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**THE GREAT
SF STORIES:**

18

(1956)

EDITED BY

**ISAAC ASIMOV AND
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INTRODUCTION

In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev said, "History is on our side. We will bury you," but the important things he said were his condemnation of Joseph Stalin at the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party, in a secret speech that was soon leaked by Israeli intelligence and the CIA and sent shock waves through the Communist world. In the fall, the Hungarian people rose in revolt against their Soviet masters, an effort that was ruthlessly suppressed. The British, French, and Israelis attacked Egypt and Israel quickly (one hundred hours is pretty quick) took the Sinai, only to be forced out by American pressure, leaving Gamel Abdul Nasser a hero and the most influential force in the Arab world.

In 1956, blacks continued their boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama; by the end of the year, seating segregation on buses ended in that city as the civil rights movement gathered force. Prince Rainier of Monaco took Grace Kelly as his bride, and President Eisenhower won reelection in a landslide over Adlai Stevenson. Jonas Salk's polio vaccine was widely distributed to a thankful and worried American population, while Ngo Diem was "elected" President of South Vietnam.

The *Andrea Doria* sank after colliding with the *Stockholm*, sending fifty people to their deaths; over sixteen hundred other passengers were saved.

The top songs of 1956 were "My Prayer," "Mack the Knife," Elvis' "Blue Suede Shoes" and "Hound Dog," "The Great Pretender" by the immortal Platters, "Why

Do Fools Fall in Love" by the tragic Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers, and (what a year for him!) Elvis' "Love Me Tender" and "Heartbreak Hotel." Television continued to boom in 1956, with the debut of such shows as *The \$64,000 Question*, the soaps *As the World Turns* and *The Edge of Night*, and the NBC news with Huntley and Brinkley, but *I Love Lucy* was still number one.

During 1956, Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller got married; there were seven thousand drive-in theaters in the United States; and a number of foolish people tried to outlaw rock and roll.

Bardeen, Brattain, and Shockley won the Nobel Prize in physics for their research that led to the transistor. Other important scientific developments were the first observation of a neutrino and the successful first picture of the DNA molecule. Ninety-nine percent of all the scientists who ever lived were alive in 1956.

Movies continued to proliferate, and some of them were very good indeed—among the best were *Rififi*; John Ford's *The Searchers*, my favorite; *Baby Doll*; *The King and I*; *War and Peace*; *The Seventh Seal* (directed by Ingmar Bergman); *Lust for Life*; and *Around the World in Eighty Days*, which won the Oscar for Best Picture. Broadway was also active as *Auntie Mame*, *Li'l Abner*, *Separate Tables*, *My Fair Lady*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* all opened to enthusiastic audiences.

The sports world gave us such memorable moments as Don Larsen's perfect game in the World Series, which was won by those damn Yankees over my Brooklyn Dodgers; and Charley Dumas' victory in the high jump at the 1956 Olympic Games. His winning height of 6'11¼" is only one inch higher than the current *women's* world record. In 1956, Don Newcombe of the Dodgers was 27–7, Ken Rosewall won the U.S. Open in tennis, Needles won the Kentucky Derby, the New York Giants won the NFL title by humiliating the Chicago Bears 47–7, Bill Russell was a rookie with the Boston Celtics, and Alex Karras and Jim Brown were All-American college stars.

The literary world had an outstanding year in 1956, which saw the publication of *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills, *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, *Bang the Drum Slowly* by Mark Harris, *Eros and Civilization*

by Herbert Marcuse, *A Walk on the Wild Side* by Nelson Algren, and *Seize the Day* by Saul Bellow, not to mention (okay, I will) the potboilers *Andersonville* by MacKinlay Kantor and *Peyton Place* by Grace Metalious.

The high point of the year in poetry was the publication of *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg.

Death took Bela Lugosi, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Fred Allen, Jackson Pollock, Tommy Dorsey, Hattie Carnegie, Robert E. Sherwood, and Connie Mack.

Mel Brooks was Mel Brooks.

In the real world, it was another excellent year as the paperback revolution continued and science fiction went along for the ride. An important development was the holding of the first Milford (PA) Science Fiction Writers Conference, which was organized by Damon Knight, James Blish, and Judith Merril, which became an institution that continues today.

Notable books published in 1956 include *The Man Who Japed* by Philip K. Dick; *Nerves* (in a greatly expanded form from the 1942 novella version) by Lester del Rey; *To Live Forever* by Jack Vance; *Solomon's Stone* by L. Sprague de Camp; *The Green Odyssey* by the remarkable Philip José Farmer; *Agent of the Unknown* by the underrated Margaret St. Clair; *Star Ways* by Poul Anderson; and the great *The Shrinking Man* by Richard Matheson, the basis for the film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (they love those adjectives in Hollywood). However, the Hugo Award for best novel went to *Double Star* by Robert A. Heinlein, which was serialized in *Astounding* magazine from February to April—obviously this was still a time when the magazines were as important as the books.

The magazines were still prospering, but ominous clouds were beginning to gather. J. Francis McComas left *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* to try other things, leaving *F&SF* in the capable hands of Anthony Boucher; but Cele Goldsmith, who was later to do remarkable things with *Amazing Stories*, joined the Ziff-Davis group as an Associate Editor. And three new ventures hit the stands in 1956—*Satellite Science Fiction* (guided by the creative Sam Merwin, Jr.); *Science Fiction Adventures*; and *Super Science Fiction*.

In the real world, more important people made their

maiden voyages into reality; in February, Christopher Anvil with "The Prisoner"; that same month, Carol Emshwiller with "Love Me Again" and Harlan Ellison with "Glow-Worm"; in July, Lloyd Biggle, Jr., with "Gypped"; in November, Brian W. Aldiss with "T"; and in December, J. G. Ballard with "Prima Belladona" and "Escapement."

Fantastic films (in terms of category, not necessarily quality) included *The Beast of Hollow Mountain*, *Beast With a Million Eyes* (I know, I counted every one of them), *Bride of the Monster* (with a fast-fading Bela Lugosi), *The Creature Walks Among Us*, *The Creeping Unknown* (part of the excellent Quatermass series), the classic *Forbidden Planet* (perhaps the first film to have a bookstore named after it), the unforgettable and unceasing *Godzilla*, *King of the Monsters*, the wonderful, original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Roger Corman's very quick *It Conquered the World*, the disappointing *1984*, and *The Phantom from 10,000 Leagues* (one of which was *not* the NFL).

Terry Carr began his famous fanzine *Innuendo*.

The family gathered in New York for the 14th World Science Fiction Convention (Newyorcon).

Let us travel back to that honored year of 1956 and enjoy the best stories that the real world bequeathed to us.

BRIGHTSIDE CROSSING

BY ALAN E. NOURSE (1928-)

GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION
JANUARY

*Alan E. Nourse is a physician whose last name is pronounced Nurse, making him "Dr. Nurse." More importantly, he is an excellent writer of fiction and nonfiction who has published dozens of novels and popular science books for children, young adults, and us older folks. In science fiction he is best known for his "juveniles" like **ROCKET TO LIMBO** (1957), **STAR SURGEON** (1960), and **RAIDERS FROM THE RINGS** (1962), and for his ambitious and excellent novel **THE BLADERUNNER** (1974; unrelated to the film of the same name). He is also an excellent writer at the short lengths, and his collections **TIGER BY THE TAIL** (1961), **PSI HIGH AND OTHERS** (1967), and **RX FOR TOMORROW** (1971) contain many noteworthy stories. He has concentrated on nonfiction for young readers for the last fifteen years.*

"Brightside Crossing" is one of the best stories ever written about Mercury, a planet that has received relatively little attention in science fiction. (MHG)

"Brightside Crossing" is, in a sense, one of the casualties of the information explosion of the last generation with regard to the Solar System. Radio telescopes, rockets, and probes have enormously extended our knowledge of the planets and outdated incredible quantities of good science fiction.

For instance, we learned, just about the time that "Brightside Crossing" was written, that Mercury does not present one face eternally to the Sun so that there is a

"bright side," a "dark side" and (because of its markedly elliptical orbit) two rather broad liberation areas of alternate light and dark in between.

Nevertheless, "Brightside Crossing" isn't entirely knocked out. There is a side that gets the Sun at perihelion for nearly a month at a time, and crossing it will do. My own juvenile (written at about this same time) LUCKY STARR AND THE BIG SUN OF MERCURY was completely demolished by the new findings concerning Mercury, but it still gets reprinted, albeit with a warning note from me in front. (I

James Baron was not pleased to hear that he had had a visitor when he reached the Red Lion that evening. He had no stomach for mysteries, vast or trifling, and there were pressing things to think about at this time. Yet the doorman had flagged him as he came in from the street: "A thousand pardons, Mr. Baron. The gentleman—he would leave no name. He said you'd want to see him. He will be back by eight."

Now Baron drummed his fingers on the table top, staring about the quiet lounge. Street trade was discouraged at the Red Lion, gently but persuasively; the patrons were few in number. Across to the right was a group that Baron knew vaguely—Andean climbers, or at least two of them were. Over near the door he recognized old Balmer, who had mapped the first passage to the core of Vulcan Crater on Venus. Baron returned his smile with a nod. Then he settled back and waited impatiently for the intruder who demanded his time without justifying it.

Presently a small, grizzled man crossed the room and sat down at Baron's table. He was short and wiry. His face held no key to his age—he might have been thirty or a thousand—but he looked weary and immensely ugly. His cheeks and forehead were twisted and brown, with scars that were still healing.

The stranger said, "I'm glad you waited. I've heard you're planning to attempt the Brightside."

Baron stared at the man for a moment. "I see you can read telecasts," he said coldly. "The news was correct. We are going to make a Brightside Crossing."

"At perihelion?"

"Of course. When else?"

The grizzled man searched Baron's face for a moment without expression. Then he said slowly, "No, I'm afraid you're not going to make the Crossing."

"Say, who are you, if you don't mind?" Baron demanded.

"The name is Claney," said the stranger.

There was a silence. Then: "Claney? *Peter* Claney?"

"That's right."

Baron's eyes were wide with excitement, all trace of anger gone. "Great balls of fire, man—*where have you been hiding?* We've been trying to contact you for months!"

"I know. I was hoping you'd quit looking and chuck the whole idea."

"Quit looking!" Baron bent forward over the table. "My friend, we'd given up hope, but we've never quit looking. Here, have a drink. There's so much you can tell us." His fingers were trembling.

Peter Chaney shook his head. "I can't tell you anything you want to hear."

"But you've *got* to. You're the only man on Earth who's attempted a Brightside Crossing and lived through it! And the story you cleared for the news—it was nothing. We need *details*. Where did your equipment fall down? Where did you miscalculate? What were the trouble spots?" Baron jabbed a finger at Claney's face. "That, for instance—epithelioma? Why? What was wrong with your glass? Your filters? We've got to know those things. If you can tell us, we can make it across where your attempt failed—"

"You want to know why we failed?" asked Claney.

"Of course we want to know. We *have* to know."

"It's simple. We failed because it can't be done. We couldn't do it and neither can you. No human beings will ever cross the Brightside alive, not if they try for centuries."

"Nonsense," Baron declared. "We will."

Claney shrugged. "I was there. I know what I'm saying. You can blame the equipment or the men—there were flaws in both quarters—but we just didn't know what we were fighting. It was the *planet* that whipped us, that and the *Sun*. They'll whip you, too, if you try it."

"Never," said Baron.

"Let me tell you," Peter Claney said.

* * *

I'd been interested in the Brightside for almost as long as I can remember (Claney said). I guess I was about ten when Wyatt and Carpenter made the last attempt—that was in 2082, I think. I followed the news stories like a tri-V serial and then I was heartbroken when they just disappeared.

I know now that they were a pair of idiots, starting off without proper equipment, with practically no knowledge of surface conditions, without any charts—they couldn't have made a hundred miles—but I didn't know that then and it was a terrible tragedy. After that, I followed Sanderson's work in the twilight lab up there and began to get Brightside into my blood, sure as death.

But it was Mikuta's idea to attempt a Crossing. Did you ever know Tom Mikuta? I don't suppose you did. No, not Japanese—Polish-American. He was a major in the Interplanetary Service for some years and hung on to the title after he gave up his commission.

He was with Armstrong on Mars during his Service days, did a good deal of the original mapping and surveying for the Colony there. I first met him on Venus; we spent five years together up there doing some of the nastiest exploring since the Matto Grosso. Then he made the attempt on Vulcan Crater that paved the way for Balmer a few years later.

I'd always liked the Major—he was big and quiet and cool, the sort of guy who always had things figured a little further ahead than anyone else and always knew what to do in a tight place. Too many men in this game are all nerve and luck, with no judgment. The Major had both. He also had the kind of personality that could take a crew of wild men and make them work like a well-oiled machine across a thousand miles of Venus jungle. I liked him and I trusted him.

He contacted me in New York and he was very casual at first. We spent an evening here at the Red Lion, talking about old times; he told me about the Vulcan business, and how he'd been out to see Sanderson and the Twilight Lab on Mercury, and how he preferred a hot trek to a cold one any day of the year—and then he wanted to know what I'd been doing since Venus and what my plans were.

"No particular plans," I told him. "Why?"

He looked me over. "How much do you weigh, Peter?"

I told him one-thirty-five.

"That much!" he said. "Well, there can't be much fat on you at any rate. How do you take heat?"

"You should know," I said. "Venus was no icebox."

"No, I mean *real* heat."

Then I began to get it. "You're planning a trip."

"That's right. A hot trip." He grinned at me. "Might be dangerous, too."

"What trip?"

"Brightside of Mercury," the Major said.

I whistled cautiously. "At aphelion?"

He threw his head back. "Why try a Crossing at aphelion? What have you done then? Four thousand miles of butcherous heat, just to have some joker come along, use your data and drum you out of the glory by crossing at perihelion forty-four days later? No, thanks. I want the Brightside without any nonsense about it." He leaned across me eagerly. "I want to make a Crossing at perihelion and I want to cross on the surface. If a man can do that, he's got Mercury. Until then, *nobody's* got Mercury. I want Mercury—but I'll need help getting it."

I'd thought of it a thousand times and never dared consider it. Nobody had, since Wyatt and Carpenter disappeared. Mercury turns on its axis in the same time that it wheels around the Sun, which means that the Brightside is always facing in. That makes the Brightside of Mercury at perihelion the hottest place in the Solar System, with one single exception: the surface of the Sun itself.

It would be a hellish trek. Only a few men had ever learned just *how* hellish and they never came back to tell about it. It was a real hell's Crossing, but someday, I thought, somebody would cross it.

I wanted to be along.

The twilight lab, near the northern pole of Mercury, was the obvious jumping-off place. The setup there wasn't very extensive—a rocket landing, the labs and quarters for Sanderson's crew sunk deep into the crust, and the tower that housed the Solar 'scope that Sanderson had built up there ten years before.

Twilight lab wasn't particularly interested in the Brightside, of course—the Sun was Sanderson's baby and he'd

picked Mercury as the closest chunk of rock to the Sun that could hold his observatory. He'd chosen a good location, too. On Mercury, the Brightside temperature hits 770° F at perihelion and the Darkside runs pretty constant at 410° F. No permanent installation with a human crew could survive at either extreme. But with Mercury's wobble, the twilight zone between Brightside and Darkside offers something closer to survival temperatures.

Sanderson built the Lab up near the pole, where the zone is about five miles wide, so the temperature only varies fifty to sixty degrees with the libration. The Solar 'scope could take that much change and they'd get good clear observation of the Sun for about seventy out of the eighty-eight days it takes the planet to wheel around.

The Major was counting on Sanderson knowing something about Mercury as well as the Sun when we camped at the lab to make final preparations.

Sanderson did. He thought we'd lost our minds and he said so, but he gave us all the help he could. He spent a week briefing Jack Stone, the third member of our party, who had arrived with the supplies and equipment a few days earlier. Poor Jack met us at the rocket landing almost bawling, Sanderson had given him such a gloomy picture of what Brightside was like.

Stone was a youngster—hardly twenty-five, I'd say—but he'd been with the Major at Vulcan and had begged to join this trek. I had a funny feeling that Jack really didn't care for exploring too much, but he thought Mikuta was God, followed him around like a puppy.

It didn't matter to me as long as he knew what he was getting in for. You don't go asking people in this game why they do it—they're liable to get awfully uneasy and none of them can ever give you an answer that makes sense. Anyway, Stone had borrowed three men from the Lab, and had the supplies and equipment all lined up when we got there, ready to check and test.

We dug right in. With plenty of funds—tri-V money and some government cash the Major had talked his way around—our equipment was new and good. Mikuta had done the designing and testing himself, with a big assist from Sanderson. We had four Bugs, three of them the light pillow-tire models, with special lead-cooled cut-in

engines when the heat set in, and one heavy-duty tractor model for pulling the sledges.

The Major went over to them like a kid at the circus. Then he said, "Have you heard anything from McIvers?"

"Who's he?" Stone wanted to know.

"He'll be joining us. He's a good man—got quite a name for climbing, back home." The Major turned to me. "You've probably heard of him."

I'd heard plenty of stories about Ted McIvers and I wasn't too happy to hear that he was joining us. "Kind of a daredevil, isn't he?"

"Maybe. He's lucky and skillful. Where do you draw the line? We'll need plenty of both."

"Have you ever worked with him?" I asked.

"No. Are you worried?"

"Not exactly. But Brightside is no place to count on luck."

The Major laughed. "I don't think we need to worry about McIvers. We understood each other when I talked up the trip to him and we're going to need each other too much to do any fooling around." He turned back to the supply list. "Meanwhile, let's get this stuff listed and packed. We'll need to cut weight sharply and our time is short. Sanderson says we should leave in three days."

Two days later, McIvers hadn't arrived. The Major didn't say much about it. Stone was getting edgy and so was I. We spent the second day studying charts of the Brightside, such as they were. The best available were pretty poor, taken from so far out that the detail dissolved into blurs on blowup. They showed the biggest ranges of peaks and craters and faults, and that was all. Still, we could use them to plan a broad outline of our course.

"This range here," the Major said as we crowded around the board, "is largely inactive, according to Sanderson. But these to the south and west *could* be active. Seismograph tracings suggest a lot of activity in that region, getting worse down toward the equator—not only volcanic, but subsurface shifting."

Stone nodded. "Sanderson told them there was probably constant surface activity."

The Major shrugged. "Well, it's treacherous, there's no doubt of it. But the only way to avoid it is to travel

over the pole, which would lose us days and offer us no guarantee of less activity to the west. Now we might avoid some if we could find a pass through this range and cut sharp east—”

It seemed that the more we considered the problem, the further we got from a solution. We knew there were active volcanoes on the Brightside—even on the Darkside, though surface activity there was pretty much slowed down and localized.

But there were problems of atmosphere on Brightside, as well. There *was* an atmosphere and a constant atmospheric flow from Brightside to Darkside. Not much—the lighter gases had reached escape velocity and disappeared from Brightside millennia ago—but there was CO₂, and nitrogen, and traces of other heavier gases. There was also an abundance of sulfur vapor, as well as carbon disulfide and sulfur dioxide.

The atmospheric tide moved toward the Darkside, where it condensed, carrying enough volcanic ash with it for Sanderson to estimate the depth and nature of the surface upheavals on Brightside from his samplings. The trick was to find a passage that avoided those upheavals as far as possible. But in the final analysis, we were barely scraping the surface. The only way we would find out what was happening where was to be there.

Finally, on the third day, McIvers blew in on a freight rocket from Venus. He'd missed the ship that the Major and I had taken by a few hours, and had conned his way to Venus in hopes of getting a hop from there. He didn't seem too upset about it, as though this were his usual way of doing things and he couldn't see why everyone should get so excited.

He was a tall, rangy man with long, wavy hair prematurely gray, and the sort of eyes that looked like a climber's—half-closed, sleepy, almost indolent, but capable of abrupt alertness. And he never stood still; he was always moving, always doing something with his hands, or talking, or pacing about.

Evidently the Major decided not to press the issue of his arrival. There was still work to do, and an hour later we were running the final tests on the pressure suits. That evening, Stone and McIvers were thick as thieves,

and everything was set for an early departure after we got some rest.

"And that," said Baron, finished his drink and signaling the waiter for another pair, "was your first big mistake."

Peter Claney raised his eyebrows. "McIvers?"

"Of course."

Claney shrugged, glanced at the small quiet tables around them. "There were lots of bizarre personalities around a place like this, and some of the best wouldn't seem to be the most reliable at first glance. Anyway, personality problems weren't our big problem right then. *Equipment* worried us first, and *route* next."

Baron nodded in agreement. "What kind of suits did you have?"

"The best insulating suits ever made," said Claney. "Each one had an inner lining of a fiberglass modification, to avoid the clumsiness of asbestos, and carried the refrigerating unit and oxygen storage which we recharged from the sledges every eight hours. Outer layer carried a monomolecular chrome reflecting surface that made us glitter like Christmas trees. And we had a half-inch dead-air space under positive pressure between the two layers. Warning thermocouples, of course—at 770 degrees, it wouldn't take much time to fry us to cinders if the suits failed somewhere."

"How about the Bugs?"

"They were insulated, too, but we weren't counting on them too much for protection."

"You weren't!" Baron exclaimed. "Why not?"

"We'd be in and out of them too much. They gave us mobility and storage, but we knew we'd have to do a lot of forward work on foot." Claney smiled bitterly. "Which meant that we had an inch of fiberglass and a half-inch of dead air between us and a surface temperature where lead flowed like water and zinc was almost at melting point and the pools of sulfur in the shadows were boiling like oatmeal over a campfire."

Baron licked his lips. His fingers stroked the cool, wet glass as he set it down on the tablecloth.

"Go on," he said tautly. "You started on schedule?"

"Oh, yes," said Claney, "we started on schedule, all

right. We just didn't quite end on schedule, that was all. But I'm getting to that."

He settled back in his chair and continued.

We jumped off from Twilight on a course due southeast with thirty days to make it to the Center of Brightside. If we could cross an average of seventy miles a day, we could hit Center exactly at perihelion, the point of Mercury's closest approach to the Sun—which made Center the hottest part of the planet at the hottest it ever gets.

The Sun was already huge and yellow over the horizon when we started, twice the size it appears on Earth. Every day that Sun would grow bigger and whiter, and every day the surface would get hotter. But once we reached Center, the job was only half done—we would still have to travel another two thousand miles to the opposite twilight zone. Sanderson was to meet us on the other side in the Laboratory's scout ship, approximately sixty days from the time we jumped off.

That was the plan, in outline. It was up to us to cross those seventy miles a day, no matter how hot it became, no matter what terrain we had to cross. Detours would be dangerous and time-consuming. Delays could cost us our lives. We all knew that.

The Major briefed us on details an hour before we left. "Peter, you'll take the lead Bug, the small one we stripped down for you. Stone and I will flank you on either side, giving you a hundred-yard lead. McIvers, you'll have the job of dragging the sledges, so we'll have to direct your course pretty closely. Peter's job is to pick the passage at any given point. If there's any doubt of safe passage, we'll all explore ahead on foot before we risk the Bugs. Got that?"

McIvers and Stone exchanged glances. McIvers said: "Jack and I were planning to change around. We figured he could take the sledges. That would give me a little more mobility."

The Major looked up sharply at Stone. "Do you buy that, Jack?"

Stone shrugged. "I don't mind. Mac wanted—"

McIvers made an impatient gesture with his hands. "It doesn't matter. I just feel better when I'm on the move. Does it make any difference?"

"I guess it doesn't," said the Major. "Then you'll flank Peter along with me. Right?"

"Sure, sure." McIvers pulled at his lower lip. "Who's going to do the advance scouting?"

"It sounds like I am," I cut in. "We want to keep the lead Bug light as possible."

Mikuta nodded. "That's right. Peter's Bug is stripped down to the frame and wheels."

McIvers shook his head. "No, I mean the *advance* work. You need somebody out ahead—four or five miles, at least—to pick up the big flaws and active surface changes, don't you?" He stared at the Major. "I mean, how can we tell what sort of a hole we may be moving into, unless we have a scout up ahead?"

"That's what we have the charts for," the Major said sharply.

"Charts! I'm talking about *detail* work. We don't need to worry about the major topography. It's the little faults you can't see on the pictures that can kill us." He tossed the charts down excitedly. "Look, let me take a Bug out ahead and work reconnaissance, keep five, maybe ten miles ahead of the column. I can stay on good solid ground, of course, but scan the area closely and radio back to Peter where to avoid the flaws. Then—"

"No dice," the Major broke in.

"But why not? We could save ourselves days!"

"I don't care what we could save. We stay together. When we get to the Center, I want live men along with me. That means we stay within easy sight of each other at all times. Any climber knows that everybody is safer in a party than one man alone—anytime, anyplace."

McIvers stared at him, his cheeks an angry red. Finally he gave a sullen nod. "Okay. If you say so."

"Well, I say so and I mean it. I don't want any fancy stuff. We're going to hit Center together, and finish the Crossing together. Got that?"

McIvers nodded. Mikuta then looked at Stone and me and we nodded, too.

"All right," he said slowly. "Now that we've got it straight, let's go."

It was hot. If I forgot everything else about that trek, I'll never forget that huge yellow Sun glaring down, without a break, hotter and hotter with every mile. We knew

that the first few days would be the easiest and we were rested and fresh when we started down the long ragged gorge southeast of the Twilight Lab.

I moved out first; back over my shoulder, I could see the Major and McIvers crawling out behind me, their pillow tires taking the rugged floor of the gorge smoothly. Behind them, Stone dragged the sledges.

Even at only thirty percent Earth gravity they were a strain on the big tractor, until the ski blades bit into the fluffy volcanic ash blanketing the valley. We even had a path to follow for the first twenty miles.

I kept my eyes pasted to the big polaroid binocs, picking out the track the early research teams had made out into the edge of Brightside. But in a couple of hours we rumbled past Sanderson's little outpost observatory and the tracks stopped. We were in virgin territory and already the Sun was beginning to bite.

We didn't *feel* the heat so much those first days out. We *saw* it. The refrigeration units kept our skins at a nice comfortable seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit inside our suits, but our eyes watched that glaring Sun and the baked yellow rocks going past, and some nerve pathways got twisted up, somehow. We poured sweat as if we were in a superheated furnace.

We drove eight hours and slept five. When a sleep period came due, we pulled the Bugs together into a square, threw up a light aluminum sun-shield and lay out in the dust and rocks. The sun-shield cut the temperature down sixty or seventy degrees, for whatever help that was. And then we ate from the forward sledge—sucking through tubes—protein, carbohydrates, bulk gelatin, vitamins.

The Major measured water out with an iron hand, because we'd have drunk ourselves into nephritis in a week otherwise. We were constantly, unceasingly thirsty. Ask the physiologists and psychiatrists why—they can give you half a dozen interesting reasons—but all we knew, or cared about, was that it happened to be so.

We didn't sleep the first few stops, as a consequence. Our eyes burned in spite of the filters and we had roaring headaches, but we couldn't sleep them off. We sat around looking at each other. Then McIvers would say how good

a beer would taste, and off we'd go. We'd have murdered our grandmothers for one ice-cold bottle of beer.

After a few driving periods, I began to get my bearings at the wheel. We were moving down into desolation that made Earth's old Death Valley look like a Japanese rose garden. Huge sun-baked cracks opened up in the floor of the gorge, with black cliffs jutting up on either side; the air was filled with a barely visible yellowish mist of sulfur and sulfurous gases.

It was a hot, barren hole, no place for any man to go, but the challenge was so powerful you could almost feel it. No one had ever crossed this land before and escaped. Those who had tried it had been cruelly punished, but the land was still there, so it had to be crossed. Not the easy way. It had to be crossed the hardest way possible: overland, through anything the land could throw up to us, at the most difficult time possible.

Yet we knew that even the land might have been conquered before, except for that Sun. We'd fought absolute cold before and won. We'd never fought heat like this and won. The only worse heat in the Solar System was the surface of the Sun itself.

Brightside was worth trying for. We would get it or it would get us. That was the bargain.

I learned a lot about Mercury those first few driving periods. The gorge petered out after a hundred miles and we moved onto the slope of a range of ragged craters that ran south and east. This range had shown no activity since the first landing on Mercury forty years before, but beyond it there were active cones. Yellow fumes rose from the craters constantly; their sides were shrouded with heavy ash.

We couldn't detect a wind, but we knew there was a hot, sulfurous breeze sweeping in great continental tides across the face of the planet. Not enough for erosion, though. The craters rose up out of jagged gorges, huge towering spears of rock and rubble. Below were the vast yellow flatlands, smoking and hissing from the gases beneath the crust. Over everything was gray dust—silicates and salts, pumice and limestone and granite ash, filling crevices and declivities—offering a soft, treacherous surface for the Bug's pillow tires.

I learned to read the ground, to tell a covered fault by

the sag of the dust; I learned to spot a passable crack, and tell it from an impassable cut. Time after time the Bugs ground to a halt while we explored a passage on foot, tied together with light copper cable, digging, advancing, digging some more until we were sure the surface would carry the machines. It was cruel work; we slept in exhaustion. But it went smoothly, at first.

Too smoothly, it seemed to me, and the others seemed to think so, too.

McIvers' restlessness was beginning to grate on our nerves. He talked too much, while we were resting or while we were driving; wisecracks, witticisms, unfunny jokes that wore thin with repetition. He took to making side trips from the route now and then, never far, but a little farther each time.

Jack Stone reacted quite the opposite; he grew quieter with each stop, more reserved and apprehensive. I didn't like it, but I figured that it would pass off after a while. I was apprehensive enough myself; I just managed to hide it better.

And every mile the Sun got bigger and whiter and higher in the sky and hotter. Without our ultraviolet screens and glare filters we would have been blinded; as it was, our eyes ached constantly and the skin on our faces itched and tingled at the end of an eight-hour trek.

But it took one of those side trips of McIvers' to deliver the penultimate blow to our already fraying nerves. He had driven down a side-branch of a long canyon running off west of our route and was almost out of sight in a cloud of ash when we heard a sharp cry through our earphones.

I wheeled my Bug around with my heart in my throat and spotted him through the binocs, waving frantically from the top of his machine. The Major and I took off, lumbering down the gulch after him as fast as the Bugs could go, with a thousand horrible pictures racing through our minds. . . .

We found him standing stock-still, pointing down the gorge and, for once, he didn't have anything to say. It was the wreck of a Bug; an old-fashioned half-track model of the sort that hadn't been in use for years. It was wedged tight in a cut in the rock, an axle broken, its casing split wide open up the middle, half-buried in a

rock slide. A dozen feet away were two insulated suits with white bones gleaming through the fiberglass helmets.

This was as far as Wyatt and Carpenter had gotten on *their* Brightside Crossing.

On the fifth driving period out, the terrain began to change. It looked the same, but every now and then it *felt* different. On two occasions I felt my wheels spin, with a howl of protest from my engine. Then, quite suddenly, the Bug gave a lurch; I gunned my motor and nothing happened.

I could see the dull gray stuff seeping up around the hubs, thick and tenacious, splattering around in steaming gobs as the wheels spun. I knew what had happened the moment the wheels gave, and a few minutes later, they chained me to the tractor and dragged me back out of the mire. It looked for all the world like thick gray mud, but it was a pit of molten lead, steaming under a soft layer of concealing ash.

I picked my way more cautiously then. We were getting into an area of recent surface activity; the surface was really treacherous. I caught myself wishing that the Major had okayed McIvers' scheme for an advanced scout; more dangerous for the individual, maybe, but I was driving blind now and I didn't like it.

One error in judgment could sink us all, but I wasn't thinking much about the others. I was worried about *me*, plenty worried. I kept thinking, better McIvers should go than me. It wasn't healthy thinking and I knew it, but I couldn't get the thought out of my mind.

It was a grueling eight hours and we slept poorly. Back in the Bugs again, we moved still more slowly—edging out on a broad flat plateau, dodging a network of gaping surface cracks—winding back and forth in an effort to keep the machines on solid rock. I couldn't see far ahead, because of the yellow haze rising from the cracks, so I was almost on top of it when I saw a sharp cut ahead where the surface dropped six feet beyond a deep crack.

I let out a shout to halt the others; then I edged my Bug forward, peering at the cleft. It was deep and wide. I moved fifty yards to the left, then back to the right.

There was only one place that looked like a possible crossing; a long, narrow ledge of gray stuff that lay down

across a section of the fault like a ramp. Even as I watched it, I could feel the surface crust under the Bug trembling and saw the ledge shift over a few feet.

The Major's voice sounded in my ears. "How about it, Peter?"

"I don't know. This crust is on roller skates," I called back.

"How about that ledge?"

I hesitated. "I'm scared of it, Major. Let's backtrack and try to find a way around."

There was a roar of disgust in my earphones and McIvers' Bug suddenly lurched forward. It rolled down past me, picked up speed, with McIvers hunched behind the wheel like a race driver. He was heading past me straight for the gray ledge.

My shout caught in my throat; I heard the Major take a huge breath and roar: "Mac! *Stop that thing*, you fool!" and then McIvers' Bug was out on the ledge, lumbering across like a juggernaut.

The ledge jolted as the tires struck it; for a horrible moment, it seemed to be sliding out from under the machine. And then the Bug was across in a cloud of dust, and I heard McIvers' voice in my ears, shouting in glee. "Come on, you slowpokes. It'll hold you!"

Something unprintable came through the earphones as the Major drew up alongside me and moved his Bug out on the ledge slowly and over to the other side. Then he said, "Take it slow, Peter. Then give Jack a hand with the sledges." His voice sounded tight as a wire.

Ten minutes later, we were on the other side of the cleft. The Major checked the whole column; then he turned on McIvers angrily. "One more trick like that," he said, "and I'll strap you to a rock and leave you. Do you understand me? *One more time*—"

McIvers' voice was heavy with protest. "Good Lord, if we leave it up to Claney, he'll have us out here forever! Any blind fool could see that that ledge would hold."

"I saw it moving," I shot back at him.

"All right, all right, so you've got good eyes. Why all the fuss? We got across, didn't we? But I say we've got to have a little nerve and use it once in a while if we're ever going to get across this lousy hotbox."

"We need to use a little judgment, too," the Major

snapped. "All right, let's roll. But if you think I was joking, you just try me out once." He let it soak in for a minute. Then he geared his Bug on around to my flank again.

At the stopover, the incident wasn't mentioned again, but the Major drew me aside just as I was settling down for sleep. "Peter, I'm worried," he said slowly.

"McIvers? Don't worry. He's not as reckless as he seems—just impatient. We are over a hundred miles behind schedule and we're moving awfully slow. We only made forty miles this last drive."

The Major shook his head. "I don't mean McIvers. I mean the kid."

"Jack? What about him?"

"Take a look."

Stone was shaking. He was over near the tractor—away from the rest of us—and he was lying on his back, but he wasn't asleep. His whole body was shaking, convulsively. I saw him grip an outcropping of rock hard.

I walked over and sat down beside him. "Get your water all right?" I said.

He didn't answer. He just kept on shaking."

"Hey, boy," I said. "What's the trouble?"

"It's hot," he said, choking out the words.

"Sure it's hot, but don't let it throw you. We're in really good shape."

"*We're not*," he snapped. "We're in rotten shape, if you ask me. *We're not going to make it*, do you know that? That crazy fool's going to kill us for sure—" All of a sudden, he was bawling like a baby. "I'm scared—I shouldn't be here—I'm *scared*. What am I trying to prove by coming out here, for God's sake? I'm some kind of hero or something? I tell you, I'm scared—"

"Look," I said. "Mikuta's scared, *I'm* scared. So what? We'll make it, don't worry. And nobody's trying to be a hero."

"Nobody but Hero Stone," he said bitterly. He shook himself and gave a tight little laugh. "Some hero, eh?"

"We'll make it," I said.

"Sure," he said finally. "Sorry. I'll be okay."

I rolled over, but waited until he was good and quiet. Then I tried to sleep, but I didn't sleep too well. I kept thinking about that ledge. I'd known from the look of it

what it was; a zinc slough of the sort Sanderson had warned us about, a wide sheet of almost pure zinc that had been thrown up white-hot from below, quite recently, just waiting for oxygen or sulfur to rot it through.

I knew enough about zinc to know that at these temperatures it gets brittle as glass. Take a chance like McIvers had taken and the whole sheet could snap like a dry pine board. And it wasn't McIvers' fault that it hadn't.

Five hours later, we were back at the wheel. We were hardly moving at all. The ragged surface was almost impassable—great jutting rocks peppered the plateau; ledges crumbled the moment my tires touched them; long, open canyons turned into lead mires or sulfur pits.

A dozen times I climbed out of the Bug to prod out an uncertain area with my boots and pikestaff. Whenever I did, McIvers piled out behind me, running ahead like a schoolboy at the fair, then climbing back again red-faced and panting, while we moved the machines ahead another mile or two.

Time was pressing us now and McIvers wouldn't let me forget it. We had made only about three hundred twenty miles in six driving periods, so we were about a hundred miles or even more behind schedule.

"We're not going to make it," McIvers would complain angrily. "That Sun's going to be out to aphelion by the time we hit the Center—"

"Sorry, but I can't take it any faster," I told him. I was getting good and mad. I knew what he wanted, but didn't dare let him have it. I was scared enough pushing the Bug out on those ledges, even knowing that at least *I* was making the decisions. Put him in the lead and we wouldn't last for eight hours. Our nerves wouldn't take it, at any rate, even if the machines would.

Jack Stone looked up from the aluminum chart sheets. "Another hundred miles and we should hit a good stretch," he said. "Maybe we can make up distance there for a couple of days."

The Major agreed, but McIvers couldn't hold his impatience. He kept staring up at the Sun as if he had a personal grudge against it and stamped back and forth under the sun-shield. "That'll be just fine," he said. "If we ever get that far, that is."

We dropped it there, but the Major stopped me as we

climbed aboard for the next run. "That guy's going to blow wide open if we don't move faster, Peter. I don't want him in the lead, no matter what happens. He's right though, about the need to make better time. Keep your head, but crowd your luck a little, okay?"

"I'll try," I said. It was asking the impossible and Mikuta knew it. We were on a long downward slope that shifted and buckled all around us, as though there were a molten underlay beneath the crust; the slope was broken by huge crevasses, partly covered with dust and zinc sheeting, like a vast glacier of stone and metal. The outside temperature registered 547°F and getting hotter. It was no place to start rushing ahead.

I tried it anyway. I took half a dozen shaky passages, edging slowly out on flat zinc ledges, then toppling over and across. It seemed easy for a while and we made progress. We hit an even stretch and raced ahead. And then I quickly jumped on my brakes and jerked the Bug to a halt in a cloud of dust.

I'd gone too far. We were out on a wide, flat sheet of gray stuff, apparently solid—until I'd suddenly caught sight of the crevasse beneath in the corner of my eye. It was an overhanging shell that trembled under me as I stopped.

McIvers' voice was in my ear. "What's the trouble now, Claney?"

"Move back!" I shouted. "It can't hold us!"

"Looks solid enough from here."

"You want to argue about it? It's too thin, it'll snap. Move back!"

I started edging back down the ledge. I heard McIvers swear; then I saw his Bug start to creep *outward* on the shelf. Not fast or reckless this time, but slowly, churning up dust in a gentle cloud behind him.

I just stared and felt the blood rushing in my head. It seemed so hot I could hardly breathe as he edged out beyond me, farther and farther—

I think I felt it snap before I saw it. My own machine gave a sickening lurch and a long black crack appeared across the shelf—and widened. Then the ledge began to upend. I heard a scream as McIvers' Bug rose up and up and then crashed down into the crevasse in a thundering slide of rock and shattered metal.

I just stared for a full minute, I think. I couldn't move until I heard Jack Stone groan and the Major shouting, "Claney! I couldn't see—*what happened?*"

"It snapped on him, that's what happened," I roared. I gunned my motor, edged forward toward the fresh broken edge of the shelf. The crevasse gaped; I couldn't see any sign of the machine. Dust was still billowing up blindingly from below.

We stood staring down, the three of us. I caught a glimpse of Jack Stone's face through his helmet. It wasn't pretty.

"Well," said the Major heavily, "that's that."

"I guess so." I felt the way Stone looked.

"Wait," said Stone. "I heard something."

He had. It was a cry in the earphones—faint, but unmistakable.

"Mac!" the Major called. "Mac, can you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah. I can hear you." The voice was very weak.

"Are you all right?"

"I don't know. Broken leg, I think. It's—hot." There was a long pause. Then: "I think my cooler's gone out."

The Major shot me a glance, then turned to Stone. "Get a cable from the second sledge fast. He'll fry alive if we don't get him out of there. Peter, I need you to lower me. Use the tractor winch."

I lowered him; he stayed down only a few moments. When I hauled him up, his face was drawn. "Still alive," he panted. "He won't be very long, though." He hesitated for just an instant. "We've got to make a try."

"I don't like this ledge," I said. "It's moved twice since I got out. Why not back off and lower him a cable?"

"No good. The Bug is smashed and he's inside it. We'll need torches and I'll need one of you to help." He looked at me and then gave Stone a long look. "Peter, you'd better come."

"Wait," said Stone. His face was very white. "Let me go down with you."

"Peter is lighter."

"I'm not so heavy. Let me go down."

"Okay, if that's the way you want it." The Major tossed him a torch. "Peter, check these hitches and lower us slowly. If you see any kind of trouble, *anything*, cast

yourself free and back off this thing, do you understand? This whole ledge may go."

I nodded. "Good luck."

They went over the ledge. I let the cable down bit by bit until it hit two hundred feet and slacked off.

"How does it look?" I shouted.

"Bad," said the Major. "We'll have to work fast. This whole side of the crevasse is ready to crumble. Down a little more."

Minutes passed without a sound. I tried to relax, but I couldn't. Then I felt the ground shift, and the tractor lurched to the side.

The Major shouted, "*It's going, Peter—pull back!*" and I threw the tractor into reverse, jerked the controls as the tractor rumbled off the shelf. The cable snapped, coiled up in front like a broken clock spring. The whole surface under me was shaking wildly now; ash rose in huge gray clouds. Then, with a roar, the whole shelf lurched and slid sideways. It teetered on the edge for seconds before it crashed into the crevasse, tearing the side wall down with it in a mammoth slide. I jerked the tractor to a halt as the dust and flame billowed up.

They were gone—all three of them, McIvers and the Major and Jack Stone—buried under a thousand tons of rock and zinc and molten lead. There wasn't any danger of anybody ever finding their bones.

Peter Claney leaned back, finishing his drink, rubbing his scarred face as he looked across at Baron.

Slowly, Baron's grip relaxed on the chair arm. "*You got back,*" he said.

Claney nodded. "I got back, sure. I had the tractor and the sledges. I had seven days to drive back under that yellow Sun. I had plenty of time to think."

"You took the wrong man along," Baron said. "That was your mistake. Without him you would have made it."

"Never." Claney shook his head. "That's what I was thinking the first day or so—that it was *McIvers'* fault, that *he* was to blame. But that isn't true. He was wild, reckless and had lots of nerve."

"But his judgment was bad!"

"It couldn't have been sounder. We had to keep to our

schedule even if it killed us, because it would positively kill us if we didn't."

"But a man like that—"

"A man like McIvers was necessary. Can't you see that? It was the Sun that beat us, that surface. Perhaps we were licked the very day we started." Claney leaned across the table, his eyes pleading. "We didn't realize that, but it was *true*. There are places that men can't go, conditions men can't tolerate. The others had to die to learn that. I was lucky, I came back. But I'm trying to tell you what I found out—that *nobody* will ever make a Brightside Crossing."

"We will," said Baron. "It won't be a picnic, but we'll make it."

"But suppose you do," said Claney suddenly. "Suppose I'm all wrong, suppose you *do* make it. Then what? *What comes next?*"

"The Sun," said Baron.

Claney nodded slowly. "Yes. That would be it, wouldn't it?" He laughed. "Good-bye, Baron. Jolly talk and all that. Thanks for listening."

Baron caught his wrist as he started to rise. "Just one question more, Claney. Why did you come here?"

"To try to talk you out of killing yourself," said Claney.

"You're a liar," said Baron.

Claney stared down at him for a long moment. Then he crumpled in the chair. There was defeat in his pale blue eyes, and something else."

"Well?"

Peter Claney spread his hands, a helpless gesture. "When do you leave, Baron? I want you to take me along."

CLERICAL ERROR

BY MARK CLIFTON (1906–1963)

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION
FEBRUARY

Mark Clifton was an enormously skilled and creative science fiction writer who never received the attention due him—he is without doubt the least known Hugo-winning novelist in the history of that award—who nonetheless exercised considerable influence with his fellow sf writers by virtue of example. Clifton spent over a quarter of a century working as an industrial psychologist, and he claimed that he had compiled over 200,000 case histories of industrial workers and job applicants during his career. His fiction is therefore infused with rich characterization and speculation on what makes people human.

*Those who know his work at all know him for two story series—the Bossy computer tales, which culminated in his novel **THEY'D RATHER BE RIGHT** (1957); and the Ralph Kennedy stories, which include the novel **WHEN THEY COME FROM SPACE** (1962), but it is his non-series stories that really stand out. A selection of both types can be found in **THE SCIENCE FICTION OF MARK CLIFTON** (1980), which contains an introduction by Judith Merrill which is the best discussion of him that is presently available.*

“Clerical Error,” despite a weak ending that may be John W. Campbell's, shows him near the top of his form. (MHG)

A story must be understood as a product of its times.

When “Clerical Error” was written, the United States was just emerging from the traumatic horror of the Mc-

Carthy era when, for a period of some years, the nation went temporarily mad over the chimera of Communist subversion in high places. It seemed natural to foresee a United States in which the choking effects of a striving for "security" would stifle all creativity, all originality. Even though the United States escaped this, we all know that some of the mania for secrecy-at-all-costs remains, and some of the suspect-everyone psychosis still lingers. The story remains a useful object lesson, therefore.

Another thing to remember is that at this time John Campbell, legendary editor of ASTOUNDING had fallen prey to "dianetics" and had entered a period of articulate hostility toward psychiatrists. Some of the story sounds very strongly like a version of one of John's lectures on the subject (lectures I remember well). According to John, every psychiatrist lusted only for prefrontal lobotomies and shock therapies. He exaggerated enormously, of course, and as a matter of fact, at just about the time this story appeared, mild tranquilizers were coming in which made the strong-arm stuff unnecessary even on those relatively rare occasions when it had been used. (IA)

The case of David Storm came to the attention of Dr. K. Heidrich Kingston when Dr. Ernest Moss, psychiatrist in charge of the Q Security wing of the government workers' mental hospital, recommended lobotomy. The recommendation was on the lead-off sheet in Storm's medical history file. It was expressed more in the terms of a declaration of intention than a request for permission.

"I had a little trouble in getting this complete file, Doctor," Miss Verity said, as she laid it on his desk. "The fact is Dr. Moss simply brought in the recommendation and asked me to put your initials on it so he could go ahead. I told him that I was still just your secretary, and hadn't replaced you yet as Division Administrator."

Kingston visualized her aloof, almost unfriendly eyes and the faint sarcasm of her clipped speech as she respectfully told off Dr. Moss in the way an old-time nurse learns to put doctors in their place, unmistakable but not quite insubordinate. He knew Miss Verity well; she had been with him for twenty years; they understood one another. His lips twitched with a wry grin of apprecia-

tion. He looked up at her as she stood beside his desk, waiting for his reaction.

"I gather he's testing the strength of my order that I must personally approve all lobotomies," Kingston commented dryly.

"I'm quite certain the staff already knows your basic opposition to the principle of lobotomy, Doctor," she answered him formally. "You made it quite clear in an article you wrote several years ago, May 1958, to be exact, wherein you stated—"

"Yes, yes, I know," he interrupted, and quoted himself from the article, "'The human brain is more than a mere machine to be disconnected if the attending psychiatrist just doesn't happen to like the way it operates.' I still feel that way, Miss Verity."

"I'm not questioning your medical or moral judgment, Doctor," she answered, with a note of faint reproof, "merely your tactical. At the time you alienated a very large block of the profession, and they haven't forgotten it. Psychiatrists are particularly touchy about any public question of their omnipotent right and rightness. In view of our climb to power, that was a tactical error. I also feel the issuance of this order, so soon after taking over the administration of this department, was a bit premature. Dr. Moss said he was not accustomed to being treated like an intern. He merely expressed what the whole staff is thinking, of course."

"So he's the patsy the staff is using to test my authority," Kingston mused. "He is in complete charge of the Q.S. wing. None of the rest of us, not even I, have the proper Security clearances to go into that wing, because we might hear the poor demented fellows mumbling secrets which are too important for us to know."

"You'll have to admit they've set a rather neat trap, Doctor," Miss Verity said. A master of tactics, herself, she could admire an excellent stroke of the opposition. "Without a chance to see the patient and make a personal study, you can't very well override the recommendations of the psychiatrist in charge. You'd be the laughingstock of the entire profession if you tried it. You can't see the patient because I haven't been able to get Q.S. clearance for you, yet. And you can't ignore the

Security program, because that's a sacred cow which no one dares question."

It was a clear summation, but Kingston knew she was also reproving him for having laid himself open to such a trap. She had advised against the order and he had insisted upon it anyway.

He pushed himself back from his desk and got to his feet. He was not a big man, but he gave the impression of solid strength as he walked over to the window of his office. He looked out through the window and down the avenue toward various governmental office buildings which lined the street as far as he could see. His features were strong and serene, and, with his shock of prematurely white hair, gave him the characteristic look of a governmental administrator.

"I've not been in this government job very long," he said, as much to the occupants of the buildings down the street as to her, "but I've learned one thing already. When you don't want to face up to the consequences of a bad decision, you just promise to make an investigation." He turned around and faced his secretary. "Tell Dr. Moss," he said, "that I'll make an investigation of the . . . who is it? . . . the David Storm case."

Miss Verity looked as if she wanted to say something more, then clamped her thin lips shut. But at the door, leading out to her own office, she changed her mind.

"Doctor," she said with a mixture of exasperation and curiosity, "suppose you do find a way to make effective intercession in the David Storm case? After all, he's nobody. He's just another case. Suppose you are able to get another psychiatrist assigned to the case. Suppose Dr. Moss is wrong about him being an incurable, and you really get a cure. What have you gained?"

"I've got to start somewhere, Miss Verity," Kingston said gently, without resentment. "Have you had a recent look at the sharply rising incident of disturbance among these young scientists in government work, Miss Verity? The curing of Storm, if that could happen, might be only incidental, true—but it would be a start. I've got some suspicions about what's causing this rising incident. The Storm case may help to resolve them, or dismiss them. It's considerably more than merely making my orders

stick. I've got to start somewhere. It might as well be with Storm."

"Very well, Doctor," she answered, barely opening her lips. Obviously this was not the way she would have handled it. Even a cursory glance through the Storm file had shown her he was a person of no consequence. Even if Dr. Kingston succeeded, there was no tactical or publicity value to be gained from it. If Storm were a big-name scientist, then the issue would be different. A cause celebre could be made of it. But as it was, well, facing facts squarely, who would care? One way or the other?

The case history on David Storm was characteristic of Dr. Moss. It was the meticulous work of a thorough technician who had mastered the primary level of detachment. It recorded the various treatments and therapies which Dr. Moss had tried. It reported sundry rambling conversations, incoherent rantings and complaints of David Storm.

And it lacked comprehension.

Kingston, as he plowed through the dossier, felt the frustrated irritation, almost despair, of the creative administrator who must depend upon technicians who lack any basic feeling for the work they do. The work was all technically correct, but in the way a routine machinist would grind a piece of metal to the precise measurements of the specs.

"How does one go about criticizing a man for his total lack of any creative intuition?" Kingston mumbled angrily at the report. "He leaves no loopholes for technical criticism, and, in his frame of thinking, if you tried to go beyond that you'd merely be picking on vague generalities."

The work was all technically correct. There wasn't even a clerical error in it.

A vague idea, nothing more than a slight feeling of a hunch, stirred in Kingston's mind. In some of the arts you could say to a man, "Well, yes, you've mastered all the technicalities, but, man, you're just not an artist." But he couldn't tell Dr. Moss he wasn't a doctor, because Dr. Moss had a diploma which said he was. Men with minds of clerks could only understand error on a clerical level.

He tried to make the idea more vivid in his mind, but

it refused to jell. It simply remained a commentary. The case history told a complete story, but David Storm never emerged from it as a human being. He remained nothing more than a case history. Kingston could get no feeling of the substance of the man. The report might as well have dealt with lengths of steel or gallons of chemicals.

In a sort of self-defense, Kingston called in Miss Verity, away from her complex of administrative duties, and resorted to a practice they had established together, years before.

He had started his technique with simple gestalt exercises in empathy; such as the deliberate psychosomatic stimulation of pain in one's own arm to better understand the pain in some other person's broken arm. Through the years it had been possible to progress to the higher gestalt empathies of personality identification with a patient. Like other dark areas of the unknown in sciences, there had been many ludicrous mistakes, some danger, and discouragement amounting to despair. But in the long run he had found a technique for a significant increase in his effectiveness as a psychiatrist.

The expression on Miss Verity's face, when she sat down at the side of his desk with her notebook, was interesting. They were both big wheels now, he and she, and she resented taking time out from her control over hundreds of lesser wheels. Yet she was a part of the pattern of empathy. Her hard and unyielding core of practicality, realism, provided a background to contrast, in sharp relief, to the patterns of madness. Obscurely, she derived a pleasure from this contrast; and a nostalgic pleasure, also, from a return to the old days when he had been a young and struggling psychiatrist and she, his nurse, had believed in him enough to stick by him. Kingston wondered if Miss Verity really knew what she did want out of life. He pushed the speculation aside and began his dictation.

As a student, David Storm represented the all too common phenomenon of a young man who takes up the study of a science because it is the socially accepted thing to do, rather than because he had the basic instincts of the true scientist.

Kingston felt himself slipping away into the familiar sensation syndrome of true empathy with his subject. As always, he had to play a dual role. It was insufficient to enter into the other person's mind and senses, feel and see as he felt and saw. No, at the same time he must also reconstruct the individual's life pattern to show the conflicts inherent in that framework which would later lead him into such frustrations as to mature into psychosis.

In the Storm case this was particularly important. A great deal more than just an obscure patient was at stake. By building up a typical framework of conflict, using Storm as merely the focal point, he might be better able to understand this trend which was proving so dangerous to young men in science. And since our total culture had become irrevocably tied to progress in science, he might be better able to prevent a blight from destroying that culture.

His own office furniture faded away. He was there; Miss Verity was there; the precise and empty notes of Dr. Moss were there in front of him; but, to him, these things became shadows, and in the way a motion picture or television screen takes over the senses of reality, he went back to the college classrooms where David Storm had received instruction.

It was unfortunate that the real fire of science did not burn in any of his college instructors, either. Instead, they were also the all too common phenomenon of small souls who had grasped frantically at a few "proved" facts, and had clung to these with the desperate tenacity of drowning men in seas of chaos. "You cannot cheat science," these instructors were fond of saying with much didactic positiveness. "If you will follow the procedures we give you, exactly, your experiment will work. That is proof we are right!"

"If it works, it must be right" was so obviously true to Storm that he simply could not have thought of any reason or way to doubt it. He graduated without ever having been handed the most necessary tool in all science, skepticism, much less instructed in its dangers and its wise uses. For there are true-believer fanatics to be found in science, also.

Under normal conditions, Storm would have found

some mediocre and unimportant niche he deserved. For some young graduates in science the routine technician's job in a laboratory or shop is simply an opening wedge, a foot on the first rung of his ladder. For David Storm's kind, that same job is a haven, a lifetime of small but secure wage. Under such conditions the conflicts, leading to psychosis, would not have occurred.

But these are not normal times. We have science allied to big government, and controlled by individuals who have neither the instincts nor the knowledge of what science really is. This has given birth to a Security program which places more value upon a stainless past and an innocuous mind than upon real talent and ability. It was the socially acceptable and the secure thing for Storm to seek work in government-controlled research. With his record of complete and unquestioning conformity, it was as inevitable as sunrise that he should be favored.

It was as normal as gravity that his Security ratings should increase into the higher echelons of secrecy as he continued to prove complaisant, and therefore, trustworthy. The young man with a true instinct for science is a doubter, a dissenter, and, therefore, a trouble-maker. He, therefore, cannot be trusted with real importance. Under this condition, it was as natural as rain that when a time came for someone to head up a research section, Storm was the only man available.

It was after this promotion into the ranks of the Q.S. men that the falsity of the whole framework began to make itself felt. He had proved to be a good second man, who always did what he was told, who followed instructions faithfully and to the letter. But now he found himself in a position where there were no ready-made instructions for him to follow.

Kingston took up the Moss report and turned some pages to find the exact reference he wanted. Miss Verity remained passively poised, ready to speed into her shorthand notes again. Kingston found the sheet he wanted and resumed his dictation.

Storm got no satisfaction from his section adminis-

trator. "You're the expert," his boss told him. "You're supposed to *tell* us the answers, not *ask* us for them." His tentative questions of other research men got him no satisfaction. Either they were in the same boat as he, and as confused, or they were talking to this new breed who called himself a research scientist.

But one old fellow did talk, a little. He asked Storm, with disdain, if he expected the universe to furnish him with printed instructions on how it was put together. He commented, acidly, that in his opinion we were handing the fate of our civilization to a bunch of cookbook technicians.

Storm was furious, of course. He debated with himself as to whether he should, as a good loyal citizen, report the old fellow to the loyalty board. But he didn't. Something stopped him, something quite horrible—a thought all his own. This man was a world-famous scientist. He had once been a professor of science at a great university. Storm had been trained to believe what professors said. What if this one were right?

The doubts that our wise men have already found all the necessary right answers, which should have disturbed him by the time he was a sophomore in high school, began now to trouble him. The questions he should have begun to ask by the time he was a freshman in college began to seep through the tiny cracks that were opening in his tight little framework of inadequate certainties.

Kingston looked up from the report in his hands, thought for a moment, flipped a few pages of the dossier, failed to find what he wanted, turned back a couple of pages, and skimmed down the closely written record of Storm's demented ravings. "Oh yes, here it is," he said when he found the reference.

It was about that time that Storm began to think about something else he would have preferred to forget. It had been one of those beer-drinking and pipe-smoking bull sessions which act as a sort of teething ring upon which college men exercise their gums in preparation for idea maturity. The guy who was domi-

nating the talking already had a reputation for being a radical; and Storm had listened with the censor's self-assurance that it was all right for *him* to listen so he would be better able to protect others, with inferior minds and weaker wills, from such exposures.

