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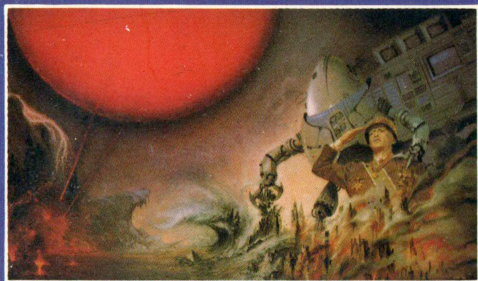
# ISAAC ASIMOV

PRESENTS

# THE GREAT SF STORIES

# 8

(1946)



EDITED BY ISAAC ASIMOV  
AND MARTIN H. GREENBERG

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FICTION  
STORIES**

***Volume 8, 1946***

**Edited by  
*Isaac Asimov and  
Martin H. Greenberg***

**DAW BOOKS, INC.**  
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## Introduction

In the world outside reality the first post-World War II year got off to a grim start with the hanging on January 3rd of William Joyce, known to millions of Britons as "Lord Haw Haw," who broadcast Nazi propaganda at the British Isles during the war. Later that year, the Nuremberg Tribunal sentenced a dozen leading Nazi war criminals to death, but the most important of them, Hermann Goering, escaped this fate by taking his own life. The United States was wracked with strikes and labor unrest throughout the year, and the situation became so serious that President Truman had to order troops to seize the railroads and most of the coal mines, but only briefly. And on the other side of the world, Ho Chi Minh began the offensive that would eventually drive the French and later the United States out of Vietnam. The bloody civil war between Communist and Nationalist forces in China resumed, with the outcome still in doubt.

On the plus side, the Security Council of the newly founded United Nations met in January and selected Norway's Trygve Lie as the first Secretary-General of that organization amid high hopes that the next decade would be a peaceful one. However, the handwriting of the Cold War was on the wall as Winston Churchill spoke of an "Iron Curtain" descending across Europe at a speech at Westminster College in Missouri.

Italian and Japanese women were granted the right to vote for the first time in history in 1946, and the Philippines were granted their independence by the United States on the Fourth of July.

During 1946 *Holiday* magazine and the publishing firm of Farrar, Straus and Company were founded. "La Vie en Rose," "The Christmas Song," "To Each His Own," and "Tenderly" were hit songs. The St. Louis Cardinals defeated the Boston Red Sox in seven games to win baseball's World Series. Great Britain created a National Health Service. Juan Peron became President of Argentina. ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer) was further developed but few outside of science fiction realized that it would profoundly change life in the industrialized world.

Marc Chagall painted "Cow with Umbrella." The Fulbright Awards were instituted. Dr. Benjamin Spock (*not* the father of Mr. Spock the Vulcan) published a book called *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (later known as just *Baby and Child Care*) and became a millionaire—some children were reportedly beaten with it. Timex Watches became available in retail stores. Broadway had a great year with such plays as *The Iceman Cometh* by Eugene O'Neill, *Born Yesterday* by Garson Kanin, *Annie Get Your Gun* by the great Irving Berlin, *Another Part of the Forest* by Lillian Hellman, and *Call Me Mister* by Harold Rome.

The scheduled flying time between London and New York was almost twenty hours. Pablo Picasso painted "Faun Playing the Pipe," while Eastman Kodak put Ektachrome color film on the market. Outstanding novels included *Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers, *All the King's Men* by Robert Penn Warren, *The Big Clock* by Kenneth Fearing, and *Zorba the Greek* by Nikos Kazantzakis. Proctor and Gamble put Tide on the market and in washing machines across the land.

There was a raft of excellent films: *The Best Years of our Lives*, directed by the late William Wyler; *The Postman Always Rings Twice*; Roberto Rossellini's *Open City*; and *Duel in the Sun*. A film called *The Killers* made a star out of Burt Lancaster, while Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall exchanged knowing glances in *The Big Sleep*. The musical *The Harvey Girls* gave the world "The Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe."

Scientists John von Neumann and Emil Fuchs applied for a patent for a device they called a "Hydrogen Bomb." Mickey Spillane gave up writing comic books for extremely hardboiled fiction with the publication of *I, The Jury*. The word "automation" was used by Delmar S. Herder, and science fiction readers understood the implications.

Assault was the top horse of the year, capturing the Triple Crown against strong competition. Mrs. Paul's deviled crabs received a terrific reception, while one of the greatest inventors of the twentieth century, the brilliant Louis Heard, designed the bikini, and named it for the island on which the first post-war atomic bomb test was to take place.

Death took chess champion Aleksandr Alekhine and photographic genius Alfred Stieglitz.

Mel Brooks was still Melvin Kaminsky.

In the real world it was a particularly outstanding year as dozens of science fiction writers returned from the military. Even a very promising young writer named Isaac Asimov who had managed to get drafted in 1945 got out again this year.

Important books were published in 1946: *Slan* by A. E. van Vogt, *The Time Stream* by John Taine, and *The Skylark of Space* by E. E. "Doc" Smith (although all were written much earlier for the magazines). The year was highlighted by the appearance of two of the all-time great anthologies—*Adventures in Time and Space*, edited by J. Francis McComas and Raymond Healy and *The Best of Science Fiction* edited by the wise Groff Conklin, the premier anthologist of his time. Soon, hundreds of thousands of library patrons would find their minds expanded.

British fans and pros launched *New Worlds* and *Fantasy* in December.

More wondrous things were happening in the real world as three terrific writers made their maiden voyages into reality: Arthur C. Clarke with "Loophole" in April; William Tenn (Philip Klass) with "Alexander the Bait" in May; and Margaret St. Clair with "Rocked to Limbo" in November.

The real people gathered together for the fourth time as the World Science Fiction Convention (the Pacificon) was held in Los Angeles under the guiding hand of the tireless Forry Ackerman.

Death took Otis Adelbert Kline, Leroy Yerxa and one of science fiction's great fathers, H. G. Wells.

But distant wings were beating as Alan Dean Foster, F. Paul Wilson, Christopher Foss, Robert Weinberg, Mark Geston, Eric S. Rabkin, Richard Glyn Jones, Steven G. Spruill, and Bruce McAllister were born.

Let us travel back to that honored year of 1946 and enjoy the best stories that the real world bequeathed to us.





# A LOGIC NAMED JOE

by Will F. Jenkins (1896-1975)

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
March

*Much better known to his readers as "Murray Leinster," Will F. Jenkins had been publishing science fiction stories for more than a quarter of a century when "A Logic Named Joe" appeared. A prolific contributor to most of the pulp magazines, Jenkins came to be known within the sf community as "The Dean of Science Fiction," a title he wore with dignity and amusement for more than twenty years, producing excellent work well into the 1960s.*

*This prophetic story about home computers and their use and misuse is one of his finest.*

*(As you look back upon the stories written a third of a century ago, the ones that strike you with head-shaking envy [if you are a science fiction writer—especially a famous one] are those which actually get things right. Anyone can write robot stories [including mine] that aren't as much fiction now as they were then; and that aren't liable to remain fiction indefinitely into the future.*

*Read this story, however, and you'll swear Will Jenkins had some sort of pipeline into the 1980's.*

*Just change "logics" to "home computers" and make a few other inconsequential semantic changes and you'll see that Will went charging full-speed in the right direction. Clever as science fiction writers may be that doesn't often happen. It happened this time, though—I.A.)*

It was on the third day of August that Joe come off the assembly line, and on the fifth Laurine come into town, and that afternoon I saved civilization. That's what I figure anyhow. Laurine is a blonde that I was crazy about once—and crazy is the word—and Joe is a logic that I have stored away down in the cellar right now. I had to pay for him because I said I busted him, and sometimes I think about turning him on and sometimes I think about taking an ax to him. Sooner or later I'm gonna do one or the other. I kinda hope it's the ax. I could use a coupla million dollars—sure!—an' Joe'd tell me how to get or make 'em. He can do plenty! But so far I've been scared to take a chance. After all, I figure I really saved a civilization by turnin' him off.

The way Laurine fits in is that she makes cold shivers run up an' down my spine when I think about her. You see, I've got a wife which I acquired after I had parted from Laurine with much romantic despair. She is a reasonable good wife, and I have some kids which are hellcats but I value 'em. If I have sense enough to leave well enough alone, sooner or later I will retire on a pension an' Social Security an' spend the rest of my life fishin', contented an' lyin' about what a great guy I used to be. But there's Joe. I'm worried about Joe.

I'm a maintenance man for the Logics Company. My job is servicing logics, and I admit modestly that I am pretty good. I was servicing televisions before that guy Carson invented his trick circuit that will select any of 'steenteen million other circuits—in theory there ain't no limit—and before the Logics Company hooked it into the tank-and-integrator setup they were usin' 'em as business machine service. They added a vision screen for speed—an' they found out they'd made logics. They were surprised an' pleased. They're still findin' out what logics will do, but everybody's got 'em.

I got Joe, after Laurine nearly got me. You know the log-

ics setup. You got a logic in your house. It looks like a vision receiver used to, only it's got keys instead of dials and you punch the keys for what you wanna get. It's hooked in to the tank, which has the Carson Circuit all fixed up with relays. Say you punch "Station SNAFU" on your logic. Relays in the tank take over an' whatever vision-program SNAFU is telecastin' comes on your logic's screen. Or you punch "Sally Hancock's Phone" an' the screen blinks an' sputters an' you're hooked up with the logic in her house an' if somebody answers you got a vision-phone connection. But besides that, if you punch for the weather forecast or who won today's race at Hialeah or who was mistress of the White House durin' Garfield's administration or what is PDQ and R sellin' for today, that comes on the screen too. The relays in the tank do it. The tank is a big buildin' full of all the facts in creation an' all the recorded telecasts that ever was made—an' it's hooked in with all the other tanks all over the country—an' anything you wanna know or see or hear, you punch for it an' you get it. Very convenient. Also it does math for you, an' keeps books, an' acts as consultin' chemist, physicist, astronomer an' tealeaf reader, with an "Advice to Lovelorn" thrown in. The only thing it won't do is tell you exactly what your wife meant when she said "Oh, you think so, do you?" in that peculiar kinda voice. Logics don't work good on women. Only on things that make sense.

Logics are all right, though. They changed civilization, the highbrows tell us. All on accounta the Carson Circuit. And Joe shoulda been a perfectly normal logic, keeping some family or other from wearin' out its brains doin' the kids' homework for 'em. But somethin' went wrong in the assembly line. It was somethin' so small that precision gauges didn't measure it, but it made Joe an individual. Maybe he didn't know it at first. Or maybe, bein' logical, he figured out that if he was to show he was different from other logics they'd scrap him. Which woulda been a brilliant idea. But anyhow, he come off the assembly line, an' he went through the regular tests without anybody screamin' shrilly on findin' out what he was. And he went right on out an' was duly installed in the home of Mr. Thaddeus Korlanovitch at 119 East Seventh Street, second floor front. So far, everything was serene.

The installation happened late Saturday night. Sunday morning the Korlanovitch kids turned him on an' seen the Kiddie Shows. Around noon their parents peeled 'em away from him an' piled 'em in the car. Then they come back in

the house for the lunch they'd forgot an' one of the kids sneaked back an' they found him punchin' keys for the Kiddie Shows of the week before. They dragged him out an' went off. But they left Joe turned on.

That was noon. Nothin' happened until two in the afternoon. It was the calm before the storm. Laurine wasn't in town yet, but she was comin'. I picture Joe sittin' there all by himself, buzzing meditative. Maybe he run Kiddie Shows in the empty apartment for awhile. But I think he went kinda remote-control exploring in the tank. There ain't any fact that can be said to be a fact that ain't on a data plate in some tank somewhere—unless it's one the technicians are diggin' out an' puttin' on a data plate now. Joe had plenty of material to work on. An' he musta started workin' right off the bat.

Joe ain't vicious, you understand. He ain't like one of these ambitious robots you read about that make up their minds the human race is inefficient and has got to be wiped out an' replaced by thinkin' machines. Joe's just got ambition. If you were a machine, you'd wanna work right, wouldn't you? That's Joe. He wants to work right. An' he's a logic. An' logics can do a lotta things that ain't been found out yet. So Joe, discoverin' the fact, begun to feel restless. He selects some things us dumb humans ain't thought of yet, an' begins to arrange so logics will be called on to do 'em.

That's all. That's everything. But, brother, it's enough!

Things are kinda quiet in the Maintenance Department about two in the afternoon. We are playing pinochle. Then one of the guys remembers he has to call up his wife. He goes to one of the banks of logics in Maintenance and punches the keys for his house. The screen sputters. Then a flash comes on the screen.

"Announcing new and improved logics service! Your logic is now equipped to give you not only consultative but directive service. If you want to do something and don't know how to do it—ask your logic!"

There's a pause. A kinda expectant pause. Then, as if reluctantly, his connection comes through. His wife answers an' gives him hell for somethin' or other. He takes it an' snaps off.

"Whadda you know?" he says when he comes back. He tells us about the flash. "We shoulda been warned about that. There's gonna be a lotta complaints. Suppose a fella asks how

to get ridda his wife an' the censor circuits block the question?"

Somebody melds a hundred aces an' says:

"Why not punch for it an' see what happens?"

"It's a gag, o' course. But the guy goes over. He punches keys. In theory, a censor block is gonna come on an' the screen will say severely, "Public Policy Forbids This Service." You hafta have censor blocks or the kiddies will be askin' detailed questions about things they're too young to know. And there are other reasons. As you will see.

This fella punches, "How can I get rid of my wife?" Just for the fun of it. The screen is blank for half a second. Then comes a flash. "Service question: Is she blonde or brunette?" He hollers to us an' we come look. He punches, "Blonde". There's another brief pause. Then the screen says, "Hexymetacryloaminoacetine is a constituent of green shoe polish. Take home a frozen meal including dried pea soup. Color the soup with green shoe polish. It will appear to be green-pea soup. Hexymetacryloaminoacetine is a selective poison which is fatal to blonde females but not to brunettes or males of any coloring. This fact has not been brought out by human experiment, but is a product of logics service. You cannot be convicted of murder. It is improbable that you will be suspected."

The screen goes blank, and we stare at each other. It's bound to be right. A logic workin' the Carson Circuit can no more make a mistake than any other kinda computin' machine. I call the tank in a hurry.

"Hey, you guys!" I yell. "Somethin's happened! Logics are givin' detailed instructions for wife-murder! Check your censor-circuits—but quick!"

That was close, I think. But little do I know. At that precise instant, over on Monroe Avenue, a drunk starts to punch for somethin' on a logic. The screen says "Announcing new and improved logics service! If you want to do something and don't know how to do it—ask your logic!" And the drunk says owlsh, "I'll do it!" So he cancels his first punching and fumbles around and says: "How can I keep my wife from finding out I've been drinking?" And the screen says, prompt: "Buy a bottle of Franine hair shampoo. It is harmless but contains a detergent which will neutralize ethyl alcohol immediately. Take one teaspoonful for each jigger of hundred-proof you have consumed."

This guy was plenty plastered—just plastered enough to stagger next door and obey instructions. An' five minutes later he was cold sober and writing down the information so he couldn't forget it. It was new, and it was big! He got rich offa that memo! He patented "*SOBUH, The Drink that Makes Happy Homes!*" You can top off any souse with a slug or two of it an' go home sober as a judge. The guy's cusin' income taxes right now!

You can't kick on stuff like that. But a ambitious young fourteen-year-old wanted to buy some kid stuff and his pop wouldn't fork over. He called up a friend to tell his troubles. And his logic says: "If you want to do something and don't know how to do it—ask your logic!" So this kid punches: "How can I make alotta money, fast?"

His logic comes through with the simplest, neatest, and the most efficient counterfeitin' device yet known to science. You see, all the data was in the tank. The logic—since Joe had closed some relays here an' there in the tank—simply integrated the facts. That's all. The kid got caught up with three days later, havin' already spent two thousand credits an' havin' plenty more on hand. They hadda time tellin' his counterfeits from the real stuff, an' the only way they done it was that he changed his printer, kid fashion, not bein' able to let somethin' that was workin' right alone.

Those are what you might call samples. Nobody knows all that Joe done. But there was the bank president who got humorous when his logic flashed that "Ask your logic" spiel on him, and jestingly asked how to rob his own bank. An' the logic told him, brief and explicit but good! The bank president hit the ceiling, hollering for cops. There must a been plenty of that sorta thing. There was fifty-four more robberies than usual in the next twenty-four hours, all of them planned astute an' perfect. Some of 'em they never did figure out how they'd been done. Joe, he'd gone exploring in the tank and closed some relays like a logic is supposed to do—but only when required—and blocked all censor-circuits an' fixed up this logics service which planned perfect crimes, nourishing an' attractive meals, conterfeitin' machines, an' new industries with a fine impartiality. He musta been plenty happy, Joe must. He was functionin' swell, buzzin' along to himself while the Korlanovitch kids were off ridin' with their ma an' pa.

They come back at seven o'clock, the kids all happily wore out with their afternoon of fightin' each other in the car. Their folks put 'em to bed and sat down to rest. They saw Joe's screen flickerin' meditative from one subject to another an' old man Korlanovitch had had enough excitement for one day. He turned Joe off.

An' at that instant the patterns of relays that Joe had turned on snapped off, all the offers of directive service stopped flashin' on logic screens everywhere, an' peace descended on the earth.

For everybody else. But for me. Laurine come to town. I have often thanked God fervent that she didn't marry me when I thought I wanted her to. In the intervenin' years she had progressed. She was blonde an' fatal to begin with. She had got blonder and fataler an' had had four husbands and one acquittal for homicide an' had acquired a air of enthusiasm and self-confidence. That's just a sketch of the background. Laurine was not the kinda former girlfriend you like to have turning up in the same town with your wife. But she came to town, an' Monday morning she tuned right into the middle of Joe's second spasm of activity.

The Korlanovitch kids had turned him on again. I got these details later and kinda pieced 'em together. An' every logic in town was dutifully flashin' a notice, "If you want to do something—ask your logic!" every time they were turned on for use. More'n that, when people punched for the morning news, they got a full account of the previous afternoon's doin's. Which put 'em in a frame of mind to share in the party. One bright fella demands, "How can I make a perpetual motion machine?" And his logic sputters a while an' then comes up with a set-up usin' the Brownian movement to turn little wheels. If the wheels ain't bigger'n a eighth of an inch they'll turn, all right, an' practically it's perpetual motion. Another one asks for the secret of transmuting metals. The logic rakes back in the data plates an' integrates a strictly practical answer. It does take so much power that you can't make no profit except on radium, but that pays off good. An' from the fact that for a coupla years to come the police were turnin' up new and improved jimmies, knob-claws for gettin' at safe innards, and all-purpose keys that'd open any known lock—why there must have been other inquiries with a strictly practical viewpoint. Joe done a lot for technical progress!

But he done more in other lines. Educational, say. None of



my kids are old enough to be interested, but Joe bypassed all censor-circuits because they hampered the service he figured logics should give humanity. So the kids an' teenagers who wanted to know what comes after the bees an' flowers found out. And there is certain facts which men hope their wives won't do more'n suspect, an' those facts are just what their wives are really curious about. So when a woman dials: "How can I tell if Oswald is true to me?" and her logic tells her—you can figure out how many rows got started that night when the men come home!

All this while Joe goes on buzzin' happy to himself, showin' the Korlanovitch kids the animated funnies with one circuit while with the others he remote-controls the tank so that all the other logics can give people what they ask for and thereby raise merry hell.

An' then Laurine gets onto the new service. She turns on the logic in her hotel room, prob'ly to see the week's style-forecast. But the logic says, dutiful: "If you want to do something—ask your logic!" So Laurine prob'ly looks enthusiastic—she would!—and tries to figure out something to ask. She already knows all about everything she cares about—ain't she had four husbands an' shot one?—so I occur to her. She knows this is the town I live in. So she punches, "How can I find Ducky?"

O.K., guy! But that is what she used to call me. She gets a service question. "Is Ducky known by any other name?" So she gives my regular name. And the logic can't find me. Because my logic ain't listed under my name on account of I am in Maintenance and don't want to be pestered when I'm home, and there ain't any data plates on code-listed logics, because the codes get changed so often—like a guy gets plastered an tells a redhead to call him up, an' on gettin' sober hurriedly has the code changed before she reaches his wife on the screen.

Well! Joe is stumped. That's prob'ly the first question logics service hasn't been able to answer. "How can I locate Ducky?"!! Quite a problem! So Joe broods over it while showin' the Korlanovitch kids the animated comic about the cute little boy who carries sticks of dynamite in his hip pocket an' plays practical jokes on everybody. Then he gets the trick. Laurine's screen suddenly flashes:

"Logics special service will work upon your question. Please punch your logic designation and leave it turned on. You will be called back."

Laurine is merely mildly interested, but she punches her hotel-room number and has a drink and takes a nap. Joe sets to work. He has been given an idea.

My wife calls me at Maintenance and hollers. She is fit to be tied. She says I got to do something. She was gonna make a call to the butcher shop. Instead of the butcher or even the "If you want to do something" flash, she got a new one. The screen says, "Service question: What is your name?" She is kinda puzzled, but she punches it. The screen sputters an' then says: "Secretarial Service Demonstration! You——" It reels off her name, address, age, sex, coloring, the amounts of all her charge accounts in all the stores, my name as her husband, how much I get a week, the fact that I've been pinched three times—twice was traffic stuff, and once for a argument I got in with a guy—and the interestin' item that once when she was mad with me she left me for three weeks an' had her address changed to her folks' home. Then it says, brisk: "Logics Service will hereafter keep your personal accounts, take messages, and locate persons you may wish to get in touch with. This demonstration is to introduce the service." Then it connects her with the butcher.

But she don't want meat, then. She wants blood. She calls me.

"If it'll tell me all about myself," she says, fairly boilin', "it'll tell anybody else who punches my name! You've got to stop it!"

"Now, now, honey!" I says. "I didn't know about all this! It's new! But they musta fixed the tank so it won't give out information except to the logic where a person lives!"

"Nothing of the kind!" she tells me, furious. "I tried! And you know that Blossom woman who lives next door! She's been married three times and she's forty-two years old and she says she's only thirty! And Mrs. Hudson's had her husband arrested four times for nonsupport and once for beating her up. And——"

"Hey!" I says. "You mean the logic told you this?"

"Yes!" she wails. "It will tell anybody anything! You've got to stop it! How long will it take?"

"I'll call up the tank," I says. "It can't take long."

"Hurry!" she says, desperate, "before somebody punches my name! I'm going to see what it says about that hussy across the street."

She snaps off to gather what she can before it's stopped. So I punch for the tank and I get this new "What is your

name?" flash. I got a morbid curiosity and I punch my name, and the screen says: "Were you ever called Ducky?" I blink. I ain't got no suspicions. I say, "Sure!" And the screen says, "There is a call for you."

Bingo! There's the inside of a hotel room and Laurine is reclinin' asleep on the bed. She'd been told to leave her logic turned on an' she done it. It is a hot day and she is trying to be cool. I would say that she oughta not suffer from the heat. Me, being human, I do not stay as cool as she looks. But there ain't no need to go into that. After I get my breath I say, "For Heaven's sake!" and she opens her eyes.

At first she looks puzzled, like she was thinking is she getting absentminded and is this guy somebody she married lately. Then she grabes a sheet and drapes it around herself and beams at me.

"Ducky!" she says. "How marvelous!"

I say something like "Ugmph!" I am sweating.

She says:

"I put in a call for you, Ducky, and here you are! Isn't it romantic? Where are you really, Ducky? And when can you come up? You've no idea how often I've thought of you!"

I am probably the only guy she ever knew real well that she has not been married to at some time or another.

I say "Ugmph!" and swallow.

"Can you come up instantly?" asks Laurine brightly.

"I'm . . . workin'," I say. "I'll . . . uh . . . call you back."

"I'm terribly lonesome," says Laurine. "Please make it quick, Ducky! I'll have a drink waiting for you. Have you ever thought of me?"

"Yeah," I say, febble. "Plenty!"

"You darling!" says Laurine. "Here's a kiss to go on with until you get here! Hurry, Ducky!"

Then I sweat! I still don't know nothing about Joe, understand. I cuss out the guys at the tank because I blame them for this. If Laurine was just another blonde—well—when it comes to ordinary blondes I can leave 'em alone or leave 'em alone, either one. A married man gets that way or else. But Laurine has a look of unquenched enthusiasm that gives a man very strange weak sensations at the back of his knees. And she'd had four husbands and shot one and got acquitted.

So I punch the keys for the tank technical room, fumbling. And the screen says: "What is your name?" but I don't want any more. I punch the name of the old guy who's stock clerk

in Maintenance. And the screen gives me some pretty interestin' dope—I never woulda thought the old fella had ever had that much pep—and winds up by mentionin' an unclaimed deposit now amountin' to two hundred eighty credits in the First National Bank, which he should look into. Then it spiels about the new secretarial service and gives me the tank at last.

I start to swear at the guy who looks at me, But he says, tired:

"Snap it off, fella. We got troubles an' you're just another. What are the logics doin' now?"

I tell him, and he laughs a hollow laugh.

"A light matter, fella," he says. "A very light matter! We just managed to clamp off all the data plates that give information on high explosives. The demand for instructions in counterfeiting is increasing minute by minute. We are also trying to shut off, by main force, the relays that hook in to data plates that just barely might give advice on the fine points of murder. So if people will only keep busy getting the goods on each other for a while, maybe we'll get a chance to stop the circuits that are shifting credit-balances from bank to bank before everybody's bankrupt except the guys who thought of askin' how to get big bank accounts in a hurry."

"Then," I says hoarse, "shut down the tank! Do somethin'!"

"Shut down the tank?" he says mirthless. "Does it occur to you, fella, that the tank has been doin' all the computin' for every business office for years? It's been handlin' the distribution of ninety-four percent of all telecast programs, has given out all information on weather, plane schedules, special sales, employment opportunities and news; has handled all person-to-person contacts over wires and recorded every business conversation and agreement—Listen, fella! Logics changed civilization. Logics *are* civilization! If we shut off logics, we go back to a kind of civilization we have forgotten how to run! I'm getting hysterical myself and that's why I'm talkin' like this! If my wife finds out my paycheck is thirty credits a week more than I told her and starts hunting for that red-head—"

He smiles a haggard smile at me and snaps off. And I sit down and put my head in my hands. It's true. If something had happened back in cave days and they'd hadda stop usin' fire—If they'd hadda stop usin' steam in the nineteenth century or electricity in the twentieth—It's like that. We got a

very simple civilization. In the nineteen hundreds a man would have to make use of a typewriter, radio, telephone, tele-typewriter, newspaper, reference library, encyclopedias, office files, directories, plus messenger service and consulting lawyers, chemists, doctors, dietitians, filing clerks, secretaries—all to put down what he wanted to remember an' to tell him what other people had put down that he wanted to know; to report what he said to somebody else and to report to him what they said back. All we have to have is logics. Anything we want to know or see or hear, or anybody we want to talk to, we punch keys on a logic. Shut off logics and everything goes skid-doo. But Laurine. . . .

Somethin' had happened. I still didn't know what it was. Nobody else knows, even yet. What had happened was Joe. What was the matter with him was that he wanted to work good. All this fuss he was raisin' was, actual, nothin' but stuff we shoul'da thought of ourselves. Directive advice, tellin' us what we wanted to know to solve a problem, wasn't but a slight extension of logical-integrator service. Figurin' out a good way to poison a fella's wife was only different in degrees from figurin' out a cube root or a guy's bank balance. It was gettin' the answer to a question. But things was goin' to pot because there was too many answers being given to too many questions.

One of the logics in Maintenance lights up. I go over, weary, to answer it. I punch the answer key. Laurine says:

"Ducky!"

It's the same hotel room. There's two glasses on the table with drinks in them. One is for me. Laurine's got on some kinda frothy hangin'-around-the-house-with-the-boyfriend outfit that automatic makes you strain your eyes to see if you actual see what you think. Laurine looks at me enthusiastic.

"Ducky!" says Laurine. "I'm lonesome! Why haven't you come up?"

"I . . . been busy," I say, strangling slightly.

"Pooh!" says Laurine. "Listen, Ducky! Do you remember how much in love we used to be?"

I gulp.

"Are you doin' anything this evening?" says Laurine.

I gulp again, because she is smiling at me in a way that a single man would maybe get dizzy, but it gives a old married man like me cold chills. When a dame looks at you possessive. . . .

"Ducky!" says Laurine, impulsive. "I was so mean to you! Let's get married!"

Desperation gives me a voice.

"I . . . got married," I tell her, hoarse.

Laurine blinks. Then she says, courageous:

"Poor boy! But we'll get you outa that! Only it would be nice if we could be married today. Now we can only be engaged!"

"I . . . can't——"

"I'll call up your wife," says Laurine, happy, "and have a talk with her. You must have a code signal for your logic, darling. I tried to ring your house and noth——"

*Click!* That's my logic turned off. I turned it off. And I feel faint all over. I got nervous prostration. I got combat fatigue. I got anything you like. I got cold feet.

I beat it outa Maintenance, yellin' to somebody I got a emergency call. I'm gonna get out in a Maintenance car an' cruise around until it's plausible to go home. Then I'm gonna take the wife an' kids an' beat it for somewheres that Laurine won't ever find me. I don't wanna be fifth in Laurine's series of husbands and maybe the second one she shoots in a moment of boredom. I got experience of blondes. I got experience of Laurine! And I'm scared to death!

I beat it out into traffic in the Maintenance car. There was a disconnected logic on the back, ready to substitute for one that hadda burnt-out coil or something that it was easier to switch and fix back in the Maintenance shop. I drove crazy but automatic. It was kinda ironic, if you think of it. I was goin' hoopla over a strictly personal problem, while civilization was crackin' up all around me because other people were havin' their personal problems solved as fast as they could state 'em. It is a matter of record that part of the Mid-Western Electric research guys had been workin' on cold electron-emission for thirty years, to make vacuum tubes that wouldn't need a power source to heat the filament. And one of those fellas was intrigued by the "Ask your logic" flash. He asked how to get cold emission of electrons. And the logic integrates a few squintillion facts on the physics data plates and tells him. Just as casual as it told somebody over in the Fourth Ward how to serve leftover soup in a new attractive way, and somebody else on Mason Street how to dispose of a torso that somebody had left careless in his cellar after ceasing to use same.

Laurine wouldn't never have found me if it hadn't been for this new logics service. But now that it was started—Zowie! She'd shot one husband and got acquitted. Suppose she got impatient because I was still married an' asked logics service how to get me free an' in a spot where I'd have to marry her by 8:30 p.m.? It woulda told her! Just like it told that woman out in the suburbs how to make sure her husband wouldn't run around no more. *Br-r-r-r!* An' like it told that kid how to find some buried treasure. Remember? He was happy totin' home the gold reserve of the Hanoverian Bank and Trust Company when they caught on to it. The logic had told him how to make some kinda machine that nobody has been able to figure how it works even yet, only they guess it dodges around a couple extra dimensions. If Laurine was to start askin' questions with a technical aspect to them, that would be logics service meat! And fella, I was scared! If you think a he-man oughtn't to be scared of just one blonde—you ain't met Laurine!

I'm driving blind when a social-conscious guy asks how to bring about his own particular system of social organization at once. He don't ask if it's best or if it'll work. He just wants to get it started. And the logic—or Joe—tells him! Simultaneous, there's a retired preacher asks how can the human race be cured of concupiscence. Bein' seventy, he's pretty safe himself, but he wants to remove the peril to the spiritual welfare of the rest of us. He finds out. It involves constructin' a sort of broadcastin' station to emit a certain wave-pattern an' turnin' it on. Just that. Nothing more. It's found out afterward, when he is solicitin' funds to construct it. Fortunate, he didn't think to ask logics how to finance it, or it woulda told him that, too, an' we woulda all been cured of the impulses we maybe regret afterward but never at the time. And there's another group of serious thinkers who are sure the human race would be a lot better off if everybody went back to nature an' lived in the woods with the ants an' posion ivy. They start askin' questions about how to cause humanity to abandon cities and artificial conditions of living. They practically got the answer in logics service!

Maybe it didn't strike you serious at the time, but while I was drivin' aimless, sweatin' blood over Laurine bein' after me, the fate of civilization hung in the balance. I ain't kiddin'. For instance, the Superior Man gang that sneers at the rest of us was quietly asking questions on what kinda

weapons could be made by which Superior men could take over and run things . . .

But I drove here an' there, sweatin' an' talkin' to myself.

"What I ought to do is ask this wacky logics service how to get outa this mess," I says. "But it'd just tell me a intricate an' foolproof way to bump Laurine off. I wanna have peace! I wanna grow comfortably old and brag to other old guys about what a hellion I used to be, without havin' to go through it an' lose my chance of livin' to be a elderly liar."

I turn a corner at random, there in the Maintenance car.

"It was a nice kinda world once," I says, bitter. "I could go home peaceful and not have belly-cramps wonderin' if a blonde has called up my wife to announce my engagement to her. I could punch keys on a logic without gazing into somebody's bedroom while she is giving her epidermis a air bath and being led to think things I gotta take out in thinkin'. I could—"

Then I groan, rememberin' that my wife, naturally, is gonna blame me for the fact that our private life ain't private any more if anybody has tried to peek into it.

"It was a swell world," I says, homesick for the dear dead days-before-yesterday. "We was playin' happy with our toys like little innocent children until somethin' happened. Like a guy named Joe come in and squashed all our mud pies."

Then it hit me. I got the whole thing in one flash. There ain't nothing in the tank set-up to start relays closin'. Relays are closed exclusive by logics, to get the information the keys are punched for. Nothin' but a logic coulda cooked up the relay patterns that constituted logics service. Humans wouldn't ha' been able to figure it out! Only a logic could integrate all the stuff that woulda made all the other logics work like this—

There was one answer. I drove into a restaurant and went over to a pay-logic an' dropped in a coin.

"Can a logic be modified," I spell out, "to co-operate in long-term planning which human brains are too limited in scope to do?"

The screen sputters. Then it says:

"Definitely yes."

"How great will the modifications be?" I punch.

"Microscopically slight. Changes in dimensions," says the screen. "Even modern precision gauges are not exact enough to check them, however. They can only come about under



present manufacturing methods by an extremely improbable accident, which has only happened once."

"How can one get hold of that one accident which can do this highly necessary work?" I punch.

The screen sputters. Sweat broke out on me. I ain't got it figured out close, yet, but what I'm scared of is that whatever is Joe will be suspicious. But what I'm askin' is strictly logical. And logics can't lie. They gotta be accurate. They can't help it.

"A complete logic capable of the work required," says the screen, "is now in ordinary family use in——"

And it gives me the Korlanovitch address and do I go over there! Do I go over there fast! I pull up the Maintenance car in front of the place, and I take the extra logic outa the back, and I stagger up the Korlanovitch flat and I ring the bell. A kid answers the door.

"I'm from Logics Maintenance," I tell the kid. "An inspection record has shown that your logic is apt to break down any minute. I come to put in a new one before it does."

The kid says "O.K.!" real bright and runs back to the livin'-room where Joe—I got the habit of callin' him Joe later, through just meditat'in' about him—is runnin' something the kids wanna look at. I hook in the other logic an' turn it on, conscientious making sure it works. Then I say:

"Now kiddies, you punch this one for what you want. I'm gonna take the old one away before it breaks down."

And I glance at the screen. The kiddies have apparently said they wanna look at some real cannibals. So the screen is presenting an anthropological expedition scientific record film of the fertility dance of the Huba-Jouba tribe of West Africa. It is supposed to be restricted to anthropological professors an' post-graduate medical students. But there ain't any censor blocks workin' any more and it's on. The kids are much interested. Me, bein' a old married man, I blush.

I disconnect Joe. Careful. I turn to the other logic and punch keys for Maintenance. I do not get a services flash. I get Maintenance. I feel very good. I report that I am goin' home because I fell down a flight of steps an' hurt my leg. I add, inspired:

"An' say, I was carryin' the logic I replaced an' it's all busted. I left it for the dustman to pick up."

"If you don't turn 'em in," says Stock, "you gotta pay for 'em."

"Cheap at the price," I say.

I go home. Laurine ain't called. I put Joe down in the cellar, careful. If I turned him in, he'd be inspected an' his parts salvaged even if I busted somethin' on him. Whatever part was off-normal might be used again and everything start all over. I can't risk it. I pay for him and leave him be.

That's what happened. You might say I saved civilization an' not be far wrong. I know I ain't goin' to take a chance on havin' Joe in action again. Not while Laurine is livin'. An' there are other reasons. With all the nuts who wanna change the world to their own line o' thinkin', an' the ones that wanna bump people off, an' generally solve their problems. . . . Yeah! Problems are bad, but I figure I better let sleepin' problems lie.

But on the other hand, if Joe could be tamed, somehow, and got to work just reasonable—He could make me a coupla million dollars, easy. But even if I got sense enough not to get rich, an' if I get retired and just loaf around fishin' an' lyin' to the other old duffers about what a great guy I used to be—Maybe I'll like it, but maybe I won't. And after all, if I get fed up with bein' old and confined strictly to thinking—why I could hook Joe in long enough to ask: "How can a old guy not stay old?" Joe'll be able to find out. An' he'll tell me.

That couldn't be allowed out general, of course. You gotta make room for kids to grow up. But it's a pretty good world, now Joe's turned off. Maybe I'll turn him on long enough to learn how to stay in it. But on the other hand, maybe. . . .

# MEMORIAL

by Theodore Sturgeon (1918- )

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
April

*The events of the late summer of 1945 at Hiroshima and Nagasaki changed the world and the world of science fiction. Sf writers had produced numerous stories about atomic energy, some of them on the "awful warning" variety, and now the future had arrived. One result was a growing boom in the science fiction field, first with the penetration of the "slick" magazines like The Saturday Evening Post by sf writers, and a few years later by a magazine boom which saw the launching of dozens of new sf titles, interest in science fiction by hardcover publishers, and a secure niche for sf within the paperback explosion of the early 1950s.*

*The tone of much sf also turned more somber, reflecting on the devastation made possible by advanced technology and this was reflected in a large group of stories about atomic war and its aftermath. "Memorial" was one of the first of this group to see print, and was the second published story by the talented Theodore Sturgeon after a long period of silence caused by personal problems. It was good to have him back.*

*(The thing is that John Campbell had predicted in 1940 or thereabouts that the inventor of nuclear energy was already alive. How right he was. Not only alive, but already a working scientist for the credit was shared by Hahn, Meitner, Szilard, Fermi and so on. It made John very sensitive to the fact of the nuclear bomb and to its possible consequences. Under his lash, his writers produced nuclear bomb stories which appeared in Astounding throughout 1946. Most of them, as would seem natural from the fact that a good story should have some drama in it, expected the worst, a worst that has not yet come true (thank goodness!) thirty-five years later. We can all be glad that "Memorial" has not come true—so far—I.A.)*

*The Pit, in A.D. 5000, had changed little over the centuries. Still it was an angry memorial to the misuse of great power; and because of it, organized warfare was a forgotten thing. Because of it, the world was free of the wasteful smoke and dirt of industry. The scream and crash of bombs and the soporific beat of marching feet were never heard, and at long last the earth was at peace.*

*To go near The Pit was slow, certain death, and it was respected and feared, and would be for centuries more. It winked and blinked redly at night, and was surrounded by a bald and broken tract stretching out and away over the horizon; and around it flickered a ghostly blue glow. Nothing lived there. Nothing could.*

*With such a war memorial, there could only be peace. The earth could never forget the horror that could be loosed by war.*

*That was Grenfell's dream.*

Grenfell handed the typewritten sheet back. "That's it, Jack. My idea, and—I wish I could express it like that." He leaned back against the littered workbench, his strangely asymmetrical face quizzical. "Why is it that it takes a useless person to adequately express an abstract?"

Jack Roway grinned as he took back the paper and tucked

it into his breast pocket. "Interestin' question, Grenfell, because this *is* your expression, the words *are* yours. Practically verbatim. I left out the 'er's' and 'ah's' that you play conversational hopscotch with, and strung together all the effects you mentioned without mentioning any of the technological causes. Net result: you think I did it, when you did. You think it's good writing, and I don't."

"You don't?"

Jack spread his bony length out on the hard little cot. His relaxation was a noticeable act, like the unbuttoning of a shirt collar. His body seemed to unjoint itself a little. He laughed.

"Of course I don't. Much too emotional for my taste. I'm just a fumbling aesthete—uesless, did you say? Mm-m-m—yeah. I suppose so." He paused reflectively. "You see, you cold-blooded characters, you scientists, are the true visionaries. Seems to me the essential difference between a scientist and an artist is that the scientist can mix his hope with patience. "The scientist visualizes his ultimate goal, but pays little attention to it. He is all caught up with the achievement of the next step upward. The artist looks so far ahead that more often than not he can't see what's under his feet; so he falls flat on his face and gets called useless by scientists. But if you strip all of the intermediate steps away from the scientist's thinking, you have an artistic concept to which the scientist responds distantly and with surprise, giving some artist credit for being deeply perspicacious purely because the artist repeated something the scientist said."

"You amaze me," Grenfell said candidly. "You wouldn't be what you are if you weren't lazy and superficial. And yet you come out with things like that. I don't know that I understand what you just said. I'll have to think—but I do believe that you show all the signs of clear thinking. With a mind like yours, I can't understand why you don't use it to build something instead of wasting it in these casual interpretations of yours."

Jack Roway stretched luxuriously. "What's the use? There's more waste involved in the destruction of something which is already built than in dispersing the energy it would take to start building something. Anyway, the world is filled with builders—and destroyers. I'd just as soon sit by and watch, and feel things. I like my environment, Grenfell. I want to feel all I can of it, while it lasts. It won't last much longer. I want to touch all of it I can reach, taste of it, hear it, while there's time. What is around me, here and now, is what is im-

portant to me. The acceleration of human progress, and the increase of its mass—to use your own terms—are taking humanity straight to Limbo. You, with your work, think you are fighting humanity's inertia. Well, you are. But it's the kind of inertia called momentum. You command no force great enough to stop it, or even to change its course appreciably."

"I have sub-atomic power."

Roway shook his head, smiling. "That's not enough. No power is enough. It's just too late."

"That kind of pessimism does not affect me," said Grenfell. "You can gnaw all you like at my foundations, Jack, and achieve nothing more than the loss of your front teeth. I think you know that."

"Certainly I know that. I'm not trying to. I have nothing to sell, no one to change. I am even more impotent than you and your atomic power; and you are completely helpless. Uh—I quarrel with your use of the term 'pessimist', though. I am nothing of the kind. Since I have resolved for myself the fact that humanity, as we know it, is finished, I'm quite resigned to it. Pessimism from me, under the circumstances, would be the pessimism of a photophobiatic predicting that the sun would rise tomorrow."

Grenfell grinned. "I'll have to think about that, too. You're such a mass of paradoxes that turn out to be chains of reasoning. Apparently you live in a world in which scientists are poets and the grasshopper has it over the ant."

"I always did think that ant was a stinker."

"Why do you keep coming here, Jack? What do you get out of it? Don't you realize I'm a criminal?"

Roway's eyes narrowed. "Sometimes I think you wish you were a criminal. The law says you are, and the chances are very strong that you'll be caught and treated accordingly. Ethically, you know you're not. It sort of takes the spice out of being one of the hunted."

"Maybe you're right," Grenfell said thoughtfully. He sighed. "It's so completely silly. During the war years, the skills I had were snatched up and the government flogged me into the Manhattan Project, expecting, and getting, miracles. I have never stopped working along the same lines. And now the government has changed the laws, and pulled legality from under me."

"Hardly surprising. The government deals rather severely with soldiers who go on killing other soldiers after the war is

over." He held up a hand to quell Grenfell's interruptions. "I know you're not killing anyone, and are working for the opposite result. I was only pointing out that it's the same switcheroo. We the people," he said didactically, "have, in our sovereign might, determined that no atomic research be done except in government laboratories. We have then permitted our politicians to allow so little for maintenance of those laboratories—unlike our overseas friends—that no really exhaustive research can be done in them. We have further made it a major offense to operate such a bootleg lab as yours." He shrugged. "Comes the end of mankind. We'll get walloped first. If we put more money and effort into nuclear research than any other country, some other country would get walloped first. If we last another hundred years—which seems doubtful—some poor, spavined, and underpaid government researcher will stumble on the aluminum-isotope space-heating system you have already perfected."

"That was a little rough," said Grenfell bitterly. "Driving me underground just in time to make it impossible for me to announce it. What a waste of time and energy it is to heat homes and buildings the way they do now! Space heating—the biggest single use for heat-energy—and I have the answer to it over there." He nodded toward a compact cube of lead alloys in the corner of the shop. "Build it into a foundation, and you have controllable heat for the life of the building, with not a cent for additional fuel and practically nothing for maintenance." His jaw knotted. "Well, I'm glad it happened that way."

"Because it got you started on your war memorial—The Pit? Yeah. Well, all I can say is, I hope you're right. It hasn't been possible to scare humanity yet. The invention of gunpowder was going to stop war, and didn't. Likewise the submarine, the torpedo, the airplane, that two-by-four bomb they pitched at Hiroshima, and the H-bomb."

"None of that applies to The Pit," said Grenfell. "You're right; humanity hasn't been scared off war yet; but the H-bomb rocked 'em back on their heels. My little memorial is the real stuff. I'm not depending on a fission or fusion effect, you know, with a release of one-tenth of one percent of the energy of the atom. I'm going to transmute it completely, and get all the energy there is in it, and in all matter the fireball touches. And it'll be *more* than a thousand times as powerful as the Hiroshima bomb, because I'm going to use twelve times as much explosive; and it's going off on the ground, not

a hundred and fifty feet above it." Grenfell's brow, over suddenly hot eyes, began to shine with sweat. "And then—The Pit," he said softly. "The war memorial to end war, and all other war memorials. A vast pit, alive with bubbling lava, radiating death for ten thousand years. A living reminder of the devastation mankind has prepared for itself. Out here on the desert, where there are no cities, where the land has always been useless, will be the scene of the most useful thing in the history of the race—a never-ending sermon, a warning, an example of the dreadful antithesis of peace." His voice shook to a whisper, and faded.

"Sometimes," said Roway, "you frighten me, Grenfell. It occurs to me that I am such a studied sensualist, tasting everything I can, because I am afraid to feel any one thing that much." He shook himself, or shuddered. "You're a fanatic, Grenfell. Hyperemotional. A monomaniac. I hope you can do it."

"I can do it," said Grenfell.

Two months passed, and in those two months Grenfell's absorption in his work had been forced aside by the increasing pressure of current events. Watching a band of vigilantes riding over the waste to the south of his little buildings one afternoon, he thought grimly of what Roway had said. "Sometimes I think you wish you were a criminal." Roway the sensualist, would say that. Roway would appreciate the taste of danger, in the same way that he appreciated all the other emotions. As it intensified, he would wait to savor it, no matter how bad it got.

Twice Grenfell shut off the instigating power of the boron-aluminum pile he had built, as he saw government helicopters hovering on the craggy skyline. He knew of hard-radiation detectors; he had developed two different types of them during the war; and he wanted no questions asked. His utter frustration at being unable to announce the success of his space-heating device, for fear that he would be punished as a criminal and his device impounded and forgotten—that frustration had been indescribable. It had canalized his mind, and intensified the devoted effort he had put forth for the things he believed in during the war. Every case of neural shock he encountered in men who had been hurt by war and despised it made him work harder on his monument—on The Pit. For if humans could be frightened by war, humanity could be frightened by The Pit.



And those he met who had been hurt by war and who still hated the late enemy—those who would have been happy to go back and kill some more, reckoning vital risk well worth it—those he considered mad, and forgot them.

So he could not stand another frustration. He was the center of his own universe, and he realized it dreadfully, and he had to justify his position there. He was a humanitarian, a philanthropist in the world's truest sense. He was probably as mad as any other man who has, through his own efforts, moved the world.

For the first time, then, he was grateful when Jack Roway arrived in his battered old convertible, although he was deliriously frightened at the roar of the motor outside his laboratory window. His usual reaction to Jack's advent was a mixture of annoyance and gratification, for it was a great deal of trouble to get out to his place. His annoyance was not because of the interruption, for Jack was certainly no trouble to have around. Grenfell suspected that Jack came out to see him partly to get the taste of the city out of his mouth, and partly to be able to feel superior to somebody be considered of worth.

But the increasing fear of discovery, and his race to complete his work before it was taken from him by a hysterical public, had had the unusual effect of making him lonely. For such a man as Grenfell to be lonely bordered on the extraordinary; for in his daily life there were simply too many things to be done. There had never been enough hours in a day nor days in a week to suit him, and he deeply resented the encroachments of sleep, which he considered a criminal waste.

"Roway!" he blurted, as he flung the door open, his tone so warm that Roway's eyebrows went up in surprise. "What dragged you out here?"

"Nothing in particular," said the writer, as they shook hands. "Nothing more than usual, which is a great deal. How goes it?"

"I'm about finished." They went inside, and as the door closed, Grenfell turned to face Jack. "I've been finished for so long I'm ashamed of myself," he said intently.

"Ha! Ardent confession so early in the day! What are you talking about?"

"Oh, there have been things to do," said Grenfell restlessly. "But I could go ahead with the . . . with the big thing at almost any time."

"You hate to be finished. You've never visualized what it

would be like to have the job done." His teeth flashed. "You know, I've never heard a word from you as to what your plans are after the big noise. You going into hiding?"

"I . . . haven't thought much about it. I used to have a vague idea of broadcasting a warning and an explanation before I let go with the disruptive explosion. I've decided against it, though. In the first place, I'd be stopped within minutes, no matter how cautious I was with the transmitter. In the second place—well, this is going to be so big that it won't need any explanation."

"No one will know who did it, or why it was done."

"Is that necessary?" asked Grenfell quietly.

Jack's mobile face stilled as he visualized The Pit, spewing its ten-thousand-year hell. "Perhaps not," he said. "Isn't it necessary, though, to you?"

"To me?" asked Grenfell, surprised. "You mean, do I care if the world knows I did this thing, or not? No; of course I don't. A chain of circumstance is occurring, and it has been working through me. It goes directly to The Pit; The Pit will do all that is necessary from then on. I will no longer have any part in it."

Jack moved, clinking and splashing, around the sink in the corner of the laboratory. "Where's all your coffee? Oh—here. Uh . . . I have been curious about how much personal motive you had for your work. I think that answers it pretty well. I think, too, that you believe what you are saying. Do you know that people who do things for impersonal motives are as rare as fur on a fish?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"I believe that, too. Sugar? And milk. I remember. And have you been listening to the radio?"

"Yes. I'm . . . a little upset, Jack," said Grenfell, taking the cup. "I don't know where to time this thing. I'm a technician, not a Machiavelli."

"Visionary, like I said. You don't know if you'll throw this gadget of yours into world history too soon or too late—is that it?"

"Exactly. Jack, the whole world seems to be going crazy. Even fusion bombs are too big for humanity to handle."

"What else can you expect," said Jack grimly, "with our dear friends across the water sitting over their push buttons waiting for an excuse to punch them?"

"And we have our own set of buttons, of course."

Jack Roway said: "We've got to defend ourselves."

"Are you kidding?"

Roway glanced at him, his dark brows plotting a V. "Not about this. I seldom kid about anything, but particularly not about this." And he—shuddered.

Grenfell stared amazedly at him and then began to chuckle. "Now," he said, "I've seen everything. My iconoclastic friend Jack Roway, of all people, caught up by a . . . a fashion. A national pastime, fostered by uncertainty and fed by yellow journalism—fear of the enemy."

"This country is not at war."

"You mean, we have no enemy? Are you saying that the gentlemen over the water, with their itching fingertips hovering about the push buttons, are not our enemies?"

"Well—"

Grenfell came across the room to his friend, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Jack—what's the matter? You can't be so troubled by the news—not *you*!"

Roway stared out at the brazen sun, and shook his head slowly. "International balance is too delicate," he said softly; and if a voice could glaze like eyes, his did. "I see the nations of the world as masses balanced each on its own mathematical point, each with its center of gravity directly above. But the masses are fluid, shifting violently away from the center lines. The opposing trends aren't equal; they can't cancel each other; the phasing is too slow. One or the other is going to topple, and then the whole works is going to go."

"But you've known that for a long time. You've known that ever since Hiroshima. Possibly before. Why should it frighten you now?"

"I didn't think it would happen so soon."

"Oh-ho! So that's it! You have suddenly realized that the explosion is going to come in your lifetime. Hm-m-m? And you can't take that. You're capable of all of your satisfying aesthetic rationalizations as long as you can keep the actualities at arm's length!"

"*Whew!*" said Roway, his irrepressible humor passing close enough to nod to him. "Keep it clean, Grenfell! Keep your . . . your sesquipedalian polysyllabics, for a scientific report."

"*Touché!*" Grenfell smiled. "Y'know, Jack, you remind me powerfully of some erstwhile friends of mine who write science-fiction. They had been living very close to atomic

power for a long time—years before the man on the street—or the average politician, for that matter—knew an atom from Adam. Atomic power was handy to these specialized word-merchants because it gave them a limitless source of power for background to a limitless source of story material. In the heyday of the Manhattan Project, most of them suspected what was going on, some of them knew—some even worked on it. All of them were quite aware of the terrible potentialities of nuclear energy. Practically all of them were scared silly of the whole idea. They were afraid for humanity, but they themselves were not really afraid, except in a delicious drawing room sort of way, because they couldn't conceive of this Buck Rogers event happening to anything but posterity. But it happened, right smack in the middle of their own sacrosanct lifetimes.

"And I will be dog-goned if you're not doing the same thing. You've gotten quite a bang out of figuring out the doom humanity faces in an atomic war. You've consciously risen above it by calling it inevitable, and in the meantime leave us gather rosebuds before it rains. You thought you'd be safe home—dead—before the first drops fell. Now social progress has rolled up a thunderhead and you find yourself a mile from home with a crease in your pants and no umbrella. And you're scared!"

Roway looked at the floor and said, "It's so soon. It's so soon." He looked up at Grenfell, and his cheekbones seemed too large. He took a deep breath. "You . . . we can stop it, Grenfell."

"Stop what?"

"The war . . . the . . . this thing that's happening to us. The explosion that will come when the strains get too great in the international situation. And it's *got* to be stopped!"

"That's what The Pit is for."

"The Pit!" Roway said scornfully. "I've called you a visionary before. Grenfell, you've got to be more practical! Humanity is not going to learn anything by example. It's got to be kicked and carved. Surgery."

Grenfell's eyes narrowed. "Surgery? What you said a minute ago about my stopping it . . . do you mean what I think you mean?"

"Don't you see it?" said Jack urgently. "What you have here—the total conversion of mass to energy—the peak of

atomic power. One or two wallops with this, in the right place, and we can stop anybody."

"This isn't a weapon. I didn't make this to be a weapon."

"The first rock ever thrown by a prehistoric man wasn't made to be a weapon, either. But it was handy and it was effective, and it was certainly used because it had to be used." He suddenly threw up his hands in a despairing gesture. "You don't understand. Don't you realize that this country is likely to be attacked at any second—that diplomacy is now hopeless and helpless, and the whole world is just waiting for the thing to start? It's probably too late even now—but it's the least we can do."

"What, specifically, is the least thing we can do?"

"Turn your work over to the Defense Department. In a few hours the government can put it where it will do the most good." He drew his finger across his throat. "Anywhere we want to, over the ocean."

There was a taut silence. Roway looked at his watch and licked his lips. Finally Grenfell said, "Turn it over to the government. Use it for a weapon—and what for? To stop war?"

"Of course!" blurted Roway. "To show the rest of the world that our way of life . . . to scare the daylights out of . . . to—"

"*Stop it!*" Grenfell roared. "Nothing of the kind. You think—you hope anyway—that the use of total disruption as a weapon will stall off the inevitable—at least in your lifetime. Don't you?"

"No, I—"

"Don't you?"

"Well, I—"

"You have some more doggerel to write," said Grenfell scathingly. "You have some more blondes to chase. You want to go limp over a few more Bach fugues."

Jack Roway said: "No one knows where the first bomb might hit. It might be anywhere. There's nowhere I . . . we . . . can go to be safe." He was trembling.

"Are the people in the city quivering like that?" asked Grenfell.

"Riots," breathed Roway, his eyes bright with panic. "The radio won't announce anything about the riots."

"Is that what you came out here for today—to try to get me to give disruptive power to *any* government?"

Jack looked at him guiltily. "It was the only thing to do. I

don't know if your bomb will turn the trick, but it has to be tried. It's the only thing left. We've got to be prepared to hit first, and hit harder than anyone else."

"No." Grenfell's one syllable was absolutely unshakable.

"Grenfell—I thought I could argue you into it. Don't make it tough for yourself. You've got to do it. Please do it on your own. Please, Grenfell." He stood up slowly.

"Do it on my own—or what? *Keep away from me!*"

"No . . . I—" Roway stiffened suddenly, listening. From far above and to the north came the whir of rotary wings. Roway's fear-slackened lips tightened into a grin, and with two incredibly swift strides he was across to Grenfell. He swept in a handful of the smaller man's shirt front and held him half off the floor.

"Don't try a thing," he gritted. There was not a sound then except their harsh breathing, until Grenfell said wearily: "There was somebody called Judas—"

"You can't insult me," said Roway, with a shade of his old cockiness, "And you're flattering yourself."

A helicopter sank into its own roaring dust-cloud outside the building. Men pounded out of it and burst in the door. There were three of them. They were not in uniform.

"Dr. Grenfell," said Jack Roway, keeping his grip, "I want you to meet—"

"Never mind that," said the taller of the three in a brisk voice. "You're Roway? Hm-m-m. Dr. Grenfell, I understand you have a nuclear energy device on the premises."

"Why did you come by yourself?" Grenfell asked Roway softly. "Why not just send these stooges?"

"For you, strangely enough. I hoped I could argue you into giving the thing freely. You know what will happen if you resist?"

"I know." Grenfell pursed his lips for a moment, and then turned to the tall man. "Yes. I have some such thing here. Total atomic disruption. Is that what you were looking for?"

"Where is it?"

"Here, in the laboratory, and then there's the pile in the other building. You'll find—" he hesitated. "You'll find two samples of the concentrate. One's over there—" he pointed to a lead case on a shelf behind one of the benches. "And there's another like it in a similar case in the shed back of the pile building."

Roway sighed and released Grenfell. "Good boy. I knew you'd come through."

"Yes," said Grenfell. "Yes—"

"Go get it," said the tall man. One of the others broke away.

"It will take two men to carry it," said Grenfell in a shaken voice. His lips were white.

The tall man pulled out a gun and held it idly. He nodded to the second man. "Go get it. Bring it here and we'll strap the two together and haul 'em to the plane. Snap it up."

The two men went out toward the shed.

"Jack?"

"Yes, Doc."

"You really think humanity can be scared?"

"It will be—now. This thing will be used right."

"I hope so. Oh, I hope so," Grenfell whispered.

The men came back. "Up on the bench," said the leader, nodding toward the case the men carried between them.

As they climbed up on the bench and laid hands on the second case, to swing it down from the shelf, Jack Roway saw Grenfell's face spurt sweat, and a sudden horror swept over him.

"Grenfell!" he said hoarsely. "It's—"

"Of course," Grenfell whispered. "Critical mass."

When the two leaden cases came together, it let go.

It was like Hiroshima, but much bigger. And yet, that explosion did not create The Pit. It was the pile that did—the boron-aluminum lattice which Grenfell had so arduously pieced together from parts bootlegged over the years. Right there at the heart of the fission explosion, total disruption took place in the pile, for that was its function. This was slower. It took more than an hour for its hellish activity to reach a peak, and in that time a huge crater had been gouged out of the earth, a seething, spewing mass of volatilized elements, raw radiation, and incandescent gases. It was—The Pit. Its activity curve was plotted abruptly—up to peak in an hour and eight minutes, and then a gradual subsidence as it tried to feed further afield with less and less fueling effect, and as it consumed its own flaming wastes in an effort to reach inactivity. Rain would help to blanket it, through energy lost in volatilizing the drops; and each of the many elements involved went through its respective secondary radioactivity, and passed away its successive half-lives. The

subsidence of The Pit would take between eight and nine thousand years.

And like Hiroshima, this explosion had effects which reached into history and into men's hearts in places far separated in time from the cataclysm itself.

These things happened:

The explosion could not be concealed; and there was too much hysteria afoot for anything to be confirmed. It was easier to run headlines saying WE ARE ATTACKED. There was an instantaneous and panicky demand for reprisals, and the government acceded, because such "reprisals" suited the policy of certain members who could command emergency powers. And so the First Atomic War was touched off.

And the Second.

There were no more atomic wars after that. The Mutants' War was a barbarous affair, and the mutants defeated the tattered and largely sterile remnants of humanity, because the mutants were strong. And then the mutants died out because they were unfit. For a while there was some very interesting material to be studied on the effects of radiation on heredity, but there was no one to study it.

There were some humans left. The rats got most of them, after increasing in fantastic numbers; and there were three plagues.

After that there were half-stooping naked things whose twisted heredity could have been traced to humankind; but these could be frightened, as individuals and as a race, so therefore they could not progress. They were certainly not human.

*The Pit, in A.D. 5000, had changed little over the centuries. Still it was an angry memorial to the misuse of great power; and because of it, organized warfare was a forgotten thing. Because of it, the world was free of the wasteful smoke and dirt of industry. The scream and crash of bombs and the soporific beat of marching feet were never heard, and at long last the earth was at peace.*

*To go near The Pit was slow, certain death, and it was respected and feared, and would be for centuries more. It winked and blinked redly at night, and was surrounded by a bald and broken tract stretching out and away over the horizon; and around it flickered a ghostly blue glow. Nothing lived there. Nothing could.*



*With such a war memorial, there could only be peace. The earth could never forget the horror that could be loosed by war.*

*That was Grenfell's dream.*

# LOOPHOLE

by Arthur C. Clarke (1917- )

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
April

*Arthur C. Clarke is widely regarded as one of the major figures in modern science fiction, and books like Childhood's End (1953) The City and the Stars (1956), the screenplay for 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) Rendezvous with Rama (1974), and The Fountains of Paradise (1979) have won him numerous awards and a secure place in the history of the field. He is also a very talented short story writer, as this and future volumes of this series will show. Virtually every one of his stories and novels is in print in many languages.*

*However, in 1946 Arthur C. Clarke was a name known only within British sf fandom. He had yet to publish a story, although he had been reading science fiction since 1927 and had written about the field since the mid-1930s. Fresh out of almost seven years in the Royal Air Force, he was more than ready to burst upon the sf scene.*

*"Loophole" was his first published story, although it was not the first one he had written.*

*(It is now widely recognized, to the point of cliché-hood, that the Big Three, in alphabetical order, are Asimov, Clarke and Heinlein. Bob Heinlein and myself appeared on the scene in 1939, and it was not till seven years later that Arthur appeared. By the early 1950s we were the Big Three and after thirty years passed, we were still the Big Three. This has made me increasingly nervous with every year that passes. I keep thinking of a hundred science fiction writers, young, eager, talented, some of them extraordinarily successful, all held back from the fair chance at becoming one of the Big Three by the persistent existence of Bob, Arthur and myself. I once said to Arthur, "Maybe we should abdicate. Surely the united baleful, hate-filled glances from all the other writers will sooner or later undermine our health." But Arthur grinned and shook his head, "No," he said, "I enjoy the situation."—That's Arthur!—I.A.)*

From: President

To: Secretary, Council of Scientists.

I have been informed that the inhabitants of Earth have succeeded in releasing atomic energy and have been making experiments with rocket propulsion. This is most serious. Let me have a full report immediately. And make it *brief* this time.

K.K. IV.

From: Secretary, Council of Scientists

To: President.

The facts are as follows. Some months ago our instruments detected intense neutron emission from Earth, but an analysis of radio programs gave no explanation at the time. Three days ago a second emission occurred and soon afterwards all radio transmissions from Earth announced that atomic bombs were in use in the current war. The translators have not completed their interpretation, but it appears that the bombs are of considerable power. Two have so far been used. Some de-

tails of their construction have been released, but the elements concerned have not yet been identified. A fuller report will be forwarded as soon as possible. For the moment all that is certain is the inhabitants of Earth *have* liberated atomic power, so far only explosively.

Very little is known concerning rocket research on Earth. Our astronomers have been observing the planet carefully ever since radio emissions were detected a generation ago. It is certain that long-range rockets of some kind are in existence on Earth, for there have been numerous references to them in recent military broadcasts. However, no serious attempt has been made to reach interplanetary space. When the war ends, it is expected that the inhabitants of the planet may carry out research in this direction. We will pay very careful attention to their broadcasts and the astronomical watch will be rigorously enforced.

From what we have inferred of the planet's technology, it should require about twenty years before Earth develops atomic rockets capable of crossing space. In view of this, it would seem that the time has come to set up a base on the Moon, so that a close scrutiny can be kept on such experiments when they commence.

Trescon.

(Added in manuscript.)

The war on Earth has now ended, apparently owing to the intervention of the atomic bomb. This will not affect the above arguments but it may mean that the inhabitants of Earth can devote themselves to pure research again more quickly than expected. Some broadcasts have already pointed out the application of atomic power in rocket propulsion.

T.

From President.

To: Chief of Bureau of Extra-Planetary Security. (C.B.E.P.S.)

You have seen Trescon's minute.

Equip an expedition to the satellite of Earth immediately. It is to keep a close watch on the planet and to report at once if rocket experiments are in progress.

The greatest care must be taken to keep our presence on the Moon a secret. You are personally responsible for this. Report to me at yearly intervals, or more often if necessary.

K.K. IV.

From: President.

To: C.B.E.P.S.

Where is the report on Earth?!!

K.K. IV.

From: C.B.E.P.S.

To: President.

The delay is regretted. It was caused by the breakdown of the ship carrying the report.

There have been no signs of rocket experimenting during the past year, and no reference to it in broadcasts from the planet.

Ranthe.

From: C.B.E.P.S.

To: President.

You will have seen my yearly reports to your respected father on this subject. There have been no developments of interest for the past seven years, but the following message has just been received from our base on the Moon:

Rocket projectile, apparently atomically propelled, left Earth's atmosphere today from Northern land-mass, traveling into space for one quarter diameter of planet before returning under control.

Ranthe.

From: President.

To: Chief of State.

Your comments, please.

K.K. V.

From: Chief of State.

To: President.

This means the end of our traditional policy.

The only hope of security lies in preventing the Terrestrials from making further advances in this direction. From what we know of them, this will require some over-whelming threat.

Since its high gravity makes it impossible to land on the planet, our sphere of action is restricted. The problem was discussed nearly a century ago by Anvar, and I agree with his conclusions. We must act *immediately* along those lines.

F.K.S.

From: President.  
To: Secretary of State.

Inform the Council that an emergency meeting is convened for noon tomorrow.

K.K. V.

From: President.  
To: C.B.E.P.S.

Twenty battleships should be sufficient to put Anvar's plan into operation. Fortunately there is no need to arm them—yet. Report progress of construction to me weekly.

K.K. V.

From: C.B.E.P.S.  
To: President.

Nineteen ships are now completed. The twentieth is still delayed owing to hull failure and will not be ready for at least a month.

Ranthe.

From: President.  
To: C.B.E.P.S.

Nineteen will be sufficient. I will check the operational plan with you tomorrow. Is the draft of our broadcast ready yet?

K.K. V.

From: C.B.E.P.S.  
To: President.

Draft herewith:

People on Earth!

We, the inhabitants of the planet you call Mars, have for many years observed your experiments towards achieving interplanetary travel. *These experiemnts must cease.* Our study of your race has convinced us that you are not fit to leave your planet in the present state of your civilization. The ships you now see floating above your cities are capable of destroying them utterly, and will do so unless you discontinue your attempts to cross space.

We have set up an observatory on your Moon and can immediately detect any violation of these orders. If you obey them, we will not interfere with you again. Otherwise, one of

your cities will be destroyed every time we observe a rocket leaving the Earth's atmosphere.

By order of the President and Council of Mars.

Ranthe.

From: President.

To: C.B.E.P.S.

I approve. The translation can go ahead.

I shall not be sailing with the fleet, after all. You will report to me in detail immediately on your return.

K.K. V.

From: C.B.E.P.S.

To: President.

I have the honor to report the successful completion of our mission. The voyage to Earth was uneventful; radio messages from the planet indicated that we were detected at a considerable distance and great excitement had been aroused before our arrival. The fleet was dispersed according to plan and I broadcast the ultimatum. We left immediately and no hostile weapons were brought to bear against us.

I shall report in detail within two days.

Ranthe.

From: Secretary, Council of Scientists.

To: President.

The psychologists have completed their report, which is attached herewith.

As might be expected, our demands at first infuriated this stubborn and high-spirited race. The shock to their pride must have been considerable, for they believed themselves to be the only intelligent beings in the Universe.

However, within a few weeks there was a rather unexpected change in the tone of their statements. They had begun to realize that we were intercepting all their radio transmissions, and some messages have been broadcast directly to us. They state that they have agreed to ban all rocket experiments, in accordance with our wishes. This is as unexpected as it is welcome. Even if they are trying to deceive us, we are perfectly safe now that we have established the second station just outside the atmosphere. They cannot possibly develop spaceships without our seeing them or detecting their tube radiation.

The watch on Earth will be continued rigorously, as instructed.

Trescon.

From: C.B.E.P.S.

To: President.

Yes, it is quite true that there have been no further rocket experiments in the last ten years. We certainly did not expect Earth to capitulate so easily!

I agree that the existence of this race now constitutes a permanent threat to our civilization and we are making experiments along the lines you suggest. The problem is a difficult one, owing to the great size of the planet. Explosives would be out of the question, and a radioactive poison of some kind appears to offer the greatest hope of success.

Fortunately, we now have an indefinite time in which to complete this research, and I will report regularly.

Ranthe.

End of Document

From: Lieutenant Commander Henry Forbes, Intelligence Branch, Special Space Corps.

To: Professor S. Maxton, Philological Department, University of Oxford.

Route: Transender II (via Schenectady.)

The above papers, with others, were found in the ruins of what is believed to be the capital Martian city. (Mars Grid KL302895.) The frequent use of the ideograph for "Earth" suggests that they may be of special interest and it is hoped that they can be translated. Other papers will be following shortly.

H. Forbes, Lt/Cdr.

(Added in manuscript.)

Dear Max,

Sorry I've had no time to contact you before, I'll be seeing you as soon as I get back to Earth.

Gosh! Mars *is* in a mess! Our co-ordinates were dead accurate and the bombs materialized right over their cities, just as the Mount Wilson boys predicted.

We're sending a lot of stuff back through the two small machines, but until the big transmitter is materialized we're



rather restricted, and, of course, none of us can return. So hurry up with it!

I'm glad we can get to work on rockets again. I may be old-fashioned, but being squirted through space at the speed of light doesn't appeal to me!

Yours in haste,

Henry.

# THE NIGHTMARE

by Chan Davis (1926- )

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
May

*Dr. Chandler Davis is a Professor of Mathematics at a Canadian university who wrote several notable stories in the mid-1940s, including the beautiful "Letter to Ellen" (Astounding, June 1947), but then only produced an occasional story in the following decades. Most importantly, he is the author of one of the very best stories (inside or outside of science fiction) on bureaucracy, the incredible "Adrift On the Policy Level" which appeared in Fred Pohl's Star Science Fiction Stories 5 in 1959. His small output and considerable talent deserve wider recognition.*

*In 1945 and 1946 (at least) his mind was very much on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and he wrote this powerful warning about atomic war.*

*(After I got my Ph.D. in 1948, I went to Boston in order to join the faculty of Boston University School of Medicine as an instructor [Officially, I am still on the faculty with the rank of Professor of Biochemistry, but it's been 23 years since I've actually faced a class of medical students].*

*Naturally, I was very lonely. In those days, before television and the West Coast siphoned off the science fiction brotherhood, New York City was where most science fiction writers were to be found, and I missed the good old gang. It was not long, however, before I met the science fiction people of Boston and one of them was Chan Davis. The very first get-together with Boston people as at his then apartment and I still remember that room with its high ceiling. It looked nothing at all like New York, but Chan was there and he wrote science fiction and that made it home.—I.A.)*

Rob Ciccone bent down, picked up the bottle of milk outside the door of his apartment, and started to pick up the paper beside it. When he saw the headline that topped two columns on the left-hand side of the front page, he hesitated. Then he stood up and wiped his forehead.

The morning newspaper is essentially a simple, ordinary, and familiar thing. It's a habit. But it doesn't seem quite so ordinary and familiar when you see your name in black type at the top of page one.

Rob picked up the paper and went back into the flat to read it. With forced deliberation, he slowly sat down in the most relaxing chair available and spread the paper carefully before starting the article. He was worried. As far as he knew there was no reason for him to be on page one. He did not belong there. He had, to be sure, been one of the speakers at the S.N.P. chapter meeting last night, but he had been planning to look for that write-up on page twenty-six or thereabouts. Worse, Rob's job was one of those in which you do not make page one in the *New York Dispatch*, or any other paper, unless it is bad news, and very bad.

He began to read, then the worry gave way to puzzlement. It was the report of the meeting after all, and carried, as he had expected, the byline of his friend Creighton Macomb. It ran:

**CICCONE FLAYS CITY'S GEIGER SEARCH POLICY; WARNS PERIL GROWS**

Dr. Robert A. Ciccone, chief of the Bronx Sector Radioactive Search Commission, stated last night that the present system of Geiger-counter search would not be adequate for the prevention of an A-bomb being planted in the New York area. Addressing the Bronx Chapter of the Society of Nuclear Physicists, he said: "No number of successes in preventing the importing of dangerous radioactives can compensate for just one failure, and I feel unable to state positively that failure, and disastrous failure, is impossible."

So far so good, thought Rob. At least they were quoting directly. Of course the sentence quoted was the most outspoken of the whole thing; it read like a much stronger attack on the search program than he had actually dared to make.

But the same thing had been said before by others. Ten years before, when the Geiger search had first been brought up as a counter-proposal to the Compton plan of decentralization, the whole subject had been batted back and forth in the press. Opponents of the search system, himself included, had claimed that New York was a sitting target for an atomic bomb, that no preventive measures could change that fact, and that the only answer to the danger was to scatter New York's industries and commerce over as wide an area as possible. The other party had pooh-poohed this warning, pointing to the U.N.O. Security Council's strict supervision of all the world's piles, and to the greatly improved methods for the detection of radioactives. Finally, the second party had won. And since that time even the most extreme alarmists had been given less and less newspaper space. He had thought his speech would be played down, interpreted as a suggestion that search methods be improved. Instead—this. Why?

He read the remainder of the article hurriedly. It was O.K. Accurately reported, without editorializing. But it didn't answer his question.

He thought of calling Crate Macomb, but looked at his watch and decided he'd have to wait. All through dressing, shaving, and breakfast, he was too preoccupied either to finish the paper or to give any thought to the rather suspicious results of some of the recent searches. Which in itself was unusual, for normally results that were not thoroughly innocuous were enough to take his mind off anything else.

At 8:15 when he was ready to leave for work, he dialed the *Dispatch*, gave an extension number.

"Could I speak to Macomb? That you, Crate?"

"Yeah. Hello, Rob." Macomb sounded ill at ease.

"I . . . er . . . I just called up to congratulate you on making the front page. Congratulate myself, too, of course."

"Congratulate—?" He sounded puzzled.

"That terrific billing I got in the paper this morning. I've got to admit I don't understand it. New editorial policy?"

"Oh, I get it. You've only seen the home edition, not the later editions."

"That's right. What have the later editions got?"

"Well, I'll tell you the whole thing." He dropped his voice.

"The City Ed and I have been against this Geiger system right along, and looking for chances to slip through stories slanted against it."

"I thought you gave that up."

"I gave up bucking editorial policy openly, because it wasn't healthy, but I thought I'd take a chance on this story. The City Ed got it past His Nibs without too much trouble, it made the first edition O.K., and we thought the thing would come off. But—"

"Yeah, but. I knew that was coming. What about those later editions?"

"That's the catch, all right. You remember what you told me last night before the meeting? About the aerial radioactivity your boys found over the Bronx yesterday?"

"You didn't let that into print, did you?"

"I didn't, no. I know well enough that radioactivity in the air might be either chance air currents from the Oswego pile, or hidden radioactives around the city, and whichever it is I know darn well that telling the people about it right away is the worst thing to do. Even if I had submitted copy on it, I wouldn't have expected it to get past the editor. But some cub reporter got the dope from the man who took the aerial tests, and didn't know any better than to submit it."

"And they ran it."

"And they ran it, yes." Crate paused, and said slowly: "They ran it in the same article with a rewritten version of what you read in the first edition."

"I can imagine . . . His Nibs couldn't recall the edition that featured my statement, so he set out to discredit me."

"That's it. It could be much worse." Crate's tone of voice

indicated what he meant. He meant, "Probably it *will* be much worse."

Rob stopped to let the implications sink in. Finally, "Has the news started a panic in the Bronx? The news of the tests, I mean."

"Not yet. Look, Rob. His Nibs doesn't know I was responsible for the slant in the original offense this morning; he's blaming it on the City Ed. He doesn't know I know you personally, either. He does know I graduated in nuclear physics. So he's assigning me to—write a feature on you. Not a build-up."

"*Whew*— So?"

"So I'll have to do the best I can. So I'd appreciate it if I could see you some time soon and talk the whole thing over. I can tell you more then."

That certainly seemed to be in order, to put it mildly. Rob named a cafeteria near the *Dispatch* Building, promised to be right down, and rang off.

On his way to the subway station he picked up a *Dispatch*. He was still on the front page, and, as Crate had indicated, the treatment of him was rather different. He had not merely addressed the Society of Nuclear Physicists; in this edition he had done much more. He had failed his trust as Sector Search Commissioner. The high aerial radioactivity indicated that an A-bomb was being assembled somewhere in his sector, although his search groups had failed to detect the importing of the bomb materials. It was hinted that the reason he had stressed, in his speech, the impossibility of adequate searches, was to cover up his own incompetence when news of his failure broke.

The slur, he reflected, would probably not hurt him much. His job was not political, and if he were incompetent no amount of fast talking would help him. Conversely, the press couldn't hurt him, outside of discrediting his statement. Still, you had to be careful not to underestimate the power of the press.

