them by members of the First Earth Expedition who fancied them as exotic pets, had run wild on Thegeth and, in the absence of any natural enemies whatsoever, had bred so mightily as to threaten the bionomic stability of the whole planet. It was that problem which the Second Expedition must solve by finding and bringing back some Earthly natural enemy of the hamster. And, old Mnigli told herself, in this case there must be no error; all avenues must be thoroughly explored.

She turned back to the cluster of humans and looked at them long and hard, as if trying to envisage in every detail their possible future as a factor in the ecology of Thegeth. They stared back at her with awed and fearful eyes, in which, perhaps, she was a god

or demon. Mnigli sighed. 'You may be right, Biologist Zilli; your reasoning does credit to one so young. You may proceed with the study of this species as an individual project, and prepare a report on its potential utility.'

'Yes, Your Fertility.'

'As conductor of a research project, you may assume the grade of senior biologist.'

'Yes, *indeed*, Your Fertility!'

The final conference was held aboard the mother ship. The assembled scientists of the expedition listened silently to reports by the biologists assigned to study the possibilities of the local weasels and of a variety of hunting cat. At last Zilli's turn came to speak, and she rose to the occasion energetically.

'Colleagues! I am here to present the case for a species very different from and in all ways superior to those hitherto discussed – to wit, *Pseudothrin terrestris* Zilli!' This was formality; at one time or another during the past weeks the others had all dropped by the stockade where Zilli's research project was being carried on. 'And I think you will agree with me that there is no need for long deliberation. We are all eager to re urn to Thegeth – '

'Spare us the oratory,' said Mnigli dryly from the head of the council table.

Zilli inclined her head submissively, conscious that her remark had told; those present were scientists, but they were also thagathla, and after six weeks of brawling, undisciplined Earth they were heartily homesick for the ordered peace of their native world. If any of them had ever questioned the wisdom of the interdict on interstellar exploration, personal experience had disabused them.

'I shall produce,' said Zilli, 'facts and figures to show that *Pseudothrin* is far more intelligent than the wild cat, and at least as bloodthirsty as the weasel – in short, that we could comb this planet for years without uncovering a better pest-control agent.'

She went on into technical details of her observations of captured humans and of their societies in a wild state, pointing out particularly that it had been found that they would prey on the hamster population not only for food but also for garments to protect their own hairless skins; there was no danger that their depredations

would be extended to native fauna on Thegeth, in view of the same differences in protein metabolism which had prevented any native Thegethian flesh-eater from acting as a check upon the hamsters. Finally, the species were markedly intelligent; judging, in the absence of any commensurable tests, by their technological level, they would rank somewhere between the forest thrin and the agricultural zgi in that regard. Their intelligence was assurance that the thagathla could depend on them to be effective in performing their proposed ecological function.

Mnigli said dubiously, 'There is a flaw in the last argument. Intelligence is a two-edged blade – and these creatures are omnivorous.'

Zilli met the coordinator's gaze squarely. 'You mean – what assurance do we have that they will not, instead of preying on their verminous relatives, find it easier to emulate the latter and make inroads upon the crops of the zgi – inroads which would be the more dangerous because of the cunning *Pseudothrin* is capable of?'

'That,' said Mnigli, 'is the crucial question.' The other scientists rotated their heads energetically in agreement.

'I am prepared to answer it. In the first place, though omnivorous, they definitely prefer meat to vegetable food when they can get it. Furthermore, their large size would make it possible to employ against them countermeasures which have proved ineffective against the hamster infestation. And finally – ' Zilli paused impressively – 'my researches have shown that *Pseudothrin* has a well-developed language, of which I have already compiled a partial vocabulary. Your Fertility, colleagues – do you see what that means?'

There was a buzz of excitement and approbation which told Zilli that she had as good as won. Swelling inwardly with triumph, she raised her voice to drive the point home:

'It means that we have here, not an ordinary animal whose reactions are fixed by instinct, but one whose behaviour can be tailored to our needs. We can implant verbal-cultural directives, as we have done with the zgi and to a lesser extent with the thrin. Impressing these directives on a few thousand initial importees will be simple, and with a minimum of intervention on our part

these will have the force of tradition even when the descendants' numbers shall have increased to millions – '

Morg, the hunter, strode easily through the open woodland beneath fronded trees that would have seemed very strange to his great-grandfather several times removed. The same great-grandfather would also have been surprised by the parklike, orderly look of this forest, free of tangling brush and strangling vines, but to Morg it was merely normal.

He carried an arrow nocked, as did the two companions who followed in his footsteps, and all of them scanned the branches overhead – eagerly, not fearfully, for there were no animals here that a man armed with a bow need seriously fear.

Morg was a splendidly-muscled savage, half a head taller than the others; while they were clad in hamster-skins crudely sewn together, he wore a garment fashioned of a single glistening-black pelt. He was a descendant of the first Morg, who had been a mighty man among those who, according to legend, had come from that Earth which some said was a country beyond the mountains and others, less credibly, claimed was up in the sky somewhere.

The trees lightened ahead, meaning that they were approaching cleared ground, and the trio relaxed their vigilance and quickened their pace, concluding that the reports of game in this forest tract – which lay only a mile from their tribe's village and had consequently been hunted-out – had been false.

Then branches crackled overhead; Morg ducked a flying twig and looked up to see a six-armed striped creature swinging forty feet above them, snarling down with a flash of fangs and chattering insults – insults which Morg understood, since he had a working knowledge of the viler portions of the thrin's rudimentary vocabulary.

So Morg cursed fluently back and took deliberate aim, drawing the arrow slowly back to its bronze head. The thrin broke off its tirade abruptly, performed a backward somersault and went brachiating away with ludicrous haste. The man grinned and let his bowstring slack without releasing the shaft; he didn't want to waste time looking for it or – if it should lodge in the thrin – have to

climb a tree to recover it, since, as he knew from experience, even a dead thrin never let go of a branch.

Nor did the men bother looking round to see if the creature's tree-house was nearby; they were not hunting thrin.

Beyond the forest's edge lay a sunlit meadowland, and off to one side were the tawny patches of ripening grain-fields among which rose the beehive-shaped huts of the zgi, the agricultural species of Thegeth. The three hunters struck out, quartering across the grassland toward the next forested area, giving the fields a wide berth. They knew that that grain which grew there was edible, but they also knew that it was taboo, as the zgi who tended it were also taboo, as it was forbidden to cut certain trees, and so on. The why of these things did not trouble them; they only knew that it had always been so. Of course there were numerous old stories about people who had broken taboo and had come to startling ends, but in real life the question of what would happen if you did so simply never came up.

In some vague way, the thagathla were behind the traditional law – the thagathla who, it was said, had placed man in the world and had bade him be fruitful and multiply. Deep at the roots of men's thinking lay the subtly reassuring conviction that they, together with the other living beings of forest and field, were part of a system, and that somewhere dwelt those who understood the whole, ruled and guided it with purposeful wisdom. If the thagathla had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent them.