"The great danger to our culture," this fellow was holding forth, "doesn't come from the nuclear bomb, the guided missile, germ warfare, or even internal subversion. Granted there's reason why our culture should endure; there's a much greater danger, and one, apparently, quite unexpected.

"Let's take our diplomatic attitudes and moves as a cross section of the best thinking our culture, as a whole, can produce. For surely here, at this critical level, the finest minds, skilled in the science of statecraft, are at work. And there is no question but that our best is no higher than a grammar-school level. A kid draws a line with his toe across the sidewalk and dares, double dares, his challenger to step across it. 'My father can lick your father' is not removed, in substance, from 'My air force can lick your air force.' What is our Security program but the childish chanting of 'I've got a secret! I've got a secret!?' Add to that the tendency to assemble a gang so that one can feel safer when he talks tough, the tendency to indiscriminate name calling, the inability to think in other terms than 'good guys' and 'bad guys.' Here you have the classical picture of the grammar-school level of thinking—and an exact parallel with our diplomacy.

"Now, sure, it's true that one kid of grammar-school mental age can pretty well hold his own with another of his own kind and strength. But here's the real danger. He doesn't stand a chance if he comes up against a mature adult. What if our opponent, whoever he may be, should grow up before we do? There's the real danger!"

Storm had considered the diatribe ridiculous at the time, and agreed with some of the other fellows that the guy should be locked up, or at least kicked off the campus. But now he began to wonder about certain aspects which he had simply overlooked before. "Consider the evidence, gentlemen," one of his instructors had repeated, like a parrot, at each stage of some

experiment. Only now it occurred to Storm that the old boy had invariably selected, with considerable care, the particular evidence he wanted them to consider.

With equal care our statecraft had presented us with the evidence that over there, in the enemy territory, science was forced to follow the party line or get itself purged. And the party line was totally false and wrong. Therefore their notions of science must be equally wrong. And you can't cheat science. If a thing is wrong, it won't work. Yet the evidence also showed that they, too, had successful nuclear fission, guided missiles, and all the rest.

This led Storm into another cycle of questions. What parts of the evidence could a man elect to believe, and what interpretations of that evidence might he dispute and still remain a totally loyal citizen, still retain his right to highest Security confidence? This posed another problem, for he was still accustomed to turning to higher authority for instruction. But of whom could he ask such questions as these? Not his associates, for they were as wary of him as he of them. In such an atmosphere where it becomes habitual for a man to guard his tongue against any and all slips, there is an automatic complex of suspicions built up to freeze out all real exchange of ideas.

Every problem has a solution. He found the only solution open to him. He went on asking such questions of himself. But, as usual, the solution to one problem merely opened the door to a host of greater ones. The very act of admitting, openly acknowledging, such questions to himself, and knowing he dared not ask them of anyone else, filled him with an overpowering sense of furtive shame and guilt. It was an axiom of the Security framework that you were either totally loyal, or you were potentially a subversive. Had he any right to keep his Security ratings when these doubts were a turmoil in his mind?

Through the months, especially during the nights, as he lay in miserable sleeplessness, he pondered these obvious flaws in his own nature, turning them over and over like a squirrel in a cage. Then, one night, there came a whole series of questions that were even more terrifying.

What if it were not he, but the culture, which contained the basic flaw? Who, in or out of science, is so immutably right that he can pass judgment on what man is meant to know and what he may never question? If we are not to ask questions beyond accepted dogma, be it textbook or statecraft, from where is man's further knowledge and advancement to come? What if these questions which filled him with such maddening doubts were the very ones most necessary to answer? Indeed, what if our very survival depended upon just such questions and answers? Would he then be giving his utmost in loyalty if he did *not* ask them?

The walls of his too narrow framework of thinking had broken away, and he felt himself drowning in a flood of dilemmas he was unprepared to solve. When a man, in a dream, finds his life in deadly peril, an automatic function takes over—the man wakes up. There is also an automatic function which takes over when the problems of reality become a deadly peril.

Storm withdrew from reality.

Kingston was silent for a moment, then his consciousness returned to the surroundings of his office, and the desk in front of him. He looked over at Miss Verity.

"Well, now," he said. "I think we begin to understand our young man a little better."

"But are you sure his conflict is typical?" Miss Verity asked.

"Consider the evidence," Kingston said with deliberate irony. "Science can progress, even exist, only where there is free exchange of ideas, and minds completely open to variant ideas. When by law, or social custom, we forbid this, we stop scientific development. Consider the evidence!" he said again. "There is already a great deal of it to show that our science is beginning to go around in circles, developing the details of the frameworks already acceptable, but not reaching out to reveal new and totally unexpected frameworks."

"I'll type this up, in case you want to review it," Miss Verity answered dryly. She did not go along with him, at all, in these flights of fancy. Certainly she saw no tactical advantage to be gained from taking such attitudes. On

the contrary, if he didn't learn to curb his tongue better, all she had worked so hard to gain for the both of them could be threatened.

Kingston watched her reactions with an inward smile. It apparently had never occurred to her that his ability in gestalt empathy could be directed toward her.

There might be quite a simple solution to the Storm matter. Too many government administrators and personnel had come to regard an act under general Security regulations to be a dictum straight from Heaven. It was possible that Storm's section had already written him off as a total loss in their minds, and no one had taken the trouble to get him declassified. Kingston felt he should explore that possibility first.

He made an appointment to see Logan Maxfield, Chief Administrator of the section where Storm had worked.

His first glance, when he walked into Maxfield's office, put a damper on his confidence. Here was a man who was more of a politician than a scientist, probably a capable enough administrator within his given boundaries, but the strained cautiousness of his greeting told Kingston he would not take any unusual risks to his own safety and reputation. He belonged to that large and ever growing class of job holders in government whose safety lies in preserving the status quo, who would desperately police and defend things as they are, for any change might be a threat.

It would take unusual tactics to jar him out of his secure rightness in attitude. Kingston was prepared to employ unusual tactics.

"Storm has been electrocuted," he said quietly, "with a charge just barely short of that used on murderers. Not once, of course, but again and again. Then, also, we've stunned him over and over with hypos jabbed down through his skull into his brain. We've sent him into numerous bone-crushing and muscle-tearing spasms with drugs. But"—he sighed heavily—"he's obstinate. He refuses to be cured by these healing therapies."

Maxfield's face turned a shade whiter, and his eyes fixed uncertainly on his pudgy hands lying on top of his desk. He looked over toward his special water cooler, as if he longed for a drink, but he did not get out of his

chair. A silence grew. It was obvious he felt called upon to make some comment. He tried to make it jocular, man to man.

"Of course I don't know anything about the science of psychiatry, Doctor," he said at last, "but in the physical sciences we feel that methods which don't work may not be entirely scientific."

"Man," Kingston exploded with heavy irony, "you imply that psychiatry isn't an exact science? Of course it is a science! Why, man, we have all sorts of intricate laboratories, and arrays of nice shiny tools, and flashing lights on electronic screens, and mechanical pencils drawing jagged lines on revolving drums of paper, and charts and graphs, and statistics. And theory? Why, man, we've got more theory than you ever dreamed of in physical science! Of course it's a science. Any rational man has to agree that the psychiatrist is a scientist. We ought to know. We are the ones who define rationality!"

Maxfield could apparently find no answer to that bit of reasoning. Along with many others he saw no particular fallacy in defining a thing in terms of itself.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked finally.

"Here's the problem," Kingston answered, in the tone of one administrator to another. "It is unethical for one doctor to question the techniques of another doctor, so let's put it this way. Suppose you had a mathematician in your department who took up a sledgehammer and deliberately wrecked his calculating machines because they would not answer a question *he did not know how to ask*. Then failing to get the answer, suppose he recommended just disconnecting what was left of the machines and abandoning them. What would you do?"

"I think I'd get myself another mathematician," Maxfield said with a sickly attempt at lightness.

"Well, now that's a problem, too," Kingston answered easily. "I'm not questioning the methods of Dr. Moss, and obviously his attitudes are the right ones, because he's the only available psychiatrist who had been cleared to treat all these fellows you keep sending over to us under Q.S. secrecy. But there's a way out of that," he said with the attitude of a salesman on television who will now let you in on the panacea for all your troubles. "If

you lifted the Security on Storm, then we could move him to another ward and try a different kind of therapy. We might even find a man who did know how to ask the question which would get the right answer."

"Absolutely impossible," Maxfield said with finality.

"Now look at it this way," Kingston said in a tone of reasonableness. "If Storm just chose to quit his job, you'd have to declassify him, wouldn't you?"

"That's different," Maxfield said. "There are proper procedures for that."

"I know," Kingston said, a little wearily. "The parting interview to impress him with the need for continued secrecy, the terrible weight of knowing that bolt number seventy-two in motor XYZ has a three-eighths thread instead of a five-eighths. So why can't you consider that Storm has left his job and declassify him in absentia. Then we could remove him to an ordinary ward and give him what may be a more effective treatment. I really don't think he can endure very much more of his present therapy."

Kingston leaned back in his chair and spoke in a tone of speculation.

"There's a theory that this treatment isn't really torture, Mr. Maxfield, because an insane person doesn't know what is happening to him. But I'm afraid that theory is fallacious. I believe the so-called insane person does know what is happening, and feels all the exquisite torture we use in trying to drive the devils out of his soul."

"Absolutely impossible," Maxfield repeated. "Although you are not a Q.S. man"—this with a certain smugness—"I'll tell you this much." He leaned forward and placed his fingertips together in his most impressive air of administrative deliberation. "We have reason to believe that David Storm was on the trail of something big. *Big*, Dr. Kingston. So big, indeed, that perhaps the very survival of the nation depends upon it."

He hesitated a few seconds, to let the gravity of his statement sink in. Then he unlocked a desk drawer and took out a file folder.

"I had this file sent in when you made the appointment to see me," he explained. "As you no doubt know, we

must have inspectors who are constantly observing our scientists, although unseen, themselves. Here is a sentence from one of our most trusted inspectors. 'Subject repeats over and over, under great emotional stress, to himself, aloud, that our very survival depends upon his finding the answers to a series of questions!' There, Dr. Kingston, does that sound like no more than the knowledge of a three-eighths thread on a bolt? No, Doctor," he answered his own rhetoric, "this can only mean something of monumental significance—with the fate of the world, our world, hanging in the balance. Now you see why we couldn't take chances with declassifying him!"

Kingston was on the verge of telling him what the pattern of Storm's questions really was, then better judgment prevailed. First the Security board would become more than a little alarmed that he, a non-Q.S. man, had already learned what was on Storm's mind, and pass some more silly rules trying to put a man's mind in solitary confinement. Second, Maxfield was convinced these questions must be concerned with some super gadget, and wouldn't believe his revealment of their true nature. Any sympathy he might have gained for Storm would be lost. Serves the fellow right for sticking strictly to his slide rules and Bunsen burners!

"Mr. Maxfield," Kingston said gravely, patiently. "It is our experience that a disturbed patient often considers something entirely trivial to be of world-shaking importance. The momentous question Storm feels he must solve may be no more than some nonsensical conundrum—such as why does a chicken cross the road. It may mean nothing whatever."

"And then again it may," Maxfield answered. "We can't take the chance. You must remember, Doctor, this statement was overheard and recorded while Storm was still a sane man."

"Before he was committed, you mean," Kingston corrected softly.

"At any rate, it must have been something quite terrible to drive a man insane, just the thought of it," Maxfield argued.

"I'll not deny that possibility," Kingston agreed seriously. "The questions could have terrified him, and the

rest of us, too, if we really stopped to think about them. Wouldn't it be worth the risk to, say, my own doubtful loyalty to make a genuine effort to find out what they were, and deal with them, instead of torturing him to drive them out of his mind?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Maxfield faltered. This doctor seemed to have the most callous way of describing beneficial therapies!

"Mr. Maxfield," Kingston said with an air of candor, "I'll let you in on a trade secret. Up until now psychiatry has fitted all the descriptions applicable to a cult, and few indeed applicable to a science. We try to tailor the mind to fit the theory. But some of us, even in the field of psychiatry, are beginning to ask questions—the first dawn of any science. Do you know anything about psychosomatic medicine?"

"Very little, just an idea of what it means," Maxfield answered cautiously.

"Enough," Kingston conceded. "You know that the human body-mind may take on very real symptoms and pains of an illness as overt objection to an untenable environment. Now we are starting to ask the question: Can it be possible that our so-called cures, brought about through electro and drug shock, are a type of psychosomatic response to unendurable torture?"

"I see a mind frantically darting from framework to framework, pursued inexorably by the vengeful psychiatrist with the implements of torture in his hands—the mind desperately trying to find a framework which the psychiatrist will approve and so slacken the torture. We have called that a return to sanity. But it is really anything more than a psychosomatic escape from an impossible situation? A compounded withdrawal from withdrawal?"

"As I say, a few of us are beginning to ask ourselves these questions. But most continue to practice the cult rituals which can be duplicated point by point, item by item, with the rites of a savage witch doctor attempting to drive out devils from some poor unfortunate of the tribe."

From the stricken look on Maxfield's face, there was no doubt he had finally scored. The man stood up as if to

indicate he could take no more. He was distressed by the problem, so distressed, in fact, that he obviously wished this psychiatrist would leave his office and just forget the whole thing.

"I . . . I want to be reasonable, Doctor," he faltered through trembling lips. "I want to do the right thing." Then his face cleared. He saw a way out. "I'll tell you what I can do. I'll make another investigation of the matter!"

"Thank you, Mr. Maxfield," Kingston said gravely, without showing the bitterness of his defeat. "I thought that is what you might do."

When he got back to his office, Kingston learned that Dr. Moss had not been content merely to lay a neat little professional trap. His indignation over being thwarted in his intention to perform a lobotomy on Storm had apparently got the better of his judgment. In a rage, he had insisted upon a meeting with a loyalty board at top level. In the avid atmosphere of Government by Informers, they had shown themselves eager to hear what he might say against his superior.

But a private review of the Storm file reminded them of those mysterious and fearful questions in his deranged mind, questions which might forever be lost through lobotomy. So they advised Moss that Dr. Kingston's opposition was purely a medical matter, and did not necessarily constitute subversion.

In the report of this meeting which lay on his desk, some clerk along the way had underscored the word "necessarily" as if, gently, to remind him to watch his step in the future.

"God save our country from the clerical mind," he murmured. And then the solution to his problem began to unfold for him.

His first step in putting his plan into operation had all the appearances of being a very stupid move. It was the first of a series of equally obvious stupidities, which, in total, might add up to a solution. For stupid people are perpetually on guard against cleverness, but will fall in with and further a pattern of stupidity as if they had a natural affinity for it.

His first move was to send Dr. Moss out to the West Coast to make a survey of mental hospitals in that area.

"This memorandum certainly surprised me," Dr. Moss said curiously, as he came through Kingston's office door, waving the paper in his hand. He seated himself rather tentatively on the edge of a chair, and looked piercingly across the desk, to see if he could fathom the ulterior motives behind the move. "It is true that my section is in good order, and my patients can be adequately cared for by the attendants for a couple of weeks or so. But that you should ask me to make the survey of West Coast conditions for you—"

He let the statement trail off into the air, demanding an explanation.

"Why not you?" Kingston asked, as if surprised by the question.

"I . . . ah . . . feared our little differences in the . . . ah . . . Storm matter might prejudice you against me," Moss said, with the attitude of a man laying his cards on the table. Kingston surmised there were cards not laid out for inspection also. The move had two obvious implications. It could be a bribe, a sort of promotion, to regain Moss' good will. Or, more subtly, it could be a threat—"You see I can transfer you out of my way, anytime I may want to."

"Oh, the Storm matter," Kingston said with some astonishment. "Frankly, Doctor, I hadn't connected up the two. I've been more impressed with your attention to detail, and the fine points of organization. It seemed to me you were the most logical one on the staff to spot any operational flaws out there. The fact that you can confidently leave your section in the care of your attendants is proof of that."

Moss gave a slight smirk at this praise, and said nothing.

"Now I'd be a rather poor executive administrator if I let a minor difference of professional opinion stand in the way of the total efficient organization, wouldn't I?" Kingston asked, with an amiable smile.

"Dr. Kingston," Moss began, and hesitated. Then he decided to be frank. "I . . . ah . . . the staff has felt that your appointment to this position was purely political. I begin to see it might also have been because of your ability, and your capacity to rise above small differences of . . . ah . . . opinion."

Kingston let that pass. If he happened to rise a little in the estimation of his staff through these maneuvers, that would be simply a side benefit.

"Now you're sure I'm not interrupting a course of vital treatment of your patients," Dr. Moss?" he asked.

"Most of my patients are totally and completely incurable, Doctor," Moss said with finality. "Not that I don't keep trying. I do try. I try everything known to the science of psychiatry to get them thinking rationally again. But let's face it. Most of them will progress—or regress—equally well with simple human care. I fear my orderlies, guards, nurses regard me as something of a tyrant," he said with obvious satisfaction. "And it isn't likely that in the space of a couple of weeks they'll let down during my absence. You needn't worry, I'll set up the proper measures."

Kingston breathed a small sigh of relief as the man left his office. That would get Dr. Moss off the scene for a while.

Equally important, but not so easily accomplished, he must get Miss Verity away at the same time. And Miss Verity was anything but stupid.

"Has it occurred to you, Miss Verity," he asked with the grin of a man who has a nice surprise up his sleeve, "that this month you will have been with me for twenty-five years?" It was probably a foolish question. Miss Verity would know the years, months, days, hours. Not for any special reason, except that she always knew everything down to the last decimal. The stern lines of her martinet face did not relax, but her pale blue eyes showed a flicker of pleasure that he would remember.

"It has been my pleasure to serve you, Doctor," she said formally. That formality between them had never been relaxed, and probably never would be since both of them wanted it. It was not an unusual relationship either in medicine or industry—as if the man should never become too apparent through the image of the executive, lest both parties lose confidence and falter.

"We've come a long way in a quarter of a century," he said reminiscently, "from that little two-room office in Seattle. And if it weren't for you, we might still be there." Rigidly he suppressed any tone which would be-

tray any implication that he might have been happier remaining obscure.

"Oh no, Doctor," she said instantly. "A man with your ability—"

"Ability is not enough," he cut in. "Ability has to be combined with ambition. I didn't have the ambition. I simply wanted to learn, to go on learning perpetually, I suppose. You know how it was before you came with me. Patients didn't pay me. I didn't check to see what their bank account or social position was before I took them on. I was getting the reputation for being a poor man's psychiatrist, before you took charge of my office and changed all that."

"That's true," she agreed candidly, with a small secret smile. "But I looked at it this way: You were . . . you are . . . a great man dedicated to the service of humanity. I felt it would do no harm for the Right People to know about it. You can cure a disturbed rich man as easily as you can cure a poor one. And as long as your job was to listen to secrets, they might as well be important secrets—those of industrialists, statesmen, people who really matter."

She looked about the well-appointed office, and out of the window toward the great governmental buildings rising in view, as if to survey the concrete results of his policies in managing his affairs. Kingston wondered how much of her ambition had been for him, and how much for herself. In the strange hierarchy of castes among government workers, she was certainly not without stature.

That remark about secrets. He knew her ability to rationalize. He wondered how much of his phenomenal rise, and his position now, was due to polite and delicate pressures she had applied in the right places.

"So now I want to do something I've put off too long," he said, letting the grin come back on his face. "I want you to take a month's vacation, all expenses paid."

She half arose out of her chair, then settled back down into it again. He had never seen her so perturbed.

"I couldn't do that," she said with a rising tone of incredulity. "There are too many things of importance. We've just barely got things organized since taking over this position. You . . . you . . . why, a dozen times a day there are things coming up you wouldn't know how to

handle. You . . . I don't mean to sound disrespectful, Doctor, but . . . well . . . you make mistakes. A great man, such as you, well, you live in another world, and without somebody to shield you, constantly—"

She broke off and smiled at them placatingly. All at once she was a tyrant mother with an adored son who has made an independent decision; a wife with a well-broken husband who had unexpectedly asserted a remnant of the manhood he once had; a career secretary who believes her boss to be a fool—a woman whose Security depended upon his indispensibility.

Then her face calmed. Her expression was easily readable. The accepted more of our culture is that men exist for the benefit of women. But they can be stubborn creatures at times. The often repeated lessons in the female magazines was that they can be driven where you want them to go only so long as they think they are leading the way there. She must go cautiously.

"Right now, particularly, I shouldn't leave," she said with more composure. "I'm trying, very hard, to get you cleared for a Q.S. As you know, the Justice Department has a rather complete file folder on anybody in the country of any consequence. They have gone back through your life. They have interviewed numerous patients you have treated. I am trying to convince the Loyalty Board that a psychiatrist must, at times, make statements to his patients which he may not necessarily believe. I am trying to convince them that the statements of neurotic and psychotic patients are not necessarily an indication of a man's loyalty to his country.

"Then, too," she continued with faint reproach, "you've made public statements questioning the basic foundations upon which modern psychology is built. You've questioned the value of considering everyone who doesn't blend in with the average norm as being aberrated."

"I still question that," he said firmly.

"I know, I know," she said impatiently. "But do you have to say such things—in public?"

"Well, now, Miss Verity," he said reasonably, "if a scientist must shape his opinions to suit the standard of the Loyalty Board or Justice Department before he is allowed to serve his country—"

"They don't say you are disloyal, Doctor," she said impatiently. "They just say: Why take a chance? I'm campaigning to get the right Important People to vouch for you."

"I think the work of setting up organization has been a very great strain on you," he answered with the attitude of a doctor toward a patient. "And there's a great deal more to be done. I want to make many changes. I think you should have some rest before we undertake it."

There had been more, much more. But in the end he had won a partial victory. She consented to a week's vacation. He had to be satisfied with that. If Storm were really badly demented, he could certainly make little progress in that time. But on the other hand, he would have accomplished his main purpose. He would have seen Storm, talked with him, contaminated him through letting him talk to a non-Q.S. man.

Miss Verity departed for a week's vacation with her brothers and sisters and their families—all of whom she detested.

Kingston did not try to push his plan too fast. He had a certain document in mind, and nothing must be done to call any special attention to it.

It was the following day after the simultaneous departure of Dr. Moss and Miss Verity, in the early afternoon, that he sat at his desk and signed a stack of documents in front of him.

Because of Miss Verity's martinet tactics in gearing up the department to prompt handling of all matters, the paper which interested him above all others should be in this stack.

While he signed one routine authorization after another, he grew conscious that his mind had been going back over the maneuvers and interviews he had taken thus far in the Storm case. The emotional impatience at their blind slavery to proper and safe procedure rekindled in him, and he found himself signing at a furious rate. Deliberately he slowed himself down. In the event that someone should begin wondering at a series of coincidences at some later date, his signature must betray no unusual mood.

It was vital to the success of his plan that the document

go through proper channels for execution as a completely routine matter. So vital that, even here, alone in the privacy of his office, he would not permit himself to riff down through the stack to see if the paper which really mattered had cleared the typing section.

He felt his hand shaking slightly at the thought he might have miscalculated the mentality of the typists, that someone might have noticed the wild discrepancy and pulled the work sheet he had written out for further question.

Just how far could a man bank on the pattern of stupidity? If the document were prematurely discovered, his only hope to escape serious consequences with the Loyalty Board was to claim a simple clerical error—the designation of the wrong form number at the top of the work sheet. He could probably win, before or after the event, because it would be obvious to anyone that a ridiculous clerical error was the only possible explanation.

A psychiatrist simply does not commit himself to be confined as an insane person.

He lay down his pen, to compose himself until all traces of any muscular waver would disappear from his signature. He tried to reassure himself that nothing could have gone wrong. The girls who filled in the spaces of the forms were only routine typists. They had the clerical mind. They checked the number on the form with the number on the work sheet. They dealt with dozens and hundreds of forms, numerically stored in supply cabinets. Probably they didn't even read the printed words on such forms—merely filled in blank spaces. If the numbered items on the work sheets corresponded with the numbered blanks on the forms, that was all they needed to go ahead.

That was also the frame of mind of those who would carry out the instructions on the documents. Make sure the proper signature authorizes the act, and do it. If the action is wrong it is the signer's neck, not theirs. They simply did what they were told. And it was doubtful that such a vast machine as government could function if it were otherwise, if every clerk took it upon himself to question the wisdom of each move of the higher echelons.

Of course, under normal procedures, someone did check

the documents before they were placed on his desk to sign. There again, if the signer took the time to check the accuracy of how the spaces were filled in, government would never get done. There had to be a checker, and in the case of his department that was a job Miss Verity had kept for herself. Her eagle eye would have caught the error immediately, and in contempt with such incompetence she would have bounced into the typing pool with fire in her eye to find out who would do such a stupid thing as this.

He had his answer ready, of course, just in case anybody did discover the mistake. He had closed out his apartment, where he lived alone, and booked a suite in a hotel. The work sheet was an order to have his things transferred to his new room number. The scribbled information was the same, and, obviously, he had simply designated the wrong form number.

But Miss Verity was away on her vacation, and there wasn't anybody to catch the mistake.

He lifted his eyes from the signature space on the paper in front of him at the rapidly dwindling stack. The document was next on top.

There it was, neatly typed, bearing no special marks to segregate it from other routine matters, and thereby call attention to it. There were no typing errors, no erasures, nothing to indicate that the typist might have been startled at what she was typing. Nothing to indicate it had been anything more than a piece of paper for her to thread into her machine, fill in, and thread out again with assembly-line accuracy.

He lifted the paper off the stack and placed it in front of himself, in position for signature. He sighed, a deep and gasping sigh, almost a groan. Then he grinned in self-derision. Was he already regretting his wild action, an action not yet taken?

All right then, tear up the document. Forget about David Storm and his problem. Forget about trying to buck the system. Miss Verity was quite right. Storm was a nobody. As compared with the other events of the world, it didn't matter whether Storm got cured, or had his intellect disconnected through lobotomy, or just rotted there in his cell because he had asked some impertinent questions of the culture in which he lived.

Never mind that the trap into which Storm had fallen was symbolic of the trap which was miring down modern science in the same manner. By freeing the symbol, he would in no way be moving to free all science from its dilemma.

He pushed himself back, away from his desk, and got to his feet. He walked over to the window he had looked down the avenue of government buildings. Skyscrapers of offices, as far as his eye could reach. How many of them held men whose state of mind matched his own? How many men quietly, desperately wanted to do a good job, but were already beaten by the pattern for frustration, the inability to take independent action?

There was one of the more curious of the psychological curiosities. In private an individual may confess to highly intelligent sympathies, but when he gets on a board or a panel or a committee, he has not the courage to stand up against what he thinks to be the mass temper or mores.

Courage, that was the element lacking. The courage to fight for progress, enlightenment, against the belief that one's neighbors may not think the same way. The courage to fight over the issue, for the sake of the issue, rather than for the votes one's action is calculated to win.

And in that sense David Storm was not unimportant. Kingston confessed to himself, standing there in front of the window, that he had begun this gambit in a sort of petty defiance—defiance of the efforts of Moss and the rest of his staff to thwart his instructions, defiance of Miss Verity's efforts to make him into an important figurehead, defiance of the whole ridiculous dilemma that the Loyalty program had become.

He wondered if he had ever really intended to go through with his plan. Hadn't he kept the reservation, in the back of his mind, that as long as he hadn't signed the order, as long as it wasn't released for implementation, he could withdraw? Why make such an issue over such a triviality as this Storm fellow?

Yet wasn't that the essence? Wasn't that the question every true scientist had to ask himself every day? To buck the accepted and the acceptable, or to swing along with it and rush with the tide of man toward oblivion?

In the popular books courage was always embodied in

a well-muscled, handsome, well-intentioned, and rather stupid young man. But what about that wispy little unhandsome fellow, behind the thick glasses perhaps, who, against ridicule, calumny, misunderstanding, poverty, ignorance, kept on with his intent to find an aspect of truth?

Resolutely he walked over to his desk, picked up his pen again, and signed the document. There! He was insane! The document said so! And the document was signed by the Chief Administrator of Psychiatric Division, Bureau of Science Coordination. That should be enough authority for anybody!

He tossed it into the outgoing basket, where it would be picked up by the mail clerk and routed for further handling. Rapidly now, he continued signing other papers, tossing them into the same basket, covering the vital one so that it was down in the middle of the stack, unlikely to call special attention to itself.

They came for him at six o'clock the next morning. That was what the order had stipulated, that they make the pickup at this early hour. Two of them walked into his room, through the door which he had left unlocked, and immediately separated so that they could come at him from either side. Two burly young men who had a job to do, and who knew how to do that job. He couldn't remember having seen either of them before, and there was no look of recognition on their faces either.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" he said loudly, in alarm. His intonation sounded like something from a rather bad melodrama. "How dare you walk into my room!" He sat up in bed and pulled the covers up around his neck.

"There, there, Buster," one of them said soothingly. "Take it easy now. We're not going to hurt you." With a lithe grace they moved into position. One of them stood near the foot of his bed, the other came up to the head, and with a swirling motion, almost too quick to follow, slipped his hands under Kingston's armpits.

"Time to get up, Buster," the man said, and propelled him upward and outward. The covers fell away from him, and he found himself standing on his feet, without quite knowing how he got there. The second man was already

eyeing his clothes, which he had hung over a chair the night before. They were beautifully trained; he'd have to give Moss that much credit. It spoke well for the routine administration of the Q.S. wing if all the attendants were as experienced in being firm, yet gentle. It wasn't that psychiatry was intentionally sadistic, just mistaken in its idea of treatment.

"What is the meaning of this?" he spluttered again. "Do you know who I am?" He tried to draw himself up proudly, but found it somewhat difficult with his head being slipped through a singlet undershirt.

"Sure, sure, your majesty," one of them said soothingly. "Sure we know."

"I am not 'your majesty,' " Kingston said bitingly. "I am Dr. K. Heindrich Kingston!"

"Oh, pardon me," the fellow said apologetically, and flipped Kingston's feet into the air just long enough for his helper to slip trousers onto his legs. "I'm pleased to meet you."

"Kingston!" the other fellow said in an awed voice. "That's the big shot, the wheel, himself."

"Well," the first one said, as he slipped suspenders over the shoulders, "at least he's not Napoleon." From somewhere underneath his uniform jacket he suddenly whipped out a canvas garment, a shapeless thing Kingston might not have recognized as a straitjacket if he hadn't been experienced. "You gonna cooperate, Dr. Kingston, or will we have to put this on you?"

"Oh, he's not so bad," the other fellow said. "This must be his up cycle. You're not going to give us any trouble at all, are you, Dr. Kingston? You're going to go over to the hospital with us nicely, aren't you?" It was a statement, a soothing, persuasive statement, not a question. "They need you over at the hospital, Dr. Kingston. That's why we came for you."

He looked at them suspiciously, craftily. Then he smoothed his face into arrogant lines of overweening ego.

"Of course," he said firmly. "Let's go to the hospital. They'll soon tell you over there who I am!"

"Sure they will, Dr. Kingston," the first attendant said. "We don't doubt it for a minute."

"Let's go," the other one said.

They walked him out the door, in perfect timing. They seemed relaxed, but their fingertips on his arms where they held him were tense, ready for an expected explosion of insane violence. They'd been all through this before, many times, and their faces seemed to say that you can always expect the unexpected. Why, he might even surprise them and go all the way to his cell without trying to murder six people in the process. It just depended on how long his up cycle lasted, and what period of the phase he was in when they came for him. Probably that was the real reason why the real Dr. Kingston had specified this early hour; probably knew when this nut was in and out of his phases.

"Wonder what it's like to be such a big shot that some poor dope goes nuts thinking he's you?" one of them asked the other as they took him out of the apartment house door and down the steps to the ambulance waiting at the curb.

"I don't think I'd like to find out," the other answered.

"I tell you for the last time, I am Dr. Kingston!" Kingston insisted and allowed the right amount of exasperation to mingle with a note of fear.

"I hope it's the last time, Doctor," the first one said. "It gets kinda tiresome telling you that we already know who you are. You don't have to keep telling us, you know. We believe you."

The way they got him into the body of the ambulance couldn't exactly be called a pull and a push. At one instant they were standing on either side of him at the back door, and in the next instant one of them was in front of him and the other behind him—and there they were, all sitting in a row inside the ambulance. The driver didn't even look back at him.

He kept silent all the way over to the hospital buildings. He had made his point. He had offered the reactions of a normal man caught up in a mistake, but certain it would all get straightened out without making a fuss about it. They had responded to the reactions of an insane man, and they hoped they could get him all straightened out and nicely deposited in his cell before he began to kick up a fuss about it. It just depended on the framework from which you viewed it, and he neither

wanted to overdo nor underplay his part to jar them out of their frame with discrepancies.

But the vital checkpoint was yet to come. There was nothing in the commitment form about his being a Q.S. man, but he had assigned David Storm's cell number in the Q.S. wing. He'd had to check a half dozen hotels before he'd found one with an open room of the same number, so that the clerical error would stand up all the way down the line.

The guards of the Q.S. wing were pretty stuffy about keeping non-Q.S. men out. He might still fail in the first phase of his solution to the problem, to provide David Storm with a doctor, one who might be able to help him.

The attendants wasted no time with red tape. The document didn't call for pre-examinations, or quarantine, or anything. It just said put him into room number 1782. So they went through a side door and bypassed all the usual routines. They were good boys who always did what the coach said. And the document, signed by the Chief Coach, himself, Dr. Kingston, said put the patient in cell 1782. They were doing what they were told.

Would the two guards at the entrance of the Q.S. wing be equally good boys?

"You're taking me to my office, I assume," he said as they were walking down the corridor toward the cell wing.

"Sure, Doctor," one of them said. "Nice warm cozy office. Just for you."

They turned a corner, and the two guards got up from chairs where they had been sitting at a hallway desk. One of the attendants pulled out the document from his inner jacket pocket and handed it to the guard.

"Got another customer for you," he said laconically. "For office number 1782." He winked broadly.

"That cell's . . . er . . . office's already occupied," the guard said instantly. "Must be a mistake."

"Maybe they're starting to double them up now," the attendant said. "You wanna go up to the Big Chief's office and tell him he's made a mistake? He signed it, you know."

"I don't know what you men are up to!" Kingston

burst out. "This whole thing is a mistake. I tell you, I am Dr. Kingston. I'll have all your jobs for this . . . this . . . this practical joke! You are not taking me any farther! I refuse to go any farther!"

He laid them out for five minutes, calling upon strings of profanity, heard again and again from the lips of uncontrolled minds, that would make an old-time mariner blush for shame. The four of them looked at him at first with admiration, then with disgust.

"You'd better get him into his cell," one of the guards mumbled to the attendants. "Before he really blows his stack."

"Yeah," the attendant agreed. "Looks like he's going into phase two, and we have not as yet got phase one typed. No telling what phase three might be like."

The guards stepped back. The attendants took him on down the hall of the Q.S. wing.

All the way up the elevator, to the seventeenth floor, and down the hall to the doorway of Storm's cell, Kingston kept wondering if any of them had ever heard of the Uncle Remus story of Bre'r Rabbit and the Briar Patch. "Oh, don't throw me in that briar patch, Bre'r Fox. Don't throw me in the briar patch!"

Stupid people resist clever moves but willingly carry out stupid patterns. These guards and attendants were keyed to keeping out anyone who tried to get in—but if someone tried to keep out, obviously he must be forced to go in.

There hadn't even been a question about a lack of Q.S. rating on the form. His vitriolic diatribe had driven it out of their minds for a moment, and if they happened to check it before they stamped the order completed, well, the damage would already have been done.

He would have talked with David Storm.

But Storm was not quite that cooperative. His eyes flared with wild resentment, suspicion, when the attendants ushered Kingston into the cell.

"You see, Doctor," one of the attendants said with soothing irony, and not too concealed humor, "we provide you with a patient and everything. We'll move in another couch, and you two can just lie back, relax, and just tell each other all about what's in your subconscious."

"Oh no you don't," Storm said instantly, and backed into a corner of the cell with an attitude of exaggerated rejection. "That's an old trick. Pretending to be a cell mate so you can learn my secret. That's an old trick, an old, old, old, old, o-l-d—" His lips kept moving, but the sound of his voice trailed away.

"You needn't think you're going to make me listen to your troubles," Kingston snapped at him. "I've got troubles of my own."

Storm's lips ceased moving, and he stared at Kingston without blinking.

"You big-shot scientists try to get along with one another," one of the attendants said as they went out the door.

"Scientists just argue," the other attendant commented. "They never *do* anything."

But Kingston hardly heard them, and hardly noticed them when, a few minutes later, they brought in a cot for him and placed it on the opposite side of the cell from Storm's cot. He was busy analyzing Storm's first reactions. Yes, the pattern was disturbed, possibly demented, certainly regressive—and yet, it was not so much irrational as adolescent, the bitterness of the adolescent when he first begins to really realize that the merchandise of humanity is not living up to the advertising under which it has been sold to him.

Under the attendants' watchful eyes, Kingston changed into the shapeless garments of the inmates. He flared up at them once again, carrying out his pattern of indignation that they should do this to him, but he didn't put much heart into it. No point in overdoing the act.

"Looks like he might have passed his peak," one of the attendants muttered. "He's calming down again. Maybe he won't be too hard to handle." They went out the door again with the admonishment: "Now you fellows be quiet, and you'll get breakfast pretty soon. But if you get naughty—" With his fist and thumb he made an exaggerated motion of working a hypodermic syringe. Storm cowered back into his corner of the cell.

"I've given up trying to convince you numskulls," Kingston said with contempt. "I'll just wait now until my office hears about this."

"Yeah," the attendant said. "Yeah, you just sit tight and wait. Just keep waiting—and quiet!"

The sound of their steps receded down the hallway. Kingston lay back on his couch and said nothing. He knew Storm's eyes were on him, watching him, as nervous, excited, and wary as an animal. The cell was barren, containing only the cots covered with a tough plastic which defied tearing with the bare fingers, and a water closet. There wasn't a seat on the latter because that can be torn off and used as a weapon either against oneself or others. In the wards there would be books, magazines, games, implements of various skills and physical therapies, all under the eyes of watchful attendants; but in these cells there was nothing, because there weren't enough attendants to watch the occupants of each cell.

Kingston lay on his couch and waited. In a little while Storm came out of his corner and sat down on the edge of his own couch. His attitude was half wary, half belligerent.

"You needn't be afraid of me," Kingston said softly, and kept looking upward at the ceiling. "I really am Dr. Heidrich Kingston. I'm a psychiatrist. And I already know all about you and your secrets."

He heard a faint whimper, the rustling of garments on the plastic couch cover, as if Storm were shrinking back against the wall, as if he expected this to be the prelude to more punishment for having such secret thoughts. Then a form of reasoning seemed to prevail, and Kingston could feel the tension relaxing in the room.

"You're as crazy as I am," Storm said loudly. There was relief in his voice, and yet regret.

Kingston said nothing. There was no point in pushing it. If his luck held, he would have several days. Miss Verity could be counted on to cut her vacation short and come back ahead of time, but even with that, he should have at least three days. And while Storm was badly disoriented, he could be reached.

"And that's an old, old trick, too," Storm said in a bitter singsong. "Pretending you already know, so I'll talk. Well, I'm not a commie! I'm not a traitor! I'm not any of those things. I just think—" He broke off abruptly. "Oh no you don't!" he exclaimed. "You can't trick me into telling you what I think. That's an old, old, old—"

It was quite clear why the therapies used by Moss hadn't worked. Storm was obsessed with guilt. He had been working in the highest echelons of Loyalty and at the same time had been harboring secret doubts that the framework was right. The Moss therapies, then, were simply punishments for his guilt, punishments which he felt he deserved, punishments which confirmed his wrongdoing. And Moss would be so convinced that Storm's thoughts were entirely wrong that he couldn't possibly use the technique of agreement to lead Storm out of his syndrome. That was why Moss' past was stainless, why the Security Board trusted him with a Q.S., he was as narrow in his estimate of right and wrong as they.

"Old, old, old, old—" Storm kept repeating. He was stuck in the adolescent groove of bitter cynicism, not yet progressed to the point of realizing that in spite of its faults and hypocrisies, there were some elements in humanity worth a man's respect and faith. Even a thinking man.

It was a full day later before Kingston attempted the first significant move in reaching through to Storm. The previous day had confirmed the pattern of the attendants: a breakfast of adequate but plain food. Moss would never get caught on the technicality so prevalent in many institutions where the inmates can't help themselves—chiseling on food and pocketing the difference. After breakfast a cleanup of the cells and their persons. Four hours alone. Lunch. Carefully supervised and highly limited exercise period. Back to the cell again for another four hours. Supper. And soon, lights out.

It varied, somewhat, from most mental hospital routines; but these were all Q.S. men, each bearing terrible secrets which had snapped their minds. They mustn't be allowed to talk to one another. It varied, too, from patient to patient. It varied mainly in that the cells were largely soundproof; they had little of the screaming, raging, cursing, strangling, choking bedlam common in many such institutions.

Moss was a good administrator. He had his wing under thorough control. It was as humane as his limited point of view could make it. There were too few attendants, but then that was always the case in mental hospitals. In

this instance it worked in Kingston's favor. There would be little chance of interruption, except at the planned times. In going into another person's mind that was a hazard to be guarded against, as potentially disastrous as a disruption of a major operation.

No reverberation of alarm at his absence from his office reached this far, and Kingston doubted there would be much. Miss Verity was more efficient than Moss, and the organization she had set up would run indefinitely during his absence and hers. Decisions, which only he could make, would pile up in the staff offices, but that was nothing unusual in government.

He didn't try to rush Storm. With a combination of the facts he had gleaned from the file and the empathy he possessed, he lay on his cot and talked quietly to the ceiling about Storm. His childhood, his days in school, his attitudes toward his parents, teachers, scoutmasters, all the carefully tailored and planned sociology surrounding growing youth in respectable circumstances of today. It was called planned youth development, but it could better be called youth suppression, for its object was to quell any divergent tendencies, make the youth docile and complaisant—a good boy, which meant no trouble to anybody.

He translated the standard pattern into specifics about Storm, for obviously, until his breakup, David had been the epitome of a model boy. There were several standard patterns of reaction to this procedure. Eager credulity, where the individual is looking for a concrete father image to carry his burdens; rejective skepticism, where the individual seizes upon the slightest discrepancy to prove the speaker cannot know; occasionally superstitious fear and awe; and even less occasionally a comprehension of how gestalt empathy works. But whatever the pattern of reaction, it is the rare person, indeed, who can keep from listening to an analysis of himself.

Storm lay on his side on his cot, facing Kingston—a good sign because the previous day he had faced the wall—and watched the older man talk quietly and easily at the ceiling. Kingston knew when he came close to dangerous areas from the catch in Storm's breathing, but there was no other sign. Deliberately he broke off in the

middle of telling Storm what his reactions had been at the bull session where the radical had been talking.

There was about ten minutes of silence. Several times there was an indrawn breath, as if Storm were starting to say something. But he kept quiet. Kingston picked up the thread and continued on, as if no time had elapsed.

He got his reward during the exercise period. Storm kept close to him, manifestly preferred his company to that of the attendants. They were among the less self-destructive few who were allowed a little time at hand-ball. The previous day Storm had swung on the ball, wildly, angrily, as if to work off some terrible rage by hitting the ball. There hadn't been even the excuse of a game. Storm, younger and quicker, much more intense, had kept the ball to himself. Today Storm seemed the opposite. The few times he did hit the ball he deliberately placed it where Kingston could get it easily. Then he lost interest and sat down in a corner of the court. The attendants hustled them out quickly, to make room for others.

Back in the cell, Kingston picked up the thread again. Genuine accomplishment in gestalt empathy allows one to enter directly into another man's mind; his whole life is laid open for reading. Specific events are often obscure, but the man's pattern of reactions to events, the psychological reality of it, is open to view. Kingston narrated, with neither implied criticism nor praise, until, in midafternoon, he sprang a bombshell.

"But you were wrong about one thing, Storm," he said abruptly. He felt Storm's instant withdrawal, the return to hostility. "You thought you were alone. You thought you were the only one with this terrible flaw in your nature. But you were not alone, son. And you aren't alone now.

"You put your finger on the major dilemma facing science today."

Now, for the first time, he glanced over at Storm. The young man was up on his elbow, staring at Kingston with an expression of horror. As easily as that, his secret had come out. And he did not doubt that Kingston knew his thoughts. The rest of it had fitted, and this fitted, too. He began to weep, at first quietly, then with great, wracking sobs.

"Disgrace," he muttered. "Disgrace, disgrace, disgrace. My mother, my father—" He buried his face in his arms. His whole body shook. He turned his face to the wall.

"All over the world, the genuine men of science are fighting out these same problems, David," Kingston said. "You are not alone."

Storm started to put his hands over his ears—then took them away. Kingston appeared not to notice.

"Politicians, not only ours, but all over the world, have discovered that science is a tremendous weapon. As with any other weapon they have seized it and turned it to their use. But it would be a great mistake to cast the politician in the role of villain. He is not a villain. He simply operates in an entirely different framework from that of science.

"Science does not understand his framework. A man of science grows extremely cautious with his words. He makes no claims he cannot substantiate. He freely admits it when he does not know something. He would be horrified to recommend the imposition of a mere theory of conduct upon a culture. The politician is not bothered by any of this. He has no hesitancy in recommending what he believes be imposed upon a culture; whatever is necessary for him to get the votes he will say.

"The scientist states again and again that saying a thing is true will not make it true. In classical physics this may have been accurate, although there is doubt of its truth in relative physics, and it is manifestly untrue in the living sciences. For often the politician says a thing with such a positive strength of confidence that the people begin operating in a framework of its truth and so implement it that it does become true.

"The public follows the politician by preference. Most of us have never outgrown our emotional childhood, and when the silver cord, the apron strings, are broken from our real parents, we set about trying to find parent substitutes to bear the responsibility for our lives. The scientist stands in uncertainty, without panaceas, without surefire solutions of how to have all we want and think we want. The politician admits to no such uncertainties. He becomes an excellent father substitute. He will take care of us, bear the brunt of responsibility for us.

"But this clash of frameworks goes much deeper than that. Just as the scientist cannot understand the politician, so the politician does not understand science. Like most people, to him the scientist is just a super trained mechanic. He's learned how to manipulate some laboratory equipment. He has memorized some vague and mysterious higher math formulae. But he's just a highly skilled mechanic, and, as such, is employed by the politician to do a given job. He is not expected to meddle in things which are none of his concern.

"But in science we know this is a false estimation. For science is far more than the development of a skill. It is a frame of thought, a philosophy, a way of life. That was the source of your conflict, son. You were trying to operate in the field of science under the politician's estimation of what it is.

"The scientist is human. He loves his home, his flag, his country. Like any other man, he wishes to protect and preserve them. But the political rules under which he is expected to do this come in direct conflict with his basic philosophy and approach to enlightenment. We have one framework, then, forced to make itself subservient to another framework, and the points of difference between the two are so great, that tremendous inner conflicts are aroused.

"The problem is not insuperable. Science has dealt with such problems before. Without risk to home, flag and country, science will find a way to deal with this dilemma, also. You are not alone."

There was a long silence, and then Storm spoke, quite rationally, from his cot.

"That's all very nice," he said, "but there's one thing wrong with it. You're just as crazy as I am, or you wouldn't be here."

Kingston looked over at him and laughed.

"Now you're thinking like the politician, Storm," he said. "You're taking the evidence and saying it can have only one possible interpretation." He was tempted to tell Storm the truth of why he was here, and to show him that science could find a way, without harm, to circumvent the too narrow restrictions placed upon it by the political mind. But that would be unwise. Better never to let anyone know how he had manipulated it so that a

simple clerical error could account for the whole chain of events.

"I really am Dr. Heidrich Kingston," he said.

"Yeah," Storm agreed, too quickly. There was derision in his eyes, but there was also pity. That was a good sign, too. Storm was showing evidence that he could think of the plight of someone else, other than himself. "Yeah, sure you are," he added.

"You don't think so, now," Kingston laughed. "But tomorrow, or the next day, my secretary will come to the door, there, and get me out of here."

"Yeah, sure. Tomorrow—or the next day." Storm agreed. "You just go on thinking that, fellow. It helps, believe me, it helps."

"And shortly afterward you'll be released, too. Because there's no point now in keeping you locked up, incommunicado. I know all about your secrets, you see."

"Yeah," Storm breathed softly. "Tomorrow or the next day, or the day after that, or the day after— Yeah, I think I'll believe it, too, fellow. Yeah, got to believe in something."

In a limited fashion the pattern of human conduct can be accurately predicted. Cause leads to effect in the lives of human beings, just as it does in the physical sciences. The old fellow who had once told Storm that the universe does not hand out printed instructions on how it is put together was only literally correct. Figuratively, he was in error, for the universe does bear the imprints of precisely how it is put together and operates. It is the business of science to learn to read those imprints and know their meanings. Life is a part of the universe, bearing imprints of how it operates, too. And we already read them, after a limited fashion. We couldn't have an organized society, at all, if this were not true.

Kingston had made some movement beyond generalized quantum theory, and could predict the given movements of certain individuals in the total motion of human affairs.

Faithful to the last drawn line on the charted pattern, it was the next morning that Miss Verity, with clenched jaws and pale face, stepped through the cell door, followed by a very worried and incredulous guard.

"Dr. Kingston," she said firmly, then faltered. She

stood silent for an instant, fighting to subdue her relief, anger, exasperation, tears. She won. She did not break through the reserve she treasured. She spoke then, quite in the secretarial manner, but she could not subdue a certain triumph in her eyes.

“Dr. Kingston,” she repeated, “it seems that while I was on my vacation, you made a . . . ah . . . clerical error.”

SILENT BROTHER

BY ALGIS BUDRYS (1931-)

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION
FEBRUARY

Fiction by the intelligent and talented Algis Budrys is a rare thing these days—he's much too busy traveling on behalf of The Writers of the Future contests and writing the best literary criticism about science fiction. It was not always so, however. Take 1956, for example. In addition to this story, he published at least the following: "Death March" (ASTOUNDING, October); "The Executioner" (ASTOUNDING, January); "Lower Than Angels" (INFINITY, October; "Man in the Sky" (ASTOUNDING, March); "The Man Who Always Knew" (ASTOUNDING, April); and "The Peasant Girl," (ASTOUNDING, June).

Those were the days. (MHG)

This story made its appearance five years before the first human being went into orbit around the Earth, and thirteen years before the first human being stood on the Moon.

Spaceflight was still strictly the province of science fiction, and there was an aura of romance, almost fantasy, about it. Anything could happen out in the mysterious depths of space.

Of course, many things can happen, and not always good things, as we found out on that tragic day in January 1986 when seven young lives were snuffed out in a moment of unbearable disaster. By then, however, spaceflight had become almost routine. We had watched spaceships go up and up in thunder and blaze, and then come down in the smoothest, longest glide we had ever seen, and

people on board who were almost euphoric over the excitement of having been in space and felt the delights of zero-gravity.

Let us return, then, to the yesteryear when space was stranger and more awe-inspiring than we could easily imagine. (IA)

The first starship was home.

At first, the sight of the *Endeavor's* massive bulk on his TV screen held Cable's eager attention. At his first glimpse of the starship's drift to its mooring, alongside a berthing satellite, he'd felt the intended impression of human grandeur; more than most viewers, for he had a precise idea of the scale of size.

But the first twitch of ambiguity came as he watched the crew come out and cross to the Albuquerque shuttle on their suit jets. He knew those men: Dugan, who'd be impatient to land, as he'd been impatient to depart; Frawley, whose white hair would be sparsely tousled over his tight pink scalp; Snell, who'd have run to fat on the voyage unless he'd exercised like the very devil and fasted like a hermit; young Tommy Penn, who'd be unable to restrain his self-conscious glances into the cameras.

It was exactly those thoughts which dulled his vicarious satisfaction. He stayed in front of the set, watching through the afternoon, while the four men took off their suits and grouped themselves briefly for the still photographers, while they got past the advance guard of reporters into the shuttle's after compartment, and refused to speak for the video coverage.

It made no essential difference that Snell was lean and graceful, or that all four of them, Frawley and Penn included, were perfectly poised and unruffled. Perhaps it was a little more irritating that they were.

Endeavor's crew was stepping gracefully into history.

The cameras and Cable followed the four men out of the shuttle and across the sun-drenched field at Albuquerque. Together they watched every trivial motion; Dugan's first cigarette in six months; Frawley's untied shoelace, which he was repairing by casually stopping in the middle of the gangway and putting a leg up on the railing; Tommy Penn giving a letter to a guard to mail.

Together with a billion other inhabitants of what was

no longer Man's only planet, Cable looked into the faces of the President of the United States, of the United Nations Secretary General, of Premier Sobieski, and Marshal Siemens. Less than others, because he had a professional's residual contempt for eulogies, he heard what they had to say.

By nine or nine-thirty that night he had gathered the essential facts about the solar system of Alpha Centaurus. There were five planets, two of them temperate and easily habitable, one of them showing strong hints of extensive heavy metal ores. The trip had been uneventful, the stay unmarked by extraordinary incident. There was no mention of inhabitants.

There was also no mention of anything going wrong with the braking system, and that, perhaps, intensified the crook that had begun to bend one corner of Cable's thin mouth.

"You're welcome," he couldn't help grunting as Frawley described the smoothness of the trip and the simplicity of landing. That decelerating an object of almost infinite mass within a definitely finite distance was at all complicated didn't seem to be worthy of mention.

More than anything, it was the four men's unshakable poise that began to grate against him.

"Happens every day," he grunted at them, simultaneously telling himself he'd turned into a crabby old man at thirty-four, muttering spitefully at his friends for doing what he no longer could.

But that flash of insight failed to reappear when his part in *Endeavor's* development was lumped in with the "hardworking, dedicated men whose courage and brilliance made our flight possible." Applied to an individual, phrases like that were meaningful. Used like this, they covered everyone from the mess hall attendants to the man in charge of keeping the armadillos from burrowing under the barrack footings.

He snapped the set off with a peevish gesture. Perhaps, if he stayed up, the program directors, running out of fresh material at last, might have their commentators fill in with feature stuff like "amazing stride forward in electronics," "unified field theory," "five years of arduous testing on practical application to spaceship propul-

sion," and the like. Eventually, if they didn't cut back to the regular network shows first, they might mention his name. Somebody might even think it important that *Endeavor* had cost the total destruction of one prototype and the near-fatal crash of another.

But suddenly he simply wanted to go to bed. He spun his chair away from the set, rolled into the bedroom, levered himself up and pulled his way onto the bed. Taking his legs in his callused hands, he put them under the blankets, turned off the lights, and lay staring up at the dark.

Which showed and told him nothing.

He shook his head at himself. It was only twenty miles to the field from here. If he was really that much of a glory hound, he could have gone. He was a dramatic enough sight. And, in all truth, he hadn't for a minute been jealous while the *Endeavor* was actually gone. It was just that today's panegyrics had been a little too much for his vanity to stave off.

He trembled on the brink of admitting to himself that his real trouble was the feeling that he'd lost all contact with the world. But only trembled, and only on the brink.

Eventually he fell asleep.

He'd slept unusually well, he discovered when he awoke in the morning. Looking at his watch, he saw it had only been about eight hours, but it felt like more. He decided to try going through the morning without the chair. Reaching over to the stand beside his bed, he got his braces and tugged them onto his legs. Walking clumsily, he tottered into the bathroom with his canes, washed his face, shaved, and combed his hair.

He'd forgotten to scrub his bridge last night. He took it out now and realized only after he did so that his gums, top and bottom, were sore.

"Oh, well," he told himself in the mirror, "we all have our cross to bear."

He decided to leave the bridge out for the time being. He never chewed with his front teeth anyway. Whistling "Sweet Violets" shrilly, he made his way back into the bedroom, where he carefully dressed in a suit, white shirt, and tie. He'd seen too many beat-up men who let

themselves go to pot. Living alone the way he did made it even more important for him to be as neat as he could.

What's more, he told himself insidiously, the boys might drop over.

Thinking that way made him angry at himself. It was pure deception, because the bunch wouldn't untangle themselves out of the red tape and debriefings for another week. That kind of wishful thinking could drift him into living on hungry anticipations, and leave him crabbed and querulous when they failed to materialize on his unreal schedule.

He clumped into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator with a yank of his arm.

That was something else to watch out for. Compensation was all well and good, but refrigerators didn't need all that effort to be opened. If he got into the habit of applying excessive arm strength to everything, the day might come when he'd convince himself a man didn't need legs at all. That, too, was a trap. A man could get along without legs, just as a man could teach himself to paint pictures with his toes. But he'd paint better with finger dexterity.

The idea was to hang on to reality. It was the one crutch everybody used.

He started coffee boiling and went back out to the living room to switch on the TV.

That was another thing. He could have deliberately stopped and turned it on while on his way to the kitchen. But he'd never thought to save the steps before he'd crashed. More difficult? Of course it was more difficult now! But he needed the exercise.

Lift. Swing. Lock. Lean. Lift other leg. Swing, lock. Lean. Unlock other leg. Lift—

He cursed viciously at the perspiration going down his face.

And now the blasted set wouldn't switch on. The knob was loose. He looked more closely, leaning carefully to one side in order to get a look at the set's face.

He had no depth perception, of course, but there was something strange about the dark square behind the plastic shield over the face of the tube.

The tube was gone. He grunted incredulously, but now that his eye was accustomed to the dimmer light in this

room, he could see the inside of the cabinet through the shield.

He pushed the the cabinet away from the wall with an unexpected ease that almost toppled him. The entire set was gone. The antennae line dangled loosely from the wall. Only the big speaker, mounted below the chassis compartment, was still there.

First, he checked the doors and windows.

The two doors were locked from the inside, and the house, being air-conditioned, had no openable windows. He had only to ascertain that none of the panes had been broken or removed. Then he cataloged his valuables and found nothing gone.

The check was not quite complete. The house had a cellar. But before he was willing to go through that effort, he weighed the only other possibility in balance.

His attitude on psychiatry was blunt, and on psychology only a little less so. But he was a pragmatist; that is, he played unintuitive poker with success.

Because he was a pragmatist, he first checked the possibility that he'd had a mental lapse and forgotten he'd called to have the set taken out for repairs. Unlocking the front door, he got the paper off the step. A glance at the date and a story lead beginning "Yesterday's return of the *Endeavor*—" exploded that hypothesis, not to his surprise. The set had been there last night. It was still too early today for any repair shop to be open.