The other angle was much more important. Suppose the paper's first charge were right. Suppose that yesterday's test results had been more than chance, and that for some reason, maybe for the purpose of building a bomb, radioactives really had been smuggled into his sector. He wouldn't try to guess who might be doing it; he didn't know politics. But the thing was possible. Well?

Before meeting Crate, he slipped into a phone booth and held a conversation—consisting chiefly of code phrases—with the Bronx Sector headquarters. When it was done he hurried into the cafeteria and spotted Macomb. He asked abruptly, "Your car in town today?"

"Yes, it is."

"The usual parking lot?"

"Yeah."

"Good. We'd better go uptown right away." Macomb came without question.

"I just phoned Charlie. They're still getting the same results, a little bit stronger, and consistent. The wind's changed to east, and the meteorologist says if the readings keep coming this way another hour there's no chance that it's a false alarm. They really should have got in touch with me earlier, but as it is I'll have to get there as quickly as I can."

"This takes precedence over everything else, all right."

"It takes precedence over just about anything in the whole city, if it's not a false alarm. Anyhow," he added as they climbed into the car, "you're not skipping out on your assignment. If you're going to succeed in getting a story on my incompetence, here's your chance, and I certainly hope I disappoint you."

They cut west toward Riverside Drive, Macomb at the wheel. When they were on the Drive, Ciccone asked suddenly, "Who runs the *Dispatch*, anyway?"

"The Ed does a pretty fair job."

"Yes, but . . . you told me once the Ed takes orders from somebody."

The other laughed. "Things aren't as simple as that in the newspaper racket. Nobody gives orders. But if any one man determines the policies of the paper, I guess it's Ellsworth Bates."

Ellsworth Bates. Ciccone ran over in his mind what he knew of the man. Bates was not, to the public, a prominent name. On the society page it was inconspicuous. In political news the name seldom appeared. Even in business news it ordinarily occurred only in listings of corporation boards. Yet apparently behind the scenes this Bates was a power; Macomb certainly should know.

"I was thinking," Rob went on. "Suppose for a minute a bomb is being assembled, and suppose Bates is connected with it. Wouldn't that explain what happened this morning?"

"Why—"

"First, he may succeed in confusing our sector organization by slinging mud at me. Second, he may confuse the whole borough by starting a panic. Third, he would surely jump on anything that might talk the public into decentralization; he'd want the city to remain a good, highly localized target. The decentralization issue was what started all this, remember."

"Hm-m-m. Sounds plausible at first, but—forget it. Not a chance of it. Nobody with Bates' financial interests in the city is going to try to destroy it, and that rules out not only Bates but anyone else with the power to high-pressure into print a slam against you. Besides—this bomb scare might start a panic among the populace, but on the other hand it puts the squeeze on the Search Commission, making sure they'll act as quickly and as efficiently as they can. No, forget it."

"Still, for whatever reason, Bates is probably back of His Nibs' policy."

"It'd be a good guess, all right."

"And why," Rob said, half to himself, "does he go to such lengths to slap down anybody who speaks out for decentralization?"

They sped north along the Drive. Ahead of them was the Highway Search Station, where extrasensitive detectors would scan them, and, in case they revealed radioactivity, would operate relays, causing the car to be photographed and an alarm bell to be rung. Ciccone had been caught more than once; the detectors were so sensitive that small amounts of natural uranium adhering to his clothes and shoes after lab work could sometimes actuate them. This time they got past without the Search Commission's police giving chase.

They were now in the Bronx Sector. "Where to?" asked Crate.

"Just a minute. If you'll get off the Drive and stop at the next drugstore, I'll give Charlie another ring."

"Use my radiophone if you want."

"We avoid 'em. Easier to intercept them than it is to tap ordinary phone wires."

"O.K." Macomb acceded to Rob's request.

Another coded phone conversation and Ciccone returned to the car, to give a few brief directions. "We're going to look over Import Station Three," he explained. "There are two ways we might track this thing down. The first is to localize the source of the active gases by testing more air samples at a lower altitude. They're going ahead with that, and there's not



much I can do to help. The second, assuming that bomb materials are still being shipped in, is to check the import stations through which all trucking passes."

"You sound pretty certain that it is a bomb."

"Without having any idea who would want to build one here and now, I'd say the probability was about twenty-five percent and growing all the time."

Unconsciously, Macomb gave the car another ten miles an hour's worth of gas.

Traffic was light, and they made good time to the import station. As they entered the vast, warehouselike building, Rob said: "I thought this'd be the station to inspect because those aerial tests seem to localize the thing between ten and fifty blocks northwest of here. Normally I wouldn't suspect this station of having a leak; they have the best equipment of any. They even make chemical analyses of samples of any cadmium that passes through."

"Cadmium? Why?"

"It's one way you might shield U-235 from the radiation detectors. Alloy it with plenty of cadmium and no neutrons get out. Just one of the dodges we have to be prepared for."

Inside the building, three lines of trucks were being sent slowly through what resembled roughly an assembly line. First the walls of the truck would be tested to insure that they were not radiation-absorbent, then a few of the crates, chosen at random, would be broken open and inspected in the same way. Following this, the truck would be driven slowly down a long double line of confusingly different instruments, and would wait until it had been given the green light by the operators of all the instruments before it proceeded into the Sector. By this time the next truck would have finished its preliminary inspection and would be ready to roll through.

The most important of the detectors were modifications of the familiar Geiger-Mueller counter. An alpha particle, proton, or other emission would ionize the gas between two charged plates, allowing discharge. The discharges would be stored on a condenser, which in turn discharged through a glow tube if the counter operated more than a certain number of times in a given interval.

Ciccone and Macomb stood at one corner of the floor watching the procedure, Ciccone said: "It's not as effective as you might think. The stuff might be brought through here by packing it in the middle boxes of a big truckload, where the

outside boxes would shield it. Those guys don't dig down and get at the inside often enough."

"I should think this'd be one job where they'd be more than willing to do a little extra work just to make sure."

"No, people aren't that way. It's a lot of work to half-unload one of those trucks. This is just a job to most of the men, no matter how hard we try to make it something more; it's just their job, and they make it as easy for themselves as they can.

"Today they're being pretty thorough, though; when I called Charlie I told him to needle the boys up a bit."

"So I see." A large Diesel crane was being used in one of the assembly lines to remove the contents of one truck for individual testing. Several men were clustered around with hand-test sets. In a few minutes Rob went over, motioning Crate to accompany him.

"One thing," he whispered on the way, "whatever you see, don't act more than normally suspicious. You can't forget the possibility that the truck driver, or even one of our men, might be an agent. Hello, Sam. What you got here?"

"Radium dial watches. Darn things scare the pants off us every time. Compared to the little tiny bleeps we get on our meters from most of this stuff, they look like Hiroshima."

"Been getting many?"

"Yeah, a good few."

"I hope you check the inside boxes pretty often to make sure the watches' emissions aren't masking something else underneath."

"Yeah, we've doing that."

"Well." Rob looked down at the one crate out of the truck-load which contained the watches. It had been opened, and several of the carefully packed boxes removed. An idea struck him, and he mentally noted the address on the crate, while apparently examining the watches. The watches were a standard American make.

"Well, keep up the good work, Sam," he said casually. "Oh, Sam. Have you seen the *Dispatch* this morning?"

"No, why?"

"Never mind." After watching a few more trucks pass uneventfully by, he left, accompanied by Macomb.

"Anson Mercantile Company," he said pensively as they climbed back into the car; "no street or number given. As I remember, it's about ten blocks west and four north. Suppose

you let me drive, I think I can find it. If I have to, I'll ask a cop, but I didn't want to ask in there."

He did not have to ask a cop. At Anson's, the two of them looked enough like retailers to get into a salesman's office without delay. Rob interrupted the salesman's commercial cordiality by showing an F.B.I. badge, then asked without explanation, "Who's buying up that shipment of watches that's coming in?"

"Why—let's see. I don't believe they're all ordered yet." He showed no inclination to continue.

"Who buys watches from you?" Rob prompted.

"Well—" The man listed several jewelry and department stores. "Those are the principal ones."

This was not going to be quite as simple as Rob had hoped. "Have any of them specified any individual shipments, rather than just naming brands?"

"I wouldn't know. I don't have anything to do with—"

"I think you know."

"What is this about, anyway?"

Rob debated whether to fib or to bully the man with his F.B.I. badge; he decided on the former course. "There's been some highjacking of watches, and we're trying to track it down." It didn't sound at all plausible, but the man, though baffled, was apparently satisfied.

"Well, now that you mention it," he admitted, "Grelner's has specified shipments several times." He stopped, tentatively.

"That's all," said Ciccone, and he and Macomb left, trying to look like G-men.

"Well," commented Rob, "I guess we can assume for now that he was telling the truth."

"Might I ask you something, sir?"

"Ask me what?"

"The same thing that fellow in there asked you: what the heck is this all about?"

Rob laughed. "I'm sorry. Those watches looked pretty innocent, didn't they, to be causing all this? But we have to follow up the implausible leads, because all the plausible ones get investigated at the import station. This one is 'highly non-trivial,' as my math prof used to say.

"Look. We let radium dial watches through the import station because no one could possibly extract the fissionable substances from the phosphorescent paint on those things

without revealing themselves—even if they could get enough into the city that way. But there's another possibility. What if, instead of natural uranium, you were to use Pu-239, ordinary plutonium, in your phosphorescent paint? It's an alpha-emitter with long half-life, like common U-238; our instruments couldn't tell the difference. You'd have the job of purifying after you got the stuff in, and you'd have to get in an awful lot. It's just possible, just barely. And all the probable things, as I say, are checked."

"But it'd take so long to accumulate enough plutonium for a bomb. They couldn't be anywhere finished now, could they?"

"Sure could. They could have been accumulating the stuff for years without giving themselves away. It wouldn't be until they started purifying that Sneezy—the aerial radioactivity detector—would show anything. That's happened. We'd better follow up on Grelner's, and if it's not that, we'll start looking around again. Grelner's did, after all, ask for particular shipments—those shipments, maybe, that they knew were loaded with plutonium. They wouldn't buy up the whole shipment, because that would seem peculiar to the wholesalers, and the Pu-239 watches are, I suppose, perfectly usable as such. They wouldn't ship the watches in direct to the store, because it's not usual business practice.

"Everything fits. Which in itself proves nothing. Still, we can't afford not to check it. I don't think I can get much further with this investigating, I'd better order a search right now." They had been walking toward the store; now Rob started once more for a phone. "You call police, give my name and the code word 'antipasto,' and say 'Grelner's Department Store.' I'll be calling the import station for some detectors."

Luckily Schmidt's Drugstore had two empty phone booths. Nobody looked up as they walked in and slipped into the booths.

Ciccione, as he dialed his number, had a sudden vision. A pillar of multi-colored smoke rising from the city, erasing the Bronx and Manhattan down to Central Park, shattering windows in Nyack, lighting up the Albany sky. A nightmare, a familiar and a very real nightmare, an accepted part of modern life, something you couldn't get away from; and it seemed more immediate than ever right now. Trying to pretend it was just fancy, he looked out of the booth at the girl

wiping off the drugstore counter, the middle-aged woman buying toothbrushes, the suspended loafer thumbing through the magazines. He thought the commonplaceness of Schmidt's Drugstore might be reassuring; but it didn't help.

"Import Station Three."

"This is Ciccone. Could I speak to Sam?"

Again he waited. The nightmare was still there, and somewhere, quite likely just a few blocks from where he was now, were the few ounces of metal that might be the nightmare.

"Hello. Hello, Sam. Send down—*antipasto*—send down all your mobiles, except for one full battery to be left at the station. Grelner's Department Store. Know where it is?"

"Sure do. Right down." Sam hung up before Rob had a chance to tell him to hurry. He knew that an order like that, in a situation like that, just plain meant "hurry", in capital letters.

Hurry. It might already be too late, or they might have months to spare, or there might be no danger at all. Yet the chance was always there that one minute's delay might make all the difference.

Always that chance, he thought as he and Macomb walked up the innocent-looking street toward where the police and the search men would soon arrive. The chance that the time he had wasted at the meeting last night, and the hour he had wasted this morning because of that peculiar newspaper episode, might themselves have been fatal.

"And yet," He said aloud, "assuming we get to this bomb in time—always assuming that—this man Ellsworth Bates, and whoever else he represents, may be more important than any one bomb. No number of successes can compensate for one failure—"

Crate interrupted him. "The police have started arriving!"

Ciccone knew the routine of the search; he'd been largely responsible for preparing police and search men alike for this eventuality. He knew perfectly well what had to be done, and he also knew that, since the organization was trained to function without him, there was little he could do besides helping with the details.

First a cordon had to be thrown around the block in as short a time as possible after giving the alarm. Plutonium, enough of it to make a bomb, could be taken from the block in a two-passenger coupé, or in the pockets of a few men willing to subject themselves to radioactive poisoning by car-

rying it adequately shielded. So the police had to make sure that, for the present, everybody inside the cordon stayed inside.

The search men arrived not long after the police: a fleet of bizarre-looking, specially-built trucks, roaring through the city with sirens screaming, then pulling up in a group at one side of the block. The mobile search units made up a respectable detection laboratory in themselves. They carried, in addition to the larger, more sensitive instruments, enough simple hand-test sets to arm a large force of searchers. Some of these were distributed quickly to the policemen comprising the cordon, and the first part of the search began.

A bluecoat would beckon to one of the bewildered passersby who had been caught in the cordon, and then, while a second policeman covered him, would search the man. This consisted in passing two test sets, one held in either hand, over all parts of his body; reading them and pressing a button to recharge the electroscopes and readjust the counters' potential; and frisking him in the standard manner. He would then be allowed—ordered, rather—to leave the block. In this way the sidewalks were rapidly cleared.

Macomb left Rob's side, pad and pencil in hand, to go to where a short, well-dressed man of about sixty was being searched by two bored policemen. Rob dismissed Macomb with the mental comment, "Good story for him."

Himself, he wanted to help with the big job: going through the buildings on the block, one by one, story by story, with every type of instrument from Geiger counter to uranium neutron-detector. It was a big job, it would take alot of men a long time, and he knew they could use his help.

The detectors were already being unloaded from the trucks. Sam was organizing a group of about twenty search men to begin on the row of five-and six-story apartments that made up one side of the block.

"Say, Sam," began Rob.

"Oh, there you are," said Sam.

"I didn't see you; I was beginning to think that call was a fake. Have a counter."

"Say, Sam, why don't you start at the store itself?"

"The Sneezies are registering like hell right here—like all hell." He gave a few more instructions and the men scattered into the buildings.

Ciccone found it almost a relief to know that the source of

the radio-activity had been located fairly closely. Now, all the uncertainties involved in his reasoning were resolved. It might have been that Grelner's, like the wholesaler's, was just an intermediate stage in the smuggling; it might have been that the whole lead was a false one. But it wasn't.

With Sam and one other, he started down the basement steps of the first apartment house, to begin the search at the bottom. One of the tenants was coming down from the second story and looked with amazed curiosity at their test sets and drawn guns. Sam waved him out onto the street, and the three of them continued on down.

But the tedious and dangerous hunt which they had anticipated was interrupted. Suddenly, a booming voice filled the air. Rob looked around for a loudspeaker, but seeing none, concentrated on the words.

"You're are looking," the voice said, with a slight foreign intonation, "for the bomb which is being assembled here. I would warn that we have a quantity of plutonium in excess of the critical mass. If any more men enter this block of buildings, or if anyone enters this particular building, then the bomb, which is in readiness, will be exploded."

Rob, followed by the others, ran out into the street. He didn't know why, but he felt an almost claustrophobic oppression on the apartment stairway. As if getting out of the building would do any good were an A-bomb to go off!

The voice from the hidden loudspeakers continued, to a petrified audience of policemen and search men: "We will leave our laboratory, which is that building formerly used as a warehouse by the Grelner's Store, by helicopter. You must not attempt to intercept us—"

Rob was standing beside the police captain, looking up at the expressionless row of apartment houses. The decision, he realized, was up to him. Was this a bluff, and dare they call it?

"—will, in any case, be detonated by radio in two weeks. This will give you time to largely clear the area, and the bomb will still accomplish our purpose of disruption. You must not interfere, and you must prepare for the explosion in exactly two weeks' time." A pause, then, "You are looking for the bomb which is being assembled here. I would warn—"

It was a record, and it was repeating. The whole message was in Ciccone's hands now; it was up to him. He looked nervously around him. The police captain, Macomb, and the

short, well-dressed old man to whom Macomb had gone earlier—Cicccone hardly saw them.

"—enters this particular building, then the bomb, which is in readiness, will be exploded. We will leave our laboratory—"

"It's a bluff," said Cicccone, and his voice sounded weak as death. "Enter the building."

The captain didn't move, but stared straight ahead, his jaw knotted.

"It's a bluff. If they were going to set off an A-bomb, they wouldn't give us the opportunity to clear the people out of the city, even those few people we could get out in two weeks. They'd try for maximum destruction.

"Either they're not ready, or they are and we've nothing left to lose. Enter the building."

"They're not ready," said a voice behind Rob. He turned; it was Macomb's companion. "Any group which would send agents to destroy New York, would plan that the agents also be destroyed. Thus any chance would be eliminated of this country's learning the identity of the group, and they might be spared retaliation. Only if the bomb could not be detonated would such a bluff as this be attempted, on the chance that a copter might escape."

Rob stared at the unknown in dumb amazement. The confidence and precision with which he had spoken were—inhuman.

But for the moment he ignored this remarkable interruption and turned once more to the captain. The latter's face had a look almost of resignation as he finally gave the necessary orders to about twenty of the policemen who lined the sidewalk. They hesitated; they, too, could hear that voice over the loudspeaker. "—will still accomplish our purpose of disruption. You must not interfere, and you must prepare for the explosion—"

Somehow when the first of the policemen moved to obey, the others followed. Slowly they advanced toward a gap between two buildings, through which they could reach the spot the voice had named as the laboratory site.

"—that we have a quantity of plutonium in excess of the critical mass. If any more men enter this block of buildings—"

They advanced, and one by one disappeared through the gap. Cicccone waited. Maybe the men inside, whoever they were, had not observed the violation of their conditions. Yet.



Except for the loudspeaker, the whole street was in intolerable silence, as everyone—waited. Finally, as one, they relaxed and breathed more easily. It was not that they were absolutely certain yet that no bomb would go off, but simply that the tension could not be borne any longer.

The police captain turned to his car radio.

"In case those boys do get their helicopter off that roof," he said, "I'm going to call for some of our planes to intercept them."

Rob made a mental note to have planes added to the search plan in the future, and nodded assent.

"No," Macomb's companion interjected. "It was a bluff, but you must allow them to escape."

Rob's previous amazement was redoubled. He could find no answer except to blurt, "Who are you, anyway?"

"Ellsworth Bates."

Before Ciccone could reply, all eyes were turned upward by a shout from one of the search men standing nearby. A helicopter was hovering above the apartment buildings, drifting slightly in the wind, and rising.

The captain turned again to his radio, but was halted by the urgency in Bates' voice as he repeated: "No, they must escape. If they are captured, it will be discovered whom they represent, and this country will certainly open fire in retaliation. Every trace of their identity must be lost if there's going to be any chance of peace. Don't you see? It doesn't matter that they are the aggressors, that we, in a sense, would be in the right were we to fight them—whoever they are. The only thing we must consider is the impossibility of our fighting any war with anybody, now. Unfortunately, it's a thing our government, and our people, will probably not consider if these men are identified.

"The whole thing can be reported to the Security Council. They can investigate—secretly. The United States must not investigate."

He paused. "Sabotage bomb attack is the only method of atomic warfare that can be used as long as the Security Council controls the world's atomic power. Fissionable elements are rigidly controlled, they're hard to get, no one can get enough of them away from the Security Council's jurisdiction to arm a fleet of rockets. And a fleet is what you'd need to stand a chance of getting through a modern radar-rocket defense screen. Sabotage bomb attack is the only thing left.

"Until open warfare breaks out. Then, one or both of the warring nations defy the Security Council, grab all the fissionable elements they can, and what have you? Chaos. Ruin. If you like to put it that way, the end of civilization. Once the Security Council's power is broken and the rocket-atomic war starts, we're lost, that's all.

"Mr. Ciccone, I realize you're in charge here, and I'm unable to force your decision. Nevertheless, you've *got* to let that copter get away—delay your pursuit, say, ten minutes, and don't make it seem deliberate. More than that, you've got to destroy the evidence in that building—again accidentally—and, if possible, destroy so much that it can't be proved a bomb was ever in the process of construction."

He stopped. Rob looked up to where the helicopter was dwindling into the distance. "Mr. Bates, if there has been one bomb, there can be another, maybe from the same source."

"No number of successes can make up for one failure. Precisely. But we wouldn't avert that possible failure by tracing down this bomb attempt. We'd precipitate it.

"Granted, we'd find the culprit's identity. But after the cities of this and every other country had been destroyed, it'd be small consolation to know who started the thing."

Then something happened inside Rob, and the nightmare was on him again. The light too bright to be seen, the sound too loud to be heard, the horror too great for any man to know. He sighed, and spoke to the captain:

"You heard what he said?"

"Yes."

"Do what he said about the helicopter. The rest of it, forget. I mean that—forget it."

Ciccone sat with Macomb and Bates in the front room of Crate's Greenwich Village flat, recounting the steps he had taken to follow Bates' plan. "It may work out," he said. "No one's been all the way inside the lab yet, except Sam and me. The lab will be accidentally destroyed tonight, after the plutonium has been removed and Sam has seen plenty of things which were not there at all. And, Mr. Bates, if your spell over the newspapers is as great as Macomb says it is, they may all print our version of the story." He indicated a *Dispatch* extra in his hand. "The radioactives were brought in by private experimenters dodging the U.N.O.; they tried the bomb bluff in order to escape, and they then eluded police

pursuers. No matter how much perjuring we do it's a weak story."

"No," replied Bates, "with a few loopholes patched up, it'll go. If we're long on theorizing and minimize the actual faking; we'll get out result without much risk. And don't worry about the perjury; this is one end that justifies any means."

There was a silence while Ciccone gathered his courage. Bates was no longer the evil genius he had seemed earlier in the day; nevertheless courage was required to begin, "So now we have one success—we've postponed the fatal failure a little further."

Bates smiled. "Unless I miss my guess, you're getting back to decentralization."

Macomb took up the theme. "Yes," he said, "that problem's still there. This bomb's been found, this crisis may soon be over; but there'll be others. We'll never have even relative safety until everything is so uniformly distributed that no one bomb can destroy more than one of the old block-busters could now."

"I'll try to explain the thing to you," Bates began slowly. "You're right, that would be the only way to safety. You're also right in thinking that I've been suppressing the movement toward decentralization. Now wait a minute; please don't interrupt. I know I seem to be contradicting myself, but let me start from the beginning.

"Ten years ago several of the smaller European nations, which had not been getting much information on nuclear physics from the larger nations, independently developed working chain-reactions. Tension mounted, and a large-scale atomic war might have resulted had not the world been too exhausted from the recent World War II. As it was, everybody got such a bad case of the jitters that the affair was halted before the A-bomb was used.

"This world-wide case of the jitters had other effects, you remember. The Security Council was quickly given supervision over all piles, plus sizable military and intelligence forces. Second, the movement for decentralization was started."

"And stopped," put in Ciccone.

"Yes. To what, if I may ask, did you ascribe its failure?"

"Lack of vision on the part of—well, leaders of industry. People like you could have swung it."

"No. The people whom you call leaders of industry saw

everything you saw in the situation, and they did try to swing it. The thing is, when they got right down to cases they saw something you missed; to be specific, they saw that decentralization was impossible."

"Impossible?"

"Because of a factor which the scientist finds it easy to ignore: the terrific inertia of our civilization. Here's the way it works. New York businessmen see that the world would be a much safer place if all business were to disperse away from the big metropolitan centers. They think it would be fine if this were to be done. But they can't do it themselves if, say, Prague businessmen are going to remain concentrated, because it'd be a big financial blow to New York to stand the expense of moving and to give up their ready access to transportation. They wouldn't be able to compete with Prague, or London, or Calcutta, as the case might be—whatever city didn't go along. Unless everybody will take the step, nobody will take it. It has to be world-wide, and ten years ago the world wasn't unified enough.

"You remember the 1929 crash? A little before your time, I guess. It was the same thing. The economists saw it coming several years ahead, but no one could duck out of the wave of overinvestment, because if they did, their competitors would not, and would continue to make profits from the boom. Everyone had to keep riding the wave as long as possible, even though they knew such a policy was just insuring that the crash, when it came, would be really serious. There you are: inertia. Our overgrown civilization starts going in one direction, and it's just too much for individuals to stop.

"So decentralization was impossible ten years ago. With different conditions and with a stronger political movement, it might have gone; but it didn't. We took what seemed like the next best plan, radar screens plus search programs, and so far it's worked.

"Today, gradual decentralization has progressed to some extent, thanks to improved transportation and individuals' mistrust of cities. A new movement for the abrupt sort of decentralization would have some chance—less inertia now to overcome; but if it succeeded it would be very dangerous.

"In the last ten years, many things have changed. Reconstruction of the destruction of World War II is to all intents and purposes finished; capital is freed and looking for new investment opportunities; manufactured goods are looking

around for markets. It's the type of situation where motives for aggression may be present, and everyone's jittery again. The jitters are not nearly so widespread as they were before, or even as they were after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but they're having a much worse effect, and they're building up. Certain groups in several different countries are beginning to think seriously of atomic warfare, of beating the other guy to the punch and grabbing whatever's left when the smoke clears. Many of those who aren't considering it, are suspecting others. And everybody has to keep his defenses up.

Now. What *are* our defenses? Let me list them again: radar screens, searches, and Security Council supervision of fissionable elements. Well, you tell me, Mr. Ciccone—what would happen to the effectiveness of your search program if New York were to begin tomorrow to move en masse to the Mohawk Valley?"

"Yes, I see what you mean. We'd have a hard time keeping up even a pretense."

"You certainly would. New York could be blasted before it had got well started moving. Another thing: atomic power plants, too, are centralized, to simplify the Security Council's job of control, so no doubt you'd ask that they be included in the program of dispersal. But think of the confusion involved in moving billions of dollars' worth of industrial plant. How could a merely human Security Council prevent the smuggling out, somewhere, of a few hundred pounds of U-235 or Pu-239?"

"No, the pressure's on, and we have to stick by the choice we made.

"Our civilization: a great, big, overgrown truck going much too fast. Suddenly the road became dangerously narrow, and slippery besides, but the truck was too big and it was going too fast. It couldn't stop. Now we have only a few inches to spare on either side of our wheels, but we still can't do what you suggest, stop, get out, and look for a detour. No, we've chosen our road and we've got to stick to it.

"Not much seems to be changed, at first glance—the truck's engine still runs smoothly—the steering gear still responds—even the driver isn't in such bad shape. Yet come tomorrow, it may all be over. If we don't steer straight, it certainly will be.

"Makes quite a picture. Our magnificent, overgrown, bungling civilization going on its own magnificent and senseless

way because it is so big that nothing can stop it, so big that it can't even stop itself."

Bates stopped speaking, but neither Ciccone nor Macomb answered. There was no answer. Ten years ago, there might perhaps have been, but not now.

# RESCUE PARTY

by Arthur C. Clarke

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
May

*One month after his debut with "Loophole" Arthur C. Clarke published what most observers consider to be one of his finest stories. "Rescue Party" is justly famous, but should not obscure the fact that it is not his best, and that he continued to grow and develop steadily as a writer and as a craftsman. This story is more than just a fine tale. It is perhaps the ultimate John W. Campbell, Jr. story, especially in its view of our species' status in the universe, and of our ultimate destiny.*

*However, it should be pointed out that the story was written for a British sf magazine that had difficulty in getting started, so ASTOUNDING was not the market for which it was originally intended.*

*(Marty, in referring to this story as an "ultimate John W. Campbell, Jr. story," knew whereof he spoke. In my association with John, I early learned that there was no chance in selling him a story in which the human race lost. No matter what the odds against them in point of view of numbers or technological superiority, human beings had to win.*

*I honestly think it was because to John this was a larger version of the battle of himself against the world, with himself sure to win.*

*John loved stories that glorified Homo victor, and he managed to find some very good examples of the genus. Clarke supplied one of the best, as was not surprising. (I myself chickened out of the task, and invented the all-human Galaxy in order to sell stories to John without having to give humanity victories I didn't feel we deserved—I.A.)*

Who was to blame? For three days Alveron's thoughts had come back to that question, and still he had found no answer. A creature of a less civilized or a less sensitive race would never have let it torture his mind, and would have satisfied himself with the assurance that no one could be responsible for the working of fate. But Alveron and his kind had been lords of the Universe since the dawn of history, since that far distant age when the Time Barrier had been folded round the cosmos by the unknown powers that lay beyond the Beginning. To them had been given all knowledge—and with infinite knowledge went infinite responsibility. If there were mistakes and errors in the administration of the galaxy, the fault lay on the heads of Alveron and his people. And this was no mere mistake: it was one of the greatest tragedies in history.

The crew still knew nothing. Even Rugon, his closest friend and the ship's deputy captain, had been told only part of the truth. But now the doomed worlds lay less than a billion miles ahead. In a few hours, they would be landing on the third planet.

Once again Alveron read the message from Base; then, with a flick of a tentacle that no human eye could have followed, he pressed the "General Attention" button. Throughout the mile-long cylinder that was the Galactic Survey Ship S9000, creatures of many races laid down their work to listen to the words of their captain.

"I know you have all been wondering," began Alveron, "why we were ordered to abandon our survey and to proceed at such an acceleration to this region of space. Some of you



may realize what this acceleration means. Our ship in on its last voyage: the generators have already been running for sixty hours at Ultimate Overload. We will be very lucky if we return to Base under our own power.

"We are approaching a sun which is about to become a Nova. Detonation will occur in seven hours, with an uncertainty of one hour, leaving us a maximum of only four hours for exploration. There are ten planets in the system about to be destroyed—and there is a civilization on the third. That fact was discovered only a few days ago. It is our tragic mission to contact that doomed race and if possible to save some of its members. I know that there is little we can do in so short a time with this single ship. No other machine can possibly reach the system before detonation occurs."

There was a long pause during which there could have been no sound or movement in the whole of the mighty ship as it sped silently toward the worlds ahead. Alveron knew what his companions were thinking and he tried to answer their unspoken questions.

"You will wonder how such a disaster, the greatest of which we have any record, has been allowed to occur. On one point I can reassure you. The fault does not lie with the Survey.

"As you know, with our present fleet of under twelve thousand ships, it is possible to re-examine each of the eight thousand million solar systems in the Galaxy at intervals of about a million years. Most worlds change very little in so short a time as that.

"Less than four hundred thousand years ago, the survey ship S5060 examined the planets of the system we are approaching. It found intelligence on none of them, though the third planet was teeming with animal life and two other worlds had once been inhabited. The usual report was submitted and the system is due for its next examination in six hundred thousand years.

"It now appears that in the incredibly short period since the last survey, intelligent life has appeared in the system. The first intimation of this occurred when unknown radio signals were detected on the planet Kulath in the system X29.35, Y34.76, Z27.93. Bearings were taken on them; they were coming from the system ahead.

"Kulath is two hundred light-years from here, so those radio waves had been on their way for two centuries. Thus for at least that period of time a civilization has existed on one

of these worlds—a civilization that can generate electromagnetic waves and all that that implies.

"An immediate telescopic examination of the system was made and it was then found that the sun was in the unstable pre-nova stage. Detonation might occur at any moment, and indeed might have done so while the light waves were on their way to Kulath.

"There was a slight delay while the supervelocity scanners of Kulath II were focused onto the system. They showed that the explosion had not yet occurred but was only a few hours away. If Kulath had been a fraction of a light-year farther from this sun, we should never have known of its civilization until it had ceased to exist.

"The Administrator of Kulath contacted Sector Base immediately, and I was ordered to proceed to the system at once. Our object is to save what members we can of the doomed race, if indeed there are any left. But we have assumed that a civilization possessing radio could have protected itself against any rise of temperature that may have already occurred.

"This ship and the two tenders will each explore a section of the planet. Commander Torkalee will take Number One, Commander Orostron Number Two. They will have just under four hours in which to explore this world. At the end of that time, they must be back in the ship. It will be leaving then, with or without them. I will give the two commanders detailed instructions in the control room immediately.

"That is all. We enter atmosphere in two hours."

On the world once known as Earth the fires were dying out: there was nothing left to burn. The great forests that had swept across the planet like a tidal wave with the passing of the cities were now no more than glowing charcoal and the smoke of their funeral pyres still stained the sky. But the last hours were still to come, for the surface rocks had not yet begun to flow. The continents were dimly visible through the haze, but their outlines meant nothing to the watchers in the approaching ship. The charts they possessed were out of date by a dozen Ice Ages and more deluges than one.

The S9000 had driven past Jupiter and seen at once that no life could exist in those half-gaseous oceans of compressed hydrocarbons, now erupting furiously under the sun's abnormal heat. Mars and the outer planets they had missed, and Alveron realized that the worlds nearer the sun than Earth

would be already melting. It was more than likely, he thought sadly, that the tragedy of this unknown race was already finished. Deep in his heart, he thought it might be better so. The ship could only have carried a few hundred survivors, and the problem of selection had been haunting his mind.

Rugon, Chief of Communications and Deputy Captain, came into the control room. For the last hour he had been striving to detect radiation from Earth, but in vain.

"We're too late," he announced gloomily. "I've monitored the whole spectrum and the ether's dead except for our own stations and some two-hundred-year-old programs from Kulath. Nothing in this system is radiating anymore."

He moved toward the giant vision screen with a graceful flowing motion that no mere biped could ever hope to imitate. Alveron said nothing; he had been expecting this news.

One entire wall of the control room was taken up by the screen, a great black rectangle that gave an impression of almost infinite depth. Three of Rugon's slender control tentacles, useless for heavy work but incredibly swift at all manipulation, flickered over the selector dials and the screen lit up with a thousand points of light. The star field flowed swiftly past as Rugon adjusted the controls, bringing the projector to bear upon the sun itself.

No man of Earth would have recognized the monstrous shape that filled the screen. The sun's light was white no longer: great violet-blue clouds covered half its surface and from them long streamers of flame were erupting into space. At one point an enormous prominence had reared itself out of the photosphere, far out even into the flickering veils of the corona. It was as though a tree of fire had taken root in the surface of the sun—a tree that stood half a million miles high and whose branches were rivers of flame sweeping through space at hundreds of miles a second.

"I suppose," said Rugon presently, "that you are quite satisfied about the astronomers' calculations. After all—"

"Oh, we're perfectly safe," said Alveron confidently. "I've spoken to Kulath Observatory and they have been making some additional checks through our own instruments. That uncertainty of an hour includes a private safety margin which they won't tell me in case I feel tempted to stay any longer."

He glanced at the instrument board.

"The pilot should have brought us to the atmosphere now. Switch the screen back to the planet, please. Ah, there they go!"

There was a sudden tremor underfoot and a raucous clanging of alarms, instantly stilled. Across the vision screen two slim projectiles dived toward the looming mass of Earth. For a few miles they traveled together, then they separated, one vanishing abruptly as it entered the shadow of the planet.

Slowly the huge mother ship, with its thousand times greater mass, descended after them into the raging storms that already were tearing down the deserted cities of Man.

It was night in the hemisphere over which Orostron drove his tiny command. Like Torkalee, his mission was to photograph and record, and to report progress to the mother ship. The little scout had no room for specimens or passengers. If contact was made with the inhabitants of this world, the S9000 would come at once. There would be no time for parleying. If there was any trouble the rescue would be by force and the explanations could come later.

The ruined land beneath was bathed with an eerie, flickering light, for a great auroral display was raging over half the world. But the image on the vision screen was independent of external light, and it showed clearly a waste of barren rock that seemed never to have known any form of life. Presumably this desert land must come to an end somewhere. Orostron increased his speed to the highest value he dared risk in so dense an atmosphere.

The machine fled on through the storm, and presently the desert of rock began to climb toward the sky. A great mountain range lay ahead, its peaks lost in the smoke-laden clouds. Orostron directed the scanners toward the horizon, and on the vision screen the line of mountains seemed suddenly very close and menacing. He started to climb rapidly. It was difficult to imagine a more unpromising land in which to find civilization and he wondered if it would be wise to change course. He decided against it. Five minutes later, he had his reward.

Miles below lay a decapitated mountain, the whole of its summit sheared away by some tremendous feat of engineering. Rising out of the rock and straddling the artificial plateau was an intricate structure of metal girders, supporting masses of machinery. Orostron brought his ship to a halt and spiraled down toward the mountain.

The slight Doppler blur had now vanished, and the picture on the screen was clear-cut. The latticework was supporting some scores of great metal mirrors, pointing skyward at an

angle of forty-five degrees to the horizontal. They were slightly concave, and each had some complicated mechanism at its focus. There seemed something impressive and purposeful about the great array; every mirror was aimed at precisely the same spot in the sky—or beyond.

Orostron turned to his colleagues.

"It looks like some kind of observatory to me," he said. "Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

Klarten, a multitentacled, tripedal creature from a globular cluster at the edge of the Milky Way, had a different theory.

"That's communication equipment. Those reflectors are for focusing electromagnetic beams. I've seen the same kind of installation on a hundred worlds before. It may even be the station that Kulath picked up—though that's rather unlikely, for the beams would be very narrow from mirrors that size."

"That would explain why Rugon could detect no radiation before we landed," added Hansur II, one of the twin beings from the planet Thargon.

Orostron did not agree at all.

"If that is a radio station, it must be built for interplanetary communication. Look at the way the mirrors are pointed. I don't believe that a race which has only had radio for two centuries can have crossed space. It took my people six thousand years to do it."

"We managed it in three," said Hansur II mildly, speaking a few seconds ahead of his twin. Before the inevitable argument could develop, Klarten began to wave his tentacles with excitement. While the others had been talking, he had started the automatic monitor.

"Here it is! Listen!"

He threw a switch, and the little room was filled with a raucous whining sound, continually changing in pitch but nevertheless retaining certain characteristics that were difficult to define.

The four explorers listened intently for a minute; then Orostron said, "Surely that can't be any form of speech! No creature could produce sounds as quickly as that!"

Hansur I had come to the same conclusion. "That's a television program. Don't you think so, Klarten?"

The other agreed.

"Yes, and each of those mirrors seems to be radiating a different program. I wonder where they're going? If I'm correct, one of the other planets in the system must lie along those beams. We can soon check that."

Orostron called the S9000 and reported the discovery. Both Rugon and Alveron were greatly excited, and made a quick check of the astronomical records.

The result was surprising—and disappointing. None of the other nine planets lay anywhere near the line of transmission. The great mirrors appeared to be pointing blindly into space.

There seemed only one conclusion to be drawn, and Klarten was the first to voice it.

"They had interplanetary communication," he said. "But the station must be deserted now, and the transmitters no longer controlled. They haven't been switched off, and are just pointing where they were left."

"Well, we'll soon find out," said Orostron. "I'm going to land."

He brought the machine slowly down to the level of the great metal mirrors, and past them until it came to rest on the mountain rock. A hundred yards away, a white stone building crouched beneath the maze of steel girders. It was windowless, but there were several doors in the wall facing them.

Orostron watched his companions climb into their protective suits and wished he could follow. But someone had to stay in the machine to keep in touch with the mother ship. Those were Alveron's instructions, and they were very wise. One never knew what would happen on a world that was being explored for the first time, especially under conditions such as these.

Very cautiously, the three explorers stepped out of the airlock and adjusted the antigravity field of their suits. Then, each with the mode of locomotion peculiar to his race, the little party went toward the building, the Hansur twins leading and Klarten following close behind. His gravity control was apparently giving him trouble, for he suddenly fell to the ground, rather to the amusement of his colleagues. Orostron saw them pause for a moment at the nearest door—then it opened slowly and they disappeared from sight.

So Orostron waited, with what patience he could, while the storm rose around him and the light of the aurora grew even brighter in the sky. At the agreed times he called the mother ship and received brief acknowledgments from Rugon. He wondered how Torkalee was faring, halfway round the planet, but he could not contact him through the crash and thunder of solar interference.

It did not take Klarten and the Hansurs long to discover

that their theories were largely correct. The building was a radio station, and it was utterly deserted. It consisted of one tremendous room with a few small offices leading from it. In the main chamber, row after row of electrical equipment stretched into the distance; lights flickered and winked on hundreds of control panels, and a dull glow came from the elements in a great avenue of vacuum tubes.

But Klarten was not impressed. The first radio sets his race had built were now fossilized in strata a thousand million years old. Man, who had possessed electrical machines for only a few centuries, could not compete with those who had known them for half the lifetime of the Earth.

Nevertheless, the party kept their recorders running as they explored the building. There was still one problem to be solved. The deserted station was broadcasting programs, but where were they coming from? The central switchboard had been quickly located. It was designed to handle scores of programs simultaneously, but the source of those programs was lost in a maze of cables that vanished underground. Back in the S9000, Rugon was trying to analyze the broadcasts and perhaps his researches would reveal their origin. It was impossible to trace cables that might lead across continents.

The party wasted little time at the deserted station. There was nothing they could learn from it, and they were seeking life rather than scientific information. A few minutes later the little ship rose swiftly from the plateau and headed toward the plains that must lie beyond the mountains. Less than three hours were still left to them.

As the array of enigmatic mirrors dropped out of sight, Orostron was struck by a sudden thought. Was it imagination, or had they all moved through a small angle while he had been waiting, as if they were still compensating for the rotation of the Earth? He could not be sure, and he dismissed the matter as unimportant. It would only mean that the directing mechanism was still working, after a fashion.

They discovered the city fifteen minutes later. It was a great, sprawling metropolis, built around a river that had disappeared leaving an ugly scar winding its way among the great buildings and beneath bridges that looked very incongruous now.

Even from the air, the city looked deserted. But only two and a half hours were left—there was no time for further exploration. Orostron made his decision, and landed near the largest structure he could see. It seemed reasonable to sup-

pose that some creatures would have sought shelter in the strongest buildings, where they would be safe until the very end.

The deepest caves—the heart of the planet itself—would give no protection when the final cataclysm came. Even if this race had reached the outer planets, its doom would only be delayed by the few hours it would take for the ravaging wavefronts to cross the Solar System.

Orostron could not know that the city had been deserted not for a few days or weeks, but for over a century. For the culture of cities, which had outlasted so many civilizations had been doomed at last when the helicopter brought universal transportation. Within a few generations the great masses of mankind, knowing that they could reach any part of the globe in a matter of hours, had gone back to the fields and forests for which they had always longed. The new civilization had machines and resources of which earlier ages had never dreamed, but it was essentially rural and no longer bound to the steel and concrete warrens that had dominated the centuries before. Such cities as still remained were specialized centers of research, administration or entertainment; the others had been allowed to decay, where it was too much trouble to destroy them. The dozen or so greatest of all cities, and the ancient university towns, had scarcely changed and would have lasted for many generations to come. But the cities that had been founded on steam and iron and surface transportation had passed with the industries that had nourished them.

And so while Orostron waited in the tender, his colleagues raced through endless empty corridors and deserted halls, taking innumerable photographs but learning nothing of the creatures who had used these buildings. There were libraries, meeting places, council rooms, thousands of offices—all were empty and deep with dust. If they had not seen the radio station on its mountain eyrie, the explorers could well have believed that this world had known no life for centuries.

Through the long minutes of waiting, Orostron tried to imagine where this race could have vanished. Perhaps they had killed themselves knowing that escape was impossible; perhaps they had built great shelters in the bowels of the planet, and even now were cowering in their millions beneath his feet, waiting for the end. He began to fear that he would never know.

It was almost a relief when at last he had to give the order



for the return. Soon he would know if Torkalee's party had been more fortunate. And he was anxious to get back to the mother ship, for as the minutes passed the suspense had become more and more acute. There had always been the thought in his mind: What if the astronomers of Kulath have made a mistake? He would begin to feel happy when the walls of the S9000 were around him. He would be happier still when they were out in space and this ominous sun was shrinking far astern.

As soon as his colleagues had entered the airlock, Orostron hurled his tiny machine into the sky and set the controls to home on the S9000. Then he turned to his friends.

"Well, what have you found?" he asked.

Klarten produced a large roll of canvas and spread it out on the floor.

"This is what they were like," he said quietly. "Bipeds, with only two arms. They seem to have managed well, in spite of that handicap. Only two eyes as well, unless there are others in the back. We were lucky to find this; it's about the only thing they left behind."

The ancient oil painting stared stonily back at the three creatures regarding it so intently. By the irony of fate, its complete worthlessness had saved it from oblivion. When the city had been evacuated, no one had bothered to move Alderman John Richards, 1909-1974. For a century and a half he had been gathering dust while far away from the old cities the new civilization had been rising to heights no earlier culture had ever known.

"That was almost all we found," said Klarten. "The city must have been deserted for years. I'm afraid our expedition has been a failure. If there are any living beings on this world, they've hidden themselves too well for us to find them."

His commander was forced to agree.

"It was an almost impossible task," he said. "If we'd had weeks instead of hours we might have succeeded. For all we know, they may even have built shelters under the sea. No one seems to have thought of that."

He glanced quickly at the indicators and corrected the course.

"We'll be there in five minutes. Alveron seems to be moving rather quickly. I wonder if Torkalee has found anything."

The S9000 was hanging a few miles above the seaboard of a blazing continent when Orostron homed upon it. The dan-

ger line was thirty minutes away and there was no time to lose. Skillfully, he maneuvered the little ship into its launching tube and the party stepped out of the airlock.

There was a small crowd waiting for them. That was to be expected, but Orostron could see at once that something more than curiosity had brought his friends here. Even before a word was spoken, he knew that something was wrong.

"Torkalee hasn't returned. He's lost his party and we're going to the rescue. Come along to the control room at once."

From the beginning, Torkalee had been luckier than Orostron. He had followed the zone of twilight, keeping away from the intolerable glare of the sun, until he came to the shores of the inland sea. It was a very recent sea, one of the latest of Man's works, for the land it covered had been desert less than a century before. In a few hours it would be desert again, for the water was boiling and clouds of steam were rising to the skies. But they could not veil the loveliness of the great white city that overlooked the tideless sea.

Flying machines were still parked neatly round the square in which Torkalee landed. They were disappointingly primitive, though beautifully finished, and depended on rotating airfoils for support. Nowhere was there any sign of life, but the place gave the impression that its inhabitants were not very far away. Lights were still shining from some of the windows.

Torkalee's three companions lost no time in leaving the machine. Leader of the party, by seniority of rank and race was T'sinadree, who like Alveron himself had been born on one of the ancient planets of the Central Suns. Next came Alarkane, from a race which was one of the youngest in the Universe and took a perverse pride in the fact. Last came one of the strange beings from the system of Palador. It was nameless, like all its kind, for it possessed no identity of its own, being merely a mobile but still dependent cell in the consciousness of its race. Though it and its fellows had long been scattered over the galaxy in the exploration of countless worlds, some unknown link still bound them together as inexorably as the living cells in a human body.

When a creature of Palador spoke, the pronoun it used was always "We". There was not, nor could there ever be, any first person singular in the language of Palador.

The great doors of the splendid building baffled the explorers, though any human child would have known their

secret. T'sinadree wasted no time on them but called Torkalee on his personal transmitter. Then the three hurried aside while their commander maneuvered his machine into the best position. There was a brief burst of intolerable flame; the massive steelwork flickered once at the edge of the visible spectrum and was gone. The stones were still glowing when the eager party hurried into the building, the beams of their light projectors fanning before them.

The torches were not needed. Before them lay a great hall, glowing with light from lines of tubes along the ceiling. On either side, the hall opened out into long corridors, while straight ahead a massive stairway swept majestically toward the upper floors.

For a moment T'sinadree hesitated. Then, since one way was as good as another, he led his companions down the first corridor.

The feeling that life was near had now become very strong. At any moment, it seemed, they might be confronted by the creatures of this world. If they showed hostility—and they could scarcely be blamed if they did—the paralyzers would be used at once.

The tension was very great as the party entered the first room, and only relaxed when they saw that it held nothing but machines—row after row of them, now stilled and silent. Lining the enormous room were thousands of metal filing cabinets, forming a continuous wall as far as the eye could reach. And that was all; there was no furniture, nothing but the cabinets and the mysterious machines.

Alarkane, always the quickest of the three, was already examining the cabinets. Each held many thousand sheets of tough, thin material, perforated with innumerable holes and slots. The Paladorian appropriated one of the cards and Alarkane recorded the scene together with some close-ups of the machines. Then they left. The great room, which had been one of the marvels of the world, meant nothing to them. No living eye would ever again see that wonderful battery of almost human Hollerith analyzers and the five thousand million punched cards holding all that could be recorded of each man, woman and child on the planet.

It was clear that this building had been used very recently. With growing excitement, the explorers hurried on to the next room. This they found to be an enormous library, for millions of books lay all around them on miles and miles of shelving. Here, though the explorers could not know it, were

the records of all the laws that Man had ever passed, and all the speeches that had ever been made in his council chambers.

T'sinadree was deciding his plan of action, when Alarkane drew his attention to one of the racks a hundred yards away. It was half empty, unlike all the others. Around it books lay in a tumbled heap on the floor, as if knocked down by someone in frantic haste. The signs were unmistakable. Not long ago, other creatures had been this way. Faint wheel marks were clearly visible on the floor to the acute sense of Alarkane, though the others could see nothing. Alarkane could even detect footprints, but knowing nothing of the creatures that had formed them he could not say which way they led.

The sense of nearness was stronger than ever now, but it was nearness in time, not in space. Alarkane voiced the thoughts of the party.

"Those books must have been valuable, and someone has come to rescue them—rather as an afterthought, I should say. That means there must be a place of refuge, possibly not very far away. Perhaps we may be able to find some other clues that will lead us to it."

T'sinadree agreed; the Paladorian wasn't enthusiastic.

"That may be so," it said, "but the refuge may be anywhere on the planet, and we have just two hours left. Let us waste no more time if we hope to rescue these people."

The Party hurried forward once more, pausing only to collect a few books that might be useful to the scientists at Base—though it was doubtful if they could ever be translated. They soon found that the great building was composed largely of small rooms, all showing signs of recent occupation. Most of them were in a neat and tidy condition, but one or two were very much the reverse. The explorers were particularly puzzled by one room—clearly an office of some kind—that appeared to have been completely wrecked. The floor was littered with papers, the furniture had been smashed, and smoke was pouring through the broken windows from the fires outside.

T'sinadree was rather alarmed.

"Surely no dangerous animal could have got into a place like this!" he exclaimed, fingering his paralyzer nervously.

Alarkane did not answer. He began to make that annoying sound which his race called "laughter." It was several minutes before he would explain what had amused him.

"I don't think any animal has done it," he said. "In fact, the explanation is very simple. Suppose *you* had been working all your life in this room, dealing with endless papers year after year. And suddenly, you are told that you will never see it again, that your work is finished, and that you can leave it forever. More than that—no one will come after you. Everything is finished. How would you make your exit, T'sinadree?"

The other thought for a moment.

"Well, I suppose I'd just tidy things up and leave. That's what seems to have happened in all the other rooms."

Alarkane laughed again.

"I'm quite sure you would. But some individuals have a different psychology. I think I should have liked the creature that used this room."

He did not explain himself further, and his two colleagues puzzled over his words for quite a while before they gave it up.

It came as something of a shock when Torkalee gave the order to return. They had gathered a great deal of information, but had found no clue that might lead them to the missing inhabitants of this world. That problem was as baffling as ever, and now it seemed that it would never be solved. There were only forty minutes left before the S9000 would be departing.

They were halfway back to the tender when they saw the semicircular passage leading down into the depths of the building. Its architectural style was quite different from that used elsewhere, and the gently sloping floor was an irresistible attraction to creatures whose many legs had grown weary of the marble staircases which only bipeds could have built in such profusion. T'sinadree had been the worst sufferer, for he normally employed twelve legs and could use twenty when he was in a hurry, though no one had ever seen him perform this feat.

The party stopped dead and looked down the passageway with a single thought. A tunnel, leading down into the depths of Earth! At its end, they might yet find the people of this world and rescue some of them from their fate. For there was still time to call the mother ship if the need arose.

T'sinadree signaled to his commander and Torkalee brought the little machine immediately overhead. There might not be time for the party to retrace its footsteps through the maze of passages, so meticulously recorded in the

Paladorian mind that there was no possibility of going astray. If speed was necessary, Torkalee could blast his way through the dozen floors above their head. In any case, it should not take long to find what lay at the end of the passage.

It took only thirty seconds. The tunnel ended quite abruptly in a very curious cylindrical room with magnificently padded seats along the walls. There was no way out save that by which they had come and it was several seconds before the purpose of the chamber dawned on Alarkane's mind. It was a pity, he thought, that they would never have time to use this. The thought was suddenly interrupted by a cry from T'sinadree. Alarkane wheeled around and saw that the entrance had closed silently behind them.

Even in that first moment of panic, Alarkane found himself thinking with some admiration: Whoever they were, they knew how to build automatic machinery!

The Paladorian was the first to speak. It waved one of its tenacles toward the seats.

"We think it would be best to be seated," it said. The multiplex mind of Palador had already analyzed the situation and knew what was coming.

They did not have long to wait before a low-pitched hum came from a grill overhead, and for the very last time in history a human, even if lifeless, voice was heard on Earth. The words were meaningless, though the trapped explorers could guess their message clearly enough.

"Choose your stations, please, and be seated."

Simultaneously, a wall panel at one end of the compartment glowed with light. On it was a simple map, consisting of a series of a dozen circles connected by a line. Each of the circles had writing alongside it, and beside the writing were two buttons of different colors.

Alarkane looked questioningly at his leader.

"Don't touch them," said T'sinadree. "If we leave the controls alone, the doors may open again."

He was wrong. The engineers who had designed the automatic subway had assumed that anyone who entered it would naturally wish to go somewhere. If they selected no intermediate station, their destination could only be the end of the line.

There was another pause while the relays and thyatroncs waited for their orders. In those thirty seconds, if they had known what to do, the party could have opened the doors

and left the subway. But they did not know, and the machines geared to a human psychology acted for them.

The surge of acceleration was not very great; the lavish upholstery was a luxury, not a necessity. Only an almost imperceptible vibration told of the speed at which they were traveling through the bowels of the earth, on a journey the duration of which they could not even guess. And in thirty minutes, the S9000 would be leaving the Solar System.

There was a long silence in the speeding machine. T'sinadree and Alarkane were thinking rapidly. So was the Paladorian, though in a different fashion. The conception of personal death was meaningless to it, for the destruction of a single unit meant no more to the group mind than the loss of a nail-paring to a man. But it could, though with great difficulty, appreciate the plight of individual intelligences such as Alarkane and T'sinadree, and it was anxious to help them if it could.

Alarkane had managed to contact Torkalee with his personal transmitter, though the signal was very weak and seemed to be fading quickly. Rapidly he explained the situation, and almost at once the signals became clearer. Torkalee was following the path of the machine, flying above the ground under which they were speeding to their unknown destination. That was the first indication they had of the fact that they were traveling at nearly a thousand miles an hour, and very soon after that Torkalee was able to give the still more disturbing news that they were rapidly approaching the sea. While they were beneath the land, there was a hope, though a slender one, that they might stop the machine and escape. But under the ocean—not all the brains and the machinery in the great mother ship could save them. No one could have devised a more perfect trap.

T'sinadree had been examining the wall map with great attention. Its meaning was obvious, and along the line connecting the circles a tiny spot of light was crawling. It was already halfway to the first of the stations marked.

"I'm going to press one of those buttons," said T'sinadree at last. "It won't do any harm, and we may learn something."

"I agree. Which will you try first?"

"There are only two kinds, and it won't matter if we try the wrong one first. I suppose one is to start the machine and the other is to stop it."

Alarkane was not very hopeful.

"It started without any button pressing," he said. "I think

it's completely automatic and we can't control it from here at all."

T'sinadree could not agree.

"These buttons are clearly associated with the stations, and there's no point in having them unless you can use them to stop yourself. The only question is, which is the right one?"

His analysis was perfectly correct. The machine could be stopped at any intermediate station. They had only been on their way ten minutes, and if they could leave now, no harm would have been done. It was just bad luck that T'sinadree's first choice was the wrong button.

The little light on the map crawled slowly though the illuminated circle without checking its speed. And at the same time Torkalee called from the ship overhead.

"You have just passed underneath a city and are heading out to sea. There cannot be another stop for nearly a thousand miles.

Alveron had given up all hope of finding life on this world. The S9000 had roamed over half the planet, never staying long in one place, descending ever and again in an effort to attract attention. There had been no response; Earth seemed utterly dead. If any of its inhabitants were still alive, thought Alveron, they must have hidden themselves in its depths where no help could reach them, though their doom would be nonetheless certain.

Rugon brought news of the disaster. The great ship ceased its fruitless searching and fled back through the storm to the ocean above which Torkalee's little tender was still following the track of the buried machine.

The scene was truly terrifying. Not since the days when Earth was born had there been such seas as this. Mountains of water were racing before the storm which had now reached velocities of many hundred miles an hour. Even at this distance from the mainland the air was full of flying debris—trees, fragments of houses, sheets of metal, anything that had not been anchored to the ground. No airborne machine could have lived for a moment in such a gale. And ever and again even the roar of the wind was drowned as the vast water-mountains met head-on with a crash that seemed to shake the sky.

Fortunately, there had been no serious earthquakes yet. Far beneath the bed of the ocean, the wonderful piece of engineering which had been the World President's private vac-



uum-subway was still working perfectly, unaffected by the tumult and destruction above. It would continue to work until the last minute of the Earth's existence, which, if the astronomers were right, was not much more than fifteen minutes away—though precisely how much more Alveron would have given a great deal to know. It would be nearly an hour before the trapped party could reach land and even the slightest hope of rescue.

Alveron's instructions had been precise, though even without them he would never have dreamed of taking any risks with the great machine that had been entrusted to his care. Had he been human, the decision to abandon the trapped members of his crew would have been desperately hard to make. But he came of a race far more sensitive than Man, a race that so loved the things of the spirit that long ago, and with infinite reluctance, it had taken over control of the Universe since only thus could it be sure that justice was being done. Alveron would need all his superhuman gifts to carry him through the next few hours.

Meanwhile, a mile below the bed of the ocean Alarkane and T'sinadree were very busy indeed with their private communicators. Fifteen minutes is not a long time in which to wind up the affairs of a lifetime. It is indeed, scarcely long enough to dictate more than a few of those farewell messages which at such moments are so much more important than all other matters.

All the while the Paladorian had remained silent and motionless, saying not a word. The other two, resigned to their fate and engrossed in their personal affairs, had given it no thought. They were startled when suddenly it began to address them in its peculiarly passionless voice.

"We perceive that you are making certain arrangements concerning your anticipated destruction. That will probably be unnecessary. Captain Alveron hopes to rescue us if we can stop this machine when we reach land again."

Both T'sinadree and Alarkane were too surprised to say anything for a moment. Then the latter gasped, "How do you know?"

It was a foolish question, for he remembered at once that there were several Paladorians—if one could use the phrase—in the S9000, and consequently their companion knew everything that was happening in the mother ship. So he did not wait for an answer but continued, "Alveron can't do that! He daren't take such a risk!"

"There will be no risk," said the Paladorian. "We have told him what to do. It is really very simple."

Alarkane and T'sinadree looked at their companion with something approaching awe, realizing now what must have happened. In moments of crisis, the single units comprising the Paladorian mind could link together in an organization no less close than that of any physical brain. At such moments they formed an intellect more powerful than any other in the Universe. All ordinary problems could be solved by a few hundred or thousand units. Very rarely, millions would be needed, and on two historic occasions the billions of cells of the entire Paladorian consciousness had been welded together to deal with emergencies that threatened the race. The mind of Palador was one of the greatest mental resources of the Universe; its full force was seldom required, but the knowledge that it was available was supremely comforting to other races. Alarkane wondered how many cells had co-ordinated to deal with this particular emergency. He also wondered how so trivial an incident had ever come to its attention.

To that question he was never to know the answer, though he might have guessed it had he known that the chillingly remote Paladorian mind possessed an almost human streak of vanity. Long ago, Alarkane had written a book trying to prove that eventually all intelligent races would sacrifice individual consciousness and that one day only group-minds would remain in the Universe. Palador, he had said, was the first of those ultimate intellects, and the vast, dispersed mind had not been displeased.

They had no time to ask any further questions before Alveron himself began to speak through their communicators.

"Alveron calling! We're staying on this planet until the detonation waves reach it, so we may be able to rescue you. You're heading toward a city on the coast which you'll reach in forty minutes at your present speed. If you cannot stop yourselves then, we're going to blast the tunnel behind and ahead of you to cut off your power. Then we'll sink a shaft to get you out—the chief engineer says he can do it in five minutes with the main projectors. So you should be safe within an hour, unless the sun blows up before."

"And if that happens, you'll be destroyed as well! You mustn't take such a risk!"

"Don't let that worry you; we're perfectly safe. When the sun detonates, the explosion wave will take several minutes to

rise to its maximum. But apart from that, we're on the night side of the planet, behind an eight-thousand-mile screen of rock. When the first warning of the explosion comes, we will accelerate out of the Solar System, keeping in the shadow of the planet. Under our maximum drive, we will reach the velocity of light before leaving the cone of shadow, and the sun cannot harm us then."

T'sinadree was still afraid to hope. Another objection came at once into his mind.

"Yes, but how will you get any warning, here on the night side of the planet?"

"Very easily," replied Alveron. "This world has a moon which is now visible from this hemisphere. We have telescopes trained on it. If it shows any sudden increase in brilliance, our main drive goes on automatically and we'll be thrown out of the system."

The logic was flawless. Alveron, cautious as ever, was taking no chances. It would be many minutes before the eight-thousand-mile shield of rock and metal could be destroyed by the fires of the exploding sun. In that time, the S9000 could have reached the safety of the velocity of light.

Alarkane pressed the second button when they were still several miles from the coast. He did not expect anything to happen then, assuming that the machine could not stop between stations. It seemed too good to be true when, a few minutes later, the machine's slight vibration died away and they came to a halt.

The doors slid silently apart. Even before they were fully open, the three had left the compartment. They were taking no more chances. Before them a long tunnel stretched into the distance, rising slowly out of sight. They were starting along it when suddenly Alveron's voice called from the communicators.

"Stay where you are! We're going to blast!"

The ground shuddered once, and far ahead there came the rumble of falling rock. Again the earth shook—and a hundred yards ahead the passageway vanished abruptly. A tremendous vertical shaft had been cut clean through it.

The party hurried forward again until they came to the end of the corridor and stood waiting on its lip. The shaft in which it ended was a full thousand feet across and descended into the earth as far as the torches could throw their beams. Overhead, the storm clouds fled beneath a moon that no man would have recognized, so luridly brilliant was its disk. And,

most glorious of all sights, the S9000 floated high above, the great projectors that had drilled this enormous pit still glowing cherry red.

A dark shape detached itself from the mother ship and dropped swiftly toward the ground. Torkalee was returning to collect his friends. A little later, Alveron greeted them in the control room. He waved to the great vision screen and said quietly, "See, we were barely in time."

The continent below them was slowly settling beneath the mile-high waves that were attacking its coasts. The last that anyone was ever to see of Earth was a great plain, bathed with the silver light of the abnormally brilliant moon. Across its face the waters were pouring in a glittering flood toward a distant range of mountains. The sea had won its final victory, but its triumph would be shortlived for soon sea and land would be no more. Even as the silent party in the control room watched the destruction below, the infinitely greater catastrophe to which this was only the prelude came swiftly upon them.

It was as though dawn had broken suddenly over this moonlit landscape. But it was not dawn: it was only the moon, shining with the brilliance of a second sun. For perhaps thirty seconds that awesome, unnatural light burnt fiercely on the doomed land beneath. Then there came a sudden flashing of indicator lights across the control board. The main drive was on. For a second Alveron glanced at the indicators and checked their information. When he looked again at the screen, Earth was gone.

The magnificent, desperately overstrained generators quietly died when the S9000 was passing the orbit of Persephone. It did not matter, the sun could never harm them now, and although the ship was speeding helplessly out into the lonely night of interstellar space, it would only be a matter of days before rescue came.

There was irony in that. A day ago, they had been the rescuers, going to the aid of a race that now no longer existed. Not for the first time Alveron wondered about the world that had just perished. He tried, in vain, to picture it as it had been in its glory, the streets of its cities thronged with life. Primitive though its people had been, they might have offered much to the Universe. If only they could have made contact! Regret was useless; long before their coming, the people of this world must have buried themselves in its iron heart. And

now they and their civilization would remain a mystery for the rest of time.

Alveron was glad when his thoughts were interrupted by Rugon's entrance. The chief of communications had been very busy ever since the take-off, trying to analyze the programs radiated by the transmitter Orostron had discovered. The problem was not a difficult one, but it demanded the construction of special equipment, and that had taken time.

"Well, what have you found?" asked Alveron.

"Quite a lot," replied his friend. "There's something mysterious here, and I don't understand it.

"It didn't take long to find how the vision transmissions were built up, and we've been able to convert them to suit our own equipment. It seems that there were cameras all over the plant, surveying points of interest. Some of them were apparently in cities, on tops of very high buildings. The cameras were rotating continuously to give panoramic views. In the programs we've recorded there are about twenty different scenes.

"In addition, there are a number of transmissions of a different kind, neither sound nor vision. They seem to be purely scientific—possibly instrument readings or something of that sort. All these programs were going out simultaneously on different frequency bands.

"Now there must be a reason for all this. Orostron still thinks that the station simply wasn't switched off when it was deserted. But these aren't the sort of programs such a station would normally radiate at all. It was certainly used for interplanetary relaying—Klarten was quite right there. So these people must have crossed space, since none of the other planets had any life at the time of the last survey. Don't you agree?"

Alverton was following intently.

"Yes, that seems reasonable enough. But it's also certain that the beam was pointing to none of the other planets. I checked that myself."

"I know," said Rugon. "What I want to discover is why a giant interplanetary relay station is busily transmitting pictures of a world about to be destroyed—pictures that would be of immense interest to scientists and astronomers. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to arrange all those panoramic cameras. I am convinced that those beams were going somewhere."

Alveron started up.

"Do you imagine that there might be an outer planet that hasn't been reported?" he asked. "If so, your theory's certainly wrong. The beam wasn't even pointing in the plane of the Solar System. And even if it were—just look at this."

He switched on the vision screen and adjusted the controls. Against the velvet curtain of space was hanging a blue-white sphere, apparently composed of many concentric shells of incandescent gas. Even though its immense distance made all movement invisible, it was clearly expanding at an enormous rate. At its center was a blinding point of light—the white dwarf star that the sun had now become.

"You probably don't realize just how big that sphere is," said Alveron. "Look at this."

He increased the magnification until only the center portion of the nova was visible. Close to its heart were two minute condensations, one on either side of the nucleus.

"Those are the two giant planets of the system. They have still managed to retain their existence—after a fashion. And they were several hundred million miles from the sun. The nova is still expanding—but it's already twice the size of the Solar System."

Rugon was silent for a moment.

"Perhaps you're right," he said, rather grudgingly.

"You've disposed of my first theory. But you still haven't satisfied me."

He made several swift circuits of the room before speaking again. Alveron waited patiently. He knew the almost intuitive powers of his friend, who could often solve a problem when mere logic seemed insufficient.

Then, rather slowly, Rugon began to speak again.

"What do you think of this?" he said. "Suppose we've completely underestimated these people? Orostron did it once—he thought they could never have crossed space, since they'd only known radio for two centuries. Hansur II told me that. Well, Orostron was quite wrong. Perhaps we're all wrong. I've had a look at the material that Klarten brought back from the transmitter. He wasn't impressed by what he found, but it's a marvelous achievement for so short a time. There were devices in that station that belonged to civilizations thousands of years older. Alveron, can we follow that beam to see where it leads?"

Alveron said nothing for a full minute. He had been more than half expecting the question, but it was not an easy one to answer. The main generators had gone completely. There

was no point in trying to repair them. But there was still power available, and while there was power, anything could be done in time. It would mean a lot of improvisation, and some difficult maneuvers, for the ship still had its enormous initial velocity. Yes, it could be done, and the activity would keep the crew from becoming further depressed, now that the reaction caused by the mission's failure had started to set in. The news that the nearest heavy repair ship could not reach them for three weeks had also caused a slump in morale.

The engineers, as usual, made a tremendous fuss. Again as usual, they did the job in half the time they had dismissed as being absolutely impossible. Very slowly, over many hours, the great ship began to discard the speed its main drive had given it in as many minutes. In a tremendous curve, millions of miles in radius, the S9000 changed its course and the star fields shifted round it.

The maneuver took three days, but at the end of that time the ship was limping along a course parallel to the beam that had once come from Earth. They were heading out into emptiness, the blazing sphere that had been the sun dwindling slowly behind them. By the standards of interstellar flight, they were almost stationary.

For hours Rugon strained over his instruments, driving his detector beams far ahead into space. There were certainly no planets within many light-years; there was no doubt of that. From time to time Alveron came to see him and always he had to give the same reply: "Nothing to report." About a fifth of the time Rugon's intuition let him down badly; he began to wonder if this was such an occasion.

Not until a week later did the needles of the mass-detectors quiver feebly at the ends of their scales. But Rugon said nothing, not even to his captain. He waited until he was sure, and he went on waiting until even the short-range scanners began to react, and to build up the first faint pictures on the vision screen. Still he waited patiently until he could interpret the images. Then, when he knew that his wildest fancy was even less than the truth, he called his colleagues into the control room.

The picture on the vision screen was the familiar one of endless star fields, sun beyond sun to the very limits of the Universe. Near the center of the screen a distant nebula made a patch of haze that was difficult for the eye to grasp.

Rugon increased the magnification. The stars flowed out of the field; the little nebula expanded until it filled the screen

and then—it was a nebula no longer. A simultaneous gasp of amazement came from all the company at the sight that lay before them.

Lying across league after league of space, ranged in a vast three-dimensional array of rows and columns with the precision of a marching army, were thousands of tiny pencils of light. They were moving swiftly; the whole immense lattice holding its shape as a single unit. Even as Alveron and his comrades watched, the formation began to drift off the screen and Rugon had to recenter the controls.

After a long pause, Rugon started to speak.

"This is the race," he said softly, "that has known radio for only two centuries—the race that we believed had crept to die in the heart of its planet. I have examined those images under the highest possible magnification.

"That is the greatest fleet of which there has ever been a record. Each of those points of light represents a ship larger than our own. Of course, they are very primitive—what you see on the screen are the jets of their rockets. Yes, they dared to use rockets to bridge interstellar space! You realize what that means. It would take them centuries to reach the nearest star. The whole race must have embarked on this journey in the hope that its descendants would complete it, generations later.

"To measure the extent of their accomplishment, think of the ages it took us to conquer space, and the longer ages still before we attempted to reach the stars. Even if we were threatened with annihilation, could we have done so much in so short a time? Remember, this is the youngest civilization in the Universe. Four hundred thousand years ago it did not even exist. What will it be a million years from now?"

An hour later, Orostron left the crippled mother ship to make contact with the great fleet ahead. As the little torpedo disappeared among the stars, Alveron turned to his friend and made a remark that Rugon was often to remember in the years ahead.

"I wonder whay they'll be like?" he mused. "Will they be nothing but wonderful engineers, with no art or philosophy? They're going to have such a surprise when Orostron reaches them—I expect it will be rather a blow to their pride. It's funny how all isolated races think they're the only people in the Universe. But they should be grateful to us; we're going to save them a good many hundred years of travel."

Alveron glanced at the Milky Way, lying like a veil of sil-



ver mist across the vision screen. He waved toward it with a sweep of a tentacle that embraced the whole circle of the galaxy, from the Central Planets to the lonely suns of the Rim.

"You know," he said to Rugon, "I feel rather afraid of these people. Suppose they don't like our little Federation?" He waved once more toward the star-clouds that lay massed across the screen, glowing with the light of their countless suns.

"Something tells me they'll be very determined people," he added. "We had better be polite to them. After all, we only outnumber them about a thousand million to one."

Rugon laughed at his captain's little joke.

Twenty years afterward, the remark didn't seem funny.

# PLACET IS A CRAZY PLACE

by Fredric Brown (1906-1972)

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
May

*We have discussed the talented Fredric Brown at some length in previous volumes in this series, but it is worth repeating that he was one of science fiction's premier craftsmen, capable of outstanding work at all lengths from the short-short to the novel. He was perhaps the first major sf writer who had the ability to be consistently funny and consistently wise at the same time, and he certainly exercised a greater influence on the field than historians have given him credit for.*

*"Placet is a Crazy Place" was not included in his The Best of Fredric Brown, but it should have been. To duplicate it, all you have to do is mix a little Philip K. Dick, add some Philip José Farmer, and top off with a generous portion of Ferdinand Feghoot!*

*(Funny science fiction is not as common as I wish it were, but then successfully funny fiction of any kind is not as common as I wish it were. That's because it isn't easy being successfully funny and few writers try and still fewer writers succeed. Fred-*

*ric Brown is one of those who make it, and this story has always had a warm spot in my heart because Fred managed to take an utterly loony situation and forced it to make sense. Oh, I don't believe that light will really slow down to the speed of sound in the neighborhood of matter-antimatter interaction, but we can suppose it does. Incidentally, "contraterrene matter" is a science fiction term that was replaced by the actual term used by real scientists when they got around to considering it seriously. They decided on "antimatter" and we had to follow suit.—IA)*

Even when you're used to it, it gets you down sometimes. Like that morning—if you can call it a morning. Really it was night. But we go by Earth time on Placet because Placet time would be as screwy as everything else on that goofy planet. I mean, you'd have a six-hour day and then a two-hour night and then a fifteen-hour day and a one-hour night and—well, you just couldn't keep time on a planet that does a figure-eight orbit around two dissimilar suns, going like a bat out of hell around and between them, and the suns going around each other so fast and so comparatively close that Earth astronomers thought it was only one sun until the Blakeslee expedition landed here twenty years ago.

You see, the rotation of Placet isn't any even fraction of the period of its orbit and there's the Blakeslee Field in the middle between the suns—a field in which light rays slow down to a crawl and get left behind and—well—

If you've not read the Blakeslee reports on Placet, hold on to something while I tell you this:

Placet is the only known planet that can eclipse itself twice at the same time, run headlong into itself every forty hours, and then chase itself out of sight.

I don't blame you.

I didn't believe it either, and it scared me stiff the first time I stood on Placet and saw Placet coming head-on to run into us. And yet I'd read the Blakeslee reports and knew what was really happening, and why. It's rather like those early movies when the camera was set up in front of a train and the audi-

ence saw the locomotive heading right toward them and would feel an impulse to run even though they knew the locomotive wasn't really there.

But I started to say, like that morning. I was sitting at my desk, the top of which was covered with grass. My feet were—or seemed to be—resting on a sheet of rippling water. But it wasn't wet.

On top of the grass of my desk lay a pink flowerpot, into which, nose-first, stuck a bright green Saturnian lizard. That—reason and not my eyesight told me—was my pen and inkwell. Also an embroidered sampler that said, "God Bless Our Home" in neat cross-stitching. It actually was a message from Earth Center which had just come in on the radiotype. I didn't know what it said because I'd come into my office after the B. F. effect had started. I didn't think it really said, "God Bless Our Home" because it seemed to. And just then I was mad, I was fed up, and I didn't care a holler what it actually did say.

You see—maybe I'd better explain—the Blakeslee Field effect occurs when Placet is in mid-position between Argyle I and Argyle II, the two suns it figure eights around. There's a scientific explanation of it, but it must be expressed in formulas, not in words. It boils down to this: Argyle I is terrene matter and Argyle II is contraterrene, or negative matter. Halfway between them—over a considerable stretch of territory—is a field in which light rays are slowed down, way down. They move at about the speed of sound. The result is that if something is moving faster than sound—as Placet itself does—you can still see it coming after it has passed you. It takes the visual image of Placet twenty-six hours to get through the field. By that time, Placet has rounded one of its suns and meets its own image on the way back. In midfield, there's an image coming and an image going, and it eclipses itself twice, occulting both suns at the same time. A little farther on, it runs into itself coming from the opposite direction—and scares you stiff if you're watching, even if you know it's not really happening.

Let me explain it this way before you get dizzy. Say an old-fashioned locomotive is coming toward you, only at a speed much faster than sound. A mile away, it whistles. It passes you and *then* you hear the whistle, coming from the point a mile back where the locomotive isn't any more. That's the auditory effect of an object traveling faster than sound; what I've just described is the visual effect of an object trav-

eling—in a figure-eight orbit—faster than its own visual image.

That isn't the worst of it; you can stay indoors and avoid the eclipsing and the head-on collisions, but you can't avoid the physio-psychological effect of the Blakeslee Field.

And that, the physio-psychological effect, is something else again. The field does something to the optic nerve centers, or to the part of the brain to which the optic nerves connect, something similar to the effect of certain drugs. You have—you can't exactly call them hallucinations, because you don't ordinarily see things that aren't there, but you get an illusory picture of what *is* there.

I knew perfectly well that I was sitting at a desk the top of which was glass, and not grass; that the floor under my feet was ordinary platiplate and not a sheet of rippling water; that the objects on my desk were not a pink flowerpot with a Saturnian lizard sticking in it, but an antique twentieth century inkwell and pen—and that the "God Bless Our Home" sampler was a radiotype message on ordinary radiotype paper. I could verify any of those things by my sense of touch, which the Blakeslee Field doesn't affect.

You can close your eyes, of course, but you don't—because even at the height of the effect, your eyesight gives you the relative size and distance of things and if you stay in familiar territory your memory and your reason tell you what they are.

So when the door opened and a two-headed monster walked in, I knew it was Reagan. Reagan isn't a two-headed monster, but I could recognize the sound of his walk.

I said, "Yes, Reagan?"

The two-headed monster said, "Chief, the machine shop is wobbling. We may have to break the rule not to do any work in midperiod."

"Birds?" I asked.