Halfway across the meadow Morg spied a hamster sitting by its burrow's entrance, and nailed it with a well-aimed arrow. As he ran to retrieve it, a great shadow swept suddenly over the grass with frightening speed, and the other hunters cried out. Morg looked up sharply, and saw before him a thing like an immense painted bird with immobile wings, settling silently to the ground.

Morg stood frozen. He heard behind him the frantic noise of his comrades' flight, and he still stood. A door opened in the aircraft's side, and a thegethli emerged and looked down at Morg.

Morg had never doubted that the thagathla existed – one saw their airships passing overhead, and from a mountaintop one could see the white towers of their city far away – but being face to face with one was a different matter. He dropped to one knee and laid

his bow crosswise on the ground before him – but he kept a firm grip on the weapon, and though he bowed his head humbly his eyes were slitted and wary. If necessary, he could shoot very quickly from a kneeling position.

The thegethli was not so impressive-looking as he had imagined. He was struck most of all by its close similarity to the zgi – like a more graceful and refined version of the same animal, and with a larger skull. Morg would have had no doubts of his ability to worst this creature in hand-to-hand combat – but something, flash of intuition or echo of tradition, told him that the thagathla could not be met on terms of prowess.

The thegethli came down a flight of steps that seemed to grow out of the great bird's side. In the doorway above appeared another, whose arms cradled a gleaming metal tube.

The first one said in human speech, 'Stand up, man. What is your name?'

'I am Morg,' said the hunter. He stood upright, hands loose at his sides, deceptively relaxed, facing the avatar at only a few yards' distance. The thegethli involuntarily straightened her erect forebody so as to be taller than he.

'I have been looking for you, Morg,' said the thegethli somewhat inexactly. 'My name is Zilli.'

'I have heard your name.'

'Indeed?' said Zilli, not displeased. She recollected that five human generations – roughly equivalent to those of the males of her own kind – had passed since she had had any immediate contact with this community. Since then she had achieved the grade of ecologist and had, naturally enough, become the right-hand assistant of the coordinator specially charged with human affairs; it was gratifying to know that her reputation extended even among the lesser species.

'But perhaps you are not the same one,' said Morg cautiously. 'According to the old men, *the* Zilli is twenty feet tall, with eyes like fiery coals, and – '

'I am *the* Zilli,' said Zilli stiffly. 'And, speaking of fiery coals, it is about that that I want you to carry a message to your people. Some weeks ago a valuable tract of timberland to the west of here was completely burned over.'

Morg bowed, without taking his eyes off the thegethli. 'I understand. I will tell them that unless they are more careful with fire they will all be stricken with boils, rheumatism, and lightning.'

'Well – ' Zilli hesitated, remembering the language in which her superior had recalled that one Zilli had authored – the original proposal for introducing a fire-using animal as a pest control. 'Yes, you had better make it strong.'

She eyed the man critically up and down, and said, 'That is one matter. There is another: What is that garment you are wearing?'

Morg looked down at the sleek black pelt, tastefully secured at shoulder and hip with bronze fibulae. He said with a touch of pride, 'It is a yuruk skin. I myself slew the beast.'

'How is it that you are able to wear the hide?'

Morg blinked uneasily, scenting a trap. He said carefully, 'If one wears a raw yuruk skin, true, it will make his own skin red and itching; and its meat will outrage a man's belly. For that reason, in my father's time we did not hunt the yuruk; but now it is known that if the hide and the flesh are soaked for a time in salt water – '

'I see,' said Zilli. She had the simple explanation for what had been a puzzling development on the census records of the Bureau of Ecology: the fact that, in certain of the areas inhabited by humans, the slothlike herbivorous yuruk had fallen off inexplicably in numbers, and with them the thrin which preyed largely upon them and had – until recently at least – served as the principal check upon the yuruk's excessive multiplication.

Well, her report on this might produce a minor stir in the Bureau; but it was of small consequence balanced against the showing which, as the same recent censuses indicated, *Pseudothrin terrestris* Zilli was making in its intended role of counter-agent for the rodent plague. She had not missed noticing the hamster which lay a little to one side, transfixed by Morg's arrow. Curious – in naming these creatures, Zilli had wrought better than she knew; now, in addition to their own ecological function, they were usurping that of the genuine thrin.

Zilli looked at the skin-clad hunter almost with affection; after all, he and his kind were her project. She said, 'Very well. On the whole I am well pleased with your people, Morg. But do not forget to warn them about carelessness with fires.'

Morg bowed again. The guard stood aside to let Zilli enter the flier; the door clicked shut behind them, and the craft rose steeply.

Morg stood watching it dwindle into the blue; when it was out of sight, he turned and strolled unhurriedly back to the edge of the woods. His two companions were crouched in the shelter of a thicket there; they met him with awed glances.

'What–' one of them faltered, 'did the thegethli tell you, Morg?'

'Many things,' said Morg mysteriously. 'Many things.' He was already turning over in his mind certain innovations which he had long thought about, but had feared to present to the elders as his own ideas. Now, his fellow-hunters were witnesses that he had truly talked with a thegethli; and he already savoured in advance the looks the chief men of the tribe would wear when he, Morg, spoke to them as one conveying the will of the thagathla.

In particular, he wanted to broach the advantages of trading with the zgi, taboo or no taboo. Only a week earlier, he had found by experiment that those bovine and none-too-bright creatures were willing to pay well for cured yuruk hides; they received synthetic fabrics as well as tools from the thagathla in return for their crop surpluses, of course, but furs were to them a novelty which in the past they had had only when they happened upon a carcass freshly slain by thrin or other predators. In a pouch slung about Morg's neck burned the bit of iron he had received in exchange for just one hide; during the minutes past he had been on tenterhooks lest some second sight reveal it to Zilli. It would make a phenomenal arrowhead, but he had found that he would need also an iron hammer to work it into shape. If yuruk skins became valuable trade goods, Morg, the mighty hunter, would become the owner of much iron.

He told his companions very seriously: 'I am going to be a great man.'

The farmer Morgus was rich. The fields worked by his numerous family and dependents stretched for miles around the big stone house that the present farmer's grandfather had built when he first settled in that country; and members of his clan, the Morgusi, owned most of the land in these parts, so that as patriarch of the

clan he was a recognized leader through all the countryside.

Just now, Morgus' face, in its frame of iron-grey beard, was set in hard and stubborn lines. He looked down from the elevation of his front porch at the zgi, and said gruffly, 'No. How often do I have to tell you?'

The zgi – two stocky, powerful creatures, a head shorter than a man, like dwarfish and uncouth replicas of the thagathla to which their species was closely related – blinked dully up at him. One of them said, in its broken jargon that was a mixture of its own and human language: 'Me . . . good job. Run plow . . . yes? Watch barn . . . yes?'