Ergo, he had to check the cellar windows. He hadn't lost a day, or done anything else incredible like that. Tossing the paper on the kitchen table, he swung his way to the cellar door, opened it, and looked down, hoping against hope that he'd see the broken window from here and be able to report the burglary without the necessity of having to ease himself down the steps.

But, no such luck. Tucking the canes under his left arm, he grasped the railing and fought his body's drag.

Once down, he found it unnecessary to look at the windows. The set chassis was in the middle of his old, dust-covered workbench. It was on its side, and the wiring had been ripped out. The big tube turned its pale face

toward him from a nest of other components. A soldering iron balanced on the edge of the bench, and some rewiring had been begun on the underside of the chassis.

It was only then—and this, he admitted to himself without any feeling of self-reproach, was perfectly normal for a man like himself—that he paid any notice to the superficial burns, few in number, on the thumb and forefinger of his left hand.

The essence of anything he might plan, he decided, was in discarding the possibility of immediate outside help.

He sat in his chair, drinking a cup of the coffee he'd made after having to scrape the burned remains of the first batch out of the coffee-maker, and could see where that made the best sense.

He had no burglary to report, so that took care of the police. As for calling anyone else, he didn't have the faintest idea of whom to call if he'd wanted to. There was no government agency, local, state, or federal—certainly not intentional, ramified though the United Nations was—offering advice and assistance to people who disassembled their own TV sets in their sleep and then proceeded to rework them into something else.

Besides, this was one he'd solve for himself.

He chuckled. What problem wasn't? He was constitutionally incapable of accepting anyone else's opinion over his own, and he knew it.

Well, then, data thus far:

One ex-TV set in the cellar. Better: one collection of electronic parts.

Three burns on fingertips. Soldering iron?

He didn't know. He supposed that if he ever took the trouble to bone up with a book or two on circuitry, he could throw together a fair FM receiver and, given a false start or two, mock up some kind of jackleg video circuit. But he'd never used a soldering iron in his life. He imagined the first try might prove disgracefully clumsy.

Questions:

How did one shot-up bag of rag-doll bones and twitchless nerves named Harvey Cable accomplish all this in his sleep?

How did he pull that set out of the cabinet, hold it in both arms as he'd have to, and, even granting the chair up to this point, make it down the cellar steps?

Last question, par value, sixty-four dollars: Where had the tools come from?

He searched the house again, but there was definitely no one else in it.

Toward noon he found his mind still uneasy on one point. He got out his rubber-stamp pad, inked his fingertips, and impressed a set of prints on a sheet of paper. With this, his shaving brush, and a can of talcum powder, he made his way into the cellar again and dusted the face of the picture tube. The results were spotty, marred by the stiffness of the brush and his lack of skill, but after he hit on the idea of letting the powder drift across the glass like a dry ripple riding the impetus of his gently blown breath, he got a clear print of several of his fingers. There were some very faint prints that were not his own, but he judged from their apparent age that they must belong to the various assemblers in the tube's parent factory. There were no prints of comparable freshness to his own, and he knew he'd never handled the tube before.

That settled it.

Next, he examined the unfamiliar tools that had been laid on the bench. Some of them were arranged in neat order, but others—the small electric soldering iron, a pair of pliers, and several screwdrivers—were scattered among the parts. He dusted those, too, and found his own prints on them. All of the tools were new, and unmarked with work scratches.

He went over to where his electric drill was hanging up beside his other woodworking tools. There were a few shavings of aluminum clinging to the burr of the chuck. Going back to the reworked chassis, he saw that several new cuts and drillings had been made on it.

Well. He looked blankly at it all.

Next question: What in the name of holy horned hell am I building?

He sat looking thoughtfully down at the paper, which he'd finally come around to reading. He wasn't the only one infested with mysteries.

The story he'd glanced at before read:

OFFICIAL CENSORSHIP SHROUDS
ENDEAVOR CREW

Albuquerque, May 14—Yesterday's return of the Endeavor brought with it a return of outmoded press policies on the part of all official government agencies concerned. In an unprecedented move, both the U.S. and U.N. Press Secretaries late last night refused to permit further interviews with the crew or examination of the starship. At the same time, the Press was restricted to the use of official mimeographed releases in its stories.

Unofficial actions went even farther. Reporters at the Sandia auxiliary press facilities were told "off the record" that a "serious view" might "well be taken" if attempts were made to circumvent these regulations. This was taken to mean that offending newspapers would henceforth be cut off from all official releases. Inasmuch as these releases now constitute all the available information on the Endeavor, her crew, and their discoveries, this "unofficial advice" is tantamount to a threat of total censorship. The spokesman giving this "advice" declined to let his name be used.

Speculation is rife that some serious mishap, in the nature of an unsuspected disease or infection, may have been discovered among members of the Endeavor's crew. There can, of course, be no corroboration or denial of this rumor until the various agencies involved deign to give it.

Under this was a box: See Editorial, "A Free Press in a Free World," p. 23.

Cable chuckled, momentarily, at the paper's discomfiture. But his face twisted into a scowl again while he wondered whether Dugan, Frawley, Snell, and Tommy Penn were all right. The odds were good that the disease theory was a bunch of journalistic hogwash, but anything that made the government act like that was sure to be serious.

Some of his annoyance, he realized with another chuckle on a slightly different note, came from his disappoint-

ment. It looked like it might be even longer before the bunch was free to come over and visit him.

But this return to yesterday's perverse selfishness did not stay with him long. He was looking forward eagerly to tonight's experiment. Cable smiled with a certain degree of animation as he turned the pages. By tomorrow he'd have a much better idea of what was happening here. Necessarily, his own problem eclipsed the starship mystery. But that was good.

It was nice, having a problem to wrestle with again.

There was an item about a burgled hardware store—"small tools and electrical supplies were taken"—and he examined it coolly. Data on source of tools?

The possibility existed. Disregard the fact he was the world's worst raw burglar material. He hadn't been a set designer before last night, either.

He immediately discarded the recurring idea that the police should be called. They'd refuse to take him seriously; there was even a tangible risk of being cross-questioned by a psychiatrist.

He judged as objectively as he could that it would take several days of this before he grew unreasonably worried. Until such time, he was going to tackle this by himself, as best he could.

His gums still ached, he noticed—more so than this morning, perhaps.

His eyes opened, and he looked out at morning sunshine. So, he hadn't been able to keep awake all night. He'd hardly expected to.

Working methodically, he looked at the scratch pad on which he'd been noting the time at ten-minute intervals. The last entry, in a sloppy hand, was for eleven-twenty. Somewhat later than he was usually able to stay awake, but not significantly much.

He looked at his watch. It was now 7:50 a.m. A little more than eight hours, all told, and again he felt unusually rested. Well, fine. A sound mind in a sound body, and all that. The early worm gets the bird. Many lights make hand work easier on the eyes. A nightingale in the bush is worth two birds in the hand.

He was also pretty cheerful.

Strapping on his braces and picking up his canes, he now swung himself over to the locked bedroom door. There were no new burns on his fingers.

He looked at the door critically. It was still locked, and, presumably until proven otherwise, the key was still far out of reach in the hall, where he'd skittered it under the door after turning the lock.

He turned back to the corner where he'd left the screwdriver balanced precariously on a complex arrangement of pots and pans which the tool's weight kept from toppling, and which he'd had to hold together with string while he was assembling it. After placing the screwdriver, he'd burned the string, as well as every other piece of twine or sewing thread in the house.

He was unable to lift the tool now without sending the utensils tumbling with a crash and clatter that made him wince. It seemed only reasonable that the racket would have been quite capable of waking the half-dead, even if none of his other somnambulistic activities had. But the screwdriver hadn't been touched—or else his sleeping brain was more ingenious than his waking one.

Well, we'll see. He went back to the door, found no scratches on the lock, but left quite a few in the process of taking the lock apart and letting himself out.

Data: key still far out on hall floor. He picked it up after some maneuvering with his canes and brace locks, put it in his pocket, and went to the cellar door, which was also still locked.

His tactics here had been somewhat different. The key was on the kitchen table, on a dark tablecloth, with flour scattered over it in a random pattern he'd subsequently memorized with no hope of being able to duplicate it.

The flour was undisturbed. Nevertheless, there was a possibility he might have shaken out the cloth, turned it over to hide the traces of flour remaining, replaced the key, and somehow duplicated the flour pattern—or, at any rate, come close enough to fool himself, provided he was interested in fooling himself.

This checked out negative. He'd done no such thing. He defied anyone to get all the traces of flour out of the cloth without laundering it, in which case he'd been wonderfully ingenious at counterfeiting several leftover food stains.

Ergo, he hadn't touched the key. *Ipsa facto. Reductio ad absurdum. Non lessi illegitimis te carborundum.*

Next move.

He unlocked the cellar door and lowered himself down the steps.

Which gave him much food for thought. He stood cursing softly at the sight of the chassis with more work done on it.

For the first time he felt a certain degree of apprehension. No bewilderment, as yet; too many practical examples in his lifetime had taught him that today's inexplicable mystery was tomorrow's dry fact. Nevertheless, he clumped forward with irritated impatience and stood looking down at the workbench.

All the tools were scattered about now. The tube had been wiped clean of his amateur fingerprintings yesterday, and the tools, apparently, had come clean in handling. The chassis was tipped up again, and some parts, one of which looked as though it had been revamped, had been bolted to its upper surface and wired into the growing circuit. The soldering was much cleaner; apparently he was learning.

He was also learning to walk through locked doors, damn it!

He'd left a note for himself: "What am I doing?" block-printed in heavy letters on a shirt cardboard he'd propped against the chassis. It had been moved to one side, laid down on the far end of the bench.

There was no answer.

He glowered down at the day's paper, his eye scanning the lines, but not reading. It wasn't even in focus.

His entire jaw was aching, but he grimly concentrated past that, grinding at the situation with the sharp teeth of his mind.

The new fingerprints on the set were his, again. He was still doing a solo—or was it a duet with himself?

He'd rechecked the locks, examined the doors, tried to move the immovable hinge pins, and even tested the bedroom and cellar windows to make sure against the absurd possibility that he'd gotten them open and clambered in and out that way.

The answer was no.

But the thing in the cellar had more work done on it.

The answer was yes.

That led nowhere. Time out to let the subconscious mull it over. He concentrated on the paper, focusing his blurred vision on the newspaper by main force, wondering how the starship base was doing with *its* mystery.

Not very well. The entire base had been quarantined, and the official press releases cut to an obfuscatory trickle.

For a moment, his anxiety about the boys made him forget his preoccupation. Reading as rapidly as he could with his foggy eye, he discovered that the base was entirely off limits to anyone now; apparently that applied to government personnel, too. The base had been cordoned off by National Guard units at a distance of two miles. The paper was beating the disease drum for all it was worth, and reporting a great deal of international anxiety on the subject.

It seemed possible now that the paper was correct in its guess. At any rate, it carried a front-page story describing the sudden journeys of several top-flight biologists and biochemists en route to the base, or at least this general area.

Cable clamped his lips into a worried frown.

He'd been in on a number of the preliminary briefings on the trip, before he'd disqualified himself. The theory had been that alien bugs wouldn't be any happier on a human being than, say, a rock lichen would be. But even the people quoting the theory had admitted that the odds were not altogether prohibitive against it, and it was Cable's experience that theories were only good about twenty-five percent of the time in the first place.

It was at this point that the idea of a correlation between the starship's mystery and his own first struck him.

He fumed over it for several hours.

The idea looked silly. Even at second or third glance, it resembled the kind of brainstorm a desperate man might get in a jam like this.

That knowledge alone was enough to prejudice him strongly against the possibility. But he couldn't quite persuade himself to let go of it.

Item: The crew of the starship might be down with something.

Item: The base was only twenty miles away. Airborne infection?

Item: The disease, if it was a disease, had attacked the world's first astronauts. By virtue of his jouncings-about in the prototype models, he also qualified as such.

A selective disease attacking people by occupational specialty?

Bushwah!

Airborne infection in an air-conditioned house?

All right, his jaw ached and his vision was blurred.

He pawed angrily at his eye.

When he had conceived of interfering with the progress of the work, he'd intended it as one more cool check on what the response would be. But now it had become something of a personal spite against whatever it was he was doing in the cellar.

By ten o'clock that night, he'd worked himself into a fuming state of temper. He clumped downstairs, stood glaring at the set, and was unable to deduce anything new from it. Finally he followed the second part of his experimental program by ripping all the redone wiring loose, adding a scrawled "Answer me!" under yesterday's note, and went to bed seething. Let's see what he did about *that*.

His mouth ached like fury in the morning, overbalancing his sense of general well-being. He distracted himself with the thought that he was getting a lot of sound rest for a man on a twenty-four-hour day, while he lurched quickly into the bathroom and peeled his lips back in front of the mirror.

He stared at the front of his mouth in complete amazement. Then he began to laugh, clutching the washbasin and continuing to look incredulously at the sight in the mirror.

He was teething!

With the look of a middle-aged man discovering himself with chicken pox, he put his thumb and forefinger up to his gums and felt the hard ridges of outthrusting enamel.

He calmed down with difficulty, unable to resist the occasional fresh temptation to run his tongue over the sprouting teeth. Third sets of teeth occasionally happened, he knew, but he'd dismissed that possibility quite early in the game. Now, despite his self-assurances at the time the bridge was fitted, he could admit that manufactured dentures were never as satisfying as the ones a man grew for himself. He grinned down at the pronged monstrosity he'd been fitting into his mouth each morning for the past year, picked it up delicately, and dropped it into the wastebasket with a satisfying sound.

Whistling again for the first time in two days, he went out to the cellar door and opened it, bent, and peered down. He grunted and reached for the rail as he swung his right foot forward.

He opened his mouth in a strangled noise of surprise. He'd seen *depth* down those stairs. His other eye was working again—the retina had reattached itself!

The stairs tumbled down with a crash as their supports, sawed through, collapsed under his weight. The railing came limply loose in his clutch, and he smashed down into the welter of splintered boards ten feet below.

I shouldn't, he thought to himself in one flicker of consciousness, have ripped up that set. Then he pitched into blackness again.

He rolled over groggily, wiped his hand over his face, and opened his eyes. There didn't seem to be any pain.

He was facing the stairs, which had been restored. The braces had been splinted with scrap lumber, and two of the treads were new wood. The old ones were stacked in a corner, and he half growled at the sight of brown smears on their splintered ends.

There was still no pain. He had no idea of how long he'd been lying here on the cellar floor. His watch was smashed.

He looked over at the workbench, and saw that whatever he'd been building was finished. The chassis sat right-side-up on the bench, the power cord trailing up to the socket.

It looked like no piece of equipment he'd ever seen. The tube was lying on the bench beside the chassis, wired

in but unmounted. Apparently it didn't matter whether it was rigidly positioned or not. He saw two control knobs rising directly out of the top of the chassis, as well as two or three holes in the chassis where components had been in the TV circuit but were not required for this new use. The smaller tubes glowed. The set was turned on.

Apparently, too, he hadn't cared what condition his body was in while he worked on it.

He'd been fighting to keep his attention away from his body. The teeth and the eye had given him a hint he didn't dare confirm at first.

But it was true. He could feel the grittiness of the floor against the skin of his thighs and calves. His toes responded when he tried to move them, and his legs flexed.

His vision was perfect, and his teeth were full-grown, strong and hard as he clamped them to keep his breathing from frightening him.

Something brushed against his leg, and he looked down. His leg motions had snapped a hair-thin copper wire looped around one ankle and leading off toward the bench. He looked up, and the triggered picture tube blinked a light in his eyes.

Blink can't think blink rhythm I think blink trick think blink sink blink wink—CAN'T THINK!

He slammed his hands up against his face, covering his eyes.

He held them there for a few choked moments. Then he opened two fingers in a thin slit, like a little boy playing peekaboo with his mother.

The light struck his eye again. This time there was no getting away. The trigger of the picture tube's flicker chipped at each attempt to think, interrupting each beat of his brain as it tried to bring its attention on anything but the stimulus of that blink. He had no chance of even telling his hands to cover his eyes again.

His body collapsed like a marionette, and his face dropped below the flickering beam. His head hanging, he got to his hands and knees like a young boy getting up to face the schoolyard bully again.

The blink reflected off the floor and snapped his head up like a kick. The beam struck him full in the eyes.

It was even impossible for him to tell his throat to

scream. He swayed on his knees, and the blink went into his brain like a sewing machine.

Eventually he fell again, and by now he was beginning to realize what the machine was doing to him. Like an Air Force cadet feeling the controls of his first trainer, he began to realize that there was a logic to this—that certain actions produced a certain response—that the machine could predict the rhythm of his thoughts and throttle each one as it tried to leave his brain and translate itself into coherent thought.

He looked up deliberately, planning to snatch his face to one side the moment he felt it grip him again.

This time he was dimly aware of his arms, flailing upward and trying to find his face in a hopelessly uncoordinated effort.

He discovered he could sidestep the blink. If he upset the machine's mechanical prediction, he could think. His mind rolled its thought processes along well-worn grooves. As simple a thought as knowing he was afraid had to search out its correlations in a welter of skin temperature data, respiration and heartbeat notations, and an army of remembered precedents.

If he could reshuffle that procedure, using data first that would ordinarily claim his attention last, he could think. The blink couldn't stop him.

Like a man flying cross-country for the first time, he learned that railroads and highways are snakes, not arrows. Like a pilot teaching his instincts to punch the nose *down* in a stall, abrogating the falling-response that made him ache to pull back on the stick, he learned. He had to, or crash.

To do that, he had to change the way he thought.

The blink turned into a flashing light that winked on and off at preset intervals. He reached up and decided which knob was logically the master switch. He turned it off, feeling the muscles move, his skin stretch, and his bones roll to the motion. He felt the delicate nerves in his fingertips tell him how much pressure was on his capillaries, and the nerves under his fingernails corroborate their reading against the pressure there. His fingers told him when the switch was off, not the click of it. There was no click. The man who'd put that switch in hadn't intended it for human use.

Most of all, he felt his silent brother smile within him.

The three uniformed men stopped in the doorway and stared at him.

"Harvey Cable?" one of them finally asked. He blinked his eyes in the bright sunshine, peering through the doorway.

Cable smiled. "That's right. Come on in."

The man who'd spoken wore an Air Force major's insignia and uniform. The other two were United Nations inspectors. They stepped in gingerly, looking around them curiously.

"I refurnished the place," Cable said pleasantly. "I've got a pretty good assortment of woodworking tools in the cellar."

The major was pale, and the inspectors were nervous. They exchanged glances. "Typical case," one of them muttered, as though it had to be put in words.

"We understood you were crippled," the major stated.

"I was, Major—?"

"Paulson. Inspector Lee, and Inspector Carveth."

Paulson took a deep breath. "Well, we're exposed now. May we sit down?"

"Sure. Help yourselves. Exposed to the disease, you mean?"

The major dropped bitterly into a chair, an expression of surprise flickering over his face as he realized how comfortable it was. "Whatever it is. Contagious psychosis, they're saying now. No cure," he added bluntly.

"No disease," Cable said, but made little impression. All three men had their mouths clamped in thin, desperate lines. Apparently the most superfictional contact with the "disease" had proved sufficient for "infection."

"Well," Cable said, "what can I do for you? Would you like a drink first?"

Paulson shook his head, and the inspectors followed suit. Cable shrugged politely.

"We came here to do a job," Paulson said doggedly. "We might as well do it." He took an envelope out of his blouse pocket. "We had quite a battle with the Postmaster General about this. But we got it. It's a letter to you from Thomas Penn."

Cable took it with a wordless tilt of one eyebrow. It had been opened. Reaching into the envelope, he pulled out a short note:

Harv—

Chances are, this is the only way we'll have time to get in touch with you. Even so, you may not get it. Don't worry about us, no matter what you hear. We're fine. You won't know how fine until you get acquainted with the friend we're sending you.

*Good luck,
Tommy*

He smiled, feeling his silent brother smile, too. For a moment they shared the warmth of feeling between them. Then he turned his attention back to the three men. "Yes?"

Paulson glared at him. "Well, what about it? What friend? Where is he?"

Cable grinned at him. Paulson would never believe him if he told him. So there was no good in telling him. He'd have to find out for himself.

Just as everybody would. There was no logic in telling. Telling proved nothing, and who would welcome a "parasitic" alien into his body and mind, even if that "parasite" was a gentle, intelligent being who kept watch over the host, repairing his health, seeing to his well-being? Even if that "parasite" gave you sanity and rest, tranquillity and peace, because he needed it in order to fully be your bother? Who wants symbiosis until he's felt it? Not you, Major. Not Harvey Cable, either, fighting his battles on the edge of the world, proud, able—but alone.

Who wants to know any human being can go where he wants to, do what he wants to, now? Who wants to know disease is finished, age is calm, and death is always a falling asleep, now? Not the medical quacks, not the lonely-hearts bureaus, not the burial-insurance companies. Not the people who live on fear. Who wants a brother who doesn't hesitate to slap you down if you need it while you're growing up?

Should the *Endeavor* have brought riot and war back with it? Better a little panic now, damping itself out before it even gets out of the Southwest.

No, you don't tell people about this. You simply give it.

"Well?" Paulson demanded again.

Cable smiled at him. "Relax, Major. There's all the time in the world. My friend's where you can't ever get him unless I let you. What's going on up around the base?"

Paulson grunted his anger. "I don't know," he said harshly. "We were all in the outer quarantine circle."

"The outer circle. It's getting to one circle after another, is it?"

"Yes!"

"What's it like? The disease. What does it do?"

"You know better than I do."

"Men walking in their sleep? Doing things? Getting past guards and sentries, getting out of locked rooms? Some of them building funny kinds of electronic rigs?"

"What do you think?" Paulson was picturing himself doing it. It was plain on his face.

"I think so. Frighten you?"

Paulson didn't answer.

"It shouldn't. It's a little rough, going it alone, but with others around you, I don't imagine you'll have any trouble."

It wasn't the man who momentarily disorganized his body and passed under a door who was frightened. Not after he could do it of his own volition instead of unconsciously, at his brother's direction. It was the man who watched him do it, just as it was the men on the ground who were terrified for the Wright brothers. Paulson was remembering what he'd seen. He had no idea of how it felt to be free.

Cable thought of the stars he'd seen glimmering as he rode *Endeavor's* prototype, and the curtains and clouds of galaxies beyond them. He'd wanted to go to them all, and stand on every one of their planets.

Well, he couldn't quite have that. There wasn't time enough in a man's life. But his brother, too, had been a member of a race chained to one planet. The two of them could see quite a bit before they grew old.

So we were born in a solar system with one habitable planet, and we developed the star drive. And on Alpha's

planet, a race hung on, waiting for someone to come along and give it hands and bodies.

What price the final plan of the universe? Will my brother and I find the next piece of the ultimate jigsaw puzzle?

Cable looked at the three men, grinning at the thought of the first time one of them discovered a missing tooth was growing back in.

Starting with Paulson, he sent them each a part of his brother.

THE COUNTRY OF THE KIND

BY DAMON KNIGHT (1922-)

THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION
FEBRUARY

The multitalented Damon Knight returns to this series with what is perhaps his most important story. "The Country of the Kind" (the title pays homage to H. G. Wells) is the best "misfit-in-utopia" story ever written and contains several layers of meaning, including the nature of justice, the nature of prejudice, and the nature of human experience. It is the first of two excellent stories by him in this volume.

1956 was an important year for Damon Knight because it saw the publication of the first version of his IN SEARCH OF WONDER, the collection of book reviews and essays that along with its revised edition of 1967, would win him a Pilgrim Award from the Science Fiction Research Association in 1975. The book was published by Advent, a small Chicago-based publisher of books about science fiction that is still operating today.

Along with James Blish, he was the premier critical voice inside science fiction until the emergence of Algis Budrys. (MHG)

Stories don't necessarily stay with a person. A story can be very good; it can make an enormous impression and give much joy at the time; but then it passes, and you may not have occasion to think of it for a long time—or ever.

And some stories won't let you alone. You find yourself thinking about it and turning it over and over in your mind. "The Country of the Kind" is an example of the glue-story, as far as I am concerned. It has remained with me for over thirty years.

One of the reasons is because of my own unresolved feelings toward the question of the punishment for crime. Intellectually I grasp the necessity of understanding the causes of crime, the importance of prevention, of the improvement of society, of rehabilitation, of, in short, the notion of the criminal as victim.

But emotionally I am as much a prey as anyone else to fury and horror and revulsion and to the mad passion for revenge and for punishing a blow with a harder blow in instant return. The desire for getting back at an offender is so keen, so sharp, so demanding, that it leaves the desire for food or sex in the shade.

And then I think of "The Country of the Kind" and turn it over and over in my mind. (IA)

The attendant at the car lot was daydreaming when I pulled up—a big, lazy-looking man in black satin checkered down the front. I was wearing scarlet, myself; it suited my mood. I got out, almost on his toes.

"Park or storage?" he asked automatically, turning around. Then he realized who I was, and ducked his head away.

"Neither," I told him.

There was a hand torch on a shelf in the repair shed right behind him. I got it and came back. I knelt down to where I could reach behind the front wheel, and ignited the torch. I turned it on the axle and suspension. They glowed cherry red, then white, and fused together. Then I got up and turned the flame on both tires until the rubberoid stank and sizzled and melted down to the pavement. The attendant didn't say anything.

I left him there, looking at the mess on his nice clean concrete.

It had a been a nice car, too; but I could get another any time. And I felt like walking. I went down on the winding road, sleepy in the afternoon sunlight, dappled with shade and smelling of cool leaves. You couldn't see the houses; they were all sunken or hidden by shrubbery, or a little of both. That was the fad I'd heard about; it was what I'd come here to see. Not that anything the dulls did would be worth looking at.

I turned off at random and crossed a rolling lawn, went

through a second hedge of hawthorn in blossom, and came out next to a big sunken games court.

The tennis net was up, and two couples were going at it, just working up a little sweat—young, about half my age, all four of them. Three dark-haired, one blonde. They were evenly matched, and both couples played well together; they were enjoying themselves.

I watched for a minute. But by then the nearest two were beginning to sense I was there, anyhow. I walked down onto the court, just as the blonde was about to serve. She looked at me frozen across the net, poised on tiptoe. The others stood.

"Off," I told them. "Game's over."

I watched the blonde. She was not especially pretty as they go, but compactly and gracefully put together. She came down slowly, flat-footed without awkwardness, and tucked the racket under her arm; then the surprise was over and she was trotting off the court after the other three.

I followed their voices around the curve of the path, between towering masses of lilacs, inhaling the sweetness, until I came to what looked like a little sunning spot. There was a sundial, and a birdbath, and towels lying around on the grass. One couple, the dark-haired pair, was still in sight farther down the path, heads bobbing along. The other couple had disappeared.

I found the handle in the grass without any trouble. The mechanism responded, and an oblong section of turf rose up. It was the stair I had, not the elevator, but that was all right. I ran down the steps and into the first door I saw, and was in the top-floor lounge, an oval room lit with diffused simulated sunlight from above. The furniture was all comfortably bloated, sprawling and ugly; the carpet was deep, and there was a fresh flower scent in the air.

The blonde was over at the near end with her back to me, studying the autochef keyboard. She was half out of her playsuit. She pushed it the rest of the way down and stepped out of it, then turned and saw me.

She was surprised again; she hadn't thought I might follow her down.

I got up close before it occurred to her to move; then it was too late. She knew she couldn't get away from me;

she closed her eyes and leaned back against the paneling, turning a little pale. Her lips and her golden brows went up in the middle.

I looked her over and told her a few uncomplimentary things about herself. She trembled, but didn't answer. On an impulse, I leaned over and dialed the autochef to hot cheese sauce. I cut the safety out of circuit and put the quantity dial all the way up. I dialed *soup tureen* and then *punch bowl*.

The stuff began to come out in about a minute, steaming hot. I took the tureens and splashed them up and down the wall on either side of her. Then when the first punch bowl came out I used the empty bowls as scoops. I clotted the carpet with the stuff; I made streamers of it all along the walls, and dumped puddles into what furniture I could reach. Where it cooled it would harden, and where it hardened it would cling.

I wanted to splash it across her body, but it would've hurt, and we couldn't have that. The punch bowls of hot sauce were still coming out of the autochef, crowding each other around the vent. I punched *cancel*, and then *sauterne* (*swt., Calif.*).

It came out well chilled in open bottles. I took the first one and had my arm back just about to throw a nice line of the stuff right across her midriff when a voice said behind me: "Watch out for cold wine."

My arm twitched and a little stream of the wine splashed across her thighs. She was ready for it; her eyes had opened at the voice, and she barely jumped.

I whirled around, fighting mad. The man was standing there where he had come out of the stairwell. He was thinner in the face than most, bronzed, wide-chested, with alert blue eyes. If it hadn't been for him, I knew it would have worked—the blonde would have mistaken the chill splash for a scalding one.

I could hear the scream in my mind, and I wanted it.

I took a step toward him, and my foot slipped. I went down clumsily, wrenching one knee. I got up shaking and tight all over. I wasn't in control of myself. I screamed, "You—you—" I turned and got one of the punch bowls and lifted it in both hands, heedless of how the hot sauce was slopping over onto my wrists, and I had it almost in the air toward him when the sickness took me—that

damned buzzing in my head, louder, louder, drowning everything out.

When I came to, they were both gone. I got up off the floor, weak as death, and staggered over to the nearest chair. My clothes were slimed and sticky. I wanted to die. I wanted to drop into that dark furry hole that was yawning for me and never come up; but I made myself stay awake and get out of the chair.

Going down in the elevator, I almost blacked out again. The blonde and the thin man weren't in any of the second-floor bedrooms. I made sure of that, and then I emptied the closets and bureau drawers onto the floor, dragged the whole mess into one of the bathrooms and stuffed the tub with it, then turned on the water.

I tried the third floor: maintenance and storage. It was empty. I turned the furnace on and set the thermostat up as high as it would go. I disconnected all the safety circuits and alarms. I opened the freezer doors and dialed them to defrost. I propped the stairwell door open and went back up in the elevator.

On the second floor I stopped long enough to open the stairway door there—the water was halfway toward it, creeping across the floor—and then searched the top floor. No one was there. I opened book reels and threw them unwinding across the room; I would have done more, but I could hardly stand. I got up to the surface and collapsed on the lawn: that furry pit swallowed me up, dead and drowned.

While I slept, water poured down the open stairwell and filled the third level. Thawing food packages floated out into the rooms. Water seeped into wall panels and machine housings: circuits shorted and fuses blew. The air-conditioning stopped, but the pile kept heating. The water rose.

Spoiled food, floating supplies, grimy water surged up the stairwell. The second and first levels were bigger and would take longer to fill, but they'd fill. Rugs, furnishings, clothing, all the things in the house would be waterlogged and ruined. Probably the weight of so much water would shift the house, rupture water pipes and other fluid intakes. It would take a repair crew more than a day just to clean up the mess. The house itself was done for,

not repairable. The blonde and the thin man would never live in it again.

Serve them right.

The dulls could build another house; they built like beavers. There was only one of me in the world.

The earliest memory I have is of some woman, probably the crèche-mother, staring at me with an expression of shock and horror. Just that. I've tried to remember what happened directly before or after, but I can't. Before, there's nothing but the dark formless shaft of no-memory that runs back to birth. Afterward, the big calm.

From my fifth year, it must have been, to my fifteenth, everything I can remember floats in a pleasant dim sea. Nothing was terribly important. I was languid and soft; I drifted. Waking merged into sleep.

In my fifteenth year it was the fashion in loveplay for the young people to pair off for months or longer. "Loving steady," we called it. I remember how the older people protested that it was unhealthy; but we were all normal juniors, and nearly as free as adults under the law.

All but me.

The first steady girl I had was named Elen. She had blonde hair, almost white, worn long; her lashes were dark and her eyes pale green. Startling eyes: they didn't look as if they were looking at you. They looked blind.

Several times she gave me strange startled glances, something between fright and anger. Once it was because I held her too tightly and hurt her; other times, it seemed to be for nothing at all.

In our group, a pairing that broke up sooner than four weeks was a little suspect—there must be something wrong with one partner or both, or the pairing would have lasted longer.

Four weeks and a day after Elen and I made our pairing, she told me she was breaking it.

I'd thought I was ready. But I felt the room spin half around me till the wall came against my palm and stopped.

The room had been in use as a hobby chamber; there was a rack of plasticraft knives under my hand. I took one without thinking, and when I saw it I thought, *I'll frighten her.*

And I saw the startled, half-angry look in her pale eyes

as I went toward her; but this is curious: she wasn't looking at the knife. She was looking at my face.

The elders found me later with the blood on me, and put me into a locked room. Then it was my turn to be frightened, because I realized for the first time that it was possible for a human being to do what I had done.

And if I could do it to Elen, I thought, surely they could do it to me.

But they couldn't. They set me free: they had to.

And it was then I understood that I was the king of the world. . . .

The sky was turning clear violet when I woke up, and shadow was spilling out from the hedges. I went down the hill until I saw the ghostly blue of photon tubes glowing in a big oblong, just outside the commerce area. I went that way, by habit.

Other people were lining up at the entrance to show their books and be admitted. I brushed by them, seeing the shocked faces and feeling their bodies flinch away, and went on into the robing chamber.

Straps, aqualungs, masks and flippers were all for the taking. I stripped, dropping the clothes where I stood, and put the underwater equipment on. I strode out to the poolside, monstrous, like a being from another world. I adjusted the lung and the flippers, and slipped into the water.

Underneath, it was all crystal blue, with the forms of swimmers sliding through it like pale angels. Schools of small fish scattered as I went down. My heart was beating with a painful joy.

Down, far down, I saw a girl slowly undulating through the motions of a sinuous underwater dance, writhing around and around a ribbed column of imitation coral. She had a suction-tipped fish lance in her hand, but she was not using it; she was only dancing, all by herself, down at the bottom of the water.

I swam after her. She was young and delicately made, and when she saw the deliberately clumsy motions I made in imitation of hers, her eyes glinted with amusement behind her mask. She bowed to me in mockery, and slowly glided off with simple, exaggerated movements, like a child's ballet.

I followed. Around her and around I swam, stiff-legged,

first more childlike and awkward than she, then subtly parodying her motions; then improving on them until I was dancing an intricate, mocking dance around her.

I saw her eyes widen. She matched her rhythm to mine, then, and together, apart, together again we coiled the wake of our dancing. At last, exhausted, we clung together where a bridge of plastic coral arched over us. Her cool body was in the bend of my arm; behind two thicknesses of vitrin—a world away!—her eyes were friendly and kind.

There was a moment when, two strangers yet one flesh, we felt our souls speak to one another across that abyss of matter. It was a truncated embrace—we could not kiss, we could not speak—but her hands lay confidently on my shoulders, and her eyes looked into mine.

That moment had to end. She gestured toward the surface, and left me. I followed her up. I was feeling drowsy and almost at peace, after my sickness. I thought . . . I don't know what I thought.

We rose together at the side of the pool. She turned to me, removing her mask: and her smile stopped, and melted away. She stared at me with a horrified disgust, wrinkling her nose.

"*Pyah!*" she said, and turned, awkward in her flippers. Watching her, I saw her fall into the arms of a white-haired man, and heard her hysterical voice tumbling over itself.

"But don't you remember?" the man's voice rumbled. "You should know it by heart." He turned. "Hal, is there a copy of it in the clubhouse?"

A murmur answered him, and in a few moments a young man came out holding a slender brown pamphlet.

I knew that pamphlet. I could even have told you what page the white-haired man opened it to; what sentences the girl was reading as I watched.

I waited. I don't know why.

I heard her voice rising: "To think that I let him *touch* me!" And the white-haired man reassured her, the words rumbling, too low to hear. I saw her back straighten. She looked across at me . . . only a few yards in that scented, blue-lit air; a world away . . . and folded up the pamphlet into a hard wad, threw it, and turned on her heel.

The pamphlet landed almost at my feet. I touched it

with my toe, and it opened to the page I had been thinking of:

. . . sedation until his fifteenth year, when for sexual reasons it became no longer practicable. While the advisers and medical staff hesitated, he killed a girl of the group by violence.

And farther down:

The solution finally adopted was threefold.

1. *A sanction*—the only sanction possible to our humane, permissive society. Excommunication: not to speak to him, touch him willingly, or acknowledge his existence.

2. *A precaution*. Taking advantage of a mild predisposition to epilepsy, a variant of the so-called Kusko analog technique was employed, to prevent by an epileptic seizure any future act of violence.

3. *A warning*. A careful alteration of his body chemistry was affected to make his exhaled and exuded wastes emit a strong pungent and offensive odor. In mercy, he himself was rendered unable to detect this smell.

Fortunately, the genetic and environmental accidents which combined to produce this atavism have been fully explained and can never again . . .

The words stopped meaning anything, as they always did at that point. I didn't want to read any farther; it was all nonsense, anyway. I was the king of the world.

I got up and went away, out into the night, blind to the dulls who thronged the rooms I passed.

Two squares away was the commerce area. I found a clothing outlet and went in. All the free clothes in the display cases were drab: those were for worthless floaters, not for me. I went past them to the specials, and found a combination I could stand—silver and blue, with a severe black piping down the tunic. A dull would have said it was "nice." I punched for it. The automatic looked me over with its dull glassy eye and croaked, "Your contribution book, please."

I could have had a contribution book, for the trouble

of stepping out into the street and taking it away from the first passerby; but I didn't have the patience. I picked up the one-legged table from the refreshment nook, hefted it, and swung it at the cabinet door. The metal shrieked and dented, opposite the catch. I swung once more to the same place, and the door sprang open. I pulled out clothing in handfuls till I got a set that would fit me.

I bathed and changed, and then went prowling in the big multi-outlet down the avenue. All those places are arranged pretty much alike, no matter what the local managers do to them. I went straight to the knives, and picked out three in graduated sizes, down to the size of my fingernail. Then I had to take my chances. I tried the furniture department, where I had had good luck once in a while, but this year all they were using was metal. I had to have seasoned wood.

I knew where there was a big cache of cherry wood, in good-sized blocks, in a forgotten warehouse up north at a place called Kootenay. I could have carried some around with me—enough for years—but what for, when the world belonged to me?

It didn't take me long. Down in the workshop section, of all places, I found some antiques—tables and benches, all with wooden tops. While the dulls collected down at the other end of the room, pretending not to notice, I sawed off a good oblong chunk of the smallest bench, and made a base for it out of another.

As long as I was there, it was a good place to work, and I could eat and sleep upstairs, so I stayed.

I knew what I wanted to do. It was going to be a man, sitting, with his legs crossed and his forearms resting down along his calves. His head was going to be tilted back, and his eyes closed, as if he were turning his face up to the sun.

In three days it was finished. The trunk and limbs had a shape that was not man and not wood, but something in between: something that hadn't existed before I made it.

Beauty. That was the old word.

I had carved one of the figure's hands hanging loosely, and the other one curled shut. There had to be a time to stop and say it was finished. I took the smallest knife, the one I had been using to scrape the wood smooth, and cut

away the handle and ground down what was left of the shaft to a thin spike. Then I drilled a hole into the wood of the figurine's hand, in the hollow between thumb and curled finger. I fitted the knife blade in there; in the small hand it was a sword.

I cemented it in place. Then I took the sharp blade and stabbed my thumb, and smeared the blade.

I hunted most of that day, and finally found the right place—a niche in an outcropping of striated brown rock, in a little triangular half-wild patch that had been left where two roads forked. Nothing was permanent, of course, in a community like this one that might change its houses every five years or so, to follow the fashion; but this spot had been left to itself for a long time. It was the best I could do.

I had the paper ready: it was one of a batch I had printed up a year ago. The paper was treated, and I knew it would stay legible a long time. I hid a little photo capsule in the back of the niche, and ran the control wire to a staple in the base of the figurine. I put the figurine down on top of the paper, and anchored it lightly to the rock with two spots of all-cement. I had done it so often that it came naturally; I knew just how much cement would hold the figurine steady against a casual hand, but yield to one that really wanted to pull it down.

Then I stepped back to look: and the power and the pity of it made my breath come short, and tears start to my eyes.

Reflected light gleamed fitfully on the dark-stained blade that hung from his hand. He was sitting alone in that niche that closed him in like a coffin. His eyes were shut, and his head tilted back, as if he were turning his face up to the sun.

But only rock was over his head. There was no sun for him.

Hunched on the cool bare ground under a pepper tree, I was looking down across the road at the shadowed niche where my figurine sat.

I was all finished here. There was nothing more to keep me, and yet I couldn't leave.

People walked past now and then—not often. The community seemed half deserted, as if most of the people

had flocked off to a surf party somewhere, or a contribution meeting, or to watch a new house being dug to replace the one I had wrecked. . . . There was a little wind blowing toward me, cool and lonesome in the leaves.

Up the other side of the hollow there was a terrace, and on that terrace, half an hour ago, I had seen a brief flash of color—a boy's head, with a red cap on it, moving past and out of sight.

That was why I had to stay. I was thinking how that boy might come down from his terrace and into my road, and passing the little wild triangle of land, see my figurine. I was thinking he might not pass by indifferently, but stop: and go closer to look: and pick up the wooden man: and read what was written on the paper underneath.

I believed that sometimes it had to happen. I wanted it so hard that I ached.

My carvings were all over the world, wherever I had wandered. There was one in Congo City, carved of ebony, dusty-black; one on Cyprus, of bone; one in New Bombay, of shell; one in Chang-teh, of jade.

They were like signs printed in red and green, in a color-blind world. Only the one I was looking for would ever pick one of them up, and read the message I knew by heart.

TO YOU WHO CAN SEE, the first sentence said, I OFFER YOU A WORLD . . .

There was a flash of color up on the terrace. I stiffened. A minute later, here it came again, from a different direction: it was the boy, clambering down the slope, brilliant against the green, with his red sharp-billed cap like a woodpecker's head.

I held my breath.

He came toward me through the fluttering leaves, ticked off by pencils of sunlight as he passed. He was a brown boy, I could see at this distance, with a serious thin face. His ears stuck out, flickering pink with the sun behind them, and his elbow and knee pads made him look knobby.

He reached the fork in the road, and chose the path on my side. I huddled into myself as he came nearer. *Let him see it, let him not see me*, I thought fiercely.

My fingers closed around a stone.

He was nearer, walking jerkily with his hands in his pockets, watching his feet mostly.

When he was almost opposite me, I threw the stone.

It rustled through the leaves below the niche in the rock. The boy's head turned. He stopped, staring. I think he saw the figurine then. I'm sure he saw it.

He took one step.

"Risha!" came floating down from the terrace.

And he looked up. "Here," he piped.

I saw the woman's head, tiny at the top of the terrace. She called something I didn't hear; I was standing up, tight with anger.

Then the wind shifted. It blew from me to the boy. He whirled around, his eyes big, and clapped a hand to his nose.

"Oh, what a stench!" he said.

He turned to shout, "Coming!" and then he was gone, hurrying back up the road, into the unstable blur of green.

My one chance, ruined. He would have seen the image, I knew, if it hadn't been for that damned woman, and the wind shifting. . . . They were all against me, people, wind and all.

And the figurine still sat, blind eyes turned up to the rocky sky.

There was something inside me that told me to take my disappointment and go away from there, and not come back.

I knew I would be sorry. I did it anyway: took the image out of the niche, and the paper with it, and climbed the slope. At the top I heard his clear voice laughing.

There was a thing that might have been an ornamental mound, or the camouflaged top of a buried house. I went around it, tripping over my own feet, and came upon the boy kneeling on the turf. He was playing with a brown-and-white puppy.

He looked up with the laughter going out of his face. There was no wind, and he could smell me. I knew it was bad. No wind, and the puppy to distract him—everything about it was wrong. But I went to him blindly anyhow, and fell on one knee, and shoved the figurine at his face.

"Look—" I said.

He went over backward in his hurry: he couldn't even have seen the image, except as a brown blur coming at

him. He scrambled up, with the puppy whining and yapping around his heels, and ran for the mound.

I was up after him, clawing up moist earth and grass as I rose. In the other hand I still had the image clutched, and the paper with it.

A door popped open, and swallowed him and popped shut again in my face. With the flat of my hand I beat the vines around it until I hit the doorplate by accident and the door opened. I dived in, shouting, "Wait," and was in a spiral passage, lit pearl-gray, winding downward. Down I went headlong, and came out at the wrong door—an underground conservatory, humid and hot under the yellow lights, with dripping rank leaves in long rows. I went down the aisle raging, overturning the tanks, until I came to a vestibule and an elevator.

Down I went again to the third level and a labyrinth of guest rooms, all echoing, all empty. At last I found a ramp leading upward, past the conservatory, and at the end of it voices.

The door was clear vitrin, and I paused on the near side of it looking and listening. There was the boy, and a woman old enough to be his mother, just—sister or cousin, more likely—and an elderly woman in a hard chair holding the puppy. The room was comfortable and tasteless, like other rooms.

I saw the shock grow on their faces as I burst in: it was always the same, they knew I would like to kill them, but they never expected that I would come uninvited into a house. It was not done.

There was that boy, so close I could touch him, but the shock of all of them was quivering in the air, smothering, like a blanket that would deaden my voice. I felt I had to shout.

"Everything they tell you is lies!" I said. "See here—here, this is the truth!" I had the figurine in front of his eyes, but he didn't see.

"Risha, go below," said the young woman quietly. He turned to obey, quick as a ferret. I got in front of him again. "Stay," I said, breathing hard. "Look—"

"Remember, Risha, don't speak," said the woman.

I couldn't stand any more. Where the boy went I don't know; I ceased to see him. With the image in one hand and the paper with it, I leaped at the woman. I was

almost quick enough; I almost reached her; but the buzzing took me in the middle of a step, louder, louder, like the end of the world.

It was the second time that week. When I came to, I was sick and too faint to move for a long time.

The house was silent. They had gone, of course . . . the house had been defiled, having me in it. They wouldn't live here again, but would build elsewhere.

My eyes blurred. After a while I stood up and looked around at the room. The walls were hung with a gray, close-woven cloth that looked as if it would tear, and I thought of ripping it down in strips, breaking furniture, stuffing carpets and bedding into the oubliette. . . . But I didn't have the heart for it. I was too tired. Thirty years. . . . They had given me all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory thereof, thirty years ago. It was more than one man alone could bear, for thirty years.

At last I stooped and picked up the figurine, and the paper that was supposed to go under it—crumpled now, with the forlorn look of a message that someone has thrown away unread.

I sighed bitterly.

I smoothed it out and read the last part.

YOU CAN SHARE THE WORLD WITH ME. THEY CAN'T STOP YOU. STRIKE NOW—PICK UP A SHARP THING AND STAB, OR A HEAVY THING AND CRUSH. THAT'S ALL. THAT WILL MAKE YOU FREE. ANYONE CAN DO IT.

Anyone. Someone. Anyone.

EXPLORATION TEAM

BY MURRAY LEINSTER (WILL F. JENKINS,
1896-1975)

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION
MARCH

The late Murray Leinster returns to this series (see "First Contact" in Volume 7 (1945) and "A Logic Called Joe" in Volume 8 (1946) with one of his most famous stories and the one that won him a Hugo Award in 1956. What is remarkable about Leinster is (1) the longevity of his career, since he first published in 1913 and was a full-time writer from 1918 until close to his death; (2) the fact that he grew with the field and remained a solid professional until the end; and (3) that he managed to be innovative with stories such as "Sidewise in Time," "First Contact," the Med series, the above-mentioned first story about a personal computer, and several others that broke new ground.

"Exploration Team" has aliens, interplanetary exploration, and that good old storytelling ability that made Murray Leinster a man to read and a talent not to be missed. (MHG)

I think of the Hugo Awards sometimes. They weren't awarded on a regular basis until 1955. By that time, Murray Leinster was a sexagenarian and had been publishing for over forty years. What if the Hugo Awards had been awarded, let us say, from the beginning of magazine science fiction in 1926? Surely Leinster would have gotten a Hugo in 1934 for "Sidewise in Time" and very likely in 1945 for "First Contact." Even so, he managed to make it in the twilight of his career.

In fact, I have in the past thought of a series of anthologies featuring the Ghost Hugos; picking the Hugo winners

year by year, in those years before the Hugo existed. In that same year in which "Sidewise in Time" would win the novelette Hugo, Stanley Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" would surely have won the short-story Hugo.

And just think—for the year 1941, perhaps Robert Heinlein's METHUSELAH'S CHILDREN would have taken the novel category, Alfred Bester's "Adam and No Eve," the short story, and my own "Nightfall" the novelette. And all three, in whole or in part, were in the September 1941 issue of ASTOUNDING.

Oh, well—dreams of glory! (IA)

I

The nearer moon went by overhead. It was jagged and irregular in shape, and was probably a captured asteroid. Huyghens had seen it often enough, so he did not go out of his quarters to watch it hurtle across the sky with seemingly the speed of an atmosphere-flier, occulting the stars as it went. Instead, he sweated over paperwork, which should have been odd because he was technically a felon and all his labors on Loren Two felonious. It was odd, too, for a man to do paperwork in a room with steel shutters and a huge bald eagle—untethered—dozing on a three-inch perch set in the wall. But paperwork was not Huyghens' real task. His only assistant had tangled with a night-walker and the furtive Kodius Company ships had taken him away to where Kodius Company ships came from. Huyghens had to do two men's work in loneliness. To his knowledge, he was the only man in this solar system.

Below him, there were snufflings. Sitka Pete got up heavily and padded to his water pan. He lapped the refrigerated water and sneezed violently. Sourdough Charley waked and complained in a rumbling growl. There were divers other rumblings and mutterings below. Huyghens called reassuringly, "Easy there!" and went on with his work. He finished a climate report, and fed figures to a computer, and while it hummed over them he entered the inventory totals in the station log, showing what supplies remained. Then he began to write up the log proper.

"Sitka Pete," he wrote, "*has apparently solved the prob-*

lem of killing individual sphexes. He has learned that it doesn't do to bug them and that his claws can't penetrate their hide—not the top hide, anyhow. Today Semper notified us that a pack of sphexes had found the scent-trail to the station. Sitka hid downwind until they arrived. Then he charged from the rear and brought his paws together on both sides of a sphex's head in a terrific pair of slaps. It must have been like two twelve-inch shells arriving from opposite directions at the same time. It must have scrambled the sphex's brains as if they were eggs. It dropped dead. He killed two more with such mighty pairs of wallops. Sourdough Charley watched, grunting, and when the sphexes turned on Sitka, he charged in his turn. I, of course, couldn't shoot too close to him, so he might have fared badly but that Faro Nell came pouring out of the bear quarters to help. The diversion enabled Sitka Pete to resume the use of his new technique, towering on his hind legs and swinging his paws in the new and grisly fashion. The fight ended promptly. Semper flew and screamed above the scrap, but as usual did not join in. Note: Nuggest, the cub, tried to mix in but his mother cuffed him out of the way. Sourdough and Sitka ignored him as usual. Kodius Champion's genes are sound!"

The noises of the night went on outside. There were notes like organ tones—song lizards. There were the tittering giggling cries of night-walkers—not to be tittered back at. There were sounds like tack hammers, and doors closing, and from every direction came noises like hiccups in various keys. These were made by the improbable small creatures which on Loren Two took the place of insects.

Huyghens wrote out:

"Sitka seemed ruffled when the fight was over. He painstakingly used his trick on every dead or wounded sphex, except those he'd killed with it, lifting up their heads for his piledriverlike blows from two directions at once, as if to show Sourdough how it was done. There was much grunting as they hauled the carcasses to the incinerator. It almost seemed—"

The arrival bell clanged, and Huyghens jerked up his head to stare at it. Semper, the eagle, opened icy eyes. He blinked.

Noises. There was a long, deep, contented snore from

below. Something shrieked, out in the jungle. Hiccups. Clatterings, and organ notes—

The bell clanged again. It was a notice that a ship aloft somewhere had picked up the beacon beam—which only Kodius Company ships should know about—and was communicating for a landing. But there shouldn't be any ships in this solar system just now! This was the only habitable planet of the sun, and it had been officially declared uninhabitable by reason of inimical animal life. Which meant sphexes. Therefore no colony was permitted, and the Kodius Company broke the law. And there were few graver crimes than unauthorized occupation of a new planet.

The bell clanged a third time. Huyghens swore. His hand went out to cut off the beacon—but that would be useless. Radar would have fixed it and tied it in with physical features like the nearby sea and the Sere Plateau. The ship could find the place, anyhow, and descend by daylight.

"The devil!" said Huyghens. But he waited yet again for the bell to ring. A Kodius Company ship would double-ring to reassure him. But there shouldn't be a Kodius Company ship for months.

The bell clanged singly. The space phone dial flickered and a voice came out of it, tinny from stratospheric distortion:

"Calling ground! Calling ground! Crete Line ship Odysseus calling ground on Loren Two. Landing one passenger by boat. Put on your field lights."

Huyghens' mouth dropped open. A Kodius Company ship would be welcome. A Colonial Survey ship would be extremely unwelcome, because it would destroy the colony and Sitka and Sourdough and Faro Nell and Nugget—and Semper—and carry Huyghens off to be tried for unauthorized colonization and all that it implied.

But a commercial ship, landing one passenger by boat—there were simply no circumstances under which that would happen. Not to an unknown, illegal colony. Not to a furtive station!

Huyghens flicked on the landing-field lights. He saw the glare in the field outside. Then he stood up and prepared to take the measures required by discovery. He packed the paperwork he'd been doing into the disposal

safe. He gathered up all personal documents and tossed them in. Every record, every bit of evidence that the Kodiak Company maintained this station went into the safe. He slammed the door. He touched his finger to the disposal button, which would destroy the contents and melt down even the ashes past their possible use for evidence in court.

Then he hesitated. If it were a Survey ship, the button had to be pressed and he must resign himself to a long term in prison. But a Crete Line ship—if the space phone told the truth—was not threatening. It was simply unbelievable.

He shook his head. He got into travel garb and armed himself. He went down into the bear quarters, turning on lights as he went. There were startled snufflings and Sitka Pete reared himself very absurdly to a sitting position to blink at him. Sourdough Charley lay on his back with his legs in the air. He'd found it cooler, sleeping that way. He rolled over with a thump. He made snorting sounds which somehow sounded cordial. Faro Nell padded to the door of her separate apartment—assigned her so that Nugget would not be underfoot to irritate the big males.

Huyghens, as the human population of Loren Two, faced the work force, fighting force, and—with Nugget—four-fifths of the terrestrial nonhuman population of the planet. They were mutated Kodiak bears, descendants of that Kodiak Champion for whom the Kodiak Company was named. Sitka Pete was a good twenty-two hundred pounds of lumbering, intelligent carnivore. Sourdough Charley would weigh within a hundred pounds of that figure. Faro Nell was eighteen hundred pounds of female charm—and ferocity. Then Nugget poked his muzzle around his mother's furry rump to see what was there, and he was six hundred pounds of ursine infancy. The animals looked at Huyghens expectantly. If he'd had Semper riding on his shoulder, they'd have known what was expected of them.

"Let's go," said Huyghens. "It's dark outside, but somebody's coming. And it may be bad!"

He unfastened the outer door of the bear quarters. Sitka Pete went charging clumsily through it. A forthright charge was the best way to develop any situation—if one was an oversize male Kodiak bear. Sourdough went lum-

bering after him. There was nothing hostile immediately outside. Sitka stood up on his hind legs—he reared up a solid twelve feet—and sniffed in the air. Sourdough methodically lumbered to one side and then the other, sniffing in his turn. Nell came out, nine-tenths of a ton of daintiness, and rumbled admonitorily at Nugget, who trailed her closely. Huyghens stood in the doorway, his night-sighted gun ready. He felt uncomfortable at sending the bears ahead into a Loren Two jungle at night. But they were qualified to scent danger, and he was not.

The illumination of the jungle in a wide path toward the landing field made for weirdness in the look of things. There were arching giant ferns and columnar trees which grew above them, and the extraordinary lanceolate underbrush of the jungle. The flood lamps, set level with the ground, lighted everything from below. The foliage, then, was brightly lit against the black night sky—brightly lit enough to dim out the stars. There were astonishing contrasts of light and shadow everywhere.

“On ahead!” commanded Huyghens, waving. “Hup!”

He swung the bear-quarters door shut. He moved toward the landing field through the lane of lighted forest. The two giant male Kodiaks lumbered ahead. Sitka Pete dropped to all fours and prowled. Sourdough Charley followed closely, swinging from side to side. Huyghens came alertly behind the two of them, and Faro Nell brought up the rear with Nugget following her closely.

It was an excellent military formation for progress through dangerous jungle. Sourdough and Sitka were advance guard and point, respectively, while Faro Nell guarded the rear. With Nugget to look after she was especially alert against attack from behind. Huyghens was, of course, the striking force. His gun fired explosive bullets which would discourage even sphexes, and his night-sight—a cone of light which went on when he took up the trigger slack—told exactly where they would strike. It was not a sportsmanlike weapon, but the creatures of Loren Two were not sportsmanlike antagonists. The night-walkers, for example— But night-walkers feared light. They attacked only in a species of hysteria if it were too bright.

Huyghens moved toward the glare at the landing field. His mental state was savage. The Kodius Company sta-

tion on Loren Two was completely illegal. It happened to be necessary, from one point of view, but it was still illegal. The tinny voice on the space phone was not convincing, in ignoring that illegality. But if a ship landed, Huyghens could get back to the station before men could follow, and he'd have the disposal safe turned on in time to protect those who'd sent him here.

But he heard the faraway and high, harsh roar of a landing-boat rocket—not a ship's bellowing tubes—as he made his way through the unreal-seeming brush. The roar grew louder as he pushed on, the three big Kodiaks padding here and there, sniffing thoughtfully, making a perfect defensive-offensive formation for the particular conditions of this planet.

He reached the edge of the landing field, and it was blindingly bright, with the customary divergent beams slanting skyward so a ship could check its instrument landing by sight. Landing fields like this had been standard, once upon a time. Nowadays all developed planets had landing grids—monstrous structures which drew upon ionospheres for power and lifted and drew down star ships with remarkable gentleness and unlimited force. This sort of landing field would be found where a survey team was at work, or where some strictly temporary investigation of ecology or bacteriology was under way, or where a newly authorized colony had not yet been able to build its landing grid. Of course it was unthinkable that anybody would attempt a settlement in defiance of the law!