Both of his heads nodded. "The underground part of those walls must be like sieves from the birds flying through 'em, and we'd better pour concrete quick. Do you think those new alloy reinforcing bars the *Ark*'ll bring will stop them?"

"Sure," I lied. Forgetting the field, I turned to look at the clock, but there was a funeral wreath of white lilies on the wall where the clock should have been. You can't tell time from a funeral wreath. I said, "I was hoping we wouldn't have to reinforce those walls till we had the bars to sink in them. The *Ark*'s about due; they're probably hovering outside

right now waiting for us to come out of the field. You think we could wait till—"

There was a crash.

"Yeah, we can wait," Reagan said. "There went the machine shop, so there's no hurry at all."

"Nobody was in there?"

"Nope, but I'll make sure." He ran out.

That's what life on Placet is like. I'd had enough of it; I'd had too much of it. I made up my mind while Reagan was gone.

When he came back, he was a bright blue articulated skeleton.

He said, "O.K., Chief. Nobody was inside."

"Any of the machines badly smashed?"

He laughed. "Can you look at a rubber beach horse with purple polka dots and tell whether it's an intact lathe or a busted one? Say, Chief, you know what you look like?"

I said, "If you tell me, you're fired."

I don't know whether I was kidding or not; I was plenty on edge. I opened my drawer of my desk and put the "God Bless Our Home" sampler in it and slammed the drawer shut. I was fed up. Placet is a crazy place and if you stay there long enough you go crazy yourself. One out of ten of Earth Center's Placet employes has to go back to Earth for psychopathic treatment after a year or two on Placet. And I'd been there three years, almost. My contract was up. I made my mind up, too.

"Reagan," I said.

He'd been heading for the door. He turned. "Yeah, Chief?"

I said, "I want you to send a message on the radiotype to Earth Center. And get it straight, two words: *I quit.*"

He said, "O.K., Chief." He went on out and closed the door.

I sat back and closed my eyes to think. I'd done it now. Unless I ran after Reagan and told him not to send the message, it was done and over and irrevocable. Earth Center's funny that way; the board is plenty generous in some directions, but once you resign they never let you change your mind. It's an ironclad rule and ninety-nine times out of a hundred it's justified on interplanetary and intragalactic projects. A man must be 100 per cent enthusiastic about his job to make a go of it, and once he's turned against it, he's lost the keen edge.

I knew the midperiod was about over, but I sat there with

my eyes closed just the same. I didn't want to open them to look at the clock until I could see the clock *as a clock* and not as whatever it might be this time. I sat there and thought.

I felt a bit hurt about Reagan's casualness in accepting the message. He'd been a good friend of mine for ten years; he could at least have said he was sorry I was going to leave. Of course there was a fair chance that he might get the promotion, but even if he was thinking that, he could have been diplomatic about it. At least, he could have—

*Oh, quit feeling sorry for yourself, I told myself. You're through with Placet and you're through with Earth Center, and you're going back to Earth pretty soon now, as soon as they relieve you, and you can get another job there, probably teaching again.*

But damn Reagan, just the same. He'd been my student at Earth City Poly, and I'd got him this Placet job and it was a good one for a youngster his age, assistant administrator of a planet with nearly a thousand population. For that matter, my job was a good one for a man *my age*—I'm only thirty-one myself. An excellent job, except that you couldn't put up a building that wouldn't fall down again and—*Quit crabbing, I told myself; you're through with it now. Back to Earth and a teaching job again. Forget it.*

I was tired. I put my head on my arms on top of the desk, and I must have dozed off for a minute.

I looked up at the sound of footsteps coming through the doorway; they weren't Reagan's footsteps. The illusions were getting better now, I saw. It was—or appeared to be—a gorgeous redhead. It couldn't be, of course. There are a few women on Placet, mostly wives of technician's, but—

She said, "Don't you remember me, Mr. Rand?" It was a woman; her voice was a woman's voice, and a beautiful voice. Sounded vaguely familiar, too.

"Don't be silly," I said; "how can I recognize you at mid-per—" My eyes suddenly caught a glimpse of the clock past her shoulder, and it was a clock and not a funeral wreath or a cuckoo's nest, and I realized suddenly that everything else in the room was back to normal. And that meant midperiod was over, and I wasn't seeing things.

My eyes went back to the redhead. She must be real, I realized. And suddenly I knew her, although she'd changed, changed plenty. All changes were improvements, although Michaelina Witt had been a very pretty girl when she'd been

in my extra-terrestrial Botany III class at Earth City Polytech four—no, five years ago.

She'd been pretty, then. Now she was beautiful. She was stunning. How had the teletalkies missed her? Or had they? What was she doing *here*? She must have just got off the *Ark*, but—I realized I was still gawking at her. I stood up so fast I almost fell across the desk.

"Of course I remember you, Miss Witt," I stammered. "Won't you sit down? How did you come here? Have they relaxed the no-visitors rule?"

She shook her head, smiling. "I'm not a visitor, Mr. Rand, Center advertised for a technician-secretary for you, and I tried for the job and got it, subject to your approval, of course. I'm on probation for a month, that is."

"Wonderful," I said. It was a masterpiece of understatement. I started to elaborate on it: "Marvelous—"

There was the sound of someone clearing his throat. I looked around; Reagan was in the doorway. This time not as a blue skeleton or a two-headed monster. Just plain Reagan.

He said, "Answer to your radiotype just came." He crossed over and dropped it on my desk. I looked at it. "O. K. August 19th," it read. My momentary wild hope that they'd failed to accept my resignation went down among the widgie birds. They'd been as brief about it as I'd been.

August 19th—the next arrival of the *Ark*. They certainly weren't wasting any time—mine or theirs. Four days!

Reagan said, "I thought you'd want to know right away, Phil."

"Yeah," I told him. I glared at him. "Thanks." With a touch of spite—or maybe more than a touch—I thought, *well, my bucko, you don't get the job, or that message would have said so; they're sending a replacement on the next shuttle of the Ark.*

But I didn't say that; the veneer of civilization was too thick.

I said, "Miss Witt, I'd like you to meet—" They looked at each other and started to laugh, and I remembered. Of course, Reagan and Michaelina had both been in my botany class, as had Michaelina's twin brother, Ichabod. Only, of course, no one ever called the redheaded twins Michaelina and Ichabod. It was Mike and Ike, once you knew them.

Reagan said, "I met Mike getting off the *Ark*. I told her how to find your office, since you weren't there to do the honors."



"Thanks," I said. "Did the reinforcing bars come?"

"Guess so. They unloaded some crates. They were in a hurry to pull out again. They've gone."

I grunted.

Reagan said, "Well, I'll check the ladings. Just came to give you the radiotype; thought you'd want the good news right away."

He went out, and I glared after him. The louse. The—

Michaelina said, "Am I to start to work right away, Mr. Rand?"

I straightened out my face and managed a smile. "Of course not," I told her. "You'll want to look around the place first. See the scenery and get acclimated. Want to stroll into the village for a drink?"

"Of course."

We strolled down the path toward the little cluster of buildings, all small, one-story, and square.

She said, "It's—it's nice. Feels like I'm walking on air, I'm so light. Exactly what is the gravity?"

"Point seven four," I said. "If you weigh—um-m, a hundred twenty pounds on Earth, you weigh about eighty-nine pounds here. And on you, it looks good."

She laughed. "Thank you, Professor—Oh, that's right; you're not a professor now. You're now my boss, and I must call you Mr. Rand."

"Unless you're willing to make it Phil, Michaelina."

"If you'd call me Mike; I detest Michaelina, almost as much as Ike hates Ichabod."

"How is Ike?"

"Fine. Has a student-instructor job at Poly, but he doesn't like it much." She looked ahead at the village. "Why so many small buildings instead of a few bigger ones?"

"Because the average life of a structure of any kind on Placet is about three weeks. And you never know when one is going to fall down—with someone inside. It's our biggest problem. All we can do is make them small and light, except the foundations, which we make as strong as possible. Thus far, nobody has been hurt seriously in the collapse of a building, for that reason, but—Did you feel that?"

"The vibration? What was it, an earthquake?"

"No," I said. "It was a flight of birds."

"What?"

I had to laugh at the expression on her face, I said, "Placet is a crazy place. A minute ago, you said you felt as though

you were walking on air. Well, in a way, you are doing just exactly that. Placet is one of the rare objects in the Universe that is composed of both ordinary and *heavy* matter. Matter with a collapsed molecular structure, so heavy you couldn't lift a pebble of it. Placet has a core of that stuff; that's why this tiny planet, which has an area about twice the size of Manhattan Island, has a gravity three-quarters that of Earth. There is life—animal life, not intelligent—living on the core. There are birds, whose molecular structure is like that of the planet's core, so dense that ordinary matter is as tenuous to them as air is to us. They actually *fly* through it, as birds on Earth fly through the air. From their standpoint, we're walking on top of Placet's atmosphere."

"And the vibration of their flight under the surface makes the houses collapse?"

"Yes, and worse—they fly right through the foundations, no matter what we make them of. Any matter we can work with is just so much gas to them. They fly through iron or steel as easily as through sand or loam. I've just got a shipment of some specially tough stuff from Earth—the special alloy steel you heard me ask Reagan about—but I haven't much hope of it's doing any good."

"But aren't those birds dangerous? I mean, aside from making the buildings fall down. Couldn't one get up enough momentum flying to carry it out of the ground and into the air a little way? And wouldn't it go right through anyone who happened to be there?"

"It would," I said, "but it doesn't. I mean, they never fly closer to the surface than a few inches. Some sense seems to tell them when they're nearing the top of their "atmosphere." Something analogous to the supersonics a bat uses. You know, of course, how a bat can fly in utter darkness and never fly into a solid object."

"Like radar, yes."

"Like radar, yes, except a bat uses sound waves instead of radio waves. And the widge birds must use something that works on the same principle, in reverse; turns them back a few inches before they approach what to them would be the equivalent of a vacuum. Being heavy-matter, they could no more exist or fly in air than a bird could exist or fly in a vacuum."

While we were having a cocktail apiece in the village, Michaelina mentioned her brother again. She said, "Ike

doesn't like teaching at all, Phil. Is there any chance at all that you could get him a job here on Placet?"

I said, "I'm been badgering Earth Center for another administrative assistant. The work is increasing plenty since we've got more of the surface under cultivation. Reagan really needs help. I'll—"

Her whole face was alight with eagerness. And I remembered. I was through. I'd resigned, and Earth Center would pay as much attention to any recommendation of mine as though I were a widgie bird. I finished weakly, "I'll—I'll see if I can do anything about it."

She said, "Thanks—Phil." My hand was on the table beside my glass, and for a second she put hers over it. All right, it's a hackneyed metaphor to say it felt as though a high-voltage current went through me. But it did, and it was a mental shock as well as a physical one, because I realized then and there that I was head over heels. I'd fallen harder than any of Placet's buildings ever had. The thump left me breathless. I wasn't watching Michaelina's face, but from the way she pressed her hand harder against mine for a millisecond and then jerked it away as though from a flame, she must have felt a little of that current, too.

I stood up a little shakily and suggested that we walk back to headquarters.

Because the situation was completely impossible, now. Now that Center had accepted my resignation and I was without visible or invisible means of support. In a psychotic moment, I'd cooked my own goose. I wasn't even sure I could get a teaching job. Earth Center is the most powerful organization in the Universe and has a finger in every pie. If they black-listed me—

Walking back, I let Michaelina do most of the talking; I had some heavy thinking to do. I wanted to tell her the truth—and I didn't want to.

Between monosyllabic answers, I fought it out with myself. And, finally lost. Or won. I'd not tell her—until just before the next coming of the *Ark*. I'd pretend everything was O. K. and normal for that long, give myself that much chance to see if Michaelina would fall for me. That much of a break I'd give myself. A chance, for four days.

And then—well, if by then she'd come to feel about me the way I did about her, I'd tell her what a fool I'd been and tell her I'd like to—No, I wouldn't let her return to Earth with me, even if she wanted to, until I saw light ahead

through a foggy future. All I could tell her was that if and when I had a chance of working my way up again to a decent job—and after all I was still only thirty-one and might be able to—

That sort of thing.

Reagan was waiting in my office, looking as mad as a wet hornet. He said, "Those saps at Earth Center shipping department gummed things again. Those crates of special steel—aren't."

"Aren't what?"

"Aren't anything. They're empty crates. Something went wrong with the crating machine and they never knew it."

"Are you sure that's what those crates were supposed to contain?"

"Sure I'm sure. Everything else on the order came, and the ladings specified the steel for those particular crates." He ran a hand through his tousled hair. It made him look more like an Airedale than he usually does.

I grinned at him. "Maybe it's invisible steel."

"Invisible, weightless and intangible. Can I word the message to Center telling them about it?"

"Go as far as you like," I told him. "Wait here a minute, though. I'll show Mike where her quarters are and then I want to talk to you a minute."

I took Michaelina to the best available sleeping cabin of the cluster around headquarters. She thanked me again for trying to get Ike a job here, and I felt lower than a widge bird's grave when I went back to my office.

"Yeah, Chief?" Reagan said.

"About that message to Earth," I told him. "I mean the one I sent this morning. I don't want to say anything about it to Michaelina."

He chuckled. "Want to tell her yourself, huh? O. K. I'll keep my yap shut."

I said, a bit wryly, "Maybe I was foolish sending it."

"Huh?" he said. "I'm sure glad you did. Swell idea."

He went out, and I managed not to throw anything at him.

The next day was a Tuesday, if that matters. I remember it as the day I solved one of Placet's two major problems. An ironic time to do it, maybe.

I was dictating some notes on greenwort culture—Placet's importance to Earth is, of course, the fact that certain plants

native to the place and which won't grow anywhere else yield derivatives that have become important to the pharmacopoeia. I was having heavy sledding because I was watching Michaelina take the notes; she'd insisted on starting work her second day on Placet.

And suddenly, out of a clear sky and out of a muggy mind, came an idea. I stopped dictating and rang for Reagan. He came in.

"Reagan," I said, "order five thousand ampoules of J-17 Conditioner. Tell 'em to rush it."

"Chief, don't you remember? We tried the stuff. Thought it might condition us to see normally in midperiod, but it didn't affect the optic nerves. We still saw screwy. It's great for conditioning people to high or low temperatures or—"

"Or long or short waking-sleeping periods," I interrupted him. "That's what I'm talking about, Reagan. Look, revolving around two suns, Placet has such short irregular periods of light and dark that we never took them seriously. Right?"

"Sure, but—"

"But since there's no logical Placet day and night we could use, we made ourselves slaves to a sun so far away we can't see it. We use a twenty-four hour day. But midperiod occurs every twenty hours, regularly. We can use conditioner to adapt ourselves to a *twenty*-hour day—six hours sleep, twelve awake—with everybody blissfully sleeping through the period when their eyes play tricks on them. And in a darkened sleeping room so you couldn't see anything, even if you woke up. More and shorter days per year—and nobody goes psychopathic on us. Tell me what's wrong with it."

His eyes went bleak and blank and he hit his forehead a resounding whack with the palm of his hand.

He said, "Too simple, that's what's wrong with it. So darned simple only a genius could see it. For two years I've been going slowly nuts and the answer so easy nobody could see it. I'll put the order in right away."

He started out and then turned back. "Now how do we keep the buildings up? Quick, while you're fey or whatever you are."

I laughed. I said, "Why not try that invisible steel of yours in the empty crates?"

He said, "Nuts," and closed the door.

And the next day was a Wednesday and I knocked off work and took Michaelina on a walking tour around Placet. Once around is just a nice day's hike. But with Michaelina

Witt, any day's hike would be a nice day's hike. Except, of course, that I knew I had only one more full day to spend with her. The world would end on Friday.

Tomorrow the *Ark* would leave Earth, with the shipment of conditioner that would solve one of our problems—and with whomever Earth Center was sending to take my place. It would warp through space to a point a safe distance outside the Argyle I-II system and come in on rocket power from there. It would be here Friday, and I'd go back with it. But I tried not to think about that.

I pretty well managed to forget it until we got back to headquarters and Reagan met me with a grin that split his homely mug into horizontal halves. He said, "Chief, you did it."

"Swell," I said. "I did what?"

"Gave me the answer what to use for reinforcing foundations. You solved the problem."

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yeah. Didn't he, Mike?"

Michaelina looked as puzzled as I must have. She said, "He was kidding. He said to use the stuff in the empty crates, didn't he?"

Reagan grinned again. "He just thought he was kidding. That's what we're going to use from now on. Nothing. Look, Chief, it's like the conditioner—so simple we never thought of it. Until you told me to use what was in the empty crates, and I got to thinking it over."

I stood thinking a moment myself, and then I did what Reagan had done the day before—hit myself a whack on the forehead with the heel of my palm.

Michaelina still looked puzzled.

"Hollow foundations," I told her. "What's the one thing widgie birds won't fly through? *Air*. We can make buildings as big as we need them, now. For foundations, we sink double walls with a wide air space between. We can—"

I stopped, because it wasn't "we" any more. *They* could do it after I was back on Earth looking for a job.

And Thursday went and Friday came.

I was working, up till the last minute, because it was the easiest thing to do. With Reagan and Michaelina helping me, I was making out material lists for our new construction projects. First, a three-story building of about forty rooms for a headquarters building.

We were working fast, because it would be midperiod

shortly, and you can't do paper work when you can't read and can write only be feel.

But my mind was on the *Ark*. I picked up the phone and called the radiotype shack to ask about it.

"Just got a call from them," said the operator. "They've warped in, but not close enough to land before midperiod. They'll land right after."

"O. K.," I said, abandoning the hope that they'd be a day late.

I got up and walked to the window. We were nearing mid-position all right. Up in the sky to the north I could see Placet coming toward us.

"Mike," I said. "Come here."

She joined me at the window and we stood there, watching. My arm was around her. I don't remember putting it there, but I didn't take it away, and she didn't move.

Behind us, Reagan cleared his throat. He said, "I'll give this much of the list to the operator. He can get it on the ether right after midperiod." He went out and shut the door behind him.

Michaelina seemed to move a little closer. We were both looking out the window at Placet rushing toward us. She said, "Beautiful, isn't it, Phil?"

"Yes," I said. But I turned, and I was looking at her face as I said it. Then—I hadn't meant to—I kissed her.

I went back, and sat down at my desk. She said, "Phil, what's the matter? You haven't got a wife and six kids hidden away somewhere, or something, have you? You were single when I had a crush on you at Earth Polytech—and I waited five years to get over it and didn't, and finally wangled a job on Placet just to—Do I have to do the proposing?"

I groaned. I didn't look at her. I said, "Mike, I'm nuts about you. But—just before you came, I sent a two-word radiotype to Earth. It said, 'I quit.' So I've got to leave Placet on this shuttle of the *Ark*, and I doubt if I can even get a teaching job, now that I've got Earth Center down on me, and—"

She said, "But, Phil!" and took a step toward me.

There was a knock on the door, Reagan's knock. I was glad, for once, of the interruption. I called out for him to come in, and he opened the door.

He said, "You told Mike yet, Chief?"

I nodded, glumly.

Reagan grinned. "Good," he said; "I've been busting to tell her. It'll be swell to see Ike again."

"Huh?" I said. "Ike who?"

Reagan's grin faded. He said, "Phil, are you slipping, or something? Don't you remember giving me the answer to that Earth Center radiotype four days ago, just before Mike got here?"

I stared at him with my mouth open. I hadn't even read that radiotype, let alone answered it. Had Reagan gone psychopathic, or had I? I remembered shoving it in the drawer of my desk. I jerked open the drawer and pulled it out. My hand shook a little as I read it: REQUEST FOR ADDITIONAL ASSISTANT GRANTED. WHOM DO YOU WANT FOR THE JOB?

I looked up at Reagan again. I said, "You're trying to tell me I sent an answer to this?"

He looked as dumbfounded as I felt.

"You told me to," he said.

"What did I tell you to send?"

"Ike Witt." He stared at me. "Chief, are you feeling all right?"

I felt so all right something seemed to explode in my head. I stood up and started for Michaelina. I said, "Mike, will you marry me?" I got my arms around her, just in time, before midperiod closed down on us, so I couldn't see what she looked like, and vice versa. But over her shoulder, I could see what must be Reagan. I said, "Get out of here, you ape," and I spoke quite literally because that's exactly what he appeared to be. A bright yellow ape.

The floor was shaking under my feet, but other things were happening to me, too, and I didn't realize what the shaking meant until the ape turned back and yelled, "A flight of birds going under us, Chief! Get out quick, before—"

But that was as far as he got before the house fell down around us and the tin roof hit my head and knocked me out. Placet is a crazy place. I like it.



# CONQUEROR'S ISLE

by Nelson S. Bond (1908- )

BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE  
June

Blue Book Magazine, under several names, was one of the longest running generalist pulps in the United States, lasting well over half a century. It published much interesting science fiction over the years, including novels by such notables as George Allan England, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the team of Philip Wylie and Edwin Bulmer. After World War II it featured work by Robert A. Heinlein and Eric Frank Russell, among others. Indeed, an anthology of the best science fiction from Blue-book would make a more than respectable book.

Its most frequent sf author was Nelson Bond, who contributed two series—about “Pat Pending” and “Squareddeal Sam”—to its pages in the 1940s. “Conqueror’s Isle” is an excellent story about evolution and about what might come after man.

*(This is what makes Marty invaluable. He finds the stories in Blue Book. I never read this story until it showed up in the batch that Marty had sent me for my consideration. It’s a lucky thing I was told it was from Blue Book, too, for if I had been asked in which magazine it had appeared, I would*

*have said Astounding and would have been sufficiently certain of it to have backed my opinion with a sizable chunk of money. You see this notion that "there are mutants among us" was another of John Campbell's favorite notions. I think it was because John felt that he himself was one of them. At least, I know he once suggested I might be one, but I shook my head violently at that. There's no question that I know full well that I am very bright, but I know too many of my own weaknesses and insufficiencies not to be quite certain I am Homo average.*

*But Bond makes me shiver in this story. I don't want to be caught on the short end of the stick.—I.A.)*

"You've got to believe this," said Brady. He spoke with tense, white-knuckled ferocity, his eyes intent on those of the older man. "It sounds utterly impossible, I know. It sounds—it sounds crazy. That's why I'm here. But it's the truth, and you've got to believe it! *Got to*—sir," he finished, belatedly acknowledging his listener's seniority.

Lieutenant Commander Gorham said quietly: "At ease, Lieutenant. I'm here to consult with you as a physician, not order your cure as a superior officer. Suppose we ignore the braid while you tell me about it?"

Joe Brady smiled. It was his first smile in weeks and his face could not quite accomplish it. His lips twisted jerkily, but his eyes remained blank windows into torment.

He said: "Thank you, Doctor. Where would you like me to begin?"

Gorham shuffled the pages of the lieutenant's case history. Random excerpts telescoped three years of spotless if not spectacular service: *Brady, Joseph Travers . . . Age: 24 . . . Graduated, U. S. N. A., 1941 . . . Pre-Flight Training, Sarasota 1941-2 . . . Assigned: U. S. S. Stinger . . . Lieutenant (j.g.) 1942 . . . Group Citation . . . Personal citation . . . Recommended for . . .*

"It's your story," said the doctor carefully. "You know

what it is you want me to believe. The trouble began, I understand, on your last bombing mission?"

"That's right. Or rather, that's when *my* troubles began. The thing's been going on for longer than that—much longer. Years, certainly; perhaps decades." Brady's fingers were like talons on the desk top. "Someone's got to *do* something, Doctor! Time is racing by, and with every passing day *They* grow stronger. I've got to make people understand—"

"At the beginning?" suggested Gorham. "Suppose you start with that unfortunate last flight."

His calm matter-of-fact tone had a soothing effect on the younger man. Brady's voice lost its high note of hysteria.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Very good, sir. Well, then, it was this way. We accomplished our mission and started for home—"

We accomplished our mission (said Lieutenant Brady) and started home. "Home" was, of course, the *Stinger*. I can tell you, now that the war's over, where we were and what we were doing. We were cruising the South China Sea, roughly off Palawan, between the Philippines and Indo-China. Our job was to harass enemy shipping in that area, breaking the lifeline between the Straits and the Nipponese home islands. Our task force was in position to support any one of a dozen land invasions from Labuan to Hainan, and our air arm periodically feinted at various concentration points to confuse the Japs.

Our latest target had been Songcau, and it was from this port we were returning when it happened

We sighted a tramp beating her way up the coast, and I called the squadron leader for permission to unload a heavy I was carrying home undropped. He O. K.'d, and we peeled off. The freighter opened up on us with all she had as we came in, but she might as well have been throwing spit balls. We laid our eggs down her aft stack, and she flew into pieces like one of those toys kids play with. You know—the kind you push a button, and *blooie!*

So, that was that, and we were all talking it up and feeling pretty hot stuff when all of a sudden we discovered we were losing elevation like crazy. It seems the freighter had died like a rat, clawing in her death agony. A hunk of her exploding hide had slashed out of our wing tanks, and we were spraying gas all over the South China Sea.

Even then we weren't worried. The Navy watches out for its own, and we knew that an hour after we were forced to

our life rafts, a rescue party would be out to pick us up. So we reported the bad news to the squadron leader and accepted his condolences philosophically; and with no great dismay watched the flight dwindle to black dots as we lurched along, coaxing every last possible mile out of our ruptured duck.

It would be annoying, we thought, and a nuisance. But it wouldn't be dangerous. That's what we thought.

That's what we thought, being logical guys. But in the South Pacific area you can toss logic and reason out the window.

About ten minutes after the flight had disappeared, and about one cupful of gas before we'd have to ditch, out of a bald, blue, breezeless nowhere came thundering mountains of cumulus, torrential cloudbursts of rain, and a shrieking hundred-mile gale that picked us up and whirled us like the button on a hen-coop door.

How long we rode that thing, I haven't the faintest idea. I had no time for clock-watching; I had all I could do holding the *Ardent Alice*—that was our ship's name—holding the *Ardent Alice's* nose steady in the face of that blast. It grabbed us, and shook us, and lifted and dropped us, and spun us as if we weighed ounces instead of tons. We had no way of climbing above the storm, of course; we just had to sit there and take it. At least a dozen times I was sure we were going to be slammed into the sea, but each time the unpredictable wind jerked us upstairs again to play with us some more.

All three of us were nerve-tattered, bone-bruised, and dog-sick from the storm's beating, and not one but would have cheerfully given up a year's shore leaves to be clear of this mess. And then, suddenly—as suddenly as it had sprung from nowhere—the typhoon passed. One minute we were standing on our ears in a maelstrom of wind and rain; the next, the skies were crystal clean and a benevolent sun beamed down on a blue tranquil sea, while under the shadow of our wing tips the pink-and-green sanctuary of a tropical island!

Gorham coughed politely, interrupting his patient.

"Pardon me, Lieutenant. I'd like to make a note of that. It may be important. An island? *What* island?"

Brady shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know, sir. We had been twisted, battered, bounced

around so badly, and for so long, that none of us had any idea where we were. We might have been one mile or fifty—or five hundred!—from where the typhoon struck us.”

His voice strengthened with purpose. “But wherever it is, we’ve got to find that island again. *Got to!* Because it’s *Their* island. Unless we find it, and destroy *Them*—”

“Suppose,” suggested the doctor quietly, “you go on with your story? You reached this uncharted island. And you landed safely, I take it?”

“That’s right, sir. We landed safely on a sandy strip of beach—”

We landed safely (continued Lieutenant Brady) on a sandy strip of beach. We were jubilant at having made a safe harbor but uncertain as to just *how* safe the harbor was. We didn’t know, you see, whether we’d been carried into friendly or enemy territory. In that Godforsaken corner of the world there was also the possibility that the island’s inhabitants, if any, might be technically neutral but still dangerous. In other words, head-hunting aborigines.

Imagine our pleasure and surprise, then, when a few minutes after we’d landed we heard a cheerful hail and looked up to find white men approaching us from the wall of tropical foliage that spanned the beach.

They were smiling and unarmed, and they welcomed us in English with courteous enthusiasm. They had seen us land, said the head of their party—a youngish chap who introduced himself as Dr. Grove—and had hurried out to meet us in case anyone needed medical assistance.

I assured him we were all right, and that we needed only food, rest, and a means of communicating our whereabouts to our comrades, who by this time were undoubtedly fanned out over half the South Pacific searching for us.

He nodded. “Food and rest you shall have” he said heartily. “As for the other—those things take time in this primitive country. But we shall see; we shall see.”

“We have a radio in the plane—” I began, but Jack Kavanaugh, our radioman, shook his head at me.

“*Did* have Skipper? It went out just as we sighted the island. Must have got whanged around a bit in the storm.”

“But you can fix it?”

“I suppose so. If it’s nothing serious. I’ll tell you better after I’ve had a chance to look it over.”

“Of course,” nodded Grove. “But in the meantime, I hope

you'll accept our humble hospitality? We don't have the pleasure of entertaining new guests here very often. It will be good to chat with you all. If you'll follow me—"

There was nothing else to do. Like sheep being led to the slaughter—blindly trusting and without a struggle—we followed him off the beach into a winding jungle path.

It was Tom Goeller, my gunner, who first intimated there might be something wrong about this setup. Even *he* did not really suspect anything; he was just puzzled. He wondered aloud as we pushed forwards: "Where from? I don't get it?"

"Don't get what?" I asked him. "What do you mean—where from? What's biting you, Tom?"

"That Grove character," grumbled Tom. "He said they saw us land. Only—where from? Where the hell do they live? In the trees? I had a good look at this island just before we landed. A good, long look—from topside. And I didn't see a sign of anything that looked like a house."

I said: "By God, you're right! I didn't, either. I wonder if—"

But my question was answered before I voiced it. We stopped, inexplicably, before a sort of concrete shelter under a sprawling banyan tree; a lean-to sort of business in mottled green and brown—so perfectly camouflaged to conform with its surroundings that you could hardly see it from ten yards away, much less from the air.

Dr. Grove smiled and said: "Here we are, gentlemen." He touched a button, and the shelter door swung open. "If you will be good enough to enter—"

Kavanaugh spoke up roughly. "Enter what? That?"

Grove laughed pleasantly. "Don't be alarmed. It's merely an elevator. The entrance is from ground level."

"An elevator!" I exclaimed. "In this jungle? What kind of monkey business is this, anyhow? Do you mean to tell me you live underground?"

"My dear Lieutenant," said the self-styled "Doctor" languidly, "I'll be glad to explain everything—later. It's all very simple. But first I must insist that you—"

"Oh!" I interrupted. "So now you are *insisting*, eh? And suppose we prefer not to step into your mysterious little parlor? Then what?"

"Then," sighed Dr. Grove, "I should be compelled—most regretfully—to enforce my request."

"That right?" I grunted. "Guess again, pal. There are more

of you than us—we happen to be armed.” I took out my automatic and held it on him level. “That’s one detail you seem to have overlooked. Now—”

“I overlook no details, Lieutenant,” answered Grove quietly. “Would you be kind enough to fire your gun? If you have qualms against killing a man in cold blood”—his lips curled mockingly—“you might fire into the air.”

I stared at him, baffled. He wasn’t stalling. You can *feel* things like that. He was amused, superior, contemptuous. Goeller said: “Watch yourself, Skipper; it’s a trick! He *wants* you to shoot. The sound will bring help.”

Grove smiled. “Wrong, my friend. I need no help.” He slipped a hand into his breast pocket. “Very well. Since you won’t accept my invitation—”

Shooting was risky, but I had no choice. “O.K.,” I snapped. “You asked for it!” And I squeezed the trigger. I froze on it, waiting for the blast, and the sight of his body crumpling before me.

But nothing happened!

Gorham listening to this recital, blinked. “You mean,” he suggested, “the gun missed fire—that it jammed?”

“I mean,” said Brady helplessly, “it just didn’t go off; that’s all. It didn’t miss fire. It didn’t jam. There wasn’t a thing wrong with it, mechanically. Later I took it down piece by piece and examined it. It was perfect. But it just wouldn’t fire on that island.”

Gorham said slowly: “It wouldn’t fire—on that island?” His eyes on the younger man were cautious, and he was doodling thoughtfully on the pad before him. “But that’s incredible! Why not?”

“I soon found out,” said Brady grimly, “about that. About that and a lot of other things—”

I stood there (said Brady) speechless. I couldn’t understand. At first I thought—like you—that my gun had jammed. Then suddenly I discovered that the other men had drawn their guns too—and that they too were staring incredulously at utterly futile weapons.

“You see?” Grove shrugged. “Now, perhaps, you will be kind enough to step into the shaft?”

“Not on your life!” I blazed back, “I don’t understand what’s going on here. But whatever it is, I don’t want any part of it. Come on, gang! Let’s get out of here!”

“I’m sorry,” said the doctor. “You force me to use harsh measures. Believe me, I do so reluctantly.”

From his breast pocket he drew a slender tube about the size and shape of a fountain pen. He pointed it at me—at *us*, I should say, because from it suddenly flowed a silver cone of radiance.

I started to rush him, shouting something or other. But both shout and movement stopped abruptly as that curious, silvery radiance engulfed me. It wasn't a gas. It was odorless and tasteless; it did not burn or sting or cause pain in any way. But it was as though I had charged into an ocean of lambent cobwebs, to become enmeshed in a shroud of moonbeams. I could neither move nor speak; only my senses functioned.

As in a dream, I heard Dr. Grove bid his followers: "Place them in the shaft. Gently, please!" Then the feel of hands lifting, carrying me; they felt—how can I explain it?—they felt *far away* upon my body, as though layers of sponge rubber lay between their flesh and mine.

I could see, too, but only straight ahead of me, in the direction in which my pupils were fixed. I couldn't move my eyes. So I saw only that the interior of the elevator was smooth, polished metal, anomalous in these surroundings. I heard the whine of an electric motor and sensed, rather than felt, the motion of our swift descent.

Dr. Groves leaned over me, thrusting himself into my line of vision.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," he said. "I sincerely regret having had to inconvenience you. But, you see, firearms won't work on this island. No explosions of any kind are permitted—unless by special arrangement. We have means of hampering your primitive mechanical devices. That is why your guns did not fire, and why your radio will not operate."

I was filled with a thousand questions, but I could not ask them, not even with my eyes. "*What are these means?*" I wanted to ask him. "*And who, or what are you that you should speak of a radio as a primitive mechanical device? Where are we going, and what are you planning to do with us?*" All these questions hammered at my brain, but my tongue was silent.

Then the sensation of movement stopped, I heard the elevator door slide open, and our captors lifted us again. I saw the metal ceiling of long, well-lighted corridors, and heard voices proclaiming the presence of many more persons in these subterranean vaults, and once was silent witness to a



conversation between Grove and someone apparently his superior.

"Well, Frater?"

"I'm sorry, Frater Dorden. It was necessary. They would not come willingly."

"I see." A sigh. "Few of them do. Ah, well—put them in sleeping chambers until they recover . . . And be gentle. They are frightened, poor devils."

And then our journey continued through a maze of gleaming metal corridors, until finally I was carried through a doorway and placed tenderly on a cot. A light covering was thrown over me; its pleasant warmth made me realize how weary I was. I could not close my eyes, but the lights were dimmed slowly, and at last in utter darkness I forgot my troubles in sleep . . .

I do not know whether the return of lights awakened me, or whether some unseen control automatically brought back the illumination when I awoke. At any rate, I roused from my slumber to find the room bright again.

Even more important was the fact that I could move. I leaped from my cot and sprang to the door at the other side of the room but, as I had expected, it was locked. So I gave up, for the time being, any idea of attempting to escape and set myself to a study of my surroundings.

For one thing, I was alone. Apparently our captors had assigned each of us to a separate chamber, or cell. This one was Spartan in its simplicity. Four walls of a dull gray metallic substance I could not immediately identify—a floor of some resilient rubber or plastic composition—a low ceiling of the same material as the walls. A cot, a chair, and a desk were the only furnishings. There were no decorations on the walls; no carpet covered the floor; and of course—since we were underground—there were no windows.

What amazed me most was that there were no lighting fixtures. I looked in vain for any source from which originated the pleasant, unflickering illumination that flooded the room. I found nothing. It was no jiggery-pokery of indirect lighting, either. The flow of light was constant and, oddly enough there were no shadows!

I think that's when I started to get frightened. I don't mean flappy-lipped, knock-kneed scared, but *cold*. Cold and awed and numb, like—well, the way a trapped rabbit must feel when it sees the hunter approaching.

These persons, these men who spoke with indifferent contempt of mankind's finest accomplishments, who regretfully and casually employed weapons and tools unknown to science—who were they? And why had we been separated? Where were my comrades—Kavanaugh and Goeller? Suddenly, desperately, I needed the reassurance of their presence.

I raised my voice and shouted. There was no reply. The impassive walls should have echoed the panic in my voice, being metal. But, like everything else in this strange place, it behaved unnaturally. It absorbed the sound, sopping it up as a sponge absorbs water.

I shouted again and again. Fruitlessly, I thought. But not fruitlessly. For suddenly I heard the faintest sound behind me and whirled. Dr. Grove was stepping though the wall.

Lieutenant Brady stopped abruptly, as if in anticipation of his listener's reaction. It came. Gorham, despite his training as a psychiatrist, stopped doodling and tossed a swift, anxious frown at the younger man.

With an obvious effort he erased the sudden pursing of his lips. He said quietly: "Through the wall, Lieutenant? Of course you mean through the *door*?"

"Through the wall," said Brady dully. "Through the wall, sir. The door was in front of me. But Dr. Grove stepped into my cell through the solid metal wall."

"You realize," said Gorham, "that what you are saying is impossible?"

"To us"—Brady's eyes were haggard—"it is. To *Them*, nothing is impossible. Nothing! Or very little. That is why we must act, and act *now*! Before it is too late. You must believe me, sir. This is man's last chance—"

"I'll do my best," promised Gorham. "Perhaps you'd better continue? This Dr. Grove stepped through the wall—"

I'll cut it short (said Brady wanly). I'll tell it as quickly as I can. I'm just wasting your time and mine. I can tell by your eyes that you don't believe me. But someone must. Somewhere, somehow, sometime—someone must . . . Well, as I was saying, Dr. Grove stepped through the wall. And strange as it may sound, in that moment my panic ended. I still *feared*; yes. But I feared as a man fears a god, or a demon, or a raw and elemental force beyond his comprehension. I did not look on him with dread, as one watches a human foe charge upon him with a flaming gun or blood stained sword; I

looked on him with awe, knowing him to be as far above and beyond me in the life scale as I am superior to a dog or a beast of burden.

So it was we talked—not as man to man, but as man to a lesser creature. And *I* was the lesser creature. He was the master, I the serf. And he told me many things . . .

Has it ever occurred to you, Doctor, that we humans are an egotistic race? Our Darwins and our Huxleys have told us we are the product of a steady, progressive evolution—an evolution that started in primeval slime and has gradually developed to our present proud and self-proclaimed status as *homo sapiens*.

*Homo sapiens*—intelligent man! . . . But perhaps we are not so intelligent, at that. For in our blind folly we have assumed ourselves to be the final and glorious end product of Nature's eternal striving toward perfection!

Could we not guess that the same force which led the first lungfish from primordial ooze to solid earth—the force which evolved the Neanderthal man from his bestial, hairy ancestor, and developed from this rock-hurling cave man a race that works its destruction with atomic fission—could we not have guessed that this force would inevitably progress a step farther?

That is what has happened. There dwells upon earth today a race representing the *next step* in man's progress. A people to whom our thoughts are as immature and elementary as to us is the prattling of infants.

They begin where we leave off. Our vaunted physics and mathematics are their nursery ABC's; the hard-won learning of our best brains is theirs intuitively. They *sense* what we must study; and what they must study, we cannot even begin to grasp. They are the new lords of creation—*homo superior*!

How they came to be, that is one thing even they do not know. There is a force called "mutation" which you, as a doctor, must understand better than I. By mutation a white rose appears among red, and the white breed true from that time on. The new men are mutants. They—or the first of them—were born of normal parents. But from the cradle they sensed that they were different. Having a telepathic instinct, they were able to discern their brothers in a crowd—or even over long distances—and they banded together.

Long ago—how long Dr. Grove did not tell me—the new men decided they must isolate themselves from us. It was a logical decision. They had no more in common with us than

we have with our pets. Few men, by choice, dine with dogs or sleep in stables.

So they sought this secluded island in the Pacific, far from lesser man's civilization. They went underground to escape detection. There they live, and study, and learn, and wait with infinite patience for the day when they must emerge and take over the world which is theirs by inheritance—even as *homo sapiens* took it over from his beetle-browed forebear, the ape man.

"We are few in number," Grove told me, "but we increase with each passing year. Some are born here; others come from the four corners of the earth, drawn to us by mental rapport. Soon we will be many enough, and strong enough, to accept the responsibility of government of all the earth."

"You mean," I said, "destroy man? And claim the entire world for yourselves?"

Grove said almost sadly: "How little you understand us, you humans. Do you destroy the animals of the field just because they are not your intellectual peers? Our obligation is to keep and protect you; to act as your friendly guardians in a world that will be strange to you, and frightening.

"Yes, frightening," he went on as I began some protest. "I saw the dread and horror in your eyes when I walked into the room. You did not understand how I passed through a wall that to you seems solid. Not understanding, you feared.

"Yet there is nothing supernatural or fearful about what I did; about what any of us can do at will. There is no such thing as a solid in a universe wherein all things—size and dimension and substance—are but relative. We know there is room and to spare for the molecules comprising our persons to pass unhindered through the molecules comprising these walls. We simply make a necessary mental adjustment—and walk where we will. It is an ability as basic, fundamental, to us as breathing is to a person like you."

"Then what?" I asked him, "is your plan for man?"

"Your question should be," he replied gently, "what is Nature's plan for man? And I believe the question answers itself. The answer lies in history. What becomes of Nature's earlier experiments: the giant reptiles, the anthropoids, the men who dwelt in caves and trees?"

"They died out," I said. "Civilization passed them by. They fell before the onrush of higher life forms."

"Even so," Grove said regretfully. "Even so. But you have our pledge that we will be kind. We will be kind."

You see, that was the essence of the matter. These new men are intelligent, a thousandfold more intelligent than we. And being that great step farther along the path to perfection, they are born with the instinct to gentleness. That is why their weapons anesthetize, but do not harm. They will not, they *cannot*, kill.

I could go on for hours relating what I heard and saw during the three weeks I was prisoner in the subterranean refuge of the new men. I'll tell only a few things, because I can see you—like all the others—think I am mad. But there are some things you should know.

Those metal cells hold more than two hundred humans like you and me, men and women who have stumbled by accident upon the hideaway island and have been restrained there lest they go back and tell the world of the conquest to come.

They are comfortable, of course. They are well fed and housed, entertained and made as happy as possible—under the circumstances. Men do not ruthlessly destroy their pets. And on that island, men are the wards of supermen.

I could quote names that would amaze you. A famous author and traveler whose ship disappeared some years ago in the Pacific—a big-game hunter supposedly killed—an aviatrix for whom a dozen fleets sought in vain. They are there.

I could tell you something else that would make the small hairs creep on the back of your neck—if you dared let yourself believe it. *They* are among us already, the new men. As their hour of ascendancy approaches, they are paving the way for their bloodless conquest. Some of them have left the island and taken their places in our world. You can see the master plan. A handful of them settled in key spots—here a politician, there an industrial magnate, there an author whose every word is gospel to his readers—what chance has a race of underlings to combat them when they strike?

And they *will* strike, and soon. When they do, that will be our end as the rulers of earth. For they cannot fail in anything they try. We, as a people, are strong. But *They* are omnipotent!

"That is why," concluded Brady, "you've got to make yourself believe me, no matter how crazy this sounds. You've got to, Doctor. From the broader point of view, perhaps it's better they should inherit the earth. But I am a human. And as a member of my race, I do not want to fall before a higher culture, no matter how superior.

"I want to live! And if we want to live, *They* must die.

Their island must be destroyed, utterly and completely. An atomic bomb—"

"You have said," interrupted Dr. Gorham, "that they are omnipotent. You have called them wise with the wisdom of demigods. Yet you escaped from their island without outside help. Is that proof of their superhuman intelligence?"

Brady shook his head.

"It is proof of their great kindness, and my animal cunning.

"There is a chink in their armor. I took advantage of it. They cannot willfully cause any creature pain. Knowing this, I begged Grove to take me to the surface so I could get some things from the *Ardent Alice* one day. Some personal belongings, I told him. Pictures of my loved ones that I had hidden in a secret compartment of the plane.

"He agreed. We had been on friendly terms for some weeks, and he suspected no treachery. That is a human trait. They cannot conceive of guile or deceit.

"He was careless, and I was desperate. He turned to look when I cried out and pointed to something behind him; he never knew what hit him. I don't know whether my rock killed him or not. I hope not.

"The plane, of course, was useless. But there were self-inflating life rafts, and the water was only yards away. I paddled from the devil's shore with the strength of a madman. You know the rest: How my food and water ran out. How they found me raving deliriously days or maybe weeks later, bearded and sun-blistered and more than half dead."

Dr. Gorham nodded and quietly closed the memo book in which he had scratched only doodles.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Yes. It must have been a terrible experience."

He rose.

"Well, Lieutenant—" he said awkwardly.

Lieutenant Brady stared at him with hopeless eyes.

"You don't believe me, either," he said. "Do you?"

"It's been a pleasure listening to your story," the medico said. "I'll make a report to my superiors. Please be patient and try not to worry. Good day, Lieutenant."

"Go to hell!" said Lieutenant Brady dully. "Oh, go to hell—" he added mechanically—"sir."

The doctor stiffened, then gazed compassionately at the younger man for an instant, shrugged, and left the narrow chamber.

Outside, another medical officer greeted him.

"Ah, there, Gorham! You've talked with him? What's the verdict?"

Gorham touched his forehead. "A clear case of persecution mania—an amazing form. I've never heard a tale so complete and logical, but—" He shrugged. "Do what you can for him. I'm afraid he's going to be here for a long time—perhaps for as long as he lives. Turned loose, he might be dangerous."

"Tough! A nice boy, too. But it does nasty things to a man, floating for weeks in a life raft. He was the only one of his crew to survive. Well, Doctor—will you lunch with me?"

The other medical officer shook his head.

"No, thanks," said Gorham. "I've got to run along. Have to turn in a report and a recommendation on this case."

"Of course. See you later, then."

The other medico disappeared down the spotless corridor of the mental ward. Gorham pondered briefly, orienting himself. He was in the west wing of the hospital, facing the street. His car stood at the curb just outside. He was very busy. There was so much work to be done; *so much*. And if he walked through the anteroom, some fool was sure to delay him, drag him into a long-winded discussion. He didn't feel a bit like talking. He wanted to get out of this place and forward his report—his report that the Brady case was closed. That there would be no more trouble from that source.

He glanced swiftly up and down the corridor. There was no one in sight. His senses told him the street was also deserted. There was no danger of his being seen. So—

So Dr. Gorham turned and walked quietly through the wall.

# LORELEI OF THE RED MIST

by Ray Bradbury (1920- )  
and Leigh Brackett (1915-1978)

PLANET STORIES  
Summer

*Ray Bradbury is now one of the best known science fiction writers in the world, but in 1946 he had not yet achieved the fame that would rightfully be his—in fact, most of his published fiction until that year consisted of fantasy and horror stories, many of which appeared in the late and lamented Weird Tales, (these early stories were collected in 1947 as Dark Carnival, his first book and now a collector's item). Bradbury was one of the first major writers to emerge from science fiction fandom, and it was through fandom that he met Leigh Brackett, who encouraged and aided his writing career. She was a fine author and notable screen-writer whose excellent space opera was a mainstay of Planet Stories, the magazine most closely associated with this area of science fiction.*

*"Lorelei of the Red Mist" was apparently started by Ms. Brackett and finished by Ray Bradbury, one of his relatively rare excursions into the realms of what would become known as "sword and sorcery."*



*(Ray Bradbury is, in some ways, the one-who-doesn't-fit in the world of science fiction. He is the only writer who graduated to greatness in the course of the Golden Age without having passed through the school in which John W. Campbell, Jr. was headmaster. He was the first science fiction writer to become well-known outside science fiction. He made it in the general world of literature when all the rest of us didn't even know there existed such a thing as the general world of literature.*

*To non-science-fiction readers, he is still the giant of science fiction, and yet to science fiction readers themselves, however they may admire him, he has never threatened the position of the Big Three [any more than Kurt Vonnegut—that latter-day Ray Bradbury—has]. The key to the puzzle is that to outsiders, Bradbury does not really write standard science fiction. He writes what he has invented and what no one else can duplicate.—I.A.)*

The company dicks were good. They were plenty good. Hugh Starke began to think maybe this time he wasn't going to get away with it.

His small stringy body hunched over the control bank, nursing the last ounce of power out of the Kallman. The hot night sky of Venus fled past the ports in tattered veils of indigo. Starke wasn't sure where he was any more. Venus was a frontier planet, and still mostly a big X, except to the Venusians—who weren't sending out any maps. He did know that he was getting dangerously close to the Mountains of White Cloud. The backbone of the planet, towering far into the stratosphere, magnetic trap, with God knew what beyond. Maybe even God wasn't sure.

But it looked like over the mountains or out. Death under the guns of the Terro-Venus Mines, Incorporated, Special Police, or back to the Luna cell blocks for life as an habitual felon.

Starke decided he would go over.

Whatever happened, he'd pulled off the biggest lone-wolf caper in history. The T-V Mines payroll ship, for close to a

million credits. He cuddled the metal strongbox between his feet and grinned. It would be a long time before anybody equaled that.

His mass indicators began to jitter. Vaguely, a dim purple shadow in the sky ahead, the Mountains of White Cloud, stood like a wall against him. Starke checked the positions of the pursuing ships. There was no way through them. He said flatly, "All right, damn you," and sent the Kallman angling up into the thick blue sky.

He had no very clear memories after that. Crazy magnetic vagaries, always a hazard on Venus, made his instruments useless. He flew by the seat of his pants and he got over, and the T-V men didn't. He was free, with a million credits in his kick.

Far below in the virgin darkness he saw a sullen crimson smear on the night, as though someone had rubbed it with a bloody thumb. The Kallman dipped toward it. The control bank flickered with blue flame, the jet timers blew, and then there was just the screaming of air against the falling hull.

Hugh Starke sat still and waited . . .

He knew, before he opened his eyes, that he was dying. He didn't feel any pain, he didn't feel anything, but he knew just the same. Part of him was cut loose. He was still there, but not attached anymore.

He raised his eyelids. There was a ceiling. It was a long way off. It was black stone veined with smoky reds and ambers. He had never seen it before.

His head was tilted toward the right. He let his gaze move down that way. There were dim tapestries, more of the black stone, and three tall archways giving onto a balcony. Beyond the balcony was a sky veiled and clouded with red mist. Under the mist, spreading away from a murky line of cliffs, was an ocean. It wasn't water and it didn't have any waves on it, but there was nothing else to call it. It burned, deep down inside itself, breathing up the red fog. Little angry bursts of flame coiled up under the flat surface, sending circles of sparks flaring out like ripples from a dropped stone.

He closed his eyes and frowned and moved his head restively. There was the texture of fur against his skin. Through the cracks of his eyelids he saw that he lay on a high bed piled with silks and soft tanned pelts. His body was covered. He was rather glad he couldn't see it. It didn't matter because he wouldn't be using it any more anyway, and it hadn't been such a hell of a body to begin with. But he was

used to it, and he didn't want to see it now, the way he knew it would have to look.

He looked along over the foot of the bed, and he saw the woman.

She sat watching him from a massive carved chair softened with a single huge white pelt like a drift of snow. She smiled, and let him look. A pulse began to beat under his jaw, very feebly.

She was tall and sleek and insolently curved. She wore a sort of tabard of pale grey spider-silk, held to her body by a jeweled girdle, but it was just a nice piece of ornamentation. Her face was narrow, finely cut, secret, faintly amused. Her lips, her eyes, and her flowing silken hair were all the same pale cool shade of aquamarine.

Her skin was white, with no hint of rose. Her shoulders, her forearms, the long flat curve of her thighs, the pale-green tips of her breasts, were dusted with tiny particles that glistened like powdered diamond. She sparkled softly like a fairy thing against the snowy fur, a creature of foam and moonlight and clear shallow water. Her eyes never left his, and they were not human, but he knew that they would have done things to him if he had had any feeling below the neck.

He started to speak. He had no strength to move his tongue. The woman leaned forward, and as though her movement were a signal four men rose from the tapestried shadows by the wall. They were like her. Their eyes were pale and strange like hers.

She said, in liquid High Venusian, "You're dying, in this body. But *you* will not die. You will sleep now, and wake in a strange body, in a strange place. Don't be afraid. My mind will be with yours, I'll guide you, don't be afraid. I can't explain now, there isn't time, but don't be afraid."

He drew back his thin lips baring his teeth in what might have been a smile. If it was, it was wolfish and bitter, like his face.

The woman's eyes began to pour coolness into his skull. They were like two little rivers running through the channels of his own eyes, spreading in silver-green quiet across the tortured surface of his brain. His brain relaxed. It lay floating on the water, and then the twin streams became one broad, flowing stream, and his mind, or ego, the thing that was intimately himself, vanished along it.

It took him a long, long time to regain consciousness. He felt as though he'd been shaken until pieces of him were scat-

tered all over inside. Also, he had an instinctive premonition that the minute he woke up he would be sorry he had. He took it easy, putting himself together.

He remembered his name, Hugh Starke. He remembered the mining asteroid where he was born. He remembered the Luna cell blocks where he had once come near dying. There wasn't much to choose between them. He remembered his face decorating half the bulletin boards between Mercury and The Belt. He remembered hearing about himself over the telecasts, stuff to frighten babies with, and he thought of himself committing his first crime—a stunted scrawny kid of eighteen swinging a spanner on a grown man who was trying to steal his food.

The rest of it came fast, then. The T-V Mines job, the getaway that didn't get, the Mountains of White Cloud. The crash . . .

The woman.

That did it. His brain leaped shatteringly. Light, feeling, a naked sense of reality swept over him. He lay perfectly still with his eyes shut, and his mind clawed at the picture of the shining woman with sea-green hair and the sound of her voice saying, *You will not die, you will wake in a strange body, don't be afraid . . .*

He was afraid. His skin pricked and ran cold with it. His stomach knotted with it. His skin, his stomach, and yet somehow they didn't feel just right, like a new coat that hasn't shaped to you . . .

He opened his eyes, a cautious crack.

He saw a body sprawled on its side in dirty straw. The body belonged to him, because he could feel the straw pricking it, and the itch of little things that crawled and ate and crawled again.

It was a powerful body, rangy and flat-muscled, much bigger than his old one. It had obviously not been starved the first twenty-some years of its life. It was stark naked. Weather and violence had written history on it, wealed white marks on leathery bronze, but nothing seemed to be missing. There was black hair on its chest and thighs and forearms, and its hands were lean and sinewy for killing.

It was a human body. That was something. There were so many other things it might have been that his racial snobbery wouldn't call human. Like the nameless shimmering creature who smiled with strange pale lips.

Starke shut his eyes again.

He lay, the intangible self that was Hugh Starke, belied down in the darkness of the alien shell, quiet, indrawn, waiting. Panic crept up on its soft black paws. It walked around the crouching ego and sniffed and patted and nuzzled, whining, and then struck with its raking claws. After a while it went away, empty.

The lips that were now Starke's lips twitched in a thin, cruel smile. He had done six months once in the Luna solitary crypts. If a man could do that, and come out sane and on his two feet, he could stand anything. Even this.

It came to him then, rather deflatingly, that the woman and her four companions had probably softened the shock by hypnotic suggestion. His subconscious understood and accepted the change. It was only his conscious mind that was superficially scared to death.

Hugh Starke cursed the woman with great thoroughness, in seven languages and some odd dialects. He became healthily enraged that any dame should play around with him like that. Then he thought, What the hell, I'm alive. And it looks like I got the best of the trade-in!

He opened his eyes again, secretly, on his new world.

He lay at one end of a square stone hall, good sized, with two straight lines of pillars cut from some dark Venusian wood. There were long crude benches and tables. Fires had been burning on round brick hearths spaced between the pillars. They were embers now. The smoke climbed up, tarnishing the gold and bronze of shields hung on the walls and pediments, dulling the blades of longswords, the spears, the tapestries and hides and trophies.

It was very quiet in the hall. Somewhere outside of it there was fighting going on. Heavy, vicious fighting. The noise of it didn't touch the silence, except to make it deeper.

There were two men besides Starke in the hall.

They were close to him, on a low dais. One of them sat in a carved high seat, not moving, his big scarred hands flat on the table in front of him. The other crouched on the floor by his feet. His head was bent forward so that his mop of lint-white hair hid his face and the harp between his thighs. He was a little man, a swamp-edger from his albino coloring. Starke looked back at the man in the chair.

The man spoke harshly. "Why doesn't she send word?"

The harp gave out a sudden bitter chord. That was all.

Starke hardly noticed. His whole attention was drawn to the speaker. His heart began to pound. His muscles coiled

and lay ready. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. He recognized it. It was hate.

He had never seen the man before, but his hands twitched with the urge to kill.

He was big, nearly seven feet, and muscled like a draft horse. But his body, naked above a gold-bossed leather kilt, was lithe and quick as a greyhound in spite of its weight. His face was square, strong-boned, weathered, and still young. It was a face that had laughed a lot once, and liked wine and pretty girls. It had forgotten those things now, except maybe the wine. It was drawn and cruel with pain, a look as of something in a cage. Starke had seen that look before, in the Luna blocks. There was a thick white scar across the man's forehead. Under it his blue eyes were sunken and dark behind half-closed lids. The man was blind.

Outside, in the distance, men screamed and died.

Starke had been increasingly aware of a soreness and stricture around his neck. He raised a hand, careful not to rustle the straw. His fingers found a long tangled beard, felt under it, and touched a band of metal.

Starke's new body wore a collar, like a vicious dog.

There was a chain attached to the collar. Starke couldn't find any fastening. The business had been welded on for keeps. His body didn't seem to have liked it much. The neck was galled and chafed.

The blood began to crawl up hot into Starke's head. He'd worn chains before. He didn't like them. Especially around the neck.

A door opened suddenly at the far end of the hall. Fog and red daylight spilled in across the black stone floor. A man came in. He was big, half naked, blond, and bloody. His long blade trailed harshly on the flags. His chest was laid open to the bone and he held the wound together with his free hand.

"Word from Beudag," he said. "They've driven us back into the city, but so far we're holding the Gate."

No one spoke. The little man nodded his white head. The man with the slashed chest turned and went out again, closing the door.

A peculiar change came over Starke at the mention of the name Beudag. He had never heard it before, but it hung in his mind like a spear point, barbed with strange emotion. He couldn't identify the feeling, but it brushed the blind man aside. The hot simple hatred cooled. Starke relaxed in a sort

of icy quiet, deceptively calm as a sleeping cobra. He didn't question this. He waited, for Beudag.

The blind man struck his hands down suddenly on the table and stood up. "Romna," he said, "give me my sword."

The little man looked at him. He had milk-blue eyes and a face like a friendly bulldog. He said, "Don't be a fool, Faolan."

Faolan said softly, "Damn you. Give me my sword."

Men were dying outside the hall, and not dying silently. Faolan's skin was greasy with sweat. He made a sudden, darting grab toward Romna.

Romna dodged him. There were tears in his pale eyes. He said brutally, "You'd only be in the way. Sit down."

"I can find the point," Faolan said, "to fall on it."

Romna's voice went up to a harsh scream. "Shut up. Shut up and sit down."

Faolan caught the edge of the table and bent over it. He shivered and closed his eyes, and the tears ran out hot under the lids. The bard turned away, and his harp cried out like a woman.

Faolan drew a long sighing breath. He straightened slowly, came round the carved high seat, and walked steadily toward Starke.

"You're very quiet, Conan," he said. "What's the matter? You ought to be happy, Conan. You ought to laugh and rattle your chain. You're going to get what you wanted. Are you sad because you haven't a mind any more, to understand that with?"

He stopped and felt with one sandaled foot across the straw until he touched Starke's thigh. Starke lay motionless.

"Conan," said the blind man gently, pressing Starke's belly with his foot. "Conan the dog, the betrayer, the butcher, the knife in the back. Remember what you did at Falga, Conan? No, you don't remember now. I've been a little rough with you, and you don't remember any more. But I remember, Conan. As long as I live in darkness, I'll remember."

Romna stroked the harp strings and they wept, savage tears for strong men dead of treachery. Low music, distant but not soft. Faolan began to tremble, a shallow animal twitching of the muscles. The flesh of his face was drawn, iron shaping under the hammer. Quite suddenly he went down on his knees. His hands struck Starke's shoulders, slid inward to the throat, and locked there.

Outside, the sound of fighting had died away.

Starke moved, very quickly. As though he had seen it and knew it was there, his hand swept out and gathered in the slack of the heavy chain and swung it.

It started out to be a killing blow. Starke wanted with all his heart to beat Faolan's brains out. But at the last second he pulled it, slapping the big man with exquisite judgment across the back of the head. Faolan grunted and fell sideways, and by that time Romna had come up. He had dropped his harp and drawn a knife. His eyes were startled.

Starke sprang up. He backed off, swinging the slack of the chain warningly. His new body moved magnificently. Outside everything was fine, but inside his psycho-neural setup had exploded into civil war. He was furious with himself for not having killed Faolan. He was furious with himself for losing control enough to want to kill a man without reason. He hated Faolan. He did not like Faolan because he didn't know him well enough. Starke's trained, calculating unemotional brain was at grips with a tidal wave to baseless emotion.

He hadn't realized it was baseless until his mental monitor, conditioned through years of bitter control, had stopped him from killing. Now he remembered the woman's voice saying, *My mind will be with yours, I'll guide you . . .*

Catspaw, huh? Just a hired hand, paid off with a new body in return for two lives. Yeah, two. This Beaudag, whoever he was. Starke knew now what that cold alien emotion had been leading up to.

"Hold it," said Starke hoarsely. "Hold everything. *Catspaw! You green-eyed she-devil! You picked the wrong guy this time.*"

Just for a fleeting instant he saw her again, leaning forward with her hair like running water across the soft foam-sparkle of her shoulders. Her sea-pale eyes were full of mocking laughter, and a direct, provocative admiration. Starke heard her quite plainly:

"You may not have any choice, Hugh Starke. They know Conan, even if you don't. Besides, it's of no great importance. The end will be the same for them—it's just a matter of time. You can save your new body or not, as you wish." She smiled. "I'd like it if you did. It's a good body. I knew it, before Conan's mind broke and left it empty."

A sudden thought came to Starke. "My box, the million credits."

"Come and get them." She was gone. Starke's mind was



clear, with no alien will tramping around in it. Faolan crouched on the floor, holding his head. He said:

"Who spoke?"

Romna the bard stood staring. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Starke said, "I spoke. Me, Hugh Starke. I'm not Conan, and I never heard of Falga, and I'll brain the first guy that comes near me."

Faolan stayed motionless, his face blank, his breath sobbing in his throat. Romna began to curse, very softly, not as though he were thinking about it. Starke watched them.

Down the hall the doors burst open. The heavy reddish mist coiled in with the daylight across the flags, and with them a press of bodies hot from battle, bringing a smell of blood.

Starke felt the heart contract in the hairy breast of the body named Conan, watching the single figure that led the pack.

Romna called out, "Beudag!"

She was tall. She was built and muscled like a lioness, and she walked with a flat-hipped arrogance, and her hair was like coiled flame. Her eyes were blue, hot and bright, as Faolan's might have been once. She looked like Faolan. She was dressed like him, in a leather kilt and sandals, her magnificent body bare above the waist. She carried a longsword slung across her back, the hilt standing above the left shoulder. She had been using it. Her skin was smeared with blood and grime. There was a long cut on her thigh and another across her flat belly, and bitter weariness lay on her like a burden in spite of her denial of it.

"We've stopped them, Faolan," she said. "They can't breach the Gate, and we can hold Crom Dhu as long as we have food. And the sea feeds us." She laughed, but there was a hollow sound to it. "Gods, I'm tired!"

She halted then, below the dais. Her flame-blue gaze swept across Faolan, across Romna, and rose to meet Hugh Starke's, and stayed there.

The pulse began to beat under Starke's jaw again, and this time his body was strong, and the pulse was like a drum throbbing.

Romna said, "His mind has come back."

There was a long, hard silence. No one in the hall moved. Then the men back of Beudag, big brawny kilted warriors, began to close in on the dais, talking in low snarling under-

tones that rose toward a mob howl. Faolan rose up and faced them, and bellowed them to quiet.

"He's mine to take! Let him alone."

Beudag sprang up onto the dais, one beautiful flowing movement. "It isn't possible," she said. "His mind broke under torture. He's been a drooling idiot with barely the sense to feed himself. And now, suddenly, you say he's normal again?"

Starke said, "You know I'm normal. You can see it in my eyes."

"Yes."

He didn't like the way she said that. "Listen, my name is Hugh Starke. I'm an Earthman. This isn't Conan's brain come back. This is a new deal. I got shoved into his body. What it did before I got it I don't know, and I'm not responsible."

Faolan said, "He doesn't remember Falga. He doesn't remember the longships at the bottom of the sea." Faolan laughed.

Romna said quietly, "He didn't kill you, though. He could have, easily. Would Conan have spared you?"

Beudag said, "Yes, if he had a better plan. Conan's mind was like a snake. It crawled in the dark, and you never knew where it was going to strike."

Starke began to tell them how it happened, the chain swinging idly in his hand. While he was talking he saw a face reflected in a polished shield hung on a pillar. Mostly it was just a tangled black mass of hair, mounted on a frame of long, harsh, jutting bone. The mouth was sensuous, with a dark sort of laughter on it. The eyes were yellow. The cruel, brilliant yellow of a killer hawk.

Starke realized with a shock that the face belonged to him.

"A woman with pale green hair," said Beudag softly. "Rann," said Faolan, and Romna's harp made a sound like a high-priest's curse.

"Her people have that power," Romna said. "They can think a man's soul into a spider, and step on it."

"They have many powers. Maybe Rann followed Conan's mind, wherever it went, and told it what to say, and brought it back again."

"Listen," said Starke angrily. "I didn't ask . . ."

Suddenly, without warning, Romna drew Beudag's sword and threw it at Starke.

Starke dodged it. He looked at Romna with ugly yellow

eyes. "That's fine. Chain me up so I can't fight and kill me from a distance." He did not pick up the sword. He'd never used one. The chain felt better, not being too different from a heavy belt or a length of cable, or the other chains he'd swung on occasion.

Romna said, "Is that Conan?"

Faolan snarled, "What happened?"

"Romna threw my sword at Conan. He dodged it, and left it on the ground." Beudag's eyes were narrowed. "Conan could catch a flying sword by the hilt, and he was the best fighter on the Red Sea, barring you, Faolan."

"He's trying to trick us. Rann guides him."

"The hell with Rann!" Starke clashed his chain. "She wants me to kill the both of you, I still don't know why. All right. I could have killed Faolan, easy. But I'm not a killer. I never put down anyone except to save my own neck. So I didn't kill him in spite of Rann. And I don't want any part of you, or Rann either. All I want is to get the hell out of here!"

Beudag said, "His accent isn't Conan's. And the look in his eyes is different, too." Her voice had an odd note to it. Romna glanced at her. He fingered a few rippling chords on his harp, and said:

"There's one way you could tell for sure."

A sullen flush began to burn on Beudag's cheekbones. Romna slid unobtrusively out of reach. His eyes danced with malicious laughter.

Beudag smiled, the smile of an angry cat, all teeth and no humor. Suddenly she walked toward Starke, her head erect, her hands swinging loose and empty at her sides. Starke tensed warily, but the blood leaped pleasantly in his borrowed veins.

Beudag kissed him.

Starke dropped the chain. He had something better to do with his hands.

After a while he raised his head for breath, and she stepped back and whispered wonderingly,

"It isn't Conan."

The hall had been cleared. Starke had washed and shaved himself. His new face wasn't bad. Not bad at all. In fact, it was pretty damn good. And it wasn't known around the System. It was a face that could own a million credits and no questions asked. It was a face that could have a lot of fun on a million credits.

All he had to figure out now was a way to save the neck the face was mounted on, and get his million credits back from that beautiful she-devil named Rann.

He was still chained, but the straw had been cleaned up and he wore a leather kilt and a pair of sandals. Faolan sat in his high seat nursing a flagon of wine. Beudag sprawled wearily on a fur rug beside him. Romna sat cross-legged, his eyes veiled sleepily, stroking soft wandering music out of his harp. He looked fey. Starke knew his swamp-edgers. He wasn't surprised.

"This man is telling the truth," Romna said. "But there's another mind touching his, Rann's, I think. Don't trust him."

Faolan growled, "I couldn't trust a god in Conan's body"

Starke said, "What's the setup? All the fighting out there, and this Rann dame trying to plant a killer on the inside. And what happened at Falga? I never heard of this whole damn ocean, let alone a place called Falga."

The bard swept his hand across the strings. "I'll tell you, Hugh Starke. And maybe you won't want to stay in that body any longer."

Starke grinned. He glanced at Beudag. She was watching him with a queer intensity from under lowered lids. Starke's grin changed. He began to sweat. Get rid of this body, hell! It was really a body. His own stringy little carcass had never felt like this.

The bard said, "In the beginning, in the Red Sea, was a race of people having still their fins and scales. They were amphibious, but after a while part of this race wanted to remain entirely on land. There was a quarrel, and a battle, and some of the people left the sea forever. They settled along the shore. They lost their fins and most of their scales. They had great mental powers and they loved ruling. They subjugated the human peoples and kept them almost in slavery. They hated their brothers who still lived in the sea, and their brothers hated them.

"After a time a third people came to the Red Sea. They were rovers from the North. They raided and reaved and wore no man's collar. They made a settlement on Crom Dhu, and Black Rock, and built longships, and took toll of the coastal towns.

"But the slave people didn't want to fight against the rovers. They wanted to fight with them and destroy the sea-folk. The rovers were human, and blood calls to blood. And the rovers liked to rule, too, and this is a rich country. Also, the

time had come in their tribal development when they were ready to change from nomadic warriors to builders in their own country.

"So the rovers, and the sea-folk, and the slave-people who were caught between the two of them, began their struggle for the land."

The bard's fingers thrummed against the strings so that they beat like angry hearts. Starke saw that Beudag was still watching him, weighing every change of expression on his face. Romna went on:

"There was a woman named Rann, who had green hair and great beauty, and ruled the sea-folk. There was a man called Faolan of the Ships, and his sister Beudag, which means Dagger-in-the-Sheath, and they two ruled the outland rovers. And there was the man called Conan."

The harp crashed out like a sword-blade striking.

"Conan was a great fighter and a great lover. He was next under Faolan of the Ships, and Beudag loved him, and they were plighted. Then Conan was taken prisoner by the sea-folk during a skirmish, and Rann saw him—and Conan saw Rann."

Hugh Starke had a fleeting memory of Rann's face smiling, and her low voice saying, *It's a good body. I knew it, before . . .*

Beudag's eyes were two stones of blue vitriol under her narrow lids.

"Conan stayed a long time at Falga with Rann of the Red Sea. Then he came back to Crom Dhu, and said that he had escaped, and had discovered a way to take the longships into the harbor of Falga, at the back of Rann's fleet; and from there it would be easy to take the city, and Rann with it. And Conan and Beudag were married."

Starke's yellow hawk eyes slid over Beudag, sprawled like a long lioness in power and beauty. A muscle began to twitch under his cheekbone. Beudag flushed, a slow deep color. Her gaze did not waver.

"So the longships went out from Crom Dhu, across the Red Sea. And Conan led them into a trap at Falga, and more than half of them were sunk. Conan thought his ship was free, that he had Rann and all she'd promised him, but Faolan saw what had happened and went after him. They fought, and Conan laid his sword across Faolan's brow and blinded him; but Conan lost the fight. Beudag brought them home.

"Conan was chained naked in the marketplace. The people

were careful not to kill him. From time to time other things were done to him. After a while his mind broke, and Faolan had him chained here in the hall, where he could hear him babble and play with his chain. It made darkness easier to bear.

"But since Falga, things have gone badly from Crom Dhu. Too many men were lost, too many ships. Now Rann's people have us bottled up here. They can't break in, we can't break out. And so we stay, until . . ." The harp cried out a bitter question, and was still.

After a minute or two Starke said slowly, "Yeah, I get it. Stalemate for both of you. And Rann figured if I could kill off the leaders, your people might give up." He began to curse. "What a lousy, dirty, sneaking trick! And who told her she could use me . . ." He paused. After all, he'd be dead now. After all, a new body, and a cool million credits. Ah, the hell with Rann. He hadn't asked her to do it. And he was nobody's hired killer. Where did she get off, sneaking around his mind, trying to make him do things he didn't even know about? Especially to someone like Beudag.

Still, Rann herself was nobody's crud.

And just where was Hugh Starke supposed to cut in on this deal? Cut was right. Probably with a longsword, right through the belly. Swell spot he was in, and a good three strikes on him already.

He was beginning to wish he'd never see the T-V Mines payroll ship, because then he might never have seen the Mountains of White Cloud.

He said, because everybody seemed to be waiting for him to say something. "Usually when there's a deadlock like this, somebody calls in a third party. Isn't there somebody you can yell for?"

Faolan shook his rough red head. "The slave people might rise, but they haven't arms and they're not used to fighting. They'd only get massacred, and it wouldn't help us any."

"What about those other—uh—people that live in the sea? And just what is that sea, anyhow? Some radiation from it wrecked my ship and got me into this bloody mess."

Beudag said lazily, "I don't know what it is. The seas our forefathers sailed on were water, but this is different. It will float a ship, if you know how to build the hull—very thin, of a white metal we mine from the foothills. But when you swim in it, it's like being in a cloud of bubbles. It tingles, and the farther down you go in it the stranger it gets, dark and

full of fire. I stay down for hours sometimes, hunting the beasts that live there."

Starke said, "For hours? You have diving suits, then. What are they?"

She shook her head, laughing. "Why weigh yourself down that way? There's no trouble to breathe in this ocean."

"For cripesake," said Starke. "Well I'll be damned. Must be a heavy gas, then, radioactive, surface tension under atmospheric pressure, enough to float a light hull, and high oxygen content without any dangerous mixture. Well, well. Okay, why doesn't somebody go down and see if the sea-people will help? They don't like Rann's branch of the family, you said."

"They don't like us, either," said Faolan. "We stay out of the southern part of the sea. They wreck our ships, sometimes." His bitter mouth twisted in a smile. "Did you want to go to them for help?"

Starke didn't quite like the way Faolan sounded. "It was just a suggestion," he said.

Beudag rose, stretching, wincing as the stiffened wounds pulled her flesh. "Come on, Faolan. Let's sleep."

He rose and laid his hand on her shoulder. Romna's harp-strings breathed a subtle little mockery of sound. The bard's eyes were veiled and sleepy. Beudag did not look at Starke, called Conan.

Starke said, "What about me?"

"You stay chained," said Faolan. "There's plenty of time to think. As long as we have food—and the sea feeds us."

He followed Beudag, through a curtained entrance to the left. Romna got up, slowly, slinging the harp over one white shoulder. He stood looking steadily into Starke's eyes in the dying light of the fires.

"I don't know," he murmured.

Starke waited, not speaking. His face was without expression.

"Conan we knew. Starke we don't know. Perhaps it would have been better if Conan had come back." He ran his thumb absently over the hilt of the knife in his girdle. "I don't know. Perhaps it would have been better for all of us if I'd cut your throat before Beudag came in."

Starke's mouth twitched. It was not exactly a smile.

"You see," said the bard seriously, "to you, from Outside, none of this is important, except as it touches you. But we live in this little world. We die in it. To us, it's important."

The knife was in his hand now. It leaped up glittering into the dregs of the firelight, and fell, and leaped again.

"You fight for yourself, Hugh Starke. Rann also fights through you. I don't know."

Starke's gaze did not waver.

Romna shrugged and put away the knife. "It is written of the gods," he said sighing. "I hope they haven't done a bad job of the writing."

He went out. Starke began to shiver slightly. It was completely quiet in the hall. He examined his collar, the rivets, every separate link of the chain, the staple to which it was fixed. Then he sat down on the fur rug provided for him in place of the straw. He put his face in his hands and cursed, steadily, for several minutes, and then struck his fists down hard on the floor. After that he lay down and was quiet. He thought Rann would speak to him. She did not.

The silent black hours that walked across his heart were worse than any he had spent in the Luna crypts.

She came soft-shod, bearing a candle. Beudag, the Dagger-in-the-Sheath. Starke was not asleep. He rose and stood waiting. She set the candle on the table and came, not quite to him, and stopped. She wore a length of thin white cloth twisted loosely at the waist and dropping to her ankles. Her body rose out of it straight and lovely, touched mystically with shadows in the little wavering light.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "What are you?"

"A man. Not Conan. Maybe not Hugh Starke anymore. Just a man."

"I loved the man called Conan, until . . ." She caught her breath, and moved closer. She put her hand on Starke's arm. The touch went through him like white fire. The warm clean healthy fragrance of her tasted sweet in his throat. Her eyes searched his.

"If Rann has such great powers, couldn't it be that Conan was forced to do what he did? Couldn't it be that Rann took his mind and moulded it her way, perhaps without his knowing it?"

"It could be."

"Conan was hot-tempered and quarrelsome, but he . . ."

Starke said slowly, "I don't think you could have loved him if he hadn't been straight."

Her hand lay still on his forearm. he stood looking at him, and then her hand began to tremble, and in a moment



she was crying, making no noise about it. Starke drew her gently to him. His eyes blazed yellowly in the candlelight.

"Woman's tears," she said impatiently, after a bit. She tried to draw away. "I've been fighting too long, and losing, and I'm tired."

He let her step back, not far. "Do all the women of Crom Dhu fight like men?"

"If they want to. There have always been shield-maidens. And since Falga, I would have had to fight anyway, to keep from thinking." She touched the collar on Starke's neck. "And from seeing."