'No!' said Morgus. 'For the last time – I've stopped using zgi. There are plenty of men who want to work, and they're better hands. On down the road with you. I hear that in the valley to the west they're still hiring your kind.'

The zgi stared mournfully at him. Stupid as they were, they read the inflexibility of the farmer's manner; they turned and shuffled disconsolately away toward the highway.

Morgus watched their retreating figures suspiciously for a time, then turned to the door of his house. But then he became aware of a dust cloud approaching rapidly on the road from the east, and he halted with his hand on the latch.

The vehicle slowed to a stop at Morgus's gate, and swung cautiously, bouncing over tractor ruts, into the lane that led past the house to the barnyard. It was obviously one of the travelling machines of the thagathla, very different from the trucks which came to carry away the crop surpluses; this vehicle was long, sleek, and shiny beneath a fresh coating of dust. Its doors opened, and three of the ruling race climbed stiffly out.

Morgus squared his homespun-clad shoulders and advanced with a slow and dignified gait to meet the visitors. 'Welcome,' he rumbled. 'To what do I owe – ?'

'I am Ecological Coordinator Zilli,' said the leading thegethli curtly. 'You are the farmer Morgus? . . . Good. I wish to talk to you.'

'Will the great one enter my poor abode?' With specious humility Morgus indicated the rambling stone farmhouse.

'Wait at the door,' Zilli commanded her two bodyguards.

'But, Your Fertility – '

'There is no danger.'

Morgus, leading the way, gave no sign of having understood the exchange in the thagathlan language; in fact he had picked up a fair smattering of the tongue in his contacts with the assistant coordinators who made periodic tours of inspection. But a full-fledged coordinator was an unprecedented guest. And her name was Zilli – the same as one of the principal household gods of the Morgusi. Morgus was not superstitious; he believed in what he could see and hear and in what his horny hands could grasp. But now, for quite unsuperstitious reasons, he was growing uneasy.

They entered the living-room – spacious, low-ceilinged, dominated by a great stone fireplace above which hung crossed hunting spears. In the doorway that led to the kitchen a woman, one of Morgus's daughters-in-law, stared round-eyed, clapped her apron over her mouth, and shrank from sight. From a sturdy table placed by the window where the light was best, a hollow-cheeked beardless youth looked up, rose to his feet like a startled animal, and eyed the thegethli uncertainly; on the table lay several thin slabs of wood covered with cryptic charcoal scrawls.

'My youngest son,' said the farmer. Nervousness made him add with a loquacity unusual for him: 'He is not strong enough for field work, so he keeps the records of the farm. He claims that with the system of marks he has invented it is possible to write our language as you thagathla write with your letters – and, to be sure, they seem to get mixed up less often than the old tallies used to.'

Zilli was paying scant attention. 'Morgus,' she said sadly, 'my assistants have brought me disturbing reports about you.'

Morgus stroked his iron-grey beard. 'How so? Haven't I and all my family amply fulfilled the produce quotas?'

'Yes. But – '

'We haven't even made any demands on the thagathla for new machinery or other factory-made goods, except for fuel, recently. If my son's book-keeping isn't badly awry, we should have a respectable balance of credit in our favour.' The boy looked embarrassed, but nodded vigorously.

'Yes, yes,' Zilli admitted testily. 'But that is beside the point. Be quiet and listen to me!'

She gazed sombrely at the humans. Zilli was already well past the mid-point of her race's long life span; her crest was beginning to acquire a venerable patina, and she had risen to the coordinatorship once held by the now long-dead Mnigli, a position only three places removed in order of succession from the supreme post of senior coordinator. At times like the present she felt the weight of her six hundred years, and of the changes that time had wrought since she had been an eager young junior biologist.

She demanded sternly, 'Morgus, what were those animals I saw in a fenced field a little way down the road?'

'Animals?' Morgus hesitated briefly before he decided there was nothing to be gained by pretended ignorance. 'Oh, ah, yes. Those were merely some pnid I've been fattening on the upland pastures. The creatures are very little extra trouble; they become quite docile when tamed, and the boys look after them while they graze.'

'That cannot be permitted.'

Morgus stared at the thegethli from under bushy grey brows. 'Pnid are not taboo animals. The hunters kill them all the time.'

'It is their domestication that we cannot allow. Formerly, when all the land here was cultivated by the zgi, there was no such problem,' said Zilli a bit ruefully.

'We are not like the zgi – nor like the thagathla. We need meat!'

'You can hunt, then, or trade with the forest men.'

Morgus glanced out the west window, toward where the wooded mountains rose dark in the distance. He scowled; he did not care for dealing with the men who inhabited the woodlands as his own ancestors had done up to a few generations back. They were, in his opinion, backward, uncouth, and thievish. And above all – from the window he saw also the fertile sweep of the new-sown fields, the neat fence-rows, and beyond, the rolling highlands with their lush high grass. He said hotly, 'You have no right to order me about like that! It is *my* land and they are *my* pnid.'

'It is not a question of property rights,' said Zilli patiently, 'but rather one of . . . of the ecological balance.' Perforce she used a

Thagathlan expression that conveyed nothing to Morgus save a hazy notion of 'taboo'.

'I am a reasonable man,' said the farmer doggedly, 'but here I see no reason.'

'Very well,' said Zilli. 'I will try to explain this matter to you as to a reasonable being. Suppose that you – and your neighbours following your lead – were to go on pasturing the grass-eating pnid on the slopes yonder. Under your care, their herds would increase greatly, made safe from predators other than men, and provided with food and shelter in the winters. Sooner or later – in your sons' lifetime, perhaps, or your grandsons' – on the uplands denuded of grass by overgrazing, erosion would set in and increasing quantities of soil be washed away by every season of rains.

'Here in the valley where you farm, the excessive run-off would cause floods and would leach valuable elements out of the soil. Nor would the damage end there; drought would follow flood, because of the rain water which would have flowed away instead of being held back as at present, by the thick sod on the hillsides. A few dry summers would accelerate the process of erosion; and a vicious circle would be established, which might end only in the drying-up and ruin of what are now first-class farmlands.

'Now do you understand why you must not herd the pnid?'

Morgus's lined face was stony. 'You talk,' he said, 'about things that might happen a long time from now; or they might not. I am a practical man; I don't understand your complicated Thagathlan theories.'

'Exactly,' said Zilli. 'If you did, you would be equal to the thagathla.'

'I understand though that we need more flesh food than we get by trading with the shiftless forest-folk or by hunting in time we can ill spare from farm work. There can be no harm in keeping a few beasts for our own use, and I intend to do so!'

Zilli drew herself up stiffly, eyeing the man with a coldness which covered a qualm of misgiving that she felt not for the first time in dealing with humans; this, though, was the first time she had met with open defiance. Zilli felt a sense of crisis, mingled with thankfulness that she still possessed a potent weapon, forged against

just such an emergency by the provident foresight of the Psychological Division.