Already, as Huyghens reached the edge of the scorched open space, the night creatures had rushed to the light like moths on Earth. The air was misty with crazily gyrating, tiny flying things. They were innumerable and of every possible form and size, from the white midges of the night and multiwinged flying worms to those revoltingly naked-looking larger creatures which might have passed for plucked flying monkeys if they had not been carnivorous and worse. The flying things soared and whirred and danced and spun insanely in the glare. They made peculiarly plaintive humming noises. They almost formed a lamplit ceiling over the cleared space. They did hide the stars. Staring upward, Huyghens could just barely make

out the blue-white flame of the space boat's rocket through the fog of wings and bodies.

The rocket flame grew steadily in size. Once, apparently, it tilted to adjust the boat's descending course. It went back to normal. A speck of incandescence at first, it grew until it was like a great star, and then a more-than-brilliant moon, and then it was a pitiless glaring eye. Huyghens averted his gaze from it. Sitka Pete sat lumpily—more than a ton of him—and blinked wisely at the dark jungle away from the light. Sourdough ignored the deepening, increasing rocket roar. He sniffed the air delicately. Faro Nell held Nugget firmly under one huge paw and licked his head as if tidying him up to be seen by company. Nugget wriggled.

The roar became that of ten thousand thunders. A warm breeze blew outward from the landing field. The rocket boat hurled downward, and its flame touched the mist of flying things, and they shriveled and burned and were hot. Then there were churning clouds of dust everywhere, and the center of the field blazed terribly—and something slid down a shaft of fire, and squeezed it flat, and sat on it—and the flame went out. The rocket boat sat there, resting on its tail fins, pointing toward the stars from which it came.

There was a terrible silence after the tumult. Then, very faintly, the noises of the night came again. There were sounds like those of organ pipes, and very faint and apologetic noises like hiccups. All these sounds increased, and suddenly Huyghens could hear quite normally. Then a side port opened with a quaint sort of clattering, and something unfolded from where it had been inset into the hull of the space boat, and there was a metal passageway across the flame-heated space on which the boat stood.

A man came out of the port. He reached back in and shook hands very formally. He climbed down the ladder rungs to the walkway. He marched above the steaming baked area, carrying a traveling bag. He reached the end of the walk and stepped gingerly to the ground. He moved hastily to the edge of the clearing. He waved to the space boat. There were ports. Perhaps someone returned the gesture. The walkway folded briskly back up to the hull and vanished in it. A flame exploded into being under the tail fins. There were fresh clouds of

monstrous, choking dust and a brightness like that of a sun. There was noise past the possibility of endurance. Then the light rose swiftly through the dust cloud, and sprang higher and climbed more swiftly still. When Huyghens' ears again permitted him to hear anything, there was only a diminishing mutter in the heavens and a small bright speck of light ascending to the sky and swinging eastward as it rose to intercept the ship which had let it descend.

The night noises of the jungle went on. Life on Loren Two did not need to heed the doings of men. But there was a spot of incandescence in the day-bright clearing, and a short, brisk man looked puzzledly about him with a traveling bag in his hand.

Huyghens advanced toward him as the incandescence dimmed. Sourdough and Sitka preceded him. Faro Nell trailed faithfully, keeping a maternal eye on her offspring. The man in the clearing stared at the parade they made. It would be upsetting, even after preparation, to land at night on a strange planet, and to have the ship's boat and all links with the rest of the cosmos depart, and then to find oneself approached—it might seem stalked—by two colossal male Kodiak bears, with a third bear and a cub behind them. A single human figure in such company might seem irrelevant.

The new arrival gazed blankly. He moved, startledly. Then Huyghens called: "Hello, there! Don't worry about the bears! They're friends!"

Sitka reached the newcomer. He went warily downwind from him and sniffed. The smell was satisfactory. Man-smell. Sitka sat down with the solid impact of more than a ton of bear meat landing on packed dirt. He regarded the man amiably. Sourdough said "*Whoosh!*" and went on to sample the air beyond the clearing. Huyghens approached. The newcomer wore the uniform of the Colonial Survey. That was bad. It bore the insignia of a senior officer. Worse.

"Hah!" said the just-landed man. "Where are the robots? What in all the nineteen hells are these creatures? Why did you shift your station? I'm Roane, here to make a progress report on your colony."

Huyghens said: "What colony?"

"Loren Two Robot Installation—" Then Roane said

indignantly, "Don't tell me that that idiot skipper dropped me at the wrong place! This is Loren Two, isn't it? And this is the landing field. But where are your robots? You should have the beginning of a grid up! What the devil's happened here and what are these beasts?"

Huyghens grimaced.

"This," he said politely, "is an illegal, unlicensed settlement. I'm a criminal. These beasts are my confederates. If you don't want to associate with criminals you needn't, of course, but I doubt if you'll live till morning unless you accept my hospitality while I think over what to do about your landing. In reason, I ought to shoot you."

Faro Nell came to a halt behind Huyghens, which was her proper post in all outdoor movement. Nugget, however, saw a new human. Nugget was a cub, and, therefore, friendly. He ambled forward ingratiatingly. He was four feet high at the shoulders, on all fours. He wriggled bashfully as he approached Roane. He sneezed, because he was embarrassed.

His mother overtook him swiftly and cuffed him to one side. He wailed. The wail of a six-hundred-pound Kodiak bear cub is a remarkable sound. Roane gave ground a pace.

"I think," he said carefully, "that we'd better talk things over. But if this is an illegal colony, of course you're under arrest and anything you say will be used against you."

Huyghens grimaced again.

"Right," he said. "But now if you'll walk close to me, we'll head back to the station. I'd have Sourdough carry your bag—he likes to carry things—but he may need his teeth. We've half a mile to travel." He turned to the animals. "Let's go!" he said commandingly. "Back to the station! Hup!"

Grunting, Sitka Pete arose and took up his duties as advanced point of a combat team. Sourdough trailed, swinging widely to one side and another. Huyghens and Roane moved together. Faro Nell and Nugget brought up the rear. Which, of course, was the only relatively safe way for anybody to travel on Loren Two, in the jungle, a good half mile from one's fortresslike residence.

But there was only one incident on the way back. It

was a night-walker, made hysterical by the lane of light. It poured through the underbrush, uttering cries like maniacal laughter.

Sourdough brought it down, a good ten yards from Huyghens. When it was all over, Nugget bristled up to the dead creature, uttering cub growls. He feigned to attack it.

His mother whacked him soundly.

II

There were comfortable, settling-down noises below. The bears grunted and rumbled, but ultimately were still. The glare from the landing field was gone. The lighted lane through the jungle was dark again. Huyghens ushered the man from the space boat up into his living quarters. There was a rustling stir, and Semper took his head from under his wing. He stared coldly at the two humans. He spread monstrous, seven-foot wings and fluttered them. He opened his beak and closed it with a snap.

"That's Semper," said Huyghens. "Semper Tyrannis. He's the rest of the terrestrial population here. Not being a fly-by-night sort of creature, he didn't come out to welcome you."

Roane blinked at the huge bird, perched on a three-inch-thick perch set in the wall.

"An eagle?" he demanded. "Kodiak bears—mutated ones you say, but still bears—and now an eagle? You've a very nice fighting unit in the bears."

"They're pack animals too," said Huyghens. "They can carry some hundreds of pounds without losing too much combat efficiency. And there's no problem of supply. They live off the jungle. Not sphexes, though. Nothing will eat a sphex, even if it can kill one."

He brought out glasses and a bottle. He indicated a chair. Roane put down his traveling bag. He took a glass.

"I'm curious," he observed. "Why Semper Tyrannis? I can understand Sitka Pete and Sourdough Charley as names. The home of their ancestors makes them fitting. But why Semper?"

"He was bred for hawking," said Huyghens. "You sic a dog on something. You sic Semper Tyrannis. He's too

big to ride on a hawking glove, so the shoulders of my coats are padded to let him ride there. He's a flying scout. I've trained him to notify us of sphexes, and in flight he carries a tiny television camera. He's useful, but he hasn't the brains of the bears."

Roane sat down and sipped at his glass.

"Interesting . . . very interesting! But this is an illegal settlement. I'm a Colonial Survey officer. My job is reporting on progress according to plan, but nevertheless I have to arrest you. Didn't you say something about shooting me?"

Huyghens said doggedly: "I'm trying to think of a way out. Add up all the penalties for illegal colonization and I'd be in a very bad fix if you got away and reported this setup. Shooting you would be logical."

"I see that," said Roane reasonably. "But since the point has come up—I have a blaster trained on you from my pocket."

Huyghens shrugged.

"It's rather likely that my human confederates will be back here before your friends. You'd be in a very tight fix if my friends came back and found you more or less sitting on my corpse."

Roane nodded.

"That's true, too. Also it's probable that your fellow terrestrials wouldn't cooperate with me as they have with you. You seem to have the whip hand, even with my blaster trained on you. On the other hand, you could have killed me quite easily after the boat left, when I'd first landed. I'd have been quite unsuspecting. So you may not really intend to murder me."

Huyghens shrugged again.

"So," said Roane, "since the secret of getting along with people is that of postponing quarrels—suppose we postpone the question of who kills whom? Frankly, I'm going to send you to prison if I can. Unlawful colonization is very bad business. But I suppose you feel that you have to do something permanent about me. In your place I probably should, too. Shall we declare a truce?"

Huyghens indicated indifference.

Roane said vexedly: "Then I do! I have to! So—"

He pulled his hand out of his pocket and put a pocket blaster on the table. He leaned back, defiantly.

"Keep it," said Huyghens. "Loren Two isn't a place where you live long unarmed." He turned to a cupboard. "Hungry?"

"I could eat," admitted Roane.

Huyghens pulled out two meal-packs from the cupboard and inserted them in the readier below. He set out plates.

"Now—what happened to the official, licensed, authorized colony here?" asked Roane briskly. "License issued eighteen months ago. There was a landing of colonists with a drone fleet of equipment and supplies. There've been four ship contacts since. There should be several thousand robots being industrious under adequate human supervision. There should be a hundred-mile-square clearing, planted with food plants for later human arrivals. There should be a landing grid at least half-finished. Obviously there should be a space beacon to guide ships to a landing. There isn't. There's no clearing visible from space. That Crete Line ship has been in orbit for three days, trying to find a place to drop me. Her skipper was fuming. Your beacon is the only one on the planet, and we found it by accident. What happened?"

Huyghens served the food. He said dryly: "There could be a hundred colonies on this planet without any one knowing of any other. I can only guess about your robots, but I suspect they ran into sphexes."

Roane paused, with his fork in his hand.

"I read up on this planet, since I was to report on its colony. A sphex is part of the inimical animal life here. Cold-blooded belligerent carnivore, not a lizard but a genus all its own. Hunts in packs. Seven to eight hundred pounds when adult. Lethally dangerous and simply too numerous to fight. They're why no license was ever granted to human colonists. Only robots could work here, because they're machines. What animal attacks machines?"

Huyghens said: "What machine attacks animals? The sphexes wouldn't bother robots, of course, but would robots bother the sphexes?"

Roane chewed and swallowed.

"Hold it! I'll agree that you can't make a hunting robot. A machine can discriminate, but it can't decide. That's why there's no danger of a robot revolt. They can't decide to do something for which they have no

instructions. But this colony was planned with full knowledge of what robots can and can't do. As ground was cleared, it was enclosed in an electric fence which no sphex could touch without frying."

Huyghens thoughtfully cut his food. After a moment: "The landing was in the wintertime," he observed. "It must have been, because the colony survived a while. And at a guess, the last ship landing was before thaw. The years are eighteen months long here, you know."

Roane admitted: "It was in winter that the landing was made. And the last ship landing was before spring. The idea was to get mines in operation for material, and to have ground cleared and enclosed in sphex-proof fence before the sphexes came back from the tropics. They winter there, I understand."

"Did you ever see a sphex?" Huyghens asked. Then added, "No, of course not. But if you took a spitting cobra and crossed with it a wildcat, painted it tan and blue and then gave it hydrophobia and homicidal mania at once—why, you might have one sphex. But not the race of sphexes. They can climb trees, by the way. A fence wouldn't stop them."

"An electrified fence," said Roane. "Nothing could climb that!"

"No one animal," Huyghens told him. "But sphexes are a race. The smell of one dead sphex brings others running with blood in their eyes. Leave a dead sphex alone for six hours and you've got them around by the dozen. Two days and there are hundreds. Longer, and you've got thousands of them! They gather to caterwaul over their dead pal and hunt for whoever or whatever killed him."

He returned to his meal. A moment later he said: "No need to wonder what happened to your colony. During the winter the robots burned out a clearing and put up an electrified fence according to the book. Come spring, the sphexes came back. They're curious, among their other madnesses. A sphex would try to climb the fence just to see what was behind it. He'd be electrocuted. His carcass would bring others, raging because a sphex was dead. Some of them would try to climb the fence—and die. And their corpses would bring others. Presently the fence would break down from the bodies hanging on it, or a

bridge of dead beasts' carcasses would be built across it—and from as far downwind as the scent carried there'd be loping, raging, scent-crazed sphexes racing to the spot. They'd pour into the clearing through or over the fence, squalling and screeching for something to kill. I think they'd find it."

Roane ceased to eat. He looked sick.

"There were . . . pictures of sphexes in the data I read. I suppose that would account for . . . everything."

He tried to lift his fork. He put it down again.

"I can't eat," he said abruptly.

Huyghens made no comment. He finished his own meal, scowling. He rose and put the plates into the top of the cleaner. There was a whirring. He took them out of the bottom and put them away.

"Let me see those reports, eh?" he said dourly. "I'd like to see what sort of setup they had—those robots."

Roane hesitated and then opened his traveling bag. There was a microviewer and reels of films. One entire reel was labeled "Specifications for Construction, Colonial Survey," which would contain detailed plans and all the requirements of material and workmanship for everything from desks, office, administrative personnel, for use of, to landing grids, heavy-gravity planets, lift capacity one hundred thousand Earth tons. But Huyghens found another. He inserted it and spun the control swiftly here and there, pausing only briefly at index frames until he came to the section he wanted. He began to study the information with growing impatience.

"Robots, robots, robots!" he snapped. "Why don't they leave them where they belong—in cities to do the dirty work, and on airless planets where nothing unexpected ever happens! Robots don't belong in new colonies! Your colonies depended on them for defense! Dammit, let a man work with robots long enough and he thinks all nature is as limited as they are! This is a plan to set up a controlled environment! On Loren Two! Controlled environment—" He swore luridly. "Complacent, idiotic, desk-bound half-wits!"

"Robots are all right," said Roane. "We couldn't run civilization without them."

"But you can't tame a wilderness with 'em!" snapped Huyghens. "You had a dozen men landed, with fifty

assembled robots to start with. There were parts for fifteen hundred more—and I'll bet anything I've got that the ship contacts landed more still."

"They did," admitted Roane.

"I despise 'em," growled Huyghens. "I feel about 'em the way the old Greeks and Romans felt about slaves. They're for menial work—the sort of work a man will perform for himself, but that he won't do for another man for pay. Degrading work!"

"Quite aristocratic!" said Roane with a touch of irony. "I take it that robots clean out the bear quarters downstairs."

"No!" snapped Huyghens. "I do! They're my friends! They fight for me! They can't understand the necessity, and no robot would do the job right!"

He growled again. The noises of the night went on outside. Organ tones and hiccupings and the sound of the tack hammers and slamming doors. Somewhere there was a singularly exact replica of the discordant squeaking of a rusty pump.

"I'm looking," said Huyghens at the microviewer, "for the record of their mining operations. An open-pit operation wouldn't mean a thing. But if they had driven a tunnel, and somebody was there supervising the robots when the colony was wiped out, there's an off-chance he survived awhile."

Roane regarded him with suddenly intent eyes.

"And—"

"Dammit," snapped Huyghens, "if so I'll go see! He'd . . . they'd have no chance at all, otherwise. Not that the chance is good in any case!"

Roane raised his eyebrows.

"I'm a Colonial Survey officer," he said. "I've told you I'll send you to prison if I can. You've risked the lives of millions of people, maintaining nonquarantined communication with an unlicensed planet. If you did rescue somebody from the ruins of the robot colony, does it occur to you that they'd be witnesses to your unauthorized presence here?"

Huyghens spun the viewer again. He stopped. He switched back and forth and found what he wanted. He muttered in satisfaction: "They did run a tunnel!" Aloud he said, "I'll worry about witnesses when I have to."

He pushed aside another cupboard door. Inside it were odds and ends a man makes use of to repair the things about his house that he never notices until they go wrong. There was an assortment of wires, transistors, bolts, and similar stray items that a man living alone will need. When to his knowledge he's the only inhabitant of a solar system, he especially needs such things.

"What now?" asked Roane mildly.

"I'm going to try to find out if there's anybody left alive over there. I'd have checked before if I'd known the colony existed. I can't prove they're all dead, but I may prove that somebody's still alive. It's barely two weeks' journey away from here! Odd that two colonies picked spots so near!"

He absordedly picked over the oddments he'd selected.

Roane said vexedly: "Confound it! How can you check whether somebody's alive some hundreds of miles away—when you didn't know he existed half an hour ago?"

Huyghens threw a switch and took down a wall panel, exposing electronic apparatus and circuits behind. He busied himself with it.

"Ever think about hunting for a castaway?" he asked over his shoulder. "There's a planet with some tens of millions of square miles on it. You know there's a ship down. You've no idea where. You assume the survivors have power—no civilized man will be without power very long, so long as he can smelt metals!—but making a space beacon calls for high-precision measurements and workmanship. It's not to be improvised. So what will your shipwrecked civilized man do, to guide a rescue ship to the one or two square miles he occupies among some tens of millions on the planet?"

Roane fretted visibly.

"What?"

"He's had to go primitive, to begin with," Huyghens explained. "He cooks his meat over a fire, and so on. He has to make a strictly primitive signal. It's all he can do without gauges and micrometers and very special tools. But he can fill all the planet's atmosphere with a signal that searchers for him can't miss. You see?"

Roane thought irritably. He shook his head.

"He'll make," said Huyghens, "a spark transmitter. He'll fix its output at the shortest frequency he can

contrive—it'll be somewhere in the five-to-fifty-metre wave band, but it will tune very broad—and it will be a plainly human signal. He'll start it broadcasting. Some of those frequencies will go all around the planet under the ionosphere. Any ship that comes in under the radio roof will pick up his signal, get a fix on it, move and get another fix, and then go straight to where the castaway is waiting placidly in a hand-braided hammock, sipping whatever sort of drink he's improvised out of the local vegetation."

Roane said grudgingly: "Now that you mention it, of course—"

"My space phone picks up microwaves," said Huyghens, "I'm shifting a few elements to make it listen for longer stuff. It won't be efficient, but it will pick up a distress signal if one's in the air. I don't expect it, though."

He worked. Roane sat still a long time, watching him. Down below, a rhythmic sort of sound arose. It was Sourdough Charley, snoring. He lay on his back with his legs in the air. He'd discovered that he slept cooler that way. Sitka Pete grunted in his sleep. He was dreaming. In the general room of the station Semper, the eagle, blinked his eyes rapidly and then tucked his head under a gigantic wing and went to sleep. The noises of the Loren Two jungle came through the steel-shuttered windows. The nearer moon—which had passed overhead not long before the ringing of the arrival bell—again came soaring over the eastern horizon. It sped across the sky at the apparent speed of an atmosphere-flier. Overhead, it could be seen to be a jagged irregular mass of rock or metal, plunging blindly about the great planet forever.

Inside the station, Roane said angrily: "See here, Huyghens! You've reason to kill me. Apparently you don't intend to. You've excellent reason to leave that robot colony strictly alone. But you're preparing to help, if there's anybody alive to need it. And yet you're a criminal—and I mean a criminal! There've been some ghastly bacteria exported from planets like Loren Two! There've been plenty of lives lost in consequence, and you're risking more! Why do you do it? Why do you do something that could produce monstrous results to other beings?"

Huyghens grunted.

"You're only assuming there are no sanitary and quarantine precautions taken in my communications. As a matter of fact, there are. They're taken, all right! As for the rest, you wouldn't understand."

"I don't understand," snapped Roane, "but that's no proof I can't! Why are you a criminal?"

Huyghens painstakingly used a screwdriver inside the wall panel. He delicately lifted out a small electronic assembly. He carefully began to fit in a spaghettied new assembly with larger units.

"I'm cutting my amplification here to hell-and-gone," he observed, "but I think it'll do. I'm doing what I'm doing," he added calmly, "I'm being a criminal because it seems to me befitting what I think I am. Everybody acts according to his own real notion of himself. You're a conscientious citizen, and a loyal official, and a well-adjusted personality. You consider yourself an intelligent rational animal. But you don't act that way! You're reminding me of my need to shoot you or something similar, which a merely rational animal would try to make me forget. You happen, Roane, to be a man. So am I. But I'm aware of it. Therefore, I deliberately do things a merely rational animal wouldn't, because they're my notion of what a man who's more than a rational animal should do."

He very carefully tightened one small screw after another.

Roane said annoyedly: "Oh. Religion."

"Self-respect," corrected Huyghens. "I don't like robots. They're too much like rational animals. A robot will do whatever it can that its supervisor requires it to do. A merely rational animal will do whatever it can that circumstances require it to do. I wouldn't like a robot unless it had some idea of what was befitting it and would spit in my eye if I tried to make it do something else. The bears downstairs, now—they're no robots! They are loyal and honorable beasts, but they'd turn and tear me to bits if I tried to make them do something against their nature. Faro Nell would fight me and all creation together, if I tried to harm Nugget. It would be unintelligent and unreasonable and irrational. She'd lose out and get killed. But I like her that way! And I'll fight you and all creation when you make me try to do something against my

nature. I'll be stupid and unreasonable and irrational about it." Then he grinned over his shoulder. "So will you. Only you don't realize it."

He turned back to his task. After a moment he fitted a manual-control knob over a shaft in his haywire assembly.

"What did somebody try to make you do?" asked Roane shrewdly. "What was demanded of you that turned you into a criminal? What are you in revolt against?"

Huyghens threw a switch. He began to turn the knob which controlled the knob of his makeshift modified receiver.

"Why," he said amusedly, "when I was young the people around me tried to make me into a conscientious citizen and a loyal employee and a well-adjusted personality. They tried to make me into a highly intelligent rational animal and nothing more. The difference between us, Roane, is that I found it out. Naturally, I rev—"

He stopped short. Faint, crackling, crisp frying sounds came from the speaker of the space phone, now modified to receive what once were called shortwaves.

Huyghens listened. He cocked his head intently. He turned the knob very, very slowly. Then Roane made an arrested gesture, to call attention to something in the sibilant sound. Huyghens nodded. He turned the knob again, with infinitesimal increments.

Out of the background noise came a patterned mutter. As Huyghens shifted the tuning, it grew louder. It reached a volume where it was unmistakable. It was a sequence of sounds like discordant buzzing. There were three half-second buzzings with half-second pauses between. A two-second pause. Three full-second buzzings with half-second pauses between. Another two-second pause and three half-second buzzings, again. Then silence for five seconds. Then the pattern repeated.

"The devil!" said Huyghens. "That's a human signal! Mechanically made, too! In fact, it used to be a standard distress call. It was termed an SOS, though I've no idea what that meant. Anyhow, somebody must have read old-fashioned novels, some time, to know about it. And so someone is still alive over at your licensed, but now smashed-up, robot colony. And they're asking for help. I'd say they're likely to need it."

He looked at Roane.

"The intelligent thing to do is sit back and wait for a ship—either of my friends or yours. A ship can help survivors or castaways much better than we can. A ship can even find them more easily. But maybe time is important to the poor devils! So I'm going to take the bears and see if I can reach them. You can wait here, if you like. What say? Travel on Loren Two isn't a picnic! I'll be fighting nearly every foot of the way. There's plenty of 'inimical animal life' here!"

Roane snapped angrily: "Don't be a fool! Of course I'm coming! What do you take me for? And two of us should have four times the chance of one!"

Huyghens grinned.

"Not quite. You forget Sitka Pete and Sourdough Charley and Faro Nell. There'll be five of us if you come, instead of four. And, of course, Nugget has to come—and he'll be no help—but Semper may make up for him. You won't quadruple our chances, Roane, but I'll be glad to have you if you want to be stupid and unreasonable and not at all rational and come along."

III

There was a jagged spur of stone looming precipitously over a river valley. A thousand feet below, a broad stream ran westward to the sea. Twenty miles to the east, a wall of mountains rose sheer against the sky. Its peaks seemed to blend to a remarkable evenness of height. There was rolling, tumbled ground between for as far as the eye could see.

A speck in the sky came swiftly downward. Great pinions spread, and flapped, and icy eyes surveyed the rocky space. With more great flappings, Semper the eagle came to ground. He folded his huge wings and turned his head jerkily, his eyes unblinking. A tiny harness held a miniature camera against his chest. He strutted over the bare stone to the highest point. He stood there, a lonely and arrogant figure in the vastness.

There came crashings and rustlings, and then snuffling sounds. Sitka Pete came lumbering out into the clear space. He wore a harness, too, and a pack. The harness was complex, because it had not only to hold a pack in

normal travel, but when he stood on his hind legs, it must not hamper the use of forepaws in combat.

He went cagily all over the open area. He peered over the edge of the spur's farthest tip. He prowled to the other side and looked down. He scouted carefully. Once he moved close to Semper and the eagle opened his great curved beak and uttered an indignant noise. Sitka paid no attention.

He relaxed, satisfied. He sat down untidily, his hind legs sprawling. He wore an air approaching benevolence as he surveyed the landscape about and below him.

More snufflings and crashings. Sourdough Charley came into view with Huyghens and Roane behind him. Sourdough carried a pack, too. Then there was a squealing and Nugget scurried up from the rear, impelled by a whack from his mother. Faro Nell appeared, with the carcass of a staglike animal lashed to her harness.

"I picked this place from a space photo," said Huyghens, "to make a directional fix from. I'll get set up."

He swung his pack from his shoulders to the ground. He extracted an obviously self-constructed device which he set on the ground. It had a whip aerial, which he extended. Then he plugged in a considerable length of flexible wire and unfolded a tiny, improvised directional aerial with an even tinier booster at its base. Roane slipped his pack from his shoulders and watched. Huyghens slipped headphones over his ears. He looked up and said sharply: "Watch the bears, Roane. The wind's blowing up the way we came. Anything that trails us—sphexes, for example—will send its scent on before. The bears will tell us."

He busied himself with the instruments he'd brought. He heard the hissing, frying, background noise which could be anything at all except a human signal. He reached out and swung the small aerial around. Rasping, buzzing tones came in, faintly and then loudly. This receiver, though, had been made for this particular wave band. It was much more efficient than the modified spacephone had been. It picked up three short buzzes, three long ones, and three short ones again. Three dots, three dashes, and three dots. Over and over again. SOS. SOS. SOS.

Hughens took a reading and moved the directional aerial a careful measured distance. He took another read-

ing. He shifted it yet again and again, carefully marking and measuring each spot and taking notes of the instrument readings. When he finished, he had checked the direction of the signal not only by loudness but by phase—he had as accurate a fix as could possibly be had with portable apparatus.

Sourdough growled softly. Sitka Pete whiffed the air and arose from his sitting position. Faro Nell whacked Nugget, sending him whimpering to the farthest corner of the flea place. She stood bristling, facing downhill the way they'd come.

"Damn!" said Huyghens.

He got up and waved his arm at Semper, who had turned his head at the stirrings. Semper squawked in a most un-eaglelike fashion and dived off the spur and was immediately fighting the downdraft beyond it. As Huyghens reached his weapon, the eagle came back overhead. He went magnificently past, a hundred feet high, careening and flapping in the tricky currents. He screamed, abruptly, and circled and screamed again. Huyghens swung a tiny vision plate from its strap to where he could look into it. He saw, of course, what the little camera on Semper's chest could see—reeling, swaying terrain as Semper saw it, through without his breadth of field. There were moving objects to be seen through the shifting trees. Their coloring was mistakable.

"Sphexes," said Huyghens dourly. "Eight of them. Don't look for them to follow our track, Roane. They run parallel to a trail on either side. That way they attack on breadth and all at once when they catch up. And listen! The bears can handle anything they tangle with! It's our job to pick off the loose ones! And aim for the body! The bullets explode."

He threw off the safety of his weapon. Faro Nell, uttering thunderous growls, went padding to a place between Sitka Pete and Sourdough. Sitka glanced at her and made a whuffing noise, as if derisive of her blood-curdling sounds. Sourdough grunted in a somehow solid fashion. He and Sitka moved farther away from Nell to either side. They would cover a wider front.

There was no other sign of life than the shrillings of the incredibly tiny creatures which on this planet were birds, and Faro Nell's deep bass, raging growls, and then the

click of Roane's safety going off as he got ready to use the weapon Huyghens had given him.

Semper screamed again, flapping low above the tree-tops, following particolored, monstrous shapes beneath.

Eight blue-and-tan fiends came racing out of the underbrush. They had spiny fringes, and horns, and glaring eyes, and they looked as if they had come straight out of hell. On the instant of their appearance they leaped, emitting squalling, spitting squeals that were like the cries of fighting tomcats ten thousand times magnified. Huyghens' rifle cracked, and its sound was wiped out in the louder detonation of its bullet in sphexian flesh. A tan-and-blue monster tumbled over, shrieking. Faro Nell charged, the very impersonation of white-hot fury. Roane fired, and his bullet exploded against a tree. Sitka Pete brought his massive forepaws in a clapping, monstrous ear-boxing motion. A sphex died.

Then Roane fired again. Sourdough Charley whuffed. He fell forward upon a splitting bicolored fiend, rolled him over, and raked with his hind claws. The belly hide of the sphex was tenderer than the rest. The creature rolled away, snapping at its own wounds. Another sphex found itself shaken loose from the tumult about Sitka Pete. It whirled to leap on him from behind—and Huyghens fired very coldly—and two plunged upon Faro Nell and Roane blasted one and Faro Nell disposed of the other in truly awesome fury. Then Sitka Pete heaved himself erect—seeming to drip sphexes—and Sourdough waddled over and pulled one off and killed it and went back for another. And both rifles cracked together and there was suddenly nothing left to fight.

The bears prowled from one to another of the corpses. Sitka Pete rumbled and lifted a limp head. Crash! Then another. He went over the lot, whether or not they showed signs of life. When he had finished, they were wholly still.

Semper came flapping down out of the sky. He had screamed and fluttered overhead as the fight went on. Now he landed with a rush. Huyghens went soothingly from one bear to another, calming them with his voice. It took longest to calm Faro Nell, licking Nugget with impassioned solicitude and growling horribly as she licked.

"Come along now," said Huyghens, when Sitka showed

signs of intending to sit down again. "Heave these carcasses over a cliff. Come along! Sitka! Sourdough! Hup!"

He guided them as the two big males somewhat fastidiously lifted up the nightmarish creatures they and the guns together had killed, and carried them to the edge of the spur of stone. They let the dead beasts go bouncing and sliding down into the valley.

"That," said Huyghens, "is so their little pals will gather around them and caterwaul their woe where there's no trail of ours to give them ideas. If we'd been near a river, I'd have dumped them in to float downriver and gather mourners wherever they stranded. Around the station I incinerate them. If I had to leave them, I'd make tracks away. About fifty miles upwind would be a good idea."

He opened the pack Sourdough carried and extracted giant-sized swabs and some gallons of antiseptic. He tended the three Kodiaks in turn, swabbing not only the cuts and scratches they'd received, but deeply soaking their fur where there could be suspicion of spilled sphex blood.

"This antiseptic deodorizes, too," he told Roane. "Or we'd be trailed by any sphex who passed to leeward of us. When we start off, I'll swab the bears' paws for the same reason."

Roane was very quiet. He'd missed his first shot with a bullet-firing weapon—a beam hasn't the stopping power of an explosive bullet—but he'd seemed to grow savagely angry with himself. The last few seconds of the fight, he'd fired very deliberately and every bullet hit. Now he said bitterly: "If you're instructing me so I can carry on should you be killed, I doubt that it's worthwhile!"

Huyghens felt in his pack and unfolded the enlargements he'd made of the space photos of this part of the planet. He carefully oriented the map with distant landmarks. He drew a painstakingly accurate line across the photo.

"The SOS signal comes from somewhere close to the robot colony," he reported. "I think a little to the south of it. Probably from a mine they'd opened up, on the far side—of course—of the Sere Plateau. See how I've marked this map? Two fixes, one from the station and one from here. I came away off-course to get a fix here so we'd have two position lines to the transmitter. The signal

could have come from the other side of the planet. But it doesn't."

"The odds would be astronomical against other cast-aways," protested Roane.

"No-o-o-o," said Huyghens. "Ships have been coming here. To the robot colony. One could have crashed. And I have friends, too."

He repacked his apparatus and gestured to the bears. He led them beyond the scene of combat and very carefully swabbed off their paws, so they could not possibly leave a trail of sphex-blood scent behind them. He waved Semper, the eagle, aloft.

"Let's go," he told the Kodiaks. "Yonder! Hup!"

The party headed downhill and into the jungle again. Now it was Sourdough's turn to take the lead, and Sitka Pete prowled more widely behind him. Faro Nell trailed the men, with Nugget. She kept an extremely sharp eye upon the cub. He was a baby, still. He only weighed six hundred pounds. And of course she watched against danger from the rear.

Overhead, Semper fluttered and flew in giant circles and spirals, never going very far away. Huyghens referred constantly to the screen which showed what the airborne camera saw. The image tilted and circled and blanked and swayed. It was by no means the best air reconnaissance that could be imagined. But it was the best that would work. Presently Huyghens said: "We swing to the right, here. The going's bad straight ahead, and it looks like a pack of sphexes has killed and is feeding."

Roane was upset. He was dissatisfied with himself. So he said: "It's against reason for carnivores to be as thick as you say! There has to be a certain amount of other animal life for every meat-eating beast! Too many of them would eat all the game and starve!"

"They're gone all winter," explained Huyghens, "which around here isn't as severe as you might think. And a good many animals seem to breed just after the sphexes go south. Also, the sphexes aren't around all the warm weather. There's a sort of peak, and then for a matter of weeks you won't see a one of them, and suddenly the jungle swarms with them again. Then, presently, they

head south. Apparently they're migratory in some fashion, but nobody knows." He said dryly: "There haven't been many naturalists around on this planet. The animal life is inimical."

Roane fretted. He was a senior officer in the Colonial Survey, and he was accustomed to arrival at a partly or completely finished colonial setup, and to pass upon the completion or noncompletion of the planned installation as designed. Now he was in an intolerably hostile environment, depending upon an illegal colonist for his life, engaged upon a demoralizingly indefinite enterprise—because the mechanical spark signal could be working long after its constructors were dead—and his ideas about a number of matters were shaken. He was alive, for example, because of three giant Kodiak bears and a bald eagle. He and Huyghens could have been surrounded by ten thousand robots, and they'd have been killed. Sphexes and robots would have ignored each other, and sphexes would have made straight for the men, who'd have had less than four seconds in which to discover for themselves that they were attacked, prepare to defend themselves, and kill eight sphexes.

Roane's convictions as a civilized man were shaken. Robots were marvelous contrivances for doing the expected: accomplishing the planned; coping with the predicted. But they also had defects. Robots could only follow instructions—if this thing happens, do this, if that thing happens, do that. But before something else, neither this nor that, robots were helpless. So a robot civilization worked only in an environment where nothing unanticipated ever turned up, and human supervisors never demanded anything unexpected. Roane was appalled. He'd never encountered the truly unpredictable before in all his life and career.

He found Nugget, the cub, ambling uneasily in his wake. The cub flattened his ears miserably when Roane glanced at him. It occurred to the man that Nugget was receiving a lot of disciplinary thumpings from Faro Nell. He was knocked about physically, pretty much as Roane was being knocked about psychologically. His lack of information and unfitness for independent survival in his environment was being hammered into him.

"Hi, Nugget," said Roane ruefully. "I feel just about the way you do!"

Nugget brightened visibly. He frisked. He tended to gambol. He looked very hopefully up into Roane's face—and he stood four feet high at the shoulder and would overtop Roane if he stood erect.

Roane reached out and patted Nugget's head. It was the first time in all his life that he'd ever patted an animal.

He heard a snuffling sound behind him. Skin crawled at the back of his neck. He whirled.

Faro Nell regarded him—eighteen hundred pounds of she-bear only ten feet away and looking into his eyes. For one panicky instant Roane went cold all over. Then he realized that Faro Nell's eyes were not burning. She was not snarling. She did not emit those bloodcurdling sounds which the bare prospect of danger to Nugget had produced up on the rocky spur. She looked at him blandly. In fact, after a moment she swung off in some independent investigation of a matter that had aroused her curiosity.

The traveling party went on, Nugget frisking beside Roane and tending to bump into him out of pure cub-clumsiness. Now and again he looked adoringly at Roane, in the instant and overwhelming affection of the very young.

Roane trudged on. Presently he glanced behind again. Faro Nell was now ranging more widely. She was well satisfied to have Nugget in the immediate care of a man. From time to time he got on her nerves.

A little while later, Roane called ahead. "Huyghens! Look here! I've been appointed nursemaid to Nugget!"

Huyghens looked back. "Oh, slap him a few times and he'll go back to his mother."

"The devil I will!" said Roane querulously. "I like it!"

The traveling party went on.

When night fell, they camped. There could be no fire, of course, because all the minute night-things about would come eagerly to dance in the glow. But there could not be darkness, equally, because night-walkers hunted in the dark. So Huyghen set out the barrier lamps which made a wall of twilight about their halting place, and the

staglike creature Faro Nell had carried became their evening meal. Then they slept—at least the men did—and the bears dozed and snorted and waked and dozed again. But Semper sat immobile with his head under his wing on a tree limb. And presently there was a glorious cool hush and all the world glowed in morning light diffused through the jungle by a newly risen sun. And they arose, and traveled again.

This day they stopped stock-still for two hours while sphexes puzzled over the trail the bears had left. Huyghens discoursed calmly on the need for an anti-scent, to be used on the boots of men and the paws of bears, which would make the following of their trails unpopular with sphexes. And Roane seized upon the idea and absorbedly suggested that a sphex-repellent odor might be worked out, which would make a human revolting to a sphex. If that were done—why, humans could go freely about unmolested.

“Like stinkbugs,” said Huyghens, sardonically. “A very intelligent idea! Very rational! You can feel proud!”

And suddenly Roane, very obscurely, was not proud of the idea at all.

They camped again. On the third night they were at the base of that remarkable formation, the Sere Plateau, which from a distance looked like a mountain range but was actually a desert table land. And it was not reasonable for a desert to be raised high, while lowlands had rain, but on the fourth morning they found out why. They saw, far, far away, a truly monstrous mountain mass at the end of the long-way expanse of the plateau. It was like the prow of a ship. It lay, so Huyghens observed, directly in line with the prevailing winds, and divided them as a ship's prow divides the waters. The moisture-bearing air currents flowed beside the plateau, not over it, and its interior was pure sere desert in the unscreened sunshine of high altitudes.

It took them a full day to get halfway up the slope. And here, twice as they climbed, Semper flew screaming over aggregations of sphexes to one side of them or the other. These were much larger groups than Huyghens had ever seen before—fifty to a hundred monstrosities together, where a dozen was a large hunting pack else-

where. He looked in the screen which showed him what Semper saw, four to five miles away. The sphexes padded uphill toward the Sere Plateau in a long line. Fifty—sixty—seventy tan-and-azure beasts out of hell.

"I'd hate to have that bunch jump us," he said candidly to Roane. "I don't think we'd stand a chance."

"Here's where a robot tank would be useful," Roane observed.

"Anything armored," conceded Huyghens. "One man in an armored station like mine would be safe. But if he killed a sphex he'd be besieged. He'd have to stay holed up, breathing the smell of dead sphex, until the odor had gone away. And he mustn't kill any others or he'd be besieged until winter came."

Roane did not suggest the advantages of robots in other directions. At that moment, for example, they were working their way up a slope which averaged fifty degrees. The bears climbed without effort despite their burdens. For the men it was infinite toil. Semper, the eagle, manifested impatience with bears and men alike, who crawled so slowly up an incline over which he soared.

He went ahead up the mountainside and teetered in the air currents at the plateau's edge. Huyghens looked in the vision plate by which he reported.

"How the devil," panted Roane—they had stopped for a breather, and the bears waited patiently for them—"do you train bears like these? I can understand Semper."

"I don't train them," said Huyghens, staring into the plate. "They're mutations. In heredity the sex linkage of physical characteristics is standard stuff. But there's been some sound work done on the gene linkage of psychological factors. There was need, on my home planet, for an animal who could fight like a fiend, live off the land, carry a pack and get along with men at least as well as dogs do. In the old days they'd have tried to breed the desired physical properties into an animal who already had the personality they wanted. Something like a giant dog, say. But back home they went at it the other way. They picked the wanted physical characteristics and bred for the personality—the psychology. The job got done over a century ago—a Kodiak bear named Kodius Champion was the first real success. He had everything that was wanted. These bears are his descendants."

"They look normal," commented Roane.

"They are!" said Huyghens warmly. "Just as normal as an honest dog! They're not trained, like Semper. They train themselves!" He looked back into the plate in his hands, which showed the ground five and six and seven thousand feet higher. "Semper, now, is a trained bird without too much brains. He's educated—a glorified hawk. But the bears want to get along with men. They're emotionally dependent on us! Like dogs. Semper's a servant, but they're companions and friends. He's trained, but they're loyal. He's conditioned. They love us. He'd abandon me if he ever realized he could—he thinks he can only eat what men feed him. But the bears wouldn't want to. They like us. I admit that I like them. Maybe because they like me."

Roane said deliberately: "Aren't you a trifle loose-tongued, Huyghens? I'm a Colonial Survey officer. I have to arrest you sooner or later. You've told me something that will locate and convict the people who set you up here. It shouldn't be hard to find where bears were bred for psychological mutations, and where a bear named Kodius Champion left descendants! I can find out where you came from now, Huyghens!"

Huyghens looked up from the plate with its tiny swaying television image, relayed from where Semper floated impatiently in midair.

"No harm done," he said amiably. "I'm a criminal there, too. It's officially on record that I kidnapped these bears and escaped with them. Which, on my home planet, is about as heinous a crime as a man can commit. It's worse than horse theft back on Earth in the old days. The kin and cousins of my bears are highly thought of. I'm quite a criminal, back home."

Roane stared. "Did you steal them?" he demanded.

"Confidentially," said Huyghens, "no. But prove it!" Then he said: "Take a look in this plate. See what Semper can see at the plateau's edge."

Roane squinted aloft, where the eagle flew in great sweeps and dashes. Somehow, by the experience of the past few days, Roane knew that Semper was screaming fiercely as he flew. He made a dart toward the plateau's border.

Roane looked at the transmitted picture. It was only four inches by six, but it was perfectly without grain and in accurate color. It moved and turned as the camera-bearing eagle swooped and circled. For an instant the screen showed the steeply sloping mountainside, and off at one edge the party of men and bears could be seen as dots. Then it swept away and showed the top of the plateau.

There were sphexes. A pack of two hundred trotted toward the desert interior. They moved at leisure, in the open. The viewing camera reeled, and there were more. As Roane watched and as the bird flew higher, he could see still other sphexes moving up over the edge of the plateau from a small erosion defile here and another one there. The Sere Plateau was alive with the hellish creatures. It was inconceivable that there should be game enough for them to live on. They were visible as herds of cattle would be visible on grazing planets.

It was simply impossible.

"Migrating," observed Huyghens. "I said they did. They're headed somewhere. Do you know, I doubt that it would be healthy for us to try to cross the plateau through such a swarm of sphexes?"

Roane swore, in an abrupt change of mood.

"But the signal's still coming through! Somebody's alive over at the robot colony! Must we wait till the migration's over?"

"We don't know," Huyghens pointed out, "that they'll stay alive. They may need help badly. We have to get to them. But at the same time—"

He glanced at Sourdough Charley and Sitka Pete, clinging patiently to the mountainside while the men rested and talked. Sitka had managed to find a place to sit down, though one massive paw anchored him in his place.

Huyghens waved his arm, pointing in a new direction. "Let's go!" he called briskly. "Let's go! Yonder! Hup!"

IV

They followed the slopes of the Sere Plateau, neither ascending to its level top—where sphexes congregated—nor descending into the foothills where sphexes assembled. They moved along hillsides and mountain flanks

which sloped anywhere from thirty to sixty degrees, and they did not cover much distance. They practically forgot what it was to walk on level ground. Semper, the eagle, hovered overhead during the daytime, not far away. He descended at nightfall for his food from the pack of one of the bears.

"The bears aren't doing too well for food," said Huyghens dryly. "A ton of bear needs a lot to eat. But they're loyal to us. Semper hasn't any loyalty. He's too stupid. But he's been conditioned to think that he can only eat what men feed him. The bears know better, but they stick to us regardless. I rather like these bears."

It was the most self-evident of understatements. This was at an encampment on the top of a massive boulder which projected from a mountainous stony wall. This was six days from the start of their journey. There was rarely room on the boulder for all the party. And Faro Nell fussily insisted that Nugget should be in the safest part, which meant near the mountainflank. She would have crowded the men outward, but Nugget whimpered for Roane. Wherefore, when Roane moved to comfort him, Faro Nell contentedly drew back and snorted at Sitka and Sourdough and they made room for her near the edge.

It was a hungry camp. They had come upon tiny rills upon occasion, flowing down the mountainside. Here the bears had drunk deeply and the men had filled canteens. But this was the third night, and there had been no game at all. Huyghens made no move to bring out food for Roane or himself. Roane made no comment. He was beginning to participate in the relationship between bears and men, which was not the slavery of the bears but something more. It was two-way. He felt it.

"It would seem," he said fretfully, "that since the sphexes don't seem to hunt on their way uphill, that there should be some game. They ignore everything as they file uphill."

This was true enough. The normal fighting formation of sphexes was line abreast, which automatically surrounded anything which offered to flee and outflanked anything which offered fight. But here they ascended the mountain in long lines, one after the other, following

apparently long-established trails. The wind blew along the slopes and carried scent only sideways. But the sphexes were not diverted from their chosen paths. The long processions of hideous blue-and-tawny creatures—it was hard to think of them as natural beasts, male and female and laying eggs like reptiles on other planets—simply climbed.

“There’ve been other thousands of beasts before them,” said Huyghens. “They must have been crowding this way for days or even weeks. We’ve seen tens of thousands in Semper’s camera. They must be uncountable, altogether. The first-comers ate all the game there was, and the last-comers have something else on whatever they use for minds.”

Roane protested: “But so many carnivores in one place is impossible! I know they are here, but they can’t be!”

“They’re cold-blooded,” Huyghens pointed out, “They don’t burn food to sustain body temperature. After all, lots of creatures go for long periods without eating. Even bears hibernate. But this isn’t hibernation—or estivation, either.”

He was setting up the radiation-wave receiver in the darkness. There was no point in attempting a fix here. The transmitter was on the other side of the Sere Plateau, which inexplicably swarmed with the most ferocious and deadly of all the creatures of Loren Two. The men and bears would commit suicide by crossing here.

But Huyghens turned on the receiver. There came the whispering, scratchy sound of background noise. Then the signal. Three dots, three dashes, three dots. Three dots, three dashes, three dots. It went on and on and on. Huyghens turned it off. Roane said: “Shouldn’t we have answered that signal before we left the station? To encourage them?”

“I doubt they have a receiver,” said Huyghens. “They won’t expect an answer for months, anyhow. They’d hardly listen all the time, and if they’re living in a mine tunnel and trying to sneak out for food to stretch their supplies—why, they’ll be too busy to try to make complicated recorders or relays.”

Roane was silent for a moment or two.

“We’ve got to get food for the bears,” he said presently. “Nugget’s weaned, and he’s hungry.”

"We will," Huyghens promised. "I may be wrong, but it seems to me that the number of sphexes climbing the mountain is less than yesterday and the day before. We may have just about crossed the path of their migration. They're thinning out. When we're past their trail, we'll have to look out for night-walkers and the like again. But I think they wiped out all animal life on their migration route."

He was not quite right. He was waked in darkness by the sound of slappings and the gruntings of the bears. Feather-light puffs of breeze beat upon his face. He struck his belt-lamp sharply and the world was hidden by a whitish film which snatched itself away. Something flapped. Then he saw the stars and the emptiness on the edge of which they camped. Then big white things flapped toward him.

Sitka Pete whuffed mightily and swatted. Faro Nell grunted and swung. She caught something in her claws. She crunched. The light went off as Huyghens realized. Then he said: "Don't shoot, Roane!" He listened, and heard the sounds of feeding in the dark. It ended. "Watch this!" said Huyghens.

The belt-light came on again. Something strangely shaped and pallid like human skin reeled and flapped crazily toward him. Something else. Four. Five—ten—twenty—more . . .

A huge hairy paw reached up into the light beam and snatched a flying thing out of it. Another great paw. Huyghens shifted the light and the three great Kodiaks were on their hind legs, swatting at creatures which flittered insanely, unable to resist the fascination of the glaring lamp. Because of their wild gyrations it was impossible to see them in detail, but they were those unpleasant night creatures which looked like plucked flying monkeys but were actually something quite different.

The bears did not snarl or snap. They swatted, with a remarkable air of businesslike competence and purpose. Small mounds of broken things built up about their feet.

Suddenly there were no more. Huyghens snapped off the light. The bears crunched and fed busily in the darkness.

"Those things are carnivores *and* bloodsuckers, Roane,"

said Huyghens calmly. "They drain their victims of blood like vampire bats—they've some trick of not waking them—and when they're dead the whole tribe eats. But bears have thick furs, and they wake when they're touched. And they're omnivorous—they'll eat anything but sphexes, and like it. You might say that those night creatures came to lunch. But they stayed. They are it—for the bears, who are living off the country as usual."

Roane uttered a sudden exclamation. He made a tiny light, and blood flowed down his hand. Huyghens passed over his pocket kit of antiseptic and bandages. Roane stanching the bleeding and bound up his hand. Then he realized that Nugget chewed on something. When he turned the light, Nugget swallowed convulsively. It appeared that he had caught and devoured the creature which had drawn blood from Roane. But Roane had lost none to speak of, at that.

In the morning they started along the sloping scarp of the plateau once more. During the morning, Roane said painfully: "Robots wouldn't have handled those vampire-things, Huyghens."

"Oh, they could be built to watch for them," said Huyghens tolerantly. "But you'd have to swat for yourself. I prefer the bears."

He led the way on. Here their jungle formation could not apply. On a steep slope the bears ambled comfortably, the tough pads of their feet holding fast on the slanting rock, but the men struggled painfully. Twice Huyghens halted to examine the ground about the mountains' bases through binoculars. He looked encouraged as they went on. The monstrous peak which was like the bow of a ship at the end of the Sere Plateau was visibly nearer. Toward midday, indeed, it looked high above the horizon, no more than fifteen miles away. And at midday Huyghens called a final halt.

"No more congregations of sphexes down below," he said cheerfully, "and we haven't seen a climbing line of them in miles." The crossing of a sphex-trail meant simply waiting until one party had passed, and then crossing before another came into view. "I've a hunch we've crossed their migration route. Let's see what Semper tells us!"

He waved the eagle aloft. And Semper, like all creatures other than men, normally functioned only for the satisfaction of his appetite, and then tended to loaf or sleep. He had ridden the last few miles perched on Sitka Pete's pack. Now he soared upward, and Huyghens watched in the small vision plate.

Semper went soaring—and the image on the plate swayed and turned—and in minutes was above the plateau's edge. And here there was some vegetation and the ground rolled somewhat, and there were even patches of brush. But as Semper towered higher still, the inner desert appeared. But nearby it was clear of beasts. Only once, when the eagle banked sharply and the camera looked along the long dimension of the plateau, did Huyghens see any sign of the blue-and-tan beasts. There he saw what looked like masses amounting to herds. But, of course, carnivores do not gather in herds.

"We go straight up," said Huyghens in satisfaction. "We cross the plateau here—and we can edge downwind a bit, even. I think we'll find something interesting on our way to your robot colony."

He waved to the bears to go ahead uphill.

They reached the top hours later—barely before sunset. And they saw game. Not much, but game at the grassy, bushy border of the desert. Huyghens brought down a shaggy ruminant which surely would not live on a desert. When night fell there was an abrupt chill in the air. It was much colder than night temperatures on the slopes. The air was thin. Roane thought confusedly and presently guessed at the cause. In the lee of the prow-mountain the air was calm. There were no clouds. The ground radiated its heat to empty space. It could be bitterly cold in the nighttime, here.

"And hot by day," Huyghens agreed when he mentioned it. "The sunshine's terrifically hot where the air is thin, but on most mountains there's wind. By day, here, the ground will tend to heat up like the surface of a planet without atmosphere. It may be a hundred and forty or fifty degrees on the sand at midday. But it should be cold at night."

It was. Before midnight Huyghens built a fire. There could be no danger of night-walkers where the temperature dropped to freezing.

In the morning the men were stiff with cold, but the bears snorted and moved about briskly. They seemed to revel in the morning chill. Sitka and Sourdough Charley, in fact, became festive and engaged in a mock fight, whacking each other with blows that were only feigned, but would have crushed in the skull of any man. Nugget sneezed with excitement as he watched them. Faro Nell regarded them with female disapproval.

They went on. Semper seemed sluggish. After a single brief flight he descended and rode on Sitka's pack, as on the previous day. He perched there, surveying the landscape as it changed from semiarid to pure desert in their progress. His air was arrogant. But he would not fly. Soaring birds do not like to fly when there are no winds to make currents of which to take advantage. On the way, Huyghens painstakingly pointed out to Roane exactly where they were on the enlarged photograph taken from space, and the exact spot from which the distress signal seemed to come.

"You're doing it in case something happens to you," said Roane. "I admit it's sense, but—what could I do to help those survivors even if I got to them, without you?"

"What you've learned about sphexes would help," said Huyghens. "The bears would help. And we left a note back at my station. Whoever grounds at the landing field back there—and the beacon's working again—will find instructions to come to the place we're trying to reach."

Roane plodded alongside him. The narrow nondesert border of the Sere Plateau was behind them now. They marched across powdery desert sand.

"See here," said Roane, "I want to know something! You tell me you're listed as a bear thief on your home planet. You tell me it's a lie—to protect your friends from prosecution by the Colonial Survey. You're on your own, risking your life every minute of every day. You took a risk in not shooting me. Now you're risking more in going to help men who'd have to be witnesses that you were a criminal. What are you doing it for?"

Huyghens grinned.

"Because I don't like robots. I don't like the fact that they're subduing men—making men subordinate to them."

"Go on," insisted Roane. "I don't see why disliking

robots should make you a criminal. Nor men subordinating themselves to robots, either!"

"But they are," said Huyghens mildly. "I'm a crank, of course. But—I live like a man on this planet. I go where I please and do what I please. My helpers, the bears, are my friends. If the robot colony had been a success, would the humans in it have lived like men? Hardly! They'd have to live the way the robots let them! They'd have to stay inside a fence the robots built. They'd have to eat foods that robots could raise, and no others. Why—a man couldn't move his bed near a window, because if he did the house-tending robots couldn't work! Robots would serve them—the way the robots determined—but all they'd get out of it would be jobs servicing the robots!"

Roane shook his head.

"As long as men want robot service, they have to take the service that robots can give. If you don't want those services—"

"I want to decide what I want," said Huyghens, again mildly, "instead of being limited to choose among what I'm offered. On my home planet we halfway tamed it with dogs and guns. Then we developed the bears, and we finished the job with them. Now there's population pressure and the room for bears and dogs—and men—is dwindling. More and more people are being deprived of the power of decision, and being allowed only the power of choice among the things robots allow. The more we depend on robots, the more limited those choices become. We don't want our children to limit themselves to wanting what robots can provide! We don't want them shriveling to where they abandon everything robots can't give—or won't! We want them to be men—and women. Not damned automatons who lived *by* pushing robot controls so they can live *to* push robot controls. If that's not subordination to robots—"

"It's an emotional argument," protested Roane. "Not everybody feels that way."

"But I feel that way," said Huyghens. "And so do a lot of others. This is a big galaxy and it's apt to contain some surprises. The one sure thing about a robot and a man who depends on them is that they can't handle the unexpected. There's going to come a time when we need men

who can. So on my home planet, some of us asked for Loren Two, to colonize. It was refused—too dangerous. But men can colonize anywhere if they're men. So I came here to study the planet. Especially the sphexes. Eventually, we expected to ask for a license again, with proof that we could handle even those beasts. I'm already doing it in a mild way. But the Survey licensed a robot colony—and where is it?"

Roane made a sour face.

"You picked the wrong way to go about it, Huyghens. It was illegal. It is. It was the pioneer spirit, which is admirable enough, but wrongly directed. After all, it was pioneers who left Earth for the stars. But—"

Sourdough raised up on his hind legs and sniffed the air. Huyghens swung his rifle around to be handy. Roane slipped off the safety catch of his own. Nothing happened.

"In a way," said Roane vexedly, "you're talking about liberty and freedom, which most people think is politics. You say it can be more. In principle, I'll concede it. But the way you put it, it sounds like a freak religion."

"It's self-respect," corrected Huyghens.

"You may be—"

Faro Nell growled. She bumped Nugget with her nose, to drive him closer to Roane. She snorted at him. She trotted swiftly to where Sitka and Sourdough faced toward the broader, sphex-filled expanse of the Sere Plateau. She took up her position between them.

Huyghens gazed sharply beyond them and then all about.

"This could be bad!" he said softly. "But luckily there's no wind. Here's a sort of hill. Come along, Roane!"

He ran ahead, Roane following and Nugget plumping heavily with him. They reached the raised place—actually a mere hillock no more than five or six feet above the surrounding sand, with a distorted cactuslike growth protruding from the ground. Huyghens stared again. He used his binoculars.

"One sphex," he said curtly. "Just one. And it's out of all reason for a sphex to be alone! But it's not rational for them to gather in hundreds of thousands, either!" He wetted his finger and held it up. "No wind at all."

He used the binoculars again.

"It doesn't know we're here," he added. "It's moving away. Not another one in sight—" He hesitated, biting his lips. "Look here, Roane! I'd like to kill that one lone sphex and find out something. There's a fifty percent chance I could find out something really important. But—I might have to run. If I'm right—" Then he said grimly. "It'll have to be done quickly. I'm going to ride Faro Nell—for speed. I doubt Sitka or Sourdough would stay behind. But Nugget can't run fast enough. Will you stay here with him?"