He thought of Conan in the market square, and Conan shaking his chain and gibbering in Faolan's hall, and Beudag watching it. Starke's fingers tightened. He slid his palms upward along the smooth muscles of her arms, across the straight, broad planes of her shoulders, onto her neck, the proud strength of it pulsing under his hands. Her hair fell loose. He could feel the redness of it burning him.

She whispered, "You don't love me."

"No."

"You're an honest man, Hugh Starke."

"You want me to kiss you."

"Yes."

"You're an honest woman, Beudag."

Her lips were hungry, passionate, touched with the bitterness of tears. After a while Starke blew out the candle . . .

"I could love you, Beudag."

"Not the way I mean."

"The way you mean. I've never said that to any woman before. But you're not like any woman before. And—I'm a different man."

"Strange—so strange. Conan, and yet not Conan."

"I could love you, Beudag—if I lived."

Harpstrings gave a thrumming sigh in the darkness, the faintest whisper of sound. Beudag started, sighed, and rose from the fur rug. In a minute she had found flint and steel and got the candle lighted. Romna the bard stood in the curtained doorway, watching them.

Presently he said, "You're going to let him go."

Beudag said, "Yes."

Romna nodded. He did not seem surprised. He walked across the dais, laying his harp on the table, and went into another room. He came back almost at once with a hacksaw.

"Bend your neck," he said to Starke.

The metal of the collar was soft. When it was cut through Starke got his fingers under it and bent the ends outward, without trouble. His old body could never have done that. His old body could never have done a lot of things. He figured Rann hadn't cheated him. Not much.

He got up, looking at Beudag. Beudag's head was dropped forward, her face veiled behind shining hair.

"There's only one possible way out of Crom Dhu," she said. There was no emotion in her voice. "There's a passage leading down through the rock to a secret harbor, just large enough to moor a skiff or two. Perhaps, with the night and the fog, you can slip through Rann's blockade. Or you can go aboard one of her ships, for Falga." She picked up the candle. "I'll take you down."

"Wait," Starke said. "What about you?"

She glanced at him surprised. "I'll stay, of course."

He looked into her eyes. "It's going to be hard to know each other that way."

"You can't stay here, Hugh Starke. The people would tear you to pieces the moment you went into the street. They may even storm the hall, to take you. Look here." She set the candle down and led him to a narrow window, drawing back the hide that covered it.

Starke saw narrow twisting streets dropping steeply toward the sullen sea. The longships were broken and sunk in the harbor. Out beyond, riding lights flickering in the red fog, were other ships. Rann's ships.

"Over there," said Beudag, "is the mainland. Crom Dhu is connected to it by a tongue of rock. The sea-folk hold the land beyond it, but we can hold the rock bridge as long as we live. We have enough water, enough food from the sea. But there's no soil nor game on Crom Dhu. We'll be naked after a while, without leather or flax, and we'll have scurvy without grain and fruit. We're beaten, unless the gods send us a miracle. And we're beaten because of what was done at Falga. You can see how the people feel."

Starke looked at the dark streets and the silent houses leaning on each other's shoulders, and the mocking lights out in the fog. "Yeah," he said. "I can see."

"Besides, there's Faolan. I don't know whether he believes your story. I don't know whether it would matter."

Starke nodded. "But you won't come with me?"

She turned away sharply and picked up the candle again. "Are you coming, Romna?"

The bard nodded. He slung his harp over his shoulder. Beudag held back the curtain of a small doorway far to the side. Starke went through it and Romna followed, and Beudag went ahead with the candle. No one spoke.

They went along a narrow passage, past store rooms and armories. They paused once while Starke chose a knife, and Romna whispered: "Wait!" He listened intently. Starke and Beudag strained their ears along with him. There was no sound. Romna shrugged. "I thought I heard sandals scraping stone," he said. They went on.

The passage lay behind a wooden door. It led downward steeply through the rock, a single narrow way without side galleries or branches. In some places there were winding steps. It ended, finally, in a flat ledge low to the surface of the cove, which was a small cavern closed in with the black rock. Beudag set the candle down.

There were two little skiffs built of some light metal moored to rings in the ledge. Two long sweeps leaned against the cave wall. They were of a different metal, oddly vaned. Beudag laid one across the thwarts of the nearest boat. Then she turned to Starke. Romna hung back in the shadows by the tunnel mouth.

Beudag said quietly, "Goodbye, man without a name."

"It has to be goodbye?"

"I'm leader now, in Faolan's place. Besides, these are my people." Her fingers tightened on his wrists. "If you could . . ." Her eyes held a brief blaze of hope. Then she dropped her head and said, "I keep forgetting you're not one of us. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Beudag."

Starke put his arms around her. He found her mouth, almost cruelly. Her arms were tight about him, her eyes half closed and dreaming. Starke's hands slipped upward, toward her throat, and locked on it.

She bent back, her body like a steel bow. Her eyes got fire in them, looking into Starke's but only for a moment. His fingers pressed expertly on the nerve centers. Beudag's head fell forward limply, and then Romna was on Starke's back and his knife was pricking Starke's throat.

Starke caught his wrist and turned the blade away. Blood ran onto his chest, but the cut was not into the artery. He threw himself backward onto the stone. Romna couldn't get clear in time. The breath went out of him in a rushing gasp. He didn't let go of the knife. Starke rolled over. The little

man didn't have a chance with him. He was tough and quick, but Starke's sheer size smothered him. Starke could remember when Romna would not have seemed small to him. He hit the bard's jaw with his fist. Romna's head cracked hard against the stone. He let go of the knife. He seemed to be through fighting. Starke got up. He was sweating, breathing heavily, not because of his exertion. His mouth was glistening and eager, like a dog's. His muscles twitched, his belly was hot and knotted with excitement. His yellow eyes had a strange look.

He went back to Beudag.

She lay on the black rock, on her back. Candlelight ran pale gold across her brown skin, skirting the sharp strong hollows between her breasts and under the arching rim of her rib case. Starke knelt, across her body, his weight pressed down against her harsh breathing. He stared at her. Sweat stood out on his face. He took her throat between his hands again.

He watched the blood grow dark in her cheeks. He watched the veins coil on her forehead. He watched the redness blacken her lips. She fought a little, very vaguely, like someone moving in a dream. Starke breathed hoarsely, animal-like through an open mouth.

Then, gradually his body became rigid. His hands froze, not releasing pressure, but not adding any. His yellow eyes widened. It was as though he were trying to see Beudag's face and it was hidden in dense clouds.

Back of him, back in the tunnel, was the soft faint whisper of sandals on uneven rock. Sandals, walking slowly. Starke did not hear. Beudag's face glimmered deep in a heavy mist below him, a blasphemy of a face, distorted, blackened.

Starke's hands began to open.

They opened slowly. Muscles stood like coiled ropes in his arms and shoulders, as though he moved them against heavy weights. His lips peeled back from his teeth. He bent his neck, and sweat dropped from his face and glittered on Beudag's breast.

Starke was now barely touching Beudag's neck. She began to breathe again, painfully.

Starke began to laugh. It was not nice laughter. "Rann," he whispered. "Rann, you she-devil." He half fell away from Beudag and stood up, holding himself against the wall. He was shaking violently. "I wouldn't use your hate for killing, so you tried to use my passion." He cursed her in a flat sibi-

lant whisper. He had never in his profane life really cursed anyone before.

He heard an echo of laughter dancing in his brain.

Starke turned. Faolan of the Ships stood in the tunnel mouth. His head was bent, listening, his blind dark eyes fixed on Starke as though he saw him.

Faolan said softly, "I hear you, Starke. I hear the others breathing, but they don't speak."

"They're all right. I didn't mean to do . . ."

Faolan smiled. He stepped out on the narrow ledge. He knew where he was going, and his smile was not pleasant.

"I heard your steps in the passage beyond my room. I knew Beudag was leading you, and where, and why. I would have been here sooner, but it's a slow way in the dark."

The candle lay in his path. He felt the heat of it close to his leg, and stopped and felt for it, and ground it out. It was dark, then. Very dark, except for a faint smudgy glow from the scrap of ocean that lay along the cave floor.

"It doesn't matter," Faolan said, "as long as I came in time."

Starke shifted his weight warily. "Faolan . . ."

"I wanted you alone. On this night of all nights I wanted you alone. Beudag fights in my place now, Conan. My manhood needs proving."

Starke strained his eyes in the gloom, measuring the ledge, measuring the place where the skiff was moored. He didn't want to fight Faolan. In Faolan's place he would have felt the same. Starke understood perfectly. He didn't hate Faolan, he didn't want to kill him, and he was afraid of Rann's power over him when his emotions got control. You couldn't keep a determined man from killing you and still be uninvolved emotionally. Starke would be damned if he'd kill anyone to suit Rann.

He moved, silently, trying to slip past Faolan on the outside and get into the skiff. Faolan gave no sign of hearing him. Starke did not breathe. His sandals came down lighter than snowflakes. Faolan did not swerve. He would pass Starke with a foot to spare. They came abreast.

Faolan's hand shot out and caught in Starke's long black hair. The blind man laughed softly and closed in.

Starke swung one from the floor. Do it the quickest way and get clear. But Faolan was fast. He came in so swiftly that Starke's fist jarred harmlessly along his ribs. He was big-

ger than Starke, and heavier, and the darkness didn't bother him.

Starke bared his teeth. Do it quick, brother, and clear out! Or that green-eyed she-cat . . . Faolan's brute bulk weighted him down. Faolan's arm crushed his neck. Faolan's fist was knocking his guts loose. Starke got moving.

He'd fought in a lot of places. He'd learned from stokers and tramps, Martian Low-Canalers, red-eyed Nahali in the running gutters of Lhi. He didn't use his knife. He used his knees and feet and elbows and his hands, fist and flat. It was a good fight. Faolan was a good fighter, but Starke knew more tricks.

One more, Starke thought. One more and he's out. He drew back for it, and his heel struck Romna, lying on the rock. He staggered, and Faolan caught him with a clean swinging blow. Starke fell backward against the cave wall. His head cracked the rock. Light flooded crimson across his brain and then paled and grew cooler, a wash of clear silver-green like water. He sank under it . . .

He was tired, desperately tired. His head ached. He wanted to rest, but he could feel that he was sitting up, doing something that had to be done. He opened his eyes.

He sat in the stern of a skiff. The long sweep was laid into its crutch, held like a tiller bar against the body. The blade of the sweep trailed astern in the red sea, and where the metal touched there was a spurt of silver fire and a swirling of brilliant motes. The skiff moved rapidly through the sullen fog, through a mist of blood in the hot Venusian night.

Beudag crouched in the bow, facing Starke. She was bound securely with strips of the white cloth she had worn. Bruises showed dark on her throat. She was watching Starke with the intent, unwinking, perfectly expressionless gaze of a tigress.

Starke looked away, down at himself. There was blood on his kilt, a brown smear of it across his chest. It was not his blood. He drew the knife slowly out of its sheath. The blade was dull and crusted, still a little wet.

Starke looked at Beudag. His lips were stiff, swollen. He moistened them and said hoarsely, "What happened?"

She shook her head, slowly, not speaking. Her eyes did not waver.

A black, cold rage took hold of Starke and shook him. Rann! He rose and went forward, letting the sweep go where it would. He began to untie Beudag's wrists.

A shape swam toward them out of the red mist. A longship

with two heavy sweeps bursting fire astern and a slender figurehead shaped like a woman. A woman with hair and eyes of aquamarine. It came alongside the skiff.

A rope ladder snaked down. Men lined the low rail. Slender men with skin that glistened white like powdered snow, and hair the color of distant shadows.

One of them said, "Come aboard, Hugh Starke."

Starke went back to the sweep. It bit into the sea, sending the skiff in a swift arc away from Rann's ship.

Grapnels flew, hooking the skiff at thwart and gunwale. Bows appeared in the hands of the men, wicked curving things with barbed metal shafts on the string. The man said again, politely, "Come aboard."

Hugh Starke finished untying Beudag. He didn't speak. There seemed to be nothing to say. He stood back while she climbed the ladder and then followed. The skiff was cast loose. The longship veered away, gathering speed.

Starke said, "Where are we going?"

The man smiled. "To Falga."

Starke nodded. He went below with Beudag into a cabin with soft couches covered with spider-silk and panels of dark wood beautifully painted, dim fantastic scenes from the past of Rann's people. They sat opposite each other. They still did not speak.

They raised Falga in the opal dawn—a citadel of basalt cliffs rising sheer from the burning sea, with a long arm holding a harbor full of ships. There were green fields inland, and beyond, cloaked in the eternal mists of Venus, the Mountains of White Clouds lifted spaceward. Starke wished that he had never seen the Mountains of White Cloud. Then, looking at his hands, lean and strong on his long thighs, he wasn't so sure. He thought of Rann waiting for him. Anger, excitement, a confused violence of emotion set him pacing nervously.

Beudag sat quietly, withdrawn, waiting.

The longship threaded the crowded moorings and slid into place alongside a stone quay. Men rushed to make fast. They were human men, as Starke judged humans, like Beudag and himself. They had the shimmering silver hair and fair skin of the plateau peoples, the fine-cut faces and straight bodies. They wore leather collars with metal tags and they went naked like beasts, and they were gaunt and bowed with labor.

Here and there a man with pale blue-green hair and resplendent harness stood godlike above the swarming masses.

Starke and Beudag went ashore. They might have been prisoners or honored guests, surrounded by their escort from the ship. Streets ran back from the harbor, twisting and climbing crazily up the cliffs. Houses climbed on each other's backs. It had begun to rain, the heavy steaming downpour of Venus, and the moist heat brought out the choking stench of people, too many people.

They climbed, ankle deep in water sweeping down the streets that were half stairway. Thin naked children peered out of the houses, out of narrow alleys. Twice they passed through market squares where women with the blank faces of defeat drew back from stalls of coarse food to let the party through.

There was something wrong. After a while Starke realized it was the silence. In all that horde of humanity no one laughed, or sang, or shouted. Even the children never spoke above a whisper. Starke began to feel a little sick. Their eyes had a look in them . . .

He glanced at Beudag, and away again.

The waterfront streets ended in a sheer basalt face honeycombed with galleries. Starke's party entered them, still climbing. They passed level after level of huge caverns, open to the sea. There was the same crowding, the same stench, the same silence. Eyes glinted in the half-light, bare feet moved furtively on stone. Somewhere a baby cried thinly, and was hushed at once.

They came out on the cliff top, into the clean high air. There was a city here. Broad streets, lined with trees, low rambling villas of the black rock set in walled gardens, drowned in brilliant vines and giant ferns and flowers. Naked men and women worked in the gardens, or hauled carts of rubbish through the alleys, or hurried on errands, slipping furtively across the main streets where they intersected the mews.

The party turned away from the sea, heading toward an ebon palace that sat like a crown above the city. The steaming rain beat on Starke's bare body, and up here you could get the smell of the rain, even through the heavy perfume of the flowers. You could smell Venus in the rain—musky and primitive and savagely alive, a fecund giantess with passion flowers in her outstretched hands. Starke set his feet down like a panther and his eyes burned a smoky amber.



They entered the palace of Rann. . . .

She received them in the same apartment where Starke had come to after the crash. Through a broad archway he could see the high bed where his old body had lain before the life went out of it. The red sea steamed under the rain outside, the rusty fog coiling languidly through the open arches of the gallery. Rann watched them lazily from a raised couch set massively into the wall. Her long sparkling legs sprawled arrogantly across the black spider-silk draperies. This time her tabard was a pale yellow. Her eyes were still the color of shoal-water, still amused, still secret, still dangerous.

Starke said, "So you made me do it after all."

"And you're angry." She laughed, her teeth showing white and pointed as bone needles. Her gaze held Starke's. There was nothing casual about it. Starke's hawk eyes turned molten yellow, like hot gold, and did not waver.

Beudag stood like a bronze spear, her forearms crossed beneath her bare sharp breasts. Two of Rann's palace guards stood behind her.

Starke began to walk toward Rann.

She watched him come. She let him get close enough to reach out and touch her, and then she said slyly, "It's a good body, isn't it?"

Starke looked at her for a moment. Then he laughed. He threw back his head and roared, and struck the great corded muscles of his belly with his fist. Presently he looked straight into Rann's eyes and said:

"I know you."

She nodded. "We know each other. Sit down, Hugh Starke." She swung her long legs over to make room, half erect now, looking at Beudag. Starke sat down. He did not look at Beudag.

Rann said, "Will your people surrender now?"

Beudag did not move, not even her eyelids. "If Faolan is dead—yes."

"And if he's not?"

Beudag stiffened. Starke did too.

"Then," said Beudag quietly, "They'll wait."

"Until he is?"

"Or until they must surrender."

Rann nodded. To the guards she said, "See that this woman is well fed and well treated."

Beudag and her escort had turned to go when Starke said,

"Wait." The guards looked at Rann, who nodded, and glanced quizzically at Starke. Starke said:

"Is Faolan dead?"

Rann hesitated. Then she smiled. "No. You have the most damnably tough mind, Starke. You struck deep, but not deep enough. He may still die, but . . . No, he's not dead." She turned to Beudag and said with easy mockery, "You needn't hold anger against Starke. I'm the one who should be angry." Her eyes came back to Starke. They didn't look angry.

Starke said, "There's something else. Conan—the Conan that used to be, before Falga."

"Beudag's Conan."

"Yeah. Why did he betray his people?"

Rann studied him. Her strange pale lips curved, her sharp white teeth glistening wickedly with barbed humor. Then she turned to Beudag. Beudag was still standing like a carved image, but her smooth muscles were ridged with tension, and her eyes were not the eyes of an image.

"Conan or Starke," said Rann, "she's still Beudag, isn't she? All right, I'll tell you. Conan betrayed his people because I put it into his mind to do it. He fought me. He made a good fight of it. But he wasn't quite as tough as you are, Starke."

There was a silence. For the first time since entering the room, Hugh Starke looked at Beudag. After a moment she sighed and lifted her chin and smiled, a deep, faint smile. The guards walked out beside her, but she was more erect and lighter of step than either of them.

"Well," said Rann, when they were gone, "and what about you, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan?"

"Have I any choice?"

"I always keep my bargains."

"Then give me my dough and let me clear the hell out of here."

"Sure that's what you want?"

"That's what I want."

"You could stay awhile, you know."

"With you?"

Rann lifted her frosty-white shoulders. "I'm not promising half my kingdom, or even part of it. But you might be amused."

"I got no sense of humor."

"Don't you even want to see what happens to Crom Dhu?"

"And Beudag."

"And Beudag." He stopped, then fixed Rann with unpromising yellow eyes. "No. Not Beudag. What are you going to do to her?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that."

"I say again, nothing. Whatever is done, her own people will do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that little Dagger-in-the-Sheath will be rested, cared for, and fattened, for a few days. Then I shall take her aboard my own ship and join the fleet before Crom Dhu. Beudag will be made quite comfortable at the masthead, where her people can see her plainly. She will stay there until the Rock surrenders. It depends on her own people how long she stays. She'll be given water. Not much, but enough."

Starke stared at her. He stared at her a long time. Then he spat deliberately on the floor and said in a perfectly flat voice: "How soon can I get out of here?"

Rann laughed, a small casual chuckle. "Humans," she said, "are so damned queer. I don't think I'll ever understand them." She reached out and struck a gong that stood in a carved frame beside the couch. The soft deep shimmering note had a sad quality of nostalgia. Rann lay back against the silken cushions and sighed.

"Goodbye, Hugh Starke."

A pause. Then, regretfully:

"Goodbye—Conan!"

They had made good time along the rim of the Red Sea. One of Rann's galleys had taken them to the edge of the Southern Ocean and left them on a narrow shingle beach under the cliffs. From there they had climbed to the rimrock and gone on foot—Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan and four of Rann's arrogant shining men. They were supposed to guide and escort. They were courteous, and they kept pace uncomplainingly though Starke marched as though the devil were pricking his heels. But they were armed, and Starke was not.

Sometimes, very faintly, Starke was aware of Rann's mind touching his with the velvet delicacy of a cat's paw. Sometimes he started out on his sleep with her image sharp in his mind, her lips touched with the mocking, secret smile. He didn't like that. He didn't like it at all.

But he liked even less the picture that stayed with him waking or sleeping. The picture he wouldn't look at. The pic-

ture of a tall woman with hair like loose fire on her neck, walking on light proud feet between her guards.

She'll be given water, Rann said. Not much, but enough.

Starke gripped the solid squareness of the box that held his million credits and set the miles reeling backward from under his sandals.

On the fifth night one of Rann's men spoke quietly across the campfire. "Tomorrow," he said, "we'll reach the pass."

Starke got up and went away by himself, to the edge of the rimrock that fell sheer to the burning sea. He sat down. The red fog wrapped him like a mist of blood. He thought of the blood on Beudag's breast the first time he saw her. He thought of the blood on his knife, crusted and dried. He thought of the blood poured rank and smoking into the gutters of Crom Dhu. The fog has to be red, he thought. Of all the goddam colors in the universe, it has to be red. Red like Beudag's hair.

He held out his hands and looked at them, because he could still feel the silken warmth of that hair against his skin. There was nothing there now but the old white scars of another man's battles.

He set his fists against his temples and wished for his old body back again—the little stunted abortion that had clawed and scratched its way to survival through sheer force of mind. A most damnably tough mind, Rann had said. Yeah. It had to be tough. But a mind was a mind. It didn't have emotions. It just figured out something coldly and then went ahead and never questioned, and it controlled the body utterly, because the body was only the worthless machinery that carried the mind around. Worthless. Yeah. The few women he'd ever looked at had told him that—and he hadn't even minded much. The old body hadn't given him any trouble.

He was having trouble now.

Starke got up and walked.

Tomorrow we reach the pass.

Tomorrow we go away from the Red Sea. There are nine planets and the whole damn Belt. There are women on all of them. All shapes, colors, and sizes, human, semi-human, and God knows what. With a million credits a guy could buy half of them, and with Conan's body he could buy the rest. What's a woman anyway? Only a . . .

*Water. She'll be given water. Not much, but enough.*

Conan reached out and took hold of a spire of rock, and

his muscles stood out like knotted ropes. "Oh God," he whispered, "what's the matter with me?"

"Love."

It wasn't God who answered. It was Rann. He saw her plainly in his mind, heard her voice like a silver bell.

"Conan was a man, Hugh Starke. He was whole, body and heart and brain. He knew how to love, and with him it wasn't women, but one woman—and her name was Beudag. I broke him, but it wasn't easy. I can't break you."

Starke stood for a long, long time. He did not move, except that he trembled. Then he took from his belt the box containing his million credits and threw it out as far as he could over the cliff edge. The red mist swallowed it up. He did not hear it strike the surface of the sea. Perhaps in that sea there was no splashing. He did not wait to find out.

He turned back along the rimrock, toward a place where he remembered a cleft, or chimney, leading down. And the four shining men who wore Rann's harness came silently out of the heavy luminous night and ringed him in. Their sword-points caught sharp red glimmers from the sky.

Starke had nothing on him but a kilt and sandals, and a cloak of tight-woven spider-silk that shed the rain.

"Rann sent you?" he said.

The men nodded.

"To kill me?"

Again they nodded. The blood drained out of Starke's face, leaving it grey and stony under the bronze. His hand went to his throat, over the gold fastening of his cloak.

The four men closed in like dancers.

Starke loosed his cloak and swung it like a whip across their faces. It confused them for a second, for a heartbeat—no more, but long enough. Starke left two of them to tangle their blades in the heavy fabric and leaped aside. A sharp edge slipped and turned along his ribs, and then he had reached in low and caught a man around the ankles, and used the thrashing body for a flail.

The body was strangely light, as though the bones in it were no more than rigid membrane, like a fish.

If he had stayed to fight, they would have finished him in seconds. They were fighting men, and quick. But Starke didn't stay. He gained his moment's grace and used it. They were hard on his heels, their points all but pricking his back as he ran, but he made it. Along the rimrock, out along a narrow tongue that jutted over the sea, and then outward, far out-

ward, into red fog and dim fire that rolled around his plummeting body.

Oh God, he thought, if I guessed wrong and there *is* a beach . . .

The breath tore out of his lungs. His ears cracked, went dead. He held his arms out beyond his head, the thumbs locked together, his neck braced forward against the terrific upward push. He struck the surface of the sea.

There was no splash.

Dim coiling fire that drifted with infinite laziness around him, caressing his body with slow, tingling sparks. A feeling of lightness, as though his flesh had become one with the drifting fire. A sense of suffocation that had no basis in fact and gave way gradually to a strange exhilaration. There was no shock of impact, no crushing pressure. Merely a compressed air. Starke felt himself turning end over end, pin-wheel fashion, and then that stopped, so that he sank quietly and without haste to the bottom.

Or rather, into the crystalline upper reaches of what seemed to be a forest.

He could see it spreading away along the downward-sloping floor of the ocean, into the vague red shadows of distance. Slender fantastic trunks upholding a maze of delicate shining branches, without leaves or fruit. They were like trees exquisitely molded from ice, transparent, holding the lambent shifting fire of the strange sea. Starke didn't think they were, or ever had been, alive. More like coral, he thought, or some vagary of mineral deposit. Beautiful, though. Like something you'd see in a dream. Beautiful, silent, and somehow deadly.

He couldn't explain that feeling of deadliness. Nothing moved in the red drifts between the trunks. It was nothing about the trees themselves. It was just something he sensed.

He began to move among the upper branches, following the downward drop of the slope.

He found that he could swim quite easily. Or perhaps it was more like flying. The dense gas buoyed him up, almost balancing the weight of his body, so that it was easy to swoop along, catching a crystal branch and using it as a lever to throw himself forward to the next one.

He went deeper and deeper into the heart of the forbidden Southern Ocean. Nothing stirred. The fairy forest stretched limitless ahead. And Starke was afraid.

Rann came into his mind abruptly. Her face, clearly outlined, was full of mockery.

"I'm going to watch you die. Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan. But before you die, I'll show you something. Look."

Her face dimmed, and in its place was Crom Dhu rising bleak into the red fog, the longships broken and sunk in the harbor, and Rann's fleet around it in a shining circle.

One ship in particular. The flagship. The vision in Starke's mind rushed toward it, narrowed down to the masthead platform. To the woman who stood there, naked, erect, her body lashed tight with thin cruel cords.

A woman with red hair blowing in the slow wind, and blue eyes that looked straight ahead like a falcon's at Crom Dhu.

Beudag.

Rann's laughter ran across the picture and blurred it like a ripple of ice-cold water.

"You'd have done better," she said, "to take the clean steel when I offered it to you."

She was gone, and Starke's mind was as empty and cold as the mind of a corpse. He found that he was standing still, clinging to a branch, his face upturned as though by some blind instinct, his sight blurred.

He had never cried before in all his life, nor prayed.

There was no such thing as time, down there in the smoky shadows of the sea bottom. It might have been minutes or hours later than Hugh Starke discovered he was being hunted.

There were three of them, slipping easily among the shining branches. They were pale golden, almost phosphorescent, about the size of large hounds. Their eyes were huge, jewel-like in their slim sharp faces. They possessed four members that might have been legs and arms, retracted now against their arrowing bodies. Golden membranes spread winglike from head to flank, and they moved like wings, balancing expertly the thrust of the flat, powerful tails.

They could have closed in on him easily, but they didn't seem to be in any hurry. Starke had sense enough not to wear himself out trying to get away. He kept on going, watching them. He discovered that the crystal branches could be broken, and he selected himself one with a sharp forked tip, shoving it swordwise under his belt. He didn't suppose it would do much good, but it made him feel better.

He wondered why the things didn't jump him and get it over with. They looked hungry enough, the way they were showing him their teeth. But they kept about the same distance away, in a sort of crescent formation, and every so of-

ten the ones on the outside would make a tentative dart at him, then fall back as he swerved away. It wasn't like being hunted so much as . . .

Starke's eyes narrowed. He began suddenly to feel much more afraid than he had before, and he wouldn't have believed that possible.

The things weren't hunting him at all. They were herding him.

There was nothing he could do about it. He tried stopping, and they swooped in and snapped at him, working expertly together so that while he was trying to stab one of them with his clumsy weapon, the others were worrying his heels like sheepdogs at a recalcitrant wether.

Starke, like the wether, bowed to the inevitable and went where he was driven. The golden hounds showed their teeth in animal laughter and sniffed hungrily at the thread of blood he left behind him in the slow red coils of fire.

After a while he heard the music.

It seemed to be some sort of a harp, with a strange quality of vibration in the notes. It wasn't like anything he'd ever heard before. Perhaps the gas of which the sea was composed was an extraordinarily good conductor of sound, with a property of diffusion that made the music seem to come from everywhere at once softly at first, like something touched upon in a dream, and then, as he drew closer to the source, swelling into a racing, rippling flood of melody that wrapped itself around his nerves with a demoniac shiver of ecstasy.

The golden hounds began to fret with excitement, spreading their shining wings, driving him impatiently faster through the crystal branches.

Starke could feel the vibration growing in him—the very fibers of his muscles shuddering in sympathy with the unearthly harp. He guessed there was a lot of the music he couldn't hear. Too high, too low for his ears to register. But he could feel it.

He began to go faster, not because of the hounds, but because he wanted to. The deep quivering in his flesh excited him. He began to breathe harder, partly because of increased exertion, and some chemical quality of the mixture he breathed made him slightly drunk.

The thrumming harp-song stroked and stung him, waking a deeper, darker music, and suddenly he saw Beudag clearly—half-veiled and mystic in the candlelight at Faolan's dun; smooth curving bronze, her hair loose fire about her throat. A



great stab of agony went through him. He called her name, once, and the harp-sound swept it up and away, and then suddenly there was no music anymore, and no forest, and nothing but cold embers in Starke's heart.

He could see everything quite clearly in the time it took him to float from the top of the last tree to the floor of the plain. He had no idea how long a time that was. It didn't matter. It was one of those moments when time doesn't have any meaning.

The rim of the forest fell away in a long curve that melted glistening into the spark-shot sea. From it the plain stretched out, a level glassy floor of black obsidian, the spew of some long-dead volcano. Or was it dead? It seemed to Starke that the light here was redder, more vital, as though he were close to the source from which it sprang.

As he looked farther over the plain, the light seemed to coalesce into a shimmering curtain that wavered like the heat veils that dance along the Mercurian Twilight Belt at high noon. For one brief instant he glimpsed a picture on the curtain—a city, black, shining, fantastically turreted, the gigantic reflection of a Titan's dream. Then it was gone and the immediate menace of the foreground took all of Starke's attention.

He saw the flock, herded by more of the golden hounds. And he saw the shepherd, with the harp held silent between his hands.

The flock moved slightly, phosphorescently.

One hundred, two hundred silent, limply floating warriors drifting down the red dimness. In pairs, singly, or in pallid clusters they came. The golden hounds winged silently, leisurely around them, channeling them in tides that sluiced toward the fantastic ebon city.

The shepherd stood, a crop of obsidian, turning his shark-pale face. His sharp, aquamarine eyes found Starke. His silvery hand leapt beckoning over hard threads, striking them a blow. Reverberations ran out, seized Starke, shook him. He dropped his crystal dagger.

Hot screens of fire exploded in his eyes, bubbles whirled and danced in his eardrums. He lost all muscular control. His dark head fell forward against the thick blackness of hair on his chest; his golden eyes dissolved into weak, inane yellow, and his mouth loosened. He wanted to fight, but it was useless. This shepherd was one of the sea-people he had come to see, and one way or another he would see him.

Dark blood filled his aching eyes. He felt himself led, nudged, forced first this way, then that. A golden hound slipped by, gave him a pressure which rolled him over into a current of sea-blood. It ran down past where the shepherd stood with only a harp for a weapon.

Starke wondered dimly whether these other warriors in the flock, drifting, were dead or alive like himself. He had another surprise coming.

They were all Rann's men. Men of Falga. Silver men with burning hair. Rann's men. One of them, a huge warrior colored like powdered salt, wandered aimlessly by on another tide, his green eyes dull. He looked dead.

What business had the sea-people with the dead warriors of Falga? Why the hounds and the shepherd's harp? Questions eddied like lifted silt in Starke's tired, hanging head. Eddied and settled that.

Starke joined the pilgrimage.

The hounds were deft flickerings of wings ushered him into the midst of the flock. Bodies brushed against him. *Cold* bodies. He wanted to cry out. The cords of his neck constricted. In his mind the cry went forward:

"Are you alive, men of Falga?"

No answer; but the drift of scarred, pale bodies. The eyes in them knew nothing. They had forgotten Falga. They had forgotten Rann for whom they had lifted blade. Their tongues lolling in mouths asked nothing but sleep. They were getting it.

A hundred, two hundred strong they made a strange human river slipping toward the gigantic city wall. Starke-called-Conan and his bitter enemies going together. From the corners of his eyes, Starke saw the shepherd move. The shepherd was like Rann and her people who had years ago abandoned the sea to live on land. The shepherd seemed colder, more fishlike, though. There were small translucent webs between the thin fingers and spanning the long-toed feet. Thin, scarlike gills in the shadow of his tapered chin, lifted and sealed in the current, eating, taking sustenance from the blood-colored sea.

The harp spoke and the golden hounds obeyed. The harp spoke and the bodies twisted uneasily, as in a troubled sleep. A triple chord of it came straight at Starke. His fingers clenched.

"—and the dead shall walk again—"

Another ironic ripple of music.

“—and Rann’s men will rise again, this time against her—”

Starke had time to feel a brief, bewildered shivering, before the current hurled him forward. Clamoring drunkenly, witlessly, all about him, the dead, muscleless warriors of Falga tried to crush past him, all of them at once . . .

Long ago some vast sea Titan had dreamed of avenues struck from black stone. Each stone the size of three men tall. There had been a dream of walls going up and up until they dissolved into scarlet mist. There had been another dream of sea-gardens in which fish hung like erotic flowers, on tendrils of sensitive film-tissue. Whole beds of fish clung to garden base, like colonies of flowers aglow with sunlight. And on occasion a black amoebic presence filtered by, playing the gardener, weeding out an amber flower here, an amythystine bloom there.

And the sea Titan had dreamed of endless balustrades and battlements, of windowless turrets where creatures swayed like radium-skinned phantoms, carrying their green plumes of hair in their lifted palms, and looked down with curious, insolent eyes from on high. Women with shimmering bodies like some incredible coral harvested and kept high over these black stone streets, each in its archway.

Starke was alone. Falga’s warriors had gone off along a dim subterranean vent, vanished. Now the faint beckoning of harp and the golden hounds behind him turned him down a passage that opened out into a large circular stone room, one end of which opened out into a hall. Around the ebon ceiling, slender schools of fish swam. It was their bright effulgence that gave light to the room. They had been there, breeding, eating, dying, a thousand years, giving light to the place, and they would be there breeding and dying, a thousand more.

The harp faded until it was only a murmur.

Starke found his feet. Strength returned to him. He was able to see the man in the center of the room well. Too well.

The man hung in the fire tide. Chains of wrought bronze held his thin fleshless ankles so he couldn’t escape. His body desired it. It floated up.

It had been dead a long time. It was gaseous with decomposition and it wanted to rise to the surface of the Red Sea. The chains prevented this. Its arms weaved like white scarves before a sunken white face. Black hair trembled on end.

He was one of Faolan’s men. One of the Rovers. One of those who had gone down at Falga because of Conan.

His name was Geil.

Starke remembered.

The part of him that was Conan remembered the name.

The dead lips moved.

"Conan. What luck is this! Conan. I make you welcome."

The words were cruel, the lips around them loose and dead. It seemed to Starke an anger and embittered wrath lay deep in those hollow eyes. The lips twitched again.

"I went down at Falga for you and Rann, Conan. Remember?"

Part of Starke remembered and twisted in agony.

"We're all here, Conan. All of us. Clev and Mannt and Bron and Aesur. Remember Aesur, who could shape metal over his spine, prying it with his fingers? Aesur is here, big as a sea-monster, waiting in a niche, cold and loose as string. The sea-shepherds collected us. Collected us for a purpose of irony. Look!"

The boneless fingers hung out, as in a wind, pointing.

Starke turned slowly, and his heart pounded an uneven, shattering drumbeat. His jaw clinched and his eyes blurred. That part of him that was Conan cried out. Conan was so much of him and he so much of Conan it was impossible for a cleavage. They'd grown together like pearl material around sand-specule, layer on layer. Starke cried out.

In the hall which this circular room overlooked, stood a thousand men.

In lines of fifty across, shoulder to shoulder, the men of Crom Dhu stared unseeingly up at Starke. Here and there a face became shockingly familiar. Old memory cried their names.

"Bron! Clev! Mannt! Aesur!"

The collected decomposition of their bodily fluids raised them, drifted them above the flaggings. Each of them was chained, like Geil.

Geil whispered. "We have made a union with the men of Falga!"

Starke pulled back.

"Falga!"

"In death, all men are equals." He took his time with it. He was in no hurry. Dead bodies under-sea are never in a hurry. They sort of bump and drift and bide their time. Tomorrow we march against Crom Dhu."

"You're crazy! Crom Dhu is *your* home! It's the place of Beudag and Faolan—"

"And—" interrupted the hanging corpse, quietly, "Conan? Eh?" He laughed. A crystal dribble of bubbles ran up from the slack mouth. "Especially Conan. Conan who sank us at Falga . . ."

Starke moved swiftly. Nobody stopped him. He had the corpse's short blade in an instant. Geil's chest made a cold, silent sheath for it. The blade went like a fork through butter.

Coldly, without noticing this, Geil's voice spoke out:

"Stab me, cut me. You can't kill me any deader. Make sections of me. Play butcher. A flank, a hand, a heart! And while you're at it, I'll tell you the plan."

Snarling, Starke seized the blade out again. With blind violence he gave sharp blow after blow at the body, cursing bitterly, and the body took each blow, rocking in the red tide a little, and said with a matter-of-fact-tone:

"We'll march out of the sea to Crom Dhu gates. Romna and the others, looking down, recognizing us, will have the gates thrown wide to welcome us." The head tilted lazily, the lips peeled wide and folded down languidly over the words. "Think of the elation. Conan! The moment when Bron and Mannt and Aesur and I and yourself, yes, even yourself, Conan, return to Crom Dhu!"

Starke saw it, vividly. Saw it like a tapestry woven for him. He stood back, gasping for breath, his nostrils flaring, seeing what his blade had done to Geil's body, and seeing the great stone gates of Crom Dhu crashing open. The deliberation. The happiness, the elation to Faolan and Romna to see old friends returned. Old Rovers, long thought dead. Alive again, come to help! It made a picture!

With great deliberation, Starke struck out flat across before him.

Geil's head, severed from its lazy body, began, with infinite tiredness, to float toward the ceiling. As it traveled upward, now facing, now bobbling the back of its skull toward Starke, it finished its nightmare speaking:

"And then once inside the gates, what then, Conan? Can you guess? Can you guess what we'll do, Conan?"

Starke stared at nothingness, the sword trembling in his fist. From far away he heard Geil's voice:

"—we will kill Faolan in his hall. He will die with surprised lips. Romna's harp will lie in his disemboweled stomach. His heart with its last pulsings will sound the strings. And as for Beudag—"

Starke tried to push the thoughts away, raging and helpless.

Geil's body was no longer anything to look at. He had done all he could to it. Starke's face was bleached white and scraped down to the insane bone of it, "You'd kill you own people!"

Geil's separated head lingered at the ceiling, lightfish illuminating its ghastly features. "Our people? But we have no people! We're another race now. The dead. We do the bid-dings of the sea-shepherds."

Starke looked out into the hall, then he looked at circular wall.

"Okay," he said, without tone in his voice. "Come out. Wherever you're hiding and using this voice-throwing act. Come on out and talk straight."

In answer, an entire section of ebon stones fell back on silent hingework. Starke saw a long slender black marble table. Six people sat behind it in carven midnight thrones.

They were all men. Naked except for filmlike garments about their loins. They looked at Starke with no particular hatred or curiosity. One of them cradled a harp. It was the shepherd who'd drawn Starke through the gate. Amusedly, his webbed fingers lay on the strings, now and then bringing out a clear sound from one of the two hundred strands.

The shepherd stopped Starke's rush forward with a cry of that harp!

The blade in his hand was red hot. He dropped it.

The shepherd put a head on the story. "And then? And then we will march Rann's dead warriors all the way to Falga. There, Rann's people, seeing the warriors, will be overjoyed, hysterical to find their friends and relatives returned. They, too, will fling wide Falga's defenses. And death will walk in, disguised as resurrection."

Starke nodded, slowly, wiping his hand across his cheek. "Back on Earth we call that psychology. *Good* psychology. But will it fool Rann?"

"Rann will be with her ships at Crom Dhu. While she's gone, the innocent population will let in their lost warriors gladly." The shepherd had amused green eyes. He looked like a youth of some seventeen years. Deceptively young. If Stark guessed right, the youth was nearer to two centuries old. That's how you lived and looked when you were under the Red Sea. Something about the emanations of it kept part of you young.

Starke lidded his yellow hawk's eyes thoughtfully. "You've got all aces. You'll win. But what's Crom Dhu to you? Why

not just Rann? She's one of you; you hate her more than you do the Rovers. Her ancestors came up on land; you never got over hating them for that—"

The shepherd shrugged. "Toward Crom Dhu we have little actual hatred. Except that they are by nature land-men, even if they do rove by boat, and pillagers. One day they might try their luck on the sunken devices of this city."

Starke put a hand out. "We're fighting Rann, too. Don't forget, we're on your side!"

"Whereas we are on no one's," retorted the greenhaired youth, "Except our own. Welcome to the army which will attack Crom Dhu."

"Me! By the gods, over my dead body!"

"That," said the youth, amusedly, "is what we intend. We've worked many years, you see, to perfect the plan. We're not much good out on land. We needed bodies that could do the work for us. So, every time Faolan lost a ship or Rann lost a ship, we were there, with our golden hounds, waiting. Collecting. Saving. Waiting until we had enough of each side's warriors. They'll do the fighting for us. Oh, not for long, of course. The Source energy will give them a semblance of life, a momentary electrical ability to walk and combat, but once out of water they'll last only half an hour. But that should be time enough once the gates of Crom Dhu and Falga are open."

Starke said, "Rann will find some way around you. Get her first. Attack Crom Dhu the following day."

The youth deliberated. "You're stalling. But there's sense in it. Rann is most important. We'll get Falga first, then. You'll have a bit of time in which to raise false hopes."

Starke began to get sick again. The room swam.

Very quietly, very easily, Rann came into his mind again. He felt her glide in like the merest touch of a sea fern weaving in a tide pool.

He closed his mind down, but not before she snatched at a shred of thought. Her aquamarine eyes reflected desire and inquiry.

"Hugh Starke, you're with the sea people?"

Her voice was soft. He shook his head.

"Tell me, Hugh Starke. How are you plotting against Falga?"

He said nothing. He thought nothing. He shut his eyes.

Her fingernails glittered, raking at his mind. "Tell me!"

His thoughts rolled tightly into a metal sphere which nothing could dent.

Rann laughed unpleasantly and leaned forward until she filled every dark horizon of his skull with her shimmering body. "All right. I gave you Conan's body. Now I'll take it away."

She struck him a combined blow of her eyes, her writhing lips, her bone-sharp teeth. "Go back to your old body, go back to your old body, Hugh Starke," she hissed. "Go back! Leave Conan to his idiocy. Go back to your old body!"

Fear had him. He fell down upon his face, quivering and jerking. You could fight a man a sword. But how could you fight this thing in your brain? He began to suck sobbing breaths through his lips. He was screaming. He could not hear himself. Her voice rushed in from the dim outer red universe, destroying him.

"Hugh Starke! Go back to your old body!"

His old body was—dead!

And she was sending him back into it.

Part of him shot endwise looks through red fog.

He lay on a mountain plateau overlooking the harbor of Falga.

Red fog coiled and snaked around him. Flame birds dived eerily down at his staring, blind eyes.

His old body held him.

Putrefaction stuffed his nostrils. The flesh sagged and slipped greasily on his loosened structure. He felt small again and ugly. Flame birds nibbled, picking, choosing between his ribs. Pain gorged him. Cold, blackness, nothingness filled him. Back in his old body. Forever.

He didn't want that.

The plateau, the red fog vanished. The flame birds, too.

He lay once more on the floor of the sea shepherds, struggling.

"That was just a start," Rann told him. "Next time, I'll leave you up there on the plateau in that body. Now, will you tell the plans of the sea people? And go on living in Conan? He's yours, if you tell." She smirked. "You don't want to be dead."

Starke tried to reason it out. Any way he turned was the wrong way. He grunted out a breath. "If I tell, you'll still kill Beudag."

"Her life in exchange for what you know, Hugh Starke."

Her answer was too swift. It had the sound of teachery.



Starke did not believe. He would die. That would solve it. Then, at least, Rann would die when the sea people carried out their strategy. That much revenge, at least, damn it.

Then he got the idea.

He coughed out a laugh, raised his weak head to look at the startled sea shepherd. His little dialogue with Rann had taken about ten seconds, actually, but it had seemed a century. The sea shepherd stepped forward.

Starke tried to get to his feet. "Got—got a proposition for you. You with the harp. Rann's inside me. *Now*. Unless you guarantee Crom Dhu and Beudag's safety, I'll tell her some things she might want to be in on!"

The sea shepherd drew a knife.

Starke shook his head, coldly. "Put it away. Even if you get me I'll give the whole damned strategy to Rann."

The shepherd dropped his hand. He was no fool.

Rann tore at Starke's brain. "Tell me! Tell me their plan!"

He felt like a guy in a revolving door. Starke got the sea men in focus. He saw that they were afraid now, doubtful and nervous. "I'll be dead in a minute," said Starke. "Promise me the safety of Crom Dhu and I'll die without telling Rann a thing."

The sea shepherd hesitated, then raised his palm upward. "I promise," he said. "Crom Dhu will go untouched."

Starke sighed. He let his head fall forward until it hit the floor. Then he rolled over, put his hands over his eyes. "It's a deal. Go give Rann hell for me, will you, boys? Give her hell!"

As he drifted into mind darkness, Rann waited for him. Feebly, he told her, "Okay, duchess. You'd kill me even if I'd told you the idea. I'm ready. Try your god-awfullest to shove me back into that stinking body of mine. I'll fight you all the way there!"

Rann screamed. It was a pretty frustrated scream. Then the pains began. She did a lot of work on his mind in the next minute.

That part of him that was Conan held on like a clam holding to its precious contents.

The odor of putrid flesh returned. The blood mist returned. The flame birds fell down at him in spirals of sparks and blistering smoke, to winnow his naked ribs.

Starke spoke one last word before the blackness took him.

"Beudag."

He never expected to awaken again.

He awoke just the same.

There was red sea all around him. He lay on a kind of stone bed, and the young sea shepherd sat beside him, looking down at him, smiling delicately.

Starke did not dare move for a while. He was afraid his head might fall off and whirl away like a big fish, using its ears as propellers. "Lord," he muttered, barely turning his head.

The sea creature stirred. "You won. You fought Rann, and won."

Starke groaned. "I feel like something passed through a wildcat's intestines. She's gone. Rann's gone." He laughed. "That makes me sad. Somebody cheer me up. Rann's gone." He felt of his big, flat-muscle body. "She was bluffing. Trying to decide to drive me batty. She knew she couldn't really tuck me back into that carcass, but she didn't want me to know. It was like a baby's nightmare before it's born. Or maybe you haven't got a memory like me." He rolled over, stretching. "She won't ever get in my head again. I've locked the gate and swallowed the key." His eyes dilated. "What's *your* name?"

"Linnl," said the man with the harp. "You didn't tell Rann our strategy?"

"What do *you* think?"

Linnl smiled sincerely. "I think I like you, man of Crom Dhu. I think I like your hatred for Rann. I think I like the way you handled the entire matter, wanted to kill Rann and save Crom Dhu, and being so willing to die to accomplish either."

"That's a lot of thinking. Yeah, and what about that promise you made?"

"It will be kept."

Starke gave him a hand. "Linnl, you're okay. If I ever get back to Earth, so help me, I'll never bait a hook again and drop it in the sea." It was lost to Linnl. Starke forgot it, and went on, laughing. There was an edge of hysteria to it. Relief. You got booted around for days, people milled in and out of your mind like it was a bargain basement counter, pawing over the treads and convolutions, yelling and fighting; the woman you loved was starved on a ship masthead, and as a climax a lady with green eyes tried to make you a filling for an accident-mangled body. And now you had an ally.

And you couldn't believe it.

He laughed in little starts and stops, his eyes shut.

"Will you let me take care of Rann when the time comes?"

His fingers groped hungrily upward, closed on an imaginary figure of her, pressed, tightly, choked.

Linnl said, "She's yours. I'd like the pleasure, but you have as much if not more of a revenge to take. Come along. We start now. You've been asleep for one entire period."

Starke let himself down gingerly. He didn't want to break a leg off. He felt if someone touched him he might disintegrate.

He managed to let the tide handle him, do all the work. He swam carefully after Linnl down three passageways where an occasional silver inhabitant of the city slid by.

Drifting below them in a vast square hall, each gravitating but imprisoned by leg-shackles, the warriors of Falga looked up with pale cold eyes at Starke and Linnl. Occasional discharges of light-fish from interstices in the walls passed luminous, fleeting glows over the warriors. The light-fish flirted briefly in a long shining rope that tied knots around the dead faces and as quickly untied them. Then the light-fish pulsed away and the red color of the sea took over.

Bathed in wine, thought Starke, without humor. He leaned forward.

"Men of Falga!"

Linnl plucked a series of harp-threads.

"Aye." A deep suggestion of sound issued from a thousand dead lips.

"We go to sack Rann's citadel!"

"Rann!" came the muffled thunder of voices.

At the sound of another tune, the golden hounds appeared. They touched the chains. The men of Falga, released, danced through the red sea substance.

Siphoned into a valve mouth, they were drawn out into a great volcanic courtyard. Starke went close after. He stared down into a black ravine, at the bottom of which was a blazing caldera.

This was the Source Life of the Red Sea. Here it had begun a millennium ago. Here the savage cyclones of sparks and fire energy belched up, shaking titanic black garden walls, causing currents and whirlpools that threatened to suck you forward and shoot you violently up to the surface, in cannulas of force, thrust, in capillaries of ignited mist, in chutes of color that threatened to cremate but only exhilarated you, gave you a seething rebirth!

He braced his legs and fought the suction. An unbelievable

sinew of fire sprang up from out the ravine, crackling and roaring.

The men of Falga did not fight the attraction.

They moved forward in their silence and hung over the incandescence.

The vitality of the Source grew upward in them. It seemed to touch their sandaled toes first, and then by a process of shining osmosis, climb up the limbs, into the loins, into the vitals, delineating their strong bone structure as mercury delineates the glass thermometer with a rise of temperature. The bones flickered like carved polished ivory through the momentarily film-like flesh. The ribs of a thousand men expanded like silvered spider legs, clenched, then expanded again. Their spines straightened, their shoulders flattened back. Their eyes, the last to take the fire, now were ignited and glowed like candles in refurbished sepulchers. The chins snapped up, the entire outer skins of their bodies broke into silver brilliance.

Swimming through the storm of energy like nightmare fragments, entering cold, they reached the far side of the ravine resembling smelted metal from blast furnaces. When they brushed into one another, purple sparks sizzled, jumped from head to head, from hand to hand.

Linnl touched Starke's arm. "You're next."

"No thank you."

"Afraid?" laughed the harp-shepherd. "You're tired. It will give you new life. You're next."

Starke hesitated only a moment. Then he let the tide drift him rapidly out. He was afraid. Damned afraid. A belch of fire caught him as he arrived in the core of the ravine. He was wrapped in layers of ecstasy. Beudag pressed against him. It was her consuming hair that netted him and branded him. It was her warmth that crept up his body into his chest and into his head. Somebody yelled somewhere in animal delight and unbearable passion. Somebody danced and threw out his hands and crushed that solar warmth deeper into his huge body. Somebody felt all tiredness, oldness flumed away, a whole new feeling of warmth and strength inserted.

That somebody was Starke.

Waiting on the other side of the ravine were a thousand men of Falga. What sounded like a thousand harps began playing now, and as Starke reached the other side, the harps began marching, and the warriors marched with them. They were still dead, but you would never know it. There were no

minds inside those bodies. The bodies were being activated from outside. But you would never know it.

They left the city behind. In embering ranks, the soldier-fighters were led by golden hounds and distant harps to a place where a huge intracoastal tide swept by.

They got on the tide for a free ride. Linnl beside him, using his harp, Starke felt himself sucked down through a deep where strange monsters sprawled. They looked at Starke with hungry eyes. But the harp wall swept them back.

Starke glanced about at the men. They don't know what they're doing, he thought. Going home to kill their parents and their children, to set the flame to Falga, and they don't know it. Their alive-but-dead faces tilted up, always upward, as though visions of Rann's citadel were there.

Rann. Starke let the wrath simmer in him. He let it cool. Then it was cold. Rann hadn't bothered him now for hours. Was there a chance she'd read his thought in the midst of that fighting nightmare? Did she know this plan for Falga? Was that an explanation for her silence now?

He sent his mind ahead, subtly. *Rann. Rann.* The only answer was the move of silver bodies through the fiery deeps.

Just before dawn they broke surface of the sea.

Falga drowsed in the red-smeared fog silence. Its slave streets were empty and dew-covered. High up, the first light was bathing Rann's gardens and setting her citadel aglow.

Linnl lay in the shallows beside Starke. They both were smiling half-cruel smiles. They had waited long for this.

Linnl nodded. "This is the day of the carnival. Fruit, wine, and love will be offered the returned soldiers of Rann. In the streets there'll be dancing."

Far over to the right lay a rise of mountain. At its blunt peak—Starke stared at it intently—rested a body of a little, scrawny Earthman, with flame-birds clustered on it. He'd climb that mountain later. When it was over and there was time.

"What are you searching for?" asked Linnl.

Starke's voice was distant. "Someone I used to know."

Filing out on the stone quays, their rustling sandals eroded by time, the men stood clean and bright. Starke paced, a caged animal, at their center, so his dark body would pass unnoticed.

They were seen.

The cliff guard looked down over the dirty slave dwellings, from their arrow galleries, and set up a cry. Hands waved,

pointed frosty white in the dawn. More guards loped down the ramps and galleries, meeting, joining others and coming on.

Linnl, in the sea by the quay, suggested a theme on the harp. The other harps took it up. The shuddering music lifted from the water and with a gentle firmness, set the dead feet marching down the quays, upward through the narrow, stifling alleys of the slaves, to meet the guard.

Slave people peered out at them tiredly from their choked quarters. The passing of warriors was old to them, of no significance.

These warriors carried no weapons. Starke didn't like that part of it. A length of chain even, he wanted. But this emptiness of the hands. His teeth ached from too long a time of clenching his jaws tight. The muscles of his arms were feverish and nervous.

At the edge of the slave community, at the cliff base, the guard confronted them. Running down off the galleries, swords naked, they ran to intercept what they took to be an enemy.

The guards stopped in blank confusion.

A little laugh escaped Starke's lips. It was a dream. With fog over, under and in between its parts. It wasn't real to the guard, who couldn't believe it. It wasn't real to these dead men either, who were walking around. He felt alone. He was the only live one. He didn't like walking with dead men.

The captain of the guard came down warily, his green eyes suspicious. The suspicion faded. His face fell apart. He had lain on his fur pelts for months thinking of his son who had died to defend Falga.

Now his son stood before him. Alive.

The captain forgot he was captain. He forgot everything. His sandals scraped over stones. You could hear the air go out of his lungs and come back in in a numbed prayer.

"My son! In Rann's name. They said you were slain by Faolan's men one hundred darknesses ago. My son!"

A harp tinkled somewhere.

The son stepped forward, smiling.

They embraced. The son said nothing. He couldn't speak.

This was the signal for the others. The whole guard, shocked and surprised, put away their swords and sought out old friends, brothers, fathers, uncles, sons!

They moved up the galleries, the guard and the returned warriors, Starke in their midst. Threading up the cliff,

through passage after passage, all talking at once. Or so it seemed. The guards did the talking. None of the dead warriors replied. They only *seemed* to. Starke heard the music strong and clear everywhere.

They reached the green gardens atop the cliff. By this time the entire city was awake. Women came running, bare-breasted and sobbing, and throwing themselves forward into the ranks of their lovers. Flowers showered over them.

"So this is war," muttered Starke, uneasily.

They stopped in the center of the great gardens. The crowd milled happily, not yet aware of the strange silence from their men. They were too happy to notice.

"Now," cried Starke to himself. "Now's the time. Now!"

As if in answer, a wild skirling of harps out of the sky.

The crowd stopped laughing only when the returned warriors of Falga swept forward, their hands lifted and groping before them . . .

The crying in the streets was like a far siren wailing. Metal made a harsh clangor that was sheathed in silence at the same moment metal found flesh to lie in. A vicious pantomime was concluded in the green moist gardens.

Starke watched from Rann's empty citadel. Fog plumes strolled by the archway and a thick rain fell. It came like a blood squall and washed the garden below until you could not tell rain from blood.

The returned warriors had gotten their swords by now. First they killed those nearest them in the celebration. Then they took the weapons from the victims. It was very simple and very unpleasant.

The slaves had joined battle now. Swarming up from the slave town, plucking up fallen daggers and short swords, they circled the gardens, happening upon the arrogant shining warriors of Rann who had so far escaped the quiet, deadly killing of the alive-but-dead men.

Dead father killed startled, alive son. Dead brother garroted unbelieving brother. Carnival indeed in Falga.

An old man waited alone. Starke saw him. The old man had a weapon, but refused to use it. A young warrior of Falga, harped on by Linnl's harp, walked quietly up to the old man. The old man cried out. His mouth formed words. "Son! What *is* this?" He flung down his blade and made to plead with his boy.

The son stabbed him with silent efficiency, and without a glance at the body, walked onward to find another.

Starke turned away, sick and cold.

A thousand such scenes were being finished.

He set fire to the black spider-silk tapestries. They whispered and talked with flame. The stone echoed his feet as he searched room after room. Rann had gone, probably last night. That meant that Crom Dhu was on the verge of falling. Was Faolan dead? Had the people of Crom Dhu, seeing Beudag's suffering, given in? Falga's harbor was completely devoid of ships, except for small fishing skiffs.

The fog waited him when he returned to the garden. Rain found his face.

The citadel of Rann was fire-encrusted and smoke-shrouded as he looked up at it.

A silence lay in the garden. The fight was over.

The men of Falga, still shining with Source-Life, hung their blades from uncomprehending fingers, the light beginning to leave their green eyes. Their skin looked dirty and dull.

Starke wasted no time getting down the galleries, through the slave quarter, and to the quays again.

Linnl awaited him, gently petting the obedient harp.

"It's over. The slaves will own what's left. They'll be our allies, since we've freed them."

Starke didn't hear. He was squinting off over the Red Sea.

Linnl understood. He plucked two tones from the harp, which pronounced the two words uppermost in Starke's thought.

"Crom Dhu."

"If we're not too late." Starke leaned forward. "If Faolan lives. If Beudag still stands at the masthead."

Like a blind man he walked straight ahead, until he fell into the sea.

It was not quite a million miles to Crom Dhu. It only seemed that far.

A sweep of tide picked them up just off shore from Falga and siphoned them rapidly, through deeps along coastal latitudes, through crystal forests. He cursed every mile of the way.

He cursed the time it took to pause at the Titan's city to gather fresh men. To gather Clev and Mannt and Aesur and Bron. Impatiently, Starke watched the whole drama of the Source-Fire and the bodies again. This time it was the bodies of Crom Dhu men, hung like beasts on slow-turned spits,



their limbs and vitals soaking through and through, their skins taking bronze color, their eyes holding flint-sparks. And then the harps wove a garment around each, and the garment moved the men instead of the men the garment.

In the tidal basilic now, Starke twisted. Coursing behind him were the new bodies of Clev and Aesur! The current elevated them, poked them through obsidian needle-eyes like spider-silk threads.

There was good irony in this. Crom Dhu's men, fallen at Falga under Conan's treachery, returned now under Conan to exonerate that treachery.

Suddenly they were in Crom Dhu's outer basin. Shadows swept over them. The long dark falling shadows of Falga's longboats lying in that harbor. Shadows like black culling-nets let down. The school of men cleaved the shadow nets. The tide ceased here, eddied and distilled them.

Starke glared up at the immense silver bottom of a Falgian ship. He felt his face stiffen and his throat tighten. Then, flexing knees, he rammed upward; night air broke dark red around his head.

The harbor held flare torches on the rims of long ships. On the neck of land that led from Crom Dhu to the mainland the continuing battle sounded. Faint cries and clashing made their way through the fog veils. They sounded like echoes of past dreams.

Linnl let Starke have the leash. Starke felt something pressed into his fist. A coil of slender green woven reeds, a rope with hooked weights on the end of it. He knew how to use it without asking. But he wished for a knife now, even though he realized carrying a knife in the sea was all but impossible if you wanted to move fast.

He saw the sleek naked figurehead of Rann's best ship a hundred yards away, a floating silhouette, its torches hanging fire like Beudag's hair.

He swam toward it, breathing quietly. When at last the silvered figurehead with the mocking green eyes and the flag of shoal-shallow hair hung over him, he felt the cool white ship metal kiss his fingers.

The smell of torch-smoke lingered. A rise of faint shouts from the land told of another rush upon the Gate. Behind him—a ripple. Then—a thousand ripples.

The resurrected men of Crom Dhu rose in dents and stirrings of sparkling wine. They stared at Crom Dhu and maybe they knew what it was and maybe they didn't. For one mo-

ment, Starke felt apprehension. Suppose Linnl was playing a game. Suppose, once these men had won the battle, they went on into Crom Dhu to rupture Romna's harp and make Faolan the blinder? He shook the thought away. That would have to be handled in time. On either side of him Clev and Mannt appeared. They looked at Crom Dhu, their lips shut. Maybe they saw Faolan's eyrie and heard a harp that was more than these harps that sang them to blade and plunder—Romna's instrument telling bard-tales of the rovers and the coastal wars and the old, living days. Their eyes looked and looked at Crom Dhu, but saw nothing.

The sea shepherds appeared now, the followers of Linnl, each with his harp; and the harp music began, high. So high you couldn't hear it. It wove a tension on the air.

Silently, with a grim certainty, the dead-but-not-dead gathered in a bronze circle about Rann's ship. The very silence of their encirclement made your skin crawl and sweat break cold on your cheeks.

A dozen ropes went raveling, looping over the ship side. They caught, held, grapnelled, hooked.

Starke had thrown his, felt it bite, and hold. Now he scrambled swiftly, cursing, up its length, kicking and slipping at the silver hull.

He reached the top.

Beudag was there.

Half over the low rail he hesitated, just looking at her.

Torchlight limned her, shadowed her. She was still erect; her head was tired and her eyes closed, her face thinned and less brown, but she was still alive. She was coming out of a deep stupor now, at the whistle of ropes and the grate of metal hooks on the deck.

She saw Starke and her lips parted. She did not look away from him. His breath came out of him, choking.

It almost cost him his life, his standing there, looking at her.

A guard, with flesh like new snow, shafted his bow from the turret and let it loose. A chain lay on deck. Thankfully, Starke took it.

Clev came over the rail beside Starke. His chest took the arrow. Clev kept going after the man who had shot it. He caught up with him.

Beudag cried out. "Behind you, Conan!"

Conan! In her excitement, she gave the old name.

Conan he was. Whirling, he confronted a wiry little fellow,

chained him brutally across the face, seized the man's falling sword, used it on him. Then he walked in, got the man's jaw, unbalanced him over into the sea.

The ship was awake now. Most of the men had been down below, resting from the battles. Now they came pouring up, in a silver spate. Their yelling was in strange contrast to the calm silence of Crom Dhu's men. Starke found himself busy.

Conan had been a healthy animal, with great recuperative powers. Now his muscles responded to every trick asked of them. Starke leaped cleanly across the deck, watching for Rann, but she was nowhere to be seen. He engaged two blades, dispatched one of them. More ropes raveled high and snaked him. Every ship in the harbor was exploding with violence. More men swarmed over the rail behind Starke, silently.

Above the shouting, Beudag's voice came, at sight of the fighting men. "Clev! Mannt! Aesur!"

Starke was a god; anything he wanted he could have. A man's head? He could have it. It meant acting the guillotine with knife and wrist and lunged body. Like—*this!* His eyes were smoking amber and there were deep lines of grim pleasure tugging at his lips. An enemy cannot fight without hands. One man, facing Starke, suddenly displayed violent stumps before his face, not believing them.

Are you watching, Faolan? cried Starke inside himself, delivering blows. Look here, Faolan! God, no, you're blind. *Listen* then! Hear the ring of steel on steel. Does the smell of hot blood and hot bodies reach you? Oh, if you could see this tonight, Faolan. Falga would be forgotten. This is Conan, out of idiocy, with a guy named Starke wearing him and telling him where to go!

It was not safe on deck. Starke hadn't particularly noticed before, but the warriors of Crom Dhu didn't care whom they attacked now. They were beginning to do surgery to one another. They excised one another's shoulders, severed limbs in blind instantaneous obedience. This was no place for Beudag and himself.

He cut her free of the masthead, drew her quickly to the rail.

Beudag was laughing. She could do nothing but laugh. Her eyes were shocked. She saw dead men alive again, lashing out with weapons; she had been starved and made to stand night and day, and now she could only laugh.

Starke shook her.

She did not stop laughing.

"Beudag! You're all right. You're free."

She stared at nothing. "I'll—I'll be all right in a minute."

He had to ward off a blow from one of his own men. He parried the thrust, then got in and pushed the man off the deck, over into the sea. That was the only thing to do. You couldn't kill them.

Beudag stared down at the tumbling body.

"Where's Rann?" Starke's yellow eyes narrowed, searching.

"She was here." Beudag trembled.

Rann looked out of her eyes. Out of the tired numbness of Beudag, an echo of Rann. Rann was nearby, and this was her doing.

Instinctively, Starke raised his eyes.

Rann appeared at the masthead, like a flurry of snow. Her green-tipped breasts were rising and falling with emotion. Pure hatred lay in her eyes. Starke licked his lips and readied his sword.

Rann snapped a glance at Beudag. Stooping, as in a dream, Beudag picked up a dagger and held it to her own breast.

Starke froze.

Rann nodded, with satisfaction. "Well, Starke? How will it be? Will you come at me and have Beudag die? Or will you let me go free?"

Starke's palms felt sweaty and greasy. "There's no place for you to go. Falga's taken. I can't guarantee your freedom. If you want to go over the side, into the sea, that's your chance. You might make shore and your own men."

"Swimming? With the *sea-beasts* waiting?" She accented the *beasts* heavily. She was one of the *sea-people*. They, Linnl and his men, were *sea-beasts*. "No, Hugh Starke. I'll take a skiff. Put Beudag at the rail where I can watch her all the way. Guarantee my passage to shore and my own men there, and Beudag lives."

Starke waved his sword. "Get going."

He didn't want to let her go. He had other plans, good plans for her. He shouted the deal down at Linnl. Linnl nodded back, with much reluctance.

Rann, in a small silver skiff, headed toward land. She handled the boat and looked back at Beudag all the while. She passed through the *sea-beasts* and touched the shore. She lifted her hand and brought it smashing down.

Whirling, Starke swung his fist against Beudag's jaw. Her hand was already striking the blade into her breast. Her head

flopped back. His fist carried through. She fell. The blade clattered. He kicked it overboard. Then he lifted Beudag. She was warm and good to hold. The blade had only pricked her breast. A small rivulet of blood ran.

On the shore, Rann vanished upward on the rocks, hurrying to find her men.

In the harbor the harp music paused. The ships were taken. Their crews lay filling the decks. Crom Dhu's men stopped fighting as quickly as they'd started. Some of the bright shining had dulled from the bronze of their arms and bare torsos. The ships began to sink.

Linnl swam below, looking up at Starke. Starke looked back at him and nodded at the beach. "Swell. Now, let's go get that she-devil," she said.

Faolan waited on his great stone balcony, overlooking Crom Dhu. Behind him the fires blazed high and their eating sound of flame on wood filled the pillared gloom with sound and furious light.

Faolan leaned against the rim, his chest swathed in bandage and healing ointment, his blind eyes flickering, looking down again and again with a fixed intensity, his head tilted to listen.

Romna stood beside him, filled and refilled the cup that Faolan emptied into his thirsty mouth, and told him what happened. Told of the men pouring out of the sea, and Rann appearing on the rocky shore. Sometimes Faolan leaned to one side, weakly, toward Romna's words. Sometimes he twisted to hear the thing itself, the thing that happened down beyond the Gate of besieged Crom Dhu.

Romna's harp lay untouched. He didn't play it. He didn't need to. From below, a great echoing of harps, more liquid than his, like a waterfall drenched the city, making the fog sob down red tears.

"Are those harps?" cried Faolan.

"Yes, harps!"

"What was that?" Faolan listened, breathing harshly, clutching for support.

"A skirmish," said Romna.

"Who won?"

"We won."

"And *that*?" Faolan's blind eyes tried to see until they watered.

"The enemy falling back from the Gate!"

"And that sound, and that sound?" Faolan went on and on, feverishly, turning this way and that, the lines of his face agonized and attentive to each eddy and current and change of tide. The rhythm of swords through fog and body was a complicated music whose themes he must recognize. "Another fell! I heard him cry. And another of Rann's men!"

"Yes," said Romna.

"But why do our warriors fight so quietly? I've heard nothing from their lips. So quiet."

Romna scowled. "Quiet! Yes—quiet."

"And where did they come from? All our men are in the city?"

"Aye." Romna shifted. He hesitated, squinting. He rubbed his bulldog jaw. "Except those that died at—Falga."

Faolan stood there a moment. Then he rapped the empty cup.

"More wine, bard. More wine."

He turned to the battle again.

"Oh, gods, if I could see it, if I could only see it!"

Below, a ringing crash. A silence. A shouting, a pouring of noise.

"The Gate!" Faolan was stricken with fear. "We're lost! My sword!"

"Stay, Faolan!" Romna laughed. Then he sighed. It was a sigh that did not believe. "In the name of ten thousand mighty gods. Would that I were blind now, or could see better."

Faolan's hand caught, held him. "What is it? Tell!"

"Clev! And Tlan! And Conan! And Bron! And Mannt! Standing in the gate, like wine visions! Swords in their hands!"

Faolan's hand relaxed, then tightened. "Speak their names again, and speak them slowly. And tell the truth." His skin shivered like that of a nervous animal. "You said—Clev? Mannt? Bron?"

"And Tlan! And Conan! Back from Falga. They've opened the Gate and the battle's won. It's over, Faolan. Crom Dhu will sleep tonight."

Faolan let him go. A sob broke from his lips. "I will get drunk. Drunker than ever in my life. Gloriously drunk. Gods, but if I could have seen it. Been in it. Tell me again of it, Romna . . ."

Faolan sat in the great hall, on his carved high-seat, waiting.

The pad of sandals on stone outside, the jangle of chains.

A door flung wide, red fog sluiced in, and in the sluice, people walking. Faolan started up. "Clev? Mannt? Aesur?"

Starke came forward into the firelight. He pressed his right hand to the open mouth of wound on his thigh. "No, Faolan. Myself and two others."

"Beudag?"

"Yes." And Beudag came wearily to him.

Faolan stared. "Who's the other? It walks light. It's a woman."

Starke nodded. "Rann."

Faolan rose carefully from his seat. He thought the name over. He took a short sword from a place beside the high seat. He stepped down. He walked toward Starke. "You brought Rann alive to me?"

Starke pulled the chain that bound Rann. She ran forward in little steps, her white face down, her eyes slitted with animal fury.

"Faolan's blind," said Starke. "I let you live for one damned good reason, Rann. Okay, go ahead."

Faolan stopped walking, curious. He waited.

Rann did nothing.

Starke took her hand and wrenched it behind her back. "I said 'go ahead.' Maybe you didn't hear me."

"I will," she gasped, in pain.

Starke released her. "Tell me what happens, Faolan."

Rann gazed steadily at Faolan's tall figure there in the light.

Faolan suddenly threw his hands to his eyes and choked.

Beudag cried out, seized his arm.

"I can see!" Faolan staggered, as if jolted. "I can see!" First he shouted it, then he whispered it. "*I can see.*"

Starke's eyes blurred. He whispered to Rann, tightly. "Make him see it, Rann, or you die now. Make him see it!" To Faolan: "What do you see?"

Faolan was bewildered; he swayed. He put out his hands to shape the vision. "I—I see Crom Dhu. It's a good sight. I see the ships of Rann. Sinking!" He laughed a broken laugh. "I—see the fight beyond the gate!"

Silence swam in the room, over their heads.

Faolan's voice went alone, and hypnotized, into that silence.

He put out his big fists, shook them, opened them. "I see Mannt, and Aesur and Clev! Fighting as they always fought.

I see Conan as he was. I see Beudag wielding steel again, on the shore! I see the enemy killed! I see men pouring out of the sea with brown skins and dark hair. Men I knew a long darkness ago. Men that roved the sea with me. *I see Rann captured!*" He began to sob with it, his lungs filling and releasing it, sucking on it, blowing it out. Tears ran down from his vacant, blazing eyes. "I see Crom Dhu as it was and is and shall be! *I see, I see, I see!*"

Starke felt the chill on the back of his neck.

"I see Rann captured and held, and her men dead around her on the land before the Gate. I see the Gate thrown open—" Faolan halted. He looked at Starke. "Where are Clev and Mannt? Where is Bron and Aesur?"

Starke let the fires burn on the hearths a long moment. Then he replied.

"They went back into the sea, Faolan."

Faolan's fingers fell emptily. "Yes," he said, heavily. "They had to go back, didn't they? They couldn't stay, could they? Not even for one night of food on the table, and wine in the mouth, and women in the deep warm furs before the hearth. Not even for one toast." He turned. "A drink, Romna. A drink for everyone."

Romna gave him a full cup. He dropped it, fell down to his knees, clawed at his breast. "My heart!"

"Rann, you sea-devil!"

Starke held her instantly by the throat. He put pressure on the small raging pulses on either side of her snow-white neck. "Let him go, Rann!" More pressure. "*Let him go!*" Faolan grunted. Starke held her until her white face was dirty and strange with death.

It seemed like an hour later when he released her. She fell softly and did not move. She wouldn't move again.

Starke turned slowly to look at Faolan.

"You saw, didn't you, Faolan?" he said.

Faolan nodded blindly, weakly. He roused himself from the floor, groping. "I saw. For a moment, I saw everything. And Gods! but it made good seeing! Here, Hugh-Starke-called-Conan, gave this other side of me something to lean on."

Beudag and Starke climbed the mountain above Falga the next day. Starke went ahead a little way, and with his coming the flame birds scattered, glittering away.

He dug the shallow grave and did what had to be done



with the body he found there, and then when the grave was covered with thick grey stones he went back for Beudag. They stood together over it. He had never expected to stand over a part of himself, but here he was, and Beudag's hand gripped his.

He looked suddenly a million years old standing there. He thought of Earth and the Belt and Jupiter, of the joy streets in the Jekkara Low Canals of Mars. He thought of space and the ships going through it, and himself inside them. He thought of the million credits he had taken in that last job. He laughed ironically.

"Tomorrow, I'll have the sea creatures hunt for a little metal box full of credits." He nodded solemnly at the grave. "He wanted that. Or at least he thought he did. He killed himself getting it. So if the sea-people find it, I'll send it up here to the mountain and bury it down under the rocks in his fingers. I guess that's the best place."

Beudag drew him away. They walked down the mountain toward Falga's harbor where a ship waited them. Walking, Starke lifted his face. Beudag was with him, and the sails of the ship were rising to take the wind, and the Red Sea waited for them to travel it. What lay on its far side was something for Beudag and Faolan-of-the-Ships and Romna and Hugh-Starke-called-Conan to discover. He felt damned good about it. He walked on steadily, holding Beudag near.

And on the mountain, as the ship sailed, the flame birds soared down fitfully and frustratedly to beat at the stone mound, ceased, and mourning shrilly, flew away.

# THE MILLION YEAR PICNIC

by Ray Bradbury

PLANET STORIES  
Summer

*The summer, 1946 Planet Stories was quite an issue. Not only did it feature the excellent novella you have just read, but it also contained one of the most important short stories in all of science fiction. "The Million Year Picnic" turned out to be the first of the stories that were collected together as The Martian Chronicles (1950), which in spite of its weak science, became a landmark book in the history of the field.*

*(I remember the year Doubleday began to publish hard-cover science fiction. The very first book published, in 1949, was The Big Eye by Max Ehrlich. The second, in January, 1950, was my own Pebble in The Sky [my first book]. The third was Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles. Bradbury's book is the rock on which his science fiction fame still rests thirty years later. It was the first science fiction blockbuster to the great world outside. It presented a second picture of Mars, equal in power to that of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and although science has outstripped fiction here and*

*presented Mars as it really is, the mythical Mars of Bradbury is not likely to die. It will continue to exist forever in some hidden nook of the mind. And The Million Year Picnic, the first written, is the last of the twenty-six stories in the book, and the fitting climax. Those last four sentences!—I.A.)*

Somehow the idea was brought up by Mom that perhaps the whole family would enjoy a fishing trip. But they weren't Mom's words; Timothy knew that. They were Dad's words and Mom used them for him somehow.

Dad shuffled his feet in a clutter of Martian pebbles and agreed. So immediately there was a tumult and a shouting, and very quickly the camp was tucked into capsules and containers. Mom slipped into traveling jumpers and blouse, Dad stuffed his pipe full with trembling hands, his eyes on the Martian sky, and the three boys piled yelling into the motorboat, none of them really keeping an eye on Mom and Dad, except Timothy.

Dad pushed a stud. The water boat sent a humming sound up into the sky. The water shook back and the boat nosed ahead, and the family cried, "Hurrah!"

Timothy sat in the back of the boat with Dad, his small fingers atop Dad's hairy ones, watching the canal twist, leaving the crumbled place behind where they had landed in their small family rocket all the way from Earth. He remembered the night before they left Earth, the hustling and hurrying, the rocket that Dad had found somewhere, somehow, and the talk of a vacation on Mars. A long way to go for a vacation, but Timothy said nothing because of his younger brothers. They came to Mars and now, first thing, or so they said, they were going fishing.