'Morgus,' she said bleakly, 'you forget yourself, and you forget what your race owes to us, the thagathla. You lay claim to reason, but your attitude belies the claim!'

She paused to let that sink in, but if it made any impression on the obdurate farmer she was unable to see it. She reflected briefly, not without a tinge of vanity, on the gulf that after all separated her own species from the human; the latter was undoubtedly of a high order of intelligence – witness its rapid climb from its original stone-age culture to the use of metals and even some understanding of the agricultural machinery furnished by the thagathla – but it still looked on the world around it with the eyes of any other lower animal species, greedy to exploit its environment and multiply its own numbers without thought of consequences. The thagathla, on the other hand, were truly intelligent. They and they alone saw and understood and guided the whole, the all-embracing unity of field and forest, sea and desert, and the varied populations of plant and animal life which all together made up the single vast ecological community that covers Thegeth; that, biologically speaking, *was* Thegeth – the hierarchy of predators and prey, the network of more subtle interdependences among countless species – the ecological pyramid. At the summit of the pyramid stood the thagathla, the controlling intelligence of the planet-wide system, because they understood – understood that they themselves as a species were an integral part of that system, no less and no more than the lowliest soil-boring worm or nitrogen-fixing bacterium.

And the human population of Thegeth was equally a part of the pyramid. True, since their introduction they had extended their ecological functions, with remarkable adaptability they had supplanted the now almost-vanished thrin as forest predators and were in process of pushing the zgi toward the brink of extinction by replacing them in their role of cultivators – displaying, unquestionably, more efficiency and ingenuity in that role than the zgi ever had. But those were developments within the system, affecting its essential integrity not at all. Whenever, as now, a situation threatened which *would* disrupt the total environment, the thagathla were at hand to intervene.

Reluctantly, Zilli brought her not-so-secret weapon to bear. 'Where is your title to the land, Morgus?' she inquired.

The farmer's weathered face went sallow-pale. Now that it was too late, he saw the blow coming, saw that he should have foreseen it, but there was nothing he could do.

'*Where is the title?*'

Morgus's jaw muscles worked; veins swelled in his temple. His eyes peered huntedly from under their shaggy brows; they flicked furtively to the crossed spears over the fireplace, then swung slowly, unwillingly back to the motionless figure of the thegethli. Suddenly his shoulders sagged; he turned away, haltingly, like an old man. The silently watching boy stared at his father in fascinated horror.

The Psychological Division of the Bureau of Ecology had planned shrewdly. When man had begun emerging from the woods and cautiously but purposefully shouldering the zgi out of the arable tracts, the Bureau had correctly anticipated that this change of habitat would produce correspondingly deep-going changes in mentality; the mechanisms of taboo and superstitious awe which had served to keep the primitive hunter within the bounds of permissible behaviour would not hold up under the impact of a new way of life and of closer contact with the thagathla. The psychologists observed the spontaneous beginnings of an emotionally-charged system of property relationships; they took those beginnings adroitly in hand, encouraged and shaped them to their own ends. The thagathla made the law, and under the law the right of ownership in land – symbolized by suitably impressive documents designed on the basis of psychometric data – stemmed exclusively from them and held good solely at their pleasure.

The farmer Morgus felt the very foundations of his life crumbling.

'One moment, coordinator,' he said thickly. 'I . . . I will fetch the title – '

'That will not be necessary,' said Zilli sharply; the scene was distasteful to her. 'But you must get rid of the domesticated pnid.'

Morgus looked briefly at her and dropped his eyes to the floor. 'Yes, coordinator.'

'And one more thing.' Conscientiously, Zilli turned at the door.

'The Aerial Survey has reported evidence that some members of your clan have been seeding lands supposed to be lying fallow. That must be stopped.'

'Yes, coordinator,' Morgus mumbled. He did not look up even when the grinding of wheels outside told him that the thagathla had departed.

At Morgus's side his son said breathlessly, 'Do they take us for zgi?'

'What does it matter?' Morgus lifted his grey head heavily. 'Ring the bell and call your brothers. We'll have to get ready to slaughter the animals.'

The boy took a step to obey, then turned back hesitantly. 'Father . . . I want to look at the title-deed the thegethli spoke of.'

'What for?'

'Perhaps it doesn't really say all they claim it does.'

'Suppose not – *they* have the power. And no man can tell what it says, anyway – it's *their* writing.'

The boy bit his lip; but he persisted, 'Perhaps after a time I can make something of it. I think they use the principle of a mark for a sound.'

'As you like,' said the father listlessly.

The boy rang the summoning-bell outside; and while they waited for the others to come from the field, he stood on the porch looking into the east. At his back, behind the house and behind the forested hills where the skin-clad hunters roamed, the sun was near setting. The eastern sky was shadowy; and against the darkening backdrop, luminous with reflected sunlight, the white-towered city of the thagathla glowed only twenty miles away across the plain.

Zilli left the automatic elevator and ambled slowly along the silent passage. Her old bones creaked, and she puffed with a shortness of breath that had troubled her during the last fifty years.

This corridor, at least, was the same as it had always been – virtually unchanged since the time, so long past, when an enthusiastic young junior biologist named Zilli had been summoned for the first time in her life up to the rarefied heights of the top-floor offices of that exalted being, the senior coordinator, to be informed

of her designation as a member of the Second and last Earth Expedition.

Now, on the door at the corridor's end, the faintly shining legend in flowing Thagathlan script read:

SENIOR COORDINATOR ZILLI

Beneath it the same indication was repeated in the angular, graceless characters of the Human alphabet. This second inscription was brighter, because more recent.

The door of Zilli's office slid quietly open at her approach. In the roomy, well-lit chamber beyond, two men rose quickly to their feet from a paper-strewn desk by the great curved window that looked over the city.

One of them was Antan Morgu, Zilli's confidential secretary – a neatly barbered and manicured man of indeterminate age, dressed, as always, in conservative but expensive clothing of synthetic fabrics, and in a studiously affable expression. The other was a stranger, a large human who hugged a bulging pnidskin case as if fearful of being parted from it.

On the window ledge, Morgu's hamster sat up and watched the thegethli with a bright, beady stare.

Zilli stiffened her erect forebody, ignoring rheumatic twinges, and straightened her front pair of legs, making herself as tall as possible. It was a reflex she had never been able to suppress during all her association with humans, an involuntary reaction to the curious impression of *towering* which these two-legged creatures gave.

'Your Fertility!' the secretary greeted her in the Thagathlan language. 'I wasn't expecting you in so early. This is my cousin, Rodon Morgu, who dropped by for a moment to discuss a private matter. If you don't mind, Rodon, you can wait in the next room till the current business is disposed of.'