Roane drew in his breath. Then he said calmly: "You know what you're doing. Of course."

"Keep your eyes open. If you see anything, even at a distance, shoot and we'll be back—fast! Don't wait until something's close enough to hit. Shoot the instant you see anything—if you do!"

Roane nodded. He found it peculiarly difficult to speak again. Huyghens went back over to the embattled bears. He climbed up on Faro Nell's back, holding fast by her shaggy fur.

"Let's go!" he snapped. "That way! Hup!"

The three Kodiaks plunged away at a dead run, Huyghens lurching and swaying on Faro Nell's back. The sudden rush dislodged Semper from his perch. He flapped wildly and got aloft. Then he followed effortfully, flying low.

It happened very quickly. A Kodiak bear can travel as fast as a racehorse on occasion. These three plunged arrow-straight for a spot perhaps half a mile distant, where a blue-and-tawny shape whirled to face them. There was the crash of Huyghens' weapon from where he rode on Faro Nell's back—the explosion of the weapon and the bullet was one sound. The somehow unnatural spiky monster leaped and died.

Huyghens jumped down from Faro Nell. He became feverishly busy at something on the ground—where the particolored sphex had fallen. Semper banked and whirled and came down to the ground. He watched, with his head on one side.

Roane stared, from a distance. Huyghens was doing something to the dead sphex. The two male bears prowled about. Faro Nell regarded Huyghens with intense curios-

ity. Back at the hillock, Nugget whimpered a little. Roane patted him roughly. Nugget whimpered more loudly. In the distance, Huyghens straightened up and took three steps toward Faro Nell. He mounted. Sitka turned his head back toward Roane. He seemed to see or sniff something dubious. He reared upward. He made a noise, apparently, because Sourdough ambled to his side. The two great beasts began to trot back. Semper flapped wildly and—lacking wind—lurched crazily in the air. He landed on Huyghens' shoulder and his talons clung there.

Then Nugget howled hysterically and tried to swarm up Roane, as a cub tries to swarm up the nearest tree in time of danger. Roane collapsed, and the cub upon him—and there was a flash of stinking scaly hide, while the air was filled with the snarling, spitting squeals of a sphex in full leap. The beast had overjumped, aiming at Roane and the cub while both were upright and arriving when they had fallen. It went tumbling.

Roane heard nothing but the fiendish squalling, but in the distance Sitka and Sourdough were coming at rocketship speed. Faro Nell let out a roar and fairly split the air. And then there was a furry cub streaking toward her, bawling, while Roane rolled to his feet and snatched up his gun. He raged through pure instinct. The sphex crouched to pursue the cub and Roane swung his weapon as a club. He was literally too close to shoot—and perhaps the sphex had only seen the fleeing bear cub. But he swung furiously.

And the sphex whirled. Roane was toppled from his feet. An eight-hundred-pound monstrosity straight out of hell—half wildcat and half spitting cobra with hydrophobia and homicidal mania added—such a monstrosity is not to be withstood when, in whirling, its body strikes one in the chest.

That was when Sitka arrived, bellowing. He stood on his hind legs, emitting roars like thunder, challenging the sphex to battle. He waddled forward. Huyghens arrived, but he could not shoot with Roane in the sphere of an explosive bullet's destructiveness. Faro Nell raged and snarled, torn between the urge to be sure that Nugget was unharmed and the frenzied fury of a mother whose offspring has been endangered.

Mounted on Faro Nell, with Semper clinging idiotically to his shoulder, Huyghens watched helplessly as the sphex spat and squalled at Sitka, having only to reach out one claw to let out Roane's life.

V

They got away from there, though Sitka seemed to want to lift the limp carcass of his victim in his teeth and dash it repeatedly to the ground. He seemed doubly raging because a man—with whom all Kodius Champion's descendants had an emotional relationship—had been mishandled. But Roane was not grievously hurt. He bounced and swore as the bears raced for the horizon. Huyghens had flung him up on Sourdough's pack and snapped for him to hold on. He bumped and chattered furiously: "Dammit, Huyghens! This isn't right! Sitka got some deep scratches! That horror's claws may be poisonous!"

But Huyghens snapped, "Hup! Hup!" to the bears, and they continued their race against time. They went on for a good two miles, when Nugget wailed despairingly of his exhaustion and Faro Nell halted firmly to nuzzle him.

"This may be good enough," said Huyghens. "Considering that there's no wind and the big mass of beasts is down the plateau and there were only those two around here. Maybe they're too busy to hold a wake, even! Anyhow—"

He slid to the ground and extracted the antiseptic and swabs.

"Sitka first," snapped Roane. "I'm all right!"

Huyghens swabbed the big bear's wounds. They were trivial, because Sitka Pete was an experienced sphex fighter. Then Roane grudgingly let the curiously smelling stuff—it reeked of ozone—be applied to the slashes on his chest. He held his breath as it stung. Then he said dourly: "It was my fault, Huyghens. I watched you instead of the landscape. I couldn't imagine what you were doing."

"I was doing a quick dissection," Huyghens told him. "By luck, that first sphex was a female, as I hoped. And she was just about to lay her eggs. Ugh! And now I know why the sphexes migrate, and where, and how it is that they don't need game up here."

He slapped a quick bandage on Roane. He led the way eastward, still putting distance between the dead sphexes and his party. It was a crisp walk, only, but Semper flapped indignantly overhead, angry that he was not permitted to ride again.

"I'd dissected them before," said Huyghens. "Not enough's been known about them. Some things needed to be found out if men were ever to be able to live here."

"With bears?" asked Roane ironically.

"Oh, yes," said Huyghens. "But the point is that sphexes come to the desert here to breed—to mate and lay their eggs for the sun to hatch. It's a particular place. Seals return to a special place to mate—and the males, at least, don't eat for weeks on end. Salmon return to their native streams to spawn. They don't eat, and they die afterward. And eels—I'm using Earth examples, Roane—travel some thousands of miles to the Sargasso to mate and die. Unfortunately, sphexes don't appear to die, but it's clear that they have an ancestral breeding place and that they come here to the Sere Plateau to deposit their eggs!"

Roane plodded onward. He was angry: angry with himself because he hadn't taken elementary precautions; because he'd felt too safe, as a man in a robot-served civilization forms the habit of doing; because he hadn't used his brain when Nugget whimpered, in even a bear cub's awareness that danger was near.

"And now," Huyghens added, "I need some equipment that the robot colony had. With it I think we can make a start toward making this a planet that men can live like men on!"

Roane blinked. "What's that?"

"Equipment," said Huyghens impatiently. "It'll be at the robot colony. Robots were useless because they wouldn't pay attention to sphexes. They'd still be. But take out the robot controls and the machines will do! They shouldn't be ruined by a few months' exposure to weather!"

Roane marched on and on. Presently he said: "I never thought you'd want anything that came from that colony, Huyghens!"

"Why not?" demanded Huyghens impatiently. "When men make machines do what they want, that's all right.

Even robots—when they're where they belong. But men will have to handle flame-casters in the job I want them for. There have to be some, because there was a hundred-mile clearing to be burned off. And Earth sterilizers—intended to kill the seeds of any plants that robots couldn't handle. We'll come back up here, Roane, and at least we'll destroy the spawn of these infernal beasts! If we can't do more than that—just doing that every year will wipe out the race in time. There are probably other hordes than this, with other breeding places. But we'll find them, too. We'll make this planet into a place where men from my world can come—and still be men!"

Roane said sardonically: "It was sphexes that beat the robots. Are you sure you aren't planning to make this world safe for robots?"

Huyghens laughed shortly.

"You've only seen one night-walker," he said. "And how about those things on the mountain slope—which would have drained you of blood and then feasted? Would you care to wander about this planet with only a robot bodyguard, Roane? Hardly! Men can't live on this planet with only robots to help them—and stop them from being fully men! You'll see!"

They found the colony after only ten days more of travel and after many sphexes and more than a few staglike creatures and shaggy ruminants had fallen to their weapons and the bears. But first they found the survivors of the colony.

There were three of them, hard-bitten and bearded and deeply embittered. When the electrified fence went down, two of them were away at a mine tunnel, installing a new control panel for the robots who worked in it. The third was in charge of the mining operation. They were alarmed by the stopping of communication with the colony and went back in a tank truck to find out what had happened, and only the fact that they were unarmed saved them. They found sphexes prowling and caterwauling about the fallen colony, in numbers they still did not wholly believe. And the sphexes smelled men inside the armored vehicle, but couldn't break in. In turn, the men couldn't kill them, or they'd have been trailed to the mine and besieged there for as long as they could kill an occasional monster.

The survivors stopped all mining—of course—and tried to use remote-controlled robots for revenge and to get supplies for them. Their mining robots were not designed for either task. And they had no weapons. They improvised miniature throwers of burning rocket fuel, and they sent occasional prowling sphexes away screaming with scorched hides. But this was useful only because it did not kill the beasts. And it cost fuel. In the end they barricaded themselves and used the fuel only to keep a spark signal going against the day when another ship came to seek the colony. They stayed in the mine as in a prison, on short rations, waiting without real hope. For diversion they could only contemplate the mining robots they could not spare fuel to run and which could not do anything but mine.

When Huyghens and Roane reached them, they wept. They hated robots and all things robotic only a little less than they hated sphexes. But Huyghens explained, and armed them with weapons from the packs of the bears, and they marched to the dead colony with the male Kodiaks as point and advance guard, and with Faro Nell bringing up the rear. They killed sixteen sphexes on the way. In the now overgrown clearing there were four more. In the shelters of the colony they found foulness and the fragments of what had been men. But there was some food—not much, because the sphexes clawed at anything that smelled of men, and had ruined the plastic packets of radiation-sterilized food. But there were some supplies in metal containers which were not destroyed.

And there was fuel, which men could dispense when they got to the control panels of the equipment. There were robots everywhere, bright and shining and ready for operation, but immobile, with plants growing up around and over them

They ignored those robots. But lustfully they fueled tracked flame-casters—adapting them to human rather than robot operation—and the giant soil sterilizer which had been built to destroy vegetation that robots could not be made to weed out or cultivate. And they headed back for the Sere Plateau, burning-eyed and filled with hate.

But Nugget became a badly spoiled bear cub, because the freed men approved passionately of anything that

would even grow up to kill sphexes. They petted him to excess when they camped.

And they reached the plateau by a sphex trail to the top. And Semper scouted for sphexes, and the giant Kodiaks disturbed them and the sphexes came squalling and spitting to destroy them—and while Roane and Huyghens fired steadily, the great machines swept up with their special weapons. The Earth-sterilizer, it was found, was deadly against animal life as well as seeds, when its diathermic beam was raised and aimed. But it had to be handled by a man. No robot could decide just when it was to be used, and against what target.

Presently the bears were not needed, because the scorched corpses of sphexes drew live ones from all parts of the plateau even in the absence of noticeable breezes. The official business of the sphexes was presumably finished, but they came to caterwaul and seek vengeance—which they did not find. Presently the survivors of the robot colony drove machines—as men needed to do, here—in great circles around the huge heap of slaughtered fiends, destroying new arrivals as they came. It was such a killing as men had never before made on any planet, but there would not be many left of the sphex horde which had bred on this particular patch of desert. There might be other hordes elsewhere, and other breeding places, but the normal territory of this mass of monsters would see few of them this year.

Or next year, either. Because the soil sterilizer would go over the dug-up sand where the sphex spawn lay hidden for the sun to hatch. And the sun would never hatch them.

But Huyghens and Roane, by that time, were camped on the edge of the plateau with the Kodiaks. They were technically upwind from the scene of slaughter—and somehow it seemed more befitting for the men of the robot colony to conduct it. After all, it was those men whose companions had been killed.

There came an evening when Huyghens amiably cuffed Nugget away from where he sniffed too urgently at a stag steak cooking on the campfire. Nugget ambled dolefully behind the protecting form of Roane and sniveled.

“Huyghens,” said Roane painfully, “we’ve got to come

to a settlement of our affairs. I'm a Colonial Survey officer. You're an illegal colonist. It's my duty to arrest you."

Huyghens regarded him with interest.

"Will you offer me lenience if I tell on my confederates," he asked mildly, "or may I plead that I can't be forced to testify against myself?"

Roane said vexedly: "It's irritating! I've been an honest man all my life, but—I don't believe in robots as I did, except in their place. And their place isn't here. Not as the robot colony was planned, anyhow. The sphexes are nearly wiped out, but they won't be extinct and robots can't handle them. Bears and men will have to live here or—the people who do will have to spend their lives behind sphex-proof fences, accepting only what robots can give them. And there's much too much on this planet for people to miss it! To live in a robot-managed controlled environment on a planet like Loren Two wouldn't . . . it wouldn't be self-respecting!"

"You wouldn't be getting religious, would you?" asked Huyghens dryly. "That was your term for self-respect before."

Semper, the eagle, squawked indignantly as Sitka Pete almost stepped on him, approaching the fire. Sitka Pete sniffed, and Huyghens spoke to him sharply, and he sat down with a thump. He remained sitting in an untidy lump, looking at the steak and drooling.

"You don't let me finish!" protested Roane querulously. "I'm a Colonial Survey officer, and it's my job to pass on the work that's done on a planet before any but the first-landed colonists may come here to live. And of course to see that specifications are followed. Now—the robot colony I was sent to survey was practically destroyed. As designed, it wouldn't work. It couldn't survive."

Huyghens grunted. Night was falling. He turned the meat over the fire.

"Now, in emergencies," said Roane carefully, "colonists have the right to call on any passing ship for aid. Naturally! So—I've always been an honest man before, Huyghens—my report will be that the colony as designed was impractical, and that it was overwhelmed and de-

stroyed except for three survivors who holed up and signaled for help. They did, you know!"

"Go on," grunted Huyghens.

"So," said Roane querulously, "it just happened—just happened, mind you—that a ship with you and Sitka and Sourdough and Faro Nell on board—and Nugget and Semper, too, of course—picked up the distress call. So you landed to help the colonists. And you did. That's the story. Therefore it isn't illegal for you to be here. It was only illegal for you to be here when you were needed. But we'll pretend you weren't."

Huyghens glanced over his shoulder in the deepening night. He said calmly: "I wouldn't believe that if I told it myself. Do you think the Survey will?"

"They're not fools," said Roane tartly. "Of course they won't! But when my report says that because of this unlikely series of events it is practical to colonize the planet, whereas before it wasn't—and when my report proves that a robot colony alone is stark nonsense, but that with bears and men from your world added, so many thousand colonists can be received per year. And when that much is true, anyhow—"

Huyghens seemed to shake a little as a dark silhouette against the flames. A little way off, Sourdough sniffed the air hopefully. With a bright light like the fire, presently naked-looking flying things might appear to be slapped down out of the air. They were succulent—to a bear.

"My reports carry weight," insisted Roane. "The deal will be offered, anyhow! The robot colony organizers will have to agree or they'll have to fold up. It's true! And your people can hold them up for nearly what terms they choose."

Huyghens' shaking became understandable. It was laughter.

"You're a lousy liar, Roane," he said, chuckling. "Isn't it unintelligent and unreasonable and irrational to throw away a lifetime of honesty just to get me out of a jam? You're not acting like a rational animal, Roane. But I thought you wouldn't, when it came to the point."

Roane squirmed.

"That's the only solution I can think of. But it'll work."

"I accept it," said Huyghens, grinning. "With thanks. If only because it means another few generations of men living like men on a planet that is going to take a lot of taming. And—if you want to know—because it keeps Sourdough and Sitka and Nell and Nugget from being killed because I brought them here illegally."

Something pressed hard against Roane. Nugget, the cub, pushed urgently against him in his desire to get closer to the fragrantly cooking meat. He edged forward. Roane toppled from where he squatted on the ground. He sprawled. Nugget sniffed luxuriously.

"Slap him," said Huyghens. "He'll move back."

"I won't!" said Roane indignantly from where he lay. "I won't do it! He's my friend!"

RITE OF PASSAGE

BY HENRY KUTTNER (1915–1958) AND C. L.
MOORE (1911–1987)

THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION
MAY

This is a sad moment in the history of this series because this is the last story by the remarkable husband-and-wife team of Kuttner and Moore that we will be offering you. By 1958, Kuttner would be dead and Moore largely silent, a silence that lends some credence to the theory that he was the driving force in their collaboration, even though she was the better-known writer before their marriage. "Near Miss" would appear in 1958, but that good story will not make the final cut in our volume for that year.

"Rite of Passage" is a real find—a never before re-printed story that was brought to our attention by the thorough and faithful Barry N. Malzberg. Thanks again, Barry. (MHG)

My first thought, on re-reading this story, was how often religion presents its darker aspects in literature.

But then I think, is that really surprising? Religion is one of those "good" words in the ordinary vocabulary, but only in a very limited way. We tend to think of our own religion (if any) as wonderful and spiritual. Other people's religions we rarely have respect for, and we can consider them foolish and vicious. We therefore don't mind the religious figure as villain as long as it isn't our religion.

In science fiction it would seem particularly likely to have the darker aspects of religion present, if only because of the traditional (and sometimes exaggerated) enmity between science and religion, with science fiction on

the side of science. And nowadays, of course, there is fresh fuel for animosity in view of the manner in which the more primitive fundamentalist sects inveigh against the inescapable fact of the evolutionary development of the universe, of life, and of humanity. (IA)

Phrater Stephen Rabb was pretending not to be afraid. He sat there, sullen-faced and black-browed, trying to ignore the sacred things in my office, but he couldn't keep his eyes away from the Eagle Totem in its alcove above me. It made him shiver. It was supposed to. I pretended to be looking through the papers on my desk.

Finally he said, "You are Mr. Cole?"

"That's right," I said pleasantly, and waited.

"You're the Black President?"

"Of Communications Corporation, Eagle Totem," I said, and waited again, trying not to smile because I felt so good. I'd waited for Phrater Rabb a long time now. Not Rabb himself, but a man with his mission.

"I want . . ." He looked up at the totem. "You know what I want."

"Yes," I said, patting the papers before me affectionately. I might have added, "And it's what I want too, Phrater Rabb. A lot more than you do, if you only knew it." But aloud I could only say, "It's all here in your application, Rabb. I know what you want. But you can't have it—not at the price you offer."

"Six years' service?" He sounded shocked. "That's not enough? You mean I put in six years living at bare subsistence, give the Corporation all that service practically for free, and it's not enough to get rid of Jake Haliaia?"

"Stealing a soul is an expensive business," I told him, looking solemn. "And service is only as good as the skill you've got. You're rated point five seven in your field. What is it—electrical engineering? According to my dope sheet, there's an oversupply right now. You'd have to go in hock for twenty years of subsistence living in service to the Corporation before we'd break even. If it's worth that much to you—"

Rabb said angrily, "I could kill him myself a lot cheaper.

"You could, sure. But what then? One of his phraters

would get the Black President of his clan to put a spell on you. It might be sickness or accident. We could cure that. But it might be soul-stealing. I think it would be. You ready to die that fast?"

Rabb pushed out his underlip sullenly and looked up at the Eagle in its little gold-lined alcove. He hesitated.

"What did Haliaia do to *you*, anyhow?" I asked, and then bit my tongue a little trying to take back that giveaway accent, with its frank implication. I knew damn well what he had done to *me*. But he'd been safe. He knew I couldn't touch him. Black Presidents have to give up personal animosities when they take office. Or at least, they have to go through the motions.

"He swindled me out of an inheritance," Rabb said. "He's a cousin of mine." He hit his knee with a doubled fist. "Twenty years' service just to wipe out a man like that," he said. "It isn't fair."

"You could always go to court," I suggested, and we both laughed. It would take more like a hundred years of service to pay out the bribes that solution would cost. Law courts have nothing to do with justice anymore. With no salaries involved, the officials live on bribes. It's a survival, like trial by combat, and it'll die out presently. Social control is based on corporate magic today, each corporation formed of people chosen according to aptitude, training and interest. Rabb had far more in common with me, his phrater in the Communications Corporation, than with his blood-relative Haliaia, that big, brown, handsome, half-Polynesian who thinks he can get away with—well, not murder, or course. But it's worse than that to steal a man's wife.

Rabb was still sitting there considering.

"Twenty years is too long," he said. "I couldn't face it, not even to get back at Jake. Six years is my limit. What could you do to him for that?"

"Disease and injury," I said. "On the nonphysical plane, I could make him very unhappy. But I can't guarantee anything, of course. It all depends on how strong the White President of his clan is. Everything's curable except soul-stealing—if the other guy's White President is good enough."

"I know your reputation, Mr. Cole," Rabb said. "You're

just about the biggest in the business. I know you'll do your best. And it's worth six years to me."

"No more?"

He shook his head slowly.

"All right, Rabb," I said. "Sign here, then." I pushed a contract and a pen across the desk. "And here—that's for your insurance. Can't have you die on us before your term's up."

He scribbled his name twice. "That's all," I said.

"But will I—"

"You'll be notified, in detail. Eyewitness reports on Haliaia's progress will be mailed to you weekly. That's part of the service. Okay, Rabb? Good afternoon."

He went out awkwardly, shuffling sideways not to turn his back on the Eagle, whose strong, sacred wings theoretically carry the Communications Corporation in flight around the world. I shuffled his papers together and poised them over the slot in my desk that would suck them down to Administration.

Under my breath I said, "The damned fool." But I couldn't quite let go of the papers. I couldn't quite decide. On the one hand, some richer enemy of Jake Haliaia's might turn up eventually. On the other, Rabb was a bird in the hand. I'd waited six months even for this. Haliaia was a man who made enemies right and left, sure. But soul-stealing is an expensive business. Unless Haliaia antagonized somebody so high in rating that the investment of only a few years' service would do the job, I'd be no better off—for waiting. Ideally, somebody else would turn up wanting what I wanted—Haliaia's death. Practically, it wasn't likely. I'd have to gimmick somebody's papers to get the man disposed of. Rabb's papers were as good as anybody's, for that purpose. But it's a risk. It's always a risk to tamper with corporate magic.

I'd gladly have paid Rabb's expenses out of my own pocket, if I'd dared. Did I dare? For months now I'd been telling myself that I risked nothing. I know how this so-called magic works. I know the truth. Magic can't affect a man if there's no such thing as magic. Or anyhow, not if he doesn't believe in it. My magic works, sure. But not because it's real.

Still, forty years of training leaves its compulsions. A Black President who turns his powers to selfish ends has

never been heard of. I'll bet it's been done, but not by anyone fool enough to get found out. At worst, I'd lose my job, which I spent fifteen years learning, and my prestige, which is always a good thing to have, and my pay, which is one of the highest in the Corporation. At worst, that is, from my enlightened viewpoint. From theirs, the worst is the soul-stealing spell, and I'd certainly get slapped with that. When they found it wouldn't work—what? A President, black or white, is immune to magic himself as long as his totem protects him—that is, as long as he doesn't break any major taboos, especially in public. But suppose I broke the biggest taboo, and it became known? My soul might be stolen. In that case, everyone would expect me to cooperate by dying.

When I didn't die at the appointed time, what then? Would there be a more realistic attempt to murder me, with a bullet or poison? I thought that would depend entirely on how superstitious my would-be executioners were. If they were skeptical enough, they'd certainly not depend on magic alone, after they saw it wasn't succeeding. But if they weren't skeptical, then they'd simply decide that my magic was stronger than theirs, and my prestige and power would rise higher than ever.

Was I the only President who wasn't blinded by superstitious belief in magic?

Well, there was one quick way to find out. I laid Rabb's papers on my desk and pushed the button that locked my office door. I didn't want any inquiring eyes to notice them before I made my mind up. I flipped the intercom switch and said to my secretary, "I'll be in Thornvald's office, Jan. Don't bother us unless it's urgent."

There is a private door in my office and in Thornvald's that opens on our connecting bridge. I always liked to cross over that way. Communications headquarters building covers two square miles. Above it our twin towers rise impressively, for I'm the nominal head of the corporation, along with Karl Thornvald, the White President. Walking across the bridge, you can always hear the wind howling thinly through the steel structuring and sometimes a surprised bird looks wildly at you from beyond the glass. I used to wonder how we'd handle the embarrassment if an eagle ever came by and knocked itself senseless against our bridge. Probably nobody'd ever no-

tice. It's amazing how much a person can train himself to ignore if his beliefs are contravened.

Crossing the bridge is almost like flying. You're so high in the blue air, all the rooftops far below and spreading out enormously to the ring of green fields a mile away in every direction. For a moment it reminded me of the hallucination of flight that comes with the Eagle ritual.

Thornvald's telltale showed he was alone. I knocked and went in. His desk is like mine, with the Eagle Totem on the wall, but otherwise the office is bright and cheerful, without the black-magic props I have to have around.

Karl is a plump, round-faced man with an air of impressive solemnity he can put on at will. Right now he put it on automatically as the door opened, and then shrugged and gave me a mild grin.

"Hello, Lloyd," he said. "What's up?"

"Coffee break," I said. He shook his head over the papers in his hand, laid them down, shrugged again and pushed the coffee button. Two coffee bulbs rose instantly out of a desk panel.

"Good idea," he said, biting his open in that irritating, unsanitary way of his. "I've been sweating out a cure for a tough case. A key sonar man. The clan really needs him."

I opened my coffee with one hand and with the other reached for the paper he was handing me.

"Somebody in Food Corporation put a spell on him, eh?"

"Right. And you know. Mumm. He's tricky, and getting trickier."

I knew him. Mumm is the new Black President of Foods, a young man and a very smart one, out to make a reputation for himself fast.

Thornvald said sadly, "I can't locate the real trouble. I thought it might be a foreign body, but the fluoroscope says no. And the man thinks he'll die."

"This says it's the Pneumonia Spell?"

"I think it is, but—"

"With pneumonia anybody'd feel lousy," I said. "Have you ever considered that what's wrong with your patient may not be magic, but germs?"

Thornvald blinked at me. "Well . . . now wait a minute, Lloyd. Of course it's germs. We know that, if it's the

Pneumonia Spell. But who sends the germs? And who puts enough magic in them to eat up my patient's mana? I tell you, Mumm can make germs more virulent than any Black President I ever heard of. I've used five different blessings on the aureomycin, and I still can't cancel Mumm's magic."

"Maybe your patient's a skeptic," I said.

"Now, Lloyd," he said, pulling on his air of solemnity.

"Come off it, Karl," I said. "You know there are skeptics."

"Yes, I suppose so, poor souls. I'm happy to say I never met one. I've sometimes wondered how I'd handle it if I did."

I'd never met one either, barring myself, but I gave him a wise grin and said, "I know one. Smart man, too. Skeptics have their own power, Karl, some of them. Did you ever think one skeptic might be able to cure another, if your methods fail?"

He looked very shocked. His pink face actually went pale with it. "Be careful, Lloyd," he said. "That's getting close to blasphemy."

"I'm just stating facts," I said.

"If you know a skeptic, you know your duty." His voice was prim. "As for saving a patient at the expense of his soul, I'd rather have the man die in a state of grace, and so would you, Lloyd."

"Even a key man? Somebody the Corporation can't afford to lose?"

"Of course, Lloyd."

"Even if it means letting Mumm score a win, and our reputation going down?"

"Lloyd, I don't understand you in this mood." He looked up at the Eagle Totem and his lips moved slightly.

I sighed and got up, draining my coffee. "Forget it, Karl," I said. "I was just kidding."

"I certainly hope so," he told me stiffly. "I understand you, but others might get wrong ideas. If you really know a confessed skeptic, Lloyd, you have to report him. For his own good."

"I told you I was kidding. Sorry, Karl. I've been worrying, too."

"Trouble? Maybe I can help."

I looked at him. He really had gone pale at the thought

of blasphemy. It had to be genuine. You can't put on an act like that. I drew a deep breath and plunged.

"No, not trouble exactly. I got a soul-stealing order today and it's going to be embarrassing for me, that's all."

He gave me one of his keen looks and then demonstrated in one word that he's really well qualified to be White President, however much I may underestimate the man sometimes.

"Haliaia?" he asked.

It scared me a little. He's almost too quick. But I couldn't back down now without losing a chance that might not come again for months.

"That's it," I said. "Haliaia."

He looked down at his hands, and then up again. His prim lips were firm.

"I know how you feel, Lloyd. There'll be talk. But you'll have to bear it. You know your duty. As long as you and I have the facts straight, what does it matter how people gossip?"

I gave him a stalwart, resolute look, Black President to White President, and the world well lost for duty's sake.

"You're right, Karl. Dead right."

"I know I am. Now stop worrying and put the papers through with a clear conscience, Lloyd. It isn't always easy, being a President."

I thought, "There's nothing easier, Karl," but aloud I said, "All right, if you say so, I'll do it. I'll put them through right now."

I went back across the bridge, feeling exhilarated and only a little scared. I made the necessary changes in Rabb's request. Then I held Jake Haliaia over the slot and let go, and watched him go fluttering down the dark vacuum into infinity.

Afterward I turned and looked up at the Eagle Totem. It's just a stuffed bird. That's all.

Now there was no use in even trying to keep the secret. I sat down and put in a call to Florida. After a little while the wings of the stuffed eagle carried Communications Corporation's message across the continent and a woman's face appeared on the screen. She was looking lovelier than I had ever seen her look before. Her eyes

were a little out of focus; obviously I wasn't registering yet on her screen. Or in her life, either, if you wanted to think about it that way.

A mechanical voice said, "Mr. Cole? We have Miami now. Mrs. Cole is on the screen."

Now the violet eyes focused. We looked at each other across many miles and enormous emotional distances that would never be bridged again.

"Hello, Lila," I said.

"What do you want?"

"Two things. First, congratulations. The divorce is final this week, isn't it?"

She simply waited.

I smiled at her. "Oh, yes," I said. "The other thing. Haliaia is going to die."

The ritual hallucination was the next step. It's meaningless, of course—a drug-induced dream which habit has shaped to an expected pattern. Thorvald goes through the same ritual for white magic, and he really believes the Eagle appears and talks to him. I'm not that gullible, but I follow the routine too. When I don't, it worries me, maybe because I feel if I vary in one thing I may get careless and vary in more public, and dangerous, ways.

This time I thought I'd skip the ritual. It hadn't even the validity of faith, now I'd broken the main taboo of my office. But I found I couldn't concentrate on my work. Habit, after all, was too strong for me. I made mistakes, punched the wrong buttons, got so irritated finally that that I gave up and went ahead with the routine mumbo-jumbo. I entered the ritual room with an odd sense of relief. I burned the necessary herbs, gave myself a shot of the holy drug and said the usual prayer to the Eagle. After that it was the same hallucination I've had so often.

I dreamed. The Eagle flew with me to Miami. I found Haliaia in a casino playing chuck-a-luck. He was big and brown and handsome. I knew he was due to get enormously fat in later life, like most Polynesians. Lila would be spared this, and Jake. But they wouldn't thank me for it.

I stunned him with my sacred spear and dragged him to a dark place. With the spear I made a circle on his

forehead. Then I drove the spear through his chest and dropped three drops of his heart's blood on the Eagle Totem which I carried. I touched him with the Eagle and the wound closed. I whirled the totem around his head. He opened his eyes and saw me.

I said to him, "You will live two weeks. For a day you will be well. Then you will be sick. On the fourteenth day you will die. The Eagle Totem will eat up your soul."

Then the dream ended.

What really happened was completely practical. Haliaia's sheaf of papers, sucked down into Administration, passed across various desks, were stamped, sorted, assigned, and then sat waiting my go-ahead. My assistants handle most of the black magic, but for a soul-stealing the Black President himself usually performs the honors.

So I sent down for the folder on Haliaia, made up some months ago by our spies in Haliaia's Corporation. He was a key man in the Food Company, and we try to keep folders on such people handy, just in case. I had to know just the right moment when the launching of a spell against the man would hit him where he lived.

Ordinary magic is easy to handle, run-of-the-mill stuff like bad luck, illness, accidents. You can handle it on the spiritual level as a rule, but you don't depend on that. Often you give a man a little push. You arrange to get him infected with a virus, say. You have spies in the restaurant where he eats to drop something mildly toxic in his soup. But you want to make sure he knows it. To make sure antibiotics won't lick the virus, you put a very public spell on the virus. Somehow, if the victim knows what you've done, the magic usually works. He's scared, and fear helps the bugs work. And of course if the bugs don't work, if antibiotics or something cure the victim, then everybody believes the black magic has been cured by white magic—the job of the White President of every clan.

But you have to study your victim carefully, his life charts and psychological patterns and the reports from trained observers working quietly in the enemy's office or his home. (I don't doubt that observers usually had an eye on me, making notes for the files of other Black

Presidents. You just can't do anything about the situation. Our whole social pattern is based on it.)

So you study your victim's charts. You pick exactly the right time to publicize your spell against him. It's always a time when the man's already down—in an emotional depression, or sick with some mild infection, or under stress of some kind. Then you reinforce the stress, make sure he knows he's under a spell and that all his associates know it, and he's apt to cooperate even against his will.

But the really big magic, the soul-stealing—that has to be handled more carefully. Plenty of deaths have been diagnosed as soul-stealing when they're really a burst appendix or thrombosis, or something medicine can't help. The White President of the dead man's clan can't admit his magic's too weak to save the victim. So he takes the obvious out of claiming an enemy used the soul-stealing spell against him. For that there is no cure.

Actually, few Black Presidents do it. Few people can pay for it. But simply because most deaths are diagnosed as the result of soul-stealing, people believe that if their souls are stolen, they'll inevitably die. It's affirming the consequent, of course, which isn't logically valid, but it works. You say, "If a man dies, his soul must have been stolen," so naturally, if his soul is stolen, he's got to die. There's nothing to magic but that.

So I went over Haliaia's charts very closely. I wanted to make sure. Everybody has cycles of worry and depression. Pick your moment and it often takes only one push to send a man over the edge. You play on his buried stresses, his hidden fears. I spent fifteen years learning how these things are done. I chose the moment carefully. . . .

An emergency newscast broke into all the programs. Everything went off the air except the announcement that the soul of Jakob Haliaia of Food Corporation had been stolen. And that meant he was already half dead.

I liked to think about his reactions. He'd been worried a long time about what I'd do. No matter how confident he thought he felt, I was a Black President. He was worried, all right. And his charts showed that he was highly suggestible. I didn't need to wait for a physical illness or accident, or even to induce one. I simply set my date, and struck.

After that I closed my office and went away on a short vacation. In a sense it was cowardly and would look bad. Mumm, the young Black President of Haliaia's Corporation, would think I was afraid of him. Certainly he'd strike back if he could. That didn't worry me much, though it would be interesting to see what he'd do.

No, I had two reasons for going. The important one was that I meant to watch Jake Haliaia die. I wanted to spend two wonderful weeks as near him as I could get, seeing the spell take hold, seeing society draw away from him, seeing him move through a vacuum that gradually thickened into the murk of oblivion as the day of his death drew on. That would be worth any cost I might have to pay later for breaking the strongest taboo a Black President can face.

The unimportant reason was Phrater Rabb. He was the weak link in my chain, of course. There wasn't much I could do to cover my tracks. The plain fact was that I'd falsified his papers, given away fourteen years of the Corporation's money and violated my own sacred vows in striking down a personal enemy for private revenge. But what covering-up I could do, I did.

Specifically, I wrote Rabb a letter stating that the Black President had been called away on an extended trip before Rabb's application for soul-stealing could be confirmed. Therefore, in my absence, my assistant was putting the application through. Would Rabb kindly notify them if there was any error in this case? If not, Jakob Haliaia's soul-stealing would go into operation on schedule, and Rabb would be kept posted by eyewitness reports on the progress of his revenge.

I knew damned well Rabb wouldn't notify the Company that there'd been a mistake. For I'd studied Rabb's life charts and personality patterns very thoroughly before I'd decided to move. It was perfectly true that Rabb had been swindled out of an inheritance, but that's a commonplace event today. What was unusual was the man's reaction. He wanted revenge, because he'd been hit in his most vulnerable area. It was all laid out clearly in his charts—*dominant trait: dysfunctional acquisitiveness*. In our terminology, what that meant was that Rabb would be so delighted to get something for nothing that he'd

keep his mouth shut. A man behaves as he's conditioned to behave, and this was Rabb's way. He wouldn't talk.

So I couldn't fail.

Florida's Food Corporation glitters from the air. The solar water vats make the roofs a dazzle of light, and the city stretches out into the Gulf on islands and floating platforms. Moving ways studded with cars cross the water and canals give back blue light and color through what seems to be dry land.

I took a taxi into the Corporation. I wasn't making the slightest effort at concealment. Both Mumm and Haliaia must know quite well who issued the spell that cut Haliaia off from the world. If Mumm found out I was here it would show him I wasn't afraid. If anyone asked me, it was quite natural that I should be here. A Black President is helpless to defend himself against a personal enemy, but there isn't a rule in the book that forbids him to enjoy the spectacle of an enemy destroyed at someone else's orders.

I left my taxi at the door of Haliaia's office building and went up to the floor that wasn't his anymore. I didn't go into the office. It wasn't necessary. I just sat on the windowsill, lit a cigarette, and looked for about ten minutes at the door that didn't carry Jake Haliaia's name anymore. I thought about how it must have happened.

Where was he when the news broke? How had he first heard it? Was he watching the TV screen when his own broad brown face came on, and the voice intoning his death? Was he with Lila when he heard? And did she draw away from him, like everyone else, frightened and awestruck, knowing Haliaia was a dead man from that moment on?

It's a highly ritualized pattern, the ostracism of the living dead. The man's social personality is removed. The victim is completely isolated. The social fabric pulls away from the condemned man and from that moment he ceases to exist in the world of the living.

He must have hurried to his office—this building, this door—to call on his confederates in Food Corporation for help. Somehow at first, a man never believes this can possibly be happening to him. He always expects his friends can help. . . .

When he got here, this was what he saw: Another

man's name on his office door. Another man's face behind his desk. Eyes that turned away from his, nervous and embarrassed, fearful of contagion.

That's the first movement. Society assumes the man is dead. He may still be walking and talking and making hysterical demands, but everyone knows he is no longer a living being.

In the second movement society surges back over the victim like a returning wave, but it comes with a purpose. The man is dead—living, but not living—and he must now be removed, put into the spirit world of his totem, where he now belongs. He is sacred but dangerous. So the movement of society's return is the mourning rite. It is the funeral, which guides the victim into the spirit world. He attends his own funeral, in the place of honor, the bier. And by that time he cooperates fully. I've never seen it fail. The enormous compulsive force of the ritual is too strong to fight. The victim believes, and dies. At the end, his personality can be seen altering before your eyes. Sometimes they begin to act like their totem. Always they die—because they believe.

I took another taxi to Haliaia's home. It was a luxury place, big curved walls of translucent plastic ribbed with veins of its own fabric. Had he brought Lila here? She wouldn't be here now. The walls and windows were darkened, and hanging on the door was a big black wreath. I saw some dishes of food standing by the door in black containers. There would be nobody at all in the house now, except Haliaia.

I crossed the street and waited in the shadow of a doorway. After a long time I saw the black wreath of the big house shiver slightly, and the door opened quite slowly. Haliaia looked out.

He was still big, but he looked shrunken. He was still brown, but very pale under the brown. He looked all around, without seeing me, and then down at the funeral dishes. He was wearing the sacred garment of his clan, green, with his Fish Totem on the breast. All of his other clothing had, of course, been sold or given away by now. At his funeral the robe he wore would be changed for the shroud, white, with his totem on it.

Oh, yes, Haliaia believed. He had allowed the sacred garment to be put on him, and he was still wearing it. He

wasn't fighting against the spell. The obsession was too strong for him.

I felt an odd little rush of relief when I saw that. Recognizing it. I knew suddenly why I had really come to Florida. I no longer believed in my own magic, or anyone else's. Not believing, I didn't feel entirely sure that anyone else did either. Especially Jake Haliaia. He too might have become a skeptic, though he never could have got access to the forgotten and forbidden microfilms which gave me my new knowledge.

So that was why I had come. I had to see with my own eyes that Haliaia still believed. No, he'd never have got to the microfilms, but I thought me knew what was in them as surely as if he himself had seen them spin up the glowing glass screen like time winding up. For Lila knew, and Lila would have told him.

Because I'd told Lila.

I'd told her the truth. I'd told her that no magic really existed, and what was really happening, and why it had happened this way. And then, free of the fear of magic, she had done what she'd always wanted to do—she'd left me and gone to Haliaia. There's no law against that. There isn't even a taboo, which is stronger than any law. Only it was almost unprecedented, because, somehow, no one divorces a President—a magician. No one who believes in magic.

And I was the one who'd swept the shadows of superstition from Lila's mind and let her see the truth.

I'd done that—I could reverse the process. I could make Lila a believer in magic again. In fact, I had to. For I'd told her too much, and that made her dangerous, if she talked enough, long enough, to enough people. Rumor spreads. If it became commonly known that I, Black President of the Eagle Clan, didn't believe in corporate magic, where would I be?

Probably dead.

All right. She'd never loved me, though I'd thought she had. She'd married me against her will, partly because of her family, partly because she was afraid to refuse a Black President's offer. But she loved Haliaia.

When she saw her lover die—by magic—the powerful, unconscious forces in her mind, the enormous invisible pressure of society would force her back into the dark-

ness of superstition from which I'd brought her. Against her will, she would succumb, since reason cannot fight against emotion when the stress is powerful enough. If I'd used magic against Lila herself, I think I would have failed. But Haliaia was her vulnerable point, and I struck at him, and now he was already following the compulsive ritual which would end in the Rite of Passage and his death.

Oh, yes—Lila would believe in magic again. And then I'd get her back. . . .

A man came down the street slowly, lounging on the rail of the moving way. Haliaia shouted, "Ed! Ed!" and waved frantically. As his head turned I saw the red ring stamped in the brownness of his forehead—the mark of my sacred spear in the hallucination. The clan undertakers stamp that indelible ring at the same time they change the victim's clothing.

The man on the moving way twitched a little when he heard the call, but he did not turn. I saw Haliaia surge forward, as if he meant to run out and force an answer from the man. He almost ran—almost. I saw his foot reach out for the next step. But something stopped him. He hesitated, drew back, opened his mouth to call again, but he made no sound at all.

I looked away down the length of the street. Far off on the Gulf I could see the fishing fleet, copter-guided, driving the shoals of food into the nets. A queer thought struck me. Long ago, in primitive groups, the totem animal had been taboo, or so my research in the micro-film libraries had told me. But today we eat our totems. Perhaps all life today is a ritual condition, not just the totem itself but all life. . . .

I realized I was avoiding looking at Haliaia. I made myself look back. He wasn't there any longer, and the black dishes of food had disappeared.

There would be about a ten-day interval now before Haliaia died. I meant to be there to watch. In the meantime I enjoyed a vacation, the first I'd had in nearly five years. Partly I felt I needed it, and partly I wanted to keep out of everybody's way until Haliaia was irrevocably dead. I had an uneasy feeling that Black President Mumm was looking for me. There wasn't a thing he

could do, but I would have been just as happy to avoid him entirely until the thing was over.

One of the things I did was revisit the microfilm library where I had first learned the truth about magic and the past. Never mind where it is. Never mind how I found out about it. I showed my pass at the door, went down to the lowest level of all, and found in the dark corner the same dusty door which nobody had passed since I found it last. I thought I must be the only man alive who had ever stumbled across it. It isn't strange—the library is a very hard one to get entry to at all, and these levels of the stacks are forbidden to all but a few of the very highest officials in the Corporations.

I filled my pockets with ancient rolls of film and went calmly up to a scanner booth and shut the door behind me. And for the next hour I took a heady plunge into the quaint, terrible old days of the twentieth century.

Some of the films were books on social psychology, anthropology, medicine. Some of them were old newspapers of the 1980s. Unsteadily under the slanting, greenish glass of the screen, the print and the pictures swam as I turned the controls that unreeled them and brought them into focus. It was eerie, reading the columns of forgotten news that men first read during the terrible wars of the twentieth century. Everything about their way of life seems so incredible, now.

They had national boundaries then, instead of corporations. The wars between totalitarian states and monopolistic corporations hadn't yet been fought out to a synthesis which resulted in today's gigantic companies that kept society alive. Much of their way of life seems unbelievable now, but some of it makes very good sense.

Belief in magic, then, was something for the primitives of the world. I looked it up in the anthropology books. In a way, it all seems very plausible. You can see how magic regained control.

In the early days, you believed in magic only if you had no control over your environment. Naturally, you didn't need magic if you could control your life without it. But the uncivilized peoples, at the mercy of nature, had to use magic because it was their own refuge from despair. And along with them, groups in civilized society who still had to fight with the unpredictable also believed. Fisher-

men, for instance, in conflict with the sea, believed in luck and charms. Hunters, sportsmen, actors all believed. Everyone at the whim of nature or society clung to superstitions in a frantic effort to believe they could control by luck or magic what they could not control by their greatest skill.

So when society broke down, after the Great Wars, mankind quite naturally reverted to magic. And the organized, vested interests in magic kept control when society climbed back up the steep slopes down which it had skidded at the end of the Wars. Some sciences were allowed to progress. Not all. Nothing that might weaken faith in magic is practiced by the Corporation today.

It's amazing how much you can believe if you're brought up in the conviction that magic really works. Even I had believed, in a sort of split-minded way, in a lot of things I actually knew weren't true. I had learned the rigamarole. I performed the rituals. People sickened or died when I leveled my spells at them. Sometimes people sickened whom I'd never heard of, and I accepted the magical responsibility, knowing I lied about those, wondering if I lied even to myself about others. But I acted as if it were all true, and after a while I really began believing I'd worked the magic I claimed, just as everyone else believed.

But always a part of my mind must have rebelled. So it was a wonderful feeling to learn the truth. I wasn't really mad, or blasphemous, to doubt my own powers. I could give up the long inward struggle, trying to force myself to believe impossible things. I felt a relief so tremendous it made me a little lightheaded, the first time I ran these microfilms under the greenish glass and read the things my mind had always known were true.

After that I was free. Or as free as society would allow. The tremendous power of public belief still restricted me externally, but in my own mind I could think as I chose. I could behave as I chose, so long as I stayed careful. I could send out a spell that would strike Jake Haliaia down in his tracks, and nobody could stop me, because the truth had set me free. . . .

But it was no good to be free alone.

I looked at the columns of forgotten news on the screen before me, and wished that I had lived then instead of now, in a world and time that seemed far more

real to me than my own. I had been born into a world of wrongness, a time that was out of joint. I was a skeptic, the one-eyed man in the country of the blind. It was as if I alone could see a great leaning crag far overhead, swaying, ready to topple and crush us all, while all around me the blind men made their futile magic and never knew the real danger.

I didn't know either, really. There was nothing as tangible as a toppling cliff. But I, the one-eyed man, had always seen a shadow, sensed an insecurity, felt a dim and hovering terror. I had never found out what it was. Not the Eagle—the totem was only a superstition. Magic? There was none. But somehow, somewhere, something existed that cast its shadow of fear, a monster I had been trying to identify all my life. And perhaps that was really why I first began to search the forbidden microfilms. Perhaps I had thought that in the past I could find the monster's genesis, and learn its name.

I never had. I had learned truth, and skepticism, and I had come to understand why corporate magic was the basis of my own culture. Back in the twentieth century, the troubles—stresses—dangers had grown until they merged into one great terror—a death-fear—which left no room in life for anything else. There had been real dangers, certainly. Society could have destroyed itself. And it nearly did. Then the death-fear grew too great, and reality could not be faced anymore. Men were afraid of men. Society, somehow, had to be protected against itself, and so magic became the safeguard. Or, rather, a belief in magic, indoctrinated early, self-perpetuating, until now society felt safe—under some unnamed monster's terrifying shadow.

What monster?

I didn't know. But I was alone, in the country of the blind, and I think that was why I had to open Lila's superstition-blinded eyes. So I wouldn't be alone anymore. And I'd done it, and I'd lost her.

And in the end I'd get her back—blind again. She'd come back to me, after Haliaia died and the great forces of ritual had driven her into blindness, no matter how much her reason might fight against it. She was already learning that, even though magic was a lie, I was very far from powerless.

She would come back blind. If that was the only way I could get her back—and it was—then let her eyes be sealed again.

I sat there, staring at the glowing screen that opened into time. I sat there for a long while, thinking about Lila.

On the fourteenth day I went to watch Haliaia die.

I was just leaving my hotel room for his home when the bell rang and the face I had been expecting for two weeks flashed into sight on the visiphone screen. My hand, outstretched for the doorknob, began to shake. My heart pumped. I felt like a schoolboy caught in some act of guilt. My first impulse was to run. But then I pulled myself together and remembered who I was, and how well I was covered. I turned back to the screen and pushed the button that would bring me into focus for Mumm of Food Corporation.

He had a sharp young face, not too scrupulous, and that frightening brashness that comes from the confidence of youth, before it has ever known a major defeat. I remembered him dimly from our school days, he just entering the university as candidate for training when I was graduating. His eyes came into quick focus on mine as my face shaped on his screen.

"Hello," he said. "Mumm. I remember you from school, don't I, Cole?"

"Yes, I know you," I said. "How are you, Mumm?" And I touched three fingers to the corner of the screen in the same moment he extended his to the same spot, which is as close as you can come to a handshake on television.

"I heard you were in town," he said rather cagily.

"I'll bet," I murmured. "What can I do for you?"

He eyed me sharply and closely. "We're losing a good man today," he said.

I didn't pretend not to understand. "You can't expect me to be sorry," I said.

"I know." He paused. "Quite a coincidence," he said, his eyes searching my face. "Convenient for you," he added.

I let my voice sharpen. "Maybe the rules have changed since I left the university. Used to be out of line to ask what you're asking."

"I'm not asking any questions," he told me. "I don't need to. All I'm saying is it's very convenient for you, having Haliaia die so soon after your . . . falling-out. Coincidence, your turning up for the funeral. You a relative, Cole?"

I paused long enough to be sure my voice wouldn't shake. I was repressing a strong impulse to smash the screen in his face.

"Not precisely a relative," I told him when my voice was under control. "I wanted to watch him die. Does that surprise you?"

"I know it was you," he said flatly. "I'm not asking. I know. What I wonder is whether you had a valid client, or if you acted for yourself."

"I could bring you up before the university for that," I said.

"You won't."

"I may. I'll talk it over with Thornvald. If you have any doubts about my ethics, you'd better take it up with him, not me. Do you think I'd show up here if I knew I'd blasphemed?"

He grimaced very slightly. "You might. If you stole Haliaia's soul for the reason I think you did, you wouldn't stop at anything. I'll talk with Thornvald."

"Then do it, and stop annoying me." I drew a deep breath. "You talk like a skeptic when you break your vows this way. I'll have a word with your White President after the funeral, Mumm. You and I haven't got a thing to say to each other." I flipped the switch and cut him off in the middle of whatever he was about to say next. His mouthing face, gone silent, shrank to a bright pinpoint and vanished.

Shaking a little, I whirled around, snatched up my funeral robe and hurried out. It didn't matter a damn what Mumm believed, because I was covered. Even if he moved illegally against me, I wasn't afraid of his magic. But if he talked to Thornvald . . .

Suddenly I saw what a fool I'd been. I would have to get rid of Rabb. I couldn't see how I could possibly have overlooked something so obvious so long. With Rabb's mouth shut, the only possible evidence against me would be gone. I couldn't afford to take any further chances.

Thinking over what viruses I had on hand in the lab, I hurried into a taxi and gave Haliaia's address.

The house was crowded. For the first time since the spell against Haliaia was announced, his friends and relatives returned. Society flowed back over the living dead man to celebrate his funeral and the receiving of his soul by the totem of his clan. Voices were singing the second funeral hymn as my taxi drew up. I pulled the funeral robe on over my street clothing and joined the crowds moving through the house. Nobody here was likely to know me, and I didn't care if they did.

I followed the mourners up the escalator to Haliaia's bedroom, where he lay on the black-draped bed. The Fish Totem had been set up where he could see it. His half-closed eyes blinked slowly, gazing at the stuffed fish on its gold board as if he saw the vision of eternity before him. Maybe he did. Belief can do strange things even to the intelligent mind.

Against the wall were his relatives in the clan, and his closest friends, kneeling on little pneumatic pads and singing the death song. I didn't see Lila, but two of Haliaia's wives were present. I hadn't realized he had gone through marriage and divorce that often. I wondered how Lila liked being third.

Around the bed, back and forth, hands folded over a little green plastic fish figure, walked a man I knew must be Haliaia's father, his closest living relative. He sang in a deep soft voice.

On the bed Haliaia lay wrapped in the white shroud with the Fish Totem. His half-shut eyes were dull. I thought he saw nothing but the stuffed figure above the bed. His mouth gaped and closed. His arms were pressed close to his sides. He lay like the totem of his clan, straight and rigid on the bed.

Suddenly his whole body twisted in a convulsive arc, and then wrenched itself back. Three times he did this, and lay motionless again.

The song rose solemnly.

A fourth time Haliaia twisted himself back and forth. He was imitating his totem. He lay still. But his feet moved a little, slowly, as if they moved through water. . . .

* * *

The bad luck began two months later. There was nothing magical about it. Just one of these things—everybody has runs of bad luck.

I kept a very close watch on Mumm and on my own safety. And on my own White President, just in case Mumm proffered charges against me. Nothing happened there. Thornvald's behavior was perfectly normal. I tried to put myself in Mumm's place and see what he would do. I couldn't figure it. What could he do? He might not be able to resist sending out a stray virus or two, just in the hope of a hit. I watched myself very carefully for that. He might even hire a thug to shoot me or to arrange an accident. I watched for that, too, as much as any man can. You have to take your chances in this world, and you don't get something for nothing. I had got Haliaia's death and it was worth the risk.

Once I called Lila. She wouldn't talk to me. I let it slide. Time enough later to try again. In the meantime I got a girl with the theatrical name of Flamme to live with me. I didn't intend to marry again for a while, and I needed someone to keep my establishment operating. It has to be done on a big scale, and I need a wife for social purposes. Flamme was of the hetera class, which meant she could act as wife in everything except the spiritual link, which is part of the magical system. Like our ancestors, we have serial polygamy, so after a divorce I could marry again, but on the spiritual level the polygamy is cumulative. There can be no spiritual divorce. So in the magical world I was still married to Lila. And she wouldn't talk to me—yet.

Rabb, incidentally, had an accident about a week after Haliaia's death, and unfortunately, in the hospital, he got an overdose of sedation and died. The clan gave him a very respectable funeral.

Otherwise nothing unusual happened, at first—except for one irrational, nonsensical thing that I'd never anticipated. Everything conscious, everything controllable and rational, I knew I could handle. But what began to go wrong was the ritual dream.

I told you how it works. Herbs are burn, there's the shot of so-called holy drug, ritual prayer, hallucination. The average magician's belief in himself is reinforced by the hallucination. Even after I lost the belief I went on

with the window-dressing ritual, because I felt that if I began to vary from the conventional routine even in small matters, I might get careless and vary too much, in ways that would be noticeable.

So I went on as usual. People came to me to get spells put on their enemies in other clans, and I got their signatures on the necessary contracts and publicized the magic in the communication channels. I had no trouble until another case of soul-stealing came up.

The man was a Communications executive and his enemy was in Entertainment, the Lion Totem. My man's skill was rated high enough so he had to sign up for only nine years of service on minimum subsistence. I got his signature, sent him away, and burned the herbs. I gave myself an injection and said the Eagle Totem prayer.

The hallucination began.

I found the victim in my dream and was just about to stun him with the sacred spear when—I woke up.

I was back in my office, with the herbs smoking in their burner and my arm still tingling from the hypodermic spray. It was the first time since I'd been an acolyte this had ever happened. I sat there, wondering. Wondering and worrying.

It was idiotic, but what kept running through my head was the thought that unless I had the ritual hallucination, I couldn't visit the taboo microfilm library anymore. There was no logical connection at all. And yet I couldn't get the idea out of my mind. The more I thought about it the more worried I felt, without any reason at all.

At last I realized that the drug must have been weak, or the herbs—well, not the herbs, they're part of the window-dressing. All the same. I sent them down for chemical analysis, along with the drug. I sat waiting for the results. Once, I remember, I glanced back over my shoulder at the stuffed eagle on the wall. He gave me a glassy look.

The report said the drug and the herbs were the same as usual.

Not that it mattered. I could start the soul-stealing telecast at any time, and the magic would work whether or not I had the hallucination, since the magic was in the mind of the victim, not in my mumbo jumbo. But I didn't like this. It was a symptom, and I needed to understand its meaning.

Finally I decided I'd gradually built up immunity to the drug, and what I needed was a stronger dose. Well, I was right, up to a point. When I doubled the dose I got further into the hallucination. But I still woke up before I'd completed the ritual dream. This time I woke with a sense of near panic, a feeling that something had gone very wrong indeed, and the knowledge that I had to do something about it fast.

What I did was dangerous, but I wasn't thinking clearly, and little waves of anxiety kept starting around my stomach and spreading out until—well, I tried again, with a still stronger dose, and I finished the hallucination. But I woke up with two doctors working on me, and Thornvald hovering behind them adjusting his silly totem symbols.

"Get the hell out of here, Karl," I said. "This is medical, not magical. I just got an overdose of the holy drug."

"Now, Lloyd," Thornvald said, trying to look impressive. "The medics are taking care of their business. Just let me take care of mine."

"Well, it isn't around here," I said, and fell back, gasping, my heart fluttering till I was afraid it would stop altogether. One of the doctors gave me a shot of something and told me to relax. Remembering Rabb, I was really scared as I drifted off in spite of myself into sleep. But I woke feeling better. Thornvald had gone, leaving word that while he hadn't finished his diagnosis, no magic seemed involved.

I still felt terrible, but I went back to my desk and finished the job, purely routine now, lucklily. Then I went home, canceling my other appointments, and told Flamme to keep the house quiet.

The next day I still felt terrible. Flamme wanted me to stay home, but once a man gets sick it's assumed there's magic at work, and I couldn't afford to have people start wondering why a Black President should feel bad. So I started for the office, with a splitting headache and a slight temperature.

Only I didn't get there. As I stepped onto a moving way I felt dizzy and misjudged the distance when I reached for the back of a lounge chair. I fell flat. If I hadn't tried to catch myself it would have been all right. But I threw out my arms and landed at just the proper angle to break my left thumb.