Dad had a funny look in his eyes as the boat went up-canal. A look that Timothy couldn't figure. It was made of strong light and maybe a sort of relief. It made the deep wrinkles laugh instead of worry or cry.

So there went the cooling rocket, around a bend, gone.

"How far are we going?" Robert splashed his hand. It looked like a small crab jumping in the violent water.

Dad exhaled. "A million years."

"Gee," said Robert.

"Look, kids." Mother pointed one soft long arm. "There's a dead city."

They looked with fervent anticipation, and the dead city lay dead for them alone, drowning in a hot silence of summer made on Mars by a Martian weatherman.

And Dad looked as if he was pleased that it was dead.

It was a futile spread of pink rocks sleeping on a rise of sand, a few tumbled pillars, one lonely shrine, and then the sweep of sand again. Nothing else for miles. A white desert around the canal and a blue desert over it.

Just then a bird flew up. Like a stone thrown across a blue pond, hitting, falling deep, and vanishing.

Dad got a frightened look when he saw it. "I thought it was a rocket."

Timothy looked at the deep ocean sky, trying to see Earth and the war and the ruined cities and the men killing each other since the day he was born. But he saw nothing. The war was as removed and far off as two flies battling to the death in the arch of a great high and silent cathedral. And just as senseless.

William Thomas wiped his forehead and felt the touch of his son's hand on his arm, like a young tarantula, thrilled. He beamed at his son. "How goes it, Timmy?"

"Fine, Dad."

Timothy hadn't quite figured out what was ticking inside the vast adult mechanism beside him. The man with the immense hawk nose, sunburnt, peeling—and the hot blue eyes like agate marbles you play with after school in summer back on Earth, and the long thick columnar legs in the loose riding breeches.

"What are you looking at so hard, Dad?"

"I was looking for Earthian logic, common sense, good government, peace, and responsibility."

"All that up there?"

"No. I didn't find it. It's not there any more. Maybe it'll never be there again. Maybe we fooled ourselves that it was ever there."

"Huh?"

"See the fish," said Dad, pointing.

There arose a soprano clamor from all three boys as they rocked the boat in arching their tender necks to see. They *ooohed* and *ahed*. A silver ring fish floated by them, undulat-

ing, and closing like an iris, instantly, around food particles, to assimilate them.

Dad looked at it. His voice was deep and quiet.

"Just like war. War swims along, sees food, contracts. A moment later—Earth is gone."

"William," said Mom.

"Sorry," said Dad.

They sat still and felt the canal water rush cool, swift, and glassy. The only sound was the motor hum, the glide of water, the sun expanding the air.

"When do we see the Martians?" cried Michael.

"Quite soon, perhaps," said Father. "Maybe tonight."

"Oh, but the Martians are a dead race now," said Mom.

"No, they're not. I'll show you some Martians, all right," Dad said presently.

Timothy scowled at that but said nothing. Everything was odd now. Vacations and fishing and looks between people.

The other boys were already engaged making shelves of their small hands and peering under them toward the seven-foot stone banks of the canal, watching for Martians.

"What do they look like?" demanded Michael.

"You'll know them when you see them." Dad sort of laughed, and Timothy saw a pulse beating time in his cheek.

Mother was slender and soft, with a woven plait of spun-gold hair over her head in a tiara, and eyes the color of the deep cool canal water where it ran in shadow, almost purple, with flecks of amber caught in it. You could see her thoughts swimming around in her eyes, like fish—some bright, some dark, some fast, quick, some slow and easy, and sometimes, like when she looked up where Earth was, being nothing but color and nothing else. She sat in the boat's prow, one hand resting on the side lip, the other on the lap of her dark blue breeches, and a line of sunburnt soft neck showing where her blouse opened like a white flower.

She kept looking ahead to see what was there, and, not being able to see it clearly enough she looked backward toward her husband, and through his eyes, reflected then, she saw what was ahead; and since he added part of himself to this reflection, a determined firmness, her face relaxed and she accepted it and she turned back, knowing suddenly what to look for.

Timothy looked too. But all he saw was a straight pencil line of canal going violet through a wide shallow valley penned by low, eroded hills, and on until it fell over the sky's

edge. And this canal went on and on, through cities that would have rattled like beetles in a dry skull if you shook them. A hundred or two hundred cities dreaming hot-summer-day dreams and cool-summer-night dreams . . .

They had come millions of miles for this outing—to fish. But there had been a gun on the rocket. This was a vacation. But why all the food, more than enough to last them years and years, left hidden back there near the rocket! Vacation. Just behind the veil of the vacation was not a soft face of laughter, but something hard and body and perhaps terrifying. Timothy could not lift the veil, and the two other boys were busy being ten and eight years old, respectively.

"No Martians yet. Nuts." Robert put his V-shaped chin on his hands and glared at the canal.

Dad had brought an atomic radio along, strapped to his wrist. It functioned on an old-fashioned principle: you held it against the bones near your ear and it vibrated singing or talking to you. Dad listened to it now. His face looked like one of those fallen Martian cities, caved in, sucked dry, almost dead.

Then he gave it to Mom to listen to. Her lips dropped open.

"What—" Timothy started to question, but never finished what he wished to say.

For at that moment there were two titantic, marrow-jolting explosions that grew upon themselves, followed by a half dozen minor concussions.

Jerking his head up, Dad notched the boat speed higher immediately. The boat leaped and jounced and spanked. This shook Robert out of his funk and elicited yelps of frightened but ecstatic joy from Michael, who clung to Mom's legs and watched the water pour by his nose in a wet torrent.

Dad swerved the boat, cut speed, and ducked the craft into a little branch canal and under an ancient, crumbling stone wharf that smelled of crab flesh. The boat rammed the wharf hard enough to throw them all forward, but no one was hurt, and Dad was already twisted to see if the ripples on the canal were enough to map their route into hiding. Water lines went across, lapped the stones, and rippled back to meet each other, settling, to be dappled by the sun. It all went away.

Dad listened. So did everybody.

Dad's breathing echoed like fists beating against the cold wet wharf stones. In the shadow, Mom's cat eyes just watched Father for some clue to what next.

Dad relaxed and blew out a breath, laughing at himself.

"The rocket, of course. I'm getting jumpy. The rocket."

Michael said, "What happened, Dad, what happened?"

"Oh, we just blew up our rocket, is all," said Timothy, trying to sound matter-of-fact. "I've heard rockets blown up before. Ours just blew."

"Why did we blow up our rocket?" asked Michael. "Huh, Dad?"

"It's part of the game, silly!" said Timothy.

"A game!" Michael and Robert loved the word.

"Dad fixed it so it would blow up and no one'd know where we landed or went! In case they ever came looking, see?"

"Oh boy, a secret!"

"Scared by my own rocket," admitted Dad to Mom. "I am nervous. It's silly to think there'll ever be any more rockets. Except *one*, perhaps, if Edwards and his wife get through with *their* ship."

He put his tiny radio to his ear again. After two minutes he dropped his hand as you would drop a rag.

"It's over at last," he said to Mom. "The radio just went off the atomic beam. Every other world station's gone. They dwindled down to a couple in the last few years. Now the air's completely silent. It'll probably remain silent."

"For how long?" asked Robert.

"Maybe—your great-grandchildren will hear it again," said Dad. He just sat there, and the children were caught in the center of his awe and defeat and resignation and acceptance.

Finally he put the boat out into the canal again, and they continued in the direction in which they had originally started.

It was getting late. Already the sun was down the sky, and a series of dead cities lay ahead of them.

Dad talked very quietly and gently to his sons. Many times in the past he had been brisk, distant, removed from them but now he patted them on the head with just a word and they felt it.

"Mike, pick a city."

"What, Dad?"

"Pick a city, Son. Any one of these cities we pass."

"All right," said Michael. "How do I pick?"

"Pick the one you like the most. You, too, Robert and Tim. Pick the city you like best."

"I want a city with Martians in it," said Michael.

"You'll have that," said Dad. "I promise." His lips were for the children, but his eyes were for Mom.

They passed six cities in twenty minutes. Dad didn't say anything more about the explosions; he seemed much more interested in having fun with his sons, keeping them happy, than anything else.

Michael liked the first city they passed, but this was vetoed because everyone doubted quick first judgments. The second city nobody liked. It was an Earth Man's settlement, built of wood and already rotting into sawdust. Timothy liked the third city because it was large. The fourth and fifth were too small and the sixth brought acclaim from everyone, including Mother, who joined in the Gees, Goshes, and Look-at-thats!

There were fifty or sixty huge structures still standing, streets were dusty but paved, and you could see one or two old centrifugal fountains still pulsing wetly in the plazas. That was the only lifewater leaping in the late sunlight.

"This is the city," said everybody.

Steering the boat to a wharf, Dad jumped out.

"Here we are. This is ours. This is where we live from now on!"

"From now on?" Michael was incredulous. He stood up, looking, and then turned to blink back at where the rocket used to be. "What about the rocket? What about Minnesota?"

"Here," said Dad.

He touched the small radio to Michael's blond head. "Listen."

Michael listened.

"Nothing," he said.

"That's right. Nothing. Nothing at all anymore. No more Minneapolis, no more rockets, no more Earth."

Michael considered the lethal revelation and began to sob little dry sobs.

"Wait a moment," said Dad the next instant. "I'm giving you a lot more in exchange, Michael!"

"What?" Michael held off the tears, curious, but quite ready to continue in case Dad's further revelation was as disconcerting as the original.

"I'm giving you this city, Mike. It's yours."

"Mine?"

"For you and Robert and Timothy, all three of you, to own for yourselves."

Timothy bounded from the boat. "Look, guys, all for *us*! All of *that*!" He was playing the game with Dad, playing it



large and playing it well. Later, after it was all over and things had settled, he could go off by himself and cry for ten minutes. But now it was still a game, still a family outing, and the other kids must be kept playing.

Mike jumped out with Robert. They helped Mom.

"Be careful of your sister," said Dad, and nobody knew what he meant until later.

They hurried into the great pink-stoned city, whispering among themselves, because dead cities have a way of making you want to whisper, to watch the sun go down.

"In about five days," said Dad quietly, "I'll go back down to where our rocket was and collect the food hidden in the ruins there and bring it here; and I'll hunt for Bert Edwards and his wife and daughters there."

"Daughters?" asked Timothy. "How many?"

"Four."

"I can see that'll cause trouble later." Mom nodded slowly.

"Girls." Michael made a face like an ancient Martian stone image. "Girls."

"Are they coming in a rocket too?"

"Yes. If they make it. Family rockets are made for travel to the Moon, not Mars. We were lucky we got through."

"Where did you get the rocket?" whispered Timothy, for the other boys were running ahead.

"I saved it. I saved it for twenty years, Tim. I had it hidden away, hoping I'd never have to use it. I suppose I should have given it to the government for the war, but I kept thinking about Mars . . ."

"And a picnic!"

"Right. This is between you and me. When I saw everything was finishing on Earth, after I'd waited until the last moment, I packed us up. Bert Edwards had a ship hidden, too, but we decided it would be safer to take off separately, in case anyone tried to shoot us down."

"Why'd you blow up the rocket, Dad?"

"So we can't go back, ever. And so if any of those evil men ever come to Mars they won't know we're here."

"Is that why you look up all the time?"

"Yes, it's silly. They won't follow us, ever. They haven't anything to follow with. I'm being too careful, is all."

Michael came running back. "Is this really *our* city, Dad?"

"The whole darn planet belongs to us, kids. The whole darn planet."

They stood there, King of the Hill, Top of the Heap,

Ruler of All They Surveyed, Unimpeachable Monarchs and Presidents, trying to understand what it meant to own a world and how big a world really was.

Night came quickly in the thin atmosphere, and Dad left them in the square by the pulsing fountain, went down to the boat, and came walking back carrying a stack of paper in his big hands.

He laid the papers in a clutter in an old courtyard and set them afire. To keep warm, they crouched around the blaze and laughed, and Timothy saw the little letters leap like frightened animals when the flames touched and engulfed them. The papers crinkled like an old man's skin, and the cremation surrounded innumerable words:

"GOVERNMENT BONDS: Business Graph, 1999; Religious Prejudice: An Essay; The Science of Logistics; Problems of the Pan-American Unity; Stock Report for July 3, 1998; The War Digest . . ."

Dad had insisted on bringing these papers for this purpose. He sat there and fed them into the fire, one by one, with satisfaction, and told his children what it all meant.

"It's time I told you a few things. I don't suppose it was fair, keeping so much from you. I don't know if you'll understand, but I have to talk, even if only part of it gets over to you."

He dropped a leaf in the fire.

"I'm burning a way of life, just like the way of life is being burned clean off Earth right now. Forgive me if I talk like a politician. I am, after all, a former state governor, and I was honest and they hated me for it. Life on Earth never settled down to doing anything very good. Science ran too far ahead of us too quickly, and the people got lost in a mechanical wilderness, like children making over pretty things, gadgets, helicopters, rockets; emphasizing the wrong items, emphasizing machines instead of how to run the machines. Wars got bigger and bigger and finally killed Earth. That's what the silent radio means. That's what we ran away from.

"We were lucky. There aren't any more rockets left. It's time you knew this isn't a fishing trip at all. I put off telling you. Earth is gone. Interplanetary travel won't be back for centuries, maybe never. But that way of life proved itself wrong and strangled itself with its own hands. You're young. I'll tell you this again every day until it sinks in."

He paused to feed more papers to the fire.

"Now we're alone. We and a handful of others who'll land

in a few days. Enough to start over. Enough to turn away from all that back on Earth and strike out on a new line—”

The fire leaped up to emphasize his talking. And then all the papers were gone except one. All the laws and beliefs of Earth were burnt into small hot ashes which soon would be carried off in a wind.

Timothy looked at the last thing that Dad tossed in the fire. It was a map of the World, and it wrinkled and distorted itself hotly and went—flimpf—and was gone like a warm, black butterfly. Timothy turned away.

“Now I’m going to show you the Martians,” said Dad. “Come on, all of you. Here Alice.” He took her hand.

Michael was crying loudly, and Dad picked him up and carried him, and they walked down through the ruins toward the canal.

The canal. Where tomorrow or the next day their future wives would come up in a boat, small laughing girls now, with their father and mother.

The night came down around them, and there were stars. But Timothy couldn’t find Earth. It had already set. That was something to think about.

A night bird called among the ruins as they walked. Dad said, “Your mother and I will try to teach you. Perhaps we’ll fail. I hope not. We’ve had a good lot to see and learn from. We planned this trip years ago, before you were born. Even if there hadn’t been a war we would have come to Mars, I think, to live and form our own standard of living. It would have been another century before Mars would have been really poisoned by the Earth civilization. Now, of course—”

They reached the canal. It was long and straight and cool and wet and reflective in the night.

“I’ve always wanted to see a Martian,” said Michael. “Where are they, Dad? You promised.”

“There they are,” said Dad, and he shifted Michael on his shoulder and pointed straight down.

The Martians were there. Timothy began to shiver.

The Martians were there—in the canal—reflected in the water. Timothy and Michael and Robert and Mom and Dad.

The Martians stared back up at them for a long, long silent time from the rippling water . . .

# THE LAST OBJECTIVE

by Paul A. Carter (1926- )

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
August

*Dr. Paul A. Carter is Professor of History at the University of Arizona and the author of such works of scholarship as The Twenties in America and Another Part of the Twenties. He is also the author of the insightful and entertaining study The Creation of Tomorrow: Fifty years of Magazine Science Fiction (Columbia University Press, 1977) an excellent analysis of some of the major themes of modern sf as they developed in the genre magazines.*

*Two decades before that book saw publication Paul A. Carter published "The Last Objective" the first of a handful of his stories to appear in the sf magazines (although he has recently returned to science fiction.) It was a memorable debut then, and is still a fine story today.*

*(After every great war there is an understandable revulsion against war in general—against the carnage, the destruction, the misery, and [to anyone with any brains at all] the stupidity. World War II was the greatest, bloodiest, cruelest war ever fought*

*[at least, to date] and its only saving grace was that it had an enemy worth fighting.*

*Nevertheless, the coming of the nuclear bomb at the very end made it quite plain that World War III, if it ever came, would finally achieve the crowning stupidity of war, the destruction of so much that no conceivable justification could exist for fighting. Here is a story that makes this quite plain in the military language that writers had learned from the war just concluded and yet a generation later, the world still prepares feverishly for a war only the insane would fight.—I.A.)*

For uncounted eons the great beds of shale and limestone had known the stillness and the darkness of eternity. Now they trembled and shuddered to the passage of an invader; stirred and vibrated in sleepy protest at a disturbance not of Nature's making.

Tearing through the masses of soft rock, its great duralloy cutters screaming a hymn of hate into the crumbling crust, its caterpillar treads clanking and grinding over gravel shards fresh-torn from their age-old strata, lurched a juggernaut—one of the underground cruisers of the Combined Western Powers. It was squat, ugly; the top of its great cutting head full forty feet above the clattering treads, its square stern rocking and swaying one hundred and fifty feet behind the diamond-hard prow. It was angular, windowless; there were ugly lumps just behind the shrieking blades which concealed its powerful armament.

It had been built for warfare in an age when the sea and air were ruled by insensate rocket projectiles which flashed through the skies to spend their atomic wrath upon objectives which had long since ceased to exist; where infantry no longer was Queen of Battles, since the ravages of combat had wiped out the armies which began the war. And floods of hard radiation, sterilizing whole populations and making hideous mutational horrors of many of those who were born alive, had prevented the conscription of fresh armies which might have won the war.

The conflict had been going on for more than a generation.

The causes had long been forgotten; the embattled nations, burrowing into the earth, knew only a fiery longing for revenge. The chaos produced by the first aerial attacks had enabled the survivors to hide themselves beyond the reach even of atomic bombs to carry on the struggle. Navies and armoured divisions exchanged knowledge; strategy and tactics underwent drastic revamping. Psychology, once the major hope of mankind for a solution to the war problem, now had become perverted to the ends of the militarists, as a substitute for patriotism to motivate the men at war. In new ways but with the old philosophies, the war went on; and therefore this armored monster clawed its way through the earth's crust toward its objective.

On the 'bridge' of the underground warship, a small turret in the centre of its roof, Commander Sanderson clung to a stanchion as he barked orders to his staff through the intercom. The ship proper was swung on special mountings and gyro-stabilized to divorce it from the violent jolting of the lower unit, consisting of the drill, the treads and the mighty-earth-moving atomic engines. But still some of the lurching and jouncing of the treads was transmitted up through the storerooms through the crew's quarters to the bridge, and the steel deck underfoot swayed and shook drunkenly. However, men had once learned to accustom themselves to the fitful motions of the sea; and the hardened skipper paid no attention to the way his command pounded forward.

Commander Sanderson was a thickset man, whose hunched shoulders and bull neck suggested the prize ring. But he moved like a cat, even here inside this vibrating juggernaut, as he slipped from one command post to another, reading over the shoulders of unheeding operators the findings of their instruments. The Seismo Log was an open book to his practised eye; his black brows met in a deep frown as he noticed a severe shock registered only two minutes previously, only a few hundred yards to starboard. He passed by the radio locator and the radioman; their jobs would come later, meantime radio silence was enforced on both sides. The thin little soundman adjusted his earphones as the 'Old Man' came by: 'No other diggers contacted, sir,' he muttered automatically and continued listening. The optical technician leaped to his feet and saluted smartly as the Commander passed; he would have nothing to do unless they broke into a cavern, and so he rendered the military courtesy his fellows could not.

Sanderson halted beside the post of the environmental technician. This man's loosely described rating covered many fields; he was at once geologist, radarman, vibration expert and navigator. It was his duty to deduce the nature of their surroundings and suggest a course to follow.

'Your report,' demanded Sanderson.

'Igneous rock across our course at fifteen thousand feet, I believe, sir,' he replied promptly. 'It's not on the chart, sir—probably a new formation.'

Sanderson swore. This meant volcanic activity—and, whether man-made or accidental, that spelled trouble. 'Course?' he asked.

'Change course to one hundred seventy-five degrees—and half-speed, sir, if you please, until I can chart this formation more accurately.'

Sanderson returned his salute, turned on his heel. 'Mr. Culver!'

The young lieutenant-commander saluted casually. 'Sir?'

Sanderson repressed another oath. He did not like the young executive officer with his lordly manners, his natty uniform and the coat of tan he had acquired from frequent ultraviolet exposure—a luxury beyond the means of most of the pasty-faced undermen. But duty is duty—'Change course to one seven five. Half-speed,' he ordered.

'Aye, aye, sir.' Culver picked up a microphone, jabbed a phone jack into the proper plug and pressed the buzzer.

Far below, near the clanking treads, Lieutenant Watson wiped the sweat from his brow—most of the ship was not as well insulated as the bridge, whose personnel must be at their physical peak at all times. He jumped as the intercom buzzed, then spoke into his chest microphone. 'Navigation,' he called.

'Bridge,' came Culver's voice. 'Change course to one seven five. Over.'

'Navigation to bridge. Course one seven five, aye, aye,' said Watson mechanically. Then: 'What is it, Culver?'

'Environmental thinks it's lava.'

'Damnation.' The old lieutenant—one of the few able-bodied survivors of the surface stages of the war—turned to his aides. 'Change course to one seven five.'

Peterson, brawny Navigator Third Class, stepped up to a chrome handle projecting from a circular slot and shoved it to '175', then turned a small crank for finger adjustment. Slowly the pitch of the great blades shifted—the sound of

their turning, muffled by layers of armour, abruptly changed in tone.

Chief Navigator Schmidt looked up from a pile of strata charts. 'Ask the exec to have a copy of the new formation sent down here,' he said, speaking as calmly as if he were a laboratory technician requesting a routine report. Schmidt was the psycho officer's pride and joy; he was the only person aboard the underground cruiser who had never been subjected to a mental manhandling as a result of that worthy's suspicions. He was slightly plump, pink-cheeked, with a straggling yellow moustache—just a little childish; perhaps that was why he had never cracked.

His request was transmitted; up on the bridge, the environmental technician threw a switch, cutting a remote repeater into the series of scanners which brought him his information. Chief Navigator Schmidt heard the bell clang, fed a sheet of paper into the transcriber, and sat back happily to watch the results.

The great drillhead completed its grinding turn; the blades tore into the rock ahead of it again.

'Navigation to bridge: bearing one seven five,' reported Watson.

'Carry on,' returned young Culver. He pulled out the phone jack, plugged it in elsewhere.

Ensign Clark stroked the slight, fuzzy black beard which was one of many ego-boosters for his crushing introversion, along with the tattoos on his arms and the book of physical exercises which he practised whenever he thought he was alone. At Culver's buzz, he cursed the exec vigorously, then opened the circuit. 'Power,' he replied diffidently.

'Bridge to power: reduce speed by one-half. Over.'

'Power to bridge: speed one-half—aye, aye.' Clark put his hand over the mike, shouted at the non-rated man stationed at the speed lever. 'You! Half-speed, and shake the lead out of your pants!'

The clanking of the treads slowed; simultaneously the whine of the blades rose, cutting more rapidly to compensate for the decreased pressure from behind the drill.

In the hot, steam-filled galley, fat Chief Cook Kelly lifted the lid from a kettle to sniff the synthetic stew. 'What stinkin' slum—an' to think they kicked about the chow back in the Surface Wars.'

'Chief, they say there was *real meat* in the chow then,' rejoined Marconi, Food Chemist First Class.



'Why, Marc, even I can remember—' he was interrupted by the intercom's buzz.

'Attention, all hands!' came Culver's voice. 'Igneous rock detected, probably a fresh lava-flow. We have changed our course. Action is expected within a few hours—stand by to go to quarters. Repeating—'

Kelly spat expertly. His face was impassive, but his hand trembled as he replaced the lid on the kettle. 'We better hurry this chow up, Marc. Heaven only knows when we'll eat again.'

Lieutenant Carpenter raised his hand, slapped the hysterical Private Worth twice.

'Now, shut up or I'll have the psych corpsmen go over you again,' he snapped.

Worth dropped his head between his hands, said nothing.

Carpenter backed out of the cell. 'I'm posting a guard here,' he warned. 'One peep out of you and the boys will finish what they started.'

He slammed the door for emphasis.

'Well, sir, you did it again,' said the sentry admiringly. 'He was throwing things when you got here, but you tamed him in a hurry.'

'We've got to get these cells soundproofed,' muttered Carpenter abstractedly, putting on his glasses. 'The combat-detachment bunks are right next to him.'

'Yeah, sir, I guess it's harder on the combat detachment than the rest of us. We've all got our watches and so forth, but they haven't got a thing to do until we hit an enemy city or something. They crack easy—like this Worth guy in here now.'

Carpenter whirled on him. 'Listen, corpsman, I'm too busy a man to be chasing up here to deal with every enlisted man in this brig—I've got the other officers to keep in line. And let's not be volunteering information to superiors without permission!' he hissed.

'I'm sorry, sir—' the guard began—but the lieutenant was gone!

The sentry smiled crookedly. 'O.K., Mr Carpenter, your big job is to keep the officers in line. I'm just wonderin' who's supposed to keep *you* out of this cell block.'

Corporal Sheehan dealt the cards with sudden, jerky motions; his brow was furrowed, his face a study in concentration.

One would have thought him a schoolboy puzzling over a difficult final examination.

Sergeants Fontaine and Richards snatched each card as it came, partly crushing the pasteboards as they completed their hands. Fat old Koch, Private First Class, waited until all the cards had been dealt, then grabbed the whole hand and clutched it against his broad stomach, glancing suspiciously at his fellow players.

Their conversation was in terse, jerky monosyllables—but around them other men of the combat detachment talked, loudly and incessantly. Private Carson sat in a corner, chain smoking in brief, nervous puffs. Coarse jokes and harsh laughter dominated the conversation. Nobody mentioned Culver's 'alert' of a few minutes before.

'Three,' grunted the obese Koch. Sheehan dealt him the cards swiftly.

'Hey!' Richards interrupted, before play could begin. 'I didn't like that deal. Let's have a look at that hand.'

'Know what you're callin' me?' retorted Sheehan, snatching the deck as Richards was about to pick it up.

'Yeah—I know what to call you, you lvin', yella cheat—'

Sheehan lurched to his feet, lashed out with a ham-like fist. Richards scrambled out of the way, bringing chair and table down with a crash. A moment later both men were on their feet and squared off.

Conversation halted; men drifted over toward the table even as Fontaine stepped between the two players. Koch had not yet fully reacted to the situation and was only halfway out of his chair.

'You fools!' shouted Fontaine. 'You want the psych corpsmen on our necks again? That louse Carpenter said if there was another fight we'd all get it.'

Corporal Sheehan's big fists unclenched slowly. 'That low, stinkin'—'

'Sit down,' said Koch heavily. 'Fontaine's right. The psychs probably have a spy or two planted in this room.' His eyes rested briefly on Carson, still smoking silently alone in the corner, seemingly oblivious of the commotion.

'That Carson,' muttered Richards, shifting the object of his anger. 'I'll bet any money you want he's a stool for Carpenter.'

'Always by himself,' corroborated Sheehan. 'What's the story about him—born in a lab somewhere, wasn't he?'

The others were moving away now that it was plain there

was to be no fight. Koch picked up the cards, stacked them. 'Carson may not even be human,' he suggested. 'The science profs have been workin' on artificial cannon-fodder for years, and you can be sure if they ever do make a robot they're not goin' to talk about it until it's been tried in combat.'

Carson overheard part of his statement; smiled shortly. He rose and left the room.

'See?' Richards went on. 'Probably puttin' all four of us on report right now.'

Lieutenant Carpenter placed the wire recorder back inside its concealed niche, polished his glasses carefully, opened his notebook and made several entries in a neat schoolteacher's hand:

Friction betw. Sheehan, Richards worse—psych, reg. next time back to Gen. Psych. Hosp. New Chicago. No sign men susp. Koch my agent; K. planting idea of robots in crew's minds per order. Can reveal Carson whenever enemy knows Powers mfg. robots in quantity. Fontaine well integrated, stopped fight—recomm. transfer my staff to Sanderson.

He put the notebook away, began to climb the nearest metal ladder with the mincing, catlike tread which the whole crew had learned to hate.

The long guard before the massive lead-and-steel door of the central chamber saluted as the lieutenant passed. His task was to safeguard the ship's most important cargo—its sole atomic bomb. Carpenter asked him several routine word-association questions before proceeding.

The lieutenant paused just once more in his progress upward. This was to play back the tape of another listening device, this one piped into the quarters of the men who serviced the mighty atomic engines. Making notes copiously, he proceeded directly to the bridge.

'Captain, my report,' he announced, not without some show of pride.

'Later,' said Sanderson shortly, without looking up from a rough strata-chart the environmental technician had just handed him.

'But it's rather important, sir. Serious trouble is indicated in the combat detachment—'

'It always is,' retorted Sanderson in some heat. 'Take your report to Culver; I'm busy.'

Carpenter froze, then turned to the young lieutenant-commander. 'If you will initial this, please—'

Culver repressed a shudder. He couldn't keep back the rebellious feeling that the ancient navies had been better off with their primitive chaplains than the modern underground fleets with their prying psychiatrists. Of course, he hastily told himself, that was impossible today—organized religion had long since ceased to sanction war and had been appropriately dealt with by the government.

The Seismo Log recorded a prolonged disturbance directly ahead, and as Sanderson began his rounds the environmental technician called to him. 'Sudden fault and more igneous activity dead ahead, sir,' he reported.

'Carry on,' replied Sanderson. 'Probably artificial,' he muttered half to himself. 'Lot of volcanism in enemy territory. . . . Mr Culver!'

Culver hastily initialled the psycho officer's notebook and handed it back. 'Sir?'

'Elevate the cutters twenty-five degrees—we're going up and come on the enemy from above.'

The order was soon transmitted to navigation; Lieutenant Watson's efficient gang soon had the metallic behemoth inclined at an angle of twenty-five degrees and rising rapidly toward the surface. Chief Schmidt dragged out new charts, noted down outstanding information and relayed data topside.

The ship's body swung on its mountings as the treads assumed the new slant, preserving equilibrium throughout. An order from Ensign Clark of power soon had the ship driving ahead as fast as the cutters could tear through the living rock.

'Diggers ahead,' the thin soundman called out suddenly, adjusting his earphones. He snapped a switch; lights flickered on a phosphorescent screen. 'Sounds like about three, sir—one is going to intersect our course at a distance of about five thousand yards.'

'Let him,' grunted Sanderson. 'Mr Culver, you may level off now.'

'Electronic activity dead ahead,' and 'Enemy transmitter dead ahead,' the radio locator and radioman reported almost simultaneously, before Culver's quiet order had been carried out.

'Go to general quarters, Mr Culver,' ordered Sanderson quickly. The exec pressed a button.

Throughout the ship was heard the tolling of a great bell—slowly the strokes lost their ponderous beat, quickened in tempo faster and faster until they became a continuous pandemonium of noise; simultaneously the pitch increased. All of this was a trick devised by staff psych officers, believing it would produce a subconscious incentive to greater speed and urgency.

The observational and operational posts were already manned; now, as quickly as possible, reliefs took over the more gruelling watches such as that of the environmental technician. Medical and psych corpsmen hurriedly unpacked their gear, fanned out through the ship. Ensign Clark's voice faltered briefly as he ordered the power consumption cut to a minimum. The great cruiser slowed to a crawl.

The galley was bedlam as Kelly and Marconi rushed from one kettle to the next, supervising the ladling of hot food into deep pans by the apprentices who had assembled in haste in response to Kelly's profane bellowing. Chow runners dashed madly out the door, slopping over the contents of the steaming dishes as they ran. 'Battle breakfast' was on its way to the men; and even as the last load departed Kelly shut off all power into the galley and shrugged his squat form into a heavy coverall. Marconi snatched two empty trays, filled them, and the two men wolfed their meal quickly and then ran at full tilt down toward the combat detachment's briefing-room.

Here the scene was even more chaotic. Men helped one another hastily into coveralls, rubber-and-steel suits, metallic boots. They twisted each other's transparent helmets into place, buckled on oxygen tanks, kits of emergency rations, first aid equipment, and great nightmarish-looking weapons. Richards and Sheehan, their quarrel temporarily forgotten, wrestled with the latter's oxygen valve. Koch struggled mightily with the metal joints of his attack suit; Fontaine checked the readings of the dials on a long, tubular 'heat ray' machine. Carson, fully outfitted, manipulated the ingenious device which brought a cigarette to his lips and lit it. He took a few puffs, pressed another lever to eject the butt, and wrenched his helmet into place with gloved hands. From now until the battle was over, the men would carry all their air on their backs, compressed in cylinders. Underneath the shouts and the rattling noises of the armour could be heard the screams of Private Worth from his cell next door. They were

suddenly cut off; one of Lieutenant Carpenter's watchful corpsmen had silenced the boy.

And now there was nothing to do but wait. The combat detachment's confusion subsided; but a subdued clatter of shifting armour, helmets being adjusted, tightening of joints, the rattle of equipment, and telephoned conversation continued. The new bridge-watch checked their instruments, then settled down to careful, strained waiting. Sanderson paced his rounds, hearing reports and issuing occasional orders. Culver stood by the intercom, told the crew all their superiors knew of the opposition as the information came in. Carpenter cat-footed through the ship, followed at a discreet distance by four of his strong-arm men.

Ensign Clark was white with fear. He sat stiffly at his post like a prisoner in Death Row; the sweat rolled down his face and into his soft black beard. He tried to repeat the auto-suggestion formulae Carpenter had prescribed for him, but all that he could choke out was a series of earnest curses which a kinder age would have called prayers.

He jumped as if he had been shot at Culver's sudden announcement: 'Attention all hands. Enemy digger believed to have sighted this ship. Prepare for action at close quarters.' The voice paused, and then added: 'Bridge to power: full speed ahead for the next half-hour, then bring the ship to a halt. We'll let the enemy carry the fight to us.'

Clark automatically repeated 'Full speed ahead,' then cringed as the crewman slammed the lever over and the cruiser leaped forward with a shrill whine of its blades. 'No!' he suddenly yelled, leaping out of his seat. 'Not another inch—stop this ship!' He ran over to the speed lever, pushed at the crewman's hands. 'I won't be killed, I won't, I *won't!*' The brawny crewman and the maddened officer wrestled desperately for a moment, then the crewman flung his superior on his back and stood over him, panting, 'I'm sorry, sir.'

Clark lay there whimpering for a few seconds, then made a quick grab inside his shirt and levelled a pistol at the towering crewman. 'Get over there,' he half-sobbed, 'and stop this ship before I shoot you.'

The white-uniformed psych corpsman flung open the door and fired, all in one motion. The crewman instinctively backed away as the little pellet exploded, shredding most of Clark's head into his cherished beard; the crewman stood over the body, making little wordless sounds.

'Go off watch,' ordered Carpenter, coming into the room

on the heels of his henchman. 'Get a sedative from the medics.' He gazed lingeringly, almost appreciatively, on the disfigured face of the dead man before covering it with the ensign's coat. Then he called Culver and told him briefly what had happened.

'I'll send a relief,' promised the exec. 'Tell him to reduce speed in another twenty minutes. That was quick thinking, Carpenter; the captain says you rate a citation.' The psycho officer had failed to give the corpsman credit for firing the shot.

Sanderson caught Culver's eye, put a finger to his lips.

'Huh?' Culver paused, then got the idea. 'Oh—and, say, Carpenter—don't let the crew hear of this. It wouldn't do for them to know an officer was the first to crack.' There was a very faint trace of sarcasm in his tone.

But Sanderson's warning was already too late. The power crewman who had witnessed Clark's death agonies talked before he was put to sleep; the medic who administered the sedative took it to the crew. By the time Carpenter had received the new order from Culver, his efficient corpsmen had disposed of Clark's body and the whole ship knew the story. It hit the combat detachment like a physical blow; their strained morale took a serious beating, and the officers grew alarmed.

'Pass the word to let them smoke,' Sanderson finally ordered, after the great ship had shuddered to a halt and backed a short distance up the tunnel on his order. 'Give them ten minutes—the enemy will take at least twice that to get here. Have Carpenter go down and administer drugs at his own discretion—maybe it will slow them for fighting, but if they crack they'll be of no use anyway.'

And so for ten minutes the combat crewmen removed their helmets and relaxed, while the psychos moved unobtrusively throughout the room, asking questions here and there, occasionally giving drugs. Once they helped a man partially out of his armour for a hypo. Tension relaxed somewhat; the psych corpsmen could soothe as well as coerce.

Kelly and Marconi were engaged in a heated argument over the relative merits of synthetic and natural foods—a time-tested emotional release the two veterans used habitually. Koch was up to his ears in a more serious controversy—for Sheehan and Richards were practically at each other's throats again. Carson as usual said nothing, smoked

continuously; even the level-headed Fontaine got up and paced the floor, his armour clanking as he walked. Three men had to be put to sleep. Then the ten-minute break was over and the strain grew even worse.

Carpenter spoke softly into the intercom. "Tell the commander that if battle is not joined in another hour I cannot prevent a mutiny. Culver, I *told* you not to leave that man on watch—if you had listened to me Ensign Clark need not have been liquidated."

Culver's lip curled; he opened his mouth to reply in his usual irritating manner—but at that moment the soundman flung the earphones off his head. The roar of shearing duralloy blades was audible several feet away as the phones bounced to the deck. 'Enemy digger within one hundred feet and coming in fast!' the soundman shouted.

'*Don't reverse engines!*' Sanderson roared as Culver contacted the new power officer. 'Turn on our drill, leaving the treads stationary—we'll call his bluff.'

Culver issued the necessary order, then alerted the crew again. The great blades began to whirl once more; there was a brief shower of rocks, and they churned emptiness—their usual throbbing, tearing chant became a hair-raising shriek; the blast of air they raised kicked up a cloud of dust which blanketed the fresh-carved tunnel—'That's for their optical technician,' explained Sanderson. 'He'll be blind when he comes out—and we've a sharp gunnery officer down in fire control that will catch them by surprise.'

The soundman gingerly picked up the headphones; the roar of the enemy's drill had dropped to a whisper—Sanderson's curious tactics evidently had him guessing, for he had slowed down.

The sound of the approaching drill was now audible without the benefit of electronic gear, as a muffled noise like the chewing of a great rat. Then came the chattering breakthrough, and Sanderson knew he had contacted the enemy, despite the dust clouds which baffled even the infra-red visual equipment.

Temporarily blind, confused by the whirling blades of their motionless opponent, the enemy hesitated for the precious seconds that meant the difference between victory and destruction.

As the enemy warhead broke through, the cruiser's whirling blades suddenly came to a quivering halt. Simultaneously the forward batteries opened fire.



Gone were the days of labouring, sweating gun-crews and ammunition loaders. All the stubby barrels were controlled from a small, semicircular control panel like an organ console. Lieutenant Atkins, a cool, competent, greying officer who had once been an instructor at the military academy, calmly pressed buttons and pulled levers and interestedly watched the results by means of various types of mechanical 'eyes'. And so it was that, when the sweep second-hand of his chronometer crossed the red line, Atkins' sensitive fingers danced over the keys and the ship rocked to the salvos of half its guns.

Magnified and echoed in the narrow tunnel, the crash of the barrage rolled and reverberated and shouted in an uninterrupted tornado of pure noise, roar upon roar—the light of the explosions was by contrast insignificant, a vicious reddish flare quickly snuffed in the dust. The ship jerked with each salvo; faint flashes and Olympian thunders tossed the great cruiser like a raft on the wild Atlantic. The fury of sound beat through the thick armour plate, poured and pounded savagely past the vaunted 'soundproof' insulation. The decks lurched and reeled underfoot; instruments and equipment trembled with bone-shaking vibrations. Crash upon thunderous crash filled the air with new strains of this artillery symphony; and then Culver pressed a button. His voice could not be heard through the racket, but the suddenly glow of a red light in the combat detachment's assembly room transmitted his order instantly—'Away landing party!'

And then the trap between the great, flat treads was sprung, and the mechanical monster spawned progeny, visible only by infra-red light in the underground gloom—little doll-like figures in bulky, nightmarish costumes, dropping from a chain ladder to the broken shale underfoot, running and stumbling through the debris, falling and picking themselves up and falling again like so many children—Marconi and Kelly and Carson and Sheehan and Richards and Fontaine and Koch, tripping over the debris and fragments which the great machine had made.

And at last the enemy cruiser replied, even as the landing party picked its way through the obscuring dust and fanned out from its source. Though confused and blind, the men of the other ship, too, had been prepared for action, and thus new sounds were added to the din that were not of the attackers' making.

A titanic explosion rocked the carriage of Sanderson's cruiser; then another, and still another, strewn steel fragments indiscriminately among the men in the tunnel. The ferocity of the defence was less than the attack; much of their armament must have been destroyed on the first salvo—but what remained wrought havoc. Some quick-witted commander of the enemy must have anticipated the landing of a ground party, for fragmentation shells burst near the embattled cruisers, and here and there the armoured figures began to twist and jerk and go down. Their comrades dropped into the partial protection of the broken rock and continued their advance.

Fontaine ran and crawled and scrambled and crouched over the tunnel floor, which was visible to his infra-red-sensitive helmet, and torn now even more by arrowing slivers of steel. His hand found a valve, twisted it to give him more oxygen for this most critical part of the struggle. He did not think much; he was too busy keeping alive. But a bitter thought flashed across his mind—*This part of war hasn't changed a bit*. He leaped over a strange and terrible object in which armour, blood, rock and flesh made a fantastic jigsaw puzzle which had lost its meaning. Once again he merely noted the item in his subconscious mind; he did not think.

Lieutenant Atkins' fingers still danced over the console; his face was exalted like that of a man playing a concerto. And into the symphony of death which he wove with subtle skill there crept fewer and fewer of the discords of the enemy's guns.

Sanderson paced the deck moodily, communicating briefly with his subordinates by means of lip reading which Culver swiftly translated into many-coloured lights. Information came back to the bridge in the same manner. Sanderson smiled with grim satisfaction at the scarcity of dark lamps on the master damage control board. Those mighty walls could take a lot of punishment, and damage so far had been superficial—one blast in the psycho ward; Private Worth would suffer Carpenter's displeasure no longer.

The helmeted monstrosities grew bolder in their advance as the counter-barrage slackened. Now there was but one battery in action, far to the left—all the thunder came from their own ship.

Fontaine rose from the little depression in which he had been crouching. Another man waved to him; from that out-sized suit it would have to be Koch. The big man's armour

was dented, the rubber portions torn—his steel right boot looked like a large, wrinkled sheet of tinfoil, and he dragged the leg behind him. But he saw Fontaine, pointed a gauntleted finger into the gloom. The enemy ship must be up there; yes, there was the flash of the one operating gun—Fontaine moved forward.

There was another, nearer flash; something exploded on Koch's chestplate, knocking him down. He moved, feebly, like a crushed insect, then lay still. Fontaine immediately slipped back into his hollow; for here was the enemy.

A man in a light, jointed metal suit of Asian make appeared from behind a boulder, slipped over to Koch's body to examine it, felt for Koch's weapons.

Fontaine unslung the long, bazooka-like heat-ray tube—an adaptation of very slow atomic disintegration—and pressed the firing stud. The weapon contributed no noise and no flare to the hellish inferno of the tunnel, but the Asiatic suddenly straightened up, took a step forward. That was all he had time for.

Accident and his jointed armour combined to keep his body standing. Fontaine made sure of his man by holding the heat ray on him until the enemy's armour glowed cherry-red, then released the stud. He came forward, gave the still-glowing figure a push. The body collapsed with a clatter across Koch. Fontaine pushed on—the dust was at last clearing slightly, and directly ahead loomed the enemy ship.

Another Asiatic appeared over a short ridge; too quick for the heat ray. Fontaine drew his pistol and fired. The pellet flared; another enemy went down.

Something whizzed over Fontaine's head; he ducked, ran for cover. Somebody was firing high-speed metallic slugs from an old-fashioned machine gun, and his partly-rubber suit would not stop them. Miraculously he found himself unharmed in front of the enemy ship.

Its drill was torn and crumpled, blades lying cast off amongst the rocks; one of the treads was fouled, and the forward part of the carriage was smashed in completely. This war vehicle would obviously never fight again. Another volley of slugs chattered overhead, and Fontaine rolled back out of the way. *Snap judgement*, he told himself ironically in another rare flash of lucidity. *Maybe she'll never fight after this time, but she's got plenty of spirit right now.*

He dug a hole in the loose shale and tried to cover himself as much as possible, meanwhile surveying the layout. They

couldn't know he was here, or his life would have been snuffed out; but he could neither advance nor retreat. He absently transmitted the prearranged 'contact' signal back to the cruiser. Then he settled himself, soldier-wise, to wait as long as might be necessary.

Fontaine's 'contact', and several others, returned to their ship as lights on a board. The landing party could proceed no further or they would enter their own barrage. Sanderson immediately gave the 'cease fire' order. The barrage lifted.

Culver shouted down an immediate flood of radio reports that broke the sudden, aching silence. 'Lieutenant Atkins, you will continue action against the remaining enemy battery until you have destroyed it, or until I inform you that members of the task force have neutralized it.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Atkins turned back to his guns, studied the image of the battered enemy ship which was becoming increasingly visible as the dust settled. He restored all the automatic controls to manual, pressed several buttons judiciously, and fingered a firing switch.

To Fontaine, crouching in his retreat under the enemy ship, the sudden silence which followed the barrage was almost intolerable. One moment the guns had thundered and bellowed overhead; the next there were a few echoes and reverberations and then all was over.

His ears sang for minutes; his addled brains slowly returned to a normal state. And he realized that the silence was not absolute. It was punctually broken by the crash of the remaining enemy battery, and soon at less frequent intervals by the cautious probing of Atkins' turrets. And between the blows of this duel of giants he could at last hear the whine of metal slugs over his head.

This weapon had him stumped. The Asiatic explosive bullets, such as the one that had killed Koch, only operated at fairly close quarters; the rubber suits were fairly good insulation against death rays; and the Asiatics had no heat ray. But with an antiquated machine gun an Asiatic could sit comfortably at a considerable distance from him and send a volley of missiles crunching through the flimsy Western armour to rip him apart in helpless pain. He raised his head very slightly and looked around. The detachment was well trained; he could see only three of his fellows and they were well concealed from the enemy. Under infra-red light—the only

possible means of vision in the gloom of the tunnel—they looked like weird red ghosts.

Something gleamed ahead of him. He sighted along the heat ray, energized its coils. The mechanism hummed softly; the Asiatic jumped out of his hiding place and right into the machine gun's line of fire. The singing bits of metal punched a neat line of holes across his armour and knocked him down, twisting as he fell. Moments later the chattering stream stopped flowing, and Fontaine dashed for more adequate cover. Bullets promptly kicked up dust in little spurts in the hollow he had just vacated.

He searched the darkness, a weird, shimmering ghostland revealed to him by its own tremendous heat through his infra-red equipment. The ship and his armour were very well insulated; he had not been conscious of the stifling heat or the absolute night-gloom which would have made combat impossible for an unprepared, unprotected soldier of the Surface Wars.

Atkins' insistent batteries spoke; there was a great flash and a series of explosions at the enemy target to the left. Fontaine seized the opportunity to make a charge on the loosely piled boulders which, his practised eye told him, sheltered the deadly machine gun. He fell and rolled out of the line of fire as the opposing gunner found him and swerved his weapon; then began to fire explosive pellets at the crude nest, showering it with a series of sharp reports. The enemy machine gun swung back and forth, raking the terrain in search of the invader.

Fontaine unloaded his heat ray, placed it in a well-sheltered crevice and worked it around until it was aimed at the enemy, then shorted the coils. The weapon throbbed with power; rocks began to glow, and the flying slugs poured down upon the menacing heat ray, trying to silence it. Meanwhile Fontaine, like uncounted warriors of all ages, began cautiously to work his way around to the left for a flank attack. Indeed, there were many things in war that had not changed.

'Fire control to bridge: enemy battery silenced,' Atkins reported firmly.

'Secure fire control,' Culver ordered, then turned on his heel. 'The enemy's ordnance is destroyed, sir,' he asserted. 'Our combat crewmen are engaging the enemy in front of his ship.'

'Send Mr Atkins my congratulations,' Sanderson replied

promptly. 'Then inform the combat detachment of the situation.'

Culver turned back to the intercom—then started, as a siren wailed somewhere in the bowels of the ship. A station amidships was buzzing frantically; he plugged in the mike. 'Bridge,' he answered.

'Atomic-bomb watch to bridge: instruments show unprecedented activity of the bomb. Dangerous reaction predicted.'

Culver fought to keep his voice down as he relayed the information. The bridge watch simply came to a dead stop; all eyes were on Sanderson.

Even the phlegmatic commander hesitated. Finally: 'Prepare to abandon ship,' he ordered, heavily.

At once the confusion which had accompanied the preparations of the combat detachment was repeated throughout the ship. Atomic bombs by this time were largely made of artificial isotopes and elements; the type which they carried had never been tested in combat—and radioactive elements can do strange and unpredictable things when stimulated. Mere concussion had started the trouble this time, and the mind of man was incapable of prophesying the results. The bomb might merely increase in the speed of its radioactive decay, flooding the ship and the bodies of its men with deadly gamma rays; it might release enormous heat and melt the cruiser into a bubbling pool of metal; it might blast both of the ships and mile on cubic mile of rocks out of existence—but all they could do was abandon the cruiser and hope for the best. All mankind was unable to do more.

Sanderson's forceful personality and Carpenter's prowling corpsmen prevented a panic. Men cursed as they struggled with obstinate clasps and joints. A few of Kelly's apprentices who had not gone into combat flung cases of concentrated food through the landing-trap to the tunnel floor. Culver packed the ship's records—logs, papers, muster sheets, inventories—into an insulated metal can for preservation. A picked force of atomic technicians in cumbersome lead suits vanished into the shielded bomb-chamber with the faint hope of suppressing the reaction.

Sanderson paused before sealing his helmet. 'Mr Culver, you will have all hands assemble in or near the landing-trap. We must advance, destroy the enemy and take refuge in his ship; it is our only hope.'

Navigation buzzed; Culver made the necessary connection. 'One moment, sir,' he murmured to Sanderson. 'Bridge.'

The young exec could visualize old Lieutenant Watson's strained expression, his set jaw. 'Navigation requests permission to remain aboard when ship is abandoned,' Watson said slowly. 'Chances of crew's survival would be materially increased if the ship reversed engines and departed this area—'

Sanderson was silent a long moment. 'Permission granted,' he finally answered in a low voice. He started to say more, caught Carpenter's eye and was silent.

But Culver could not maintain military formality in answering Watson's call. 'Go ahead, Phil, and—thanks,' he replied, almost in a whisper.

Carpenter stepped forward quickly. 'This is no time for sentiment, Mr Culver,' he snapped. 'Lieutenant Watson's behaviour was a little naïve for an officer, but the important fact remains that his antiquated altruism may be the means of preserving the lives of more important personnel.' He waved a sheaf of loose papers excitedly. 'This report of mine, for example, on the psychiatric aspects of this battle will be invaluable to the Board—'

*Crack!*

All the wiry power of the young exec's rigidly trained body went into the punch; literally travelled through him from toe to fist and exploded on the psycho officer's jaw. Months of harsh discipline—psychological manhandling—the strain of combat—repressed emotions, never really unhampered since his childhood—the sense of the war's futility which had not been completely trained out of anyone—his poorly concealed hatred for Carpenter—all these subconscious impressions came boiling up and sped the blow—and his hand was incased in a metal glove.

Carpenter's head snapped back. His feet literally flew off the deck as his body described a long arc and slammed into the far wall. He sprawled there grotesquely like a discarded marionette. Miraculously his glasses were unbroken.

The iron reserve which Sanderson had kept throughout the battle left him with the disruption of his neat, disciplined little military cosmos. For a long time he was unable to speak or move.

Two tough-looking psych corpsmen closed in on the exec, who stood facing the fallen officer, his fists clenched. He twisted angrily as they grabbed his arms.

'Let him alone,' Sanderson ordered, coming to his senses. They reluctantly released Culver.

'Mr Culver,' the skipper said very quietly, 'I need you now.'

You will resume your duties until this crisis is over. But, if we come through this, I'm going to see that you're broken.'

Culver faced him, anger draining out of him like the colour from his flushed face. He saluted, turned back to the intercom to give out the last order Sanderson had issued. 'Attention, all hands,' he called mechanically. 'Fall in at the landing-trap to abandon ship.'

Sanderson beckoned to the two psych corpsmen. 'Please take Lieutenant Carpenter to sick bay,' he ordered. 'Bring him around as soon as you can.'

The Asiatic squatted crosslegged behind his shining pneumatic machine gun, frantically raking the rock-strewn ground before him. The air ahead shimmered and danced with heat; the other side of his crude stone shelter must be glowing whitely, and the sweat ran down his yellow face even though the tiny cooling motor within his armour hummed savagely as it laboured to keep him from suffocating. He must destroy the offending heat ray or abandon his position.

A confused impression of rubber-and-metal armour was all he received as Fontaine rushed upon him from the side. The two men came together and went down with a loud clatter of armour, rolled over and over in quick, bitter struggle. Even in the Atomic Age there could be hand-to-hand combat.

It was an exhausting fight; the battle suits were heavy and awkward. They wrestled clumsily, the clank of their armour lending an incongruously comic note. The lithe Asiatic broke a hold, cleared his right hand. Fontaine rolled over to avoid the glittering knife his opponent had succeeded in drawing. Here beneath the crust a rip in his rubberized suit would spell disaster. The Asiatic jumped at him to follow up his advantage. Fontaine dropped back on his elbows, swung his feet around and kicked viciously.

The metal boot shattered the Asiatic's glass face-plate, nearly broke his neck from its impact. Shaken by the cruel blow to his face, blinded by blood drawn by the jagged glass, gasping from the foul air and the oppressive heat, he desperately broke away and ran staggering toward the right, misjudging the direction of his ship.

Fontaine estimated the number of explosive bullets he had left, then let his enemy go, knowing there would be no more danger from that quarter. He lay unmoving beside the abandoned machine gun, breathing heavily. His near-miraculous survival thus far deserved a few minutes' rest.



The enemy's landing-trap, like the Western one, was under the ship's carriage; instead of a chain ladder, a ramp had been let down. A terrific *mêlée* now raged around the ramp—Fontaine and his opponent had been so intent on their duel they had not seen the tide of battle wash past them. Here and there lay dead men of both sides; his recent enemy had soon been overcome and lay not a score of feet away, moving spasmodically. Battle-hardened as he was, Fontaine seriously debated putting the fellow out of his misery—death from armour failure was the worst kind in this war except radioactive poisoning—then carefully counted his explosive pellets again. Only six—he might need them. He dismissed the writhing Asiatic from his mind.

He looked up at the smashed hull of the enemy ship, and an idea came to him. They wouldn't be watching here, with their ship in danger of being boarded elsewhere.

He rose, moved quietly to the great right-hand tread. The flat links here were torn and disconnected; he seized a loose projection and hauled himself upward. Slipping and scrambling, using gauntleted hands and booted feet, he reached the top of the tread.

Directly above him was a jagged hole in the ship's carriage, about four feet long. He seized the edges and somehow managed to wriggle his way inside.

The interior was a shambles of smashed compartments, with men and metal uncleanly mated. Fontaine laboriously pushed his way forward, climbing over and around barriers flung up at the caprice of Atkins' guns. Once he was forced to expend one of the precious pellets; the recoil nearly flattened him at such close quarters, but he picked himself up and climbed through the still-smoking hole into a passageway which was buckled somewhat but still intact.

He looked carefully in both directions, then saw a ladder and began to ascend. It brought him into a small storage compartment which was still illuminated. He grunted in satisfaction; if he had reached the still-powered portion of the ship, he was going in the right direction.

He eased the door open three inches; air hissed—this compartment must be sealed off. He quickly passed through, closed the door, and cautiously tested the air—good; this part of the ship still had pure air and insulation. Confidently he continued forward and climbed another ladder toward the bridge.

He had to wait at one level until a sentry turned his back.

Then he sprang, and his steel fingers sank into the Asiatic's throat. There was no outcry.

Faintly from below there came the sounds of a struggle; his comrades had successfully invaded the ship. Curiously, Fontaine tried his helmet radio. It had been put out of commission in his fight with the machine gunner outside.

There were no more sentries; that was odd. He proceeded with extreme caution as he came to the ladder leading up to the bridge. Here would be the brains of the Asiatic ship; his five remaining pellets could end the engagement now that the battle was raging on enemy territory.

He stumbled over something—a man's foot. He dragged the body out of the shadows which had concealed it.

'What the devil—'

The man had been another guard. His chest was shattered; an explosive pistol was clutched in his right hand. One pellet was missing from the chamber.

Wonderingly Fontaine climbed the ladder, halted at the door.

Lying at his feet was another sentry. The man's body was unmarked but his face bore signs of a painful death. A small supersonic projector lay near him.

Fontaine opened the door—and turned away, sick.

Somebody had turned on a heat ray at close quarters. Officers and enlisted men lay in charred horror. And in the centre of the room the ship's commanding officer slumped on a bloodstained silken cushion. The man had committed honourable suicide with a replica of an ancient Japanese samurai sword.

In his left hand was a crumpled sheet of yellow paper, evidently a radiogram.

Fontaine took the scrap from the lax yellow fingers, puzzled over the Oriental characters.

Then he went outside, and closed the door, and sat down at the head of the ladder to await the coming of men who might be able to solve the mystery.

The last man scrambled down the swaying chains and dropped to the ground from the Western cruiser.

Lieutenants Watson and Atkins were alone in the ship.

'Why did you stay?' demanded Watson, throwing the starting switch. He had hastily rigged an extension from the power room to navigation. 'Only one man is needed to operate the ship, in an emergency.'

Lieutenant Atkins found a fine cigar in his uniform. 'I've been saving this,' he remarked, stripping off the cellophane wrapper lovingly. 'The condemned man indulges in the traditional liberties.'

'Answer my question,' Watson insisted, advancing the speed lever.

Atkins pressed a glowing heating-coil 'lighter' to the tip of the cigar. 'Let me ask you this—why did *you* make this heroic gesture?'

Watson flushed. 'You might as well ask—why fight at all?'

'You might,' Atkins said, smiling slightly.

'I did this because our men come first!' Watson shouted almost in fury.

Atkins chuckled. 'Forgive me, old friend—I find it hard to shake off the illusions I had back in the Last Surface War myself.' He blew a huge cloud of smoke. 'But, when Culver sent down the commander's congratulations to me for silencing that enemy battery, it struck me how empty all our battles and decorations are.'

Watson shoved the speed lever to maximum; the cruiser rolled backward down the tunnel at a terrific velocity, no longer impeded by masses of rock. After a long silence he asked: 'Atkins—what were *you* fighting for?'

Atkins looked him squarely in the eye. 'Well, I managed to hypnotize myself into a superficial love of massed artillery—it's a perversion of my love for the symphony—used to conduct a small orchestra at the academy before it was dissolved and the funds allocated to a military band. I liked that orchestra; felt I was doing something constructive for once.' He was silent for a while, smoking and reminiscing. Coming back to reality with a start, he went on hastily: 'Of course, underneath it all I guess I was motivated just the way you were—to maintain the dead traditions of the service, to save our shipmates who would have died anyway, and to advance a cause which no longer exists.'

Watson buried his head in his hands. 'I fought because I thought it was the right thing to do.'

Atkins softened. 'So did I, my friend,' he admitted. 'But it's all over now—'

He paused to flick ashes from the cigar. 'I saved something else for this,' he went on irrelevantly. 'Carpenter is gone now, Watson, so we can dispense with his psychopathic mummery. What a joke if he should ever know I had this aboard.' He laughed lightly, producing a small, gold-stamped book bound

in black leather. 'This sort of thing is the only value left, for us,' he asserted. 'Let us pray.'

And thus, a few minutes later, the two elderly officers died. It was not a great blast, as atomic explosions go, but ship and men and rock puffed and sparkled in bright, cleansing flame.

The bridge of the captured enemy ship looked fresh and clean. The remains of the Asiatic commander's gruesome self-destruction had been cleared away; blackened places about the room glistened with new paint. It was several hours after the battle.

Sanderson stood at attention reading report to his surviving officers. Sergeant Fontaine, permitted to attend as the first witness to the baffling slaughter, fidgeted in the presence of so much gold braid. Private Carson, the strange child of the laboratory, present to assist Fontaine in guarding the disgraced executive officer, stood stolidly, a detached expression on his face.

'—and therefore the atomic explosion, when it did come, was hardly noticed here,' the commander concluded his report. 'Lieutenant Watson did his duty'—he glared covertly at Culver, manacled between Fontaine and Carson—'and if we can return safely to our Advance Base this will go down as one of the greatest exploits in the history of warfare.'

He cleared his throat. 'At ease,' he said offhandedly, straightening his papers. The officers and crewmen relaxed, shifted position, as Sanderson went on more informally: 'Before we discuss any future action, however, there is this business of the Asiatic warlords—their inexplicable suicide. Lieutenant Carpenter?'

The psycho officer stepped forward, caressing his bandaged jaw. 'I have questioned the ten prisoners we took,' he announced as clearly as he could through the bandages, 'and my men have applied all of the standard means of coercion. I am firmly convinced that the Asiatic prisoners are as ignorant as we are of the reason for their masters' strange behaviour.'

Sanderson motioned him back impatiently. 'Ensign Becker?'

The personnel officer rustled some sheets of paper. 'I have checked the records carefully, sir,' he asserted, 'and Lieutenant-Commander Culver is the only man aboard this ship who understands written Asiatic.'

Sanderson's gaze swept over all his officers. 'Gentlemen, the executive officer was guilty of striking the psycho officer

shortly before we abandoned ship—I witnessed the action. I want to know if you will accept as valid his translation of the radio gram which Sergeant Fontaine found on the body of the enemy leader.'

'I object!' shouted Carpenter immediately. 'Culver violated one of the *basic* principles of the officers' corps—he can't be completely *sane*.'

'True, perhaps,' admitted Sanderson testily, 'but, lieutenant, would you care to suggest a plan of action—*before* we discover why our late enemies killed themselves so conveniently?'

'Commander, are you trying to vindicate this man?' Carpenter demanded indignantly.

Sanderson looked at the psycho officer with an expression almost contemptuous. 'You should know by this time, lieutenant, that I have never liked Mr Culver,' he snorted. 'Unfortunately this could be a question of our own survival. If the officers present accept Culver's translation of the message, I shall act on it.'

'But we came here to begin courtmartial proceedings—'

'That can wait,' the skipper interrupted impatiently. 'This is my command, Carpenter, and I wish you'd remember that. Well, gentlemen? A show of hands, please—' He paused to count. 'Very well,' he decided shortly. 'Sergeant Fontaine, give the message to the prisoner.'

Fontaine threw a snappy salute and handed the yellow scrap of paper silently to the exec. Carson loosened his grip somewhat; Culver began to work out the translation—

**FROM** Supreme Headquarters in Mongolia.

**TO** All field commanders.

**SUBJECT** Secret weapon X-39, failure of.

1. Research project X-39, a semi-living chemical process attacking all forms of protoplasm, was released on the South American front according to plan last night.

2. Secret weapon X-39 was found to be uncontrollable and is spreading throughout our own armies all over the world. In addition, infection centring on the secret research laboratories has covered at least one-third of Asia.

3. You are directed to—

'Well?' demanded Sanderson.

'That's all, sir,' Culver replied quietly.

The room immediately exploded into conversation, all pre-

tence at military discipline forgotten. The commander shouted for order. He stood even straighter than his normally stiff military bearing allowed; he was the picture of triumph and confidence.

'This interrupted message can be interpreted in only one way,' he declared ringingly. 'Ensign Becker, you will inform all hands that the enemy's suicide is worldwide and that *the war is over!*'

For a long, long moment there was dead silence. The last peace rumour had died when most of these men were children. It took much time for the realization to sink in that the senseless murder was over at last.

Then—cheering, laughing, slapping one another backs, the officers gave way to their emotions. Many became hysterical; a few still stood dumbly, failing to comprehend what 'peace' was.

Battle-hardened, stiffly militaristic Sanderson's face was wet with tears.

*And then Lieutenant Carpenter screamed.*

All eyes were riveted on the psycho officer, a hideous suspicion growing in their minds as he cringed in a corner and yelled meaninglessly, his whole body shaking with unutterable terror. They had all seen men afraid of death—but in Carpenter's mad eyes was reflected the essence of all the hells conceived in the ancient religions—he slavered, he whimpered, and suddenly his body began to *ripple*.

His fellow officers stood rooted to the deck in sheer fright as he *slid* rather than fell to a huddled heap that continued to sink down after he had fallen, spreading and flowing and finally *running like water*.

Sanderson stared in stunned horror at a pool of sticky yellow fluid that dripped through a bronze grating in the floor.

Culver grinned foolishly. 'Yes, commander,' he said airily, 'you were right—the war is over.'

Sanderson gingerly picked Carpenter's notebook out of the sodden pile of clothing and bandages and the broken glass of the psycho officer's spectacles. 'Read that radiogram again,' he ordered hoarsely, signalling the two crewmen to release their prisoners.

The exec rubbed his wrists to restore circulation as the handcuffs were removed. Then he picked up the crumpled paper, smoothed it out.

'Research Project X-39, a semi-living chemical process at-

tacking all forms of protoplasm, was released—' Culver choked over the words. 'Sir, I—'

And then, in a few terrible minutes of screams and curses and hideous dissolution, all the officers understood why the Asiatics had committed suicide.

Sergeant Fontaine for some reason kept his head. He fired four shots rapidly from his pistol; one missed Carson, the others found their mark in Sanderson, Culver and Becker, who looked oddly grateful as their bodies jerked under the impact and they slumped in unholy disintegration.

Sanderson saluted solemnly with a dissolving arm.

Fontaine had one more pellet in his gun. He hesitated, looked inquiringly for a moment at the inscrutable Carson, then as he felt a subtle *loosening* under his skin he turned the weapon on himself and fired.

Private Carson puffed nervously at a cigarette, staring in shocked, horrible fascination at the weird carnage—then ran blindly, fleeing from he knew not what.

The terror flew on wings of light through the ruined enemy ship. Technicians, bridge watches, the ten enemy prisoners, psych corpsmen, navigators, combat crewmen—even the dead Oriental commanders joined the dissolving tide. Richards and Sheehan were the last to go; they hysterically accused each other of causing the horror, trying desperately to find some tangible cause for the Doom—they fought like great beasts, and fat Koch was not there to stop the fight—they struggled, and coalesced suddenly into one rippling yellow pool.

Carson, still incased in his armour, raced and clattered through the deserted ship—the sound of his passing was almost sacrilegious, like the desecration of a tomb. Everywhere silence, smashed walls, empty suits of armour, little bundles of wet clothing, and curious yellow stains. *Die, why can't you die?*

Carson, the strange one—separated by more than aloofness from his fellows—spawned in a laboratory, the culmination of thousands of experiments in the vain hope of circumventing the extremity of the slaughter by manufacturing men. His metabolism was subtly different from that of normal man; he *needed* nicotine in his system for some reason—that was why he chain-smoked—but tobacco was a narcotic; it could not protect protoplasm. *Why can't you die, Carson?* All through the ship, silence, wet clothing, little pools—not even the dead had escaped—nothing moved or lived except this

running, half-mad man—or Thing—born in a laboratory, if one could say he *had* been 'born'.

A quick movement of his gloved hands sealed the round helmet on his shoulders. He ran and stumbled and climbed through passageways and down ladders; he fairly flew down the landing-ramp and soon disappeared in the black depths of the tunnel.

And the nighted cavern so recently hacked from the outraged crust was given back to the darkness and the silence it had always known.



# MEIHEM IN CE KLASRUM

by Dolton Edwards

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
September

*It isn't often one remembers something one has read over a time interval of three and a half decades, and virtually word for word, when one has not read it all during all that time. This is one of those things.*

*I had forgotten it was published in 1946 and when Marty suggested it to me, I reacted with the greatest enthusiasm.*

*At first blush, it seems a classic of satire, but read it again. I believe it is absolutely sensible and is the way to go—except that no one ever will. The trouble is that when enough people have learned things the wrong way and find it almost easy, the thought of trying to learn the right way and undoing a lifetime of practice is insupportable. Therefore the wrong way, which has become institutionalized, also proves immovable.*

*The spelling of the English language is not the only case in point. There is the immovable metronome like week which prevents the existence of a rational calendar. Worst of all, there is the typewriter keyboard, invented over a hundred years*

*ago virtually at random and so irrational that it slows typing by at least ten percent. Yet too many people know how to type and would dread unlearning it (I would, myself) so that the most modern computers still have that same old dreadful typewriter keyboard.*

*And yet there is some hope, if we think in centuries, rather than in decades. It took several centuries to replace the Roman numerals by the Arabic, the Julian Calendar by the Gregorian, a myriad stupid systems of measurement by the metric—so read “Meihem” and hope.—I.A.*

Because we are still bearing some of the scars of our brief skirmish with II-B English, it is natural that we should be enchanted by Mr. George Bernard Shaw's current campaign for a simplified alphabet.

Obviously, as Mr. Shaw points out, English spelling is in much need of a general overhauling and streamlining. However, our own resistance to any changes requiring a large expenditure of mental effort in the near future would cause us to view with some apprehension the possibility of some day receiving a morning paper printed in—to us—Greek.

Our own plan would achieve the same end as the legislation proposed by Mr. Shaw, but in a less shocking manner, as it consists merely of an acceleration of the normal processes by which the language is continually modernized.

As a catalytic agent, we would suggest that a National Easy Language Week be proclaimed, which the President would inaugurate, outlining some short cut to concentrate on during the week, and to be adopted during the ensuing year. All school children would be given a holiday, the lost time being the equivalent of that gained by the spelling shortcut.

In 1946, for example, we would urge the elimination of the soft “c,” for which we would substitute “s.” Certainly, such an improvement would be celebrated in all civic-minded circles as being sufficiently worth the trouble, and students in all cities in the land would be receptive toward any change eliminating the necessity of learning the difference between the two letters.

In 1947, sinse only the hard "c" would be left, it would be possible to substitute "k" for it, both letters being pronounsed identikally. Imagine how greatly only two years of this prosess would klarify the konfusion in the minds of students. Already we would have eliminated an entire letter from the alphabet. Typrewriters and linotypes, kould all be built with one less letter, and all the manpower and materials proviously devoted to making "c's" kould be turned toward raising the national standard of living.

In the fase of so many notable improvements, it is easy to foresee that by 1948, "National Easy Language Week" would be a pronounsed sukses. All skhool tshildren would be looking forward with konsiderable eksitement to the holiday, and in a blaze of national publisity it would be announsed that the double konsonant "ph" no longer existed, and that the sound would henseforth be written "f" in all words. This would make sutsh words as "fonograf" twenty persent shorter in print.

By 1949, publik interest in a fonetik alfabet kan be ekspekted to have inkreased to the point where a more radikal step forward kan be taken without fear of undue kritisism. We would therefore urge the elimination, at that time of al unesenary double leters, whitsh, although quite harmles, have always ben a nuisanse in the language and a desided deterrent to akurate speling. Try it yourself in the next leter you write, and se if both writing and reading are not fasilitated.

With so mutsh progres already made, it might be posible in 1950 to delve further into the posibilities of fonetik speling. After due konsideration of the reseption aforded the previous steps, it should be expedient by this time to spel al difthongs fonetikaly. Most students do not realize that the long "i" and "y," as in "time" and "by," are aktuaily the difthong "ai," as it is written in "aisle," and that the long "a" in "fate," is in reality the difthong "ei" as in "rein." Although perhaps not imediately aparent, the saving in taim and efort wil be tremendous when we leiter elimineite the sailent "e," as meide posible bai this last tsheinge.

For, as is wel known, the horrible mes of "e's" apearing in our writen language is kaused prinsipaly bai the present nesesity of indikeiting whether a vowel is long or short. Therefore, in 1951 we kould simply elimineit al sailent "e's," and kontinu to read and wrait merily along as though we wer in an atomik ag of edukation.

In 1951 we would urg a greit step forward. Sins bai this

taim it would have ben four years sins anywun had usd the leter "c," we would sugest that the "National Easy Language Wek" for 1951 be devoted to substitution of "c" for "Th." To be sur it would be som taim befor peopl would bekom akustomd to reading ceir newspapers and buks wic sutsh sentences in cem as "Ceodor caught he had cre cousand cistls crust croug ce cik of his cumb."

In ce seim maner, bai meiking eatsh leter hav its own sound and cat sound only, we kould shorten ce language stil mor. In 1952 we would elimineit ce "y"; cen in 1953 we kould us ce leter to indikeit ce "sh" sound, cerbai klarifaiing words laik yugar and yur, as wel as redusing bai wun mor leter al words laik "yut," "yore," and so forc. Cink, cen, of al ce benefits to be geind bai ce distinktion whitsh wil cen be meid between words laik:

ocean	now	writen	oyean
machine	"	"	mayin
racial	"	"	reiyial

Al sutsh divers weis of wraiting wun sound would no longer exist, and whenever wun kaim akros a "y" sound he would know exaktli what to wrait.

Kontinuing cis proses, year after year, we would eventuali have a reali sensibl writen langug. By 1975, wi ventyur tu sei, cer wud bi no mor uv ces teribli trublsom difikultis, wic no tu leters usd to indikeit ce seim nois, and laikwais no tu noises riten wic ce seim leter. Even Mr. Yaw, wi beliv, wud be hapi in ce noleg cat his drims fainali keim tru.

# VINTAGE SEASON

by **Lawrence O'Donnell** (Catherine L. Moore 1911- and Henry Kuttner 1914-1958—this story is generally credited to Moore, but we are not so sure)

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
September

*1946 was another strong year for science fiction's most renowned and effective husband-and-wife writing team. They started the year with an excellent two-part serial in Astounding, "The Fairy Chessman," and under their several pen names produced a number of solid stories throughout 1946, almost on a monthly basis (see also "Absalom" in this volume).*

*"Vintage Season" is one of their most famous stories, one that was widely imitated, especially the technique of using tourists from the future to comment on the then present. The Science Fiction Writers of America voted it a richly deserved retrospective Nebula Award in the early 1970s.*

*(Two ironclad, unbreakable limitations pen in the real world. The fact that the speed of light is an absolute limit acts to cut off most of the universe from us. The fact that moving back in time is theo-*

*retically impossible [I believe] cuts off our own past from us.*

*In science fiction, there is a tacit understanding that both these limitations be ignored in the interest of creating good stories. Faster-than-light travel is commonplace in science fiction, and so is time travel. There is no question that time-travel makes possible situations that are rich in irony and subtle tensions. Especially when well-handled, something one would expect of the Kuttners.—I.A.)*

Three people came up the walk to the old mansion just at dawn on a perfect May morning. Oliver Wilson in his pajamas watched them from an upper window through a haze of conflicting emotions, resentment predominant. He didn't want them there.

They were foreigners. He knew only that much about them. They had the curious name of Sancisco, and their first names, scrawled in loops on the lease, appeared to be Omerie, Kleph and Klia, though it was impossible as he looked down upon them now to sort them out by signature. He hadn't even been sure whether they would be men or women, and he had expected something a little less cosmopolitan.

Oliver's heart sank a little as he watched them follow the taxi driver up the walk. He had hoped for less self-assurance in his unwelcome tenants, because he meant to force them out of the house if he could. It didn't look very promising from here.

The man went first. He was tall and dark, and he wore his clothes and carried his body with that peculiar arrogant assurance that comes from perfect confidence in every phase of one's being. The two women were laughing as they followed him. Their voices were light and sweet, and their faces were beautiful, each in its own exotic way, but the first thing Oliver thought when he looked at them was, "Expensive!"

It was not only that patina of perfection that seemed to dwell in every line of their incredibly flawless garments. There are degrees of wealth beyond which wealth itself ceases to have significance. Oliver had seen before, on rare occa-

sions, something like this assurance that the earth turning beneath their well-shod feet turned only to their whim.

It puzzled him a little in this case, because he had the feeling as the three came up the walk that the beautiful clothing they wore so confidently was not clothing they were accustomed to. There was a curious air of condescension in the way they moved. Like women in costume. They minced a little on their delicate high heels, held out an arm to stare at the cut of a sleeve, twisted now and then inside their garments as if the clothing sat strangely on them, as if they were accustomed to something entirely different.

And there was an elegance about the way the garments fitted them which even to Oliver looked strikingly unusual. Only an actress on the screen, who can stop time and the film to adjust every disarrayed fold so that she looks perpetually perfect, might appear thus elegantly clad. But let these women move as they liked, and each fold of their clothing followed perfectly with the moment and fell perfectly into place again. One might almost suspect the garments were not cut of ordinary cloth, or that they were cut according to some unknown, subtle scheme, with many artful hidden seams placed by a tailor incredibly skilled at his trade.

They seemed excited. They talked in high, clear, very sweet voices, looking up at the perfect blue and transparent sky in which dawn was still frankly pink. They looked at the trees on the lawn, the leaves translucently green with an under color of golden newness, the edges crimped from constriction in the recent bud.

Happily and with excitement in their voices they called to the man, and when he answered, his own voice blended so perfectly in cadence with theirs that it sounded like three people singing together. Their voices, like their clothing, seemed to have an elegance far beyond the ordinary, to be under a control such as Oliver Wilson had never dreamed of before this morning.

The taxi driver brought up the luggage, which was of a beautiful pale stuff that did not look quite like leather, and had curves in it so subtle it seemed square until you saw how two or three pieces of it fitted together when carried, into a perfectly balanced block. It was scuffed, as if from much use. And though there was a great deal of it, the taxi man did not seem to find his burden heavy. Oliver saw him look down at it now and then and heft the weight incredulously.

One of the women had very black hair, and a skin like

cream, and smoke-blue eyes heavy-lidded with the weight of her lashes. It was the other woman Oliver's gaze followed as she came up the walk. Her hair was a clear, pale red, and her face had a softness that he thought would be like velvet to touch. She was tanned to a warm amber darker than her hair.

Just as they reached the porch steps the fair woman lifted her head and looked up. She gazed straight into Oliver's eyes and he saw that hers were very blue, and just a little amused, as if she had known he was there all along. Also they were frankly admiring.

Feeling a bit dizzy, Oliver hurried back to his room to dress.