Cousin Rodon bowed awkwardly to the ancient thegethli, and speechlessly let himself be ushered, hugging his leather case, through the door which led to the adjoining chamber. Antan Morgu slid the door shut behind him, leaving it open just a little. Then he returned to the desk and began sorting papers.

Zilli waited silently. It was no news to her that her secretary led a

double life. In his official capacity, he carried on most of the routine work of the senior coordinator's office, and did so with an industry and efficiency which seldom left room for criticism, just as nowadays so many other humans were carrying on a multitude of important tasks formerly entrusted only to thagathla. At the same time, among his fellow-humans Morgu and other members of his family were highly regarded for reasons which Zilli had never thoroughly understood. Objectively, the thagathla had observed the existence and workings of an involved system of exchange and accumulation of value-tokens; these functioned, in interhuman relationships, as a sort of universal requisition-slip for goods and services, with the peculiar proviso that honouring them was not mandatory. But an intuitive grasp of the human enthusiasm for such activities was beyond an outsider.

Zilli knew, however, that among the *aficionados* of the token-exchange the House of Morgu was a name to conjure with.

Morgu finished assembling a pile of documents, and shoved the rest to one side. 'These are the items currently requiring Your Fertility's signature.'

The senior coordinator lowered herself stiffly to the kneeling-cushion beside the desk, and picked up the stylus which her secretary placed ready to her hand. For a time the only sounds in the office were Zilli's asthmatic breathing and the rustle of papers. Morgu stood gazing out the window which gave a lofty view over the gleaming towers and parklands of the metropolis. His tame hamster squeaked and hopped from the window ledge to its master's arm; he held it up and stroked its fur absently.

Directive to Local Administrators. . . . Signature. *Schedule of Manufacturing Quotas for Region 12.* . . . Signature. *Requisition for Equipment of Urban Police Force.* . . . Zilli hesitated briefly over this one; it seemed to her that such appropriations had been coming with remarkable frequency. But she dismissed the thought, and signed. Humans – perhaps because they were a male-dominated species – were prone to sporadic violence; it was fortunate that they were capable of channelling that tendency to violence so as to keep order among themselves. *Semiannual Programme for Nitrate Recovery Plant No. 4.* . . . Something about that dry title jogged Zilli's memory, though she couldn't say just why. The document,

like so many nowadays, was in the Human tongue, made officially equal to Thagathlan by a decree of some decades ago. Sighing, Zilli began laboriously perusing the angular-lettered text, replete with figures on sample densities of nitrogen-fixing swamp bacteria, on available water-circulating and evaporation facilities –

Zilli's thoughts persisted in straying to the man standing at the window. She wondered: What does he see out there?

Not that there was much doubt, of course, that human and thagathlan eyes saw the same images in much the same way. But sometimes, in uneasy moments, Zilli wondered. Those biped creatures who swarmed in ever-increasing numbers in the streets where once only her kind had trod, who increasingly performed the functions in whose exercise the older civilized race had once been unique – did they see behind the superficial reality of this city, of this world, to the essence which *must* be obvious to any intelligent life form capable of performing those functions? In the beginning she had correctly judged the species adaptable; at the time no one could have guessed the full scope of its adaptability, the almost fantastic facility of imitation by which humans had transformed themselves successively, in a few brief centuries, into functional equivalents and supplanters of the thrin, of the zgi, and finally of the thagathla themselves. Mimicry was a trait alien to the thagathla; among humans, Zilli vaguely knew, it had subjective values ranging from flattery to mockery.

But, subjectively, 'functional equivalence' means 'essential identity'; that was a basic tenet of Thagathlan philosophy. What mattered now, as it always had, was not the survival of any particular species as such, but the preservation of the one world pattern, the balanced pyramid of the whole planet's life, potentially immortal as species and individuals are not. From that viewpoint, Man on Thegeth was a success. As originally foreseen, he had acted as an enduring check upon the hamsters which, six hundred years ago, had menaced the ecological balance; the further – and unforeseen – consequences of the importation of Man were immaterial, since they involved only displacements within the system, as irrelevant to the relationships making up that system as the substitution of different values for variables in an equation is to the form of the equation.

Thus it was in Thagathlan eyes. But the question still nagged at Zilli: *How do* they *see it?*

She forced her attention back to the document before her, and suddenly remembered what about it had disturbed her. She had a queer, sinking, panicky feeling. She said sharply, 'Morgu!'

The man set the hamster back on the window ledge and turned, face bland as always. 'Yes, Your Fertility?'

'This programme for Nitrates 4,' Zilli said slowly. 'It is . . . a mistake. It calls for a two-fold increase in production, whereas the survey commission reported that any increase now would amount to destructive exploitation.'

Still Antan Morgu's expression betrayed nothing. That impassive exterior, Morgu well knew, was one of his chief intangible assets.

But behind the mask he bitterly cursed his luck. *Now, of all times!* – just when he was at death-grips with Yano, when Yano was using every means, fair and foul, to drive him and the other Morgusi to the wall, when it was absolutely essential that Morgu's speculations in nitrate fertilizers be made to pay, furnish the capital to bolster up his other ventures and to strike back at Yano.

Zilli was eyeing him fixedly. 'Morgu! Answer me – what is going on here?'

Fleeting, sardonically, Morgu wondered what the senior co-ordinator would do if she did know all that was going on – if she knew, for instance, that this very building, housing the central offices of the Ecological Bureau, was mortgaged to the hilt to shore up Morgu's schemes, or that certain interested, but carefully anonymous, parties had offered her confidential secretary up to a million and a half to resign from his strategic post. But it would be almost impossible to explain these things to Zilli. Intelligent as the thagaltha were, in some respects they were merely like lower animals, moving about the world in blissful oblivion of finance and politics.

His mind raced, seeking a way out. At another time he would have acknowledged the 'mistake' and taken the loss – but the present crisis in his affairs ruled that course out. It wouldn't do to point out that there was an increased demand for fertilizers – Zilli would want to know why, and that could bring up the embarrass-

ing question of what had happened to certain farmlands supposedly lying fallow according to the regular rotation plan. Nor could he argue that, even if exploitation of the nitrate swamps resulted in their exhaustion, one could fall back on known artificial processes for the fixation of nitrogen – in his position. Morgu was aware that a cardinal principle of the Ecological Bureau dictated that technology should supplement, not supplant, the functions of living organisms. He had never been able to grasp the concept behind that doctrine – according to the Thagathlan theoreticians, technological unemployment of even a swamp-slime would constitute betrayal of the organic community by its intelligent members, or something like that.

There was no possibility of selling the programme to Zilli now – nothing to do but stall. Fortunately, the order for increased production had already gone out on Morgu's own authority, through human channels to human managers who had long since learned to regard the official dispositions as belated formalities; and if Morgu handled it right to gain time, his financial situation could be secured by the time a reckoning came.