That did it. The medics X-rayed and tested, and finally put my left hand in a cast that left the fingers free, but was a damned nuisance. It would take more than a month to heal, too. In a quiet rage I went home, got into bed and yelled at Flamme to bring me liquor. Finally I collapsed into happy forgetfulness, drunk as hell. So drunk I even forgot to take alcohol-neutralizing pills before I went to sleep.

So I woke up with a cold as well as a hangover.

The cold went into influenza almost immediately.

I remember medics working on me, and Flamme hovering in the background, and Thornvald, Thornvald, Thornvald eternally coming to bother me. Thornvald with his silly gadgets supposed to diagnose magic. Thornvald saying, "I'll do my best, Lloyd. You know that. I'll cure the spell if I possibly can. . . ."

And then suddenly silence, and waking with the fever gone and nothing to remind me of my sickness but the cast on my hand, and weakness. Silence.

I rang the bell, and no one came. The room seemed very dim. The windows had been partially opened. I lay there wondering.

I wondered if I were strong enough to get up. Apparently I'd have to. Angrily I threw back the covers and found I was pretty strong after all. I was shaping a few choice phrases in my mind about firing half a dozen servants and maybe Flamme too, when I swung my feet out of bed and saw the blue tunic stretched across my knees. I didn't have any blue nightwear. Blue is a sacred color. I looked down at my chest . . .

Everything came to a dead stop.

I was wearing the sacred blue tunic with the Eagle Totem, wings outspread, embroidered across the front. My hand, without any direction from my mind, flew up to touch my forehead. It was as if I could feel the red circle traced there by somebody's ritual spear in a hallucinatory dream. Somebody's—whose? Whose?

"Flamme!" I shouted.

No answer anywhere.

I jumped out of bed. I didn't feel weak at all. I ran out of the room and down the silently gliding escalator, feeling the blue tunic catch between my knees. I kept calling for Flamme and the servants. All I heard were echoes. I

jerked open the front door and there on the threshold were the black dishes of food. A black wreath swung against the door panel.

I ripped it down. I saw people passing in the street and I shouted to them. No one looked at me. Not a head turned.

I realized what I was wearing, and very quickly stepped back and shut the door. There was a mirror in the front entry. I stepped over and looked at myself. The red ring on my forehead was fluorescent in the dim light. I scrubbed at it with both hands. I whirled and ran through the house to the nearest lavatory, and with soap and nail brush I rubbed at the dye until my skin was almost as red as the ring. But nothing would take it off. I knew nothing would even cover it. That fluorescence shines through the heaviest makeup, and no known substance will remove it.

At least I could take off the tunic. Awkwardly, because of the cast on my hand, I pulled it over my head and left it in a heap on the tiled floor. Naked, I searched the house.

It was empty. Everything personal was gone. No clothing anywhere. My special cigarettes were gone. My books. My writing paper with my name on it was gone, and blank black-bordered sheets had replaced it. Every closet, every drawer, every shelf was empty.

Walking around naked, feeling like a ghost, I tried the visiphone. It was dead. The TV entertainment channels were dead too. The house resounded with silence and the feel of death.

I had to get out. So I had to have clothing. I tried a sheet, toga-fashion. It looked idiotic. But I wasn't going to wear the Eagle Totem tunic again. Not in public. Not even in private.

There was no money in the house.

Wrapped in the sheet, I went out. Nobody looked at me. The red ring on my forehead told everyone all they needed to know. No taxis would stop for me, so I had to take the moving way. At the first clothing store I stepped off and walked in, took what I wanted off the racks and shelves. No one interfered. I dressed in a booth and went back to the moving way, feeling a little better, but madder than I'd ever been in my life.

* * *

I went directly to my office. The secretaries ignored me, even when I spoke to them. I didn't waste time, I pushed past them and opened the door of my office.

Another man sat behind my desk. Above him on the wall, the Eagle Totem looked down with its glassy stare.

I said, "Who the hell are you?"

"The Black President." He was just a little defensive.

"Get out of my office," I said.

He looked at my clothes, a bit shocked at the sight of them.

"You shouldn't be wearing—" he started to say. There was a small explosion of rage and confusion in my head. I lunged across the desk and grabbed for his shirt, meaning to haul him out of his chair and—and do something, I don't know what, something violent.

But he rolled his chair backward just far enough. I sprawled across the desk, out of balance, clutching at air. And he didn't say a word. He simply watched me, with some pity on his face and some horror. I was dead, to his mind, and I ought to stay dead.

The violence went out of me. I knew what a fool I looked, sprawling there on the desk when by rights it should be I on the other side of it, perfectly safe, with people coming in afraid of me, and trying not to show it.

I straightened up and pulled down my cuffs, settled my illegal clothing around me. Quietly I said, "A Black President can be appointed only if his predecessor dies. You know that. What does it make you?"

"You're not alive," he said, and added, "holy one."

"Stop that!" I said impatiently. After a moment I added, "I suppose the publicity went out while I was unconscious. Who stole my soul? You?"

He nodded.

"Who ordered it?"

"This isn't getting us anywhere, holy one," he said. "You'd better see the White President."

I breathed out slowly. So that was it. When either President dies, the survivor appoints his successor. When either President breaks a taboo, the other one administers justice. So Thornvald had taken matters into his own hands, without a word to me, behind my back, while I was sick and unconscious. . . .

"I'll see him," I said, and turned away toward the door to the bridge. With my hand on the knob, I looked back. It was a strange feeling. Nothing had changed in my office except the man behind the desk. Everything was just as I'd always had it, all the things in a person's office that he gets used to, that become a part of him finally. And they were still a part of me. But they were also linked now, to the man in my chair. It was like a webwork with two centers, and sometimes one set of strands seemed real, something the other.

"I'll be back," I said, and went out across the bridge.

Again, as always, it was like walking the eagle's way above the two-mile sprawl of Communications Center. At the other end of it was Thornvald, standing by a window looking down. All the anger boiled up in me at the sight of him, and perhaps there was fear with the anger now.

I slammed the door behind me as hard as I could.

He jumped and whirled.

"Does that sound like a ghost, you bastard?" I asked him.

He opened his mouth, raised his eyebrows, and let out his breath with a resigned sound. I told him what I thought of him, loud and fast. It took a couple of minutes. But when I ran out of breath his expression hadn't changed.

I walked over to his desk, yanked out the chair behind it and sat down. Thorvald watched me.

"Now, I said. "Let's get a few things straight. There's somebody in my office who thinks he's the Black President. What's the idea? How did you ever make such a mistake, Karl? When I was flat on my back and unconscious, too!"

"It's no mistake, holy one," Thornvald said.

"Don't call me that! You know my name."

His round face looked at me sadly.

"I'm sorry to see this attitude in you, holy one. It shows a lack of faith that may be dangerous to your soul. I'm afraid—"

"Never mind my soul. I'll be around for a long time yet. I want to know why you double-crossed me when I couldn't defend myself."

"There was no double cross, holy one. I take my

orders from the Eagle. Surely you don't think I'd do such a thing on my own responsibility? You broke the taboo of the clan, and the Eagle has taken you."

"The Eagle has not taken me!" I yelled at him. "And what taboo did I break? Name one. Just one!"

"I felt uneasy from the first about it," Thornvald said obliquely. "About Haliaia, I mean. But even when Mumm made a formal accusation against you, I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't think any man who knew the dangers as well as you do could risk his soul for personal gain like that."

"I wouldn't. I didn't!"

Thornvald just shook his head sadly again.

"Why do you think I did?" I shouted at him, wanting to beat sense into him with my fists. He was so damned dogmatic about it. "Did you look up Rabb's papers? Did you find the least scrap of evidence that I'd break a sacred taboo? Prove it, Thornvald! Prove it!"

He pointed to my forehead where I could feel the red circle as if it were a tangible burn on the skin.

"There's proof," he said. "Would the Eagle move against you if you weren't guilty?"

I almost choked on all the things I wanted to say. But I had to keep my head.

"That's a result, not a cause, Karl," I said in a strangled voice. "The Eagle didn't move against me. You did. You accepted a lot of malicious gossip from an enemy of mine, and then you sneaked up behind me and stabbed me when I was too sick to defend myself. You—"

"I accepted the evidence of my own eyes," Thornvald said tartly. "I suspected the Eagle was punishing you when you had all the trouble with the sacred drug. And of course when you broke your thumb, and then the Eagle sent the influenza germs—"

"The Eagle didn't send anything! That was probably Mumm, if it was—"

"Mumm?" He looked shocked. "A President knowingly casting a spell on another President? I'm surprised at you, holy one. He wouldn't dare. His totem would strike him down in his tracks. No, it was the Eagle, holy one. And I knew when the Eagle allowed these curses to fall on you one after another what the truth must be. I

knew it even before the Eagle came to me in the night and gave me my orders."

"So you appointed a new Black President, and his first job was my death sentence," I said.

Thornvald nodded.

"Karl, have you ever made a mistake?" I asked.

"Often, holy one. But never about sacred things, because I act only when the Eagle commands me. A President has to renounce his own desires. You should have remembered that."

"Have you ever mistaken the Eagle's commands?"

I think that shook him a little. Such a thought had obviously never hit him before. But he shook his head decisively.

"Never in my life. Never! How could I?"

"You could," I said grimly. "You just have." I stood up and leaned over to slam the desk hard with my fist. "I'll tell you exactly what happened, Karl. You wanted to get rid of me. *You* had a personal motive. Not me, but you. You know the dogma, Karl. We accuse others of the sin we most want to commit ourselves. Ask yourself, isn't it true? No, don't answer me, Karl—just ask yourself in your own mind. And listen! You heard jealous gossip against me. You watched your chance. When I had a run of bad luck you took it for magic because you wanted to believe that way. You injected a drug or inhaled hemp or hypnotized yourself, and you had a dream. Just a plain dream, not a sacred vision. But you took this dream for a fact because you wanted to. For *your* selfish reasons you misused your holy power against me! And you won't get away with it, Thornvald! The Eagle won't let you!"

His fat face was pale as he gaped at me, horrified.

"It isn't true! It can't be true!"

"It can and is, and I'll prove it!" I hit the desk again, feeling fine. I had him this time. "Magic can't touch me!" I said. "Magic based on sin can't hurt a man when the Eagle protects him. The Eagle came to *me* last night, and gave me his sacred promise. I won't die, Thornvald. You may as well call off your soul-stealing spell right now, because it isn't going to work. *I won't die.*"

The color flooded back into his fat cheeks. He was shaking.

"You have to die. Once a spell's under way, there's no process for undoing it." His voice was shaky.

I shrugged. He was probably right. I'd never heard of a reversal, once the spell's been publicized.

"It's your funeral," I said. "Either way, you lose. Because *I'm not going to die.*"

He shut his eyes and gripped his hands together.

"The Eagle told me," he said, his voice a little desperate. "I know! I've committed no sin. You'll see for yourself, holy one, when you've finished your journey to the spirit world."

"You'll get there before I do," I told him.

He put his hand over his eyes and recited a short formula against totemic sin. Without looking at me, his hand still up, he said: "Go home, holy one. Leave me. You've disturbed me very much, but I know you're unhappy. I must allow for that. Go back and put on your sacred tunic and prepare for the funeral ceremony. You'll see more clearly when you have flown with the Eagle."

I laughed at him and went out.

Halfway home, on the moving way, reaction hit me. Dizziness and exhaustion made my head go around and around. The next thing I knew I was waking in my own bed, draped in black, in the darkened and empty house. I had on that damned blue tunic with the Eagle on the chest and the clothes I had taken were gone.

I lay there for quite a while, thinking. Finally I got up and made my way unsteadily down the escalator to the front door. Black dishes of food on the doorstep, black wreath on the door. Nobody looking at me as I stood on the step in the sunshine.

Before I took in the food I did something I hadn't thought of the last time I stood here. I checked the date of my proposed funeral on the wreath. Anyone who cared to read it could see it written in large figures among the decorations. I was scheduled to die in ten days.

Technically I wasn't a spirit yet. I was moving toward the spirit world in a sort of social limbo, separated from society, partaking more and more of the sacredness of my totem. For ten more days nobody would speak to me or hear me if I spoke. There wasn't much I could do—until the funeral.

But then, when the guests arrived and the ceremonies began, and the corpse refused to lie down and die . . .

How would Thornvald handle it? What would he do? In his shoes, I'd make very sure the corpse died on schedule by adding a little something to his food. I wondered about Thornvald. Somehow it didn't seem in character, but I had better take no more chances than I could help. The incubation period of germs is too chancy, if you've got to hit a certain date right on the nose. A poison administered later on, toward the critical day, would be the obvious thing. I thought it was fairly safe to go on eating the dead man's dinner they set on my doorstep for a few days longer, if I had to. Right now I had no choice. I was still weak.

Later on, feeling much better, I went out again, helped myself to another suit of clothes, rode the moving way to a theater and relaxed, dozing, in one of the best cushioned seats until the performance was over. It was all right, except that all the seats for ten rows around me emptied the moment I settled in. The circle on my forehead shone in the dark, and even the actors on the screen seemed almost aware of me. I felt very self-conscious.

On the way home I stopped in a restaurant. The waiters wouldn't come near me. I had to find a cafeteria to get food. Everywhere I moved in a little eddy of shocked surprise, because while people were not technically aware of me at all, they couldn't help reacting to the blasphemous behavior of a dead man who wouldn't wear the sacred tunic or restrict himself to his house of mourning and his sacred food. It was a very discouraging day. I warmed myself with thoughts of the funeral, and the repercussions throughout the clan when something unheard-of happened.

I slept that night like the—no, put it that I slept very well. And woke feeling stronger and nearer to normal. As usual, I found myself back in the blue tunic and with the street clothes gone again. It was a little alarming to think of those silent, unseen undertakers who moved so confidently through the house when I was unconscious. I had never before wondered just how they operated, but it seemed likely they used some kind of soporific gas to make sure I stayed asleep while they undressed and dressed me. A vague twinge of alarm in my mind dissipated as I

considered that they were almost certainly not corruptible to the point of poisoning me while I slept. Even if Thornvald wasn't afraid of the Eagle, he'd hardly dare lay himself open to blackmail. . . . And what was to prevent his coming in while I slept and doing the job himself? Nothing. Nothing at all, except his own superstitions. Everything would depend on that—on how much the magicians believed in their own magic.

I got up and shrugged off the problem. What I could guard against, I would. For the rest, that was on the wings of the Eagle. I might as well enjoy my remaining nine days.

They were a very long nine days. Did you ever think how little there is a man can do alone? I've read that Robinson Crusoe didn't have a personality until Friday arrived on the island. Well, I felt that I was losing my personality. I wasn't the Black President anymore, my name itself was taboo, and I wasn't even alive, according to society's viewpoint. I was a spirit, though not a very cooperative one—not as cooperative as Haliaia had been, certainly.

A man can't do much alone. He thinks too much. And he worries. And when he worries, fear comes. . . .

At first, I thought of Flamme. It took me a while to find her. TV information wouldn't help, because the operator saw my face on the screen, and the red circle on my forehead, and cut me off. I tried a robot directory, but that cut me off too; apparently even the electronic calculators had been informed that my serial number was no longer the property of a living man. Finally I gave a false serial number and got Flamme's new address.

She had gone back to her old job, modeling.

. . . There's no use thinking about that. I found her, all right. She walked right past me, obviously not hearing a word I said to her. I followed her into a corner, grabbed her by the shoulder. She twisted partly away because I had only one good hand, and couldn't hold her.

"I'm alive!" I said. "Wait, Flamme. See? I'm alive. It's all been a mistake. After the funeral, everyone will know it. Flamme, I—"

Her eyes rolled back in her head and she slid out from under my hand to the floor. She's a good solid girl, and

she fell with such a thump I knew the faint was genuine. Nobody paid any attention to me as they tried to revive her, but someone must have called for Thornvald, because presently he arrived with his mumbo-jumbo paraphernalia.

"Contagion, eh?" he said, and shook his head solemnly at me. His eyes were uneasy, but he was determined to go through with the routine to the bitter end, and neither of us said a word about our little set-to in his office.

He said to me in a reproving, official voice, "You shouldn't do this, holy one. I can cast the devil out of this poor girl, I think, but only the Eagle can cast the evil spirit out of you. Go home, put on the sacred robe. Stop eating the food of the living. Why fight against the power of the Eagle?"

"Don't be a fool, Thornvald," I said distinctly. "I'm not going to die." There was a subdued gasp from those who heard, trying to pretend they didn't hear. But I saw no point in following it up. I turned and went out, and a broad path opened up to let me go.

That night, at home, I lay on a downstairs couch to think, and when I got drowsy I realized I hated the idea of the black-draped bed in my room. I decided I would not sleep in it again. I couldn't begin too soon, I realized, to resist the pressure of custom in every way open to me. I dozed off on the couch.

Sometime in the night I dimly remember turning uncomfortably on the hard upholstery. Very faintly, I remember getting up and walking in the dark through the familiar rooms. Riding the escalator was like flying in the night. When I woke I was in my own bed, stretched out on my back, very much like a corpse under the black draperies.

And of course I was again wearing the blue tunic, which meant the undertakers had been about their work in the darkness. Had they led me upstairs? Or had they needed to?

The days went by very slowly. The wait seemed much longer than nine days. You can't do much alone. The worst was not having anyone to talk to. I even went back to my office again, knowing Thornvald at least would have to recognize me, but this time they saw me coming and he wasn't there.

Once I had a talk with a child, not old enough yet to understand I didn't exist. We had a very interesting conversation, though somewhat one-sided, until his mother came and dragged him away. He didn't want to go. He told her he'd been talking to a nice man.

"No, son," she said, hurrying him, while he looked back over his shoulder. "That wasn't a man. That was a spirit. You must never talk to spirits."

"Oh. It looked like a man."

"No, it was a spirit."

"Oh," he said, believing her.

She probably took him to Thornvald to get him decontaminated.

There was nothing in the house to read. I went out and helped myself to books and magazines, but the next morning they would be gone. I brought in food, but the undertakers removed that too, as soon as I fell asleep. I slept in other beds in the house, but always I woke in my own.

Pretty soon I found I was spending most of my time in bed, wearing the sacred blue tunic because it was a lot more convenient than anything I had to go out for, and dozing the days and night away, waking like a nocturnal animal at intervals and prowling around the house, and then dozing again. I had gone back to eating the dead man's food they brought me. There were so many ways Thorvald could get at me if he wanted, it didn't seem worthwhile to put myself to the trouble of worrying about food.

I had to outwait society. That was all I could do.

One day I glanced in a mirror and saw how haggard and unshaven my face was, with the red circle burning brilliantly on the forehead, I was scared.

"They're getting at you, Lloyd," I said to myself in a voice that echoed hollowly through the house. "Pull yourself together, Lloyd." And I put both hands up on the sides of the mirror and looked myself in the eye. My own were the only human eyes I had met in what seemed an infinitely long time. I touched three fingers to the three fingers on my image in the glass, in the visiphone handshake which is as close as two people can get, with distance between them. I was too far away from my own

kind to touch hands even with myself, even with my own image in the glass. There was only the cold feel of the mirror against my fingers.

I shook myself. This was dangerous. I squeezed my hands together, needing the pain of my bandaged thumb to remind me I wasn't yet a spirit. Then I went upstairs and shaved for the first time in days. I took a shower and threw the blue tunic down the laundry chute. Wrapped in a sheet, I went back downstairs.

I opened the door and looked out. The street was empty. Society had almost visibly shrunk away from me, the whole fabric detaching itself from the one fragment which was myself. Soon society would return. I had to be ready for them. My only defense was knowledge. I knew that magic had no reality. Objective, logical reasoning power protected me from the mindless emotions of this world of mine. But reason can be attacked by obsession.

Obsession—a persistent idea which I knew was irrational, but which I couldn't get rid of. I knew what the word meant, all right. And its next-door neighbor, compulsion, which is the second step. An irresistible impulse to perform an act without the will of the performer. Magic works because of things like these operating in the minds and bodies of believers. It had worked on Jake Haliaia. I remembered him twisting like a fish on his funeral bed writhing like the Fish Totem he thought had entered him.

Obsession, like belief in magic.

Compulsion, like imitating the Fish Totem.

Like dying.

But Haliaia had cooperated with his society in accepting his death by magic. I wasn't going to cooperate. They could isolate me, yes. The mark on my forehead labeled me as a man without a soul, a man moving to the land of the Eagle Totem and the dead. But when they came back to perform the funeral rites, they wouldn't find a willing believer.

I thought what I would do, when the moment came. It would be best, probably, to go along with them, up to a point. Less effective if they found me wandering around the house than if they saw the potential corpse laid out conventionally—until Thornvald spoke the funeral pronouncement.

That would be the moment.

I rehearsed in my mind the familiar anathema every Black President has to learn, the one by which the most terrible curse of the Totem is called down on the most terrible sinner. Thornvald was nearer his last moments than he realized. Or perhaps he did realize. I hoped so. I like to think of him, worrying and wondering.

It was up to me to depose a White President who made too great an error, just as it had been up to Thornvald to move against me. I could appoint his successor, just as he had tried to appoint mine. I turned over possibilities in my mind, promising young fellows who might do. I felt stimulated and happy—almost happy.

I had a little trouble remembering the anathema. It would have been convenient to have my books at hand to look the wording up. But it didn't matter. Any impressive words would do. It was the effect on the listener that mattered, not anything magic inherent in the phrasing. I felt tired, but relaxed and at peace, having decided all this. I knew what to do. I pictured the faces of the people when I sat upon the funeral bed and hurled the anathema in the face of the funeral orator. . . .

I had been standing there for a long time in the doorway, looking out. Now for the first time a man came into sight along the moving way. I thought I knew him. As he came nearer I was sure. I couldn't recall his name, but he was a member of a club I belonged to. I pushed the door wider and leaned out, calling to him.

At first I thought he didn't hear. Then I realized the truth. For a moment, odd as it seems, I'd forgotten.

Terror and rage and immense loneliness flooded through me as I stood there. Dressed or not dressed, I thought, I'll make him listen. I'll run after him and make him listen. . . .

I thought I was running down the steps and along the way after him, and it was like running into the wrong end of a telescope, with the distant vision getting no larger no matter how fast I ran. Then I saw I hadn't moved. My foot was poised on the edge of the step and I hadn't moved at all.

I looked down at my motionless foot, and something swam clearer and clear into my consciousness. Nearer than my foot. Nearer, and just as much a part of me. I couldn't identify it for a while. But at last I knew what it

was. And that was strange—very strange. What I saw was the Eagle Totem on my breast. I saw it as clear as the texture of the sheet, every stitch vivid.

But I wasn't wearing the Eagle Totem tunic at all. I was wearing a plain bed sheet. . . .

I was absolutely alone.

I lay in bed and tried to think. It was hard to think, because of the sense of blueness around me, and the feeling of weightlessness, of flight, of air rushing strongly past my face. I must have just wakened from a dream.

I thought: Wait. Outwait them. They'll—"

The Eagle Totem.

They'll find out the magic doesn't work on a man who doesn't believe. And I don't—

The Eagle.

And I don't believe in it. Even though it was hammered into me since infancy, since I was younger than the child I talked to when I was more alive than I am now—

The Eagle.

Stop it. It's obsession. Here in the half-dark, in the lonely, funeral house, with the fabric of society ripped completely away, there aren't any anchors anymore. There's nothing except—

The Eagle.

But not so isolated anymore, not quite so isolated, because here in the blue, moving like flight, there is . . . stop it!

From the thought comes the act. From the obsession comes the compulsion. But that wouldn't happen. I couldn't quite control my thoughts, but at least, somehow, somehow, I knew my own body would not betray me. I could control my own body. If I couldn't, I was no longer myself. I was controlled by—no, not magic. Not the totem. But the terrible force of the society of which I was born a part.

And yet, here, moving through the blue . . .

I've got to stop. I've got to think. I've got to get out of this bed.

I've got to move!

It's easy. One hand. Lift it a little.

Lift it!

The Eagle, the Eagle, the Eagle.

There was a sound of singing. Robed figures moved back and forth in the room. I had a sense the house was crowded.

Move. Move your hand, your arm. If you can move, you can sit up, speak the anathema, break the spell.

Around the wall people knelt, singing. At the foot of the bed—and I could not take my eyes from it—stood the Eagle Totem.

Someone was walking around the bed, chanting. I knew the voice. Lila.

She had come back. She was a believer again. She believed in magic, as she had in the days before I told her too much of the truth, and now, as I had known would happen when I stole Haliaia's soul, the terrible force of society's power had snuffed out the small flame of reason I had lighted in her mind. I had killed her lover by magic. She believed that now. And she believed in all the rest of the ritual too—the spiritual marriage which can never be dissolved, in spite of temporal divorce. So she was here, my closest kin, to chant the death song at the Rite of Passage.

She moved like a puppet, without will, the light of truth in her mind gone out forever.

I couldn't speak. But I had to move. I'd got Lila back now, but I knew, at last, that I did not want her back on these terms, without her soul. I tried to tell her to go. I tried to tell her that there was no magic here or anywhere, there was only suggestibility and fear, smothering reality and truth.

I could not speak or move.

I had to move. To save myself and to save Lila. Not from death; that did not matter. Men have always died. But to live in darkness—to stumble mindlessly through an imitation world of false idols . . .

I had to move. Then I could break the spell. Then I could pronounce the anathema and these fools would believe my magic was the strongest. I could live again, and this time I would tell the truth, though I died for it. I would light the flame of reason and knowledge in Lila's mind again, and spread that flame in other minds until, God willing, it might sweep around the whole world and

burn away the false idols whose shadows kept the world in darkness.

But first I had to move.

Why couldn't I move? I didn't believe . . . I knew the truth . . .

Yet waves of power beat through me, from the puppet woman walking around the bed, from the death chanters along the wall, from everyone in the crowded house . . . from everyone in the world. They believed.

I didn't believe, but they believed.

No, I didn't believe. Unless part of me did, my deep, unconscious, very ancient memories, solid as granite now, first laid down before I could even speak or walk. But there was no Eagle Totem . . . there were no totems . . . no magic. I knew that. Yet I couldn't move, for when I tried, a black and paralyzing horror made me weak and faint, as though I faced the Eagle, as though I believed in the Eagle.

Lila was a puppet that moved to and fro. The funeral chanters wailed and swayed. The robed figures moved faceless through the house. I could see the walls, transparent as glass, with every figure under my roof clearly in sight, upstairs and down. I could see beyond the house, all through the city, where all the thousands of men and women faced toward me and thrust me into darkness with the power of their belief. And beyond the city and the clan, the other cities and clans . . . millions of men and women blending into a great living organism mightier and more terrible than any god.

This is the monster. Society is the monster. Society that took the small wrong turning which led us all to the here and the now. Fear drives us all. Fear makes us blind to truth and opens our inward vision to the falsehood in which alone we could find safety.

I was no better than the rest. No, I was worse, for knowing the truth, I let fear destroy me. Fear of losing Lila, fear of what society would do if I spoke what I knew. What I knew? There is no Eagle, no magic, but there is terror and a juggernaut of monstrous power. Before that monster I lay paralyzed with the fear that centuries had nourished.

Nothing else is real. Everything else has vanished. Only the monster remains. Reality itself is corrupted

until only falsehood is real now. And like the juggernaut, our society drives headlong into the abyss, and like the juggernaut it crushed Lila and me as it has already crushed truth.

And so . . .

I am the Eagle.

Am I? Is it too late? No—Lila, we aren't puppets! We can fight . . . I'll fight for you. I'll save you . . . save myself. The monster isn't real. The truth can destroy it. If I can only speak the truth—if *I can move!*

The monster sweeps forward, hovers over me. The Rite of Passage wails across the room, the city, the world. My Rite of Passage, and mankind's. A light is going out, somewhere.

Lila . . .

I *can* move.

Now I can move.

My arms are moving, beating against my sides, faster and faster through the empty blueness.

. . . The beating of great wings.

THE MAN WHO CAME EARLY

BY POUL ANDERSON (1926-)

THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION
JUNE

Poul Anderson has won seven Hugo Awards, three Nebulas, and the Gandolf Award in a career that now exceeds forty years. What is remarkable about these accomplishments is that they have come his way for such a diverse body of work—hard science fiction, high fantasy, humorous science fiction, sword and sorcery, and socioeconomic sf. Poul Anderson has done it all, and he is still going strong in his fifth decade as a professional writer.

STAR WAYS was published in 1956 and is one of his least appreciated but most interesting books. But "The Man Who Came Early" was clearly the highlight of the year for him (at least professionally), because it remains one of his best stories. It's based on an attractive idea that has been well mined in sf—a man from the future goes back in time and pits his knowledge and technology against the natives—but it has never been done better than it is here. (MHG)

I said earlier that some stories remain in your mind, and there is the second story in this volume that has refused to leave me alone for over thirty years.

How many stories, I wonder, have been written about human beings who go back in the past and have an unutterable advantage over the naïve and ignorant people of a past century. It was done first, I believe, by Mark Twain in A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT, but that was social satire. The best effort at doing it realistically, in my opinion, was L. Sprague de Camp's, LEST DARKNESS FALL

In recent years it has been done, trivially, in the movies where people of the 1980s go back to the 1950s and try to introduce such world-shaking novelties as rock-and-roll music and panty hose.

What is needed is some one person to take into account the oft-repeated statement that you can't have a steam engine till it's steam-engine time (and when that time comes, we might as well add, it is impossible to avoid a steam engine).

Anyway, Poul takes on the task and shows us how social inertia can withstand the novelty of the far future. This particular story has forever altered my own easy visions of time travel. (IA)

Yes, when a man grows old he has heard so much that is strange there's little more can surprise him. They say the king in Miklagard has a beast of gold before his high seat which stands up and roars. I have it from Eilif Eiriksson, who served in the guard down yonder, and he is a steady fellow when not drunk. He has also seen the Greek fire used, it burns on water.

So, priest, I am not unwilling to believe what you say about the White Christ. I have been in England and France myself, and seen how the folk prosper. He must be a very powerful god, to ward so many realms . . . and did you say that everyone who is baptized will be given a white robe? I would like to have one. They mildew, of course, in this cursed wet Iceland weather, but a small sacrifice to the house-elves should—No sacrifices? Come now! I'll give up horseflesh if I must, my teeth not being what they were, but every sensible man knows how much trouble the elves make if they're not fed.

Well, let's have another cup and talk about it. How do you like the beer? It's my own brew, you know. The cups I got in England, many years back. I was a young man then . . . time goes, time goes. Afterward I came back and inherited this, my father's farm, and have not left it since. Well enough to go in viking as a youth, but grown older you see where the real wealth lies: here, in the land and the cattle.

Stoke up the fires, Hjalti. It's getting cold. Sometimes I think the winters are colder than when I was a boy. Thorbrand of the Salmondale says so, but he believes the

gods are angry because so many are turning from them. You'll have trouble winning Thorbrand over, priest. A stubborn man. Myself, I am open-minded, and willing to listen at least.

Now, then. There is one point on which I must set you right. The end of the world is not coming in two years. This I know.

And if you ask me how I know, that's a very long tale, and in some ways a terrible one. Glad I am to be old, and safe in the earth before that great tomorrow comes. It will be an eldritch time before the frost giants fare loose . . . oh, very well, before the angel blows his battle horn. One reason I hearken to your preaching is that I know the White Christ will conquer Thor. I know Iceland is going to be Christian ere long, and it seems best to range myself on the winning side.

No, I've had no visions. This is a happening of five years ago, which my own household and neighbors can swear to. They mostly did not believe what the stranger told; I do, more or less, if only because I don't think a liar could wreak so much harm. I loved my daughter, priest, and after the trouble was over I made a good marriage for her. She did not naysay it, but now she sits out on the ness-farm with her husband and never a word to me; and I hear he is ill pleased with her silence and moodiness, and spends his nights with an Irish leman. For this I cannot blame him, but it grieves me.

Well, I've drunk enough to tell the whole truth now, and whether you believe it or not makes no odds to me. Here . . . you, girls! . . . fill these cups again, for I'll have a dry throat before I finish the telling.

It begins, then, on a day in early summer, five years ago. At that time, my wife Ragnhild and I had only two unwed children still living with us: our youngest son Helgi, of seventeen winters, and our daughter Thorgunna, of eighteen. The girl, being fair, had already had suitors. But she refused them, and I am not one who would compel his daughter. As for Helgi, he was ever a lively one, good with his hands but a breakneck youth. He is now serving in the guard of King Olaf of Norway. Besides these, of course, we had about ten housefolk—two

thralls, two girls to help with the women's work, and half a dozen hired carles. This is not a small stead.

You have seen how my land lies. About two miles to the west is the bay; the thorps at Reykjavik are some five miles south. The land rises toward the Long Jökull, so that my acres are hilly; but it's good hay land, and we often find driftwood on the beach. I've built a shed down there for it, as well as a boathouse.

We had had a storm the night before—a wild huge storm with lightning flashes across heaven, such as you seldom get in Iceland—so Helgi and I were going down to look for drift. You, coming from Norway, do not know how precious wood is to us here, who have only a few scrubby trees and must get our timber from abroad. Back there men have often been burned in their houses by their foes, but we count that the worst of deeds, though it's not unheard of.

As I was on good terms with my neighbors, we took only hand weapons. I bore my ax, Helgi a sword, and the two carles we had with us bore spears. It was a day washed clean by the night's fury, and the sun fell bright on long, wet grass. I saw my stead lying rich around its courtyard, sleek cows and sheep, smoke rising from the roofhole of the hall, and knew I'd not done so ill in my lifetime. My son Helgi's hair fluttered in the low west wind as we left the buildings behind a ridge and neared the water. Strange how well I remember all which happened that day; somehow it was a sharper day than most.

When we came down to the strand, the sea was beating heavy, white and gray out to the world's edge, smelling of salt and kelp. A few gulls mewed above us, frightened off a cod washed onto the shore. I saw a litter of no few sticks, even a baulk of timber . . . from some ship carrying it that broke up during the night, I suppose. That was a useful find, though as a careful man I would later sacrifice to be sure the owner's ghost wouldn't plague me.

We had fallen to and were dragging the baulk toward the shed when Helgi cried out. I ran for my ax as I looked the way he pointed. We had no feuds then, but there are always outlaws.

This newcomer seemed harmless, though. Indeed, as he stumbled nearer across the black sand I thought him quite unarmed and wondered what had happened. He

was a big man and strangely clad—he wore coat and breeches and shoes like anyone else, but they were of odd cut, and he bound his trousers with leggings rather than straps. Nor had I ever seen a helmet like his: it was almost square, and came down toward his neck, but it had no nose guard. And this you may not believe, but it was not metal, yet had been cast in one piece!

He broke into a staggering run as he drew close, flapped his arms and croaked something. The tongue was none I had heard, and I have heard many; it was like dogs barking. I saw that he was clean-shaven and his black hair cropped short, and thought he might be French. Otherwise he was a young man, and good-looking, with blue eyes and regular features. From his skin I judged that he spent much time indoors. However, he had a fine manly build.

“Could he have been shipwrecked?” asked Helgi.

“His clothes are dry and unstained,” I said; “nor has he been wandering long, for no stubble is on his chin. Yet I’ve heard of no strangers guesting hereabouts.”

We lowered our weapons, and he came up to us and stood gasping. I saw that his coat and the shirt underneath were fastened with bonelike buttons rather than laces, and were of heavy weave. About his neck he had fastened a strip of cloth tucked into his coat. These garments were all in brownish hues. His shoes were of a sort new to me, very well stitched. Here and there on his coat were bits of brass, and he had three broken stripes on each sleeve; also a black band with white letters, the same letters on his helmet. Those were not runes, but Roman—thus: MP. He wore a broad belt, with a small clublike thing of metal in a sheath at the hip and also a real club.

“I think he must be a warlock,” muttered my carle Sigurd. “Why else so many tokens?”

“They may only be ornament, or to ward against witchcraft,” I soothed him. Then, to the stranger: “I hight Ospak Ulfsson of Hillstead. What is your errand?”

He stood with his chest heaving and a wildness in his eyes. He must have run a long way. At last he moaned and sat down and covered his face.

“If he’s sick, best we get him to the house,” said Helgi. I heard eagerness; we see few faces here.

"No . . . no . . ." The stranger looked up. "Let me rest a moment—"

He spoke the Norse tongue readily enough, though with a thick accent not easy to follow and with many foreign words I did not understand.

The other carle, Grim, hefted his spear. "Have vikings landed?" he asked.

"When did vikings ever come to Iceland?" I snorted. "It's the other way around."

The newcomer shook his head as if it had been struck. He got shakily to his feet. "What happened?" he said. "What became of the town?"

"What town?" I asked reasonably.

"Reykjavik!" he cried. "Where is it?"

"Five miles south, the way you came—unless you mean the bay itself," I said.

"No! There was only a beach, and a few wretched huts, and—"

"Best not let Hialmar Broadnose hear you call his thorp that," I counseled.

"But there was a town!" he gasped. "I was crossing the street in a storm, and heard a crash, and then I stood on the beach and the town was gone!"

"He's mad," said Sigurd, backing away. "Be careful. If he starts to foam at the mouth, it means he's going berserk."

"Who are you?" babbled the stranger. "What are you doing in those clothes? Why the spears?"

"Somehow," said Helgi, "he does not sound crazed, only frightened and bewildered. Something evil has beset him."

"I'm not staying near a man under a curse!" yelped Sigurd, and started to run away.

"Come back!" I bawled. "Stand where you are or I'll cleave your louse-bitten head."

That stopped him, for he had no kin who would avenge him; but he would not come closer. Meanwhile the stranger had calmed down to the point where he could talk somewhat evenly.

"Was it the *aitsjbom*?" he asked. "Has the war started?"

He used that word often, *aitsjbom*, so I know it now, though unsure of what it means. It seems to be a kind of Greek fire. As for the war, I knew not which war he meant, and told him so.

"We had a great thunderstorm last night," I added. "And you say you were out in one too. Maybe Thor's hammer knocked you from your place to here."

"But where is here?" he answered. His voice was more dulled than otherwise, now that the first terror had lifted.

"I told you. This is Hillstead, which is on Iceland."

"But that's where I was!" he said. "Reykjavik . . . what happened? Did the *aitsjbom* destroy everything while I lay witless?"

"Nothing has been destroyed," I said.

"Does he mean the fire at Olafsvik last month?" wondered Helgi.

"No, no, no!" Again he buried his face in his hands. After a while he looked up and said: "See here. I am *Sardjant* Gerald Robbins of the United States army base on Iceland. I was in Reykjavik and got struck by lightning or something. Suddenly I was standing on the beach, and lost my head and ran. That's all. Now, can you tell me how to get back to the base?"

Those were more or less his words, priest. Of course, we did not grasp half of them, and made him repeat several times and explain. Even then we did not understand, save that he was from some country called the United States of America, which he said lies beyond Greenland to the west, and that he and some others were on Iceland to help our folk against their foes. This I did not consider a lie—more a mistake or imagining. Grim would have cut him down for thinking us stupid enough to swallow that tale, but I could see that he meant it.

Talking cooled him further. "Look here," he said, in too calm a tone for a feverish man, "maybe we can get at the truth from your side. Has there been no war you know of? Nothing which— Well, look here. My country's men first came to Iceland to guard it against the Germans. Now it is the Russians, but then it was the Germans. When was that?"

Helgi shook his head. "That never happened that I know of," he said. "Who are these Russians?" We found out later that the Gardariki folk were meant. "Unless," Helgi said, "the old warlocks—"

"He means the Irish monks," I explained. "A few dwelt here when the Norsemen came, but they were

driven out. That was, hm, somewhat over a hundred years ago. Did your kingdom once help the monks?"

"I never heard of them!" he said. The breath sobbed in his throat. "You . . . didn't you Icelanders come from Norway?"

"Yes, about a hundred years ago," I answered patiently. "After King Harald Fairhair laid the Norse lands under him and—"

"*A hundred years ago!*" he whispered. I saw whiteness creep up beneath his skin. "What year is this?"

We gaped at him. "Well, it's the second year after the great salmon catch," I tried.

"What year after Christ, I mean," he prayed hoarsely.

"Oh, so you are a Christian? Hm, let me think . . . I talked with a bishop in England once, we were holding him for ransom, and he said . . . let me see . . . I think he said this Christ man lived a thousand years ago, or maybe a little less."

"A thousand—" Something went out of him. He stood with glassy eyes—yes, I have seen glass, I told you I am a traveled man—he stood thus, and when we led him toward the garth he went like a small child.

You can see for yourself, priest, that my wife Ragnhild is still good to look upon even in eld, and Thorgunna took after her. She was—is—tall and slim, with a dragon's hoard of golden hair. She being a maiden then, the locks flowed loose over her shoulders. She had great blue eyes and a heart-shaped face and very red lips. Withal she was a merry one, and kindhearted, so that she was widely loved. Sverri Snorrason went in viking when she refused him, and was slain, but no one had the wit to see that she was unlucky.

We led this Gerald Samsson—when I asked, he said his father was named Sam—we led him home, leaving Sigurd and Grim to finish gathering the driftwood. Some folks would not have a Christian in their house, for fear of witchcraft, but I am a broad-minded man, and Helgi, at his age, was wild for anything new. Our guest stumbled over the fields as if blind, but seemed to rouse when we entered the yard. His gaze went around the buildings that enclose it, from the stables and sheds to the smoke-house, the brewery, the kitchen, the bathhouse, the god

shrine, and thence to the hall. And Thorgunna was standing in the doorway.

Their gazes locked for a little, and I saw her color but thought nothing of it then. Our shoes rang on the flagging as we crossed the yard and kicked the dogs aside. My two thralls halted in cleaning the stables to gawp, until I got them back to work with the remark that a man good for naught else was always a pleasing sacrifice. That's one useful practice you Christians lack; I've never made a human offering myself, but you know not how helpful is the fact that I could do so.

We entered the hall, and I told the folk Gerald's name and how we had found him. Ragnhild set her maids hopping, to stoke up the fire in the middle trench and fetch beer, while I led Gerald to the high seat and sat down by him. Thorgunna brought us the filled horns. His standing was not like yours, for whom we use our out-land cups.

Gerald tasted the brew and made a face. I felt somewhat offended, for my beer is reckoned good, and asked him if aught was wrong. He laughed with a harsh note and said no, but he was used to beer that foamed and was not sour.

"And where might they make such?" I wondered testily.

"Everywhere," he said. "Iceland, too—no. . . ." He stared before him in an empty wise. "Let's say . . . in Vinland."

"Where is Vinland?" I asked.

"The country to the west whence I came. I thought you knew. . . . Wait a bit." He frowned. "Maybe I can find out something. Have you heard of Leif Eiriksson?"

"No," I said. Since then it has struck me that this was one proof of his tale, for Leif Eiriksson is now a well-known chief; and I also take more seriously those yarns of land seen by Bjarni Herjulfsson.

"His father, Erik the Red?" went on Gerald.

"Oh yes," I said. "If you mean the Norseman who came hither because of a manslaughter, and left Iceland in turn for the same reason, and has now settled with his friends in Greenland."

"Then this is . . . a little before Leif's voyage," he muttered. "The late tenth century."

"See here," broke in Helgi, "we've been forbearing

with you, but now is no time for riddles. We save those for feasts and drinking bouts. Can you not say plainly whence you come and how you got here?"

Gerald looked down at the floor, shaking.

"Let the man alone, Helgi," said Thorgunna. "Can you not see he's troubled?"

He raised his head and gave her the look of a hurt dog that someone has patted. The hall was dim; enough light seeped in the loft windows that no candles were lit, but not enough to see well by. Nevertheless, I marked a reddening in both their faces.

Gerald drew a long breath and fumbled about. His clothes were made with pockets. He brought out a small parchment box and from it took a little white stick that he put in his mouth. Then he took out another box, and a wooden stick therefrom which burst into flame when he scratched. With the fire he kindled the stick in his mouth, and sucked in the smoke.

We stared. "Is that a Christian rite?" asked Helgi.

"No . . . not just so." A wry, disappointed smile twisted his lips. "I thought you'd be more surprised, even terrified."

"It's something new," I admitted, "but we're a sober folk on Iceland. Those fire sticks could be useful. Did you come to trade in them?"

"Hardly." He sighed. The smoke he breathed in seemed to steady him, which was odd, because the smoke in the hall had made him cough and water at the eyes. "The truth is, well, something you will not believe. I can hardly believe it myself."

We waited. Thorgunna stood leaning forward, her lips parted.

"That lightning bolt—" Gerald nodded wearily. "I was out in the storm, and somehow the lightning must have smitten me in just the right way, a way that happens only once in many thousands of times. It threw me back into the past."

Those were his words, priest. I did not understand, and told him so.

"It's hard to grasp," he agreed. "God give that I'm merely dreaming. But if this is a dream I must endure till I awaken. . . . Well, look. I was born one thousand, nine hundred, and thirty-three years after Christ, in a land to

the west which you have not yet found. In the twenty-fourth year of my life, I was in Iceland with my country's war host. The lightning struck me, and now, now it is less than one thousand years after Christ, and yet I am here—almost a thousand years before I was born, I am here!”

We sat very still. I signed myself with the Hammer and took a long pull from my horn. One of the maids whimpered, and Ragnhild whispered so fiercely I could hear: “Be still. The poor fellow's out of his head. There's no harm in him.”

I thought she was right, unless maybe in the last part. The gods can speak through a madman, and the gods are not always to be trusted. Or he could turn berserker, or he could be under a heavy curse that would also touch us.

He slumped, gazing before him. I caught a few fleas and cracked them while I pondered. Gerald noticed and asked with some horror if we had many fleas here.

“Why, of course,” said Thorgunna. “Have you none?”

“No.” He smiled crookedly. “Not yet.”

“Ah,” she sighed, “then you *must* be sick.”

She was a level-headed girl. I saw her thought, and so did Ragnhild and Helgi. Clearly, a man so sick that he had no fleas could be expected to rave. We might still fret about whether we could catch the illness, but I deemed this unlikely; his woe was in the head, maybe from a blow he had taken. In any case, the matter was come down to earth now, something we could deal with.

I being a godi, a chief who holds sacrifices, it behooved me not to turn a stranger out. Moreover, if he could fetch in many of those fire-kindling sticks, a profitable trade might be built up. So I said Gerald should go to rest. He protested, but we manhandled him into the shut-bed, and there he lay tired and was soon asleep. Thorgunna said she would take care of him.

The next eventide I meant to sacrifice a horse, both because of the timber we had found and to take away any curse that might be on Gerald. Furthermore, the beast I picked was old and useless, and we were short of fresh meat. Gerald had spent the morning lounging moodily around the garth, but when I came in at noon to eat I found him and my daughter laughing.

"You seem to be on the road to health," I said.

"Oh yes. It . . . could be worse for me." He sat down at my side as the carles set up the trestle table and the maids brought in the food. "I was ever much taken with the age of the vikings, and I have some skills."

"Well," I said, "if you have no home, we can keep you here for a while."

"I can work," he said eagerly. "I'll be worth my pay."

Now I knew he was from afar, because what chief would work on any land but his own, and for hire at that? Yet he had the easy manner of the high-born, and had clearly eaten well throughout his life. I overlooked that he had made me no gifts; after all, he was shipwrecked.

"Maybe you can get passage back to your United States," said Helgi. "We could hire a ship. I'm fain to see that realm."

"No," said Gerald bleakly. "There is no such place. Not yet."

"So you still hold to that idea you came from tomorrow?" grunted Sigurd. "Crazy notion. Pass the pork."

"I do," said Gerald. Calm had come upon him. "And I can prove it."

"I don't see how you speak our tongue, if you hail from so far away," I said. I would not call a man a liar to his face, unless we were swapping friendly brags, but—

"They speak otherwise in my land and time," he said, "but it happens that in Iceland the tongue changed little since the old days, and because my work had me often talking with the folk, I learned it when I came here."

"If you are a Christian," I said, "you must bear with us while we sacrifice tonight."

"I've naught against that," he said. "I fear I never was a very good Christian. I'd like to watch. How is it done?"

I told him how I would smite the horse with a hammer before the god, and cut its throat, and sprinkle the blood about with willow twigs; thereafter we would butcher the carcass and feast. He said hastily:

"Here's my chance to prove what I am. I have a weapon that will kill the horse with, with a flash of lightning."

"What is it?" I wondered. We crowded around while he took the metal club out of its sheath and showed it to

us. I had my doubts; it looked well enough for hitting a man, I reckoned, but had no edge, though a wondrously skillful smith had forged it. "Well, we can try," I said. You have seen how on Iceland we are less concerned to follow the rites exactly than they are in the older countries.

Gerald showed us what else he had in his pockets. There were some coins of remarkable roundness and sharpness, though neither gold nor true silver; a tiny key; a stick with lead in it for writing; a flat purse holding many bits of marked paper. When he told us gravely that some of this paper was money, Thorgunna herself had to laugh. Best was a knife whose blade folded into the handle. When he saw me admiring that, he gave it to me, which was well done for a shipwrecked man. I said I would give him clothes and a good ax, as well as lodging for as long as needful.

No, I don't have the knife now. You shall hear why. It's a pity, for that was a good knife, though rather small.

"What were you ere the war arrow went out in your land?" asked Helgi. "A merchant?"

"No," said Gerald. "I was an . . . *endjinur* . . . that is, I was learning how to be one. A man who builds things, bridges and roads and tools . . . more than just an artisan. So I think my knowledge could be of great value here." I saw a fever in his eyes. "Yes, give me time and I'll be a king."

"We have no king on Iceland," I grunted. "Our forefathers came hither to get away from kings. Now we meet at the Things to try suits and pass new laws, but each man must get his own redress as best he can."

"But suppose the one in the wrong won't yield?" he asked.

"Then there can be a fine feud," said Helgi, and went on to relate some of the killings in past years. Gerald looked unhappy and fingered his *gun*. That is what he called his fire-spitting club. He tried to rally himself with a joke about now, at last, being free to call it a gun instead of something else. That disquieted me, smacked of witchcraft, so to change the talk I told Helgi to stop his chattering of manslaughter as if it were sport. With law shall the land be built.

"Your clothing is rich," said Thorgunna softly. "Your folk must own broad acres at home."

"No," he said, "our . . . our king gives each man in the host clothes like these. As for my family, we owned no farm, we rented our home in a building where many other families also dwelt."

I am not purse-proud, but it seemed to me he had not been honest, a landless man sharing my high seat like a chief. Thorgunna covered my huffiness by saying, "You will gain a farm later."

After sunset we went out to the shrine. The carles had built a fire before it, and as I opened the door the wooden Odin appeared to leap forth. My house has long invoked him above the others. Gerald muttered to my daughter that it was a clumsy bit of carving, and since my father had made it I was still more angry with him. Some folks have no understanding of the fine arts.

Nevertheless, I let him help me lead the horse forth to the altar stone. I took the blood bowl in my hands and said he could now slay the beast if he would. He drew his gun, put the end behind the horse's ear, and squeezed. We heard a crack, and the beast jerked and dropped with a hole blown through its skull, wasting the brains. A clumsy weapon. I caught a whiff, sharp and bitter like that around a volcano. We all jumped, one of the women screamed, and Gerald looked happy. I gathered my wits and finished the rest of the sacrifice as was right. Gerald did not like having blood sprinkled over him, but then he was a Christian. Nor would he take more than a little of the soup and flesh.

Afterward Helgi questioned him about the gun, and he said it could kill a man at bowshot distance but had no witchcraft in it, only use of some tricks we did not know. Having heard of the Greek fire, I believed him. A gun could be useful in a fight, as indeed I was to learn, but it did not seem very practical—iron costing what it does, and months of forging needed for each one.

I fretted more about the man himself.

And the next morning I found him telling Thorgunna a great deal of foolishness about his home—buildings as tall as mountains, and wagons that flew, or went without horses. He said there were eight or nine thousand thousands of folk in his town, a burgh called New Jorvik or the like. I enjoy a good brag as well as the next man, but this was too much, and I told him gruffly to come along and help me get in some strayed cattle.

* * *

After a day scrambling around the hills I saw that Gerald could hardly tell a cow's bow from her stern. We almost had the strays once, but he ran stupidly across their path and turned them, so the whole work was to do again. I asked him with strained courtesy if he could milk, shear, wield scythe or flail, and he said no, he had never lived on a farm.

"That's a shame," I remarked, "for everyone on Iceland does, unless he be outlawed."

He flushed at my tone. "I can do enough else," he answered. "Give me some tools and I'll show you good metalwork."

That brightened me, for truth to tell, none of our household was a gifted smith. "That's an honorable trade," I said, "and you can be of great help. I have a broken sword and several bent spearheads to be mended, and it were no bad idea to shoe the horses." His admission that he did not know how to put on a shoe was not very dampening to me then.

We had returned home as we talked, and Thorgunna came angrily forward. "That's no way to treat a guest, Father," she said. "Making him work like a carle, indeed!"

Gerald smiled. "I'll be glad to work," he said. "I need a . . . a stake . . . something to start me afresh. Also, I want to repay a little of your kindness."

Those words made me mild toward him, and I said it was not his fault they had different ways in the United States. On the morrow he could begin in the smithy, and I would pay him, yet he would be treated as an equal since craftsmen are valued. This earned him black looks from the housefolk.

That evening he entertained us well with stories of his home; true or not, they made good listening. However, he had no real polish, being unable to compose a line of verse. They must be a raw and backward lot in the United States. He said his task in the war host had been to keep order among the troops. Helgi said this was unheard of, and he must be bold who durst offend so many men, but Gerald said folk obeyed him out of fear of the king. When he added that the term of a levy in the United States was two years, and that men could be

called to war even in harvest time, I said he was well out of a country with so ruthless and powerful a lord.

"No," he answered wistfully, "we are a free folk, who say what we please."

"But it seems you may not do as you please," said Helgi.

"Well," Gerald said, "we may not murder a man just because he aggrieves us."

"Not even if he has slain your own kin?" asked Helgi.

"No. It is for the . . . the king to take vengeance, on behalf of the whole folk whose peace has been broken."

I chuckled. "Your yarns are cunningly wrought," I said, "but there you've hit a snag. How could the king so much as keep count of the slaughters, let alone avenge them? Why, he'd not have time to beget an heir!"

Gerald could say no more for the laughter that followed.

The next day he went to the smithy, with a thrall to pump the bellows for him. I was gone that day and night, down to Reykjavik to dicker with Hjalmar Broadnose about some sheep. I invited him back for an overnight stay, and we rode into my steading with his son Ketill, a red-haired sulky youth of twenty winters who had been refused by Thorgunna.

I found Gerald sitting gloomily on a bench in the hall. He wore the clothes I had given him, his own having been spoilt by ash and sparks; what had he awaited, the fool? He talked in a low voice with my daughter.

"Well," I said as I trod in, "how went the tasks?"

My man Grim snickered. "He ruined two spearheads, but we put out the fire he stared ere the whole smithy burned."

"How's this?" I cried. "You said you were a smith."

Gerald stood up, defiant. "I worked with different tools, and better ones, at home," he replied. "You do it otherwise here."

They told me he had built up the fire too hot; his hammer had struck everywhere but the place it should; he had wrecked the temper of the steel through not knowing when to quench it. Smithcraft takes years to learn, of course, but he might have owned to being not so much as an apprentice.

"Well," I snapped, "what can you do, then, to earn

your bread?" It irked me to be made a ninny of before Hjalmar and Ketill, whom I had told about the stranger.

"Odin alone knows," said Grim. "I took him with me to ride after your goats, and never have I seen a worse horseman. I asked him if maybe he could spin or weave, and he said no."

"That was no question to ask a man!" flared Thorgunna. "He should have slain you for it."

"He should indeed," laughed Grim. "But let me carry on the tale. I thought we would also repair your bridge over the foss. Well, he *can* barely handle a saw, but he nigh took his own foot off with the adze."

"We don't use those tools, I tell you!" Gerald doubled his fists and looked close to tears.

I motioned my guests to sit down. "I don't suppose you can butcher or smoke a hog, either," I said, "or salt a fish or turf a roof."

"No." I could hardly hear him.

"Well, then, man, whatever can you do?"

"I—" He could get no words out.

"You were a warrior," said Thorgunna.

"Yes, that I was!" he said, his face kindling.

"Small use on Iceland when you have no other skills," I grumbled, "but maybe, if you can get passage to the eastlands, some king will take you in his guard." Myself I doubted it, for a guardsman needs manners that will do credit to his lord; but I had not the heart to say so.

Ketill Hjalmarsson had plainly not liked the way Thorgunna stood close to Gerald and spoke for him. Now he fleered and said: "I might also doubt your skill in fighting."

"That I have been trained for," said Gerald grimly.

"Will you wrestle with me?" asked Ketill.

"Gladly!" spat Gerald.

Priest, what is a man to think? As I grow older, I find life to be less and less the good-and-evil, black-and-white thing you call it; we are each of us some hue of gray. This useless fellow, this spiritless lout who could be asked if he did women's work and not lift ax, went out into the yard with Ketill Hjalmarsson and threw him three times running. He had a trick of grabbing the clothes as Ketill rushed him . . . I cried a stop when the youth was nearing murderous rage, praised them both, and filled the

beer horns. But Ketill brooded sullen on the bench the whole evening.

Gerald said something about making a gun like his own, but bigger, a *cannon* he called it, which would sink ships and scatter hosts. He would need the help of smiths, and also various stuffs. Charcoal was easy, and sulfur could be found by the volcanoes, I suppose, but what is this saltpeter?

Too, being wary by now, I questioned him closely as to how he would make such a thing. Did he know just how to mix the powder? No, he admitted. What size must the gun be? When he told me—at least as long as a man—I laughed and asked him how a piece that size could be cast or bored, supposing we could scrape together so much iron. This he did not know either.

“You haven’t the tools to make the tools to make the tools,” he said. I don’t understand what he meant by that. “God help me, I can’t run through a thousand years of history by myself.”

He took out the last of his little smoke sticks and lit it. Helgi had tried a puff earlier and gotten sick, though he remained a friend of Gerald’s. Now my son proposed to take a boat in the morning and go with him and me to Ice Fjord, where I had some money outstanding I wanted to collect. Hjalmar and Ketill said they would come along for the trip, and Thorgunna pleaded so hard that I let her come too.

“An ill thing,” mumbled Sigurd. “The land trolls like not a woman aboard a vessel. It’s unlucky.”

“How did your fathers bring women to this island?” I grinned.

Now I wish I had listened to him. He was not a clever man, but he often knew whereof he spoke.