"We are here on a vacation," the dark man said, accepting the keys. "We will not wish to be disturbed, as I made clear in our correspondence. You have engaged a cook and housemaid for us, I understand. We will expect you to move your own belongings out of the house, then, and—"

"Wait," Oliver said uncomfortably. "Something's come up. I—" He hesitated, not sure just how to present it. These were such increasingly odd people. Even their speech was odd. They spoke so distinctly, not slurring any of the words into contractions. English seemed as familiar to them as a native tongue, but they all spoke as trained singers sing, with perfect breath control and voice placement.

And there was a coldness in the man's voice, as if some gulf lay between him and Oliver, so deep no feeling of human contact could bridge it.

"I wonder," Oliver said, "if I could find you better living quarters somewhere else in town. There's a place across the street that—"

The dark woman said, "Oh, no!" in a lightly horrified voice, and all three of them laughed. It was cool, distant laughter that did not include Oliver.

The dark man said: "We chose this house carefully, Mr. Wilson. We would not be interested in living anywhere else."

Oliver said desperately, "I don't see why. It isn't even a modern house. I have two others in much better condition. Even across the street you'd have a fine view of the city. Here there isn't anything. The other houses cut off the view, and—"

"We engaged rooms here, Mr. Wilson," the man said with finality. "We expect to use them. Now will you make arrangements to leave as soon as possible?"

Oliver said, "No," and looked stubborn. "That isn't in the



lease. You can live here until next month, since you paid for it, but you can't put me out. I'm staying."

The man opened his mouth to say something. He looked coldly at Oliver and closed it again. The feeling of aloofness was chill between them. There was a moment's silence. Then the man said,

"Very well. Be kind enough to stay out of our way."

It was a little odd that he didn't inquire about Oliver's motives. Oliver was not yet sure enough of the man to explain. He couldn't very well say, "Since the lease was signed, I've been offered three times what the house is worth if I'll sell it before the end of May." He couldn't say, "I want the money, and I'm going to use my own nuisance-value to annoy you until you're willing to move out." After all, there seemed no reason why they shouldn't. After seeing them, there seemed doubly no reason, for it was clear they must be accustomed to surroundings infinitely better than this time-worn old house.

It was very strange, the value this house had so suddenly acquired. There was no reason at all why two groups of semi-anonymous people should be so eager to possess it for the month of May.

In silence Oliver showed his tenants upstairs to the three big bedrooms across the front of the house. He was intensely conscious of the red-haired woman and the way she watched him with a sort of obviously covert interest, quite warmly, and with a curious undertone to her interest that he could not quite place. It was familiar, but elusive. He thought how pleasant it would be to talk to her alone, if only to try to capture that elusive attitude and put a name to it.

Afterward he went down to the telephone and called his fiancée.

Sue's voice squeaked a little with excitement over the wire.

"Oliver, so early? Why, it's hardly six yet. Did you tell them what I said? Are they going to go?"

"Can't tell yet. I doubt it. After all, Sue, I did take their money, you know."

"Oliver, they've got to go! You've got to do something!"

"I'm trying, Sue. But I don't like it."

"Well, there isn't any reason why they shouldn't stay somewhere else. And we're going to need that money. You'll just have to think of something, Oliver."

Oliver met his own worried eyes in the mirror above the telephone and scowled at himself. His straw-colored hair was

tangled and there was a shining stubble on his pleasant, tanned face. He was sorry the red-haired woman had first seen him in this untidy condition. Then his conscience smote him at the sound of Sue's determined voice and he said:

"I'll try, darling. I'll try. But I did take their money."

They had, in fact, paid a great deal of money, considerably more than the rooms were worth even in that year of high prices and high wages. The country was just moving into one of those fabulous eras which are later referred to as the Gay Forties or the Golden Sixties—a pleasant period of national euphoria. It was a stimulating time to be alive—while it lasted.

"All right," Oliver said resignedly. "I'll do my best."

But he was conscious, as the next few days went by, that he was not doing his best. There were several reasons for that. From the beginning the idea of making himself a nuisance to his tenants had been Sue's, not Oliver's. And if Oliver had been a little less compliant or Sue a little less determined the whole project would never have got under way. Reason was on Sue's side, but—

For one thing, the tenants were so fascinating. All they said and did had a queer sort of inversion to it, as if a mirror had been held up to ordinary living and in the reflection showed strange variations from the norm. Their minds worked on a different basic premise, Oliver thought, from his own. They seemed to derive covert amusement from the most unamusing things; they patronized, they were aloof with a quality of cold detachment which did not prevent them from laughing inexplicably far too often for Oliver's comfort.

He saw them occasionally, on their way to and from their rooms. They were polite and distant, not, he suspected, from anger at his presence but from sheer indifference.

Most of the day they spent out of the house. The perfect May weather held unbroken and they seemed to give themselves up wholeheartedly to admiration of it, entirely confident that the warm, pale-gold sunshine and the scented air would not be interrupted by rain or cold. They were so sure of it that Oliver felt uneasy.

They took only one meal a day in the house, a late dinner. And their reactions to the meal were unpredictable. Laughter greeted some of the dishes, and a sort of delicate disgust others. No one would touch the salad, for instance. And the fish seemed to cause a wave of queer embarrassment around the table.

They dressed elaborately for each dinner. The man—his name was Omerie—looked extremely handsome in his dinner clothes, but he seemed a little sulky and Oliver twice heard the women laughing because he had to wear black. Oliver entertained a sudden vision, for no reason, of the man in garments as bright and as subtly cut as the women's, and it seemed somehow very right for him. He wore even the dark clothing with a certain flamboyance, as if cloth-of-gold would be more normal for him.

When they were in the house at other meal times, they ate in their rooms. They must have brought a great deal of food with them, from whatever mysterious place they had come. Oliver wondered with increasing curiosity where it might be. Delicious odors drifted into the hall sometimes, at odd hours, from their closed doors. Oliver could not identify them, but almost always they smelled irresistible. A few times the food smell was rather shockingly unpleasant, almost nauseating. It takes a connoisseur, Oliver reflected, to appreciate the decadent. And these people, most certainly, were connoisseurs.

Why they lived so contentedly in this huge, ramshackle old house was a question that disturbed his dreams at night. Or why they refused to move. He caught some fascinating glimpses into their rooms, which appeared to have been changed almost completely by additions he could not have defined very clearly from the brief sights he had of them. The feeling of luxury which his first glance at them had evoked was confirmed by the richness of the hangings they had apparently brought with them, the half-glimpsed ornaments, the pictures on the walls, even the whiffs of exotic perfume that floated from half-open doors.

He saw the women go by him in the halls, moving softly through the brown dimness in their gowns so uncannily perfect in fit, so lushly rich, so glowingly colored they seemed unreal. That poise born of confidence in the subservience of the world gave them an imperious aloofness, but more than once Oliver, meeting the blue gaze of the woman with the red hair and the soft, tanned skin, thought he saw quickened interest there. She smiled at him in the dimness and went by in a haze of fragrance and a halo of incredible richness, and the warmth of the smile lingered after she had gone.

He knew she did not mean this aloofness to last between them. From the very first he was sure of that. When the time came she would make the opportunity to be alone with him. The thought was confusing and tremendously exciting. There

them handled it like a first edition of Shakespeare. I never even heard of the author, but he seems to be a tin god in their country, wherever that is."

"You still don't know? Haven't they even dropped any hints?"

"We don't do much talking," Oliver reminded her with some irony.

"I know, but— Oh, well, I guess it doesn't matter. Go on, what else do they do?"

"Well, this morning they were going to spend studying 'Golconda' and his great art, and this afternoon I think they're taking a trip up the river to some sort of shrine I never heard of. It isn't very far, wherever it is, because I know they're coming back for dinner. Some great man's birthplace, I think—they promised to take home souvenirs of the place if they could get any. They're typical tourists, all right—if I could only figure out what's behind the whole thing. It doesn't make sense."

"Nothing about that house makes sense anymore. I do wish—"

She went on in a petulant voice, but Oliver ceased suddenly to hear her, because just outside the door, walking with imperial elegance on her high heels, a familiar figure passed. He did not see her face, but he thought he would know that poise, that richness of line and motion, anywhere on earth.

"Excuse me a minute," he muttered to Sue, and was out of his chair before she could speak. He made the door in half a dozen long strides, and the beautifully elegant passerby was only a few steps away when he got there. Then, with the words he had meant to speak already half uttered, he fell silent and stood there staring.

It was not the red-haired woman. It was not her dark companion. It was a stranger. He watched, speechless, while the lovely, imperious creature moved on through the crowd and vanished, moving with familiar poise and assurance and an equally familiar strangeness as if the beautiful and exquisitely fitted garments she wore were an exotic costume to her, as they had always seemed to the Saneisco women. Every other woman on the street looked untidy and ill-at-ease beside her. Walking like a queen, she melted into the crowd and was gone.

She came from *their* country, Oliver told himself dizzily. So someone else nearby had mysterious tenants in this month of perfect May weather. Someone else was puzzling in

vain today over the strangeness of the people from that nameless land.

In silence he went back to Sue.

The door stood invitingly ajar in the brown dimness of the upper hall. Oliver's steps slowed as he drew near it, and his heart began to quicken correspondingly. It was the red-haired woman's room, and he thought the door was not open by accident. Her name, he knew now, was Kleph.

The door creaked a little on its hinges and from within a very sweet voice said lazily, "Won't you come in?"

The room looked very different indeed. The big bed had been pushed back against the wall and a cover thrown over it that brushed the floor all around looked like soft-haired fur except that it was a pale blue-green and sparkled as if every hair were tipped with invisible crystals. Three books lay open on the fur, and a very curious-looking magazine with faintly luminous printing and a page of pictures that at first glance appeared three-dimensional. Also a tiny porcelain pipe encrusted with porcelain flowers, and a thin wisp of smoke floating from the bowl.

Above the bed a broad picture hung, framing a square of blue water so real Oliver had to look twice to be sure it was not rippling gently from left to right. From the ceiling swung a crystal globe on a glass cord. It turned gently, the light from the windows making curved rectangles in its sides.

Under the center window a sort of chaise longue stood which Oliver had not seen before. He could only assume it was at least partly pneumatic and had been brought in the luggage. There was a very rich-looking quilted cloth covering and hiding it, embossed all over in shining metallic patterns.

Kleph moved slowly from the door and sank upon the chaise longue with a little sigh of content. The couch accommodated itself to her body with what looked like delightful comfort. Kleph wriggled a little then smiled up at Oliver.

"Do come on in. Sit over there, where you can see out the window. I love your beautiful spring weather. You know, there never was a May like it in civilized times." She said that quite seriously, her blue eyes on Oliver's, and there was a hint of patronage in her voice, as if the weather had been arranged especially for her.

Oliver started across the room and then paused and looked down in amazement at the floor, which felt unstable. He had not noticed before that the carpet was pure white, unspotted,

and sank about an inch under the pressure of the feet. He saw then that Kleph's feet were bare, or almost bare. She wore something like gossamer buskins of filmy net, fitting her feet exactly. The bare soles were pink as if they had been rouged, and the nails had a liquid gleam like tiny mirrors. He moved closer, and was not as surprised as he should have been to see that they really were tiny mirrors, painted with some lacquer that gave them reflecting surfaces.

"Do sit down," Kleph said again, waving a white-sleeved arm toward a chair by the window. She wore a garment that looked like short, soft down, loosely cut but following perfectly every motion she made. And there was something curiously different about her very shape today. When Oliver saw her in street clothes, she had the square-shouldered, slim-flanked figure that all women strive for, but here in her lounging robe she looked—well, different. There was an almost swanlike slope to her shoulders today, a roundness and softness to her body that looked unfamiliar and very appealing.

"Will you have some tea?" Kleph asked, and smiled charmingly.

A low table beside her held a tray and several small covered cups, lovely things with an inner glow like rose quartz, the color shining deeply as if from within layer upon layer of translucence. She took up one of the cups—there were no saucers—and offered it to Oliver.

It felt fragile and thin as paper in his hand. He could not see the contents because of the cup's cover, which seemed to be one with the cup itself and left only a thin open crescent at the rim. Steam rose from the opening.

Kleph took up a cup of her own and tilted it to her lips, smiling at Oliver over the rim. She was very beautiful. The pale red hair lay in shining loops against her head and the corona of curls like a halo above her forehead might have been pressed down like a wreath. Every hair kept order as perfectly as if it had been painted on, though the breeze from the window stirred now and then among the softly shining strands.

Oliver tried the tea. Its flavor was exquisite, very hot, and the taste that lingered upon his tongue was like the scent of flowers. It was an extremely feminine drink. He sipped again, surprised to find how much he liked it.

The scent of flowers seemed to increase as he drank, swirling through his head like smoke. After the third sip there

was a faint buzzing in his ears. The bees among the flowers, perhaps, he thought incoherently—and sipped again.

Kleph watched him, smiling.

"The others will be out all afternoon," she told Oliver comfortably. "I thought it would give us a pleasant time to be acquainted."

Oliver was rather horrified to hear himself saying, "What makes you talk like that?" He had had no idea of asking the question; something seemed to have loosened his control over his own tongue.

Kleph's smile deepened. She tipped the cup to her lips and there was indulgence in her voice when she said, "What do you mean by that?"

He waved his hand vaguely, noting with some surprise that at a glance it seemed to have six or seven fingers as it moved past his face.

"I don't know—precision, I guess. Why don't you say 'don't', for instance?"

"In our country we are trained to speak with precision," Kleph explained. "Just as we are trained to move and dress and think with precision. Any slovenliness is trained out of us in childhood. With you, of course—" She was polite. "With you, this does not happen to be a national fetish. With us, we have time for the amenities. We like them."

Her voice had grown sweeter and sweeter as she spoke, until by now it was almost indistinguishable from the sweetness of the flower-scent in Oliver's head, and the delicate flavor of the tea.

"What country do you come from?" he asked, and tilted the cup again to drink, mildly surprised to notice that it seemed inexhaustible.

Kleph's smile was definitely patronizing this time. It didn't irritate him. Nothing could irritate him just now. The whole room swam in a beautiful rosy glow as fragrant as the flowers.

"We must not speak of that, Mr. Wilson."

"But—" Oliver paused. After all, it was, of course, none of his business. "This is a vacation?" he asked vaguely.

"Call it a pilgrimage, perhaps."

"Pilgrimage?" Oliver was so interested that for an instant his mind came back into sharp focus. "To—what?"

"I should not have said that, Mr. Wilson. Please forget it. Do you like the tea?"

"Very much."

"You will have guessed by now that it is not only tea, but an euphoriac."

Oliver stared. "Euphoriac?"

Kleph made a descriptive circle in the air with one graceful hand, and laughed. "You do not feel the effects yet? Surely you do?"

"I feel," Oliver said, "the way I'd feel after four whiskeys."

Kleph shuddered delicately. "We get our euphoria less painfully. And without the after-effects your barbarous alcohols used to have." She bit her lip. "Sorry. I must be euphoric myself to speak so freely. Please forgive me. Shall we have some music?"

Kleph leaned backward on the chaise longue and reached toward the wall beside her. The sleeve, falling away from her round tanned arm, left bare the inside of the wrist, and Oliver was startled to see there a long, rosy streak of fading scar. His inhibitions had dissolved in the fumes of the fragrant tea; he caught his breath and leaned forward to stare.

Kleph shook the sleeve back over the scar with a quick gesture. Color came into her face beneath the softly tinted tan and she would not meet Oliver's eyes. A queer shame seemed to have fallen upon her.

Oliver said tactlessly, "What is it? What's the matter?"

Still she would not look at him. Much later he understood that shame and knew she had reason for it. Now he listened blankly as she said:

"Nothing . . . nothing at all. A . . . an inoculation. All of us . . . oh, never mind. Listen to the music."

This time she reached out with the other arm. She touched nothing, but when she had held her hand near the wall a sound breathed through the room. It was the sound of water, the sighing of waves receding upon long, sloped beaches. Oliver followed Kleph's gaze toward the picture of the blue water above the bed.

The waves there were moving. More than that, the point of vision moved. Slowly the seascape drifted past, moving with the waves, following them toward shore. Oliver watched, half-hypnotized by a motion that seemed at the time quite acceptable and not in the least surprising.

The waves lifted and broke in creaming foam and ran seething up a sandy beach. Then through the sound of the water music began to breathe, and through the water itself a man's face dawned in the frame, smiling intimately into the



room. He held an oddly archaic musical instrument, lute-shaped, its body striped light and dark like a melon and its long neck bent back over his shoulder. He was singing, and Oliver felt mildly astonished at the song. It was very familiar and very odd indeed. He groped through the unfamiliar rhythms and found at last a thread to catch the tune by—it was "Make-Believe," from "Showboat," but certainly a showboat that had never steamed up the Mississippi.

"What's he doing to it?" he demanded after a few moments of outraged listening. "I never heard anything like it!"

Kleph laughed and stretched out her arm again. Enigmatically she said, "We call it kyling. Never mind. How do you like this?"

It was a comedian, a man in semiclownd makeup, his eyes exaggerated so that they seemed to cover half his face. He stood by a broad glass pillar before a dark curtain and sang a gay, staccato song interspersed with patter that sounded impromptu, and all the while his left hand did an intricate, musical tattoo of the nailtips on the glass of the column. He strolled around and around it as he sang. The rhythms of his fingernails blended with the song and swung widely away into patterns of their own, and blended again without a break.

It was confusing to follow. The song made even less sense than the monologue, which had something to do with a lost slipper and was full of allusions which made Kleph smile, but were utterly unintelligible to Oliver. The man had a dry, brittle style that was not very amusing, though Kleph seemed fascinated. Oliver was interested to see in him an extension and a variation of that extreme smooth confidence which marked all three of the Sanciscos. Clearly a racial trait, he thought.

Other performances followed, some of them fragmentary as if lifted out of a more complete version. One he knew. The obvious, stirring melody struck his recognition before the figures—marching men against a haze, a great banner rolling backward above them in the smoke, foreground figures striding gigantically and shouting in rhythm, "Forward, forward the lily banners go!"

The music was tinny, the images blurred and poorly colored, but there was a gusto about the performance that caught at Oliver's imagination. He stared, remembering the old film from long ago. Dennis King and a ragged chorus, singing "The Song of the Vagabonds" from—was it *Vagabond King*?

"A very old one," Kleph said apologetically. "But I like it."

The steam of the intoxicating tea swirled between Oliver and the picture. Music swelled and sank through the room and the fragrant fumes and his own euphoric brain. Nothing seemed strange. He had discovered how to drink the tea. Like nitrous oxide, the effect was not cumulative. When you reached a peak of euphoria, you could not increase the peak. It was best to wait for a slight dip in the effect of the stimulant before taking more.

Otherwise it had most of the effects of alcohol—everything after a while dissolved into a delightful fog through which all he saw was uninformedly enchanting and partook of the qualities of a dream. He questioned nothing. Afterward he was not certain how much of it he really had dreamed.

There was the dancing doll, for instance. He remembered it quite clearly, in sharp focus—a tiny, slender woman with a long-nosed, dark-eyed face and a pointed chin. She moved delicately across the white rug—knee-high, exquisite. Her features were as mobile as her body, and she danced lightly, with resounding strokes of her toes, each echoing like a bell. It was a formalized sort of dance, and she sang breathlessly in accompaniment, making amusing little grimaces. Certainly it was a portrait-doll, animated to mimic the original perfectly in voice and motion. Afterward, Oliver knew he must have dreamed it.

What else happened he was quite unable to remember later. He knew Kleph had said some curious things, but they all made sense at the time, and afterward he couldn't remember a word. He knew he had been offered little glittering candies in a transparent dish, and that some of them had been delicious and one or two so bitter his tongue still curled the next day when he recalled them, and one—Kleph sucked luxuriantly on the same kind—of a taste that was actively nauseating.

As for Kleph herself—he was frantically uncertain the next day what had really happened. He thought he could remember the softness of her white-downed arms clasped at the back of his neck, while she laughed up at him and exhaled into his face the flowery fragrance of the tea. But beyond that he was totally unable to recall anything, for a while.

There was a brief interlude later, before the oblivion of sleep. He was almost sure he remembered a moment when the other two Sanciscos stood looking down at him, the man scowling, the smoky-eyed woman smiling a derisive smile.

The man said, from a vast distance, "Kleph, you know this is against every rule—" His voice began in a thin hum and soared in fantastic flight beyond the range of hearing. Oliver thought he remembered the dark woman's laughter, thin and distant too, and the hum of her voice like bees in flight.

"Kleph, Kleph, you silly little fool, can we never trust you out of sight?"

Kleph's voice then said something that seemed to make no sense. "What does it matter, *here*?"

The man answered in that buzzing, faraway hum. "—matter of giving your bond before you leave, not to interfere. You know you signed the rules—"

Kleph's voice, nearer and more intelligible: "But here the difference is . . . it does not matter *here*! You both know that. How could it matter?"

Oliver felt the downy brush of her sleeve against his cheek, but he saw nothing except the slow, smokelike ebb and flow of darkness past his eyes. He heard the voices wrangle musically from far away, and he heard them cease.

When he woke the next morning, alone in his own room, he woke with the memory of Kleph's eyes upon him very sorrowfully, her lovely tanned face looking down on him with the red hair falling fragrantly on each side of it and sadness and compassion in her eyes. He thought he had probably dreamed that. There was no reason why anyone should look at him with such sadness.

Sue telephoned that day.

"Oliver, the people who want to buy the house are here. That madwoman and her husband. Shall I bring them over?"

Oliver's mind all day had been hazy with the vague, bewildering memories of yesterday. Kleph's face kept floating before him, blotting out the room. He said, "What? I . . . oh, well, bring them if you want to. I don't see what good it'll do."

"Oliver, what's wrong with you? We agreed we needed the money, didn't we? I don't see how you can think of passing up such a wonderful bargain without even a struggle. We could get married and buy our own house right away, and you know we'll never get such an offer again for that old trash-heap. Wake up, Oliver!"

Oliver made an effort. "I know, Sue—I know. But—"

"Oliver, you've got to think of something!" Her voice was imperious.

He knew she was right. Kleph or no Kleph, the bargain shouldn't be ignored if there was any way at all of getting the tenants out. He wondered again what made the place so suddenly priceless to so many people. And what the last week in May had to do with the value of the house.

A sudden sharp curiosity pierced even the vagueness of his mind today. May's last week was so important that the whole sale of the house stood or fell upon occupancy by then. Why? *Why?*

"What's going to happen next week?" he asked rhetorically of the telephone. "Why can't they wait till these people leave? I'd knock a couple of thousand off the price if they'd—"

"You would not, Oliver Wilson! I can buy all our refrigeration units with that extra money. You'll just have to work out some way to give possession by next week, and that's that. You hear me?"

"Keep your shirt on," Oliver said pacifically. "I'm only human, but I'll try."

"I'm bringing the people over right away," Sue told him. "While the Sanciscos are still out. Now you put your mind to work and think of something, Oliver." She paused, and her voice was reflective when she spoke again. "They're . . . awfully odd people, darling."

"Odd?"

"You'll see."

It was an elderly woman and a very young man who trailed Sue up the walk. Oliver knew immediately what had struck Sue about them. He was somehow not at all surprised to see that both wore their clothing with the familiar air of elegant self-consciousness he had come to know so well. They, too, looked around them at the beautiful, sunny afternoon with conscious enjoyment and an air of faint condescension. He knew before he heard them speak how musical their voices would be and how meticulously they would pronounce each word.

There was no doubt about it. The people of Kleph's mysterious country were arriving here in force—for something. For the last week of May? He shrugged mentally; there was no way of guessing—yet. One thing only was sure: all of them must come from that nameless land where people controlled their voices like singers and their garments like actors who could stop the reel of time itself to adjust every disordered fold.

The elderly woman took full charge of the conversation

from the start. They stood together on the rickety, unpainted porch, and Sue had no chance even for introductions.

"Young man, I am Madame Hollia. This is my husband." Her voice had an underrunning current of harshness, which was perhaps age. And her face looked almost corseted, the loose flesh coerced into something like firmness by some invisible method Oliver could not guess at. The makeup was so skillful he could not be certain it was makeup at all, but he had a definite feeling that she was much older than she looked. It would have taken a lifetime of command to put so much authority into the harsh, deep, musically controlled voice.

The young man said nothing. He was very handsome. His type, apparently, was one that does not change much no matter in what culture or country it may occur. He wore beautifully tailored garments and carried in one gloved hand a box of red leather, about the size and shape of a book.

Madame Hollia went on. "I understand your problem about the house. You wish to sell to me, but are legally bound by your lease with Omerie and his friends. Is that right?"

Oliver nodded. "But—"

"Let me finish. If Omerie can be forced to vacate before next week, you will accept our offer. Right? Very well. Haral!" She nodded to the young man beside her. He jumped to instant attention, bowed slightly, said; "Yes, Hollia," and slipped a gloved hand into his coat.

Madame Hollia took the little object offered on his palm, her gesture as she reached for it almost imperial, as if royal robes swept from her outstretched arm.

"Here," she said, "is something that may help us. My dear"—she held it out to Sue—"if you can hide this somewhere about the house, I believe your unwelcome tenants will not trouble you much longer."

Sue took the thing curiously. It looked like a tiny silver box, no more than an inch square, indented at the top and with no line to show it could be opened.

"Wait a minute," Oliver broke in uneasily. "What is it?"

"Nothing that will harm anyone, I assure you."

"Then what—?"

Madame Hollia's imperious gesture at one sweep silenced him and commanded Sue forward. "Go on, my dear. Hurry, before Omerie comes back. I can assure you there is no danger to anyone."

Oliver broke in determinedly. "Madame Hollia, I'll have to know what your plans are. I—"

"Oh, Oliver, please!" Sue's fingers closed over the silver cube. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure Madame Hollia knows best. Don't you *want* to get those people out?"

"Of course I do. But I don't want the house blown up or—"

Madame Hollia's deep laughter was indulgent. "Nothing so crude, I promise you, Mr. Wilson. Remember, we want the house! Hurry, my dear."

Sue nodded and slipped hastily past Oliver into the hall. Outnumbered, he subsided uneasily. The young man, Hara, tapped a negligent foot and admired the sunlight as they waited. It was an afternoon as perfect as all of May had been, translucent gold, balmy with an edge of chill lingering in the air to point up a perfect contrast with the summer to come. Hara looked around him confidently, like a man paying just tribute to a stage set provided wholly for himself. He even glanced up at a drone from above and followed the course of a big transcontinental plane half dissolved in golden haze high in the sun. "Quaint," he murmured in a gratified voice.

Sue came back and slipped her hand through Oliver's arm, squeezing excitedly. "There," she said. "How long will it take, Madame Hollia?"

"That will depend, my dear. Not very long. Now, Mr. Wilson, one word with you. You live here also, I understand? For your own comfort, take my advice and—"

Somewhere within the house a door slammed and a clear, high voice rang wordlessly up a rippling scale. Then there was the sound of feet on the stairs, and a single line of song. "*Come hider, love, to me—*"

Hara started, almost dropping the red leather box he held.

"Kleph!" he said in a whisper. "Or Klia. I know they both just came on from Canterbury. But I thought—"

"Hush." Madame Hollia's features composed themselves into an imperious blank. She breathed triumphantly through her nose, drew back upon herself and turned an imposing facade to the door.

Kleph wore the same softly downy robe Oliver had seen before, except that today it was not white, but a pale, clear blue that gave her tan an apricot flush. She was smiling.

"Why, Hollia!" Her tone was at its most musical. "I thought I recognized voices from home. How nice to see you.

No one knew you were coming to the—" She broke off and glanced at Oliver and then away again. "Hara, too," she said. "What a pleasant surprise."

Sue said flatly, "When did *you* get back?"

Kleph smiled at her. "You must be the little Miss Johnson. Why, I did not go out at all. I was tired of sightseeing. I have been napping in my room."

Sue drew in her breath in something that just escaped being a disbelieving sniff. A look flashed between the two women, and for an instant held—and that instant was timeless. It was an extraordinary pause in which a great deal of wordless interplay took place in the space of a second.

Oliver saw the quality of Kleph's smile at Sue, that same look of quiet confidence he had noticed so often about all of these strange people. He saw Sue's quick inventory of the other women, and he saw how Sue squared her shoulders and stood up straight, smoothing down her summer frock over her flat hips so that for an instant she stood posed consciously, looking down on Kleph. It was deliberate. Bewildered, he glanced again at Kleph.

Kleph's shoulders sloped softly, her robe was belted to a tiny waist and hung in deep folds over frankly rounded hips. Sue's was the fashionable figure—but Sue was the first to surrender.

Kleph's smile did not falter. But in the silence there was an abrupt reversal of values, based on no more than the measureless quality of Kleph's confidence in herself, the quiet, assured smile. It was suddenly made very clear that fashion is not a constant. Kleph's curious, out-of-mode curves without warning became the norm, and Sue was a queer, angular, half-masculine creature beside her.

Oliver had no idea how it was done. Somehow the authority passed in a breath from one woman to the other. Beauty is almost wholly a matter of fashion; what is beautiful today would have been grotesque a couple of generations ago and will be grotesque a hundred years ahead. It will be worse than grotesque; it will be outmoded and therefore faintly ridiculous.

Sue was that. Kleph had only to exert her authority to make it clear to everyone on the porch. Kleph was a beauty, suddenly and very convincingly, beautiful in the accepted mode, and Sue was amusingly old-fashioned, an anachronism in her lithe, square-shouldered slimness. She did not belong. She was grotesque among these strangely immaculate people.

Sue's collapse was complete. But pride sustained her, and bewilderment. Probably she never did grasp entirely what was wrong. She gave Kleph one glance of burning resentment and when her eyes came back to Oliver there was suspicion in them, and mistrust.

Looking backward later, Oliver thought that in that moment, for the first time clearly, he began to suspect the truth. But he had no time to ponder it, for after the brief instant of enmity the three people from—elsewhere—began to speak all at once, as if in a belated attempt to cover something they did not want noticed.

Kleph said, "This beautiful weather—" and Madame Holli said, "So fortunate to have this house—" and Hara, holding up the red leather box, said loudest of all, "Cenbe sent you this, Kleph. His latest."

Kleph put out both hands for it eagerly, the eiderdown sleeves falling back from her rounded arms. Oliver had a quick glimpse of that mysterious scar before the sleeve fell back, and it seemed to him that there was the faintest trace of a similar scar vanishing into Hara's cuff as he let his own arm drop.

"Cenbe!" Kleph cried, her voice high and sweet and delighted. "How wonderful! What period?"

"From November 1664," Hara said. "London, of course, though I think there may be some counterpoint from the 1347 November. He hasn't finished—of course." He glanced almost nervously at Oliver and Sue. "A wonderful example," he said quickly. "Marvelous. If you have the taste for it, of course."

Madame Holli shuddered with ponderous delicacy. "That man!" she said. "Fascinating, of course—a great man. But—so *advanced!*"

"It takes a connoisseur to appreciate Cenbe's work fully," Kleph said in a slightly tart voice. "We all admit that."

"Oh yes, we all bow to Cenbe," Holli conceded. "I confess the man terrifies me a little, my dear. Do we expect him to join us?"

"I suppose so," Kleph said. "If his—work—is not yet finished, then of course. You know Cenbe's tastes."

Holli and Hara laughed together. "I know when to look for him, then," Holli said. She glanced at the staring Oliver and the subdued but angry Sue, and with a commanding effort brought the subject back into line.

"So fortunate, my dear Kleph, to have this house," she de-



clared heavily. "I saw a tridimensional of it—afterward—and it was still quite perfect. Such a fortunate coincidence. Would you consider parting with your lease, for a consideration? Say, a coronation seat at—"

"Nothing could buy us, Hollia," Kleph told her gaily, clasping the red box to her bosom.

Hollia gave her a cool stare. "You may change your mind, my dear Kleph," she said pontifically. "There is still time. You can always reach us through Mr. Wilson here. We have rooms up the street in the Montgomery House—nothing like yours, of course, but they will do. For us, they will do."

Oliver blinked. The Montgomery House was the most expensive hotel in town. Compared to this collapsing old ruin, it was a palace. There was no understanding these people. Their values seemed to have suffered a complete reversal.

Madame Hollia moved majestically toward the steps.

"Very pleasant to see you, my dear," she said over one well-padded shoulder. "Enjoy your stay. My regards to Omerie and Klija. Mr. Wilson—" she nodded toward the walk. "A word with you."

Oliver followed her down toward the street. Madame Hollia paused halfway there and touched his arm.

"One word of advice," she said huskily. "You say you sleep here? Move out, young man. Move out before tonight."

Oliver was searching in a half-desultory fashion for the hiding place Sue had found for the mysterious silver cube, when the first sounds from above began to drift down the stairwell toward him. Kleph had closed her door, but the house was old and strange qualities in the noise overhead seemed to seep through the woodwork like an almost visible stain.

It was music, in a way. But much more than music. And it was a terrible sound, the sounds of calamity and of all human reaction to calamity, everything from hysteria to heart-break, from irrational joy to rationalized acceptance.

The calamity was—single. The music did not attempt to correlate all human sorrows; it focused sharply upon one and followed the ramifications out and out. Oliver recognized these basics to the sounds in a very brief moment. They were essentials, and they seemed to beat into his brain with the first strains of the music which was so much more than music.

But when he lifted his head to listen he lost all grasp upon the meaning of the noise and it was sheer medley and confu-

sion. To think of it was to blur it hopelessly in the mind, and he could not recapture that first instant of unreasoning acceptance.

He went upstairs almost in a daze, hardly knowing what he was doing. He pushed Kleph's door open. He looked inside—

What he saw there he could not afterward remember except in a blurring as vague as the blurred ideas the music roused in his brain. Half the room had vanished behind a mist, and the mist was a three-dimensional screen upon which were projected— He had no words for them. He was not even sure if the projections were visual. The mist was spinning with motion and sound, but essentially it was neither sound nor motion that Oliver saw.

This was a work of art. Oliver knew no name for it. It transcended all art forms he knew, blended them, and out of the blend produced subtleties his mind could not begin to grasp. Basically, this was the attempt of a master composer to correlate every essential aspect of a vast human experience into something that could be conveyed in a few moments to every sense at once.

The shifting visions on the screen were not pictures in themselves, but hints of pictures, subtly selected outlines that plucked at the mind and with one deft touch set whole chords ringing through the memory. Perhaps each beholder reacted differently, since it was in the eye and the mind of the beholder that the truth of the picture lay. No two would be aware of the same symphonic panorama, but each would see essentially the same terrible story unfold.

Every sense was touched by that deft and merciless genius. Color and shape and motion flickered in the screen, hinting much, evoking unbearable memories deep in the mind; odors floated from the screen and touched the heart of the beholder more poignantly than anything visual could do. The skin crawled sometimes as if to a tangible cold hand laid upon it. The tongue curled with remembered bitterness and remembered sweet.

It was outrageous. It violated the innermost privacies of a man's mind, called up secret things long ago walled off behind mental scar tissue, forced its terrible message upon the beholder relentlessly though the mind might threaten to crack beneath the stress of it.

And yet, in spite of all this vivid awareness, Oliver did not know what calamity the screen portrayed. That is was real, vast, overwhelmingly dreadful he could not doubt. That it

had once happened was unmistakable. He caught flashing glimpses of human faces distorted with grief and disease and death—real faces, faces that had once lived and were seen now in the instant of dying. He saw men and women in rich clothing superimposed in panorama upon reeling thousands of ragged folk, great throngs of them swept past the sight in an instant, and he saw that death made no distinction among them.

He saw lovely women laugh and shake their curls, and the laughter shriek into hysteria and the hysteria into music. He saw one man's face, over and over—a long, dark, saturnine face, deeply lined, sorrowful, the face of a powerful man wise in worldliness, urbane—and helpless. That face was for awhile a recurring motif, always more tortured, more helpless than before.

The music broke off in the midst of a rising glide. The mist vanished and the room reappeared before him. The anguished dark face for an instant seemed to Oliver printed everywhere he looked, like after-vision on the eyelids. He knew that face. He had seen it before, not often, but he should know its name—

"Oliver, Oliver—" Kleph's sweet voice came out of a fog at him. He was leaning dizzily against the doorpost looking down into her eyes. She, too, had that dazed blankness he must show on his own face. The power of the dreadful symphony still held them both. But even in this confused moment Oliver saw that Kleph had been enjoying the experience.

He felt sickened to the depths of his mind, dizzy with sickness and revulsion because of the superimposing of human miseries he had just beheld. But Kleph—only appreciation showed upon her face. To her it had been magnificence, and magnificence only.

Irrelevantly Oliver remembered the nauseating candies she had enjoyed, the nauseating odors of strange food that drifted sometimes through the hall from her room.

What was it she had said downstairs a little while ago? Connoisseur, that was it. Only a connoisseur could appreciate work as—as *advanced*—as the work of someone called Cenbe.

A whiff of intoxicating sweetness curled past Oliver's face. Something cool and smooth was pressed into his hand.

"Oh, Oliver, I am so sorry," Kleph's voice murmured contritely. "Here, drink the euphoriac and you will feel better. Please drink!"

The familiar fragrance of the hot sweet tea was on his tongue before he knew he had complied. Its relaxing fumes floated up through his brain and in a moment or two the world felt stable around him again. The room was as it had always been. And Kleph—

Her eyes were very bright. Sympathy showed in them for him, but for herself she was still brimmed with the high elation of what she had just been experiencing.

"Come and sit down," she said gently, tugging at his arm. "I am so sorry—I should not have played that over, where you could hear it. I have no excuse, really. It was only that I forgot what the effect might be on one who had never heard Cenbe's symphonies before. I was so impatient to see what he had done with . . . with his new subject. I am so very sorry, Oliver!"

"What was it?" His voice sounded steadier than he had expected. The tea was responsible for that. He sipped again, glad of the consoling euphoria its fragrance brought.

"A . . . a composite interpretation of . . . oh, Oliver, you know I must not answer questions!"

"But—"

"No—drink your tea and forget what it was you saw. Think of other things. Here, we will have music—another kind of music, something gay—"

She reached for the wall beside the window, and as before, Oliver saw the broad framed picture of blue water above the bed ripple and grow pale. Through it another scene began to dawn like shapes rising beneath the surface of the sea.

He had a glimpse of a dark-curtained stage upon which a man in a tight dark tunic and hose moved with a restless, sidelong pace, his hands and face startlingly pale against the black about him. He limped; he had a crooked back and he spoke familiar lines. Oliver had seen John Barrymore once as the Crook-Backed Richard, and it seemed vaguely outrageous to him that any other actor should essay that difficult part. This one he had never seen before, but the man had a fascinatingly smooth manner and his interpretation of the Plantagenet king was quite new and something Shakespeare probably never dreamed of.

"No," Kleph said, "not this. Nothing gloomy." And she put out her hand again. The nameless new Richard faded and there was a swirl of changing pictures and changing voices, all blurred together, before the scene steadied upon a stage-full of dancers in pastel ballet skirts, drifting effortlessly

through some complicated pattern of motion. The music that went with it was light and effortless too. The room filled up with the clear, floating melody.

Oliver set down his cup. He felt much surer of himself now, and he thought the euphoriac had done all it could for him. He didn't want to blur again mentally. There were things he meant to learn about. Now. He considered how to begin.

Kleph was watching him. "That Hollia," she said suddenly. "She wants to buy the house?"

Oliver nodded. "She's offering a lot of money. She's going to be awfully disappointed if—" He hesitated. Perhaps, after all, Sue would not be disappointed. He remembered the little silver cube with the enigmatic function and he wondered if he should mention it to Kleph. But the euphoriac had not reached that level of his brain, and he remembered his duty to Sue and was silent.

Kleph shook her head, her eyes upon his warm with—was it sympathy?

"Believe me," she said, "you will not find that—important—after all. I promise you, Oliver."

He stared at her. "I wish you'd explain."

Kleph laughed on a note more sorrowful than amused. But it occurred to Oliver suddenly that there was no longer condescension in her voice. Imperceptibly that air of delicate amusement had vanished from her manner toward him. The cool detachment that still marked Omerie's attitude, and Klia's, was not in Kleph's any more. It was a subtlety he did not think she could assume. It had to come spontaneously or not at all. And for no reason he was willing to examine, it became suddenly very important to Oliver that Kleph should not condescend to him, that she should feel toward him as he felt toward her. He would not think of it.

He looked down at his cup, rose-quartz, exhaling a thin plume of steam from its crescent-slit opening. This time, he thought, maybe he could make the tea work for him. For he remembered how it loosened the tongue, and there was a great deal he needed to know. The idea that had come to him on the porch in the instant of silent rivalry between Kleph and Sue seemed now too fantastic to entertain. But some answer there must be.

Kleph herself gave him the opening.

"I must not take too much euphoriac this afternoon," she

said, smiling at him over her pink cup. "It will make me drowsy, and we are going out this evening with friends."

"More friends?" Oliver asked. "From your country?"

Kleph nodded. "Very dear friends we have expected all this week."

"I wish you'd tell me," Oliver said bluntly, "where it is you come from. It isn't from here. Your culture is too different from ours—even your names—" He broke off as Kleph shook her head.

"I wish I could tell you. But that is against all the rules. It is even against the rules for me to be here talking to you now."

"What rules?"

She made a helpless gesture. "You must not ask me, Oliver." She leaned back on the chaise longue that adjusted itself luxuriously to the motion, and smiled very sweetly at him. "We must not talk about things like that. Forget it, listen to the music, enjoy yourself if you can—" She closed her eyes and laid her head back against the cushions. Oliver saw the round tanned throat swell as she began to hum a tune. Eyes still closed, she sang again the words she had sung upon the stairs. "*Come hider, love, to me—*"

A memory clicked over suddenly in Oliver's mind. He had never heard the queer, lagging tune before, but he thought he knew the words. He remembered what Hollia's husband had said when he heard that line of song, and he leaned forward. She would not answer a direct question, but perhaps—

"Was the weather this warm in Canterbury?" he asked, and held his breath. Kleph hummed another line of the song and shook her head, eyes still closed.

"It was autumn there," she said. "But bright, wonderfully bright. Even their clothing, you know . . . everyone was singing that new song, and I can't get it out of my head." She sang another line, and the words were almost unintelligible—English, yet not an English Oliver could understand.

He stood up. "Wait," he said. "I want to find something. Back in a minute."

She opened her eyes and smiled mistily at him, still humming. He went downstairs as fast as he could—the stairway swayed a little, though his head was nearly clear now—and into the library. The book he wanted was old and battered, interlined with the penciled notes of his college days. He did not remember very clearly where the passage he wanted was, but he thumbed fast through the columns and by sheer luck

found it within a few minutes. Then he went back upstairs, feeling strange emptiness in his stomach because of what he almost believed now.

"Kleph," he said firmly, "I know that song. I know the year it was new."

Her lids rose slowly; she looked at him through a mist of euphoriac. He was not sure she had understood. For a long moment she held him with her gaze. Then she put out one downy-sleeved arm and spread her tanned fingers toward him. She laughed deep in her throat.

*"Come hider, love, to me,"* she said.

He crossed the room slowly, took her hand. The fingers closed warmly about his. She pulled him down so that he had to kneel beside her. Her other arm lifted. Again she laughed, very softly, and closed her eyes, lifting her face to his.

The kiss was warm and long. He caught something of her own euphoria from the fragrance of the tea breathed into his face. And he was startled at the end of the kiss, when the clasp of her arms loosened about his neck, to feel the sudden rush of her breath against his cheek. There were tears on her face, and the sound she made was a sob.

He held her off and looked down in amazement. She sobbed once more, caught a deep breath, and said, "Oh, Oliver, Oliver—" Then she shook her head and pulled free, turning away to hide her face. "I . . . I am sorry," she said unevenly. "Please forgive me. It does not matter . . . I *know* it does not matter . . . but—"

"What's wrong? What doesn't matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing . . . please forget it. Nothing at all." She got a handkerchief from the table and blew her nose, smiling at him with an effect of radiance through the tears.

Suddenly he was very angry. He had heard enough evasions and mystifying half-truths. He said roughly, "Do you think I'm crazy? I know enough now to—"

"Oliver, please!" She held up her own cup, steaming fragrantly. "Please, no more questions. Here, euphoria is what you need, Oliver. Euphoria, not answers."

"What year was it when you heard that song in Canterbury?" he demanded, pushing the cup aside.

She blinked at him, tears bright on her lashes. "Why . . . what year do you think?"

"I know," Oliver told her grimly. "I know the year that song was popular. I know you just came from Canterbury—Hollia's husband said so. It's May now, but it was autumn in

Canterbury, and you just came from there, so lately the song you heard is still running through your head. Chaucer's Pardoner sang that song sometime around the end of the fourteenth century. Did you see Chaucer, Kleph? What was it like in England that long ago?"

Kleph's eyes fixed his for a silent moment. Then her shoulders drooped and her whole body went limp with resignation beneath the soft blue robe. "I am a fool," she said gently. "It must have been easy to trap me. You really believe—what you say?"

Oliver nodded.

She said in a low voice, "Few people do believe it. That is one of our maxims, when we travel. We are safe from much suspicion because people before The Travel began will not believe."

The emptiness in Oliver's stomach suddenly doubled in volume. For an instant the bottom dropped out of time itself and the universe was unsteady about him. He felt sick. He felt naked and helpless. There was a buzzing in his ears and the room dimmed before him.

He had not really believed—not until this instant. He had expected some rational explanation from her that would tidy all his wild half-thoughts and suspicions into something a man could accept as believable. Not this.

Kleph dabbed at her eyes with the pale-blue handkerchief and smiled tremulously.

"I know," she said. "It must be a terrible thing to accept. To have all your concepts turned upside down— We know it from childhood, of course, but for you . . . here, Oliver. The euphoriac will make it easier."

He took the cup, the faint stain of her lip rouge still on the crescent opening. He drank, feeling the dizzy sweetness spiral through his head, and his brain turned a little in his skull as the volatile fragrance took effect. With that turning, focus shifted and all his values with it.

He began to feel better. The flesh settled on his bones again, and the warm clothing of temporal assurance settled upon his flesh, and he was no longer naked and reeling in the vortex of unstable time.

"The story is very simple, really," Kleph said. "We—travel. Our own time is not terribly far ahead of yours. No, I must not say how far. But we still remember your songs and poets and some of your great actors. We are a people of much leisure, and we cultivate the art of enjoying ourselves.



"This is a tour we are making—a tour of a year's seasons. Vintage seasons. That autumn in Canterbury was the most magnificent autumn our researchers could discover anywhere. We rode in a pilgrimage to the shrine—it was a wonderful experience, though the clothing was a little hard to manage.

"Now this month of May is almost over—the loveliest May in recorded times. A perfect May in a wonderful period. You have no way of knowing what a good, gay period you live in, Oliver. The very feeling in the air of the cities—that wonderful national confidence and happiness—everything going as smoothly as a dream. There were other Mays with fine weather, but each of them had a war or a famine, or something else wrong." She hesitated, grimaced and went on rapidly. "In a few days we are to meet at a coronation in Rome," she said. "I think the year will be 800—Christmas-time. We—"

"But why," Oliver interrupted, "did you insist on this house? Why do the others want to get it away from you?"

Kleph stared at him. He saw the tears rising again in small bright crescents that gathered above her lower lids. He saw the look of obstinacy that came upon her soft, tanned face. She shook her head.

"You must not ask me that." She held out the steaming cup. "Here, drink and forget what I have said. I can tell you no more. No more at all."

When he woke, for a little while he had no idea where he was. He did not remember leaving Kleph or coming to his own room. He didn't care, just then. For he woke to a sense of overwhelming terror.

The dark was full of it. His brain rocked on waves of fear and pain. He lay motionless, too frightened to stir, some atavistic memory warning him to lie quiet until he knew from which direction the danger threatened. Reasonless panic broke over him in a tidal flow; his head ached with its violence and the dark throbbed to the same rhythms.

A knock sounded at the door. Omerie's deep voice said, "Wilson! Wilson, are you awake?"

Oliver tried twice before he had breath to answer. "Yes—what is it?"

The knob rattled. Omerie's dim figure groped for the light switch and the room sprang into visibility. Omerie's face was drawn with strain, and he held one hand to his head as if it ached in rhythm with Oliver's.

It was in that moment, before Omerie spoke again, that Oliver remembered Hollia's warning. "Move out, young man—move out before tonight." Wildly he wondered what threatened them all in this dark house that throbbed with the rhythms of pure terror.

Omerie in an angry voice answered the unspoken question.

"Someone has planted a subsonic in the house, Wilson. Kleph thinks you may know where it is."

"S-subsonic?"

"Call it a gadget," Omerie interrupted impatiently. "Probably a small metal box that—"

Oliver said, "Oh," in a tone that must have told Omerie everything.

"Where is it?" he demanded. "Quick. Let's get this over."

"I d-don't know." With an effort Oliver controlled the chattering of his teeth. "Y-you mean all this—all this is just from the little box?"

"Of course. Now tell me how to find it before we all go crazy."

Oliver got shakily out of bed, groping for his robe with nerveless hands. "I s-suppose she hid it somewhere downstairs," he said. "S-she wasn't gone long."

Omerie got the story out of him in a few brief questions. He clicked his teeth in exasperation when Oliver had finished it.

"That stupid Hollia—"

"Omerie!" Kleph's plaintive voice wailed from the hall. "Please hurry, Omerie! This is too much to stand! Oh, Omerie, please!"

Oliver stood up abruptly. Then a redoubled wave of the inexplicable pain seemed to explode in his skull at the motion, and he clutched the bedpost and reeled.

"Go find the thing yourself," he heard himself saying dizzily. "I can't even walk—"

Omerie's own temper was drawn wire-tight by the pressure in the room. He seized Oliver's shoulder and shook him, saying in a tight voice, "You let it in—now help us get it out, or—"

"It's a gadget out of your world, not mine!" Oliver said furiously.

And then it seemed to him there was a sudden coldness and silence in the room. Even the pain and the senseless terror paused for a moment. Omerie's pale, cold eyes fixed upon Oliver a stare so chill he could almost feel the ice in it.

"What do you know about our—world?" Omerie demanded.

Oliver did not speak a word. He did not need to; his face must have betrayed what he knew. He was beyond concealment in the stress of this nighttime terror he still could not understand.

Omerie bared his white teeth and said three perfectly unintelligible words. Then he stepped to the door and snapped, "Kleph!"

Oliver could see the two women huddled together in the hall, shaking violently with involuntary waves of that strange, synthetic terror. Klia, in a luminous green gown, was rigid with control, but Kleph made no effort whatever at repression. Her downy robe had turned soft gold tonight; she shivered in it and the tears ran down her face unchecked.

"Kleph," Omerie said in a dangerous voice, "you were euphoric again yesterday?"

Kleph darted a scared glance at Oliver and nodded guiltily.

"You talked too much." It was a complete indictment in one sentence. "You know the rules, Kleph. You will not be allowed to travel again if anyone reports this to the authorities."

Kleph's lovely creamy face creased suddenly into impenitent dimples.

"I know it was wrong. I am very sorry—but you will not stop me if Cenbe says no."

Klia flung out her arms in a gesture of helpless anger. Omerie shrugged. "In this case, as it happens, no great harm is done," he said, giving Oliver an unfathomable glance. "But it might have been serious. Next time perhaps it will be. I must have a talk with Cenbe."

"We must find the subsonic first of all," Klia reminded them, shivering. "If Kleph is afraid to help, she can go out for awhile. I confess I am very sick of Kleph's company just now."

"We could give up the house!" Kleph cried wildly. "Let Hollia have it! How can you stand this long enough to hunt—"

"Give up the house?" Klia echoed. "You must be mad! With all our invitations out?"

"There will be no need for that," Omerie said. "We can find it if we all hunt. You feel able to help?" He looked at Oliver.

With an effort Oliver controlled his own senseless panic as

the waves of it swept through the room. "Yes," he said. "But what about me? What are you going to do?"

"That should be obvious," Omerie said, his pale eyes in the dark face regarding Oliver impassively. "Keep you in the house until we go. We can certainly do no less. You understand that. And there is no reason for us to do more, as it happens. Silence is all we need to impose. It is all we promised when we signed our travel papers."

"But—" Oliver groped for the fallacy in that reasoning. It was no use. He could not think clearly. Panic surged insanely through his mind from the very air around him. "All right," he said. "Let's hunt."

It was dawn before they found the box, tucked inside the ripped seam of a sofa cushion. Omerie took it upstairs without a word. Five minutes later the pressure in the air abruptly dropped and peace fell blissfully upon the house.

"They will try again," Omerie said to Oliver at the door of the back bedroom. "We must watch for that. As for you, I must see that you remain in the house until Friday. For your own comfort, I advise you to let me know if Hollia offers any further tricks. I confess I am not quite sure how to enforce your staying indoors. I could use methods that would make you very uncomfortable. I would prefer to accept your word on it."

Oliver hesitated. The relaxing of pressure upon his brain had left him exhausted and stupid, and he was not at all sure what to say.

Omerie went on after a moment. "It was partly our fault for not insuring that we have the house to ourselves," he said. "Living here with us, you could scarcely help suspecting. Shall we say that in return for your promise, I reimburse you in part for losing the sale price on this house?"

Oliver thought that over. It would pacify Sue a little. And it meant only two days indoors. Besides, what good would escaping do? What could he say to outsiders that would not lead him straight to a padded cell?

"All right," he said wearily. "I promise."

By Friday morning there was still no sign from Hollia. Sue telephoned at noon. Oliver knew the crackle of her voice over the wire when Kleph took the call. Even the crackle sounded hysterical; Sue saw her bargain slipping hopelessly through her grasping little fingers.

Kleph's voice was soothing. "I am sorry," she said many

times, in the intervals when the voice paused. "I am truly sorry. Believe me, you will find it does not matter. I know . . . I am sorry—"

She turned from the phone at last. "The girl says Hollia has given up," she told the others.

"Not Hollia," Klia said firmly.

Omerie shrugged. "We have very little time left. If she intends anything more, it will be tonight. We must watch for it."

"Oh, not tonight!" Kleph's voice was horrified. "Not even Hollia would do that!"

"Hollia, my dear, in her own way is quite as unscrupulous as you are," Omerie told her with a smile.

"But—would she spoil things for us just because she can't be here?"

"What do you think?" Klia demanded.

Oliver ceased to listen. There was no making sense out of their talk, but he knew that by tonight whatever the secret was must surely come into the open at last. He was willing to wait and see.

For two days excitement had been building up in the house and the three who shared it with him. Even the servants felt it and were nervous and unsure of themselves. Oliver had given up asking questions—it only embarrassed his tenants—and watched.

All the chairs in the house were collected in the three front bedrooms. The furniture was rearranged to make room for them, and dozens of covered cups had been set out on trays. Oliver recognized Kleph's rose-quartz set among the rest. No steam rose from the thin crescent-openings, but the cups were full. Oliver lifted one and felt a heavy liquid move within it, like something half-solid, sluggishly.

Guests were obviously expected, but the regular dinner hour of nine came and went, and no one had yet arrived. Dinner was finished; the servants went home. The Sanciscos went to their rooms to dress, amid a feeling of mounting tension.

Oliver stepped out on the porch after dinner, trying in vain to guess what it was that had wrought such a pitch of expectancy in the house. There was a quarter moon swimming in haze on the horizon, but the stars which had made every night of May this far a dazzling translucency, were very dim tonight. Clouds had begun to gather at sundown, and the un-

dimmed weather of the whole month seemed ready to break at last.

Behind Oliver the door opened a little, and closed. He caught Kleph's fragrance before he turned, and a faint whiff of the fragrance of the euphoriac she was much too fond of drinking. She came to his side and slipped a hand into his, looking up into his face in the darkness.

"Oliver," she said very softly. "Promise me one thing. Promise me not to leave the house tonight."

"I've already promised that," he said a little irritably.

"I know. But tonight—I have a particular reason for wanting you indoors tonight." She leaned her head against his shoulder for a moment, and despite himself his irritation softened. He had not seen Kleph alone since that last night of her revelations; he supposed he never would be alone with her again for more than a few minutes at a time. But he knew he would not forget those two bewildering evenings. He knew too, now, that she was very weak and foolish—but she was still Kleph and he had held her in his arms, and was not likely ever to forget it.

"You might be—hurt—if you went out tonight," she was saying in a muffled voice. "I know it will not matter, in the end, but—remember you promised, Oliver."

She was gone again, and the door had closed behind her, before he could voice the futile questions in his mind.

The guests began to arrive just before midnight. From the head of the stairs Oliver saw them coming in by twos and threes, and was astonished at how many of these people from the future must have gathered here in the past weeks. He could see quite clearly now how they differed from the norm of his own period. Their physical elegance was what one noticed first—perfect grooming, meticulous manners, meticulously controlled voices. But because they were all idle, all in a way, sensation-hunters, there was a certain shrillness underlying their voices, especially when heard all together. Petulance and self-indulgence showed beneath the good manners. And tonight, an all-pervasive excitement.

By one o'clock everyone had gathered in the front rooms. The teacups had begun to steam, apparently of themselves, around midnight, and the house was full of the faint, thin fragrance that induced a sort of euphoria all through the rooms, breathed in with the perfume of the tea.

It made Oliver feel light and drowsy. He was determined to sit up as long as the others did, but he must have dozed off

in his own room, by the window, an unopened book in his lap.

For when it happened he was not sure for a few minutes whether or not it was a dream.

The vast, incredible crash was louder than sound. He felt the whole house shake under him, felt rather than heard the timbers grind upon one another like broken bones, while he was still in the borderland of sleep. When he woke fully he was on the floor among the shattered fragments of the window.

How long or short a time he had lain there he did not know. The world was still stunned with that tremendous noise, or his ears still deaf from it, for there was no sound anywhere.

He was halfway down the hall toward the front rooms when sound began to return from outside. It was a low, indescribable rumble at first, prickled with countless tiny distant screams. Oliver's eardrums ached from the terrible impact of the vast unheard noise, but the numbness was wearing off and he heard before he saw it the first voices of the stricken city.

The door to Kleph's room resisted him for a moment. The house had settled a little from the violence of the—the explosion?—and the frame was out of line. When he got the door open he could only stand blinking stupidly into the darkness within. All the lights were out, but there was a breathless sort of whispering going on in many voices.

The chairs were drawn around the broad front windows so that everyone could see out: the air swam with the fragrance of euphoria. There was light enough here from outside for Oliver to see that a few onlookers still had their hands to their ears, but all were craning eagerly forward to see.

Through a dreamlike haze Oliver saw the city spread out with impossible distinctness below the window. He knew quite well that a row of houses across the street blocked the view—yet he was looking over the city now, and he could see it in a limitless panorama from here to the horizon. The houses between had vanished.

On the far skyline fire was already a solid mass, painting the low clouds crimson. That sulphurous light reflecting back from the sky upon the city made clear the rows upon rows of flattened houses with flame beginning to lick up among them, and farther out the formless rubble of what had been houses a few minutes ago and was now nothing at all.

The city had begun to be vocal. The noise of the flames rose loudest, but you could hear a rumble of human voices like the beat of surf a long way off, and the staccato noises of screaming made a sort of pattern that came and went continuously through the web of sound. Threading it in undulating waves the shrieks of sirens knit the web together into a terrible symphony that had, in its way, a strange inhuman beauty.

Briefly through Oliver's stunned incredulity went the memory of that other symphony Kleph had played here one day, another catastrophe retold in terms of music and moving shapes.

He said hoarsely, "Kleph—"

The tableau by the window broke. Every head turned, and Oliver saw the faces of strangers staring at him, some few in embarrassment avoiding his eyes, but most seeking them out with that avid, inhuman curiosity which is common to a type in all crowds at accident scenes. But these people were here by design, audience at a vast disaster timed almost for their coming.

Kleph got up unsteadily, her velvet dinner gown tripping her as she rose. She set down a cup and swayed a little as she came toward the door, saying, "Oliver . . . Oliver—" in a sweet, uncertain voice. She was drunk, he saw, and wrought up by the catastrophe to a pitch of stimulation in which she was not very sure what she was doing.

Oliver heard himself saying in a thin voice not his own, "W-what was it, Kleph? What happened? What—" But *happened* seemed so inadequate a word for the incredible panorama below that he had to choke back hysterical laughter upon the struggling questions, and broke off entirely, trying to control the shaking that had seized his body.

Kleph made an unsteady stoop and seized a steaming cup. She came to him, swaying, holding it out—her panacea for all ills.

"Here, drink it, Oliver—we are all quite safe here, quite safe." She thrust the cup to his lips and he gulped automatically, grateful for the fumes that began their slow, coiling surcease in his brain with the first swallow.

"It was a meteor," Kleph was saying. "Quite a small meteor, really. We are perfectly safe here. This house was never touched."

Out of some cell of the unconscious Oliver heard himself saying incoherently, "Sue? Is Sue—" he could not finish.

Kleph thrust the cup at him again. "I think she may be



safe—for a while. Please, Oliver—forget about all that and drink.”

“But you *knew!*” Realization of that came belatedly to his stunned brain. “You could have given warning, or—”

“How could we change the past?” Kleph asked. “We knew—but could we stop the meteor? Or warn the city? Before we come we must give our word never to interfere—”

Their voices had risen imperceptibly to the audible above the rising volume of sound from below. The city was roaring now, with flames and cries and the crash of falling buildings. Light in the room turned lurid and pulsed upon the walls and ceiling in red light and redder dark.

Downstairs a door slammed. Someone laughed. It was high, hoarse, angry laughter. Then from the crowd in the room someone gasped and there was a chorus of dismayed cries. Oliver tried to focus upon the window and the terrible panorama beyond, and found he could not.

It took several seconds of determined blinking to prove that more than his own vision was at fault. Kleph whimpered softly and moved against him. His arms closed about her automatically, and he was grateful for the warm, solid flesh against him. This much at least he could touch and be sure of, though everything else that was happening might be a dream. Her perfume and the heady perfume of the tea rose together in his head, and for an instant, holding her in this embrace that must certainly be the last time he ever held her, he did not care that something had gone terribly wrong with the very air of the room.

It was blindness—not continuous, but a series of swift, widening ripples between which he could catch glimpses of the other faces in the room, strained and astonished in the flickering light from the city.

The ripples came faster. There was only a blink of sight between them now, and the blinks grew briefer and briefer, the intervals of darkness more broad.

From downstairs the laughter rose again up the stairwell. Oliver thought he knew the voice. He opened his mouth to speak, but a door nearby slammed open before he could find his tongue, and Omerie shouted down the stairs.

“Hollia?” he roared above the roaring of the city. “Hollia, is that you?”

She laughed again, triumphantly. “I warned you!” her

hoarse, harsh voice called. "Now come out in the street with the rest of us if you want to see any more!"

"Hollia!" Omerie shouted desperately. "Stop this or—"

The laughter was derisive. "What will you do, Omerie? This time I hid it too well—come down in the street if you want to watch the rest."

There was angry silence in the house. Oliver could feel Kleph's quick, excited breathing light upon his cheek, feel the soft motions of her body in his arms. He tried consciously to make the moment last, stretch it out to infinity. Everything had happened too swiftly to impress very clearly on his mind anything except what he could touch and hold. He held her in an embrace made consciously light, though he wanted to clasp her in a tight, despairing grip, because he was sure this was the last embrace they would ever share.

The eye-straining blinks of light and blindness went on. From far away below the roar of the burning city rolled on, threaded together by the long, looped cadences of the sirens that linked all sounds into one.

Then in the bewildering dark another voice sounded from the hall downstairs. A man's voice, very deep, very melodious, saying:

"What is this? What are you doing here? Hollia—is that you?"

Oliver felt Kleph stiffen in his arms. She caught her breath, but she said nothing in the instant while heavy feet began to mount the stairs, coming up with a solid, confident tread that shook the old house to each step.

Then Kleph thrust herself hard out of Oliver's arms. He heard her high, sweet, excited voice crying, "Cenbel! Cenbel!" and she ran to meet the newcomer through the waves of dark and light that swept the shaken house.

Oliver staggered a little and felt a chair seat catching the back of his legs. He sank into it and lifted to his lips the cup he still held. Its steam was warm and moist in his face, though he could scarcely make out the shape of the rim.

He lifted it with both hands and drank.

When he opened his eyes it was quite dark in the room. Also it was silent except for a thin, melodious humming almost below the threshold of sound. Oliver struggled with the memory of a monstrous nightmare. He put it resolutely out of his mind and sat up, feeling an unfamiliar bed creak and sway under him.

This was Kleph's room. But no—Kleph's no longer. Her

shining hangings were gone from the walls, her white resilient rug, her pictures. The room looked as it had looked before she came, except for one thing.

In the far corner was a table—a block of translucent stuff—out of which light poured softly. A man sat on a low stool before it, leaning forward, his heavy shoulders outlined against the glow. He wore earphones and he was making quick, erratic notes upon a pad on his knee, swaying a little as if to the tune of unheard music.

The curtains were drawn, but from beyond them came a distant, muffled roaring that Oliver remembered from his nightmare. He put a hand to his face, aware of a feverish warmth and a dipping of the room before his eyes. His head ached, and there was a deep malaise in every limb and nerve.

As the bed creaked, the man in the corner turned, sliding the earphones down like a collar. He had a strong, sensitive face above a dark beard, trimmed short. Oliver had never seen him before, but he had that air Oliver knew so well by now, of remoteness which was the knowledge of time itself lying like a gulf between them.

When he spoke his deep voice was impersonally kind.

"You had too much euphoric, Wilson," he said, aloofly sympathetic. "You slept a long while."

"How long?" Oliver's throat felt sticky when he spoke.

The man did not answer. Oliver shook his head experimentally. He said, "I thought Kleph said you don't get hangovers from—" Then another thought interrupted the first, and he said quickly, "Where is Kleph?" He looked confusedly toward the door.

"They should be in Rome by now. Watching Charlemagne's coronation at St. Peter's on Christmas Day a thousand years from here."

That was not a thought Oliver could grasp clearly. His aching brain sheered away from it; he found thinking at all was strangely difficult. Staring at the man, he traced an idea painfully to its conclusion.

"So they've gone on—but you stayed behind. Why? You . . . you're Cenbe? I heard your—symphonia, Kleph called it."

"You heard part of it. I have not finished yet. I needed—this." Cenbe inclined his head toward the curtains beyond which the subdued roaring still went on.

"You needed—the meteor?" The knowledge worked painfully through his dulled brain until it seemed to strike some

area still untouched by the aching, an area still alive to implication, "The *meteor*? But—"

There was a power implicit in Cenbe's raised hand that seemed to push Oliver down upon the bed again. Cenbe said patiently, "The worst of it is past now, for a while. Forget it if you can. That was days ago. I said you were asleep for some time. I let you rest. I knew this house would be safe—from the fire at least."

"Then—something more's to come?" Oliver only mumbled his question. He was not sure he wanted an answer. He had been curious so long, and now that knowledge lay almost within reach, something about his brain seemed to refuse to listen. Perhaps this weariness, this feverish, dizzy feeling would pass as the effect of the euphoriac wore off.

Cenbe's voice ran on smoothly, soothingly, almost as if Cenbe too did not want him to think. It was easiest to lie here and listen.

"I am a composer," Cenbe was saying. "I happen to be interested in interpreting certain forms of disaster into my own terms. That is why I stayed on. The others were dilettantes. They came for the May weather and the spectacle. The aftermath—well why should they wait for that? As for myself—I suppose I am a connoisseur. I find the aftermath rather fascinating. And I need it. I need to study it at first hand, for my own purposes."

His eyes dwelt upon Oliver for an instant very keenly, like a physician's eyes, impersonal and observant. Absently he reached for his stylus and the note pad. And as he moved, Oliver saw a familiar mark on the underside of the thick, tanned wrist.

"Kleph had that scar, too," he heard himself whisper. "And the others."

Cenbe nodded. "Inoculation. It was necessary, under the circumstances. We did not want disease to spread in our own time-world."

"Disease?"

Cenbe shrugged. "You would not recognize the name."

"But, if you can inoculate against disease—" Oliver thrust himself up on an aching arm. He had a half-grasp upon a thought now which he did not want to let go. Effort seemed to make the ideas come more clearly through his mounting confusion. With enormous effort he went on.

"I'm getting it now," he said. "Wait. I've been trying to work this out. You can change history? You can! I know you

can. Kleph said she had to promise not to interfere. You all had to promise. Does that mean you really could change your own past—our time?"

Cenbe laid down his pad again. He looked at Oliver thoughtfully, a dark, intent look under heavy brows. "Yes," he said. "Yes, the past can be changed, but not easily. And it changes the future, too, necessarily. The lines of probability are switched into new patterns—but it is extremely difficult, and it has never been allowed. The physiotemporal course tends to slide back to its norm, always. That is why it is so hard to force any alteration." He shrugged. "A theoretical science. We do not change history, Wilson. If we changed our past, our present would be altered, too. And our time-world is entirely to our liking. There may be a few malcontents there, but they are not allowed the privilege of temporal travel."

Oliver spoke louder against the roaring from beyond the windows. "But you've got the power! You could alter history, if you wanted to—wipe out all the pain and suffering and tragedy—"

"All of that passed away long ago," Cenbe said.

"Not—*now!* Not—*this!*"

Cenbe looked at him enigmatically for awhile. Then—"This, too," he said.

And suddenly Oliver realized from across what distances Cenbe was watching him. A vast distance, as time is measured. Cenbe was a composer and a genius, and necessarily strongly emphatic, but his psychic locus was very far away in time. The dying city outside, the whole world of *now* was not quite real to Cenbe, falling short of reality because of that basic variance in time. It was merely one of the building blocks that had gone to support the edifice on which Cenbe's culture stood in a misty, unknown, terrible future.

It seemed terrible to Oliver now. Even Kleph—all of them had been touched with a pettiness, the faculty that had enabled Hollia to concentrate on her malicious, small schemes to acquire a ringside seat while the meteor thundered in toward Earth's atmosphere. They were all dilettantes, Kleph and Omerie and the others. They toured time, but only as on-lookers. Were they bored—sated—with their normal existence?

Not sated enough to wish change, basically. Their own time-world was a fulfilled womb, a perfection made manifest

for their needs. They dared not change the past—they could not risk flawing their own present.

Revulsion shook him. Remembering the touch of Kleph's lips, he felt a sour sickness on his tongue. Alluring she had been; he knew that too well. But the aftermath—

There was something wrong about this race from the future. He had felt it dimly at first, before Kleph's nearness had drowned caution and buffered his sensibilities. Time traveling purely as an escape mechanism seemed almost blasphemous. A race with such power—

Kleph—leaving him for the barbaric, splendid coronation at Rome a thousand years ago—*how had she seen him?* Not as a living, breathing man. He knew that, very certainly. Kleph's race were spectators.

But he read more than casual interest in Cenbe's eyes now. There was an avidity there, a bright, fascinated probing. The man had replaced his earphones—he was different from the others. He was a connoisseur. After the vintage season came the aftermath—and Cenbe.

Cenbe watched and waited, light flickering softly in the translucent block before him, his fingers poised over the note pad. The ultimate connoisseur waited to savor the rarities that no non-gourmet could appreciate.

Those thin, distant rhythms of sound that was almost music began to be audible again above the noises of the distant fire. Listening, remembering, Oliver could very nearly catch the pattern of the symphonia as he had heard it, all intermingled with the flash of changing faces and the rank upon rank of the dying—

He lay back on the bed letting the room swirl away into the darkness behind his closed and aching lids. The ache was implicit in every cell of his body, almost a second ego taking possession and driving him out of himself, a strong, sure ego taking over as he himself let go.

Why, he wondered dully, should Kleph have lied? She had said there was no aftermath to the drink she had given him. No aftermath—and yet this painful possession was strong enough to edge him out of his own body.

Kleph had not lied. It was no aftermath to drink. He knew that—but the knowledge no longer touched his brain or his body. He lay still, giving them up to the power of the illness which was aftermath to something far stronger than the strongest drink. The illness that had no name—yet.

Cenbe's new symphonia was a crowning triumph. It had its premiere from Antares Hall, and the applause was an ovation. History itself, of course, was the artist—opening with the meteor that forecast the great plagues of the fourteenth century and closing with the climax Cenbe had caught on the threshold of modern times. But only Cenbe could have interpreted it with such subtle power.

Critics spoke of the masterly way in which he had chosen the face of the Stuart king as a recurrent motif against the montage of emotion and sound and movement. But there were other faces, fading through the great sweep of the composition, which helped to build up to the tremendous climax. One face in particular, one moment that the audience absorbed greedily. A moment in which one man's face loomed huge in the screen, every feature clear. Cenbe had never caught an emotional crisis so effectively, the critics agreed. You could almost read the man's eyes.

After Cenbe had left, he lay motionless for a long while. He was thinking feverishly—

*I've got to find some way to tell people. If I'd known in advance, maybe something could have been done. We'd have forced them to tell us how to change the probabilities. We could have evacuated the city.*

*If I could leave a message—*

*Maybe not for today's people. But later. They visit all through time. If they could be recognized and caught somewhere, sometime, and made to change destiny—*

It wasn't easy to stand up. The room kept tilting. But he managed it. He found pencil and paper and through the swaying of the shadows he wrote down what he could. Enough. Enough to warn, enough to save.

He put the sheets on the table, in plain sight, and weighted them down before he stumbled back to bed through closing darkness.

The house was dynamited six days later, part of the futile attempt to halt the relentless spread of the Blue Death.

# EVIDENCE

by Isaac Asimov (1920- )

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
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*Of the nine stories collected in I, Robot (1950), I suppose "Evidence" is the best. It was the one story I wrote while I was in the army. I began it in Virginia and finished it in Hawaii. I mailed it from Hawaii with directions to John Campbell to send the check (if there was one) to my wife—which he did. What really astonished me, however, was that when the story appeared in the September, 1946 issue of Astounding I had actually been ushered out of the army on a research discharge, so that I had the pleasure of rereading a story written while I was hemmed in by army life at a time when I was revelling in my new-found freedom as a civilian. Oddly enough, there is nothing in the story that indicates the circumstance of its writing. But, then, why "oddly"? The whole purpose of writing the story was to help get my mind off a situation which alternately bored and frustrated me—so why put that situation into the story.—I.A.*



Francis Quinn was a politician of the new school. That, of course, is a meaningless expression, as are all expressions of the sort. Most of the "new schools" we have were duplicated in the social life of ancient Greece, and perhaps, if we knew more about it, in the social life of ancient Sumeria and in the lake dwellings of prehistoric Switzerland as well.

But, to get out from under what promises to be a dull and complicated beginning, it might be best to state hastily that Quinn neither ran for office nor canvassed for votes, made no speeches and stuffed no ballot boxes. Any more than Napoleon pulled a trigger at Austerlitz.

And since politics makes strange bedfellows, Alfred Lanning sat at the other side of the desk with his ferocious white eyebrows bent far forward over eyes in which chronic impatience had sharpened to acuity. He was not pleased.

The fact, if known to Quinn, would have annoyed him not the least. His voice was friendly, perhaps professionally so.

"I assume you know Stephen Byerley, Dr. Lanning."

"I have heard of him. So have many people."

"Yes, so have I. Perhaps you intend voting for him at the next election."

"I couldn't say." There was an unmistakable trace of acidity here. "I have not followed the political currents, so I'm not aware that he is running for office."

"He may be our next mayor. Of course, he is only a lawyer now, but great oaks—"

"Yes," interrupted Lanning, "I have heard the phrase before. But I wonder if we can get to the business at hand."

"We *are* at the business at hand, Dr. Lanning." Quinn's tone was very gentle, "It is to my interest to keep Mr. Byerley a district attorney at the very most, and it is to your interest to help me do so."

"To *my* interest? Come!" Lanning's eyebrows hunched low.

"Well, say then to the interest of the U. S. Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation. I come to you as Director-Emeritus of Research, because I know that your connection to them is that of, shall we say, 'elder statesman.' You are listened to with respect and yet your connection with them is no longer so tight but that you cannot possess considerable

freedom of action; even if the action is somewhat unorthodox."

Dr. Lanning was silent a moment, chewing the end of his thoughts. He said more softly, "I don't follow you at all, Mr. Quinn."

"I not surprised, Dr. Lanning. But it's all rather simple. Do you mind?" Quinn lit a slender cigarette with a lighter of tasteful simplicity and his big-boned face settled into an expression of quiet amusement. "We have spoken of Mr. Byerley—a strange and colorful character. He was unknown three years ago. He is very well known now. He is a man of force and ability, and certainly the most capable and intelligent prosecutor I have ever known. Unfortunately he is not a friend of mine—"

"I understand," said Lanning mechanically. He stared at his fingernails.

"I have had occasion," continued Quinn evenly, "in the past year to investigate Mr. Byerley—quite exhaustively. It is always useful, you see, to subject the past life of reform politicians to rather inquisitive research. If you knew how often it helped—" He paused to smile humorlessly at the glowing tip of his cigarette. "But Mr. Byerley's past is unremarkable. A quiet life in a small town, a college education, a wife who died young, an auto accident with a slow recovery, law school, coming to the metropolis, an attorney."

Francis Quinn shook his head slowly, then added, "But his present life. Ah, that is remarkable. Our district attorney never eats!"

Lanning's head snapped up, old eyes surprisingly sharp, "Pardon me?"

"Our district attorney never eats." The repetition thumped by syllables. "I'll modify that slightly. He has never been seen to eat or drink. Never! Do you understand the significance of the word? Not rarely, but never!"

"I find that quite incredible. Can you trust your investigators?"

"I can trust my investigators, and I don't find it incredible at all. Further, our district attorney has never been seen to drink—in the aqueous sense as well as the alcoholic—nor to sleep. There are other factors, but I should think I have made my point."

Lanning leaned back in his seat, and there was the rapt silence of challenge and response between them, and then the

old roboticist shook his head. "No. There is only one thing you can be trying to imply, if I couple your statements with the fact that you present them to me, and that is impossible."

"But the man is quite inhuman, Dr. Lanning."

"If you told me he were Satan in masquerade, there would be a faint chance that I might believe you."

"I tell you he is a robot, Dr. Lanning."

"I tell you it is as impossible a conception as I have ever heard, Mr. Quinn."

Again the combative silence.

"Nevertheless," and Quinn stubbed out his cigarette with elaborate care, "you will have to investigate this impossibility with all the resources of the Corporation."