Morgu allowed an air of worried concern to appear on his face.

'Perhaps there has been a mistake, Your Fertility,' he admitted. 'Let us defer action until the question can be cleared up; I myself will re-examine it thoroughly.' Unobtrusively he stretched out a hand for the offending document. But Zilli's delicately-clawed digits rested firmly on it, and she shook her crested head sternly, still regarding him with that peculiarly fixed stare. For Zilli things were falling into place: things noted and forgotten, discrepancies passed over, evidences of –

'No,' said Zilli flatly. 'I demand an explanation – *now!*'

This, then, was it. Morgu squared his shoulders and took a deep breath to utter words that would blow the lid off – and matters were taken out of his hands, abruptly and unpleasantly.

The door was wrenched open, squeaking protest. Three men flung themselves into the office; they were uniformed as Urban Police, and long knives gleamed in their hands.

Morgu started to lunge, then recoiled before the menacing blades. Two of the interlopers backed him against the wall; the

third, ignoring the frozen Zilli, bent over the desk and began rummaging among the documents there.

'Zilli!' Morgu jerked out. 'Button . . . underneath on the right – '

His voice choked off as a knife-point pressed hard against the pit of his stomach.

Zilli, numbed by the unheard-of situation, groped beneath the desk top; but she did not know where Morgu had installed the button that would summon the police in his pay from the floor below.

The intruder who had begun searching straightened and growled. 'Back against the wall. You, too.' He did not meet the thegethli's eyes, but his tone was as chill and threatening as the cold steel he held. Zilli stumbled shakily backward. She gasped, 'What . . . is the meaning . . . of this?'

It was Morgu who answered her, in a taut voice: 'These are Arak Yano's dagger-men. Sent to forestall that Nitrates order. I knew he knew about it, but I didn't think he'd try anything so raw – '

'Shut up!' snarled one of the thugs.

Morgu's eyes were riveted to the man bending over the desk. As certainly as if he had heard Yano giving these hirelings their orders, he knew what those orders must have been – to assassinate Antan Morgu just as soon as they were sure of having found the vital paper, but not till then, in case they should have to force its location from him. With Morgu dead and the Nitrates deal shorn of official sanction, Yano would be unstoppable.

Luckily the searcher must have been scarcely literate; he studied the topmost document for crawling seconds, moving his lips, before he realized that it was the one they sought. As he picked it up and wheeled with an air of triumph, Morgu tensed himself.

The door on the opposite side of the office slid silently open, and framed the bulky figure of Cousin Rodon. He no longer had his pnidskin case; a grotesque mask covered his mouth and nose, and in his hand was an object which he tossed with lumbering precision. It hit the farther wall and burst with a *plop* in the faces of the pair who held Morgu at knife-point.

They reeled backward. One slashed wildly at Morgu as he dodged, then dropped the knife and folded at the knees. The third,

paper in hand, took an uncertain step and a half before the gas hit him and he too crumpled.

Morgu reached the desk in two strides, ripped open a drawer, hastily donned a second mask and, purpling, exhaled violently to clear it before drawing breath again. Then he pressed the signal button and turned shakily to survey the scene.

'Good work!' he said to Rodon, who was methodically gathering up the enemy's scattered weapons. 'You'll be well rewarded for this. Are you all right, Your Fertility?'

Zilli had recognized the gas as the same which the Bureau's chemists had invented for use against Terrestrial organisms at the time of the Second Earth Expedition; Morgu must have found the formula in the old files. Its effect on Thagathlan metabolism was not so marked – nevertheless, Zilli felt faint and might have fallen if she had not had four legs. She wheezed, 'Yes. I am all right.'

That was more nearly true fifteen minutes later, when Rodon and a squad of Morgu's trusted men had dragged out the would-be assassins – whether the police uniforms the latter wore belonged to them or had merely been a ruse to gain entry was still not known, but it didn't greatly matter – and the ventilators had cleared the coordinator's office of gas.

Zilli sat, looking somehow shrunken, and watched Morgu pace up and down. His tame hamster, still dazed from the gas, rode unsteadily on his shoulder.

'This time,' he exulted, 'Yano has overstepped himself. With the confessions we'll get from his agents, I can use the criminal law against him. The *human* law, you understand.'

'Yes,' said the thegethli tonelessly.

'Whether he can wriggle out of the charges or not, his hands will be tied long enough for me to close in on him financially.' Morgu halted and looked closely at Zilli. He said in a different voice, choosing his words, 'This incident has no doubt opened your eyes to . . . certain facts; facts which I should have been at a loss to have explained before.'

'Yes,' said Zilli.

'But I hope it will make no real difference. We can go on working together as before. That's been one of the issues between the groups

I represent and Yano's criminal faction. Yano has boasted openly that, once he became financially and politically powerful enough, he would – dispense with the thagathla. But we are now in a position to wipe out that threat and guarantee continued interspecies cooperation. To be sure, there are some changes which ought to be made; in dealing with the present danger I've been uncomfortably hampered by some of the Bureau's obsolete regulations – '

Zilli said nothing. Morgu hesitated; he stooped and picked up the paper which lay crumpled on the floor, smoothed it out, then tore it.

'You can stop worrying about exploitation of the nitrate swamps. That's no longer necessary, now that we have a more potent weapon against the opposition.'

'No longer necessary – until the next emergency arises?'

A pained shadow crossed Morgu's face, the look of one who sees his magnanimity go unappreciated. 'Well, of course, no one can be sure what may happen.'

'But with humans in control,' said Zilli, 'something will always happen. You will go on from crisis to crisis, now that you have the power. Power: that's important to you, isn't it? Where we thagathla erred – at the time, the many times when we might still have stopped you – was in supposing that all intelligent life must follow the same pattern.'

She paused, short of breath; Morgu broke in, 'But I've explained that nothing is changed. We can go on cooperating.'

'Yes,' said Zilli heavily. 'We'll go on cooperating, until the thagathla are extinct. We were never alarmed because you might replace us; in the last analysis that would not matter. Our mistake was to think you would be satisfied with merely *replacing* us. For us the final goal was always the balanced community, the ecological pyramid; but for you that is only a means to an end. To what end? That's what I'll never understand.

'But this I do know. Now that you've reached the summit of the pyramid, you'll not rest till you've torn it all down and built something more, or possibly less, to your liking, on the ruins. And your race will never make the same mistake. You will never quietly move over and allow yourselves to be supplanted, whether by some other intelligent species or by some new breed risen from

among yourselves. When your time comes, as it must because no species is immortal, when finally you meet conditions changed even beyond your power to adapt – you will perish ungracefully, with as much noise and destruction as possible.'

Antan Morgu stared puzzledly into the filmed old eyes of the thegethli. Thagathlan philosophy had always baffled him. He started to protest once more, then changed his mind, shrugged impatiently, and turned away; downstairs they would be ready to begin extracting some confessions, an affair he should supervise.