At this time I owned a half-share in a ship that went to Norway, bartering wadmal for timber. It was a profitable business until she ran afoul of vikings during the uproar while Olaf Tryggvason was overthrowing Jarl Haakon there. Some men will do anything to make a living—thieves, cutthroats, they ought to be hanged, the worthless robbers pouncing on honest merchantmen. Had they any courage or honor they would go to Ireland, which is full of plunder.

Well, anyhow, the ship was abroad, but we had three boats and took one of these. Grim went with us others: myself, Helgi, Hjalmar, Ketill, Gerald, and Thorgunna. I saw how the castaway winced at the cold water as we launched her, yet afterward took off his shoes and stockings to let his feet dry. He had been surprised to learn we had a bathhouse—did he think us savages?—but still, he was dainty as a girl and soon moved upwind of our feet.

We had a favoring breeze, so raised mast and sail. Gerald tried to help, but of course did not know one line from another and got them fouled. Grim snarled at him and Ketill laughed nastily. But ere long we were under weigh, and he came and sat by me where I had the steering oar.

He must have lain long awake thinking, for now he ventured shyly: "In my land they have . . . will have . . . a rig and rudder which are better than these. With them, you can sail so close to the wind that you can crisscross against it."

"Ah, our wise sailor offers us redes," sneered Ketill.

"Be still," said Thorgunna sharply. "Let Gerald speak."

Gerald gave her a look of humble thanks, and I was not unwilling to listen. "This is something which could easily be made," he said. "While not a seaman, I've been on such boats myself and know them well. First, then, the sail should not be square and hung from a yardarm, but three-cornered, with the two bottom corners lashed to a yard swiveling fore and aft from the mast; and there should be one or two smaller headsails of the same shape. Next, your steering oar is in the wrong place. You should have a rudder in the stern, guided by a bar." He grew eager and traced the plan with his fingernail on Thorgunna's cloak. "With these two things, and a deep keel, going down about three feet for a boat this size, a ship can move across the wind . . . thus."

Well, priest, I must say the idea has merits, and were it not for the fear of bad luck—for everything of his was unlucky—I might yet play with it. But the drawbacks were clear, and I pointed them out in a reasonable way.

"First and worst," I said, "this rudder and deep keel would make it impossible to beach the ship or go up a shallow river. Maybe they have many harbors where you hail from, but here a craft must take what landings she

can find, and must be speedily launched if there should be an attack."

"The keel can be built to draw up into the hull," he said, "with a box around so that water can't follow."

"How would you keep dry rot out of the box?" I answered. "No, your keel must be fixed, and must be heavy if the ship is not to capsize under so much sail as you have drawn. This means iron or lead, ruinously costly."

"Besides," I said, "this mast of yours would be hard to unstep when the wind dropped and oars came out. Furthermore, the sails are the wrong shape to stretch as an awning when one must sleep at sea."

"The ship could lie out, and you go to land in a small boat," he said. "Also, you could build cabins aboard for shelter."

"The cabins would get in the way of the oars," I said, "unless the ship were hopelessly broad-beamed or else the oarsmen sat below a deck; and while I hear that galley slaves do this in the southlands, free men would never row in such foulness."

"Must you have oars?" he asked like a very child.

Laughter barked along the hull. The gulls themselves, hovering to starboard where the shore rose dark, cried their scorn.

"Do they have tame winds in the place whence you came?" snorted Hjalmar. "What happens if you're becalmed—for days, maybe, with provisions running out—"

"You could build a ship big enough to carry many weeks' provisions," said Gerald.

"If you had the wealth of a king, you might," said Helgi. "And such a king's ship, lying helpless on a flat sea, would be swarmed by every viking from here to Jomsborg. As for leaving her out on the water while you make camp, what would you have for shelter, or for defense if you should be trapped ashore?"

Gerald slumped. Thorgunna said to him gently: "Some folk have no heart to try anything new. I think it's a grand idea."

He smiled at her, a weary smile, and plucked up the will to say something about a means for finding north in cloudy weather; he said a kind of stone always pointed north when hung from a string. I told him mildly that I would be most interested if he could find me some of this

stone; or if he knew where it was to be had, I could ask a trader to fetch me a piece. But this he did not know, and fell silent. Ketill opened his mouth, but got such an edged look from Thorgunna that he shut it again. His face declared what a liar he thought Gerald to be.

The wind turned crank after a while, so we lowered the mast and took to the oars. Gerald was strong and willing, though awkward; however, his hands were so soft that erelong they bled. I offered to let him rest, but he kept doggedly at the work.

Watching him sway back and forth, under the dreary creak of the holes, the shaft red and wet where he gripped it, I thought much about him. He had done everything wrong which a man could do—thus I imagined then, not knowing the future—and I did not like the way Thorgunna's eyes strayed to him and rested. He was no man for my daughter, landless and penniless and helpless. Yet I could not keep from liking him. Whether his tale was true or only madness, I felt he was honest about it; and surely whatever way by which he came hither was a strange one. I noticed the cuts on his chin from my razor; he had said he was not used to our kind of shaving and would grow a beard. He had tried hard. I wondered how well I would have done, landing alone in this witch country of his dreams, with a gap of forever between me and my home.

Maybe that same wretchedness was what had turned Thorgunna's heart. Women are a kittle breed, priest, and you who have forsworn them belike understand them as well as I who have slept with half a hundred in six different lands. I do not think they even understand themselves. Birth and life and death, those are the great mysteries, which none will ever fathom, and a woman is closer to them than a man.

The ill wind stiffened, the sea grew gray and choppy under low, leaden clouds, and our headway was poor. At sunset we could row no more, but must pull in to a small, unpeopled bay, and make camp as well as could be on the strand.

We had brought firewood and timber along. Gerald, though staggering with weariness, made himself useful, his sulfury sticks kindling the blaze more easily than flint and steel. Thorgunna set herself to cook our supper. We were not much warded by the boat from a lean, whining

wind; her cloak fluttered like wings and her hair blew wild above the streaming flames. It was the time of light nights, the sky a dim, dusky blue, the sea a wrinkled metal sheet, and the land like something risen out of dream mists. We men huddled in our own cloaks, holding numbed hands to the fire and saying little.

I felt some cheer was needed, and ordered a cask of my best and strongest ale broached. An evil Norn made me do that, but no man escapes his weird. Our bellies seemed the more empty now when our noses drank in the sputter of a spitted joint, and the ale went swiftly to our heads. I remember declaiming the death-song of Ragnar Hairybreeks for no other reason than that I felt like declaiming it.

Thorgunna came to stand over Gerald where he sat. I saw how her fingers brushed his hair, ever so lightly, and Ketill Hjalmarsson did too. "Have they no verses in your land?" she asked.

"Not like yours," he said, glancing up. Neither of them looked away again. "We sing rather than chant. I wish I had my *gittar* here—that's a kind of harp."

"Ah, an Irish bard," said Hjalmar Broadnose.

I remember strangely well how Gerald smiled, and what he said in his own tongue, though I know not the meaning: "*Only on me mither's side, begorra.*" I suppose it was magic.

"Well, sing for us," laughed Thorgunna.

"Let me think," he said. "I shall have to put it in Norse words for you." After a little while, still staring at her through the windy gloaming, he began a song. It had a tune I liked, thus:

*From this valley they tell me you're leaving.
I will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile.
You will carry the sunshine with you
That has brightened my life all the while. . . .*

I don't remember the rest, save that it was not quite seemly.

When he had finished, Hjalmar and Grim went over to see if the meat was done. I spied a glimmer of tears in my daughter's eyes. "That was a lovely thing," she said.

Ketill sat straight. The flames splashed his face with

wild, running red. A rawness was in his tone: "Yes, we've found what this fellow can do. Sit about and make pretty songs for the girls. Keep him for that, Ospak."

Thorgunna whitened, and Helgi clapped hand to sword. Gerald's face darkened and his voice grew thick: "That was no way to talk. Take it back."

Ketill rose. "No," he said. "I'll ask no pardon of an idler living off honest yeomen."

He was raging, but had kept sense enough to shift the insult from my family to Gerald alone. Otherwise he and his father would have had the four of us to deal with. As it was, Gerald stood too, fists knotted at his sides, and said: "Will you step away from here and settle this?"

"Gladly!" Ketill turned and walked a few yards down the beach, taking his shield from the boat. Gerald followed. Thorgunna stood stricken, then snatched his ax and ran after him.

"Are you going weaponless?" she shrieked.

Gerald stopped, looking dazed. "I don't want anything like that," he said. "Fists—"

Ketill puffed himself up and drew sword. "No doubt you're used to fighting like thralls in your land," he said. "So if you'll crave my pardon, I'll let this matter rest."

Gerald stood with drooped shoulders. He stared at Thorgunna as if he were blind, as if asking her what to do. She handed him the ax.

"So you want me to kill him?" he whispered.

"Yes," she answered.

Then I knew she loved him, for otherwise why should she have cared if he disgraced himself?

Helgi brought him his helmet. He put it on, took the ax, and went forward.

"Ill is this," said Hjalmar to me. "Do you stand by the stranger, Ospak?"

"No," I said. "He's no kin or oath-brother of mine. This is not my quarrel."

"That's good," said Hjalmar. "I'd not like to fight with you. You were ever a good neighbor."

We stepped forth together and staked out the ground. Thorgunna told me to lend Gerald my sword, so he could use a shield too, but the man looked oddly at me and said he would rather have the ax. They squared off before each other, he and Ketill, and began fighting.

This was no holmgang, with rules and a fixed order of blows and first blood meaning victory. There was death between those two. Drunk though the lot of us were, we saw that and so had not tried to make peace. Ketill stormed in with the sword whistling in his hand. Gerald sprang back, wielding the ax awkwardly. It bounced off Ketill's shield. The youth grinned and cut at Gerald's legs. Blood welled forth to stain the ripped breeches.

What followed was butchery. Gerald had never used a battle-ax before. So it turned in his grasp and he struck with the flat of the head. He would have been hewn down at once had Ketill's sword not been blunted on his helmet and had he not been quick on his feet. Even so, he was erelong lurching with a dozen wounds.

"Stop the fight!" Thorgunna cried, and sped toward them. Helgi caught her arms and forced her back, where she struggled and kicked till Grim must help. I saw grief on my son's face, but a wolfish glee on the carle's.

Ketill's blade came down and slashed Gerald's left hand. He dropped the ax. Ketill snarled and readied to finish him. Gerald drew his gun. It made a flash and a barking noise. Ketill fell. Blood gushed from him. His lower jaw was blown off and the back of his skull was gone.

A stillness came, where only the wind and the sea had voice.

Then Hjalmar trod forth, his mouth working but otherwise a cold steadiness over him. He knelt and closed his son's eyes, as a token that the right of vengeance was his. Rising, he said: "That was an evil deed. For that you shall be outlawed."

"It wasn't witchcraft," said Gerald in a stunned tone. "It was like a . . . a bow. I had no choice. I didn't want to fight with more than my fists."

I got between them and said the Thing must decide this matter, but that I hoped Hjalmar would take weregild for Ketill.

"But I killed him to save my own life!" protested Gerald.

"Nevertheless, weregild must be paid, if Ketill's kin will take it," I explained. "Because of the weapon, I think it will be doubled, but that is for the Thing to judge."

Hjalmar had many other sons, and it was not as if

Gerald belonged to a family at odds with his own, so I felt he would agree. However, he laughed coldly and asked where a man lacking wealth would find the silver.

Thorgunna stepped up with a wintry calm and said we would pay. I opened my mouth, but when I saw her eyes I nodded. "Yes, we will," I said, "in order to keep the peace."

"So you make this quarrel your own?" asked Hjalmar.

"No," I answered. "This man is no blood of mine. But if I choose to make him a gift of money to use as he wishes, what of it?"

Hjalmar smiled. Sorrow stood in his gaze, but he looked on me with old comradeship.

"One day he may be your son-in-law," he said. "I know the signs, Ospak. Then indeed he will be of your folk. Even helping him now in his need will range you on his side."

"And so?" asked Helgi, most softly.

"And so, while I value your friendship, I have sons who will take the death of their brother ill. They'll want revenge on Gerald Samsson, if only for the sake of their good names, and thus our two houses will be sundered and one manslaying will lead to another. It has happened often enough ere now." Hjalmar sighed. "I myself wish peace with you, Ospak, but if you take this killer's side it must be otherwise."

I thought for a moment, thought of Helgi lying with his head cloven, of my other sons on their steeds drawn to battle because of a man they had never seen, I thought of having to wear byrnie each time we went down for driftwood and never knowing when we went to bed if we would wake to find the house ringed in by spearmen.

"Yes," I said, "You are right Hjalmar. I withdraw my offer. Let this be a matter between you and him alone."

We gripped hands on it.

Thorgunna uttered a small cry and flew into Gerald's arms. He held her close. "What does this mean?" he asked slowly.

"I cannot keep you any longer," I said, "but maybe some crofter will give you a roof. Hjalmar is a law-abiding man and will not harm you until the Thing has outlawed you. That will not be before they meet in fall. You can try to get passage out of Iceland ere then."

"A useless one like me?" he replied in bitterness.

Thorgunna whirled free and blazed that I was a coward and a perjurer and all else evil. I let her have it out before I laid my hands on her shoulders.

"I do this for the house," I said. "The house and the blood, which are holy. Men die and women weep, but while the kindred live our names are remembered. Can you ask a score of men to die for your hankerings?"

Long did she stand, and to this day I know not what her answer would have been. But Gerald spoke.

"No," he said. "I suppose you have right, Ospak . . . the right of your time, which is not mine." He took my hand, and Helgi's. His lips brushed Thorgunna's cheek. Then he turned and walked out into the darkness.

I heard, later, that he went to earth with Thorvald Hallsson, the crofter of Humpback Fell, and did not tell his host what had happened. He must have hoped to go unnoticed until he could somehow get berth on an east-bound ship. But of course word spread. I remember his brag that in the United States folk had ways to talk from one end of the land to another. So he must have scoffed at us, sitting in our lonely steads, and not known how fast news would get around. Thorvald's son Hrolf went to Brand Sealskin-Boots to talk about some matter, and mentioned the guest, and soon the whole western island had the tale.

Now, if Gerald had known he must give notice of a manslaying at the first garth he found, he would have been safe at least till the Thing met, for Hjalmar and his sons are sober men who would not needlessly kill a man still under the wing of the law. But as it was, his keeping the matter secret made him a murderer and therefore at once an outlaw. Hjalmar and his kin rode straight to Humpback Fell and haled him forth. He shot his way past them with the gun and fled into the hills. They followed him, having several hurts and one more death to avenge. I wonder if Gerald thought the strangeness of his weapon would unnerve us. He may not have understood that every man dies when his time comes, neither sooner nor later, so that fear of death is useless.

At the end, when they had him trapped, his weapon gave out on him. Then he took a dead man's sword and

defended himself so valiantly that Ulf Hjalmarsson has limped ever since. That was well done, as even his foes admitted. They are an eldritch breed in the United States, but they do not lack manhood.

When he was slain, his body was brought back. For fear of the ghost, he having maybe been a warlock, it was burned, and everything he had owned was laid in the fire with him. Thus I lost the knife he gave me. The barrow stands out on the moor, north of here, and folk shun it, though the ghost has not walked. Today, with so much else happening, he is slowly being forgotten.

And that is the tale, priest, as I saw it and heard it. Most men think Gerald Samsson was crazy, but I myself now believe he did come from out of time, and that his doom was that no man may ripen a field before harvest season. Yet I look into the future, a thousand years hence, when they fly through the air and ride in horseless wagons and smash whole towns with one blow. I think of this Iceland then, and of the young United States men come to help defend us in a year when the end of the world hovers close. Maybe some of them, walking about on the heaths, will see that barrow and wonder what ancient warrior lies buried there, and they may well wish they had lived long ago in this time, when men were free.

A WORK OF ART

BY JAMES BLISH (1921-1975)

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES
JULY

The future of the arts has always interested science fiction writers and readers, including the "high" arts, such as literature, classical music, painting, poetry, etc.; and the "low" arts, such as television, movies, comic books, and such. There is a tendency for these stories to be bitter-sweet, remembering the "old days" when people read books, or to develop new art forms as Isaac did in "Dreaming is a Private Thing."

James Blish was an intellectual who loved the classics and who edited the first anthology of sf stories about the arts of the future, NEW DREAMS THIS MORNING (1966), which contains Isaac's above-mentioned story as well as Damon Knight's "The Country of the Kind."

I'm writing these headnotes out of chronological order, and I just noticed—Isaac, since the mid-fifties were supposed to be the heyday of GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION, why are there only two stories out of fifteen from the magazine? (MHG)

I always found James Blish a bit daunting. He was not only at home in the physical sciences (as I am), but he was also an authority on modern poetry and on serious music and I can only guess on what else, and there I am totally ignorant. He was an expert on Ezra Pound, for instance, whom I find repulsive, both in his political views and in his poetry.

And yet I wonder about subjective values of these things. In his commentary in the 1966 anthology, Jim has this to

say about "A Work of Art": "Ostensibly this is a story about the future of serious music (by which I mean to exclude dance music both good—Ellington and the Strausses—and bad—Beatles and their coleoptera) . . ."

Did Jim really dislike the Beatles? I, myself, am totally barren of judgment in such things, but nowadays I hear the Beatles treated as demigods of music on all sides. But then I am quite certain that contemporary critics derided Shakespeare and Beethoven (and probably Homer and Michelangelo as well). Does this mean that time sanctifies all? Or that people copy each other and like what they feel is proper to like? Or that critics are, one and all, pretentious idiots?

And GALAXY may be omitted, because we are subjective, Marty, and might be wrong. Who knows? (I.A.)

Instantly, he remembered dying. He remembered it, however, as if at two removes—as though he were remembering a memory, rather than an actual event; as though he himself had not really been there when he died.

Yet the memory was all from his own point of view, not that of some detached and disembodied observer which might have been his soul. He had been most conscious of the rasping, unevenly drawn movements of the air in his chest. Blurring rapidly, the doctor's face had bent over him, loomed, come closer, and then had vanished as the doctor's head passed below his cone of vision, turned sideways to listen to his lungs.

It had become rapidly darker, and then, only then, had he realized that these were to be his last minutes. He had tried dutifully to say Pauline's name, but his memory contained no record of the sound—only of the rattling breath and of the film of sootiness thickening in the air, blotting out everything for an instant.

Only an instant, and then the memory was over. The room was bright again, and the ceiling, he noticed with wonder, had turned a soft green. The doctor's head lifted again and looked down at him.

It was a different doctor. This one was a far younger man, with an ascetic face and gleaming, almost fey eyes. There was no doubt about it. One of the last conscious thoughts he had had was that of gratitude that the attending physician, there at the end, had not been the one who

secretly hated him for his one-time associations with the Nazi hierarchy. The attending doctor, instead, had worn an expression amusingly proper for that of a Swiss expert called to the deathbed of an eminent man: a mixture of worry at the prospect of losing so eminent a patient, and complacency at the thought that, at the old man's age, nobody could blame this doctor if he died. At eighty-five, pneumonia is a serious matter, with or without penicillin.

"You're all right now," the new doctor said, freeing his patient's head of a whole series of little silver rods which had been clinging to it by a sort of network cap. "Rest a minute and try to be calm. Do you know your name?"

He drew a cautious breath. There seemed to be nothing at all the matter with his lungs now; indeed, he felt positively healthy. "Certainly," he said, a little nettled. "Do you know yours?"

The doctor smiled crookedly. "You're in character, it appears," he said. "My name is Barkun Kris; I am a mind sculptor. Yours?"

"Richard Strauss."

"Very good," Dr. Kris said, and turned away. Strauss, however, had already been diverted by a new singularity. *Strauss* is a word as well as a name in German; it has many meanings—an ostrich, a bouquet; von Wolzogen had had a high old time working all the possible puns into the libretto of *Feuersnot*. And it happened to be the first German word to be spoken either by himself or by Dr. Kris since that twice-removed moment of death. The language was not French or Italian, either. It was most like English, but not the English Strauss knew; nevertheless, he was having no trouble speaking it and even thinking in it.

Well, he thought, *I'll be able to conduct The Love of Danae, after all. It isn't every composer who can premier his own opera posthumously.* Still, there was something queer about all this—the queerest part of all being that conviction, which would not go away, that he had actually been dead for just a short time. Of course, medicine was making great strides, but . . .

"Explain all this," he said, lifting himself to one elbow. The bed was different, too, and not nearly as comfortable as the one in which he had died. As for the room, it

looked more like a dynamo shed than a sickroom. Had modern medicine taken to reviving its corpses on the floor of the Siemens-Schuckert plant?

"In a moment," Dr. Kris said. He finished rolling some machine back into what Strauss impatiently supposed to be its place, and crossed to the pallet. "Now. There are many things you'll have to take for granted without attempting to understand then, Dr. Strauss. Not everything in the world today is explicable in terms of your assumptions. Please bear that in mind."

"Very well. Proceed."

"The date," Dr. Kris said, "is 2161 by your calendar—or, in other words, it is now two hundred and twelve years after your death. Naturally, you'll realize that by this time nothing remains of your body but the bones. The body you have now was volunteered for your use. Before you look into a mirror to see what it's like, remember that its physical difference from the one you were used to is all in your favor. It's in perfect health, not unpleasant for other people to look at, and its physiological age is about fifty."

A miracle? No, not in this new age, surely. It is simply a work of science. But what a science! This was Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and the immortality of the superman combined into one.

"And where is this?" the composer said.

"In Port York, part of the State of Manhattan, in the United States. You will find the country less changed in some respects than I imagine you anticipate. Other changes, of course, will seem radical to you, but it's hard for me to predict which ones will strike you that way. A certain resilience on your part will bear cultivating."

"I understand," Strauss said, sitting up. "One question, please; is it still possible for a composer to make a living in this century?"

"Indeed it is," Dr. Kris said, smiling. "As we expect you to do. It is one of the purposes for which we've brought you back."

"I gather, then," Strauss said somewhat dryly, "that there is still a demand for my music. The critics in the old days—"

"That's not quite how it is," Dr. Kris said. "I understand some of your work is still played, but frankly I

know very little about your current status. My interest is rather—”

A door opened somewhere, and another man came in. He was older and more ponderous than Kris and had a certain air of academicism, but he, too, was wearing the oddly tailored surgeon's gown and looked upon Kris' patient with the glowing eyes of an artist.

“A success, Kris?” he said. “Congratulations.”

“They're not in order yet,” Dr. Kris said. “The final proof is what counts. Dr. Strauss, if you feel strong enough, Dr. Seirds and I would like to ask you some questions. We'd like to make sure your memory is clear.”

“Certainly. Go ahead.”

“According to our records,” Kris said, “you once knew a man whose initials were R.K.L.; this was while you were conducting at the Vienna *Staatsoper*.” He made the double “a” at least twice too long, as though German were a dead language he was striving to pronounce in some “classical” accent. “What was his name, and who was he?”

“That would be Kurt List—his first name was Richard, but he didn't use it. He was assistant stage manager.”

The two doctors looked at each other. “Why did you offer to write a new overture to *The Woman Without a Shadow* and give the manuscript to the city of Vienna?”

“So I wouldn't have to pay the garbage removal tax on the Maria Theresa villa they had given me.”

“In the backyard of your house at Garmisch-Partenkirchen there was a tombstone. What was written on it?”

Strauss frowned. That was a question he would be happy to be unable to answer. If one is to play childish jokes upon oneself, it's best not to carve them in stone and put the carving where you can't help seeing it every time you go out to tinker with the Mercedes. “It says,” he replied wearily, “‘Sacred to the memory of Guntram, Minnesinger, slain in a horrible way by his father's own symphony orchestra.’”

“When was *Guntram* premiered?”

“In—let me see—1894, I believe.”

“Where?”

“In Weimar.”

“Who was the leading lady?”

“Pauline de Ahna.”

"What happened to her afterwards?"

"I married her. Is she . . ." Strauss began anxiously.

"No," Dr. Kris said. "I'm sorry, but we lack the data to reconstruct more or less ordinary people."

The composer sighed. He did not know whether to be worried or not. He had loved Pauline, to be sure; on the other hand, it would be pleasant to be able to live the new life without being forced to take off one's shoes every time one entered the house, so as not to scratch the polished hardwood floors. And also pleasant, perhaps, to have two o'clock in the afternoon come by without hearing Pauline's everlasting, "Richard—*jetzt komponiert!*"

"Next question," he said.

For reasons which Strauss did not understand, but was content to take for granted, he was separated from Drs. Kris and Seirds as soon as both were satisfied that the composer's memory was reliable and his health stable. His estate, he was given to understand, had long since been broken up—a sorry end for what had been one of the principal fortunes of Europe—but he was given sufficient money to set up lodgings and resume an active life. He was provided, too, with introductions which proved valuable.

It took longer than he had expected to adjust to the changes that had taken place in music alone. Music was, he quickly began to suspect, a dying art, which would soon have a status not much above that held by flower arranging back in what he thought of as his own century. Certainly it couldn't be denied that the trend toward fragmentation, already visible back in his own time, had proceeded almost to completion in 2161.

He paid no more attention to American popular tunes than he had bothered to pay in his previous life. Yet it was evident that their assembly-line production methods—all the ballad composers openly used a slide-rule-like device called a Hit Machine—now had their counterparts almost throughout serious music.

The conservatives these days, for instance, were the twelve-tone composers—always, in Strauss's opinion, dryly mechanical but never more so than now. Their gods—Berg, Schoenberg, Webern—were looked upon by the concert-going public as great masters, on the abstruse

side perhaps, but as worthy of reverence as any of the Three B's.

There was one wing of the conservative's however, that had gone the twelve-tone procedure one better. These men composed what was called "stochastic music," put together by choosing each individual note by consultation with tables of random numbers. Their bible, their basic text, was a volume called *Operational Aesthetics*, which in turn derived from a discipline called information theory, and not one word of it seemed to touch upon any of the techniques and customs of composition which Strauss knew. The ideal of this group was to produce music which would be "universal"—that is, wholly devoid of any trace of the composer's individuality, wholly a musical expression of the universal Laws of Chance. The Laws of Chance seemed to have a style of their own, all right, but to Strauss it seemed the style of an idiot child being taught to hammer a flat piano, to keep him from getting into trouble.

By far the largest body of work being produced, however, fell into a category misleadingly called science-music. The term reflected nothing but the titles of the works, which dealt with space flight, time travel, and other subjects of a romantic or an unlikely nature. There was nothing in the least scientific about the music, which consisted of a mélange of clichés and imitations of natural sounds, in which Strauss was horrified to see his own time-distorted and diluted image.

The most popular form of science-music was a nine-minute composition called a concerto, though it bore no resemblance at all to the classical concerto form; it was instead a sort of free rhapsody after Rachmaninoff—long after. A typical one—"Song of Deep Space," it was called, by somebody named H. Valerion Krafft—began with a loud assault on the tam-tam, after which all the strings rushed up the scale in unison, followed at a respectful distance by the harp and one clarinet in parallel 6/4's. At the top of the scale cymbals were bashed together, *forte possible*, and the whole orchestra launched itself into a major-minor wailing sort of melody; the whole orchestra, that is, except for the French horns, which were plodding back down the scale again in what was evidently supposed to be a countermelody. The second

phrase of the theme was picked up by a solo trumpet with a suggestion of tremolo, the orchestra died back to its roots to await the next cloudburst, and at this point—as any four-year-old could have predicted—the piano entered with the second theme.

Behind the orchestra stood a group of thirty women, ready to come in with a wordless chorus intended to suggest the eeriness of Deep Space—but at this point, too, Strauss had already learned to get up and leave. After a few such experiences he could also count upon meeting in the lobby Sindi Noniss, the agent to whom Dr. Kris had introduced him and who was handling the reborn composer's output—what there was of it thus far. Sindi had come to expect these walkouts on the part of his client and patiently awaited them, standing beneath a bust of Gian-Carlo Menotti, but he liked them less and less, and lately had been greeting them by turning alternately red and white, like a totipotent barber pole.

"You shouldn't have done it," he burst out after the Krafft incident. "You can't just walk out on a new Krafft composition. The man's the president of the Interplanetary Society for Contemporary Music. How am I ever going to persuade them that you're a contemporary if you keep snubbing them?"

"What does it matter?" Strauss said. "They don't know me by sight."

"You're wrong; they know you very well, and they're watching every move you make. You're the first major composer the mind sculptors ever tackled, and the ISCM would be glad to turn you back with a rejection slip."

"Why?"

"Oh," said Sindi, "there are lots of reasons. The sculptors are snobs; so are the ISCM boys. Each of them wanted to prove to the other that their own art is the king of them all. And then there's the competition; it would be easier to flunk you than to let you into the market. I really think you'd better go back in. I could make up some excuse—"

"No," Strauss said shortly. "I have work to do."

"But that's just the point. Richard. How are we going to get an opera produced without the ISCM? It isn't as though you wrote theremin solos, or something that didn't cost so—"

"I have work to do," he said, and left.

And he did, work which absorbed him as had no other project during the last thirty years of his former life. He had scarcely touched pen to music paper—both had been astonishingly hard to find—when he realized that nothing in his long career had provided him with touchstones by which to judge what music he should write *now*.

The old tricks came swarming back by the thousands, to be sure: the sudden, unexpected key changes at the crest of a melody, the interval stretching, the piling of divided strings, playing in the high harmonics, upon the already tottering top of a climax, the scurry and bustle as phrases were passed like lightning from one choir of the orchestra to another, the flashing runs in the brass, the chuckling in the clarinets, the snarling mixtures of colors to emphasize dramatic tension—all of them.

But none of them satisfied him now. He had been content with them for most of a lifetime and had made them do an astonishing amount of work. But now it was time to strike out afresh. Some of the tricks, indeed, actively repelled him: Where had he gotten the notion, clung to for decades, that violins screaming out in unison somewhere in the stratosphere were a sound interesting enough to be worth repeating inside a single composition, let alone in all of them?

And nobody, he reflected contentedly, ever approached such a new beginning better equipped. In addition to the past lying available in his memory, he had always had a technical armamentarium second to none; even the hostile critics had granted him that. Now that he was, in a sense, composing his first opera—his first after fifteen of them!—he had every opportunity to make it a masterpiece.

And every such intention.

There were of course, many minor distractions. One of them was that search for old-fashioned score paper, and a pen and ink with which to write on it. Very few of the modern composers, it developed, wrote their music at all. A large bloc of them used tape, patching together snippets of tone and sound snipped from other tapes, superimposing one tape on another, and varying the results by twirling an elaborate array of knobs this way or that. Almost all the composers of 3-V scores, on the other hand, wrote on the sound track itself, rapidly scrib-

bling jagged wiggly lines which, when passed through a photocell-audio circuit, produced a noise reasonably like an orchestra playing music, overtones and all.

The last-ditch conservatives who still wrote notes on paper did so with the aid of a musical typewriter. The device, Strauss had to admit, seemed perfected at last; it had manuals and stops like an organ, but it was not much more than twice as large as a standard letter-writing typewriter and produced a neat page. But he was satisfied with his own spidery, highly legible manuscript and refused to abandon it, badly though the one pen nib he had been able to buy coarsened it. It helped to tie him to his past.

Joining the ISCM had also caused him some bad moments, even after Sindi had worked him around the political roadblocks. The Society man who examined his qualifications as a member had run through the questions with no more interest than might have been shown by a veterinarian examining his four-thousandth sick calf.

"Had anything published?"

"Yes, nine tone poems, about three hundred songs, an—"

"Not when you were alive," the examiner said, somewhat disquietingly. "I mean since the sculptors turned you out again."

"Since the sculptors—ah, I understand. Yes, a string quartet, two song cycles, a—"

"Good. Alfie, write down, 'Songs.' Play an instrument?"

"Piano."

"Hmmm." The examiner studied his fingernails. "Oh, well. Do you read music? Or do you use a Scribe, or tape clips? Or a Machine?"

"I read."

"Here." The examiner sat Strauss down in front of a viewing lectern, over the lit surface of which an endless belt of translucent paper was traveling. On the paper was an immensely magnified sound track. "Whistle me the tune of that, and name the instruments it sounds like."

"I don't read that *Musiksticheln*," Strauss said frostily, "or write it, either. I use standard notation, on music paper."

"Alfie, write down, 'Reads notes only.' " He laid a sheet of grayly printed music on the lectern above the ground glass. "Whistle me that."

"That" proved to be a popular tune called "Vangs, Snifters, and Store-Credit Snooky," which had been written on a Hit Machine in 2159 by a guitar-faking politician who sang it at campaign rallies. (In some respects Strauss reflected, the United States had indeed not changed very much.) It had become so popular that anybody could have whistled it from the title alone, whether he could read the music or not. Strauss whistled it and, to prove his bona fides, added, "It's in the key of B flat."

The examiner went over to the green-painted upright piano and hit one greasy black key. The instrument was horribly out of tune—the note was much nearer to the standard 440/cps *A* than it was to B flat—but the examiner said, "So it is. Alfie, write down, 'Also reads flats.' All right, son, you're a member. Nice to have you with us; not many people can read that old-style notation anymore. A lot of them think they're too good for it."

"Thank you," Strauss said.

"My feeling is, if it was good enough for the old masters, it's good enough for us. We don't have people like them with us these days, it seems to me. Except for Dr. Krafft, of course. They were *great* back in the old days—men like Shilkrit, Steiner, Tiomkin, and Pearl . . . and Wilder and Jannsen. Real goffin."

"*Doch gewiss*," Strauss said politely.

But the work went forward. He was making a little income now, from small works. People seemed to feel a special interest in a composer who had come out of the mind sculptors' laboratories, and in addition the material itself, Strauss was quite certain, had merits of its own to help sell it.

It was the opera that counted, however. That grew and grew under his pen, as fresh and new as his new life, as founded in knowledge an ripeness as his long, full memory. Finding a libretto had been troublesome at first. While it was possible that something existed that might have served among the current scripts for 3-V—though he doubted it—he found himself unable to tell the good from the bad through the fog cast over both by incomprehensibly technical production directions. Eventually, and for only the third time in his whole career, he had fallen back upon a play written in a language other than his

own, and—for the first time—decided to set it in that language.

The play was Christopher Fry's *Venus Observed*, in all ways a perfect Strauss opera libretto, as he came gradually to realize. Though nominally a comedy, with a complex farcical plot, it was a verse play with considerable depth to it, and a number of characters who cried out to be brought by music into three dimensions, plus a strong undercurrent of autumnal tragedy, of leaf-fall and apple-fall—precisely the kind of contradictory dramatic mixture which von Hofmannsthal had supplied him with in *The Knight of The Rose*, in *Ariadne at Naxos*, and in *Arabella*.

Alas for von Hofmannsthal, but here was another long-dead playwright who seemed nearly as gifted, and the musical opportunities were immense. There was, for instance, the fire which ended Act II; what a gift for a composer to whom orchestration and counterpoint were as important as air and water! Or take the moment where Perpetua shoots the apple from the Duke's hand; in that one moment a single passing reference could add Rossini's marmoreal *William Tell* to the musical texture as nothing but an ironic footnote! And the Duke's great curtain speech, beginning:

Shall I be sorry for myself? In Mortality's name
I'll be sorry for myself. Branches and boughs,
Brown hills, the valleys faint with brume,
A burnish on the lake. . . .

There was a speech for a great tragic comedian in the spirit of Falstaff: the final union of laughter and tears, punctuated by the sleepy comments of Reedbeck, to whose sonorous snore (trombones, no less than five of them, *con sordini*?) the opera would gently end. . . .

What could be better? And yet he had come upon the play only by the unlikeliest series of accidents. At first he had planned to do a straight knockabout farce, in the idiom of *The Silent Woman*, just to warm himself up. Remembering that Zweig had adapted that libretto for him, in the old days, from a play by Ben Jonson, Strauss had begun to search out English plays of the period just after Jonson's, and had promptly run aground on an

awful specimen in heroic couplets called *Venice Preserv'd*, by one Thomas Otway. The Fry play had directly followed the Otway in the card catalogue, and he had looked at it out of curiosity; why should a twentieth-century playwright be punning on a title from the eighteenth?

After two pages of the Fry play, the minor puzzle of the pun disappeared entirely from his concern. His luck was running again; he had an opera.

Sindi worked miracles in arranging for the performance. The date of the premiere was set even before the score was finished, reminding Strauss pleasantly of those heady days when Fuestner had been snatching the conclusion of *Elektra* off his worktable a page at a time, before the ink was even dry, to rush it to the engraver before publication deadline. The situation now, however, was even more complicated, for some of the score had to be scribed, some of it taped, some of it engraved in the old way, to meet the new techniques of performance; there were moments when Sindi seemed to be turning quite gray.

But *Venus Observed* was, as usual, forthcoming complete from Strauss's pen in plenty of time. Writing the music in first draft had been hellishly hard work, much more like being reborn than had been that confused awakening in Barkun Kris' laboratory, with its overtones of being dead instead, but Strauss found that he still retained all of his old ability to score from the draft almost effortlessly, as undisturbed by Sindi's half-audible worrying in the room with him as he was by the terrifying supersonic bangs of the rockets that bulleted invisibly over the city.

When he was finished, he had two days still to spare before the beginning of rehearsals. With those, furthermore, he would have nothing to do. The techniques of performance in this age were so completely bound up with the electronic arts as to reduce his own experience—he, the master *Kapellmeister* of them all—to the hopelessly primitive.

He did not mind. The music, as written, would speak for itself. In the meantime he found it grateful to forget the months-long preoccupation with the stage for a while. He went back to the library and browsed lazily through

old poems, vaguely seeking texts for a song or two. He knew better than to bother with recent poets; they could not speak to him, and he knew it. The Americans of his own age, he thought, might give him a clue to understanding this America of 2161, and if some such poem gave birth to a song, so much the better.

The search was relaxing, and he gave himself up to enjoying it. Finally he struck a tape that he liked; a tape read in a cracked old voice that twanged of Idaho as that voice had twanged in 1910, in Strauss' own ancient youth. The poet's name was Pound; he said, on the tape:

. . . the souls of all men great
At times pass through us,
And we are melted into them, and are not
Save reflexions of their souls.
Thus I am Dante for a space and am
One François Villon, ballad-lord and thief,
Or am such holy ones I may not write,
Lest Blasphemy be writ against my name;
This for an instant and the flame is gone.
'Tis as in midmost us there glows a sphere
Translucent, molten gold, that is the "I"
And into this some form projects itself:
Christus, or John, or eke the Florentine;
And as the clear space is not if a form's
Imposed thereon,
So cease we from all being for the time,
And these, the masters of the Soul, live on.

He smiled. That lesson had been written again and again, from Plato onward. Yet the poem was a history of his own case, a sort of theory for the metempsychosis he had undergone, and in its formal way it was moving. It would be fitting to make a little hymn of it, in honor of his own rebirth, and of the poet's insight.

A series of solemn, breathless chords framed themselves in his inner ear, against which the words might be intoned in a high, gently bending hush at the beginning . . . and then a dramatic passage in which the great names of Dante and Villon would enter ringing like challenges to Time. . . . He wrote for a while in his notebook before he returned the spool to its shelf.

These, he thought, are good auspices.

And so the night of the premiere arrived, the audience pouring into the hall, the 3-V cameras riding on no visible supports through the air, and Sindi calculating his share of his client's earnings by a complicated game he played on his fingers, the basic law of which seemed to be that one plus one equals ten. The hall filled to the roof with people from every class, as though what was to come would be a circus rather than an opera.

There were, surprisingly, nearly fifty of the aloof and aristocratic mind sculptors, clad in formal clothes which were exaggerated black versions of their surgeons' gowns. They had bought a block of seats near the front of the auditorium, where the gigantic 3-V figures which would shortly fill the "stage" before them (the real singers would perform on a small stage in the basement) could not but seem monstrously out of proportion, but Strauss supposed that they had taken this into account and dismissed it.

There was a tide of whispering in the audience as the sculptors began to trickle in, and with it an undercurrent of excitement, the meaning of which was unknown to Strauss. He did not attempt to fathom it, however; he was coping with his own mounting tide of opening-night tension, which, despite all the years, he had never quite been able to shake.

The sourceless, gentle light in the auditorium dimmed, and Strauss mounted the podium. There was a score before him, but he doubted that he would need it. Directly before him, poking up from among the musicians, were the inevitable 3-V snouts, waiting to carry his image to the singers in the basement.

The audience was quiet now. This was the moment. His baton swept up and then decisively down, and the prelude came surging up out of the pit.

For a little while he was deeply immersed in the always tricky business of keeping the enormous orchestra together and sensitive to the flexing of the musical web beneath his hand. As his control firmed and became secure, however, the task became slightly less demanding, and he was able to pay more attention to what the whole sounded like.

There was something decidedly wrong with it. Of course there were the occasional surprises as some bit of orchestral color emerged with a different *Klang* than he had expected; that happened to every composer, even after a lifetime of experience. And there were moments when the singers, entering upon a phrase more difficult to handle than he had calculated, sounded like someone about to fall off a tightrope (although none of them actually fluffed once; they were as fine a troupe of voices as he had ever had to work with).

But these were details. It was the overall impression that was wrong. He was losing not only the excitement of the premiere—after all, that couldn't last at the same pitch all evening—but also his very interest in what was coming from the stage and the pit. He was gradually tiring, his baton arm becoming heavier; as the second act mounted to what should have been an impassioned outpouring of shining tone, he was so bored as to wish he could go back to his desk to work on that song.

Then the act was over; only one more to go. He scarcely heard the applause. The twenty minutes' rest in his dressing room was just barely enough to give him the necessary strength.

And suddenly, in the middle of the last act, he understood.

There was nothing new about the music. It was the old Strauss all over again—but weaker, more dilute than ever. Compared with the output of composers like Krafft, it doubtless sounded like a masterpiece to this audience. But he knew.

The resolutions, the determination to abandon the old clichés and mannerisms, the decision to say something new—they had all come to nothing against the force of habit. Being brought to life again meant bringing to life as well all those deeply graven reflexes of his style. He had only to pick up his pen and they overpowered him with easy automatism, no more under his control than the jerk of a finger away from a flame.

His eyes filled; his body was young, but he was an old man, an old man. Another thirty-five years of this? Never. He had said all this before, centuries before. Nearly a half century condemned to saying it all over again, in a

weaker and still weaker voice, aware that even this debased century would come to recognize in him only the burnt husk of greatness?—no, never, never.

He was aware, dully, that the opera was over. The audience was screaming its joy. He knew the sound. They had screamed that way when *Day of Peace* had been premiered, but they had been cheering the man he had been, not the man that *Day of Peace* showed with cruel clarity he had become. Here the sound was even more meaningless: cheers of ignorance, and that was all.

He turned slowly. With surprise, and with a surprising sense of relief, he saw that the cheers were not, after all, for him.

They were for Dr. Barkun Kris.

Kris was standing in the middle of the bloc of mind sculptors, bowing to the audience. The sculptors nearest him were shaking his hand one after the other. More grasped at it as he made his way to the aisle and walked forward to the podium. When he mounted the rostrum and took the composer's limp hand, the cheering became delirious.

Kris lifted his arm. The cheering died instantly to an intent hush.

"Thank you," he said clearly. "Ladies and gentlemen, before we take leave of Dr. Strauss, let us again tell him what a privilege it has been for us to hear this fresh example of his mastery. I am sure no farewell could be more fitting."

The ovation lasted five minutes and would have gone another five if Kris had not cut it off.

"Dr. Strauss," he said, "in a moment, when I speak a certain formulation to you, you will realize that your name is Jerom Bosch, born in our century and with a life in it all your own. The superimposed memories which have made you assume the mask, the *persona*, of a great composer will be gone. I tell you this so that you may understand why these people here share your applause with me."

A wave of asserting sound.

"The art of mind sculpture—the creation of artificial personalities for aesthetic enjoyment—may never reach such a pinnacle again. For you should understand that as

Jerom Bosch you had no talent for music at all; indeed, we searched a long time to find a man who was utterly unable to carry even the simplest tune. Yet we were able to impose upon such unpromising material not only the personality, but the genius, of a great composer. That genius belongs entirely to you—to the *persona* that thinks of itself as Richard Strauss. None of the credit goes to the man who volunteered for the sculpture. That is your triumph, and we salute you for it.”

Now the ovation could no longer be contained. Strauss, with a crooked smile, watched Dr. Kris bow. This mind sculpturing was a suitably sophisticated kind of cruelty for this age, but the impulse, of course, had always existed. It was the same impulse that had made Rembrandt and Leonardo turn cadavers into art works.

It deserved a suitably sophisticated payment under the *lex talionis*: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—and a failure for a failure.

No, he need not tell Dr. Kris that the “Strauss” he had created was as empty of genius as a hollow gourd. The joke would always be on the sculptor, who was incapable of hearing the hollowness of the music now preserved on the 3-V tapes.

But for an instant a surge of revolt poured through his bloodstream. *I am I*, he thought. *I am Richard Strauss until I die, and will never be Jerom Bosch, who was utterly unable to carry even the simplest tune.* His hand, still holding the baton, came sharply up, through whether to deliver or to ward off a blow he could not tell.

He let it fall again, and instead, at last, bowed—not to the audience, but to Dr. Kris. He was sorry for nothing, as Kris turned to him to say the word that would plunge him back into oblivion, except that he would now have no chance to set that poem to music.

HORRER HOWCE

BY MARGARET ST. CLAIR (1911-)

GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION
JULY

Margaret St. Clair is yet another underrated writer who produced much excellent work over many years. In her case, much of her finest work is fantasy and hence no longer eligible for inclusion in this series. (We had to drop fantasies when it became clear to us that we had far too much excellent material each year.) As Idris Seabright she wrote some of the very finest whimsical and sometimes horrifying short stories to grace the pages of (mostly) THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. However, she also wrote some fine science fiction, including adventure sf, which can be found in her collections, THREE WORLDS OF FUTURITY (1964), CHANGE THE SKY AND OTHER STORIES (1974), and especially THE BEST OF MARGARET ST. CLAIR (1985). Her introduction to the latter volume is one of the best short accounts of the life and frustrations of a professional writer that I have read.

"Horrer Howce" is every bit as clever as its title. (MHG)

It seems to me that writing stories that are intended to frighten the reader is hard to do. A ghost story is not going to be frightening if the reader is steadfastly skeptical of such things. On the other hand, you might frighten not by the introduction of menaces but by the stretched-out threat of introducing menaces. By introducing suspense, you may successfully discomfort the reader, if not actually frighten him. And sometimes the author is too successful—at least where I am concerned. There are some Cornell

Woolrich novels which I have the greatest difficulty reading simply because I can't endure the assault on my nerves.

Then, of course, there is the fright induced in movies in which disgusting motifs are suddenly introduced or the natural fear of speed or of falling is played upon. (I'm thinking of movies such as Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.) There, after the first shock of fright, the attempt seems to come out the other side, so to speak, and begins to seem funny.

What you want is something that is just horrifying enough and not too horrifying, and my idea of a story that manages to hit that target is "Horror Howce." (IA)

Dickson-Hawes' face had turned a delicate pea green. He closed the shutter on the opening very quickly indeed. Nonetheless, he said in nearly his usual voice, "I'm afraid it's a trifle literary, Freeman. Reminds of that thing of Yeats"—'What monstrous beast, Its time come, uh, round again, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?' But the people who go to a horror house for amusement aren't literary. It wouldn't affect them the way it did me." He giggled nervously.

No answering emotion disturbed the normal sullenness of Freeman's face. "I thought there was a nice feel to it," he said obstinately. "I wouldn't have put so much time in on this stuff unless I thought you'd be interested. Research is more my line. I could have made a lot more money working on one of the government projects."

"You didn't have much choice, did you?" Dickson-Hawes said pleasantly. "A political past is such a handicap, unless one's willing to risk prosecution for perjury."

"I'm as loyal as anybody! For the last five years—eight, ten—all I've wanted to do was make a little cash. The trouble is, I always have such rotten luck."

"Um." Dickson-Hawes wiped his forehead unobtrusively. "Well, about your little effort. There are some nice touches, certainly. The idea of the monstrous womb, alone on the seashore, slowly swelling, and . . ." In the folds of his handkerchief he stifled a sort of cough. "No, I'm afraid it's too poetic. I can't use it, old chap."

The two men moved away from the shuttered opening. Freeman said, "Then Spring Scene is the only one you're taking?"

"Of those of yours I've seen. It's horrid enough, but not too horrid. Haven't you anything else?" Dickson-Hawes' voice was eager, but eagerness seemed to be mixed with other things—reluctance, perhaps, and the fear of being afraid.

Freeman fingered his lower lip. "There's the Well," he said after a moment. "It needs a little more work done on it, but—I guess you could look at it."

"I'd be delighted to," Dickson-Hawes agreed heartily. "I do hope you understand, old man, that there's quite a lot of *money* involved in this."

"Yeah. You've really got the capital lined up? Twice before, you were sure you had big money interested. But the deals always fell through. I got pretty tired of it."

"This time it's different. The money's already in escrow, not to mention what I'm putting in myself. We intend a coast-to-coast network of horror houses in every gayway, playland and amusement park."

"Yeah. Well, come along."

They went down the corridor to another door. Freeman unlocked it. "By the way," he said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your voice down. Some of the machinery in this stuff's—delicate. Sensitive."

"By all means. Of course."

They entered. To their right was an old brick house, not quite in ruin. To the left, a clump of blackish trees cut off the sky. Just in front of them was the moss-covered coping of an old stone well. The ground around the well was slick with moisture.

Dickson-Hawes sniffed appreciatively. "I must say you've paid wonderful attention to detail. It's exactly like being out of doors. It even smells froggy and damp."

"Thanks," Freeman replied with a small, dour smile.

"What happens next?"

"Look down in the well."

Rather gingerly, Dickson-Hawes approached. He leaned over. From the well came a gurgling splash.

Dickson-Hawes drew back abruptly. Now his face was not quite greenish; it was white. "My word, what a monster!" he gasped. "What is it, anyway?"

"Clockwork," Freeman answered. "It'll writhe for thirty-six hours on one winding. I couldn't use batteries, you know, on account of the water. That greenish flash in the

eyes comes from prisms. And the hair is the same thing you get on those expensive fur coats, only longer. I think they call it plasti-mink."

"What happens if I keep leaning over? Or if I drop pebbles down on it?"

"It'll come out at you."

Dickson-Hawes looked disappointed. "Anything else?"

"The sky gets darker and noises come out of the house. Isn't that enough?"

Dickson-Hawes coughed. "Well, of course we'd have to soup it up a bit. Put an electrified rail around the well coping and perhaps make the approach to the well slippery so the customers would have to grasp the handrail. Install a couple of air jets to blow the girls' dresses up. And naturally make it a good deal darker so couples can neck when the girl gets scared. But it's a nice little effort, Freeman, very nice indeed. I'm almost certain we can use it. Yes, we ought to have your Well in our horror house."

Dickson-Hawes' voice had rung out strongly on the last few words. Now there came another watery splash from the well. Freeman seemed disturbed.

"I *told* you to keep your voice down," he complained. "The partitions are thin. When you talk that loud, you can be heard all over the place. It isn't good for the—machinery."

"Sorry."

"Don't let it happen again. . . . I don't think the customers ought to neck in here. This isn't the place for it. If they've got to neck, let them do it outside. In the corridor."

"You have no idea, old chap, what people will do in a darkened corridor in a horror house. It seems to stimulate them. But you may be right. Letting them stay here to neck might spoil the illusion. We'll try to get them on out."

"Okay. How much are you paying me for this?"

"Our lawyer will have to discuss the details," said Dickson-Hawes. He gave Freeman a smile reeking with synthetic charm. "I assure you he can draw up a satisfactory contract. I can't be more definite until I know what the copyright or patent situation would be."

"I don't think my Well could be patented," Freeman said. "There are details in the machinery nobody understands but me. I'd have to install each unit in your

horror-house network myself. There ought to be a clause in the contract about my per-diem expenses and a traveling allowance."

"I'm sure we can work out something mutually satisfactory."

"Uh . . . let's get out of here. This is an awfully damp place to do much talking in."

They went out into the hall again. Freeman locked the door. "Have you anything else?" Dickson-Hawes asked.

Freeman's eyes moved away. "No."

"Oh, come now, old chap. Don't be coy. As I told you before, there's *money* involved."

"What sort of thing do you want?"

"Well, horrid. Though not quite so poetically horrid as what you have behind the shutter. That's a little too much. Perhaps something with a trifle more action. With more customer participation. Both the Well and Spring Scene are on the static side."

"Uh."

They walked along the corridor. Freeman said slowly, "I've been working on something. There's action and customer participation in it, all right, but I don't know. It's full of bugs. I just haven't had time to work it out yet."

"Let's have it, old man, by all means!"

"Not so loud! You've got to keep your voice down. Otherwise I can't take you in." Freeman himself was speaking almost in a whisper. "All right. Here."

They had stopped before a much more substantial door than the one behind which the Well lay. There was a wide rubber flange all around it, and it was secured at top and bottom by two padlocked hasps. In the top of the door, three or four small holes had been bored, apparently to admit air.

"You must have something pretty hot locked up behind all that," Dickson-Hawes remarked.

"Yeah." Freeman got a key ring out of his pocket and began looking over it. Dickson-Hawes glanced around appraisingly.

"Somebody's been writing on your wall," he observed. "Rotten speller, I must say."

Freeman raised his eyes from the key ring and looked in the direction the other man indicated. On the wall oppo-

site the door, just under the ceiling, somebody had written **HORRER HOWCE** in what looked like blackish ink.

The effect of the ill-spelled words on Freeman was remarkable. He dropped the key ring with a clatter, and when he straightened from picking it up, his hands were quivering.

"I've changed my mind," he said. He put the key ring back in his pocket. "I always did have the damndest luck."

Dickson-Hawes leaned back against the wall and crossed his ankles. "How do you get your ideas, Freeman?"

"Oh, all sorts of ways. Things I read, things people tell me, things I see. All sorts of ways." Both men were speaking in low tones.

"They're amazing. And your mechanical effects—I really don't see how you get machinery to do the things you make it do."

Freeman smiled meagerly. "I've always been good at mechanics. Particularly radio and signaling devices. Relays. Communication problems, you might say. I can communicate with anything. Started when I was a kid."

There was a silence. Dickson-Hawes kept leaning against the wall. A close observer, Freeman noticed almost a tic, a fluttering of his left eyelid.

At last Freeman said, "How much are you paying for the Well?"

Dickson-Hawes closed his eyes and opened them again. He may have been reflecting that while a verbal contract is quite as binding as a written one, it is difficult to prove the existence of a verbal contract to which there are no witnesses.

He answered, "Five thousand in a lump sum, I think, and a prorated share of the net admissions for the first three years."

There was an even longer silence. Freeman's face relaxed at the mention of a definite sum. He said, "How are your nerves? I need money so damned bad."

Dickson-Hawes' face went so blank that it would seem the other man had touched a vulnerable spot. "Pretty good, I imagine," he said in a carefully modulated voice. "I saw a good deal of action during the war."

Cupidity and some other emotion contended in Freeman's eyes. He fished out the key ring again. "Look, you

must not make a noise. No yelling or anything like that, no matter what you see. They're very—I mean the machinery's delicate. It's full of bugs I haven't got rid of yet. The whole thing will be a lot less ghastly later on. I'm going to keep the basic idea, make it just as exciting as it is now, but tone it down plenty."

"I understand."

Freeman looked at him with a frown. "Don't make a noise," he cautioned again. "Remember, none of this is real." He fitted the key into the first of the padlocks on the stoutly built door.

The second padlock was a little stiff. Freeman had to fidget with it. Finally he got the door open. The two men stepped through it. They were outside.

There is no other way of expressing it: They were outside. If the illusion had been good in the Well, here it was perfect. They stood in a sort of safety island on the edge of a broad freeway, where traffic poured by in an unending rush eight lanes wide. It was the time of day when, though visibility is really better than at noon, a nervous motorist or two has turned on his parking lights. Besides the two men, the safety island held a new, shiny, eggplant-colored sedan.

Dickson-Hawes turned a bewildered face on his companion. "Freeman," he said in a whisper, "did you *make* all this?"

For the first time, Freeman grinned. "Pretty good, isn't it?" he replied, also in a whisper. He opened the car door and slid into the driver's seat. "Get in. We're going for a ride. Remember, no noise."

The other man obeyed. Freeman started the car—it had a very quiet motor—and watched until a lull in the traffic gave him a chance to swing out from the curb. He stepped on the accelerator. The landscape began to move by.

Cars passed them. They passed some cars. Dickson-Hawes looked for the speedometer on the dashboard and couldn't find it. A garage, a service station, a billboard went by. The sign on the garage read: WE FIX FLATTEDS. The service station had conical pumps. The tomatoes on the billboard were purple and green.

Dickson-Hawes was breathing shallowly. He said, "Freeman—where *are* we?"

Once more, the other man grinned. "You're getting just the effect I mean to give," he retorted in a pleased whisper. "At first, the customer thinks he's on an ordinary freeway, with ordinary people hurrying home to their dinners. Then he begins to notice all sorts of subtle differences. Everything's a little off-key. It adds to the uneasiness."

"Yes, but—what's the object of all this? What are we trying to do?"

"Get home to our dinners, like everyone else."

"Where does the—well, difficulty come in?"

"Do you see that car in the outer lane?" They were still conversing in whispers. "Black, bullet-shaped, quite small, going very fast?"

"Yes."

"Keep your eye on it."

The black car *was* going very fast. It caught up with a blue sedan in front of it, cut in on it and began to crowd it over to the curb. The blue sedan tried to shake off the black car, but without success. If the driver didn't want to be wrecked, he had to get over.

For a while, the two cars ran parallel. The black car began to slow down and crowd more aggressively than ever. Suddenly it cut obliquely in front of the sedan and stopped.

There was a frenzied scream of brakes from the sedan. It stopped with its left fender almost against the black bullet-shaped car. The bodies were so close, there was no room for the sedan driver to open his door.

Freeman had let the car he was driving slow down, presumably so Dickson-Hawes could see everything.

For a moment there was nothing to see. Only for a moment. Then two—or was it three?—long, blackish, extremely thin arms came out from the black car and fumbled with the glass in the window of the sedan. The glass was forced down. The arms entered the sedan.

From the sedan there came a wild burst of shrieking. It was like the flopping, horrified squawks of a chicken at the chopping block. The shrieks were still going on when the very thin arms came out with a—

The light hid nothing. The three very thin arms came out with a plucked-off human arm.