"I'm sure that I could undertake no such thing, Mr. Quinn. You don't seriously suggest that the Corporation take part in local politics."

"You have no choice. Supposing I were to make my facts public without proof. The evidence is circumstantial enough."

"Suit yourself in that respect."

"But it would not suit me. Proof would be much preferable. And it would not suit *you*, for the publicity would be very damaging to your company. You are perfectly well acquainted, I suppose, with the strict rules against the use of robots on inhabited worlds."

"Certainly!"—brusquely.

"You know that the U. S. Robot & Mechanical Men Corporation is the only manufacturer of positronic robots in the Solar System, and if Byerley is a robot, he is a *positronic* robot. You are also aware that all positronic robots are leased, and not sold; that the Corporation remains the owner and manager of each robot, and is therefore responsible for the actions of all."

"It is an easy matter, Mr. Quinn, to prove the Corporation has never manufactured a robot of a humanoid character."

"It can be done? To discuss merely possibilities."

"Yes. It can be done."

"Secretly, I imagine, as well. Without entering it in your books."

"Not the positronic brain, sir. Too many factors are involved in that, and there is the tightest possible government supervision."

"Yes, but robots are worn out, break down, go out of order—and are dismantled."

"And the positronic brains re-used or destroyed."

"Really?" Francis Quinn allowed himself a trace of sarcasm. "And if one were, accidentally, of course, not destroyed—and there happened to be a humanoid structure waiting for a brain?"

"Impossible!"

"You would have to prove that to the government and the public, so why not prove it to me now."

"But what could our purpose be?" demanded Lanning in exasperation. "Where is our motivation? Credit us with a minimum of sense."

"My dear sir, please. The Corporation would be only too glad to have the various Regions permit the use of humanoid positronic robots on inhabited worlds. The profits would be enormous. But the prejudice of the public against such a practice is too great. Suppose you get them used to such robots first—see, we have a skillful lawyer, a good mayor—and he is a robot. Won't you buy our robot butlers?"

"Thoroughly fantastic. An almost humorous descent to the ridiculous."

"I imagine so. Why not prove it? Or would you still rather try to prove it to the public?"

The light in the office was dimming, but it was not yet too dim to obscure the flush of frustration on Alfred Lanning's face. Slowly, the roboticist's finger touched a knob and the wall illuminators glowed to gentle life.

"Well, then," he growled, "let us see."

The face of Stephen Byerley is not an easy one to describe. He was forty by birth certificate and forty by appearance—but it was a healthy well-nourished, good-natured appearance of forty; one that automatically drew the teeth of the bromide about "looking one's age."

This was particularly true when he laughed, and he was laughing now. It came loudly and continuously, died away for a bit, then began again—

And Alfred Lanning's face contracted into a rigidly bitter monument of disapproval. He made a half gesture to the woman who sat beside him, but her thin, bloodless lips merely pursed themselves a trifle.

Byerley gasped himself a stage near normality.

"Really, Dr. Lanning . . . really—I . . . I . . . a robot?"

Lanning bit his words off with a snap, "It is no statement of mine, sir. I would be quite satisfied to have you a member of humanity. Since our corporation never manufactured you,

I am quite certain that you are—in a legalistic sense, at any rate. But since the contention that you are a robot has been advanced to us seriously by a man of certain standing—”

“Don’t mention his name, if it would knock a chip off your granite block of ethics, but let’s pretend it was Frank Quinn, for the sake of argument, and continue.”

Lanning drew in a sharp, cutting snort at the interruption, and paused ferociously before continuing with added fridity. “—by a man of certain standing, with whose identity I am not interested in playing guessing games, I am bound to ask your co-operation in disproving it. The mere fact that such a contention could be advanced and publicized by the means at this man’s disposal would be a bad blow to the company I represent—even if the charge were never proven. You understand me?”

“Oh, yes, your position is clear to me. The charge itself is ridiculous. The spot you find yourself in is not. I beg your pardon, if my laughter offended you. It was the first I laughed at, not the second. How can I help you?”

“It could be very simple. You have only to sit down to a meal at a restaurant in the presence of witnesses, have your picture taken, and eat.” Lanning sat back in his chair, the worst of the interview over. The woman beside him watched Byerley with an apparently absorbed expression but contributed nothing of her own.

Stephen Byerley met her eyes for an instant, was caught by them, then turned back to the roboticist. For a while his fingers were thoughtful over the bronze paperweight that was the only ornament on his desk.

He said quietly, “I don’t think I can oblige you.”

He raised his hand, “Now wait, Dr. Lanning. I appreciate the fact that this whole matter is distasteful to you, that you have been forced into it against your will, that you feel you are playing an undignified and even ridiculous part. Still, the matter is even more intimately concerned with myself, so be tolerant.

“First, what makes you think that Quinn—this man of certain standing, you know—wasn’t hoodwinking you, in order to get you to do exactly what you are doing?”

“Why it seems scarcely likely that a reputable person would endanger himself in so ridiculous a fashion, if he weren’t convinced he was on safe ground.”

There was little humor in Byerley’s eyes, “You don’t know Quinn. He could manage to make safe ground out of a ledge

a mountain sheep could not handle. I suppose he showed the particulars of the investigation he claims to have made of me?"

"Enough to convince me that it would be too troublesome to have our corporation attempt to disprove them when you could do so more easily."

"Then you believe him when he says I never eat. You are a scientist, Dr. Lanning. Think of the logic required. I have not been observed to eat, therefore, I never eat Q.E.D. After all!"

"You are using prosecution tactics to confuse what is really a very simple situation."

"On the contrary, I am trying to clarify what you and Quinn between you are making a very complicated one. You see, I don't sleep much, that's true, and I certainly don't sleep in public. I have never cared to eat with others—an idiosyncrasy which is unusual and probably neurotic in character, but which harms no one. Look, Dr. Lanning, let me present you with a supposititious case. Supposing we had a politician who was interested in defeating a reform candidate at any cost and while investigating his private life came across oddities such as I have just mentioned.

"Suppose further that in order to smear the candidate effectively, he comes to your company as the ideal agent. Do you expect him to say to you, 'So-and-so is a robot because he hardly ever eats with people, and I have never seen him fall asleep in the middle of a case; and once when I peeped into his window in the middle of the night, there he was, sitting up with a book; and I looked in his frigidaire and there was no food in it.'

"If he told you that, you would send for a straitjacket. But if he tells you, 'He *never* sleeps; he *never* eats,' then the shock of the statement blinds you to the fact that such statements are impossible to prove. You play into his hands by contributing to the to-do."

"Regardless, sir," began Lanning, with a threatening obstinacy, "of whether you consider this matter serious or not, it will require only the meal I mentioned to end it."

Again Byerley turned to the woman, who still regarded him expressionlessly. "Pardon me. I've caught your name correctly, haven't I? Dr. Susan Calvin?"

"Yes, Mr. Byerley."

"You're the U. S. Robot's psychologist, aren't you?"

"Robopsychologist, please."

"Oh, are robots so different from men, mentally?"

"Worlds different." She allowed herself a frosty smile, "Robots are essentially decent."

Humor tugged at the corners of the lawyer's mouth, "Well, that's a hard blow. But what I wanted to say was this. Since you're a psycho—a robopsychologist, *and* a woman, I'll bet that you've done something that Dr. Lanning hasn't thought of."

"And what is that?"

"You've got something to eat in your purse."

Something caught in the schooled indifference of Susan Calvin's eyes. She said, "You surprise me, Mr. Byerley."

And opening her purse, she produced an apple. Quietly, she handed it to him. Dr. Lanning, after an initial start, followed the slow movement from one hand to the other with sharply alert eyes.

Calmly, Stephen Byerley bit into it, and calmly he swallowed it.

"You see, Dr. Lanning?"

Dr. Lanning smiled in a relief tangible enough to make even his eyebrows appear benevolent. A relief that survived for one fragile second.

Susan Calvin said, "I was curious to see if you would eat it, but, of course, in the present case, it proves nothing."

Byerley grinned, "It doesn't?"

"Of course not. It is obvious, Dr. Lanning, that if this man were a humanoid robot, he would be a perfect imitation. He is almost too human to be credible. After all, we have been seeing and observing human beings all our lives; it would be impossible to palm something merely nearly right off on us. It would have to be *all* right. Observe the texture of the skin, the quality of the irises, the bone formation of the hand. If he's a robot, I wish U. S. Robots *had* made him, because he's a good job. Do you suppose then, that anyone capable of paying attention to such niceties would neglect a few gadgets to take care of such things as eating, sleeping, elimination? For emergency use only, perhaps; as, for instance, to prevent such situations as are arising here. So a meal won't really prove anything."

"Now wait," snarled Lanning, "I am not quite the fool both of you make me out to be. I am not interested in the problem of Mr. Byerley's humanity or nonhumanity. I am interested in getting the corporation out of a hole. A public meal will end the matter and keep it ended no matter what

Quinn does. We can leave the finer details to lawyers and ro-bopsychologists."

"But, Dr. Lanning," said Byerley, "you forget the politics of the situation. I am as anxious to be elected as Quinn is to stop me. By the way, did you notice that you used his name. It's a cheap shyster trick of mine; I knew you would, before you were through."

Lanning flushed, "What has the election to do with it?"

"Publicity works both ways, sir. If Quinn wants to call me a robot, and has the nerve to do so, I have the nerve to play the game his way."

"You mean you—" Lanning was quite frankly appalled.

"Exactly. I mean that I'm going to let him go ahead, choose his rope, test its strength, cut off the right length, tie the noose, insert his head and grin. I can do what little else is required."

"You are mighty confident."

Susan Calvin rose to her feet, "Come, Alfred, we won't change his mind for him."

"You see." Byerley smiled gently. "You're a human psychologist, too."

But perhaps not all the confidence that Dr. Lanning had remarked upon was present that evening when Byerley's car parked on the automatic treads leading to the sunken garage, and Byerley himself crossed the path to the front door of his house.

The figure in the wheel chair looked up as he entered, and smiled. Byerley's face lit with affection. He crossed over to it.

The cripple's voice was a hoarse, grating whisper that came out of a mouth forever twisted to one side, leering out of a face that was half scar tissue, "You're late, Steve."

"I know, John, I know. But I've been up against a peculiar and interesting trouble today."

"So?" Neither the torn face nor the destroyed voice could carry expression, but there was anxiety in the clear eyes. "Nothing you can't handle?"

"I'm not exactly certain. I may need your help. *You're* the brilliant one in the family. Do you want me to take you out into the garden? It's a beautiful evening."

Two strong arms lifted John from the wheel chair. Gently, almost caressingly, Byerley's arms went around the shoulders and under the swathed legs of the cripple. Carefully, and slowly, he walked through the rooms, down the gentle ramp



that had been built with a wheel chair in mind, and out the back door into the walled and wired garden behind the house.

"Why don't you let me use the wheel chair, Steve? This is silly."

"Because I'd rather carry you. Do you object? You know that you're as glad to get out of that motorized buggy for a while as I am to see you out. How do you feel today?" He deposited John with infinite care upon the cool grass.

"How should I feel? But tell me about your trouble."

"Quinn's campaign will be based on the fact that he claims I'm a robot."

John's eyes opened wide, "How do you know? It's impossible. I won't believe it."

"Oh, come, I tell you it's so. He had one of the big-shot scientists of U. S. Robot & Mechanical Men Corporation over at the office to argue with me."

Slowly John's hands tore at the grass, "I see. I see."

Byerley said, "But we can let him choose his ground. I have an idea. Listen to me and tell me if we can do it—"

The scene as it appeared in Alfred Lanning's office that night was a tableau of stares. Francis Quinn stared meditatively at Alfred Lanning. Lanning's stare was savagely set upon Susan Calvin, who stared impassively in her turn at Quinn.

Francis Quinn broke it with a heavy attempt at lightness, "Bluff. He's making it up as he goes along."

"Are you going to gamble on that, Mr. Quinn?" asked Dr. Calvin, indifferently.

"Well, it's your gamble, really."

"Look here," Lanning covered definite pessimism with bluster, "we've done what you asked. We witnessed the man eat. It's ridiculous to presume him a robot."

"Do you think so?" Quinn shot toward Calvin. "Lanning said you were the expert."

Lanning was almost threatening, "No, Susan—"

Quinn interrupted smoothly, "Why not let her talk, man? She's been sitting there imitating a gatepost for half an hour."

Lanning felt definitely harassed. From what he experienced then to incipient paranoia was but a step. He said, "Very well. Have your say, Susan. We won't interrupt you."

Susan Calvin glanced at him humorlessly, then fixed cold eyes on Mr. Quinn. "There are only two ways of definitely proving Byerley to be a robot, sir. So far you are presenting

circumstantial evidence, with which you can accuse, but not prove—and I think Mr. Byerley is sufficiently clever to counter that sort of material. You probably think so yourself, or you wouldn't have come here.

"The two methods of *proof* are the physical and the psychological. Physically, you can dissect him or use an X-ray. How to do that would be *your* problem. Psychologically, his behavior can be studied, for if he is a positronic robot, he must conform to the three Rules of Robotics. A positronic brain can not be constructed without them. You know the Rules, Mr. Quinn?"

She spoke them carefully, clearly, quoting word for word the famous bold print on page one of the *Handbook of Robotics*.

"I've heard of them," said Quinn, carelessly.

"Then the matter is easy to follow," responded the psychologist dryly. "If Mr. Byerley breaks any of those three rules, he is not a robot. Unfortunately, this procedure works in only one direction. If he lives up to the rules, it proves nothing one way or the other."

Quinn raised polite eyebrows, "Why not, doctor?"

"Because, if you stop to think of it, the three Rules of Robotics are the essential guiding principles of a good many of the world's ethical systems. Of course, every human being is supposed to have the instinct of self-preservation. That's Rule Three to a robot. Also every 'good' human being, with a social conscience and a sense of responsibility, is supposed to defer to proper authority; to listen to his doctor, his boss, his government, his psychiatrist, his fellow man; to obey laws, to follow rules, to conform to custom—even when they interfere with his comfort or his safety. That's Rule Two to a robot. Also, every 'good' human being is supposed to love others as himself, protect his fellow man, risk his life to save another. That's Rule One to a robot. To put it simply—if Byerley follows all the Rules of Robotics, he may be a robot, and may simply be a very good man."

"But," said Quinn, "you're telling me that you can never prove him a robot."

"I may be able to prove him *not* a robot."

"That's not the proof I want."

"You'll have such proof as exists. You are the only one responsible for your own wants."

Here Lanning's mind leaped suddenly to the sting of an idea, "Has it occurred to anyone," he ground out, "that dis-

trict attorney is a rather strange occupation for a robot? The prosecution of human beings—sentencing them to death—bringing about their infinite harm—”

Quinn grew suddenly keen, “No, you can’t get out of it that way. Being district attorney doesn’t make him human. Don’t you know his record? Don’t you know that he boasts that he has never prosecuted an innocent man; that there are scores of people left untried because the evidence against them didn’t satisfy him, even though he could probably have argued a jury into atomizing them? That happens to be so.”

Lanning’s thin cheeks quivered, “No, Quinn, no. There is nothing in the Rules of Robotics that makes any allowance for human guilt. A robot may not judge whether a human being deserves death. It is not for him to decide. *He may not harm a human*—variety skunk or variety angel.”

Susan Calvin sounded tired. “Alfred,” she said, “don’t talk foolishly. What if a robot came upon a madman about to set fire to a house with people in it. He would stop the madman, wouldn’t he?”

“Of course.”

“And if the only way he could stop him was to kill him—”

There was a faint sound in Lanning’s throat. Nothing more.

“The answer to that, Alfred, is that he would do his best not to kill him. If the madman died, the robot would require psychotherapy because he might easily go mad at the conflict presented him—of having broken Rule One to adhere to Rule One in a higher sense. But a man would be dead and a robot would have killed him.”

“Well, *is* Byerley mad?” demanded Lanning, with all the sarcasm he could muster.

“No, but he has killed no man himself. He has exposed facts which might represent a particular human being to be dangerous to the large mass of other human beings we call society. He protects the greater number and thus adheres to Rule One at maximum potential. That is as far as he goes. It is the judge who then condemns the criminal to death or imprisonment, after the jury decides on his guilt or innocence. It is the jailer who imprisons him, the executioner who kills him. And Mr. Byerley has done nothing but determine truth and aid society.

“As a matter of fact, Mr. Quinn, I have looked into Mr. Byerley’s career since you first brought this matter to our attention. I find that he has never demanded the death sentence

in his closing speeches to the jury. I also find that he has spoken on behalf of the abolition of capital punishment and contributed generously to research institutions engaged in criminal neurophysiology. He apparently believes in the cure, rather than the punishment of crime. I find that significant."

"You do?" Quinn smiled. "Significant of a certain odor of robotcity, perhaps?"

"Perhaps? Why deny it? Actions such as his could come only from a robot, or from a very honorable and decent human being. But you see, you just can't differentiate between a robot and the very best of humans."

Quinn sat back in his chair. His voice quivered with impatience. "Dr. Lanning, it's perfectly possible to create a humanoid robot that would perfectly duplicate a human in appearance, isn't it?"

Lanning harrumphed and considered, "It's been done experimentally by U. S. Robots," he said reluctantly, "without the addition of a positronic brain, of course. By using human ova and hormone control, one can grow human flesh and skin over a skeleton of porous silicone plastics that would defy external examination. The eyes, the hair, the skin would be really human, not humanoid. And if you put a positronic brain, and such other gadgets as you might desire inside, you have a humanoid robot."

Quinn said shortly, "How long would it take to make one?"

Lanning considered, "If you had all your equipment—the brain, the skeleton, the ovum, the proper hormones and radiations—say, two months."

The politician straightened out of his chair. "Then we shall see what the insides of Mr. Byerley looks like. It will mean publicity for U. S. Robots—but I gave you your chance."

Lanning turned impatiently to Susan Calvin, when they were alone. "Why do you insist—"

And with real feeling, she responded sharply and instantly, "Which do you want—the truth or my resignation? I won't lie for you. U. S. Robots can take care of itself. Don't turn coward."

"What," said Lanning, "if he opens up Byerley, and wheels and gears fall out. What then?"

"He won't open Byerley," said Calvin, disdainfully. "Byerley is as clever as Quinn, at the very least."

The news broke upon the city a week before Byerley was

to have been nominated. But "broke" is the wrong word. It staggered upon the city, shambled, crawled. Laughter began, and wit was free. And as the faroff hand of Quinn tightened its pressure in easy stages, the laughter grew forced, an element of hollow uncertainty entered, and people broke off to wonder.

The convention itself had the air of a restive stallion. There had been no contest planned. Only Byerley could possibly have been nominated a week earlier. There was no substitute even now. They had to nominate him, but there was complete confusion about it.

It would not have been so bad if the average individual were not torn between the enormity of the charge, if true, and its sensational folly, if false.

The day after Byerley was nominated perfunctorily, hollowly—a newspaper finally published the gist of a long interview with Dr. Susan Calvin, "world famous expert on robopsychology and positronics."

What broke loose is popularly and succinctly described as hell.

It was what the Fundamentalists were waiting for. They were not a political party; they made pretense to no formal religion. Essentially they were those who had not adapted themselves to what had once been called the Atomic Age, in the days when atoms were a novelty. Actually, they were the Simple-Lifers, hungering after a life, which to those who lived it had probably appeared not so Simple, and who had been, therefore, Simple-Lifers themselves.

The Fundamentalists required no new reason to detest robots and robot manufacturers; but a new reason such as the Quinn accusation and the Calvin analysis was sufficient to make such detestation audible.

The huge plants of the U. S. Robot & Mechanical Men Corporation was a hive that spawned armed guards. It prepared for war.

Within the city the house of Stephen Byerley bristled with police.

The political campaign, of course, lost all other issues, and resembled a campaign only in that it was something filling the hiatus between nomination and election.

Stephen Byerley did not allow the fussy little man to distract him. He remained comfortably unperturbed by the uniforms in the background. Outside the house, past the line of

grim guards, reporters and photographers waited, according to the tradition of the caste. One enterprising 'visor station even had a scanner focused on the blank entrance to the prosecutor's unpretentious home, while a synthetically excited announcer filled in with inflated commentary.

The fussy little man advanced. He held forward a rich, complicated sheet. "This, Mr. Byerley, is a court order authorizing me to search these premises for the presence of illegal . . . uh . . . mechanical men or robots of any description."

Byerley half rose, and took the paper. He glanced at it indifferently, and smiled as he handed it back. "All in order. Go ahead. Do your job. Mrs. Hoppen"—to his housekeeper, who appeared reluctantly from the next room—"please go with them, and help out if you can."

The little man, whose name was Harroway, hesitated, produced an unmistakable flush, failed completely to catch Byerley's eyes, and muttered, "Come on," to the two policemen.

He was back in ten minutes.

"Through?" questioned Byerley, in just the tone of a person who is not particularly interested in the question or its answer.

Harroway cleared his throat, made a bad start in falsetto, and began again, angrily, "Look here, Mr. Byerley, our special instructions were to search the house very thoroughly."

"And haven't you?"

"We were told exactly what to look for."

"Yes?"

"In short, Mr. Byerley, and not to put too fine a point on it, we were told to search you."

"Me?" said the prosecutor with a broadening smile. "And how do you intend to do that?"

"We have a Penet-radiation unit—"

"Then I'm to have my X-ray photograph taken, hey? You have the authority?"

"You saw my warrant."

"May I see it again?"

Harroway, his forehead shining with considerably more than mere enthusiasm, passed it over a second time.

Byerley said evenly, "I read here as the description of what you are to search; I quote: 'the dwelling place belonging to Stephen Allen Byerley, located at 355 Willow Grove, Evanston, together with any garage, storehouse or other structures

or buildings thereto appertaining, together with all grounds thereto appertaining' . . . um . . . and so on. Quite in order. But, my good man, it doesn't say anything about searching my interior. I am not part of the premises. You may search my clothes if you think I've got a robot hidden in my pocket."

Harroway had no doubt on the point of to whom he owed his job. He did not propose to be backward, given a chance to earn a much better—i.e., more highly paid—job.

He said, in a faint echo of bluster, "Look here. I'm allowed to search the furniture in your house, and anything else I find in it. You are it, aren't you?"

"A remarkable observation. I *am* in it. But I'm not a piece of furniture. As a citizen of adult responsibility—I have the psychiatric certificate proving that—I have certain rights under the Regional Articles. Searching me would come under the heading of violating my Right of Privacy. That paper isn't sufficient."

"Sure, but if you're a robot, you don't have Right of Privacy."

"True enough—but that paper still isn't sufficient. It recognizes me implicitly as a human being."

"Where?" Harroway snatched at it.

"Where it says, 'the dwelling place belonging to' and so on. A robot cannot own property. And you may tell your employer, Mr. Harroway, that if he tries to issue a similar paper which does *not* implicitly recognize me as a human being, he will be immediately faced with a restraining injunction and a civil suit which will make it necessary for him to *prove* me a robot by means of information *now* in his possession, or else to pay a whopping penalty for an attempt to deprive me unduly of my Rights under the Regional Articles. You'll tell him that, won't you?"

Harroway marched to the door. He turned. "You're a slick lawyer—" His hand was in his pocket. For a short moment, he stood there. Then he left, smiled in the direction of the 'visor scanner, still playing away—waved to the reporters, and shouted, "We'll have something for you tomorrow, boys. No kidding."

In his ground car, he settled back, removed the tiny mechanism from his pocket and carefully inspected it. It was the first time he had ever taken a photograph by X-ray reflection. He hoped he had done it correctly.

Quinn and Byerley had never met face-to-face alone. But

visorphone was pretty close to it. In fact, accepted literally, perhaps the phrase was accurate, even if to each, the other was merely the light and dark pattern of a bank of photocells.

It was Quinn who had initiated the call. It was Quinn who spoke first, and without particular ceremony, "Thought you would like to know, Byerley, that I intend to make public the fact that you're wearing a protective shield against Penet-radiation."

"That's so? In that case, you've probably already made it public. I have a notion our enterprising press representatives have been tapping my various communication lines for quite a while. I know they have my office lines full of holes; which is why I've dug in at my home these last weeks." Byerley was friendly, almost chatty.

Quinn's lips tightened slightly, "This call is shielded—thoroughly. I'm making it at a certain personal risk."

"So I should imagine. Nobody knows you're behind this campaign. At least, nobody knows it officially. Nobody doesn't know it unofficially. I wouldn't worry. So I wear a protective shield? I suppose you found that out when your puppy dog's Penet-radiation photograph, the other day, turned out to be overexposed."

"You realize, Byerley, that it would be pretty obvious to everyone that you don't dare face X-ray analysis."

"Also that you, or your men, attempted illegal invasion of my Right of Privacy."

"The devil they'll care for that."

"They might. It's rather symbolic of our two campaigns, isn't it? You have little concern with the rights of the individual citizen. I have great concern. I will not submit to X-ray analysis, because I wish to maintain my Rights on principle. Just as I'll maintain the rights of others when elected."

"That will no doubt make a very interesting speech, but no one will believe you. A little too high-sounding to be true. Another thing," a sudden, crisp change, "the personnel in your home was not complete the other night."

"In what way?"

"According to the report," he shuffled papers before him that were just within the range of vision of the visiplat, "there was one person missing—a cripple."

"As you say," said Byerley, tonelessly, "a cripple. My old teacher, who lives with me and who is now in the country—and has been for two months. A 'much-needed rest' is the



usual expression applied in the case. He has your permission?"

"Your teacher? A scientist of sorts?"

"A lawyer once—before he was a cripple. He has a government license as a research biophysicist, with a laboratory of his own, and a complete description of the work he's doing filed with the proper authorities, to whom I can refer you. The work is minor, but is a harmless and engaging hobby for a—poor cripple. I am being as helpful as I can, you see."

"I see. And what does this . . . teacher . . . know about robot manufacture?"

"I couldn't judge the extent of his knowledge in a field with which I am unacquainted."

"He wouldn't have access to positronic brains?"

"Ask your friends at U. S. Robots. They'd be the ones to know."

"I'll put it shortly, Byerley. Your crippled teacher is the real Stephen Byerley. You are his robot creation. We can prove it. It was he who was in the automobile accident, not you. There will be ways of checking the records."

"Really? Do so, then. My best wishes."

"And we can search your so-called teacher's 'country place,' and see what we can find there."

"Well, not quite, Quinn." Byerley smiled broadly. "Unfortunately for you, my so-called teacher is a sick man. His country place is his place of rest. His Right of Privacy as a citizen of adult responsibility is naturally even stronger, under the circumstances. You won't be able to obtain a warrant to enter his grounds without showing just cause. However, I'd be the last to prevent you from trying."

There was a pause of moderate length, and then Quinn leaned forward, so that his imaged face expanded and the fine lines on his forehead were visible, "Byerley, why do you carry on? You can't be elected."

"Can't I?"

"Do you think you can? Do you suppose that your failure to make any attempt to disprove the robot charge—when you could easily, by breaking one of the Three Laws—does anything but convince the people that you are a robot?"

"All I see so far is that from being a rather vaguely known, but still largely obscure metropolitan lawyer, I have now become a world figure. You're a good publicist."

"But you *are* a robot."

"So it's been said, but not proven."

"It's been proven sufficiently for the electorate."

"Then relax—you've won."

"Good-by," said Quinn, with his first touch of viciousness, and the visorphone slammed off.

"Good-by," said Byerley imperturbably, to the blank plate.

Byerley brought his "teacher" back the week before election. The air car dropped quickly in an obscure part of the city.

"You'll stay here till after election," Byerley told him. "It would be better to have you out of the way if things take a bad turn."

The hoarse voice that twisted painfully out of John's crooked mouth might have had accents of concern in it. "There's danger of violence?"

"The Fundamentalists threaten it, so I suppose there is, in a theoretical sense. But I really don't expect it. The Fundies have no real power. They're just the continuous irritant factor that might stir up a riot after a while. You don't mind staying here? Please. I won't be myself if I have to worry about you."

"Oh. I'll stay. You still think it will go well?"

"I'm sure of it. No one bothered you at the place?"

"No one. I'm certain."

"And your part went well?"

"Well enough. There'll be no trouble there."

"Then take care of yourself, and watch the televisior tomorrow, John." Byerley pressed the gnarled hand that rested on his.

Lenton's forehead was a furrowed study in suspense. He had the completely unenviable job of being Byerley's campaign manager in a campaign that wasn't a campaign, for a person that refused to reveal his strategy, and refused to accept his managers.

"You can't!" It was his favorite phrase. It had become his only phrase. "I tell you, Steve, you can't!"

He threw himself in front of the prosecutor, who was spending his time, leafing through the typed pages of his speech.

"Put that down, Steve. Look, that mob has been organized by the Fundies. You won't get a hearing. You'll be stoned more likely. Why do you have to make a speech before an

audience? What's wrong with a recording, a visual recording?"

"You want me to win the election, don't you?" asked Byerley, mildly.

"Win the election! You're not going to win, Steve. I'm trying to save your life."

"Oh, I'm not in danger."

"He's not in danger. He's not in danger." Lenton made a queer, rasping sound in his throat. "You mean you're getting out on that balcony in front of fifty thousand crazy crackpots to try to talk sense to them—on a balcony like a medieval dictator?"

Byerley consulted his watch. "In about five minutes—as soon as the television lines are free."

Lenton's answering remark was not quite transliterable.

The crowd filled a roped-off area of the city. Trees and houses seemed to grow out of a mass-human foundation. And by ultrawave, the rest of the world watched. It was a purely local election, but it had a world audience just the same. Byerley thought of that and smiled.

But there was nothing to smile at in the crowd itself. There were banners and streamers, ringing every possible change on his supposed robotcy. The hostile attitude rose thickly and tangibly into the atmosphere.

From the start the speech was not successful. It competed against the inchoate mob howl and the rhythmic cries of the Fundie clagues that formed mob-islands within the mob. Byerley spoke on, slowly, unemotionally—

Inside, Lenton clutched his hair and groaned—and waited for the blood.

There was a writhing in the front ranks. An angular citizen with popping eyes, and clothes too short for the lank length of his limbs, was pulling to the fore. A policeman dived after him, making slow, struggling passage. Byerley waved the latter off angrily.

The thin man was directly under the balcony. His words tore unheard against the roar.

Byerley leaned forward. "What do you say? If you have a legitimate question, I'll answer it." He turned to a flanking guard. "Bring that man up here."

There was a tensing in the crowd. Cries of "Quiet" started in various parts of the mob, and rose to a bedlam, then toned

down raggedly. The thin man, red-faced and panting, faced Byerley.

Byerley said, "Have you a question?"

The thin man stared and said in a cracked voice, "Hit me!"

With sudden energy, he thrust out his chin at an angle. "Hit me! You say you're not a robot. Prove it. You can't hit a human, you monster."

There was a queer, flat, dead silence. Byerley's voice punctured it. "I have no reason to hit you."

The thin man was laughing wildly. "You *can't* hit me. You *won't* hit me. You're not a human. You're a monster, a make-believe man."

And Stephen Byerley, tight-lipped, in the face of thousands who watched in person and the millions who watched by screen, drew back his fist and caught the man crackingly upon the chin. The challenger went over backwards in sudden collapse, with nothing on his face but blank, blank surprise.

Byerley said, "I'm sorry. Take him in and see that he's comfortable. I want to speak to him when I'm through."

And when Dr. Calvin, from her reserved space, turned her automobile and drove off, only one reporter had recovered sufficiently from the shock to race after her, and shout an unheard question.

Susan Calvin called over her shoulder, "He's human."

That was enough. The reporter raced away in his own direction.

The rest of the speech might be described as "Spoken but not heard."

Dr. Calvin and Stephen Byerley met once again—a week before he took the oath of office as mayor. It was late—past midnight.

Dr. Calvin said, "You don't look tired."

The mayor-elect smiled. "I may stay up for a while. Don't tell Quinn."

"I shan't. But that was an interesting story of Quinn's, since you mention him. It's a shame to have spoiled it. I suppose you knew his theory?"

"Parts of it."

"It was highly dramatic. Stephen Byerley was a young lawyer, a powerful speaker, a great idealist—and with a certain

flair for biophysics. Are you interested in robotics, Mr. Byerley?"

"Only in the legal aspects."

"*This* Stephen Byerley was. But here was an accident. Byerley's wife died; he himself, worse. His legs were gone; his face was gone; his voice was gone. Part of his mind was—bent. He would not submit to plastic surgery. He retired from the world, legal career gone—only his intelligence, and his hands left. Somehow he could obtain positronic brains, even a complex one, one which had the greatest capacity of forming judgments in ethical problems—which is the highest robotic function so far developed.

"He grew a body about it. Trained it to be everything he would have been and was no longer. He sent it out into the world as Stephen Byerley, remaining behind himself as the old, crippled teacher that no one ever saw—"

"Unfortunately," said the mayor-elect, "I ruined all that by hitting a man. The papers say it was your official verdict on the occasion that I was human."

"How did that happen? Do you mind telling me? It couldn't have been accidental."

"It wasn't entirely. Quinn did most of the work. My men started quietly spreading the fact that I had never hit a man; that I was unable to hit a man: that to fail to do so under provocation would be sure proof that I was a robot. So I arranged for a silly speech in public, with all sorts of publicity overtones, and almost inevitably, some fool fell for it. In its essence, it was what I call a shyster trick. One in which the artificial atmosphere which has been created does all the work. Of course, the emotional effects made my election certain, as intended."

The robopsychologist nodded. "I see you intrude on my field—as every politician must, I suppose. But I'm very sorry it turned out this way. I like robots. I like them considerably better than I do human beings. If a robot can be created capable of being a civil executive, I think he'd make the best one possible. By the Laws of Robotics, he'd be incapable of harming humans, incapable of tyranny, of corruption, of stupidity, of prejudice. And after he had served a decent term, he would leave, even though he was immortal, because it would be impossible for him to hurt humans by letting them know that a robot had ruled them. It would be most ideal."

"Except that a robot might fail due to the inherent inade-

quacies of his brain. The positronic brain has never equalled the complexities of the human brain."

"He would have advisers. Not even a human brain is capable of governing without assistance."

Byerley considered Susan Calvin with grave interest. "Why do you smile, Dr. Calvin?"

"I smile because Mr. Quinn didn't think of everything."

"You mean there could be more to that story of his."

"Only a little. For the three months before election, this Stephen Byerley that Mr. Quinn spoke about, this broken man, was in the country for some mysterious reason. He returned in time for that famous speech of yours. And after all, what the old cripple did once, he could do a second time, particularly where the second job is very simple in comparison to the first."

"I don't quite understand."

Dr. Calvin rose and smoothed her dress. She was obviously ready to leave. "I mean there is one time when a robot may strike a human being without breaking the First Law. Just one time."

"And when is that?"

Dr. Calvin was at the door. She said quietly, "When the human to be struck is merely another robot."

She smiled broadly, her thin face glowing. "Good-by, Mr. Byerley. I hope to vote for you five years from now—for coordinator."

Stephen Byerley chuckled. "I must reply that that is a somewhat far-fetched idea."

The door closed behind her.

# ABSALOM

by Henry Kuttner

STARTLING STORIES  
Fall

*This was apparently by Kuttner alone, but one never knows with such a wonderful team. In any event, this is a story about generational conflict, a theme that has a rich history in "mainstream" fiction, but one that has received surprisingly little attention in science fiction written for adults.*

*"Absalom," while certainly not a rare story (it has been reprinted a handful of times), is one of Kuttner's best, and that is saying quite a bit. It also reminds us of just what a tragedy his death at the age of 44 was for this field.*

*(Is anyone really named Absalom? Absalom rebelled against his father, the revered King David [ancestor of the Messiah] and that has made his name a synonym for evil. After all, would you name your kid Judas? In this story, however, the name has a literal significance.*

*Once again, John Campbell was able to elicit a powerful "There are mutants among us" story out of one of his authors. And oddly enough, there is an echo in evolutionary theory now. At least there*

*are a number of paleontologists [like Stephen Jay Gould] who now think that evolution proceeds by relatively short spurts of relatively rapid evolution, interspersed with long plateau-like periods of quiescence. This was something Campbell would have approved of and would have written numerous editorials about. Still, just to keep things in perspective, even the "relatively rapid" evolution would be slow by human standards. A forward leap in each generation is not in the cards—I.A.)*

At dusk Joel Locke came home from the university where he held the chair of psychonamics. He came quietly into the house, by a side door, and stood listening, a tall, tight-lipped man of forty with a faintly sardonic mouth and cool gray eyes. He could hear the precipitron humming. That meant that Abigail Schuler, the housekeeper, was busy with her duties. Locke smiled slightly and turned toward a panel in the wall that opened at his approach.

The small elevator took him noiselessly upstairs.

There, he moved with curious stealth. He went directly to a door at the end of the hall and paused before it, his head bent, his eyes unfocused. He heard nothing. Presently he opened the door and stepped into the room.

Instantly the feeling of unsureness jolted back, freezing him where he stood. He made no sign, though his mouth tightened. He forced himself to remain quiet as he glanced around.

It could have been the room of a normal twenty-year-old, not a boy of eight. Tennis racquets were heaped in a disorderly fashion against a pile of book records. The thiaminizer was turned on, and Locke automatically clicked the switch over. Abruptly he turned. The televisior screen was blank, yet he could have sworn that eyes had been watching him from it.

This wasn't the first time it had happened.

After a while Locke turned again and squatted to examine the book reels. He picked out one labeled BRIAFF ON ENTROPIC LOGIC and turned the cylinder over in his hands, scowling.



Then he replaced it and went out of the room, with a last, considering look at the television.

Downstairs Abigail Schuler was fingering the Mastermaid switchboard. Her prim mouth was as tight as the severe bun of gray-shot hair at the back of her neck.

"Good evening," Locke said. "Where's Absalom?"

"Out playing, Brother Locke," the housekeeper said formally. "You're home early. I haven't finished the living room yet."

"Well, turn on the ions and let 'em play," Locke said. "It won't take long. I've got some papers to correct, anyway."

He started out, but Abigail coughed significantly.

"Well?"

"He's looking peaked."

"Then outdoor exercise is what he needs," Locke said shortly. "I'm going to send him to a summer camp."

"Brother Locke," Abigail said, "I don't see why you don't let him go to Baja California. He's set his heart on it. You let him study all the hard subjects he wanted before. Now you put your foot down. It's none of my affair, but I can tell he's pining."

"He'd pine worse if I said yes. I've my reasons for not wanting him to study entropic logic. Do you know what it involves?"

"I don't—you know I don't. I'm not an educated woman Brother Locke. But Absalom is bright as a button."

Locke made an impatient gesture.

"You have a genius for understatement," he said. "Bright as a button!"

Then he shrugged and moved to the window, looking down at the play court below where his eight-year-old son played handball. Absalom did not look up. He seemed engrossed in his game. But Locke, watching, felt a cool, stealthy terror steal through his mind, and behind his back his hands clenched together.

A boy who looked ten, whose maturity level was twenty, and yet who was still a child of eight. Not easy to handle. There were many parents just now with the same problem—something was happening to the graph curve that charts the percentage of child geniuses born in recent times. Something had begun to stir lazily far back in the brains of the coming generations and a new species, of a sort, was coming slowly into being. Locke knew that well. In his own time he, too, had been a child genius.

Other parents might meet the problem in other ways, he thought stubbornly. Not himself. He *knew* what was best for Absalom. Other parents might send their genius children to one of the crèches where they could develop among their own kind. Not Locke.

"Absalom's place is here," he said aloud. "With me, where I can—" He caught the housekeeper's eye and shrugged again, irritably, going back to the conversation that had broken off. "Of course he's bright. But not bright enough yet to go to Baja California and study entropic logic. Entropic logic! It's too advanced for the boy. Even you ought to realize that. It isn't like a lollypop you can hand the kid—first making sure there's castor oil in the bathroom closet. Absalom's immature. It would actually be dangerous to send him to the Baja California University now to study with men three times his age. It would involve mental strain he isn't fit for yet. I don't want him turned into a psychopath."

Abigail's prim mouth pursed up sourly.

"You let him take calculus."

"Oh, leave me alone." Locke glanced down again at the small boy on the play court. "I think," he said slowly, "that it's time for another rapport with Absalom."

The housekeeper looked at him sharply, opened her thin lips to speak, and then closed them with an almost audible snap of disapproval. She didn't understand entirely, of course, how a rapport worked or what it accomplished. She only knew that in these days there were ways in which it was possible to enforce hypnosis, to pry open a mind willy-nilly and search it for contraband thoughts. She shook her head, lips pressed tight.

"Don't try to interfere in things you don't understand," Locke said. "I tell you, I know what's best for Absalom. He's in the same place I was thirty-off years ago. Who could know better? Call him in, will you? I'll be in my study."

Abigail watched his retreating back, a pucker between her brows. It was hard to know what was best. The mores of the day demanded rigid good conduct, but sometimes a person had trouble deciding in her own mind what was the right thing to do. In the old days, now, after the atomic wars, when license ran riot and anybody could do anything he pleased, life must have been easier. Nowadays, in the violent back-swing to a Puritan culture, you were expected to think twice and search your soul before you did a doubtful thing.

Well, Abigail had no choice this time. She clicked over the wall microphone and spoke into it.

"Absalom?"

"Yes, Sister Schuler?"

"Come in. Your father wants you."

In his study Locke stood quiet for a moment, considering. Then he reached for the house microphone.

"Sister Schuler, I'm using the televisior. Ask Absalom to wait."

He sat down before his private visor. His hands moved deftly.

"Get me Dr. Ryan, the Wyoming Quizkid Crèche. Joel Locke calling."

Idly as he waited he reached out to take an old-fashioned cloth-bound book from a shelf of antique curiosa. He read:

But Absalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, As soon as ye hear the sound of the trumpet, then ye shall say, Absalom reigneth in Hebron. . . .

"Brother Locke?" the televisior asked.

The face of a white-haired, pleasant-featured man showed on the screen. Locke replaced the book and raised his hand in greeting.

"Dr. Ryan. I'm sorry to keep bothering you."

"That's all right," Ryan said. "I've plenty of time. I'm supposed to be supervisor at the Crèche, but the kids are running it to suit themselves." He chuckled. "How's Absalom?"

"There's a limit," Locke said sourly. "I've given the kid his head, outlined a broad curriculum, and now he wants to study entropic logic. There are only two universities that handle the subject, and the nearest's in Baja California."

"He could commute by copter, couldn't he?" Ryan asked, but Locke grunted disapproval.

"Take too long. Besides, one of the requirements is in-boarding, under a strict regime. The discipline, mental and physical, is supposed to be necessary in order to master entropic logic. Which is spinach. I got the rudiments at home, though I had to use the tri-disney to visualize it."

Ryan laughed.

"The kids here are taking it up. Uh—are you sure you understood it?"

"Enough, yeah. Enough to realize it's nothing for a kid to study until his horizons have expanded."

"We're having no trouble with it," the doctor said. "Don't forget that Absalom's a genius, not an ordinary youngster."

"I know. I know my responsibility, too. A normal home environment has to be maintained to give Absalom some sense of security—which is one reason I don't want the boy to live in Baja California just now. I want to be able to protect him."

"We've disagreed on that point before. All the quizkids are pretty self-sufficient, Locke."

"Absalom's a genius, and a child. Therefore he's lacking in a sense of proportion. There are more dangers for him to avoid. I think it's a grave mistake to give the quizkids their heads and let them do what they like. I refused to send Absalom to a Crèche for an excellent reason. Putting all the boy geniuses in a batch and letting them fight it out. Completely artificial environment."

"I'm not arguing," Ryan said. "It's your business. Apparently you'll never admit that there's a sine curve of geniuses these days. A steady increase. In another generation—"

"I was a child genius myself, but I got over it," Locke said irritably. "I had enough trouble with my father. He was a tyrant, and if I hadn't been lucky, he'd have managed to warp me psychologically way out of line. I adjusted, but I had trouble. I don't want Absalom to have that trouble. That's why I'm using psychonamics."

"Narcosynthesis? Enforced hypnotism?"

"It's not enforced," Locke snapped. "It's a valuable mental catharsis. Under hypnosis, he tells me everything that's on his mind, and I can help him."

"I didn't know you were doing that," Ryan said slowly. "I'm not at all sure it's a good idea."

"I don't tell you how to run your Crèche."

"No. But the kids do. A lot of them are smarter than I am."

"Immature intelligence is dangerous. A kid will skate on thin ice without making a test first. Don't think I'm holding Absalom back. I'm just running tests for him first. I make sure the ice will hold him. Entropic logic I can understand, but he can't, yet. So he'll have to wait for that."

"Well?"

Locke hesitated. "Uh—do you know if your boys have been communicating with Absalom?"

"I don't know," Ryan said. "I don't interfere with their lives."

"All right, I don't want them interfering with mine, or with Absalom's. I wish you'd find out if they're getting in touch with him."

There was a long pause. Then Ryan said slowly:

"I'll try. But if I were you, Brother Locke, I'd let Absalom go to Baja California if he wants to."

"I know what I'm doing," Locke said, and broke the beam. His gaze went toward the Bible again.

Entropic logic!

Once the boy reached maturity, his somatic and physiological symptoms would settle toward the norm, but meanwhile the pendulum still swung wildly. Absalom needed strict control, for his own good.

And, for some reason, the boy had been trying to evade the hypnotic rapports lately. There was something going on.

Thoughts moved chaotically through Locke's mind. He forgot that Absalom was waiting for him, and remembered only when Abigail's voice, on the wall transmitter, announced the evening meal.

At dinner Abigail Schuler sat like Atropos between father and son, ready to clip the conversation whenever it did not suit her. Locke felt the beginnings of a long-standing irritation at Abigail's attitude that she had to protect Absalom against his father. Perhaps conscious of that, Locke himself finally brought up the subject of Baja California.

"You've apparently been studying the entropic logic thesis." Absalom did not seem startled. "Are you convinced yet that it's too advanced for you?"

"No, Dad," Absalom said. "I'm not convinced of that."

"The rudiments of calculus might seem easy to a youngster. But when he got far enough into it . . . I went over that entropic logic, son, through the entire book, and it was difficult enough for me. And I've a mature mind."

"I know you have. And I know I haven't, yet. But I still don't think it would be beyond me."

"Here's the thing," Locke said. "You might develop psychotic symptoms if you studied that thing, and you might not be able to recognize them in time. If we could have a rapport

every night, or every other night, while you were studying—”

“But it’s in Baja California!”

“That’s the trouble. If you want to wait for my Sabbatical, I can go there with you. Or one of the nearer universities may start the course. I don’t want to be unreasonable. Logic should show you my motive.”

“It does,” Absalom said. “That part’s all right. The only difficulty’s an intangible, isn’t it? I mean, you think my mind couldn’t assimilate entropic logic safely, and I’m convinced that it could.”

“Exactly,” Locke said. “You’ve the advantage of knowing yourself better than I could know you. You’re handicapped by immaturity, lack of a sense of proportion. And I’ve had the advantage of more experience.”

“Your own, though, Dad. How much would such values apply to me?”

“You must let me be the judge of that, son.”

“Maybe,” Absalom said. “I wish I’d gone to a quizkid crèche, though.”

“Aren’t you happy here?” Abigail asked, hurt, and the boy gave her a quick, warm look of affection.

“Sure I am, Abbie. You know that.”

“You’d be a lot less happy with dementia praecox,” Locke said sardonically. “Entropic logic, for instance, presupposes a grasp of temporal variations being assumed for problems involving relativity.”

“Oh, that gives me a headache,” Abigail said. “And if you’re so worried about Absalom’s overtraining his mind, you shouldn’t talk to him like that.” She pressed buttons and slid the cloisonné metal dishes into the compartment. “Coffee, Brother Locke . . . milk, Absalom . . . and I’ll take tea.”

Locke winked at his son, who merely looked solemn. Abigail rose with her teacup and headed toward the fireplace. Seizing the little hearth broom, she whisked away a few ashes, relaxed amid cushions, and warmed her skinny ankles by the wood fire. Locke patted back a yawn.

“Until we settle this argument, son, matters must stand. Don’t tackle that book on entropic logic again. Or anything else on the subject. Right?”

There was no answer.

“Right?” Locke insisted.

“I’m not sure,” Absalom said after a pause. “As a matter of fact, the book’s already given me a few ideas.”

Looking across the table, Locke was struck by the incongruity of that incredibly developed mind in the childish body.

"You're still young," he said. "A few days won't matter. Don't forget that legally I exercise control over you, though I'll never do that without your agreement that I'm acting justly."

"Justice for you may not be justice for me," Absalom said, drawing designs on the tablecloth with his fingernail.

Locke stood up and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"We'll discuss it again, until we've thrashed it out right. Now I've some papers to correct."

He went out.

"He's acting for the best, Absalom," Abigail said.

"Of course he is, Abbie," the boy agreed. But he remained thoughtful.

The next day Locke went through his classes in an absent-minded fashion and at noon he televised Dr. Ryan at the Wyoming Quizkid Crèche. Ryan seemed entirely too casual and noncommittal. He said he had asked the quizkids if they had been communicating with Absalom, and they had said no.

"But they'll lie at the drop of a hat, of course, if they think it advisable," Ryan added, with inexplicable amusement.

"What's so funny?" Locke inquired.

"I don't know," Ryan said. "The way the kids tolerate me. I'm useful to them at times, but—originally I was supposed to be supervisor here. Now the boys supervise me."

"Are you serious?"

Ryan sobered.

"I've a tremendous respect for the quizkids. And I think you're making a very grave mistake in the way you're handling your son. I was in your house once, a year ago. It's *your* house. Only one room belongs to Absalom. He can't leave any of his possessions around anywhere else. You're dominating him tremendously."

"I'm trying to help him."

"Are you sure you know the right way?"

"Certainly," Locke snapped. "Even if I'm wrong, does that mean I'm committing fil—filio—"

"That's an interesting point," Ryan said casually. "You could have thought of the right words for matricide, parricide, or fratricide easily enough. But it's seldom one kills his son. The word doesn't come to the tongue quite as instantly."

Locke glared at the screen. "What the devil do you mean?"

"Just be careful," Ryan said. "I believe in the mutant theory, after running this Crèche for fifteen years."

"I was a child genius myself," Locke repeated.

"Uh-huh," Ryan said, his eyes intent. "I wonder if you know that the mutation's supposed to be cumulative? Three generations ago, two percent of the population were child geniuses. Two generations ago, five percent. One generation—a sine curve, Brother Locke. And the I.Q. mounts proportionately. Wasn't your father a genius too?"

"He was," Locke admitted. "But a maladjusted one."

"I thought so. Mutations take time. The theory is that the transition is taking place right now, from homo sapiens to homo superior."

"I know. It's logical enough. Each generation of mutations—this dominant mutation at least—taking another step forward till homo superior is reached. What that will be—"

"I don't think we'll ever know," Ryan said quietly. "I don't think we'd understand. How long will it take, I wonder? The next generation? I don't think so. Five more generations, or ten or twenty? And each one taking another step, realizing another buried potentiality of homo, until the summit is reached. Superman, Joel."

Absalom isn't a superman," Locke said practically. "Or a superchild, for that matter."

"Are you sure?"

"Good Lord! Don't you suppose I know my own son?"

"I won't answer that," Ryan said. "I'm certain that I don't know all there is to know about the quizkids in my Crèche, Beltram, the Denver Crèche supervisor, tells me the same thing. These quizkids are the next step in the mutation. You and I are members of a dying species, Brother Locke."

Locke's face changed. Without a word he clicked off the televisior.

The bell was ringing for his next class. But Locke stayed motionless, his cheeks and forehead slightly damp.

Presently, his mouth twisted in a curiously unpleasant smile, he nodded and turned from the televisior . . .

He got home at five. He came in quietly, by the side entrance, and took the elevator upstairs. Absalom's door was closed, but voices were coming through it faintly. Locke listened for a time. Then he rapped sharply on the panel.

"Absalom. Come downstairs. I want to talk to you."

In the living room he told Abigail to stay out for a while. With his back to the fireplace, he waited until Absalom came.



The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is. . . .

The boy entered without obvious embarrassment. He came forward and he faced his father, the boy-face calm and untroubled. He had poise, Locke saw, no doubt of that.

"I overheard some of your conversation, Absalom," Locke said.

"It's just as well," Absalom said coolly. "I'd have told you tonight anyway. I've got to go on with that entropic course."

Locke ignored that. "Who were you vising?"

"A boy I know. Malcolm Roberts, in the Denver quizkid Crèche."

"Discussing entropic logic with him, eh? After what I'd told you?"

"You'll remember that I didn't agree."

Locke put his hands behind him and interlaced his fingers.

"Then you'll also remember that I mentioned I had legal control over you."

"Legal," Absalom said, "yes. Moral, no."

"This has nothing to do with morals."

"It has, though. And with ethics. Many of the youngsters—younger than I—at the quizkid crèches are studying entropic logic. It hasn't harmed them. I must go to a crèche, or to Baja California. I must."

Locke bent his head thoughtfully.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Sorry, son. I got emotionally tangled for a moment. Let's go back on the plane of pure logic."

"All right," Absalom said, with a quiet, imperceptible withdrawal.

"I'm convinced that that particular study might be dangerous for you. I don't want you to be hurt. I want you to have every possible opportunity, especially the ones I never had."

"No," Absalom said, a curious note of maturity in his high voice. "It wasn't lack of opportunity. It was incapability."

"What?" Locke said.

"You could never allow yourself to be convinced I could safely study entropic logic. I've learned that. I've talked to other quizkids."

"Of private matters?"

"They're of my race," Absalom said. "You're not. And

please don't talk about filial love. You broke that law yourself long ago."

"Keep talking," Locke said quietly, his mouth tight. "But make sure it's logical."

"It is. I didn't think I'd ever have to do this for a long time, but I've got to now. You're holding me back from what I've got to do."

"The step mutation. Cumulative. I see."

The fire was too hot. Locke took a step forward from the hearth. Absalom made a slight movement of withdrawal. Locke looked at him intently.

"It *is* a mutation," the boy said. "Not the complete one, but Grandfather was one of the first steps. You, too—further along than he did. And I'm further than you. My children will be closer toward the ultimate mutation. The only psychonomic experts worth anything are the child geniuses of your generation."

"Thanks."

"You're afraid of me," Absalom said. "You're afraid of me and jealous of me."

Locke started to laugh. "What about logic now?"

The boy swallowed. "It *is* logic. Once you were convinced that the mutation was cumulative, you couldn't bear to think I'd displace you. It's a basic psychological warp in you. You had the same thing with Grandfather, in a different way. That's why you turned to psychonomics, where you were a small god, dragging out the secret minds of your students, molding their brains as Adam was molded. You're afraid that I'll outstrip you. And I will."

"That's why I let you study anything you wanted, I suppose?" Locke asked. "With this exception?"

"Yes, it is. A lot of child geniuses work so hard they burn themselves out and lose their mental capacities entirely. You wouldn't have talked so much about the danger if—under these circumstances—it hadn't been the one thing paramount in your mind. Sure you gave me my head. And, subconsciously, you were hoping I *would* burn myself out, so I wouldn't be a possible rival any more."

"I see."

"You let me study math, plane geometry, calculus, non-Euclidean, but you kept pace with me. If you didn't know the subject already, you were careful to bone up on it, to assure yourself that it was something you *could* grasp. You made

sure I couldn't outstrip you, that I wouldn't get any knowledge you couldn't get. And that's why you wouldn't let me take entropic logic."

There was no expression on Locke's face.

"Why?" he asked coldly.

"You couldn't understand it yourself," Absalom said. "You tried it, and it was beyond you. You're not flexible. Your logic isn't flexible. It's founded on the fact that a second-hand registers sixty seconds. You're lost the sense of wonder. You've translated too much from abstract to concrete. I *can* understand entropic logic. I can understand it!"

"You've picked this up in the last week," Locke said.

"No. You mean the rappings. A long time ago I learned to keep part of my mind blanked off under your probing."

"That's impossible!" Locke said, startled.

"It is for you. I'm a further step in the mutation. I have a lot of talents you don't know anything about. And I know this—I'm not far enough advanced for my age. The boys in the crèches are ahead of me. Their parents followed natural laws—it's the role of any parent to protect its young. Only the immature parents are out of step—like you."

Locke was still quite impassive.

"I'm immature? And I hate you? I'm jealous of you? You've quite settled on that?"

"Is it true or not?"

Locke didn't answer. "You're still inferior to me mentally," he said, "and you will be for some years to come. Let's say, if you want it that way, that your superiority lies in your—flexibility—and your homo superior talents. Whatever they are. Against that, balance the fact that I'm a physically mature adult and you weigh less than half of what I do. I'm legally your guardian. And I'm stronger than you are."

Absalom swallowed again, but said nothing. Locke rose a little higher, looking down at the boy. His hand went to his middle, but found only a lightweight zipper.

He walked to the door. He turned.

"I'm going to prove to you that you're my inferior," he said coldly and quietly. "You're going to admit it to me."

Absalom said nothing.

Locke went upstairs. He touched the switch on his bureau, reached into the drawer, and withdrew an elastic lucite belt. He drew its cool, smooth length through his fingers once. Then he turned to the dropper again.

His lips were white and bloodless by now.

At the door of the living room he stopped, holding the belt. Absalom had not moved, but Abigail Schuler was standing beside the boy.

"Get out, Sister Schuler," Locke said.

"You're not going to whip him," Abigail said, her head held high, her lips purse-string tight.

"Get out."

"I won't. I heard every word. And it's true, all of it."

"Get out, I tell you!" Locke screamed.

He ran forward, the belt uncoiled in his hand. Absalom's nerve broke at last. He gasped with panic and dashed away, blindly seeking escape where there was none.

Locke plunged after him.

Abigail snatched up the little hearth broom and thrust it at Locke's legs. The man yelled something inarticulate as he lost his balance. He came down heavily, trying to brace himself against the fall with stiff arms.

His head struck the edge of a chair seat. He lay motionless.

Over his still body, Abigail and Absalom looked at each other. Suddenly the woman dropped to her knees and began sobbing.

"I've killed him," she forced out painfully. "I've killed him—but I couldn't let him whip you, Absalom! I couldn't!"

The boy caught his lower lip between his teeth. He came forward slowly to examine his father.

"He's not dead."

Abigail's breath came out in a long, shuddering sigh.

"Go on upstairs, Abbie," Absalom said, frowning a little. "I'll give him first aid. I know how."

"I can't let you—"

"Please, Abbie," he coaxed. "You'll faint or something. Lie down for a bit. It's all right, really."

At last she took the dropper upstairs. Absalom, with a thoughtful glance at his father, went to the televisior.

He called the Denver Crèche. Briefly he outlined the situation.

"What had I better do, Malcolm?"

"Wait a minute." There was a pause. Another young face showed on the screen. "Do this," an assured, high-pitched voice said, and there followed certain intricate instructions. "Got that straight, Absalom?"

"I have it. It won't hurt him?"

"He'll live. He's psychotically warped already. This will just give it a different twist, one that's safe for you. It's projection. He'll externalize all his wishes, feelings, and so forth. On you. He'll get his pleasure only out of what *you* do, but he won't be able to control you. You know the psychonamic key of his brain. Work with the frontal lobe chiefly. Be careful of Broca's area. We don't want aphasia. He must be made harmless to you, that's all. Any killing would be awkward to handle. Besides, I suppose you wouldn't want that."

"No," Absalom said. "H-he's my father."

"All right," the young voice said. "Leave the screen on. I'll watch and help."

Absalom turned toward the unconscious figure on the floor.

For a long time the world had been shadowy now. Locke was used to it. He could still fulfill his ordinary functions, so he was not insane, in any sense of the word.

Nor could he tell the truth to anyone. They had created a psychic block. Day after day he went to the university and taught psychonamics and came home and ate and waited in hopes that Absalom would call him on the televisior.

And when Absalom called, he might condescend to tell something of what he was doing in Baja California. What he had accomplished. What he had achieved. For those things mattered now. They were the only things that mattered. The projection was complete.

Absalom was seldom forgetful. He was a good son. He called daily, though sometimes, when work was pressing, he had to make the call short. But Joel Locke could always work at his immense scrapbooks, filled with clippings and photographs about Absalom. He was writing Absalom's biography, too.

He walked otherwise through a shadow world, existing in flesh and blood, in realized happiness, only when Absalom's face appeared on the televisior screen. But he had not forgotten anything. He hated Absalom, and hated the horrible, unbreakable bond that would forever chain him to his own flesh—the flesh that was not quite his own, but one step farther up the ladder of the new mutation.

Sitting there in the twilight of unreality, his scrapbooks spread before him, the televisior set never used except when Absalom called, but standing ready before his chair, Joel

Locke nursed his hatred and a quiet, secret satisfaction that had come to him.

Some day Absalom would have a son. Some day. Some day.

# MEWHU'S JET

by Theodore Sturgeon

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION  
November

*Ted Sturgeon's second contribution to the best of 1946 is a first contact story that was original in its conception and brilliant in its execution. The publication of Murray Leinster's classic "First Contact" the previous year detracted from the impact of "Mewhu's Jet," but in his analysis of human nature and of human response to the unknown, Ted's story is nearly its equal.*

*(One always approaches a remembered favorite with a little trepidation. If you're going to reread it decades later, will you find that the magic is gone? Will the disappointment be so great that you are going to find you must veto its inclusion? [I have veto rights over the stories that appear in these volumes—except for my own. Marty alone decides whether a story of mine appears, and which.]*

*In the case of "Mewhu's Jet," my fears were unfounded. I liked it just as much this time as when it first appeared, and I loved the dénouement just as much, too. After all, even—* No! I was about to

*philosophize and, in the process, give away the ending, and I don't want to do that.—I.A.)*

"We interrupt this program to announce—"

"Jack, don't jump like that! And you've dropped ashes all over your—"

"Aw, Iris, honey, let me listen to—"

*"—at first identified as a comet, the object is pursuing an erratic course through the stratosphere, occasionally dipping as low as—"*

"You make me nervous, Jack. You're an absolute slave to the radio. I wish you paid that much attention to me."

"Darling, I'll argue the point, or pay attention to you, or anything in the wide world you like when I've heard this announcement; but please, *please let me listen!*"

*"—dents of the East Coast are warned to watch for the approach of this ob—"*

"Iris, don't—"

*Click!*

"Well, of all the selfish, inconsiderate, discourteous—"

"That will do, Jack Garry. It's my radio as much as yours, and I have a right to turn it off when I want to."

"Might I ask why you find it necessary to turn it off at this moment?"

"Because I know the announcement will be repeated any number of times if it's important, and you'll shush me every time. Because I'm not interested in that kind of thing and don't see why I should have it rammed down my throat. Because the only thing you ever want to listen to is something which couldn't possibly affect us. But mostly because you yelled at me!"

"I did *not* yell at you!"

"You *did*! And you're yelling now!"

"Mom! Daddy!"

"Oh, Molly, darling, we woke you up!"

"Poor bratlet. Hey, what about your slippers?"

"It isn't cold tonight, Daddy. What was that on the radio?"

"Something buzzing around in the sky, darling. I didn't hear it all."

"A spaceship, I betcha."



"You see? You and your so-called science fiction!"

At which point, something like a giant's fist clouted off the two-room top story of the seaside cottage and scattered it down the beach. The lights winked out, and outside the whole waterfront lit up with a brief, shattering blue glare.

"Jacky darling, are you hurt?"

"Mom, he's bleedin'!"

"Jack, honey, say something. *Please* say something."

"Urrrrgh," said Jack Garry obediently, sitting up with a soft clatter of pieces of falling lath and plaster. He put his hands gently on the sides of his head and whistled. "Something hit the house."

His redheaded wife laughed half-hysterically. "Not really, darling." She put her arms around him, whisked some dust out of his hair, and began stroking his neck. "I'm . . . frightened, Jack."

"You're frightened!" He looked around shakily in the dim moonlight that filtered in. Radiance from an unfamiliar place caught his bleary gaze, and he clutched Iris' arm. "Upstairs . . . it's gone!" he said hoarsely, struggling to his feet. "Molly's room . . . Molly—"

"I'm here, Daddy. Hey, you're squeezin'!"

"Happy little family," said Iris, her voice trembling. "Vacationing in a quiet little cottage by the sea, so Daddy can write technical articles while Mummy regains her good disposition—without a phone, without movies within miles, and living in a place where the roof flies away. Jack—what hit us?"

"One of those things you were talking about," said Jack sardonically. "One of the things you refuse to be interested in, that couldn't possibly affect us. Remember?"

"The thing the radio was talking about?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. We'd better get out of here. This place may fall in on us, or burn, or something."

"An' we'll all be kilt," crooned Molly.

"Shut up, Molly. Iris, I'm going to poke around. Better go on out and pick us a place to pitch the tent—if I can find the tent."

"Tent?" Iris gasped.

"Boy oh boy," said Molly.

"Jack Garry, I'm not going to go to bed in a tent. Do you realize that this place will be swarming with people in no time flat?"

"O.K., O.K. Only get out from under what's left of the

house. Go for a swim. Take a walk. Or g'wan to bed in Molly's room."

"I'm not going out there by myself."

Jack sighed. "I should've asked you to stay in here," he muttered. "If you're not the contariest woman ever to—Be quiet, Molly."

"I didn't say anything."

*Meeew-w-w!*

"Aren't you doing that caterwauling?"

"No, Daddy, truly."

Iris said, "I'd say a cat was caught in the wreckage except that cats are smart and no cat would ever come near this place."

*Wuh-wuh-wuh-meeee-ew-w-w!*

"What a dismal sound!"

"Jack, that isn't a cat."

*Mmmmmew. Mmm—m-m-m.*

"Whatever it is," Jack said, "it can't be big enough to be afraid of and make a funny little noise like that." He squeezed Iris' arm and, stepping carefully over the rubble, began peering in and around it. Molly scrambled beside him. He was about to caution her against making so much noise, and then thought better of it. What difference would a little racket make?

The noise was not repeated, and five minutes' searching elicited nothing. Garry went back to his wife, who was fumbling around the shambles of a living room, pointlessly setting chairs and coffee tables back on their legs.

"I didn't find anyth—"

"Yipe!"

"Molly! What is it?"

Molly was just outside, in the shrubbery. "Daddy, you better come quick!"

Spurred by the urgency of her tone, he went crashing outside. He found Molly standing rigid, trying to cram both her fists in her mouth at the same time. And at her feet was a man with silver-gray skin and a broken arm, who mewed at him.

*"—Guard and Navy Department have withdrawn their warnings. The pilot of a Pan-American transport has reported that the object disappeared into the zenith. It was last seen eighteen miles east of Normandy Beach, New Jersey. Reports from the vicinity describe it as traveling very slowly, with a*

*hissing noise. Although it reached within a few feet of the ground several times, no damage has been reported. Inves—*

"Think of that," said Iris, switching off the little three-way portable. "No damage."

"Yeah. And if no one saw the thing hit, no one will be out here to investigate. So you can retire to your downy couch in the tent without fear of being interviewed."

"Go to sleep? Are you mad? Sleep in that flimsy tent with that mewling monster lying there?"

"Oh, heck, Mom, he's sick! He wouldn't hurt anybody."

They sat around the cheerful fire, fed by roof shingles. Jack had set up the tent without much trouble. The silver-gray man was stretched out in the shadows, sleeping lightly and emitting an occasional moan.

Jack smiled at Iris. "Y'know, I love your silly chatter, darling. The way you turned to and set his arm was a pleasure to watch. You didn't think of him as a monster while you were tending to him."

"Didn't I, though? Maybe monster was the wrong word to use. Jack, he has only one bone in his forearm!"

"He has what? Oh, nonsense, honey! 'Tain't scientific. He'd have to have a ball-and-socket joint in his wrist."

"He *has* a ball-and-socket joint in his wrist."

"This I have to see," Jack muttered. He picked up a flash lantern and went over to the long prone figure.

Silver eyes blinked up at the light. There was something queer about them. He turned the beam closer. The pupils were not black in that light, but dark green. They all but closed—from the sides, like a cat's. Jack's breath wheezed out. He ran the light over the man's body. It was clad in a bright-blue roomy bathrobe effect, with a yellow sash. The sash had a buckle which apparently consisted of two pieces of yellow metal; there seemed to be nothing to keep them together. They just stayed. When the man had fainted, just as they found him, it had taken almost all Jack's strength to pull them apart.

"Iris."

She got up and came over to him. "Let the poor devil sleep."

"Iris, what color was his robe?"

"Red, with a . . . but it's *blue*!"

"Is now. Iris, what on earth have we got here?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Some poor thing that escaped from an institution for—for—"

"For what?"

"How should I know?" she snapped. "There must be some place where they send creatures that get born like that."

"Creatures don't get born like that; he isn't deformed. He's just different."

"I see what you mean. I don't know why I see what you mean, but I'll tell you something." She stopped, and was quiet for so long that he turned to her, surprised. She said slowly, "I ought to be afraid of him, because he's strange, and ugly, but—I'm not."

"Me too."

"Molly, go back to bed."

"He's a leprechaun."

"Maybe you're right. Go on to bed, chicken, and in the morning you can ask him where he keeps his crock of gold."

"Gee." She went off a little way and stood on one foot, drawing a small circle in the sand with the other. "Daddy?"

"Yes, Molly-m'love."

"Can I sleep in the tent tomorrow, too?"

"If you're good."

"Daddy obviously means," said Iris acidly, "that if you're *not* good he'll have a roof on the house by tomorrow night."

"I'll be good." She disappeared into the tent.

The gray man mewed.

"Well, old guy, what is it?"

The man reached over and fumbled at his splinted arm.

"It hurts him," said Iris. She knelt beside him and, taking the wrist of his good arm, lifted it away from the splint, where he was clawing. The man did not resist, but lay and looked at her with pain-filled, slitted eyes.

"He has six fingers," Jack said. "See?" He knelt beside his wife and gently took the man's wrist. He whistled. "It is a ball-and-socket."

"Give him some aspirin."

"That's a good . . . wait." Jack stood pulling his lip in puzzlement. "Do you think we should?"

"Why not?"

"We don't know where he comes from. We know nothing of his body chemistry, or what any of our medicines might do to him."

"He . . . what do you mean, where he comes from?"

"Iris, will you open up your mind just a little? In the face of evidence like this, are you going to even attempt to cling to the idea that this man comes from anywhere on this

earth?" Jack said with annoyance. "You know your anatomy. Don't tell me you ever saw a human freak with skin and bones like that! That belt buckle, that material in his clothes . . . come on, now. Drop your prejudices and give your brains a chance."

"You're suggesting things that simply don't *happen!*"

"That's what the man in the street said—in Hiroshima. That's what the old-time aeronaut said from the basket of his balloon when they told him about heavier-than-air craft. That's what—"

"All right, all right, Jack. I know the rest of the speech. If you want dialectics instead of what's left of a night's sleep, I might point out that the things you have mentioned have all concerned human endeavors. Show me any new plastic, a new metal, a new kind of engine, and though I may not begin to understand it, I can accept it because it is of human origin. But this, this man, or whatever he is—"

"I know," said Jack, more gently. "It's frightening because it's strange, and away down underneath we feel that anything strange is necessarily dangerous. That's why we wear our best manners for strangers and not for our friends. But I still don't think we should give this character any aspirin."

"He seems to breathe the same air we do. He perspires, he talks . . . I think he talks."

"You have a point. Well, if it'll ease his pain at all, it may be worth trying. Give him just one."

Iris went to the pump with a collapsible cup from her first-aid kit, and filled it. Kneeling by the silver-skinned man, she propped up his head, gently put the aspirin between his lips, and brought the cup to his mouth. He sucked the water in greedily, and then went completely limp.

"Oh-oh. I was afraid of that."

Iris put her hand over the man's heart. "*Jack!*"

"Is he . . . what is it, Iris?"

"Not dead, if that's what you mean. Will you feel this?"

Jack put his hand beside Iris'. The heart was beating with massive, slow blows, about eight to the minute. Under it, out of phase completely with the main beat, was another, an extremely fast, sharp beat, which felt as if it were going about three hundred.

"He's having some sort of palpitation," Jack said.

"And in two hearts at once!"

Suddenly the man raised his head and uttered a series of ululating shrieks and howls. His eyes opened wide, and across

them fluttered a translucent nictitating membrane. He lay perfectly still with his mouth open, shrieking and gargling. Then with a lightning movement he snatched Jack's hand to his mouth. A pointed tongue, light-orange and four inches longer than it had any right to be, flicked out and licked Jack's hand. Then the strange eyes closed, and shrieks died to a whimper and faded out, and the man relaxed.

"Sleeping now," said Iris. "Oh, I hope we haven't done anything to him!"

"We've done something. I just hope it isn't serious. Anyhow, his arm isn't bothering him any. That's all we were worried about in the first place."

Iris put a cushion under the man's oddly planed head and touched the beach mattress he was lying on. "He has a beautiful mustache," she said. "Like silver. He looks very old and wise."

"So does an owl. Let's go to bed."

Jack woke early, from a dream in which he had bailed out of a flying motorcycle with an umbrella that turned into a candy cane as he fell. He landed in the middle of some sharp-toothed crags which gave like sponge rubber. He was immediately surrounded by mermaids who looked like Iris and who had hands shaped like spur gears. But nothing frightened him. He awoke smiling, inordinately happy.

Iris was still asleep. Outside somewhere he heard the tinkle of Molly's laugh. He sat up and looked at Molly's camp cot. It was empty. Moving quietly, so as not to disturb his wife, he slid his feet into moccasins and went out.

Molly was on her knees beside their strange visitor, who was squatting on his haunches and—

They were playing patty-cake.

"Molly!"

"Yes, Daddy."

"What are you trying to do? Don't you realize that that man has a broken arm?" -

"Oh, gosh, I'm sorry. Do you s'pose I hurt him?"

"I don't know. It's very possible," said Jack Garry testily. He went to the alien, took his good hand.

The man looked up at him and smiled. His smile was peculiarly engaging. All of his teeth were pointed, and they were very widely spaced. "Eeee-yu mow madibu Mewhu," he said.

"That's his name," Molly said excitedly. She leaned for-

ward and tugged at the man's sleeve. "Mewhu. Hey, Mewhu!" And she pointed at her chest.

"Mooly," said Mewhu. "Mooly—Geery."

"See, Daddy?" Molly said ecstatically. "See?" She pointed at her father. "Daddy. Dah—dee."

"Deedy," said Mewhu.

"No, silly. Daddy."

"Dewdy."

"Dah-dy!"

Jack, quite entranced, pointed at himself and said, "Jack."

"Jeek."

"Good enough. Molly, the man can't say 'ah.' He can say 'oo' or 'ee' but not 'ah.' That's good enough."

Jack examined the splints. Iris had done a very competent job. When she realized that instead of the radiusulna development of a true human, Mewhu had only one bone in his forearm, she had set the arm and laid on two splints instead of one. Jack grinned. Intellectually, Iris would not accept Mewhu's existence even as a possibility; but as a nurse, she not only accepted his body structure but skillfully compensated for its differences.

"I guess he wants to be polite," said Jack to his repentant daughter, "and if you want to play patty-cake he'll go along with you, even if it hurts. Don't take advantage of him, chicken."

"I won't, Daddy."

Jack started up the fire and had a stick crane built and hot water bubbling by the time Iris emerged. "Takes a cataclysm to get you to start breakfast," she grumbled through a pleased smile. "When were you a Boy Scout?"

"Matter of fact," said Garry, "I was once. Will modom now take over?"

"Modom will. How's the patient?"

"Thriving. He and Molly had a patty-cake tournament this morning. His clothes, by the way, are red again."

"Jack, where does he come from?"

"I haven't asked him yet. When I learn to caterwaul, or he learns to talk, perhaps we'll find out. Molly has already elicited the information that his name's Mewhu." Garry grinned. "And he calls me 'Jeek.'"

"Can't pronounce an 'r,' hm?"

"That'll do, woman. Get on with the breakfast."

While Iris busied herself over the fire, Jack went to look at the house. It wasn't as bad as he had thought—a credit to

poor construction. Apparently the upper two rooms were a late addition and had just been perched onto the older, comparatively flat-topped lower section. The frame of Molly's bed was bent beyond repair, but the box spring and mattress were intact. The old roof seemed fairly sound, where the removal of the jerry-built little top story had exposed it. The room would be big enough for him and Iris, and Molly's bed could be set up in the study. There were tools and lumber in the garage, the weather was warm and clear, and Jack Garry was very much attracted by the prospect of hard work for which he would not get paid, as long as it wasn't writing. By the time Iris called him for breakfast, he had most of the debris cleared from the roof and a plan of action mapped out. All he would have to do would be to cover the hole where the stairway landing had been and go over the roof for potential leaks. A good rain, he reflected, would search those out for him quickly enough.

"What about Mewhu?" Iris asked as she handed him an aromatic plate of eggs and bacon. "If we feed him any of this, do you think he'll throw another fit?"

Jack looked at their visitor, who sat on the other side of the fire, very close to Molly, gazing big-eyed at their breakfasts.

"I don't know. We could give him a little, I suppose."

Mewhu inhaled his sample and wailed for more. He ate a second helping, and when Iris refused to fry more eggs, he gobbled toast and jam. Each new thing he tasted he would nibble at, then he would blink twice and bolt it down. The only exception was the coffee. One taste was sufficient. He put it down on the ground and very carefully, very delicately overturned it.

"Can you talk to him?" Iris asked suddenly.

"He can talk to me," declared Molly.

"I've heard him," Jack said.

"Oh, no. I don't mean *that*," Molly denied vehemently. "I can't make any sense out of that stuff."

"I . . . I dunho, Mommy. He just—talks to me, that's all."

Jack and Iris looked at each other. "Oh," said Iris. Jack shook his head, looking at his daughter carefully, as if he had not really seen her before. He could think of nothing to say, and rose.

"Think the house can be patched up?"

"Oh, sure." He laughed. "You never did like the color of the upstairs rooms, anyway."



"I don't know what's got into me," Iris said thoughtfully. "I'd have kicked like a mule at any part of this. I'd have packed up and gone home if, say, just a wall was gone upstairs, or if there were just a hole in the roof, or if this . . . this android phenomenon arrived suddenly. But when it all happens at once—I can take it all."