But in the open doorway he hesitated and faced round again. One utterance of Zilli's had stuck in his mind, he couldn't quite say why.

'What makes you say,' he demanded, frowning, 'that we've reached the top?'

The Forgotten Enemy

ARTHUR C. CLARKE

THE thick furs thudded softly to the ground as Professor Millward jerked himself upright on the narrow bed. This time, he was sure, it had been no dream; the freezing air that rasped against his lungs still seemed to echo with the sound that had come crashing out of the night.

He gathered the furs around his shoulders and listened intently. All was quiet again: from the narrow windows on the western walls long shafts of moonlight played upon the endless rows of books, as they played upon the dead city beneath. The world was utterly still; even in the old days the city would have been silent on such a night, and it was doubly silent now.

With weary resolution Professor Millward shuffled out of bed, and doled a few lumps of coke into the glowing brazier. Then he made his way slowly towards the nearest window, pausing now and then to rest his hand lovingly on the volumes he had guarded all these years.

He shielded his eyes from the brilliant moonlight and peered out into the night. The sky was cloudless: the sound he had heard had not been thunder, whatever it might have been. It had come from the north, and even as he waited it came again.

Distance had softened it, distance and the bulk of the hills that lay beyond London. It did not race across the sky with the wantonness of thunder, but seemed to come from a single point far to the north. It was like no natural sound that he had ever heard, and for a moment he dared to hope again.

Only Man, he was sure, could have made such a sound. Perhaps the dream that had kept him here among these treasures of civilization for more than twenty years would soon be a dream no longer. Men were returning to England, blasting their way through the ice and snow with the weapons that science had given

them before the coming of the Dust. It was strange that they should come by land, and from the north, but he thrust aside any thoughts that would quench the newly kindled flame of hope.

Three hundred feet below, the broken sea of snow-covered roofs lay bathed in the bitter moonlight. Miles away the tall stacks of Battersea Power Station glimmered like thin white ghosts against the night sky. Now that the dome of St Paul's had collapsed beneath the weight of snow, they alone challenged his supremacy.

Professor Millward walked slowly back along the book-shelves, thinking over the plan that had formed in his mind. Twenty years ago he had watched the last helicopters climbing heavily out of Regent's Park, the rotors churning the ceaselessly falling snow. Even then, when the silence had closed around him, he could not bring himself to believe that the North had been abandoned for ever. Yet already he had waited a whole generation, among the books to which he had dedicated his life.

In those early days he had sometimes heard, over the radio which was his only contact with the South, of the struggle to colonize the now-temperate lands of the Equator. He did not know the outcome of that far-off battle, fought with desperate skill in the dying jungles and across deserts that had already felt the first touch of snow. Perhaps it had failed; the radio had been silent now for fifteen years or more. Yet if men and machines were indeed returning from the north – of all directions – he might again be able to hear their voices as they spoke to one another and to the lands from which they had come.

Professor Millward left the University building perhaps a dozen times a year, and then only through sheer necessity. Over the past two decades he had collected everything he needed from the shops in the Bloomsbury area, for in the final exodus vast supplies of stocks had been left behind through lack of transport. In many ways, indeed, his life could be called luxurious: no professor of English literature had ever been clothed in such garments as those he had taken from an Oxford Street furrier's.

The sun was blazing from a cloudless sky as he shouldered his pack and unlocked the massive gates. Even ten years ago packs of starving dogs had hunted in this area, and though he had seen

none for years he was still cautious and always carried a revolver when he went into the open.

The sunlight was so brilliant that the reflected glare hurt his eyes; but it was almost wholly lacking in heat. Although the belt of cosmic dust through which the Solar System was now passing had made little difference to the sun's brightness, it had robbed it of all strength. No one knew whether the world would swim out into the warmth again in ten or a thousand years, and civilization had fled southwards in search of lands where the word 'summer' was not an empty mockery.

The latest drifts had packed hard, and Professor Millward had little difficulty in making the journey to Tottenham Court Road. Sometimes it had taken him hours of floundering through the snow, and one year he had been sealed in his great concrete watch-tower for nine months.

He kept away from the houses with their dangerous burdens of snow and their Damoclean icicles, and went north until he came to the shop he was seeking. The words above the shattered windows were still bright: 'Jenkins & Sons. Radio and Electrical. Television A Speciality.'

Some snow had drifted through a broken section of roofing, but the little upstairs room had not altered since his last visit a dozen years ago. The all-wave radio still stood on the table, and empty tins scattered on the floor spoke mutely of the lonely hours he had spent here before all hope had died. He wondered if he must go through the same ordeal again.

Professor Millward brushed the snow from the copy of *The Amateur Radio Handbook for 1965*, which had taught him what little he knew about wireless. The test-meters and batteries were still lying in their half-remembered places, and to his relief some of the batteries still held their charge. He searched through the stock until he had built up the necessary power supplies, and checked the radio as well as he could. Then he was ready.

It was a pity that he could never send the manufacturers the testimonial they deserved. The faint 'hiss' from the speaker brought back memories of the B.B.C., of the nine o'clock news and symphony concerts, of all the things he had taken for granted in a world that was gone like a dream. With scarcely controlled im-

patience he ran across the wave-bands, but everywhere there was nothing save that omnipresent hiss. That was disappointing, but no more: he remembered that the real test would come at night. In the meantime he would forage among the surrounding shops for anything that might be useful.

It was dusk when he returned to the little room. A hundred miles above his head, tenuous and invisible, the Heaviside Layer would be expanding outwards toward the stars as the sun went down. So it had done every evening for millions of years, and for half a century only, Man had used it for his own purposes, to reflect around the world his messages of hate or peace, to echo with trivialities or to sound with music once called immortal.

Slowly, with infinite patience, Professor Millward began to traverse the shortwave bands that a generation ago had been a babel of shouting voices and stabbing morse. Even as he listened, the faint hope that he had dared to cherish began to fade within him. The city itself was no more silent than the once-crowded oceans of ether. Only the faint crackle of thunderstorms half the world away broke the intolerable stillness. Man had abandoned his latest conquest.

Soon after midnight the batteries faded out. Professor Millward did not have the heart to search for more, but curled up in his furs and fell into a troubled sleep. He got what consolation he could from the thought that if he had not proved his theory, he had not disproved it either.

The heatless sunlight was flooding the lonely white road when he began the homeward journey. He was very tired, for he had slept little, and his sleep had been broken by the recurring fantasy of rescue.

The silence was suddenly broken by the distant thunder that came rolling over the white roofs. It came – there could be no doubt now – from beyond the northern hills that had once been London's playground. From the buildings on either side little avalanches of snow went swishing out into the wide street; then the silence returned.