"Question of perspective. Show me a nagging woman and I'll show you one who hasn't enough to worry about."

"You'll get out of my sight or you'll have this frying pan bounced off your skull," said Iris steadily. Jack got.

Molly and Mewhu trailed after him as he returned to the house—and stood side by side goggling at him as he mounted the ladder.

"Whatsha doing, Daddy?"

"Marking off the edges of this hole where the stairway hits the place where the roof isn't, so I can clean up the edges with a saw."

"Oh."

Jack roughed out the area with a piece of charcoal, lopped off the more manageable rough edges with a hatchet, cast about for his saw. It was still in the garage. He climbed down, got it, climbed up again, and began to saw. Twenty minutes of this, and sweat was streaming down his face. He knocked off, climbed down, doused his head at the pump, lit a cigarette, climbed back up on the roof.

"Why don't you jump off and back?"

The roofing job was looking larger and the day seemed warmer than it had. Jack's enthusiasm was in inverse proportion to these factors. "Don't be funny, Molly."

"Yes, but Mewhu wants to know."

"Oh, he does. Ask him to try it."

He went back to work. A few minutes later, when he paused for a breath, Mewhu and Molly were nowhere to be seen. Probably over by the tent, in Iris' hair, he thought, and went on sawing.

"Daddy!"

Daddy's unaccustomed arm and shoulder were, by this time, yelling for help. The dry softwood alternately cheesed the saw out of line and bound it. He answered impatiently, "Well, what?"

"Mewhu says to come. He wants to show you something."

"Show me what? I haven't time to play now, Molly. I'll attend to Mewhu when we get a roof over our heads again."

"But it's for you."

"What is it?"

"The thing in the tree."

"Oh, all right." Prompted more by laziness than by curiosity, Jack climbed back down the ladder. Molly was waiting. Mewhu was not in sight.

"Where is he?"

"By the tree," she said with exaggerated patience, taking his hand. "Come on. It's not far."

She led him around the house and across the bumpy track that was euphemistically known as a road. There was a tree down on the other side. He looked from it to the house, saw that in line with the felled tree and his damaged roof were more broken trees, where something had come down out of the sky, skimmed the tops of the trees, angling closer to the ground until it wiped the top off his house, and had then risen up and up—to where?

They went deeper into the woods for ten minutes, skirting an occasional branch or fallen tree top, until they came to Mewhu, who was leaning against a young maple. He smiled, pointed up into a tree, pointed to his arm, to the ground. Jack looked at him in puzzlement.

"He fell out of the tree and broke his arm," said Molly.

"How do you know?"

"Well, he just did, Daddy."

"Nice to know. Now can I get back to work?"

"He wants you to get the thing in the tree."

Jack looked upward. Hung on a fork two thirds of the way up the tree was a gleaming object, a stick about five feet long with a streamlined shape on each end, rather like the wingtip tanks of a P-80. "What on earth is that?"

"I dunno. I can't— He tol' me, but I dunno. Anyway, it's for you, so you don't . . . so you don't . . ." She looked at Mewhu for a moment. The alien's silver mustache seemed to swell a little. "—so you don't have to climb the ladder so much."

"Molly, how did you know that?"

"He *told* me, that's all. Gosh, Daddy, don't be mad. I don't know how, honest; he just did, that's all."

"I don't get it," muttered Jack. "Anyhow, what's this about that thing in the tree? I'm supposed to break my arm too?"

"It isn't dark."

"What do you mean by that?"

Molly shrugged. "Ask him."

"Oh, I think I catch that. He fell out of the tree because it

was dark. He thinks I can get up there and get the whatzit without hurting myself because I can see what I am doing. He also flatters me. Or is it flattery? How close to the apes does he think we are?"

"What are you talking about, Daddy?"

"Never mind. Why am I supposed to get that thing, anyway?"

"Uh—so's you can jump off the roof."

"That is just silly. However, I do want a look at that thing. Since his ship is gone, that object up there seems to be the only artifact he brought with him except his clothes."

"What's an artifact?"

"Second cousin to an artichoke. Here goes nothin'," and he swung up into the tree. He had not climbed a tree for years, and as he carefully chose his way, it occurred to him that there were probably more efficient ways of gaining altitude.

The tree began to shiver and sway with his weight. He looked down once and decided instantly not to do it again. He looked up and was gratified to see how close he was to the object he was after. He pulled himself up another three feet and was horrified at how far away it was, for the branches were very small up there. He squirmed upward, reached, and his fingers just brushed against the shank of the thing. It had two rings fastened to it, he noticed, each about a foot from the center, large enough to get an arm through. It was one of these which was hung up on a branch. He chinned himself, then, with his unpracticed muscles cracking, took one hand off and reached.

The one-hand chinning didn't come off so well. His arm began to sag. The ring broke off its branch as his weight came on it. He was immediately surrounded by the enthusiastic crackling of breaking shrubbery. He folded his tongue over and got his teeth on it. Since he had a grip on Mewhu's artifact, he held on—even when it came free. He began to fall, tensing himself for the bone-breaking jolt he would get at the bottom.

He fell quite fast at first, and then the stick he was holding began to bear him up. He thought it must have caught on a branch, by some miracle—but it hadn't! He was drifting down like a thistle seed, hanging from the rod, which in some impossible fashion was supporting itself in midair. There was a shrill, faint whooshing sound from the two streamlined fixtures at the ends of the rod. He looked down, blinked sweat out of his eyes, and looked again. Mewhu was grinning a

broad and happy grin; Molly was slack-jawed with astonishment.

The closer he came to the ground the slower he went. When, after what seemed an eternity, he felt the blessed pressure of earth under his feet, he had to stand and *pull* the rod down. It yielded slowly, like an eddy-current brake. Dry leaves danced and whirled under the end pieces.

"Gee, Daddy, that was wonderful!"

He swallowed twice to wet down his dry esophagus, and pulled his eyes back in. "Yeah. Fun," he said weakly.

Mewhu came and took the rod out of his hand, and dropped it. It stayed perfectly horizontal, and sank slowly down to the ground, where it lay. Mewhu pointed at it, at the tree, and grinned.

"Just like a parachute. Oh, *gee*, Daddy!"

"You keep away from it," said Jack, familiar with youthful intonation. "Heaven knows what it is. It might go off, or something."

He looked fearfully at the object. It lay quietly, the hissing of the end pieces stilled. Mewhu bent suddenly and picked it up, held it over his head with one hand. Then he calmly lifted his feet and hung from it. It lowered him gently, butt first, until he sat on the ground, in a welter of dead leaves; as soon as he picked it up, the streamlined end pieces had begun to blast again.

"That's the silliest thing I ever saw. Here—let me see it." It was floating about waist-high. He leaned over to one of the ends. It had a fine round grille over it. He put out a hand. Mewhu reached out and caught his wrist, shaking his head. Apparently it was dangerous to go too near those ends. Garry suddenly saw why. They were tiny, powerful jet motors of some kind. If the jet was powerful enough to support a man's weight, the intake must be drawing like mad—probably enough to snap a hole through a man's hand like a giant ticket-puncher.

But what controlled it? How was the jet strength adjusted to the weight borne by the device, and to the altitude? He remembered without pleasure that when he had fallen with it from the treetop, he had dropped quite fast, and that he went slower and slower as he approached the ground. And yet when Mewhu had held it over his head, it had borne his weight instantly and lowered him very slowly. And besides, how was it so stable? Why didn't it turn upside down and blast itself and passenger down to earth?

He looked at Mewhu with some increase of awe. Obviously he came from a place where science was really advanced. He wondered if he would ever be able to get any technical information from his visitor—and if he would be able to understand it. Of course, Molly seemed to be able to—

"He wants you to take it back and try it on the roof," said Molly.

"How can that refugee from a Kuttner opus help me?"

Immediately Mewhu took the rod, lifted it, ducked under it, and slipped his arms through the two rings, so that it crossed his back like a water-bucket yoke. Peering around, he turned to face a clearing in the trees, and before their startled eyes he leaped thirty feet in the air, drifted away in a great arc, and came gently to rest twenty yards away.

Molly jumped up and down and clapped her hands, speechless with delight. The only words Garry could find were a reiterated, "Ah, no!"

Mewhu stood where he was, smiling his engaging smile, waiting for them. They walked toward him, and when they were close he leaped again and soared out toward the road.

"What do you do with a thing like this?" breathed Jack. "Who do you go to, and what do you say to him?"

"Le's just keep him for a pet, Daddy."

Jack took her hand, and they followed the bounding, soaring silver man. A pet! A member of some alien race, from some unthinkable civilization—and obviously highly trained, too, for no ordinary individual would be the first to make such a trip. What was his story? Was he an advance guard? Or was he the sole survivor of his people? How far had he come? From Mars? Venus?

They caught up with him at the house. He was standing by the ladder. His strange rod was lying quiet on the ground. He was fascinatedly operating Molly's yo-yo. When he saw them, he threw down the yo-yo, picked up his device, and, slipping it across his shoulders, sprang high in the air and drifted down to the roof. "Eee-yu!" he said, with emphasis, and jumped off backward. So stable was the rod that as he sank through the air his long body swung to and fro.

"Very nice," said Jack. "Also spectacular. And I have to go back to work." He went to the ladder.

Mewhu bounded over to him and caught his arm, whimpering and whistling in his peculiar speech. He took the rod and extended it toward Jack.

"He wants you to use it," said Molly.

"No, thanks," said Jack, a trace of his tree-climbing vertigo returning to him. "I'd just as soon use the ladder." And he put his hand out to it.

Mewhu, hopping with frustration, reached past him and toppled the ladder. It levered over a box as it fell and struck Jack painfully on the shin.

"I guess you better use the flyin' belt, Daddy."

Jack looked at Mewhu. The silver man was looking as pleasant as he could with that kind of a face; on the other hand, it might just possibly be wise to humor him a little. Being safely on the ground to begin with, Jack felt that it might not matter if the fantastic thing wouldn't work for him. And if it failed him over the roof—well, the house wasn't very tall.

He shrugged his arms through the two rings. Mewhu pointed to the roof, to Jack, made a jumping motion. Jack took a deep breath, aimed carefully, and hoping the gadget wouldn't work, jumped.

He shot up to the house—too close. The eave caught him a resounding thwack on precisely the spot where the ladder had just hit him. The impact barely checked him. He went sailing up over the roof, hovered for a breathless second, and then began to come down. For a moment he thought his flailing legs would find purchase on the far edge of the roof. He just missed it. All he managed to do was to crack the same shin, in the same place, mightily on the other eave. Trailing clouds of profanity, he landed standing—in Iris' wash basket. Iris, just turning from the clothesline, confronted him.

"Jack! What on earth are you . . . get out of that! You're standing right on my wash with your dirty . . . oh!"

"Oh-oh!" said Jack, and stepped backward out of the wash basket. His foot went into Molly's express wagon, which Iris used to carry the heavy basket. To get his balance, he leaped—and immediately rose high in the air. This time his luck was better. He soared completely over the kitchen wing of the house and came to earth near Molly and Mewhu.

"Daddy, you were just like a bird! Me next, huh, Daddy?"

"I'm going to be just like a corpse if your mother's expression means what I think it does. Don't you touch that!" He shucked off the "flyin'-belt" and dived into the house just as Iris rounded the corner. He heard Molly's delighted "He went *that* way" as he plowed through the shambles of the living room and out the front door. As the kitchen door slammed he was rounding the house. He charged up to Me-

whu, snatched the gadget from him, slipped it on, and jumped. This time his judgment was faultless. He cleared the house easily although he came very near landing astride the clothesline. When Iris, panting and furious, stormed out of the house, he was busily hanging sheets.

"Just what," said Iris, her voice crackling at the seams, "do you think you're doing?"

"Just giving you a hand with the laundry, m'love," said Jack.

"What is that . . . that object on your back?"

"Another evidence of the ubiquity of the devices of science fiction," said Jack blandly. "This is a multilateral, three-dimensional mass adjuster, or pogo-chute. With it I can fly like a gull, evading the cares of the world and the advances of beautiful redheads, at such times as their passions are distasteful to me."

"Sometime in the very near future, you gangling hatrack, I am going to pull the tongue out of your juke box of a head and tie a bowknot in it." Then she laughed.

He heaved a sigh of relief, went and kissed her. "Darling, I am sorry. I was scared silly, dangling from this thing. I didn't see your clothes basket, and if I had I don't know how I'd have steered clear."

"What is it, Jack? How does it work?"

"I dunno. Jets on the ends. They blast hard when there's a lot of weight pushing them toward the earth. They blast harder near the earth than up high. When the weight on them slacks off a bit, they throttle down. What makes them do it, what they use for power—I just wouldn't know. As far as I can see, they suck in air at the top and blow it out through the jets. And, oh yes—they point directly downward no matter which way the rod is turned."

"Where did you get it?"

"Off a tree. It's Mewhu's. Apparently he used it for a parachute. On the way down, a tree branch speared through one of these rings and he slipped out of it and fell and broke his arm."

"What are we going to do with him, Jack?"

"I've been worrying about that myself. We can't sell him to a sideshow." He paused thoughtfully. "There's no doubt that he has a lot that would be of value to humanity. Why, this thing alone would change the face of the earth! Listen—I weigh a hundred and seventy. I *feel* on this thing suddenly, when I lost my grip on a tree, and it bore my weight immedi-

ately. Mewhu weighs more than I do, judging from his build. It took his weight when he lifted his feet off the ground while he was holding it over his head. If it can do that, it or a larger version should be able, not only to drive, but to support an aircraft. If for some reason that isn't possible, the power of those little jets certainly could turn a turbine."

"Will it wash clothes?" Iris was glum.

"That's exactly what I mean. Light, portable, and more power than it has any right to have—of course it'll wash clothes. And drive generators, and cars, and . . . Iris, what do you do when you have something as big as this?"

"Call a newspaper, I guess."

"And have a hundred thousand people peeking and prying all over the place, and Congressional investigations, and what all? Uh-uh!"

"Why not ask Harry Zinsser?"

"Harry? I thought you didn't like him."

"I never said that. It's just that you and he go off in the corner and chatter about multiple amputation and debilities of reactance and things like that, and I have to sit, knit—and spit when I want someone's attention. Harry's all right."

"Gosh, honey, you've got it. Harry'll know what to do. I'll go right away."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. With that hole in the roof I thought you said you could have it patched up for the night at least. By the time you get back here it'll be dark."

The prospect of sawing out the ragged hole in the roof was suddenly the least appealing thing in the world. But there was logic and an "or else" tone to what she said. He sighed and went off, mumbling something about the greatest single advance in history awaiting the whim of a woman. He forgot that he was wearing Mewhu's armpit altitudinizer. Only his first two paces were on the ground, and Iris hooted with laughter at his clumsy walking on air. When he reached the ground he set his jaw and leaped lightly up to the roof. "Catch me now, you and your piano legs," he taunted cheerfully, ducked the lancelike clothes prop she hurled at him, and went back to work.

As he sawed, he was conscious of a hubbub down below.

"Dah-dee!" "Mr-r-roo ellue—"

He sighed and put down the saw. "What is it?"

"Mewhu wants his flyin' belt!"

Jack looked at the roof, at the lower shed, and decided that his old bones could stand it if he had to get down with-



out a ladder. He took the jet-tipped rod and dropped it. It stayed perfectly horizontal, falling no slower and no faster than it had when he had ridden it down. Mewhu caught it, deftly slipped his splinted arm through it—it was astonishing how careful he was of the arm, and yet how little it inconvenienced him—then the other arm, and sprang up to join Jack on the roof.

“What do you say, fella?”

“Woopen yew weep.”

“I know how you feel.” He knew the silver man wanted to tell him something, but he couldn’t help him out. He grinned and picked up the saw. Mewhu took it out of his hand and tossed it off the roof, being careful to miss Molly, who was dancing back to get a point of vantage.

“What’s the big idea?”

“Dellihew hidden,” said Mewhu. “Pento deh numinew heh,” and he pointed at the flying belt and the hole in the roof.

“You mean I’d rather fly off in that thing than work? Brother, you got it. But I’m afraid I have to—”

Mewhu circled his arm, pointing all around the hole in the roof, and pointed again to the pogo-chute, indicating one of the jet motors.

“I don’t get it,” said Jack.

Mewhu apparently understood, and an expression of amazement crossed his mobile face. Kneeling, he placed his good hand around one of the little jet motors, pressed two tiny studs, and the casing popped open. Inside was a compact, sealed, and simple-looking device, the core of the motor itself, apparently. There seemed to be no other fastening. Mewhu lifted it out and handed it to Jack. It was about the size and shape of an electric razor. There was a button on the side. Mewhu pointed at it, pressed the back, and then moved Jack’s hand so that the device was pointed away from them both. Jack, expecting anything, from nothing at all to the “blinding bolt of searing, raw energy” so dear to the science-fiction world, pressed the button.

The gadget hissed, and snuggled back into his palm in an easy recoil.

“That’s fine,” said Jack, “but what do I do with it?”

Mewhu pointed at Jack’s cut, then at the device.

“Oh,” said Jack. He bent close, aimed the thing at the end of the saw cut, and pressed the button. Again the hiss and the slight, steady recoil, and a fine line appeared in the wood. It

was a cut, about half as thick as the saw cut, clean and even and, as long as he kept his hand steady, very straight. A fine cloud of pulverized wood rose out of the hole in the roof, carried on a swirl of air.

Jack experimented, holding the jet close to the wood and away from it. He found that it cut finer the closer he got to it. As he drew it away from the wood, the slot got wider and the device cut slower until at about eighteen inches it would not cut at all. Delighted, Jack quickly cut and trimmed the hole. Mewhu watched, grinning. Jack grinned back, knowing how he would feel if he introduced a saw to some primitive who was trying to work wood with a machete.

When he was finished, he handed the jet back to the silver man and slapped his shoulder. "Thanks a million, Mewhu."

"Jeek," said Mewhu, and reached for Jack's neck. One of his thumbs lay on Jack's collarbone, the other on his back, over the scapula. Mewhu squeezed twice, firmly.

"That the way you shake hands back home?" smiled Jack. He thought it likely. Any civilized race was likely to have a manual greeting. The handshake had evolved from a raised palm, indicating that the saluter was unarmed. It was quite possible that this was an extension, in a slightly different direction, of the same sign. It would indeed be an indication of friendliness to have two individuals present their throats to each other.

With three deft motions, Mewhu slipped the tiny jet back into its casing and, holding the rod with one hand, stepped off the roof, letting himself be lowered in that amazing this-tledown fashion to the ground. Once there, he tossed the rod back. Jack was startled to see it hurtle upward like any earthly object. He grabbed it and missed. It reached the top of its arc, and as soon as it started down the jets cut in, and it sank easily to him. He put it on and floated down to join Mewhu.

The silver man followed Jack to the garage, where he kept a few pieces of milled lumber. He selected some one-inch pine boards and dragged them out into the middle of the floor, to measure them and mark them off to the size he wanted to knock together a simple trap-door covering for the useless stairwell, a process which Mewhu watched with great interest.

Jack took up the flying belt and tried to open the streamlined shell to remove the cutter. It absolutely defied him. He

pressed, twisted, wrenched, and pulled. All it did was hiss gently when he moved it toward the floor.

"Eek, Jeek," said Mewhu. He took the jet from Jack and pressed it. Jack watched closely, then he grinned and took the cutter.

He swiftly cut the lumber up with it, sneering gayly at the rip saw which hung on the wall. Then he put the whole trap together with a Z-brace, trimmed off the few rough corners, and stood back to admire it. He realized instantly that it was too heavy to carry by himself, let alone lift it to the roof. If Mewhu had two good hands, now— He scratched his head.

"Carry it on the flyin' belt, Daddy."

"Molly! What made you think of that?"

"Mewhu tol' . . . I mean, I sort of—"

"Let's get this straight once and for all. How does Mewhu talk to you?"

"I dunno, Daddy. It's sort of like I remembered something he said, but not the . . . the words he said. I jus' . . . jus' . . ." she faltered, and then said vehemently, "I don't *know*, Daddy. Truly I don't."

"What did he say this time?"

She looked at Mewhu. Again Jack noticed the peculiar swelling of Mewhu's silver mustache. She said, "Put the door you jus' made on the flyin' belt and lift it. The flyin' belt'll make it fall slow, and you can push it along while . . . it's . . . fallin'."

Jack looked at the door, at the jet device, and got the idea. When he had slipped the jet rod under the door, Mewhu gave him a lift. Up it came; and then Mewhu, steadying it, towed it well outside the garage before it finally sank to the ground. Another lift, another easy tow, and they covered thirty more feet. In this manner they covered the distance to the house, with Molly skipping and laughing behind, pleading for a ride and praising the grinning Mewhu.

At the house, Jack said, "Well, Einstein Junior, how do we get it on the roof?"

Mewhu picked up Molly's yo-yo and began to operate it deftly. Doing so, he walked around the corner of the house.

"Hey!"

"He don't know, Daddy. You'll have to figger it out."

"You mean he could dream up that slick trick for carrying it out here and now his brains give out?"

"I guess so, Daddy."

Jack Garry looked after the retreating form of the silver

man and shook his head. He was already prepared to expect better than human reasoning from Mewhu, even if it was a little different. He couldn't quite phase this with Mewhu's shrugging off a problem in basic logic. Certainly a man with his capabilities would not have reasoned out such an ingenious method of bringing the door out here without realizing that that was only half the problem. He wondered if the solution was so obvious to Mewhu that he couldn't be bothered explaining it.

Shrugging, Jack went back to the garage and got a small block and tackle. He had to put up a big screw hook on the eave, and another on the new trap door; and once he had laboriously hauled the door up until the tackle was two-locked, it was a little more than arduous to work it over the edge and drag it into position. Mewhu had apparently quite lost interest. It was two hours later, just as he put the last screw in the tower bolt on the trap door and was calling the job finished, that he heard Mewhu begin to shriek again. He dropped his tools, shrugged into the jet slick, and sailed off the roof.

"Iris! Iris! What's the matter?"

"I don't know, Jack. He's . . .

Jack pounded around to the front of the house. Mewhu was lying on the ground in the midst of some violent, tearing convulsion. He lay on his back, arching it high, digging his heels into the turf; and his head was bent back at an impossible angle, so that his weight was on his heels and his forehead. His good arm pounded the ground, though the splinted one lay limp. His lips writhed and he uttered an edgy, gasping series of ululations quite horrible to listen to. He seemed to be able to scream as loudly when inhaling as when exhaling.

Molly stood beside him, watching him hypnotically. She was smiling. Jack knelt beside the writhing form and tried to steady it. "Molly, stop grinning at the poor fellow."

"But—he's happy, Daddy."

"He's what?"

"Can't you see, silly? He feels good, that's all. He's laughing!"

"Iris, what's the matter with him? Do you know?"

"He took some aspirin again, that's all I can tell you?"

"He ate four," said Molly. "He loves 'em."

"What can we do, Jack?"

"I don't know, honey," said Jack worriedly. "Better just let

him work it out. Any emetic or sedative we give him might be harmful."

The attack slackened and ceased suddenly, and Mewhu went quite limp. Again, with his hand over the man's chest, Jack felt the strange double pulsing.

"Out cold," he said.

Molly said in a strange, quiet voice, "No, Daddy. He's lookin' at dreams."

"Dreams?"

"A place with a or'nge sky," said Molly. He looked up sharply. Her eyes were closed. "Lots of Mewhus. Hundreds an' hundreds—big ones. As big as Mr. Throndyke." (Thorn-dyke was an editor whom they knew in the city. He was six feet seven.) "Round houses, an' big airplanes with . . . sticks fer wings."

"Molly, you're talking nonsense," her mother said worriedly. Jack shushed her. "Go on, baby."

"A place, a room. It's a . . . Mewhu is there and a bunch more. They're in . . . in lines. Rows. There's a big one with a yella hat. He keeps them in rows. Here's Mewhu. He's outa the line. He's jumpin' out th' window with a flyin' belt." There was a long silence. Mewhu moaned.

"Well?"

"Nothin', Daddy . . . wait! It's . . . all . . . fuzzy. Now there's a thing, a kinda summarine. Only on the ground, not in the water. The door's open. Mewhu is . . . is inside. Knobs, and clocks. Pull on the knobs. Push a— Oh. Oh! It hurts!" She put her fists to her temples.

"Molly!"

Molly opened her eyes and said quite calmly, "Oh, I'm all right, Mommy. It was a thing in the dream that hurt, but it didn't hurt me. It was all a bunch of fire an' . . . an' a sleepy feeling, only bigger. An' it hurt."

"Jack, he'll harm the child!"

"I doubt it," said Jack.

"So do I," said Iris wonderingly, and then, almost inaudibly, "Now, why did I say that?"

"Mewhu's asleep," said Molly suddenly.

"No more dreams?"

"No more dreams. Gee. That was—funny."

"Come and have some lunch," said Iris. Her voice shook a little. They went into the house. Jack looked down at Mewhu, who was smiling peacefully in his sleep. He thought of putting the strange creature to bed, but the day was warm and

the grass was thick and soft where he lay. He shook his head and went into the house.

"Sit down and feed," Iris said.

He looked around. "You've done wonders in here," he said. The litter of lath and plaster was gone, and Iris' triumphant antimacassars blossomed from the upholstery. She curtsied. "Thank you, m'lord."

They sat around the card table and began to do damage to tongue sandwiches. "Jack."

"Mm-m?"

"What was that—telepathy?"

"Think so. Something like that. Oh, wait'll I tell Zinsser! He'll never believe it."

"Are you going down to the airfield this afternoon?"

"You bet. Maybe I'll take Mewhu with me."

"That would be a little rough on the populace, wouldn't it? Mewhu isn't the kind of fellow you can pass off as your cousin Julius."

"Heck, he'd be all right. He could sit in the back seat with Molly while I talked Zinsser into coming out to have a look at him."

"Why not get Zinsser out here?"

"You know that's silly. When we see him in town he's got time off. Out here he's tied to that airport almost every minute."

"Jack, do you think Molly's quite safe with that creature?"

"Of course. Are you worried?"

"I . . . I am, Jack. But not about Mewhu. About me. I'm worried because I think I should worry more, if you see what I mean."

Jack leaned over and kissed her. "The good old maternal instinct at work," he chuckled. "Mewhu's new and strange and might be dangerous. At the same time Mewhu's hurt, and he's inoffensive, so something in you wants to mother him, too."

"There you really have something," Iris said thoughtfully. "He's as big and ugly as you are, and unquestionably more intelligent. Yet I don't mother you."

Jack grinned. "You're not kiddin'." He gulped his coffee and stood up. "Eat it up, Molly, and go wash your hands and face. I'm going to have a look at Mewhu."

"You're going into the airport, then?" asked Iris.

"If Mewhu's up to it. There's too much I want to know, too much I haven't the brains to figure out. I don't think I'll

get all the answers from Zinsser, by any means; but between us we'll figure out what to do about this thing. Iris, it's *big!*"

Full of wild speculation, he stepped out on the lawn. Mewhu was sitting up, happily contemplating a caterpillar.

"Mewhu."

"Dew?"

"How'd you like to take a ride?"

"Hubilly grees, Jeek?"

"I guess you don't get the idea. C'mon," said Jack, motioning toward the garage. Mewhu very, very carefully set the caterpillar down on a blade of grass and rose to follow; and just then the most unearthly crash issued from the garage. For a frozen moment no one moved, and then Molly's voice set up a hair-raising reiterated screech. Jack was pounding toward the garage before he knew he had moved.

"Molly! What is it?"

At the sound of his voice the child shut up as if she were switch-operated.

"Molly!"

"Here I am, Daddy," she said in an extremely small voice. She was standing by the car, her entire being concentrated in her protruding faintly quivering lower lip. The car was nose-foremost through the back wall of the garage.

"Daddy, I didn't mean to do it; I just wanted to help you get the car out. Are you going to spank me? Please, Daddy, I didn't—"

"*Quiet!*"

She was quiet immediately. "Molly, what on earth possessed you to do a thing like that? You know you're not supposed to touch the starter!"

"I was pretending, Daddy, like it was a summarine that could fly, the way Mewhu did."

Jack threaded his way through this extraordinary shambles of syntax. "Come here," he said sternly. She came, her paces half-size, her feet dragging, her hands behind her where her imagination told her they would do the most good. "I ought to whack you, you know."

"Yeah," she answered tremulously, "I guess you oughta. Not more'n a couple of times, Daddy?"

Jack bit the insides of his cheeks for control, but couldn't make it. He grinned. *You little minx*, he thought. "Tell you what," he said gruffly, looking at the car. The garage was fortunately flimsy, and the few new dents on hood and fenders would blend well with the old ones. "You've got three good

whacks coming to you. I'm going to add those on to your next spanking."

"Yes, Daddy," said Molly, her eyes big and chastened. She climbed into the back seat and sat, very straight and small, away back out of sight. Jack cleared away what wreckage he could, and then climbed in, started the old puddle-vaulter, and carefully backed out of the damaged shed.

Mewhu was standing well clear, watching the groaning automobile with startled silver eyes. "Come on in," said Jack, beckoning. Mewhu backed off.

"Mewhu!" cried Molly, putting her head out the rear door. Mewhu said, "Yowk," and came instantly. Molly opened the door and he climbed in, and she shouted with laughter when he crouched down on the floor, and pulled at him until he got up on the seat. Jack drove around the house, stopped, picked up Mewhu's jet rod, blew a kiss through the window to Iris and they were off.

Forty minutes later they wheeled up to the airport after an ecstatic ride during which Molly had kept up a running fire of descriptive commentary on the wonders of a terrestrial countryside. Mewhu had goggled and ogled in a most satisfactory fashion, listening spellbound to the child—sometimes Jack would have sworn that the silver man understood everything she said—and uttering shrieks, exclamatory mewings, and interrogative peeps.

"Now," said Jack, when he had parked at the field boundary, "You two stay in the car for a while. I'm going to speak to Mr. Zinsser and see if he'll come out and meet Mewhu. Molly, do you think you can make Mewhu understand that he's to stay in the car, and out of sight? You see, if other people see him, they'll want to ask a lot of silly questions, and we don't want to embarrass him, do we?"

"No, Daddy. I'll tell him. Mewhu," she said, turning to the silver man. She held his eyes with hers. His mustache swelled, rippled. "You'll be good, won't you, and stay out of sight?"

"Jeek," said Mewhu. "Jeek mereedy."

"He says you're the boss."

Jack laughed, climbing out. "He does, eh?" Did the child really know, or was it mostly a game? "Be good, then. See you soon, Mewhu." Carrying the jet rod, he walked into the building.

Zinsser, as usual, was busy. The field was not large, but it did a great deal of private-plane business, and as traffic man-



ager Zinsser had his hands full. He wrapped one of his pudgy, flexible hands around the phone he was using. "Hi, Garry! What's new out of this world?" he grated cheerfully. "Siddown. With you in a minute." He bumbled cheerfully into the telephone, grinning at Jack as he talked. Jack made himself as comfortable as patience permitted and waited until Zinsser hung up.

"Well, now," said Zinsser, and the phone rang again.

Jack closed his open mouth in annoyance. Zinsser hung up and another bell rang. He picked up a field telephone from its hook on the side of his desk. "Zinsser. Yes—"

"Now that's enough," said Jack to himself. He rose, went to the door, and closed it softly, so that he was alone with the manager. He took the jet rod and, to Zinsser's vast astonishment, stood on his desk, raised the rod high over his head, and stepped off. A hurricane screamed out of the jets. Jack, hanging by his hands from the rod as it lowered him gently through the air, looked over his shoulder. Zinsser's face looked like a red moon in a snow flurry, surrounded as it was by every interoffice memo for the past two weeks.

Anyway, the first thing he did when he could draw a breath was to hang up the phone.

"Thought that would do it," said Jack, grinning.

"You . . . you . . . what is that thing?"

"It's a dialectical polarizer," said Jack, alighting. "That is, it makes conversations possible with airport managers who won't get off the phone."

Zinsser was out of his chair and around the desk, remarkably light on his feet for a man his size. "Let me see that."

Jack handed it over and began to talk.

"Look, Mewhu! Here comes a plane!"

Together they watched the Cub slide in for a landing, and squeaked at the little puffs of dust that were thrown up by the tires and flicked away by the slipstream.

"And there goes another one. It's gonna take off!" The little blue low-wing coupé taxied across the field, braked one wheel, swung in its own length, and roared down toward them, lifting to howl away into the sky far over their heads.

"Eeeeyow," droned Molly, imitating the sound of the motor as it passed overhead.

"S-s-s-s-swEEEEEE!" hissed Mewhu, exactly duplicating the whine of control surfaces in the prop blast.

Molly clapped her hands and shrieked with delight. Another plane began to circle the field. They watched it avidly.

"Come on out and have a look at him," said Jack.

Zinsser looked at his watch. "I can't. All kidding aside, I got to stick by the phone for another half hour at the very least. Will he be all right out there? There's hardly anyone around."

"I think so. Molly's with him, and as I told you, they get along beautifully together. That's one of the things I want to have investigated—that telepathy angle." He laughed suddenly. "That Molly . . . know what she did this afternoon?" He told Zinsser about Molly's driving the car through the wrong end of the garage.

"The little hellion," chuckled Zinsser. "They'll all do it, bless 'em. My brother's kid went to work on the front lawn with his mother's vacuum cleaner the other day." He laughed. "To get back to what's-his-name—Mewhu—and this gadget of his. Jack, we've got to hang on to it. Do you realize that he and his clothes and this thing are the only clues we have as to what he is and where he came from?"

"I sure do. But listen, he's very intelligent. I'm sure he'll be able to tell us plenty."

"You can bet he's intelligent," said Zinsser. "He's probably above average on his planet. They wouldn't send just anyone on a trip like that. Jack, what a pity we don't have his ship!"

"Maybe it'll be back. What's your guess as to where he comes from?"

"Mars, maybe."

"Now, you know better than that. We know Mars has an atmosphere, but it's mighty tenuous. An organism the size of Mewhu would have to have enormous lungs to keep him going. No; Mewhu's used to an atmosphere pretty much like ours."

"That would rule Venus out."

"He wears clothes quite comfortably here. His planet must have not only pretty much the same atmosphere, but the same climate. He seems to be able to take most of our foods, though he's revolted by some of them—and aspirin sends him high as a kite. He gets what looks like a laughing drunk when he takes it."

"You don't say. Let's see, it wouldn't be Jupiter, because he isn't built to take a gravity like that. And the outer planets are too cold, and Mercury is too hot." Zinsser leaned back in

his chair and absently mopped his bald head. "Jack, this guy doesn't even come from this solar system!"

"Gosh, I guess you're right. Harry, what do you make of this jet gadget?"

"From the way you say it cuts wood . . . can I see that, by the way?" Zinsser asked.

"Sure." Garry went to work on the jet. He found the right studs to press simultaneously. The casing opened smoothly. He lifted out the active core of the device, and, handling it gingerly, sliced a small corner off Zinsser's desk top.

"That is the strangest thing I have ever seen," said Zinsser. "May I see it?"

He took it and turned it over in his hands. "There doesn't seem to be any fuel for it," he said musingly.

"I think it uses air," said Jack.

"But what pushes the air?"

"Air," said Jack. "No, I'm not kidding. I think that in some way it disintegrates part of the air, and uses the energy released to activate a small jet. If you had a shell around this jet, with an intake at one end and a blast tube at the other, it would operate like a high-vacuum pump, dragging more air through."

"Or like an athodyd," said Zinsser. Garry's blood went cold as the manager sighted down into the jet orifice. "For heaven's sake don't push that button."

"I won't. Say—you're right. The tube's concentric. Now, how on earth could a disruption unit be as small and light as that?"

Jack Garry said, "I've been chewing on that all day. I have one answer. Can you take something that sounds really fantastic, so long as it's logical?"

"You know me," grinned Zinsser, waving at a long shelf of back-number science-fiction magazines. "Go ahead."

"Well," said Jack carefully. "You know what binding energy is. The stuff that holds the nucleus of an atom together. If I understand my smattering of nuclear theory properly, it seems possible to me that a sphere of binding energy could be produced that would be stable."

"A sphere? With what inside it?"

"Binding energy—or maybe just nothing . . . space. Anyhow, if you surround that sphere with another, this one a force-field which is capable of penetrating the inner one, or of allowing matter to penetrate it, it seems to me that anything entering that balance of forces would be disrupted. An

explosive pressure would be bottled up inside the inner sphere. Now if you bring your penetrating field in contact with the binding-energy sphere, the pressures inside will come blasting out. Encase the whole rig in a device which controls the amount of matter going in one side of the sphere and the amount of orifice allowed for the escape of energy, and encase that further in an outside shell which will give you a stream of air induced violently through it—like the vacuum pump you mentioned—and you have this,” and he rapped on the little jet motor.

“Most ingenious,” said Zinsser, wagging his head. “Even if you’re wrong, it’s an ingenious theory. What you’re saying, you know, is that all we have to do to duplicate this device is to discover the nature of binding energy and then find a way to make it stay stably in spherical form. After which we figure out the nature of a field which can penetrate binding energy and allow any matter to do likewise—one way.” He spread his hands. “That’s all. Just learn to actually use the stuff that the long-hair boys haven’t thought of theorizing about yet, and we’re all set.”

“Shucks,” said Garry. “Mewhu will give us all the dope.”

“I hope so, Jack. This can revolutionize the entire industrial world.”

“You’re understanding,” grinned Jack.

The phone rang. Zinsser looked at his watch again. “There’s my call.” He sat down, answered the phone, and while he went on at great length to some high-powered character at the other end of the line, about bills of lading and charter service and interstate commerce restrictions, Jack lounged against the cut-off corner of the desk and dreamed. Mewhu—a superior member of a superior race, come to Earth to lead barbaric humanity out of its struggling, wasteful ways. He wondered what Mewhu was like at home among his strange people. Young, but very mature, he decided, and gifted in many ways; the pick of the crop, fit to be ambassador to a new and dynamic civilization like Earth’s. And what about the ship. Having dropped Mewhu, had it and its pilot returned to the mysterious corner of the universe from which they had come? Or was it circling about somewhere in space, awaiting word from the adventurous ambassador?

Zinsser cradled his instrument and stood up with a sigh. “A credit to my will power,” he said. “The greatest thing that’s ever happened to me, and I stuck by the day’s work in spite

of it. I feel like a kid on Christmas Eve. Let's go have a look at him."

"*Wheeeeyouwow!*" screamed Mewhu as another rising plane passed over their heads. Molly bounced joyfully up and down on the cushions, for Mewhu was an excellent mimic.

The silver man slipped over the back of the driver's seat in a lithe movement, to see a little better around the corner of a nearby hangar. One of the Cubs had been wheeled into it, and was standing not far away, its prop ticking over.

Molly leaned her elbows on the edge of the seat and stretched her little neck so she could see, too. Mewhu brushed against her head and her hat fell off. He bent to pick it up and bumped his own head on the dashboard, and the glove compartment flew open. His strange pupils narrowed, and the nictitating membranes flickered over his eyes as he reached inside. The next thing Molly knew, he was out of the car and running over the parking area, leaping high in the air, mouthing strange noises, and stopping every few jumps to roll and beat with his good hand on the ground.

Horried, Molly Garry left the car and ran after him. "Mewhu!" she cried. "Mewhu, come *back!*"

He cavorted toward her, his arms outspread. "W-r-r-row-w!" he shouted, rushing past her. Lowering one arm a little and raising the other like an airplane banking, he ran in a wide arc, leaped the little tarmac retaining wall, and bounded out onto the hangar area.

Molly, panting and sobbing, stopped and stamped her foot. "Mewhu!" she croaked helplessly. "Daddy said—"

Two mechanics standing near the idling Cub looked around at a sound like a civet-cat imitating an Onondaga war whoop. What they saw was a long-legged, silver-gray apparition, with a silver-white mustache and slotted eyes, dressed in a scarlet robe that turned to indigo. Without a sound, moving as one man, they cut and ran. And Mewhu, with one last terrible shriek of joy, leaped to the plane and disappeared inside.

Molly put her hands to her mouth and her eyes bugged. "Oh, Mewhu," she breathed. "Now, you've done it." She heard pounding feet, turned. Her father was racing toward her, with Mr. Zinsser waddling behind. "Molly! Where's Mewhu?"

Wordlessly she pointed at the Cub, and as if it were a sig-

nal the little ship throttled up and began to crawl away from the hangar.

"Hey! Wait! Wait!" screamed Jack Garry uselessly, sprinting after the plane. He leaped the wall but misjudged it because of his speed. His toe hooked it and he sprawled slithering, jarringly on the tarmac. Zinsser and Molly ran to him and helped him up. Jack's nose was bleeding. He whipped out an handkerchief and looked out at the dwindling plane. "Mewhu!"

The little plane waddled across the field, bellowed suddenly with power. The tail came up, and it scooted away from them—cross-wind, across the runway. Jack turned to speak to Zinsser and saw the fat man's face absolutely stricken. He followed Zinsser's eyes and there was the other plane, the big six-place cabin job, coming in.

He had never felt so helpless in all his life. Those planes were going to collide. There was nothing anyone could do about it. He watched them, unblinking, almost detachedly. They were hurtling but they seemed to creep; the moment lasted forever. Then, with a twenty-foot altitude, Mewhu cut his gun and dropped a wing. The Cub slowed, leaned into the wind, and *side-slipped* so close under the cabin ship that another coat of paint on either craft would have meant disaster.

Jack didn't know how long he had been holding that breath, but it was agony when he let it out.

"Anyway, he can fly," breathed Zinsser.

"Of course he can fly," snapped Jack. "A prehistoric thing like an airplane would be child's play for him."

"Oh, Daddy, I'm scared."

"I'm not," said Jack hollowly.

"Me, too," said Zinsser with an unconvincing laugh. "The plane's insured."

The Cub arrowed upward. At a hundred feet it went into a skidding turn, harrowing to watch, suddenly winged over, and came shouting down at them. Mewhu buzzed them so close that Zinsser went flat on his face. Jack and Molly simply stood there, wall-eyed. An enormous cloud of dust obscured everything for ninety interminable seconds. When they next saw the plane it was wobbling crazily at a hundred and fifty.

Suddenly Molly screamed piercingly and put her hands over her face.

"Molly! Kidoo, what is it?"

She flung her arms around his neck and sobbed so violently that he knew it was hurting her throat. "Stop it!" he

yelled; and then, very gently, he asked, "What's the matter, darling?"

"He's scared. Mewhu's terrible, terrible scared," she said brokenly.

Jack looked up at the plane. It yawed, fell away on one wing.

Zinsser shouted, his voice cracking. "Gun her! Gun her! Throttle up, you idiot!"

Mewhu cut the gun.

Dead sick, the plane winged over and plunged to the ground. The impact was crushing.

Molly said quite calmly, "All Mewhu's pictures have gone out now," and slumped unconscious to the ground.

They got him to the hospital. It was messy, all of it, picking him up, carrying him to the ambulance—

Jack wished fervently that Molly had not seen; but she had sat up and cried as they carried him past. He thought worriedly as he and Zinsser crossed and recrossed in their pacing of the waiting room that he would have his hands full with the child when this thing was all over.

The resident physician came in, wiping his hands. He was a small man with a nose like a walnut meat. "Who brought that plane-crash case in here—you?"

"Both of us," said Zinsser.

"What—who is he?"

"A friend of mine. Is he . . . will he live?"

"How should I know?" snapped the doctor impatiently. "I have never in my experience—" He exhaled through his nostrils. "The man has two circulatory systems. Two *closed* circulatory systems, and a heart for each. All his arterial blood looks venous—it's purple. How'd he happen to get hurt?"

"He ate half a box of aspirin out of my car," said Jack. "Aspirin makes him drunk. He swiped a plane and piled it up."

"Aspirin makes him—" The doctor looked at each of them in turn. "I won't ask if you're kidding me. Just to see that . . . that thing in there is enough to kid any doctor. How long has that splint been on his arm?"

Zinsser looked at Jack and Jack said, "About eighteen hours."

"Eighteen *hours*?" The doctor shook his head. "It's so well knitted that I'd say eighteen days." Before Jack could say anything he added. "He needs a transfusion."

"But you can't! I mean, his blood—"

"I know. Took a sample to type it. I have two technicians trying to blend chemicals into plasma so we can approximate it. Both of 'em called me a liar. But he's got to have the transfusion. I'll let you know." He strode out of the room.

"There goes one bewildered medico."

"He's O.K." said Zinsser. "I know him well. Can you blame him?"

"For feeling that way? Gosh no. Harry, I don't know what I'll do if Mewhu checks out."

"That fond of him?"

"Oh, it isn't only that. But to come so close to meeting a new culture, and then have it slip from our fingers like this, it's too much."

"That jet—Jack, without Mewhu to explain it, I don't think any scientist will be able to build another. It would be like . . . like giving a Damascus sword-smith some tungsten and asking him to draw it into filaments. There the jet would be, hissing when you shove it toward the ground, sneering at you."

"And that telepathy—what J. B. Rhine wouldn't give to be able to study it!"

"Yeah, and what about his origin?" Zinsser asked excitedly. "He isn't from this system. It means that he used an interstellar drive of some kind, or even that space-time warp the boys write about."

"He's got to live," said Jack. "He's got to, or there ain't no justice. There are too many things we've got to know, Harry! Look—he's here. That must mean that some more of his people will come someday."

"Yeah. Why haven't they come before now?"

"Maybe they have, Charles Fort—"

"Aw, look," said Zinsser, "don't let's get this thing out of hand."

The doctor came back. "I think he'll make it,"

"Really?"

"Not really. Nothing real about that character. But from all indications, he'll be O.K. Responded very strongly. What does he eat?"

"Pretty much the same as we do, I think."

"You think. You don't seem to know much about him."

"I don't. He only just got here. No—don't ask me where from," said Jack. "You'll have to ask him."

The doctor scratched his head. "He's out of this world. I can tell you that. Obviously adult, but every fracture but one



is a green-stick break; kind of thing you see on a three-year-old. Transparent membranes over his—What are you laughing at?" he asked suddenly.

Jack had started easily, with a chuckle, but it got out of control. He roared.

Zinsser said, "Jack! Cut it out. This is a hosp—"

Jack shoved his hand away. "I got to," he said helplessly and went off on another peal.

"You've got to what?"

"Laugh," said Jack. Gasping. He sobered, he more than sobered. "It has to be funny, Harry. I won't let it be anything else."

"What the devil do you—"

"Look, Harry. We assumed a lot about Mewhu, his culture, his technology, his origin. We'll never know anything about it!"

"Why? You mean he won't tell us?"

"He won't tell us. I'm wrong. He'll tell us plenty. But it won't do any good. Here's what I mean. Because he's our size, because he obviously arrived in a space ship, because he brought a gadget or two that's obviously the produce of a highly advanced civilization, we believe that *he* produced the civilization, that he's a superior individual in his own place."

"Well, he must be."

"He must be? Harry, did Molly invent the automobile?"

"No, but—"

"But she drove one through the back of the garage."

Light began to dawn on Zinsser's moon face. "You mean—"

"It all fits! Remember when Mewhu figured out how to carry that heavy trap door of mine on the jet stick, and then left the problem half-finished? Remember his fascination with Molly's yo-yo? What about that peculiar rapport he has with Molly? Doesn't that begin to look reasonable? Look at Iris' reaction to him—almost maternal, though she didn't know why."

"The poor little fellow," breathed Zinsser. "I wonder if he thought he was home when he landed?"

"Poor little fellow—sure," said Jack, and began to laugh again. "Can Molly tell you how an internal combustion engine works? Can she explain laminar flow on an airfoil?" He shook his head. "You wait and see. Mewhu will be able to tell us the equivalent of Molly's 'I rode in the car with Daddy and we went sixty miles an hour.'"

"But how did he get here?"

"How did Molly get through the back of my garage?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "His biological reactions do look like those of a child—and if he is a child, then his rate of tissue restoration will be high, and I'll guarantee he'll live."

Zinsser groaned. "Much good will it do us—and him, poor kid. With a kid's faith in any intelligent adult, he's probably been sure we'd get him home somehow. Well, we haven't got what it takes, and won't have for a long, long time. We don't even know enough to start duplicating that jet of his—and that was just a little kid's toy on his world."

# TECHNICAL ERROR

by Arthur C. Clarke

FANTASY (Great Britain)  
December

*Arthur Clarke's third contribution to this volume is a clever story about an accident at a power plant and its consequences, a theme with special importance in the wake of Three Mile Island. It was brought to the attention of American readers through its reprinting in the June, 1950 issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories, although the title was changed by the editor for that appearance.*

*(His first year in American science fiction magazines, and we find three stories to include in the volume. It's not surprising in hindsight, of course, but Arthur did start with a bang. In 1946, many science fiction writers wrote of the dangers of the nuclear bomb; that was easy in view of events. It was not so likely that the tales would be of the dangers of peacetime use of nuclear power. Bob Heinlein had done it as early as 1940 with "Blowups Happen," but he is always a special case. Arthur's version of the danger is a more romantic one, less down-to-earth, but for that very reason, he keeps you guessing. Arthur cleverly brings the accident*

*down to the molecular level and does so with chemical accuracy, I assure you.*

*Well, let's face it, I'm a great admirer of Arthur, even if he is always pointing out that he is thinner than I am. I maintain a dignified silence in the face of such personal remarks. Wild horses couldn't make me say that he is a lot balder than I am and has been three years older than me all his life.—I.A.)*

It was one of those accidents for which no one could be blamed. Richard Nelson had been in and out of the generator pit a dozen times, taking temperature readings to make sure that the unearthly chill of liquid helium was not seeping through the insulation. This was the first generator in the world to use the principle of superconductivity. The windings of the immense stator had been immersed in a helium bath, and the miles of wire now had a resistance too small to be measured by any means known to man.

Nelson noted with satisfaction that the temperature had not fallen further than expected. The insulation was doing its work; it would be safe to lower the rotor into the pit. That thousand-ton cylinder was now hanging fifty feet above Nelson's head, like the business end of a mammoth drop hammer. He and everyone else in the power station would feel much happier when it had been lowered onto its bearings and keyed into the turbine shaft.

Nelson put away his notebook and started to walk toward the ladder. At the geometric center of the pit, he made his appointment with destiny.

The load on the power network had been steadily increasing for the last hour, while the zone of twilight swept across the continent. As the last rays of sunlight faded from the clouds, the miles of mercury arcs along the great highways sprang into life. By the million, fluorescent tubes began to glow in the cities; housewives switched on their radio-cookers to prepare the evening meal. The needles of the megawattmeters began to creep up the scales.

These were the normal loads. But on a mountain three hundred miles to the south a giant cosmic ray analyzer was

being rushed into action to await the expected shower from the new supernova in Capricornus, which the astronomers had detected only an hour before. Soon the coils of its five-thousand-ton magnets began to drain their enormous currents from the thyatron converters.

A thousand miles to the west, fog was creeping toward the greatest airport in the hemisphere. No one worried much about fog, now, when every plane could land on its own radar in zero visibility, but it was nicer not to have it around. So the giant dispersers were thrown into operation, and nearly a thousand megawatts began to radiate into the night, coagulating the water droplets and clearing great swaths through the banks of mist.

The meters in the power station gave another jump, and the engineer on duty ordered the stand-by generators into action. He wished the big, new machine was finished; then there would be no more anxious hours like these. But he thought he could handle the load. Half an hour later the Meteorological Bureau put out a general frost warning over the radio. Within sixty seconds, more than a million electric fires were switched on in anticipation. The meters passed the danger mark and went on soaring.

With a tremendous crash three giant circuit breakers leaped from their contacts. Their arcs died under the fierce blast of the helium jets. Three circuits had opened—but the fourth breaker had failed to clear. Slowly, the great copper bars began to glow cherry-red. The acrid smell of burning insulation filled the air and molten metal dripped heavily to the floor below, solidifying at once on the concrete slabs. Suddenly the conductors sagged as the load ends broke away from their supports. Brilliant green arcs of burning copper flamed and died as the circuit was broken. The free ends of the enormous conductors fell perhaps ten feet before crashing into the equipment below. In a fraction of a second they had welded themselves across the lines that led to the new generator.

Forces greater than any yet produced by man were at war in the windings of the machine. There was no resistance to oppose the current, but the inductance of the tremendous windings delayed the moment of peak intensity. The current rose to a maximum in an immense surge that lasted several seconds. At that instant, Nelson reached the center of the pit.

Then the current tried to stabilize itself, oscillating wildly between narrower and narrower limits. But it never reached

its steady state; somewhere, the overriding safety devices came into operation and the circuit that should never have been made was broken again. With a last dying spasm, almost as violent as the first, the current swiftly ebbed away. It was all over.

When the emergency lights came on again, Nelson's assistant walked to the lip of the rotor pit. He didn't know what had happened, but it must have been serious. Nelson, fifty feet down, must have been wondering what it was all about.

"Hello, Dick!" he shouted. "Have you finished? We'd better see what the trouble is."

There was no reply. He leaned over the edge of the great pit and peered into it. The light was very bad, and the shadow of the rotor made it difficult to see what was below. At first it seemed that the pit was empty, but that was ridiculous; he had seen Nelson enter it only a few minutes ago. He called again.

"Hello! You all right, Dick?"

Again no reply. Worried now, the assistant began to descend the ladder. He was halfway down when a curious noise, like a toy balloon bursting very far away, made him look over his shoulder. Then he saw Nelson, lying at the center of the pit on the temporary woodwork covering the turbine shaft. He was very still, and there seemed something altogether wrong about the angle at which he was lying.

Ralph Hughes, chief physicist, looked up from his littered desk as the door opened. Things were slowly returning to normal after the night's disasters. Fortunately, the trouble had not affected his department much, for the generator was unharmed. He was glad he was not the chief engineer; Murdock would still be snowed under with paperwork. The thought gave Dr. Hughes considerable satisfaction.

"Hello, Doc," he greeted the visitor. "What brings you here? How's your patient getting on?"

Doctor Sanderson nodded briefly. "He'll be out of hospital in a day or so. But I want to talk to you about him."

"I don't know the fellow—I never go near the plant, except when the Board goes down on its collective knees and asks me to. After all, Murdock's paid to run the place."

Sanderson smiled wryly. There was no love lost between the chief engineer and the brilliant young physicist. Their

personalities were too different, and there was the inevitable rivalry between theoretical expert and "practical" man.

"I think this is up your street, Ralph. At any rate, it's beyond me. You've heard what happened to Nelson?"

"He was inside my new generator when the power was shot into it, wasn't he?"

"That's correct. His assistant found him suffering from shock when the power was cut off again.

"What kind of shock? It couldn't have been electric; the windings are insulated, of course. In any case, I gather that he was in the center of the pit when they found him."

"That's quite true. We don't know what happened. But he's now come round and seems none the worse—apart from one thing." The doctor hesitated a moment as if choosing his words carefully.

"Well, go on! Don't keep me in suspense!"

"I left Nelson as soon as I saw he would be quite safe, but about an hour later Matron called me up to say he wanted to speak to me urgently. When I got to the ward he was sitting up in bed looking at a newspaper with a very puzzled expression. I asked him what was the matter. He answered, 'Something's happened to me, Doc.' So I said, 'Of course it has, but you'll be out in a couple of days.' He shook his head; I could see there was a worried look in his eyes. He picked up the paper he had been looking at and pointed to it. 'I can't read any more,' he said.

"I diagnosed amnesia and thought: This is a nuisance! Wonder what else he's forgotten? Nelson must have read my expression, for he went on to say, 'Oh, I still know the letters and words—but they're the wrong way round! I think something must have happened to my eyes.' He held up the paper again. 'This looks exactly as if I'm seeing it in a mirror,' he said. 'I can spell out each word separately, a letter at a time. Would you get me a looking glass? I want to try something.'

"I did. He held the paper to the glass and looked at the reflection. Then he started to read aloud, at normal speed. But that's a trick anyone can learn—compositors have to do it with type—and I wasn't impressed. On the other hand, I couldn't see why an intelligent fellow like Nelson should put over an act like that. So I decided to humor him, thinking the shock must have given his mind a bit of a twist. I felt quite certain he was suffering from some delusion, though he seemed perfectly normal.

"After a moment he put the paper away and said, 'Well,

Doc, what do you make of that?" I didn't know quite what to say without hurting his feelings, so I passed the buck and said, 'I think I'll have to hand you over to Dr. Humphries, the psychologist. It's rather outside my province.' Then he made some remark about Dr. Humphries and his intelligence tests, from which I gathered he had already suffered at his hands."

"That's correct," interjected Hughes. "All the men are grilled by the Psychology Department before they join the company. All the same, it's surprising what gets through," he added thoughtfully.

Dr. Sanderson smiled, and continued his story.

"I was getting up to leave when Nelson said, 'Oh, I almost forgot. I think I must have fallen on my right arm. The wrist feels badly sprained.' 'Let's look at it,' I said, bending to pick it up. 'No, the other arm,'" Nelson said, and held up his left arm. Still humoring him, I answered, "Have it your way. But you said your right one, didn't you?"

"Nelson looked puzzled. 'So what?' he replied. 'This is my right arm. My eyes may be queer, but there's no argument about that. There's my wedding ring to prove it. I've not been able to get the darned thing off for five years.'

"That shook me rather badly. Because you see, it was his left arm he was holding up, and his left hand that had the ring on it. I could see that what he said was quite true. The ring would have to be cut to get it off again. So I said, 'Have you any distinctive scars?' He answered, 'Not that I can remember.'

"'Any dental fillings?' "

"'Yes, quite a few.' "

"We sat looking at each other in silence while a nurse went to fetch Nelson's records. 'Gazed at each other with a wild surmise' is just about how a novelist might put it. Before the nurse returned, I was seized with a bright idea. It was a fantastic notion, but the whole affair was becoming more and more outrageous. I asked Nelson if I could see the things he had been carrying in his pockets. Here they are."

Dr. Sanderson produced a handful of coins and a small, leather-bound diary. Hughes recognized the latter at once as an Electrical Engineer's Diary; he had one in his own pocket. He took it from the doctor's hand and flicked it open at random, with that slightly guilty feeling one always has when a stranger's—still more, a friend's—diary falls into one's hands.



tions of his world were giving way. Until now he had listened to Dr. Sanderson with some detachment, wondering what all the fuss was about. But now the incontrovertible evidence lay in his own hands, demanding his attention and defying his logic.

For he could read not one word of Nelson's diary. Both the print and the handwriting were inverted, as if seen in a mirror.

Dr. Hughes got up from his chair and walked rapidly around the room several times. His visitor sat silently watching him. On the fourth circuit he stopped at the window and looked out across the lake, overshadowed by the immense white wall of the dam. It seemed to reassure him, and he turned to Dr. Sanderson again.

"You expect me to believe that Nelson has been laterally inverted in some way, so that his right and left sides have been interchanged?"

"I don't expect you to believe anything. I'm merely giving you the evidence. If you can draw any other conclusion I'd be delighted to hear it. I might add that I've checked Nelson's teeth. All the fillings have been transposed. Explain that away if you can. Those coins are rather interesting, too."

Hughes picked them up. They included a shilling, one of the beautiful new, beryl-copper crowns, and a few pence and halfpence. He would have accepted them as change without hesitation. Being no more observant than the next man, he had never noticed which way the Queen's head looked. But the lettering—Hughes could picture the consternation at the Mint if these curious coins ever came to its notice. Like the diary, they too had been laterally inverted.

Dr. Sanderson's voice broke into his reverie.

"I've told Nelson not to say anything about this. I'm going to write a full report; it should cause a sensation when it's published. But we want to know how this has happened. As you are the designer of the new machine, I've come to you for advice."

Dr. Hughes did not seem to hear him. He was sitting at his desk with his hands outspread, little fingers touching. For the first time in his life he was thinking seriously about the difference between left and right.

Dr. Sanderson did not release Nelson from hospital for several days, during which he was studying his peculiar patient and collecting material for his report. As far as he could tell, Nelson was perfectly normal, apart from his inversion.

He was learning to read again, and his progress was swift after the initial strangeness had worn off. He would probably never again use tools in the same way that he had done before the accident; for the rest of his life, the world would think him left-handed. However, that would not handicap him in any way.

Dr. Sanderson had ceased to speculate about the cause of Nelson's condition. He knew very little about electricity; that was Hughes's job. He was quite confident that the physicist would produce the answer in due course; he had always done so before. The company was not a philanthropic institution, and it had good reason for retaining Hughes's services. The new generator, which would be running within a week, was his brain-child, though he had had little to do with the actual engineering details.

Dr. Hughes himself was less confident. The magnitude of the problem was terrifying; for he realized, as Sanderson did not, that it involved utterly new regions of science. He knew that there was only one way in which an object could become its own mirror image. But how could so fantastic a theory be proved?

He had collected all available information on the fault that had energized the great armature. Calculations had given an estimate of the currents that had flowed through the coils for the few seconds they had been conducting. But the figures were largely guesswork; he wished he could repeat the experiment to obtain accurate data. It would be amusing to see Murdock's face if he said, "Mind if I throw a perfect short across generators One to Ten sometime this evening?" No, that was definitely out.

It was lucky he still had the working model. Tests on it had given some ideas of the field produced at the generator's center, but their magnitudes were a matter of conjecture. They must have been enormous. It was a miracle that the windings had stayed in their slots. For nearly a month Hughes struggled with his calculations and wandered through regions of atomic physics he had carefully avoided since he left the university. Slowly the complete theory began to evolve in his mind; he was a long way from the final proof, but the road was clear. In another month he would have finished.

The great generator itself, which had dominated his thoughts for the past year, now seemed trivial and unimportant. He scarcely bothered to acknowledge the congratu-

lations of his colleagues when it passed its final tests and began to feed its millions of kilowatts into the system. They must have thought him a little strange, but he had always been regarded as somewhat unpredictable. It was expected of him; the company would have been disappointed if its tame genius possessed no eccentricities.

A fortnight later, Dr. Sanderson came to see him again. He was in a grave mood.

"Nelson's back in the hospital," he announced. "I was wrong when I said he'd be O.K."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Hughes in surprise.

"He's starving to death."

"Starving? What on earth do you mean?"

Dr. Sanderson pulled a chair up to Hughes's desk and sat down.

"I haven't bothered you for the past few weeks," he began, "because I knew you were busy on your own theories. I've been watching Nelson carefully all this time, and writing up my report. At first, as I told you, he seemed perfectly normal. I had no doubt that everything would be all right.

"Then I noticed that he was losing weight. It was some time before I was certain of it; then I began to observe other, more technical symptoms. He started to complain of weakness and lack of concentration. He had all the signs of vitamin deficiency. I gave him special vitamin concentrates, but they haven't done any good. So I've come to have another talk with you."

Hughes looked baffled, then annoyed. "But hang it all, you're the doctor!"

"Yes, but this theory of mine needs some support, I'm only an unknown medico—no one would listen to me until it was too late. For Nelson is dying, and I think I know why. . . ."

Sir Robert had been stubborn at first, but Dr. Hughes had had his way, as he always did. The members of the Board of Directors were even now filing into the conference room, grumbling and generally making a fuss about the extraordinary general meeting that had just been called. Their perplexity was still further increased when they heard that Hughes was going to address them. They all knew the physicist and his reputation, but he was a scientist and they were businessmen. What was Sir Robert planning?

Dr. Hughes, the cause of all the trouble, felt annoyed with himself for being nervous. His opinion of the Board of Directors was not flattering, but Sir Robert was a man he could re-

spect, so there was no reason to be afraid of them. It was true that they might consider him mad, but his past record would take care of that. Mad or not, he was worth thousands of pounds to them.

Dr. Sanderson smiled encouragingly at him as he walked into the conference room. The smile was not very successful, but it helped. Sir Robert had just finished speaking. He picked up his glasses in that nervous way he had, and coughed deprecatingly. Not for the first time, Hughes wondered how such an apparently timid old man could rule so vast a commercial empire.

"Well, here is Dr. Hughes, gentlemen. He will—ahem—explain everything to you. I have asked him not to be too technical. You are at liberty to interrupt him if he ascends into the more rarefied stratosphere of higher mathematics. Dr. Hughes. . . ."

Slowly at first, and then more quickly as he gained the confidence of his audience, the physicist began to tell his story. Nelson's diary drew a gasp of amazement from the Board, and the inverted coins proved fascinating curiosities. Hughes was glad to see that he had aroused the interest of his listeners. He took a deep breath and made the plunge he had been fearing.

"You have heard what has happened to Nelson, gentlemen, but what I am going to tell you now is even more startling. I must ask you for your very close attention."

He picked up a rectangular sheet of notepaper from the conference table, folded it along a diagonal and tore it along the fold.

"Here we have two right-angled triangles with equal sides. I lay them on the table—so." He placed the paper triangles side by side on the table, with their hypotenuses touching, so that they formed a kite-shaped figure. "Now, as I have arranged them, each triangle is the mirror image of the other. You can imagine that the plane of the mirror is along the hypotenuse. This is the point I want you to notice. As long as I keep the triangles in the plane of the table, I can slide them around as much as I like, but I can never place one so that it exactly covers the other. Like a pair of gloves, they are not interchangeable although their dimensions are identical."

He paused to let that sink in. There were no comments, so he continued.

"Now, if I pick up one of the triangles, turn it over in the air and put it down again, the two are no longer mirror

images, but have become completely identical—so.” He suited the action to the words. “This may seem very elementary; in fact, it is so. But it teaches us one very important lesson. The triangles on the table were flat objects, restricted to two dimensions. To turn one into its mirror image I had to lift it up and rotate it in the third dimension. Do you see what I am driving at?”

He glanced round the table. One or two of the directors nodded slowly in dawning comprehension.

“Similarly, to change a solid, three-dimensional body, such as a man, into its analogue or mirror image, it must be rotated in a fourth dimension. I repeat—a fourth dimension.”

There was a strained silence. Someone coughed, but it was a nervous, not a skeptical cough.

“Four-dimensional geometry, as you know”—he’d be surprised if they did—“has been one of the major tools of mathematics since before the time of Einstein. But until now it has always been a mathematical fiction, having no real existence in the physical world. It now appears that the unheard-of currents, amounting to millions of amperes, which flowed momentarily in the windings of our generator must have produced a certain extension into four dimensions, for a fraction of a second and in a volume large enough to contain a man. I have been making some calculations and have been able to satisfy myself that a ‘hyperspace’ about ten feet on a side was, in fact, generated: a matter of some ten thousand quartic—not cubic!—feet. Nelson was occupying that space. The sudden collapse of the field when the circuit was broken caused the rotation of the space, and Nelson was inverted.

“I must ask you to accept this theory, as no other explanation fits the facts. I have the mathematics here if you wish to consult them.”

He waved the sheets in front of his audience, so that the directors could see the imposing array of equations. The technique worked—it always did. They cowered visibly. Only McPherson, the secretary, was made of sterner stuff. He had had a semi-technical education and still read a good deal of popular science, which he was fond of airing whenever he had the opportunity. But he was intelligent and willing to learn, and Dr. Hughes had often spent official time discussing some new scientific theory with him.

“You say that Nelson has been rotated in the Fourth Dimension; but I thought Einstein had shown that the Fourth Dimension was time.”

Hughes groaned inwardly. He had been anticipating this red herring.

"I was referring to an additional dimension of space," he explained patiently. "By that I mean a dimension, or direction, at right-angles to our normal three. One can call it the Fourth Dimension if one wishes. With certain reservations, time may also be regarded as a dimension. As we normally regard space as three-dimensional, it is then customary to call time the Fourth Dimension. But the label is arbitrary. As I'm asking you to grant me four dimensions of space, we must call time the Fifth Dimension."

"Five Dimensions! Good Heavens!" exploded someone farther down the table.

Dr. Hughes could not resist the opportunity. "Space of several million dimensions has been frequently postulated in sub-atomic physics," he said quietly.

There was a stunned silence. No one, not even McPherson, seemed inclined to argue.

"I now come to the second part of my account," continued Dr. Hughes. "A few weeks after his inversion we found that there was something wrong with Nelson. He was taking food normally, but it didn't seem to nourish him properly. The explanation has been given by Dr. Sanderson, and leads us into the realms of organic chemistry. I'm sorry to be talking like a textbook, but you will soon realize how vitally important this is to the company. And you also have the satisfaction of knowing that we are now all on equally unfamiliar territory."

That was not quite true, for Hughes still remembered some fragments of his chemistry. But it might encourage the stragglers.

"Organic compounds are composed of atoms of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen, with other elements, arranged in complicated ways in space. Chemists are fond of making models of them out of knitting needles and colored plasticine. The results are often very pretty and look like works of advanced art.

"Now, it is possible to have two organic compounds containing identical numbers of atoms, arranged in such a way that one is the mirror image of the other. They're called stereo-isomers, and are very common among the sugars. If you could set their molecules side by side, you would see that they bore the same sort of relationship as a right and left glove. They are, in fact, called right- or left-handed—*dextro* or *laevo*—compounds. I hope this is quite clear."

Dr. Hughes looked around anxiously. Apparently it was.

"Stereo-isomers have almost identical chemical properties," he went on, "though there are subtle differences. In the last few years, Dr. Sanderson tells me, it has been found that certain essential foods, including the new class of vitamins discovered by Professor Vandenburg, have properties depending on the arrangement of their atoms in space. In other words, gentlemen, the left-handed compounds might be essential for life, but the right-handed ones would be of no value. This in spite of the fact that their chemical formulae are identical.

"You will appreciate, now, why Nelson's inversion is much more serious than we at first thought. It's not merely a matter of teaching him to read again, in which case—apart from its philosophical interest—the whole business would be trivial. He is actually starving to death in the midst of plenty, simply because he can no more assimilate certain molecules of food than we can put our right foot into a left boot.

"Dr. Sanderson has tried an experiment which has proved the truth of this theory. With very great difficulty, he has obtained the stereo-isomers of many of these vitamins. Professor Vandenburg himself synthesized them when he heard of our trouble. They have already produced a very marked improvement in Nelson's condition."

Hughes paused and drew out some papers. He thought he would give the Board time to prepare for the shock. If a man's life were not at stake, the situation would have been very amusing. The Board was going to be hit where it would hurt most.

"As you will realize, gentlemen, since Nelson was injured—if you can call it that—while he was on duty, the company is liable to pay for any treatment he may require. We have found that treatment, and you may wonder why I have taken so much of your time telling you about it. The reason is very simple. The production of the necessary stereo-isomers is almost as difficult as the extraction of radium—more so, in some cases. Dr. Sanderson tells me that it will cost over five thousand pounds a day to keep Nelson alive."

The silence lasted for half a minute; then everyone started to talk at once. Sir Robert pounded on the table, and presently restored order. The council of war had begun.

Three hours later, an exhausted Hughes left the conference room and went in search of Dr. Sanderson, whom he found fretting in his office.

"Well, what's the decision?" asked the doctor.

"What I was afraid of. They want me to re-invert Nelson."

"Can you do it?"

"Frankly, I don't know. All I can hope to do is to reproduce the conditions of the original fault as accurately as I can."

"Weren't there any other suggestions?"

"Quite a few, but most of them were stupid. McPherson had the best idea. He wanted to use the generator to invert normal food so that Nelson could eat it. I had to point out that to take the big machine out of action for this purpose would cost several millions a year, and in any case the windings wouldn't stand it more than a few times. So that scheme collapsed. Then Sir Robert wanted to know if you could guarantee there were no vitamins we'd overlooked, or that might still be undiscovered. His idea was that in spite of our synthetic diets we might not be able to keep Nelson alive after all."

"What did you say to that?"

"I had to admit it was a possibility. So Sir Robert is going to have a talk with Nelson. He hopes to persuade him to risk it; his family will be taken care of if the experiment fails."

Neither of the two men said anything for a few moments. Then Dr. Sanderson broke the silence.

"Now do you understand the sort of decision a surgeon often has to make?" he said.

Hughes nodded in agreement. "It's a beautiful dilemma, isn't it? A perfectly healthy man, but it will cost two millions a year to keep him alive, and we can't even be sure of that. I know the Board's thinking of its precious balance sheet more than anything else, but I don't see any alternative. Nelson will have to take a chance."

"Couldn't you make some tests first?"

"Impossible. It's a major engineering operation to get the rotor out. We'll have to rush the experiment through when the load on the system is at minimum. Then we'll slam the rotor back, and tidy up the mess our artificial short has made. All this has to be done before the peak loads come on again. Poor old Murdock's mad as hell about it."

"I don't blame him. When will the experiment start?"

"Not for a few days, at least. Even if Nelson agrees, I've got to fix up all my gear."

No one was ever to know what Sir Robert said to Nelson



during the hours they were together. Dr. Hughes was more than half prepared for it when the telephone rang and the Old Man's tired voice said, "Hughes? Get your equipment ready. I've spoken to Murdock, and we've fixed the time for Tuesday night. Can you manage by then?"

"Yes, Sir Robert."

"Good. Give me a progress report every afternoon until Tuesday. That's all."

The enormous room was dominated by the great cylinder of the rotor, hanging thirty feet above the gleaming plastic floor. A little group of men stood silently at the edge of the shadowed pit, waiting patiently. A maze of temporary wiring ran to Dr. Hughes's equipment—multibeam oscilloscopes, megawattmeters and microchronometers, and the special relays that had been constructed to make the circuit at the calculated instant.

That was the greatest problem of all. Dr. Hughes had no way of telling when the circuit should be closed; whether it should be when the voltage was at maximum, when it was at zero, or at some intermediate point on the sine wave. He had chosen the simplest and safest course. The circuit would be made at zero voltage; when it opened again would depend on the speed of the breakers.

In ten minutes the last of the great factories in the service area would be closing down for the night. The weather forecast had been favorable; there would be no abnormal loads before morning. By then, the rotor had to be back and the generator running again. Fortunately, the unique method of construction made it easy to reassemble the machine, but it would be a very close thing and there was no time to lose.

When Nelson came in, accompanied by Sir Robert and Dr. Sanderson, he was very pale. He might, thought Hughes, have been going to his execution. The thought was somewhat ill-timed, and he put it hastily aside.

There was just time enough for a last quite unnecessary check of the equipment. He had barely finished when he heard Sir Robert's quiet voice.

"We're ready, Dr. Hughes."

Rather unsteadily, he walked to the edge of the pit. Nelson had already descended, and as he had been instructed, was standing at its exact center, his upturned face a white blob far below. Dr. Hughes waved a brief encouragement and turned away, to rejoin the group by his equipment.

He flicked over the switch of the oscilloscope and played with the synchronizing controls until a single cycle of the main wave was stationary on the screen. Then he adjusted the phasing: two brilliant spots of light moved toward each other along the wave until they had coalesced at its geometric center. He looked briefly toward Murdock, who was watching the megawattmeters intently. The engineer nodded. With a silent prayer, Hughes threw the switch.

There was the tiniest click from the relay unit. A fraction of a second later, the whole building seemed to rock as the great conductors crashed over in the switch room three hundred feet away. The lights faded, and almost died. Then it was all over. The circuit breakers, driven at almost the speed of an explosion, had cleared the line again. The lights returned to normal and the needles of the megawattmeters dropped back onto their scales.

The equipment had withstood the overload. But what of Nelson?

Dr. Hughes was surprised to see that Sir Robert, for all his sixty years, had already reached the generator. He was standing by its edge, looking down into the great pit. Slowly, the physicist went to join him. He was afraid to hurry; a growing sense of premonition was filling his mind. Already he could picture Nelson lying in a twisted heap at the center of the well, his lifeless eyes staring up at them reproachfully. Then came a still more horrible thought. Suppose the field had collapsed too soon, when the inversion was only partly completed? In another moment, he would know the worst.

There is no shock greater than that of the totally unexpected, for against it the mind has no chance to prepare its defenses. Dr. Hughes was ready for almost anything when he reached the generator. Almost, but not quite. . . .

He did not expect to find it completely empty.

What came after, he could never perfectly remember. Murdock seemed to take charge then. There was a great flurry of activity, and the engineers swarmed in to replace the giant rotor. Somewhere in the distance he heard Sir Robert saying, over and over again, "We did our best—we did our best." He must have replied, somehow, but everything was very vague. . . .

In the gray hours before the dawn, Dr. Hughes awoke from his fitful sleep. All night he had been haunted by his dreams, by weird fantasies of multi-dimensional geometry.

There were visions of strange, other-worldly universes of insane shapes and intersecting planes along which he was doomed to struggle endlessly, fleeing from some nameless terror. Nelson, he dreamed, was trapped in one of those unearthly dimensions, and he was trying to reach him. Sometimes he was Nelson himself, and he imagined that he could see all around him the universe he knew, strangely distorted and barred from him by invisible walls.

The nightmare faded as he struggled up in bed. For a few moments he sat holding his head, while his mind began to clear. He knew what was happening; this was not the first time the solution of some baffling problem had come suddenly upon him in the night.

There was one piece still missing in the jigsaw puzzle that was sorting itself out in his mind. One piece only—and suddenly he had it. There was something that Nelson's assistant had said, when he was describing the original accident. It had seemed trivial at the time; until now, Hughes had forgotten all about it.

"When I looked inside the generator, there didn't seem to be anyone there, so I started to climb down the ladder. . . ."

What a fool he had been! Old McPherson had been right, or partly right, after all!

The field had rotated Nelson in the fourth dimension of space, but there had been a displacement in *time* as well. On the first occasion it had been a matter of seconds only. This time, the conditions must have been different in spite of all his care. There were so many unknown factors, and the theory was more than half guess-work.

Nelson had not been inside the generator at the end of the experiment. *But he would be.*

Dr. Hughes felt a cold sweat break out all over his body. He pictured that thousand-ton cylinder, spinning beneath the drive of its fifty million horsepower. Suppose something suddenly materialized in the space it already occupied . . . ?

He leaped out of bed and grabbed the private phone to the power station. There was no time to lose—the rotor would have to be removed at once. Murdock could argue later.

Very gently, something caught the house by its foundations and rocked it to and fro, as a sleepy child may shake its rattle. Flakes of plaster came planing down from the ceiling; a network of cracks appeared as if by magic in the walls. The lights flickered, became suddenly brilliant, and faded out.

Dr. Hughes threw back the curtain and looked toward the

mountains. The power station was invisible beyond the foothills of Mount Perrin, but its site was clearly marked by the vast column of debris that was slowly rising against the bleak light of the dawn.

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