Professor Millward stood motionless, weighing, considering, analysing. The sound had been too long-drawn out to be an ordinary explosion – he was dreaming again – it was nothing less

than the distant thunder of an atomic bomb, burning and blasting away the snow a million tons at a time. His hopes revived, and the disappointments of the night began to fade.

That momentary pause almost cost him his life. Out of a side-street something huge and white moved suddenly into his field of vision. For a moment his mind refused to accept the reality of what he saw; then the paralysis left him and he fumbled desperately for his futile revolver. Padding towards him across the snow, swinging its head from side to side with a hypnotic, serpentine motion, was a huge polar bear.

He dropped his belongings and ran, floundering over the snow toward the nearest buildings. Providentially the Underground entrance was only fifty feet away. The steel grille was closed, but he remembered breaking the lock many years ago. The temptation to look back was almost intolerable, for he could hear nothing to tell how near his pursuer was. For one frightful moment the iron lattice resisted his numbed fingers. Then it yielded reluctantly and he forced his way through the narrow opening.

Out of his childhood there came a sudden incongruous memory of an albino ferret he had once seen weaving its body ceaselessly across the wire netting of its cage. There was the same reptile grace in the monstrous shape, almost twice as high as a man, that reared itself in baffled fury against the grille. The metal bowed but did not yield beneath the pressure; then the bear dropped to the ground, grunted softly, and padded away. It slashed once or twice at the fallen haversack, scattering a few tins of food into the snow, and vanished as silently as it had come.

A very shaken Professor Millward reached the University three hours later, after moving in short bounds from one refuge to the next. After all these years he was no longer alone in the city. He wondered if there were other visitors, and that same night he knew the answer. Just before dawn he heard, quite distinctly, the cry of a wolf from somewhere in the direction of Hyde Park.

By the end of the week he knew that the animals of the North were on the move. Once he saw a reindeer running southward, pursued by a pack of silent wolves, and sometimes in the night there were sounds of deadly conflict. He was amazed that so much life still existed in the white wilderness between London and the

Pole. Now something was driving it southward, and the knowledge brought him a mounting excitement. He did not believe that these fierce survivors would flee from anything save Man.

The strain of waiting was beginning to affect Professor Millward's mind, and for hours he would sit in the cold sunlight, his furs wrapped round him, dreaming of rescue and thinking of the way in which men might be returning to England. Perhaps an expedition had come from North America across the Atlantic ice. It might have been years upon its way. But why had it come so far north? His favourite theory was that the Atlantic ice-packs were not safe enough for heavy traffic farther to the south.

One thing, however, he could not explain to his satisfaction. There had been no air reconnaissance; it was hard to believe that the art of flight had been lost so soon.

Sometimes he would walk along the ranks of books, whispering now and then to a well-loved volume. There were books here that he had not dared to open for years, they reminded him so poignantly of the past. But now, as the days grew longer and brighter, he would sometimes take down a volume of poetry and re-read his old favourites. Then he would go to the tall windows and shout the magic words over the rooftops, as if they would break the spell that had gripped the world.

It was warmer now, as if the ghosts of lost summers had returned to haunt the land. For whole days the temperature rose above freezing, while in many places flowers were breaking through the snow. Whatever was approaching from the north was nearer, and several times a day that enigmatic roar would go thundering over the city, sending the snow sliding upon a thousand roofs.

There were strange, grinding undertones that Professor Millward found baffling and even ominous. At times it was almost as if he were listening to the clash of mighty armies, and sometimes a mad but dreadful thought came into his mind and would not be dismissed. Often he would wake in the night and imagine he heard the sound of mountains moving to the sea.

So the summer wore away, and as the sound of that distant battle drew steadily nearer Professor Millward was the prey of ever more violent alternating hopes and fears. Although he saw no more wolves or bears – they seemed to have fled southward – he did not

risk leaving the safety of his fortress. Every morning he would climb to the highest window of the tower and search the northern horizon with field-glasses. But all he ever saw was the stubborn retreat of the snows above Hampstead, as they fought their bitter rearguard action against the sun.

His vigil ended with the last days of the brief summer. The grinding thunder in the night had been nearer than ever before, but there was still nothing to hint at its real distance from the city. Professor Millward felt no premonition as he climbed to the narrow window and raised his binoculars to the northern sky.

As a watcher from the walls of some threatened fortress might have seen the first sunlight glinting on the spears of an advancing army, so in that moment Professor Millward knew the truth. The air was crystal-clear, and the hills were sharp and brilliant against the cold blue of the sky. They had lost almost all their snow. Once he would have rejoiced, but it meant nothing now.

Overnight, the enemy he had forgotten had conquered the last defences and was preparing for the final onslaught. As he saw that deadly glitter along the crest of the doomed hills, Professor Millward understood at last the sound he had heard advancing for so many months. It was little wonder he had dreamed of mountains on the march.

Out of the North, their ancient home, returning in triumph to the lands they had once possessed, the glaciers had come again.

Some other Penguin science fiction is described on the following pages

THE DAY IT RAINED FOR EVER

Ray Bradbury

1878

Ray Bradbury, the author of *Fahrenheit 451*, has, one might say, been forced out into the space of science fiction by the pressure of his imagination. The seams of earth-bound fiction are almost bursting in the title story of this collection, in which three parched old men have their prayers for rain answered in an unexpected way, or in the ludicrous fantasy in which six feckless Mexicans jointly invest in 'The Wonderful Ice-Cream Suit'. When the author takes us out into space, as in 'Dark They Were' or 'Here There Be Tygers', he reveals himself as an ironical commentator on space travel, more interested in human reactions and the 'character' of planets than in the nuts and bolts of rocketry. One quality runs consistently through all these stories – an astonishing agility in the new use of old words.

'I shouldn't be surprised if *The Day it Rained Forever* wasn't Mr Bradbury's best collection so far' – *Time and Tide*

'Ignoring the laws of time, space, or probability Ray Bradbury, the American master of the weird, is free to write in a new dimension, through which he moves his characters around as unrestrainedly as a maker of cartoon comedies' – *New York Herald Tribune*

PENGUIN SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by Brian Aldiss

1638

In 1961 Man went out into space.

But writers of science fiction have been taking him on tours of the universe for years. The submarine, the bathysphere, the aeroplane, and the tank are only a few examples of modern achievements which have been foreshadowed by writers like Jules Verne or artists like Leonardo.

This Penguin collection of 'SF' stories includes work by John Steinbeck, Isaac Azimov, Eric Frank Russell, Katherine Maclean, and Bertram Chandler. Apart from the increasing possibility of their imagined worlds, either of the future or of other quarters of the universe, these writers command our attention with stories which are freed from the gravitational pull of what we term reality today.

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'Science fiction is no more written for scientists than ghost stories are written for ghosts.' Thus said Brian Aldiss in his introduction to *Penguin Science Fiction*, an earlier anthology, which was so successful that it was twice reprinted within a year of its publication.

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Oscar Mellor