They threw it into the interior of the black car. The three arms invaded the sedan once more.

This time, Dickson-Hawes had turned neither white nor greenish, but a blotchy gray. His mouth had come open all around his teeth, in the shape of a rigid oblong with raised, corded edges. It was perfectly plain that if he was not screaming, it was solely because his throat was too paralyzed.

Freeman gave his passenger only a momentary glance. He was looking into the rearview mirror. He began to frown anxiously.

The shrieking from the blue sedan had stopped. Dickson-Hawes covered his face with his hands while Freeman drove past it and the other car. When the group lay behind them, he asked in a shaking whisper, "Freeman, are there any more of them? The black cars, I mean?"

"Yeah. One of them's coming toward us now."

Dickson-Hawes' head swiveled around. Another of the black cars was hurtling toward them through the traffic, though it was still a long way behind.

Dickson-Hawes licked his lips.

"Is it—after us?"

"I think so."

"But why? Why—us?"

"Part of the game. Wouldn't be horrid otherwise. Hold on. I'm going to try to shake it off."

Freeman stepped down on the accelerator. The eggplant-colored sedan shot ahead. It was a very fast car and Freeman was evidently an expert and nerveless driver. They slid through nonexistent holes in the traffic, glanced off from fenders, slipped crazily from lane to lane, a shuttle in a pattern of speed and escape.

The black car gained on them. No gymnastics. A bulletlike directness. But it was nearer all the time.

Dickson-Hawes gave a sort of whimper.

"No noise," Freeman cautioned in a fierce whisper. "That'll bring them down for sure. *Now!*"

He pressed the accelerator all the way down. The eggplant-colored car bounced and swayed. There was a tinkle of glass from the headlights of the car on the left as the sedan brushed it glancingly. Dickson-Hawes moaned, but realized they had gained the length of several cars. Momentarily, the black pursuer fell behind.

They went through two red lights in a row. So did the black bullet. It began to edge in on them. Closer and closer. Faster and faster.

Dickson-Hawes had slumped forward with his head on his chest. The black car cut toward them immediately.

Freeman snarled. Deliberately, he swung out into the path of the pursuer. For a second, it gave ground.

"Bastards," Freeman said grimly.

The black car cut in on them like the lash of a whip. The sedan slithered. Hub caps grated on concrete. The sedan swayed drunkenly. Brakes howled. Dickson-Hawes, opening his eyes involuntarily for the crash, saw that they were in a safety island. The same safety island, surely, from which they had started out?

The black car went streaking on by.

"I hate those things," Freeman said bitterly. "Damned Voom. If I could— But never mind. We got away. We're safe. We're home."

Dickson-Hawes did not move. "I said we're safe," Freeman repeated. He opened the car door and pushed the other man out through it. Half shoving, half carrying, he led him to the door from which they had entered the freeway. It was still the time of day at which nervous motorists turn on their parking lights.

Freeman maneuvered Dickson-Hawes through the door. He closed it behind them and fastened the padlocks in the hasps. They were out in the corridor again—the corridor on whose wall somebody had written HORRER HOWCE.

Freeman drew a deep breath. "Well. Worked better than I thought it would. I was afraid you'd yell. I thought you were the type that yells. But I guess the third time's the charm."

"What?"

"I mean I guess my goddamn luck has turned at last. Yeah. What did you think of it?"

Dickson-Hawes swallowed, unable to answer.

Freeman regarded him. "Come along to my office and have a drink. You look like you need one. And then you can tell me what you think of this setup."

The office was in the front of the house, down a couple of steps. Dickson-Hawes sank into the chair Freeman

pulled out for him. He gulped down Freeman's dubious reddish bourbon gratefully.

After the second drink he was restored enough to ask, "Freeman, was it real?"

"Certainly not," the other man said promptly.

"It looked awfully real," Dickson-Hawes objected. "That arm . . ." He shuddered.

"A dummy," Freeman answered promptly once more. "You didn't see any blood, did you? Of course not. It was a dummy arm."

"I hope so. I don't see how you could have *made* all the stuff we saw. There's a limit to what machinery can do. I'd like another drink."

Freeman poured. "What did you think of it?"

Color was coming back to Dickson-Hawes' cheeks. "It was the most horrible experience I ever had in my life."

Freeman grinned. "Good. People like to be frightened. That's why roller-coaster rides are so popular."

"Not that much, people don't. Nobody would enjoy a roller-coaster ride if he saw cars crashing all around him and people getting killed. You'll have to tone it down a lot. An awful lot."

"But you liked it?"

"On the whole, yes. It's a unique idea. But you'll have to tone it down about seventy-five percent."

Freeman grimaced. "It can be done. But I'll have to have a definite commitment from you before I undertake such extensive changes."

"Um."

"There are other places I could sell it, you know," Freeman said pugnaciously. "Jenkins of Amalgamated might be interested. Or Silberstein."

"Jenkins lit out with about six thousand of Amalgamated's dollars a couple of months ago. Nobody's seen him since. And they found Silberstein wandering on the streets last week in a sort of fit. Didn't you know? He's in a mental home. You won't be selling either of *them* much of anything."

Freeman sighed, but made no attempt to dispute these distressing facts. "I'll have to have a definite commitment from you before I make that many major changes," he repeated stubbornly.

"Well . . ." Fright and whiskey may have made Dickson-

Hawes a little less cautious than usual. "We could pay you fifty a week for a couple of months while you worked on it, as advance against royalties. If we didn't like the final results, you wouldn't have to give back the advance."

"It's robbery. Apprentice mechanics earn more than that. Make it sixty-five."

"I hate haggling. Tell you what. We'll make it sixty."

Freeman shrugged tiredly. "Let's get it down in black and white. I'll just draw up a brief statement of the terms and you can sign it."

"Well, okay."

Freeman stooped and began to rummage in a desk drawer. Once he halted and seemed to listen. He opened another drawer. "Thought I had some paper. . . . Yeah, here it is." He turned on the desk light and began to write.

Dickson-Hawes leaned back in his chair and sipped at Freeman's whiskey. He crossed his legs and recrossed them. He was humming "Lili Marlene" loudly and off-pitch. His head rested against the wall.

Freeman's pen moved across the paper. "That's about it," he said at last. He was smiling. "Yeah. I—"

There was a splintering crash, the sound of lath and plaster breaking. Freeman looked up from the unsigned agreement to see the last of his entrepreneurs—the last, the indubitable last—being borne off in the long black arms of the Voom.

It was the first time they had gone through the partitions in search of a victim, but the partitions were thin and the unsuccessful chase on the highway had excited them more than Freeman had realized. There has to be a first time for any entity, even for Voom.

Ten full minutes passed. Dickson-Hawes' shrieks died away. The third episode had ended just as disastrously as the earlier two. There wasn't another entrepreneur in the entire U.S.A. from whom Freeman could hope to realize a cent for the contents of his horror house. He was sunk, finished, washed up.

Freeman remained sitting at his desk, motionless. All his resentment at the bad luck life had saddled him with—loyalty oaths, big deals that fell through, chiselers like Dickson-Hawes, types that yelled when the Voom

were after them—had coalesced into an immobilizing rage.

At last he drew a quavering sigh. He went over to the bookcase, took out a book, looked up something. He took out a second book, a third.

He nodded. A gleam of blind, intoxicated vindictiveness had come into his eyes. Just a few minor circuit changes, that was all. He knew the other, more powerful entities were there. It was only a question of changing his signaling devices to get in touch with them.

Freeman put the book back on the shelf. He hesitated. Then he started toward the door. He'd get busy on the circuit changes right away. And while he was making them, he'd be running over plans for the horror house he was going to use the new entities to help him build.

It would be dangerous. So what? Expensive . . . he'd get the money somewhere. But he'd fix them. He'd build a horror house for the beasts that would make them sorry they'd ever existed—A Horrer Howce for the Voom.

COMPOUNDED INTEREST

BY MACK REYNOLDS (1917–1983)

THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION
AUGUST

Mack Reynolds was once voted the favorite author of the readers of GALAXY and IF magazines. This was in the 1960s, and his popularity was not sustained, at least as measured by the number of his books still in print. His was a unique voice in science fiction, because he brought to the field a deep concern with radical politics, having served as a national organizer for the Socialist Labor Party for a number of years and having been active in various capacities on behalf of the democratic left in this country. His socioeconomic speculation therefore had an ideological perspective that was quite rare in American sf during his career. In addition, he was one of the few sf writers to set at least some of his work in the Third World, in particular his very interesting Africa Series—BLACKMAN'S BURDEN; BORDER, BREED NOR BIRTH; and THE BEST YE BREED (1972–1978). He had few illusions about existing socialist experiments, but he never gave up his belief that a more just society was possible.

I personally believe that his former popularity derived more from his ability to write exciting action-adventure stories than from his social ideas. In any event, "Compounded Interest" is typical of his best short fiction, in which he takes an idea, turns it on its head, and sees it through to its "logical" conclusion. (MHG)

I am interested in history. I have written a dozen history books, and I very commonly present science from a his-

torical point of view. In fact, when I was in college, I hesitated over the matter of whether I should do my graduate work in history or in chemistry. I finally decided on chemistry, since I felt that if I studied history I'd be doomed to an academic career, which I didn't think I wanted. So I got my degrees in chemistry and ended up in an academic career, anyway, until I was rescued by the increasing success of my writing.

At any rate, re-reading "Compounded Interest" activated my historic interests, and I watched eagerly for something anachronistic. I didn't find anything of the sort. And while I go out of my way in these introductions not to say anything that might spoil the story, I simply can't resist saying that I loved the double whammy at the end. The time-travel paradox might be anticipated, but the cynical last sentence caught me completely by surprise. (IA)

The stranger said in miserable Italian, "I wish to see Sior Marin Goldini on business."

The concierge's manner was suspicious. Through the wicket he ran his eyes over the newcomer's clothing. "On business, Sior?" He hesitated. "Possibly, Sior, you could inform me as to the nature of your business, so that I might inform his *Zelenza's* secretary, Vico Letta . . ." He let his sentence dribble away.

The stranger thought about that. "It pertains," he said finally, "to gold." He brought a hand from his pocket and opened it to disclose a half dozen yellow coins.

"A moment, *Lustrissimo*," the servant blurted quickly. "Forgive me. Your costume, *Lustrissimo* . . ." He let his sentence dribble away again and was gone.

A few moments later he returned to swing the door open wide. "If you please, *Lustrissimo*, his *Zelenza* awaits you."

He led the way down a vaulted hall to the central court, to the left past a fountain well to a heavy outer staircase supported by Gothic arches and sided by a carved parapet. They mounted, turned through a dark doorway and into a poorly lit corridor. The servant stopped and drummed carefully on a thick wooden door. A voice murmured from within and the servant held the door open and then retreated.

Two men were at a rough-hewn oak table. The older

was heavyset, tight of face and cold, and the other tall and thin and ever at ease. The latter bowed gently. He gestured and said, "His *Zelenza*, the Sior Marin Goldini."

The stranger attempted a clumsy bow in return, said awkwardly, "My name is . . . Mister Smith."

There was a moment of silence which Goldini broke finally by saying, "And this is my secretary, Vico Letta. The servant mentioned gold, Sior, and business."

The stranger dug into a pocket, came forth with ten coins which he placed on the table before him. Vico Letta picked one up in mild interest and examined it. "I am not familiar with the coinage," he said.

His master twisted his cold face without humor. "Which amazes me, my good Vico." He turned to the newcomer. "And what is your wish with these coins, Sior Mister Smith? I confess, this is confusing."

"I want," Mister Smith said, "to have you invest the sum for me."

Vico Letta had idly weighed one of the coins in question on a small scale. He cast his eyes up briefly as he estimated. "The ten would come to approximately forty-nine zecchini, *Zelenza*," he murmured.

Marin Goldini said impatiently, "Sior, the amount is hardly sufficient for my house to bother with. The book-keeping alone—"

The stranger broke in. "Don't misunderstand. I realize the sum is small. However, I would ask but ten percent, and would not call for an accounting for . . . for one hundred years."

The two Venetians raised puzzled eyebrows. "A hundred years, Sior? Perhaps your command of our language . . ." Goldini said politely.

"One hundred years," the stranger said.

"But surely," the head of the house of Goldini protested, "it is unlikely that any of we three will be alive. If God wants, possibly even the house of Goldini will be a memory only."

Vico Letta, intrigued, had been calculating rapidly. Now he said, "In one hundred years, at ten percent compounded annually, your gold would be worth better than seven hundred thousand zecchini."

"Quite a bit more," the stranger said firmly.

"A comfortable sum," Goldini nodded, beginning to

feel some of the interest of his secretary. "And during this period, all decisions pertaining to the investment of the amount would be in the hands of my house?"

"Exactly." The stranger took a sheet of paper from his pocket, tore it in two, and handed one half to the Venetians. "When my half of this is presented to your descendants, one hundred years from today, the bearer will be due the full amount."

"Done, Sior Mister Smith!" Goldini said. "An amazing transaction, but done. Ten percent in this day is small indeed to ask."

"It is enough. And now may I make some suggestions? You are perhaps familiar with the Polo family?"

Goldini scowled. "I know Sior Maffeo Polo."

"And his nephew, Marco?"

Goldini said cautiously, "I understand young Marco was captured by the Genoese. Why do you ask?"

"He is writing a book on his adventures in the Orient. It would be a well of information for a merchant house interested in the East. Another thing. In a few years there will be an attempt on the Venetian government and shortly thereafter a Council of Ten will be formed which will eventually become the supreme power of the republic. Support it from the first and make every effort to have your house represented."

They stared at him and Marin Goldini crossed himself unobtrusively.

The stranger said, "If you find need for profitable investments beyond Venice I suggest you consider the merchants of the Hanse cities and their soon-to-be organized League."

They continued to stare and he said, uncomfortably, "I'll go now. Your time is valuable." He went to the door, opened it himself and left.

Marin Goldini snorted. "That liar, Marco Polo."

Vico said sourly, "How could he have known we were considering expanding our activities into the East? We have discussed it only between ourselves."

"The attempt on the government," Marin Goldini said, crossing himself again. "Was he hinting that our intriguing is known? Vico, perhaps we should disassociate ourselves from the conspirators."

"Perhaps you are right, *Zelenza*," Vico muttered. He

picked up one of the coins again and examined it, back and front. "There is no such nation," he grumbled, "but the coin is perfectly minted." He picked up the torn sheet of paper, held it to the light. "Nor have I ever seen such paper, *Zelenza*, nor such a strange language, although, on closer examination, it appears to have some similarities to the English tongue."

The House of Letta-Goldini was located now in the San Toma district, an imposing structure through which passed the proceeds of a thousand ventures in a hundred lands.

Riccardo Letta looked up from his desk at his assistant. "Then he really has appeared? *Per favore*, Lio, bring me the papers pertaining to the, ah, account. Allow me a matter of ten minutes to refresh my memory and then bring the Sior to me."

The great grandson of Vico Letta, head of the House of Letta-Goldini, came to his feet elegantly, bowed in the sweeping style of his day, said, "Your servant, Sior . . ."

The newcomer bobbed his head in a jerky, embarrassed return of the courtesy, said, "Mister Smith."

"A chair, *Lustrissimo*? And now, pray pardon my abruptness. One's duties when responsible for a house of the magnitude of Letta-Goldini . . ."

Mister Smith held out a torn sheet of paper. His Italian was abominable. "The agreement made with Marin Goldini, exactly one century ago."

Riccardo Letta took the paper. It was new, clean and fresh, which brought a frown to his high forehead. He took up an aged, yellowed fragment from before him and placed one against the other. They matched to perfection. "Amazing, Sior, but how can it be that my piece is yellow with age and your own so fresh?"

Mister Smith cleared his throat. "Undoubtedly, different methods have been used to preserve them."

"Undoubtedly." Letta relaxed in his chair, placed fingertips together. "And undoubtedly you wish your capital and the interest it has accrued. The amount is a sizable one, Sior; we shall find it necessary to call in various accounts."

Mister Smith shook his head. "I want to continue on the original basis."

Letta sat upright. "You mean for another hundred years?"

"Precisely. I have faith in your management, Sior Letta."

"I see." Riccardo Letta had not maintained his position in the cutthroat world of Venetian banking and commerce by other than his own ability. It took him only a moment to gather himself. "The appearance of your ancestor, Sior, has given rise to a veritable legend in this house. You are familiar with the details?"

The other nodded warily.

"He made several suggestions, among them that we support the Council of Ten. We are now represented on the Council, Sior. I need not point out the advantage. He also suggested we investigate the travels of Marco Polo, which we failed to do—but should have. Above all in strangeness was his recommendation that investments be made in the Hanse towns."

"Well, and wasn't that a reasonable suggestion?"

"Profitable, Sior, but hardly reasonable. Your ancestor appeared in the year 1300, but the Hanseatic League wasn't formed until 1358."

The small man, strangely garbed in much the same manner tradition had it the first Mister Smith had appeared, twisted his face wryly. "I am afraid I am in no position to explain, Sior. And now, my own time is limited, and in view of the present size of my investment, I am going to request you have drawn up a contract more binding than the largely verbal one made with the founders of your house."

Riccardo Letta rang a small bell on his desk and the next hour was spent with assistants and secretaries. At the end of that period, Mr. Smith, a sheaf of documents in his hands, said, "And now may I make a few suggestions?"

Riccardo Letta leaned forward, his eyes narrow. "By all means."

"Your house will continue to grow and you will have to think in terms of spreading to other nations. Continue to bank the Hanse cities. In the not too far future a remarkable man named Jacques Coeur will become prominent in France. Bring him into the firm as French representative. However, all support should be withdrawn from him in the year 1450."

Mister Smith stood up, preparatory to leaving. "One

warning, Sior Letta. As a fortune grows large, the jackals gather. I suggest the magnitude of this one be hidden and diffused. In this manner temporary setbacks may be suffered through the actions of this prince, or that revolution, but the fortune will continue."

Riccardo Letta was not an overly religious man, but after the other had left he crossed himself as had his predecessor.

There were twenty of them waiting in the year 1500. They sat about a handsome conference table, representatives of half a dozen nations, arrogant of mien, sometimes cruel of face. Waldemar Gotland acted as chairman.

"Your Excellency," he said in passable English, "may we assume this is your native language?"

Mister Smith was taken aback by the number of them, but, "You may," he said.

"And that you wish to be addressed as Mister Smith in the English fashion?"

Smith nodded. "That will be acceptable."

"Then, sir, if you will, your papers. We have named a committee, headed by Emil de Hanse, to examine them as to authenticity."

Smith handed over his sheaf of papers. "I desired," he complained, "that this investment be kept secret."

"And it has been to the extent possible, Excellency. Its size is now fantastic. Although the name Letta-Goldini is still kept, no members of either family still survive. During the past century, Excellency, numerous attempts have been made to seize your fortune."

"To be expected," Mister Smith said interestedly. "And what foiled them?"

"Principally the number involved in its management, Excellency. As a representative from Scandinavia, it is hardly to my interest to see a Venetian or German corrupt The Contract."

Antonio Ruzzini bit out, "Nor to our interest to see Waldemar Gotland attempt it. There has been blood shed more than once in the past century, *Zelenza*."

The papers were accepted as authentic.

Gotland cleared his throat. "We have reached the point, Excellency, where the entire fortune is yours, and we merely employees. As we have said, attempts have been

made on the fortune. We suggest, if it is your desire to continue its growth”

Mister Smith nodded here.

“. . . that a stronger contract, which we have taken the liberty to draw up, be adopted.”

“Very well, I’ll look into it. But first let me give you my instructions.”

There was an intake of breath and they sat back in their chairs.

Mister Smith said, “With the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, the Venetian power will drop. The house must make its center elsewhere.”

There was a muffled exclamation.

Mister Smith went on: “The fortune is now considerable enough that we can afford to take a long view. We must turn our eyes westward. Send a representative of the fortune to Spain. Shortly, the discoveries in the west will open up investment opportunities there. Support men named Hernando Cortez and Francisco Pizarro. In the middle of the century withdraw our investments from Spain and enter them in England, particularly in commerce and manufacture. There will be large land grants in the new world; attempt to have representatives of the fortune gain some of them. There will be confusion at the death of Henry VIII; support his daughter Elizabeth.

“You will find, as industry expands in the northern countries, that it is impractical for a manufacturer to operate where there are literally scores of saints’ days and fiestas. Support such religious leaders as demand a more, ah, puritanical way of life.”

He wound it up. “One other thing. This group is too large. I suggest that only one person from each nation involved be admitted to the secret of the contract.”

“Gentlemen,” Mister Smith said in 1600, “turn more to manufacture and commerce in Europe, to agriculture, mining and accumulation of large areas of real estate in the New World. Great fortunes will be made this century in the East; be sure that our various houses are first to profit.”

They waited about the conference table in London. The clock, periodically and nervously checked, told them

they had a full fifteen minutes before Mister Smith was expected.

Sir Robert took a pinch of snuff, presented an air of nonchalance he did not feel. "Gentlemen," he said, "frankly I find it difficult to believe the story legend. Come now, after everything has been said, what does it boil down to?"

Pierre Deflage said softly, "It is a beautiful story, *messieurs*. In the year 1300 a somewhat bedraggled stranger appeared before a Venetian banking house and invested ten pieces of gold, the account to continue for a century. He made certain suggestions that would have tried the abilities of Nostradamus. Since then his descendants have appeared each century at this day and hour and reinvested the amount, never collecting a *sou* for their own use, but always making further suggestions. Until now, *messieurs*, we have reached the point where it is by far the largest fortune in the world. I, for instance, am considered the wealthiest man in France." He shrugged eloquently. "While we all know I am but an employee of The Contract."

"I submit," Sir Robert said, "that the story is impossible. It has been one hundred years since our *Mister Smith* has supposedly appeared. During that period there have been ambitious men and unscrupulous men in charge of the Contract. They concocted this fantastic tale for their own ends. Gentlemen, there is no Mister Smith and never was a Mister Smith. The question becomes, shall we continue the farce, or shall we take measures to divide the fortune and each go our own way?"

A small voice from the doorway said, "If you think that possible, sir, we shall have to work still more to make the contract iron-bound. May I introduce myself? You may call me Mister Smith."

In 1800 he said, "You are to back, for twelve years, the adventurer Bonaparte. In 1812 drop him. You are to invest largely in the new nation, the United States. Send a representative to New York immediately. This is to be a century of revolution and change. Withdraw support from monarchy . . ." There was a gasp from around the table. ". . . and support the commercial classes. Back a certain Robert Clive in India. Withdraw all support of Spain in

Latin America. In the American civil war to come, back the North.

"Largely gentlemen, this is to be the century of England. Remember that." He looked away for a moment, off into an unknown distance. "Next century will be different, but not even I know what lies beyond its middle."

After he was gone, Amschel Mayer, representative from Vienna, murmured, "Colleagues, have you realized that at last one of The Contract relics makes sense?"

Lord Windermere scowled at him, making small attempt to disguise his anti-Semitism. "What'd'ya mean by that, sir?"

The international banker opened the heavy box which contained the documents handed down since the day of Goldini. He emerged with a medium-sized gold coin. "One of the original invested coins has been retained all these centuries, my lord."

Windermere took it and read. "The United States of America. Why, confound it, man, this is ridiculous. Someone has been a-pranking. The coin couldn't have existed in Goldini's day; the colonies proclaimed their independence less than twenty-five years ago."

Amschel Mayer murmured, "And the number at the bottom of the coin. I wonder if anyone has ever considered that it might be a date."

Windermere stared at the coin again. "A date? Don't be an ass! One does not date a coin more than a century ahead of time."

Mayer rubbed his beardless face with a thoughtful hand. "More than six centuries ahead of time, my lord."

Over cigars and brandy they went into the question in detail. Young Warren Piedmont said, "You gentlemen have the advantage of me. Until two years ago I knew only vaguely of The Contract in spite of my prominence in the American branch of the hierarchy. And, unfortunately, I was not present when Mister Smith appeared in 1900, as were the rest of you."

"You didn't miss a great deal," Von Borman growled. "Our Mister Smith, who has all of us tied so tightly with The Contract that everything we own, even to this cigar I hold in my hand, is his—our Mister Smith is insignificant, all but threadbare."

"Then there actually is such a person," Piedmont said.

Albert Marat, the French representative, snorted expressively. "Amazingly enough, *messieurs*, his description, even to his clothes, is exactly that handed down from Goldini's day." He chuckled. "We have one advantage this time."

Piedmont frowned. "Advantage?"

"Unbeknown to Mr. Smith, we took a photo of him when he appeared in 1900. It will be interesting to compare it with his next appearance."

Warren Piedmont continued to frown his lack of understanding and Hideka Mitsuki explained. "You have not read the novels of the so clever Mr. H. G. Wells?"

"Never heard of him."

Smith-Winston, of the British branch, said, "To sum it up, Piedmont, we have discussed the possibility that our Mr. Smith is a time traveler."

"Time traveler! What in the world do you mean?"

"This is the year 1910. In the past century science has made strides beyond the conception of the most advanced scholars of 1810. What strides will be made in the next fifty years, we can only conjecture. That they will even embrace travel in time is mind-twisting for us, but not impossible."

"Why fifty years? It will be a full century before—"

"No. This time Mr. Smith informed us that he is not to wait until the year 2000 for his visit. He is scheduled for July 16, 1960. At that time, friends, I am of the opinion that we shall find what our Mr. Smith has in mind to do with the greatest fortune the world has ever seen."

Von Borman looked about him and growled, "Has it occurred to you that we eight men are the only persons in the world who even know The Contract exists?" He touched his chest. "In Germany, not even the Kaiser knows that I directly own—in the name of The Contract, of course—or control possibly two thirds of the corporate wealth of the Reich."

Marat said, "And has it occurred to you that all our Monsieur Smith need do is demand his wealth and we are penniless?"

Smith-Winston chuckled bitterly. "If you are thinking in terms of attempting to do something about it, forget it. For half a millennium the best legal brains of the world

have been strengthening The Contract. Wars have been fought over attempts to change it. Never openly, of course. Those who died did so of religion, national destiny, or national honor. . . . But never has the attempt succeeded. The Contract goes on."

Piedmont said, "To get back to this 1960 appearance. Why do you think Smith will reveal his purpose, if this fantastic belief of yours is correct, that he is a time traveler?"

"It all fits in, old man," Smith-Winston told him. "Since Goldini's time he has been turning up in clothing not too dissimilar to what we wear today. He speaks English—with an American accent. The coins he first gave Goldini were American double-eagles minted in this century. Sum it up. Our Mr. Smith desired to create an enormous fortune. He has done so and I believe that in 1960 we shall learn his purpose."

He sighed and went back to his cigar. "I am afraid I shall not see it. Fifty years is a long time."

They left the subject finally and went to another almost as close to their hearts. Von Borman growled, "I contend that if The Contract is to be served, Germany needs a greater place in the sun. I intend to construct a Berlin-to-Bagdad railroad and to milk the East of its treasures."

Marat and Smith-Winston received his words coldly. "I assure you, monsieur," Marat said, "we shall have to resist any such plans on your part. The Contract can best be served by maintaining the status quo; there is no room for German expansion. If you persist in this, it will mean war and you recall what Mr. Smith prophesied. In case of war, we are to withdraw support from Germany and, for some reason, Russia, and support the allies. We warn you, Borman."

"This time Mr. Smith was wrong," Borman growled. "As he said, oil is to be invested in above all, and how can Germany secure oil without access to the East? My plans will succeed and the cause of The Contract will thus be forwarded."

The quiet Hideka Mitsuki murmured, "When Mr. Smith first invested his pieces of gold I wonder if he realized the day would come when the different branches of his for-

tune would plan and carry out international conflicts in the name of The Contract?"

There were only six of them gathered around the circular table in the Empire State suite when he entered. None had been present at his last appearance, and of them all only Warren Piedmont had ever met and conversed with anyone who had actually seen Mister Smith. Now the octogenarian held up an aged photograph and compared it to the newcomer. "Yes," he muttered, "they were right."

Mister Smith handed over an envelope heavy with paper. "Don't you wish to check these?"

Piedmont looked about the table. Besides himself, there was John Smith-Winston, the second, from England; Rami Mardu, from India; Warner Voss-Richer, of West Germany; Mito Fisuki, of Japan; Juan Santos, representing Italy, France and Spain. Piedmont said, "We have here a photo taken of you in 1900, sir; it is hardly necessary to identify you further. I might add, however, that during the past ten years we have had various celebrated scientists at work on the question of whether or not time travel was possible."

Mister Smith said, "So I have realized. In short, you have spent my money in investigating me."

There was little of apology in Piedmont's voice. "We have faithfully, some of us for all our adult lives, protected The Contract. I will not deny that the pay is the highest in the world; however it is only a *job*. Part of the job consists of protecting The Contract and your interests from those who would fraudulently appropriate the fortune. We spend millions every year in conducting investigations."

"You're right, of course. But your investigations into the possibilities of time travel. . .?"

"Invariably the answer was that it was impossible. Only one physicist offered a glimmer of possibility."

"Ah, and who was that?"

"A Professor Alan Shirey who does his research at one of the California universities. We were careful, of course, not to hire his services directly. When first approached he admitted he had never considered the problem but he became quite intrigued. However, he finally

stated his opinion that the only solution would involve the expenditure of an amount of power so great that there was no such quantity available."

"I see," Mister Smith said wryly. "And following this period for which you hired the professor, did he discontinue his investigations into time travel?"

Piedmont made a vague gesture. "How would I know?"

John Smith-Winston interrupted stiffly. "Sir, we have all drawn up complete accountings of your property. To say it is vast is an understatement beyond even an Englishman. We should like instructions on how you wish us to continue."

Mister Smith looked at him. "I wish to begin immediate steps to liquidate."

"Liquidate!" six voices ejaculated.

"I want cash, gentlemen," Smith said definitely. "As fast as it can be accomplished, I want my property converted into cash."

Warner Voss-Richer said harshly, "Mister Smith, there isn't enough coinage in the world to buy your properties."

"There is no need for there to be. I will be spending it as rapidly as you can convert my holdings into gold or its credit equivalent. The money will be put back into circulation over and over again."

Piedmont was aghast. "But *why*?" He held his hands up in dismay. "Can't you realize the repercussions of such a move? Mister Smith, you must explain the purpose of all this. . . ."

Mister Smith said, "The purpose should be obvious. And the pseudonym of Mister Smith is no longer necessary. You may call me Shirey—Professor Alan Shirey. You see, gentlemen, the question with which you presented me, whether or not time travel was possible, became consumingly interesting. I have finally solved, I believe, all the problems involved. I need now only a fantastic amount of power to activate my device. Given such an amount of power, somewhat more than is at present produced on the entire globe, I believe I shall be able to travel in time."

"But, but *why*? All this, all this . . . cartels, governments, wars . . ." Warren Piedmont's aged voice wavered, faltered.

Mister Smith—Professor Alan Shirey—looked at him

strangely. "Why, so that I may travel back to early Venice where I shall be able to make the preliminary steps necessary for me to secure sufficient funds to purchase such an enormous amount of power output."

"And six centuries of human history," said Rami Mardu, Asiatic representative, so softly as hardly to be heard. "Its meaning is no more than this. . .?"

Professor Shirey looked at him impatiently.

"Do I understand you to contend, sir, that there have been other centuries of human history with more meaning?"

THE DOORSTOP

BY REGINALD BRETNOR (1911-)

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION
NOVEMBER

*Russian-born Reginald Bretnor is the author of **THROUGH SPACE AND TIME WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT** (1962 with revised editions later) and **THE SCHIMMELHORN FILE** (1979), both humorous and wacky collections that are great fun reading. A military historian of some note, his **DECISIVE WARFARE: A STUDY IN MILITARY HISTORY** (1969) and his three science-fiction anthologies, known collectively as **THE FUTURE AT WAR** (1979-1980), contain much interesting factual and speculative material.*

*However, it is as an editor of non-fiction that he has made his major mark in our field, with three landmark books—**MODERN SCIENCE FICTION: ITS MEANING AND ITS FUTURE** (1953), a pioneering collection; **SCIENCE FICTION, TODAY AND TOMORROW** (1974), an update of the first book twenty years later; and **THE CRAFT OF SCIENCE FICTION: A SYMPOSIUM ON WRITING SCIENCE FICTION AND SCIENCE FANTASY** (1976), the first major work of its kind.*

I have always preferred his uncollected sf stories, and "The Doorstop" is both serious and excellent. (MHG)

Until I read your headnote, Marty, I didn't know that Bretnor was born in Russia. That makes two of us now, and here I had thought I was one of a kind.

As a matter of fact, I looked it up and found that he was even more dramatic in his birth than I was. He was born in Vladivostok, Siberia; I was born more prosaically, near

Smolensk. He came to the United States when he was eight; I, when I was only three.

But to the story. There is Enrico Fermi's famous question, "Where is everybody?" By that he meant that if there were other intelligences in the universe, why had none of them ever visited us?

Perhaps, though, there is a question that is even more fundamental. After all, they may have visited us in the past, stood on our planet before we were sophisticated enough to know there were aliens here; or before humanity itself existed. In that case, did they leave nothing, either by design or accident? We've been burrowing in the Earth for thousands of years. "Why haven't we found anything?" (IA)

Dr. Cavaness scarcely heard the metallurgist and the chemist reading their detailed technical reports. He tried to look at them, he tried to fasten his attention on their words. But always his glance drifted, to the square, strong face of the Air Force major general sitting across from him, off to the vast industrial landscape of Detroit framed in the window of the Directors' Room, back to the other faces there—back to the thing, the Doorstop, bronze-bright and dumbbell-shaped, isolated in its bell jar, alone on the polished plain of brown mahogany. And always, refusing discipline, his mind shied from close contact with the here and now, where the Doorstop had undeniable reality, where these men were gathered with their cold answer to the riddle he did not want to solve.

Occasionally a fragment of a phrase came through to him—*And when the oxidation rate . . . as yet unanalyzed . . . a rare-earth compound or—* And every fragment sent his mind to seek a refuge in his memories, to find him pictures of a world gardened with all the good, familiar things, a world safe in the narrow limits set by common sense, a world to which the shadow of the Doorstop could never penetrate.

His mind recalled the moment forty years ago when he and Eleanor had found their first kiss floating on the sweet night air, and shared it, there on the cool brick porch, spontaneously. The stars were close. The friendly stars were winking points of light, as small as glowworms, as near, as intimate. Nightfall created them; at daybreak

they dissolved. And there had been no need to think of them, of what they really were. Not then. Then there had been no Doorstop.

His mind touched fear, and anger at the fear. Immediately it flipped the pages of the past, pages of friends and fishing trips, of midnight calls to childbirth, hypochondria, surgery—pages of precious trials and triumphs and routines. That was his life, the busy hours, the days succeeding days, the months, the seasons, the gently moving years, all encompassed by his family, his patients, and his town. That was his world, expanding rarely to include a little of Detroit; more rarely still, three weeks in California or in Canada; and sometimes, unavoidably, admitting through its walls the harsh awareness of wars abroad, of strange barbarities in stranger lands—of dark realities that had to stay unreal.

The voices in the unreal present lectured on, the chemist first, the metallurgist next, using the long-linked words of their technologies. Dr. Cavaness' mind, escaping them, found him the safety of a day when he was twelve, rising excitedly at dawn, mounting his new red bike, whistling his happy dog, riding green-bordered, unpaved roads out to his uncle's farm. He let himself be drawn into that day: there was the calm white house, the barn, the sunlit hill, and there was Uncle Matt shouting hello at him—and Uncle Matt was going to show him where beavers had built themselves a dam across the creek—and—

The picture vanished. Abruptly, cruelly, he was seventeen, and Uncle Matt was dead. The funeral service in the afternoon, the coffin covered with the flowering earth, the solemn, silent supper afterward—all this was over; he lay awake in bed, sadly and quietly understanding it. Lying there, he thought of how the minister had spoken of eternity. He tried to puzzle out the meaning of the word, tried really hard—and suddenly he seemed to *see* the endless years, innumerable, incomprehensible, receding to a frozen void that strangled sanity. Fear seized him, and anger at the fear, anger at this rude violation of his world by vastnesses less understandable than death. He called on God to drive the mystery out, extinguish it—but God, appallingly, had grown too great, unthinkably remote, as inconceivable as all the wastes of Time. Desperately, then, young Howard Cavaness had wrestled the

idea, thrusting it out beyond the wall again, denying its existence to himself—

The scene receded suddenly, surrendering to another, more vivid, stronger still. It was an autumn night a year ago, cold, crystal-clear; and he and Eleanor were driving home after the show, after a dull main feature and a short or two. One of the shorts had been about astronomy, about the giant telescope at Palmar, how it was built and used, and what it saw. The narrator had spoken of the moon, the sun, the planets near and far, of light that reached the earth in seconds, minutes, hours. He had discussed the nearest stars, a few light-years away; the nearest neighboring galaxies, seen as they were a million years before; the myriad island universes each with its own infinity of suns, stretched to the ends of space, a billion years remote—a thousand million years, each single one of which meant six quadrillion miles. To Dr. Cavaness, the numbers had been words and nothing more. He scarcely thought about them as he drove, leaving the glare of neons far behind, turning into the shadowed, winding road that crossed the hill. Finally they reached the crest. He saw the sky. From end to end, it was alive with light.

Somehow he stopped the car. Just as it had when he was seventeen, the Mystery and its magnitude seized into him. Deep in his soul, his brain, the marrow of his bones, he felt the dreadful distances between the stars.

At the Directors' Table, Dr. Cavaness forced his eyes to open, his clenching hands under its edge to part. Deliberately he forced himself to look around, to see the general's face, the long-familiar face of young Ted Froberg, his onetime partner's son, the listening faces of scientists, engineers, and men from government. Inanely his mind echoed the first comment it had made on his arrival: "Look at the big shots—pretty fast company for a small-town G.P.!" He tried again to laugh a little at himself for having been impressed, and found no laughter. He made his glance move on—on past the Doorstop—discovering with a curious sense of shock that the mineralogist had resumed his seat, and that farther down a different man, a biophysicist from Princeton, was talking now. Immediately his mind shut out the words; immediately it took

him back a week in time, back to his first acquaintance with the Doorstop—when it had been just that and nothing more.

He saw it there again, holding the door ajar as he had seen it then—a twelve-inch dumbbell on a five-inch cone, corroded green as any Roman sword, as any sunken galleon's gun dredged from the sea. He saw the clouded crystal hemispheres at either end, obscured by dust which could not quite obscure two pinpoint brilliancies. Entering, he halted; put his golf clubs down. He felt the strangeness of its lines and curves. Frowning, he pushed it with his foot, finding it heavier than it ought to be. Annoyance rose in him, at Eleanor, cluttering the house with all these antiques.

"Hello?" he called to her. "Ellie, what *is* this thing?"

Her voice replied out of the kitchen, "Did you have a good game, dear? I'm glad you're back for lunch." Drying her hands, she came into the hall. "What thing? Oh, *that*. I got it just today from Mrs. Hobbs. It's . . . well, it's a doorstep." She kissed him. "You don't mind, do you, dear? I only had to pay four-fifty for it, after all."

"Ellie, that's not what I mean. I can see you're *using* it for a doorstep. I mean, what *is* it? What was it meant to be originally?"

She laughed. "Goodness, I don't know. It looks awfully old. Maybe it's something off a sailing ship—one of those things they wrapped the ropes around."

He knelt. He turned it carefully over on its side. "Could be," he said. "Gosh knows it weighs enough. But if it is, what are those two glass ends for, and these holes reaching up into it right next to them? And what's that sort of socket in its base?" Uneasily, the feeling of its strangeness grew on him. Somehow it wasn't *right*. It didn't fit.

Shaking his head, he put the Doorstop back against the door. He rose.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just don't like the thing. It . . . it's *queer*."

"Oh, don't be superstitious." She laughed at him. "Perhaps they got it off a Chinese ship, a junk or something. What difference does it make? Anyhow, now it's just a doorstep."

Taking his arm, she led him off to lunch, where there were other matters to discuss.

After that he had said nothing more about it. Three or four times a day, going in or out, he had paused to look at it, experiencing the same sensation of uneasiness. On each occasion he had shrugged, telling himself that it was hers, that if she liked it that was all right with him.

Then, three evenings later, instantaneously, all this had altered. It was a hot, dull evening under a sweltering sky, and he was waiting for her in the hall. The Doorstop stood against the big front door, holding it open to welcome in any unlikely breeze. The tiny focal points of light at the exact center of its now polished hemisphere gleamed in the curdling dusk. The sun's departure had not diminished them. They shone more brightly than they had before. They shone—

And suddenly, before his eyes, they changed.

They did not move; there was no movement visible. The inner one, the one toward the hall, had disappeared. The other, which had been pointing straight out through the door, was now displaced by forty-five degrees. It pointed outward still, but to the sky.

He saw. For several seconds he did not understand. And then the first chill wave of comprehension struck at him. He had assumed those minute brilliancies to be reflections of the outer light; he had ignored their immobility. They shone where light was not; they were *inside* the hemispheres. They were inside the Doorstop, and part of it, part of its armored and mysterious purposes. It was no simple artifact. Alien to him and strange, it was a mechanism, a machine.

The Doorstop stood there against the door. He stared at it. The questions sounded in his skull. What was it? What was it made to do? Where was it from? The questions and the contradictions hammered him—its thick corrosion, as though it were a thing out of past ages before machines were born; the wrongness of its planes and curving surfaces; the two infinitesimal fires shifting fast as thought. He stood there staring at the Doorstop, and felt an answer stirring in his mind, stirring like something vast and dark and cold beneath the summer surface of the sea. Instantly, angrily, he rejected it.

When Eleanor came down the stairs to join him, he told her nothing. They drove to dinner; they returned; finally they went to bed. And all the while, withdrawn

into himself, he fought the obstinate irrationalities, trying to bend them to familiar shapes, seeking an answer native to his world.

He found it. It lay there ready-made, compounded for him out of the threat of war, out of repeated rumors, tensions, secrecies—the paper perils of the day and year, cocooned in headlines which could be torn and burned and thrown away. In these, he told himself, the Doorstop had had its origin. Men had conceived it. Men had employed the magic of their sciences to give it form and plan its functioning. Somewhere, in the not-yet-believable mythology of arming for destruction and defense, it had its place.

He thought of guarded factories, locked laboratories, of dangerous knowledge, spies and counterspies. The mystery was explained; he was relieved of the necessity for explanation, for doubt, for further thought. The Doorstop was a simple thing, as understandable as friend or enemy, as easily acted on. Whatever knowledge it might yield should either be protected from all eyes or torn from it. He thought of Teddy Froberg, grown up now, an electronics engineer working behind the ramparts of Security. Young Ted would know about the Doorstop; where it belonged; how to dispose of it.

He told himself all this repeatedly; each repetition was a stone to seal the chasm menacing his world, to seal away that other answer still pressing upward to his consciousness. He wrapped himself in certainty. Imagining the military importance of the Doorstop, he let himself enjoy the thrill of touching great affairs. He chuckled at the thought of how surprised young Ted would be. After a time, he slept.

Next morning, after breakfast, he called on Mrs. Hobbs, the antique dealer, and questioned her. Peevishly she assured him that everything in *her* shop was come by honestly, that he was welcome to go right over and ask that Cory boy, who'd sold it to her.

He went right over; and the Cory boy, snatching a four-bit bribe, told him that he had found the Doorstop down near the railroad tracks, half buried in the ground where there had been a sort of fire.

Afterward he drove into Detroit.

At the Directors' Table, Dr. Howard Cavaness recalled how the expression on Ted Froberg's face had changed at the unwrapping of the Doorstop, how he himself had been surprised at that astonishment. He recalled going home and telling Eleanor, too frequently, never to say a word to anyone. He recalled the noncommittal questioners, civilian, military, who had come to them, to Mrs. Hobbs, and to the Cory boy. And he remembered how, during those few days, the shadow of disquiet had attended him, waiting for moments when his guard was down—how it had crept upon him in his sleep, in the cold, drifting dreams where Uncle Matt was dead, and lost, and irretrievable in the immensities of time and space—

Once more, in anger, his mind repelled the thought. Once more it framed his still life of reality, letting him clutch the safety painted there. He felt his forearms press the hard brown wood. He felt the quickened beating of his heart, and frowned. Words reached him, and he raised his head. He knew the voice. He recognized his name.

“ . . . Our gratitude to Dr. Cavaness—”

He looked up to the left, over the bell jar and the Doorstop. Ted Froberg was the speaker now. Tall, seriously intense, he stood behind his chair.

“ . . . who, even though his background isn't technical, recognized the importance of the instrument. I guess I don't need to tell you what a lucky thing *that* was.” He paused. He grinned at Dr. Cavaness. “That's about all,” he said. “If there are any questions, I'll try to answer them.”

Then, gathering his courage in his hands, Dr. Cavaness spoke. “Well, how about it, Ted?” he asked. “Now that you've got it figured out, what *is* that gadget? What country is it from?”

He waited. Only the fall of silence answered him. He saw young Froberg's grin erase itself. He felt the quick, astounded glances gossiping.

“You mean I get three guesses?” He laughed aloud.

And no one echoed him.

There was a whispering round the table; its volume grew; three or four men started to speak at once. Raising his hand, young Froberg quieted them. “Wait,” he said

softly, soberly. "I've known Dr. Cavaness all my life. I think I understand."

He sat down on the table's edge, leaned over toward Dr. Cavaness. "Look, Dr. Howie, let me go over this again. I'll outline it. We don't know what this object is, or what it's for, or even what it's made of—at least, not accurately. They'll probably learn more back East, with their facilities. However, we've found out what it *does*. Believe me, that's enough to hold us for a while."

He was explaining slowly, patiently; and Dr. Cavaness endured the invading words, trying to listen to them separately, to isolate them from their sentences, to quench their meaning before it reached his mind.

Ted Froberg pointed at the Doorstop; he no longer seemed so very young. "When you first brought it to us, we looked it over pretty carefully. We found those two holes in the dumbbell ends—remember them? Well, they're T-shaped. Inside, at each end of the cross, there is a knob. They're cupped and knurled, like push buttons. But they weren't made for fingers, Dr. Howie. Fingers can't get at them. They're for—something else."

Dr. Cavaness forbade the thought to form. Against it he braced the trembling walls that held his world to its perspectives and accustomed measurements. He wiped the perspiration from his palms.

"We pushed the buttons; nothing happened," Froberg said. "We rigged a business to push all four at once—and the whole thing opened up, and there was all this *stuff*. It was beyond us; it made no sense at all. We didn't dare to disassemble anything for fear of wrecking it. We took some specimens, as small as possible. We tried to run analyses, and some of them succeeded. They were unbelievable; we couldn't even guess at physical conditions where manufacturing such materials would be possible."

Dr. Cavaness saw the excitement in his eyes, and shrank from it.

"Our next step followed logically. Those points of light had shifted by themselves. Besides, the socket in the base seemed to contain contact elements. We carried through a series of experiments. We found out that the points of light respond at least to radar frequencies; when you were watching them, they must've picked up a reflection from a plane, and followed it. We also found that, when

this happens, the hemispheres set up a weird sort of field that propagates at half a light-velocity—and that there's something else inside that reacts to gravitational and magnetic gradients. Each of these functions modifies the others, and at the output end they're translated into the damndest wave forms we've seen yet. The oddest part of all is that there simply is *no* source of power."

Dr. Cavaness listened—and in the final fastness of his heart he prayed. Voicelessly, in a despairing language without words, he prayed to a parochial God to make this all untrue, to wipe it out, to let his world remain as it had been. *Oh, God, preserve these small peripheries against all things incomprehensible; I am my world; its limits limit me; allow the stretches of eternity, the darknesses, to stay unreal; oh, God, deny this living proof that life unthinkable teems in those depths and distance, that they exist—*

"Look, Dr. Howie," Froberg cried, "we don't know what they *use* it for—perhaps in navigation, or to direct a weapon of some sort. But we're certain of one thing—and that may be a little hard to take. It wasn't made in any country here; it wasn't even made on Mars or Jupiter. *It's from the stars.*"

Here was the answer, stated and defined. Here was the looming nightmare made real. Here was the naked Universe. Dr. Cavaness saw it. He held it still at bay. For moments out of time, time ceased. His mind turned inward, clawing the substance of his dissolving world, trying to fabricate one last escape. He thought of the corrosion which had encased the Doorstop. He thought of Chinese bronzes, ancient urns, green with their many-centuried burial in the earth. The past had vanished; there was safety in the past—

"Well, anyhow," said Dr. Cavaness, "I guess it's been a long, long time since *they* were here—two or three thousand years. It takes that long to get a chunk of bronze all rusted up like that. At least that long. Ted, doesn't it?"

Ted Froberg looked at him. "It isn't bronze," he said. "That's why we have it in that bell jar there, pumped full of helium, sealed. Maybe corrosion would take all that time, back in *their* atmosphere. But not in ours. *In ours, it took three weeks.*"

And Dr. Cavaness sat silently; he stared straight ahead—facing the majesty of God, facing a new maturity for man, facing the open door.

THE LAST QUESTION

BY ISAAC ASIMOV (1920—)

SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY
NOVEMBER

This story was written by me for a small magazine at their request. My usual terms, in those days, was for top price (four cents a word, then). If they didn't think the story was worth it, I would try to sell it to ASTOUNDING or GALAXY and then, if they didn't buy it, I would send it back to the small magazine for whatever payment they would care to make. I don't recall that any small magazine ever risked it. They always took my stories at once, and that's what SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY did. The result was that the story that turned out to be my favorite story in all the nearly half a century I've been writing did not appear in a major science fiction magazine. But then—I didn't know at the time I wrote it that it was going to be my favorite.

In fact, it wasn't till 1971 that I realized it was my favorite. In that year it was turned into a planetarium show. The story was read to special effects on the planetarium dome, and I went all the way to Rochester, New York to hear and see it done. The effect on the audience—and on me—was tremendous, and it became my favorite at once. Since then it has been shown at planetaria all over the United States and, I am told, always with the same success.

Ordinarily I allow Marty to pick any of my stories for these volumes that he wants to and don't make any suggestions of my own. However, had he not decided to include this story in this volume, I would have violated my princi-

ples by pressing for it. Fortunately he chose it on his own (perhaps because he knew it was my favorite). (IA)

The last question was asked for the first time, half in jest, on May 21, 2061, at a time when humanity first stepped into the light. The question came about as a result of a five-dollar bet over highballs, and it happened this way:

Alexander Adell and Bertram Lupov were two of the faithful attendants of Multivac. As well as any human beings could, they knew what lay behind the cold, clicking, flashing face—miles and miles of face—of that giant computer. They had at least a vague notion of the general plan of relays and circuits that had long since past the point where any single human could possibly have a firm grasp of the whole.

Multivac was self-adjusting and self-correcting. It had to be, for nothing human could adjust and correct it quickly enough or even adequately enough—so Adell and Lupov attended the monstrous giant only lightly and superficially, yet as well as any men could. They fed it data, adjusted questions to its needs and translated the answers that were issued. Certainly they, and all others like them, were fully entitled to share in the glory that was Multivac's.

For decades, Multivac had helped design the ships and plot the trajectories that enabled man to reach the Moon, Mars, and Venus, but past that, Earth's poor resources could not support the ships. Too much energy was needed for the long trips. Earth exploited its coal and uranium with increasing efficiency, but there was only so much of both.

But slowly Multivac learned enough to answer deeper questions more fundamentally, and on May 14, 2061, what had been theory, became fact.

The energy of the sun was stored, converted, and utilized directly on a planet-wide scale. All Earth turned off its burning coal, its fissioning uranium, and flipped the switch that connected all of it to a small station, one mile in diameter, circling the Earth at half the distance of the Moon. All Earth ran by invisible beams of sunpower.

Seven days had not sufficed to dim the glory of it and Adell and Lupov finally managed to escape from the

public function, and to meet in quiet where no one would think of looking for them, in the deserted underground chambers, where portions of the mighty buried body of Multivac showed. Unattended, idling, sorting data with contented lazy clickings, Multivac, too, had earned its vacation and the boys appreciated that. They had no intention, originally, of disturbing it.

They had brought a bottle with them, and their only concern at the moment was to relax in the company of each other and the bottle.

"It's amazing when you think of it," said Adell. His broad face had lines of weariness in it, and he stirred his drink slowly with a glass rod, watching the cubes of ice slur clumsily about. "All the energy we can possibly ever use for free. Enough energy, if we wanted to draw on it, to melt all Earth into a big drop of impure liquid iron, and still never miss the energy so used. All the energy we could ever use, forever and forever and forever."

Lupov cocked his head sideways. He had a trick of doing that when he wanted to be contrary, and he wanted to be contrary now, partly because he had had to carry the ice and glassware. "Not forever," he said.

"Oh, hell, just about forever. Till the sun runs down, Bert."

"That's not forever."

"All right, then. Billions and billions of years. Twenty billion, maybe. Are you satisfied?"

Lupov put his fingers through his thinning hair as though to reassure himself that some was still left and sipped gently at his own drink. "Twenty billion years isn't forever."

"Well, it will last our time, won't it?"

"So would the coal and uranium."

"All right, but now we can hook up each individual spaceship to the Solar Station, and it can go to Pluto and back a million times without ever worrying about fuel. You can't do *that* on coal and uranium. Ask Multivac, if you don't believe me."

"I don't have to ask Multivac. I know that."

"Then stop running down what Multivac's done for us," said Adell, blazing up, "It did all right."

"Who says it didn't? What I say is that a sun won't last forever. That's all I'm saying. We're safe for twenty

billion years; but then what?" Lupov pointed a slightly shaky finger at the other. "And don't say we'll switch to another sun."

There was silence for a while. Adell put his glass to his lips only occasionally, and Lupov's eyes slowly closed. They rested.

Then Lupov's eyes snapped open. "You're thinking we'll switch to another sun when ours is done, aren't you?"

"I'm not thinking."

"Sure you are. You're weak on logic, that's the trouble with you. You're like the guy in the story who was caught in a sudden shower and who ran to a grove of trees and got under one. He wasn't worried, you see, because he figured when one tree got wet through he would just get under another one."

"I get it," said Adell. "Don't shout. When the sun is done, the other stars will be gone, too."

"Darn right they will," muttered Lupov. "It all had a beginning in the original cosmic explosion, whatever that was, and it'll all have an end when all the stars run down. Some run down faster than others. Hell, the giants won't last a hundred million years. The sun will last twenty billion years and maybe the dwarfs will last a hundred billion for all the good they are. But just give us a trillion years and everything will be dark. Entropy has to increase to maximum, that's all."

"I know all about entropy," said Adell, standing on his dignity.

"The hell you do."

"I know as much as you do."

"Then you know everything's got to run down someday."

"All right. Who says they won't?"

"You did, you poor sap. You said we had all the energy we needed, forever. You said 'forever.'"

It was Adell's turn to be contrary. "Maybe we can build things up again someday," he said.

"Never."

"Why not? Someday."

"Ask Multivac."

"Never."

"You ask Multivac. I dare you. Five dollars says it can't be done."

Adell was just drunk enough to try, just sober enough to be able to phrase the necessary symbols and operations into a question which, in words, might have corresponded to this: Will mankind one day without the net expenditure of energy be able to restore the Sun to its full youthfulness even after it had died of old age?

Or maybe it could be put more simply like this: How can the net amount of entropy of the universe be massively decreased?

Multivac fell dead and silent. The slow flashing of lights ceased, the distant sounds of clicking relays ended.

Then, just as the frightened technicians felt they could hold their breath no longer, there was a sudden springing to life of the teletype attached to that portion of Multivac. Five words were printed: INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR MEANINGFUL ANSWER.

"No bet," whispered Lupov. They left hurriedly.

By next morning, the two, plagued with throbbing heads and cottony mouths, had forgotten the incident.

Jerrodd, Jerrodine, and Jerrodette I and II watched the starry picture in the visiplat change as the passage through hyperspace was completed in its nontime lapse. At once, the even powdering of stars gave way to the predominance of a single bright marble-disk, centered.

"That's X-23," said Jerrodd confidently. His thin hands clamped tightly behind his back and the knuckles whitened.

The little Jerrodettes, both girls, had experienced the hyperspace passage for the first time in their lives and were self-conscious over the momentary sensation of inside-outness. They buried their giggles and chased one another wildly about their mother, screaming, "We've reached X-23—we've reached X-23—we've—"

"Quiet, children," said Jerrodine sharply. "Are you sure, Jerrodd?"

"What is there to be but sure?" asked Jerrodd, glancing up at the bulge of featureless metal just under the ceiling. It ran the length of the room, disappearing through the wall at either end. It was as long as the ship.

Jerrodd scarcely knew a thing about the thick rod of metal except that it was called a Microvac, that one asked it questions if one wished; that if one did, it still had its task of guiding the ship to a preordered destina-

tion; of feeding on energies from the various Sub-galactic Power Stations; of computing the equations for the hyperspatial jumps.

Jerrodd and his family had only to wait and live in the comfortable residence quarters of the ship.

Someone had once told Jerrodd that the "ac" at the end of "Microvac" stood for "analog computer" in ancient English, but he was on the edge of forgetting even that.

Jerroddine's eyes were moist as she watched the visiplat. "I can't help it. I feel funny about leaving Earth."

"Why, for Pete's sake?" demanded Jerrodd. "We had nothing there. We'll have everything on X-23. You won't be alone. You won't be a pioneer. There are over a million people on the planet already. Good Lord, our great-grandchildren will be looking for new worlds because X-23 will be overcrowded." Then, after a reflective pause, "I tell you, it's a lucky thing the computers worked out interstellar travel the way the race is growing."

"I know, I know," said Jerroddine miserably.

Jerroddine I said promptly, "Our Microvac is the best Microvac in the world."

"I think so, too," said Jerrodd, tousling her hair.

It *was* a nice feeling to have a Microvac of your own and Jerrodd was glad he was part of his generation and no other. In his father's youth, the only computers had been tremendous machines taking up a hundred square miles of land. There was only one to a planet. Planetary ACs they were called. They had been growing in size steadily for a thousand years and then, all at once, came refinement. In place of transistors, had come molecular valves so that even the largest Planetary AC could be put into a space only half the volume of a spaceship.

Jerrodd felt uplifted, as he always did when he thought that his own personal Microvac was many times more complicated than the ancient and primitive Multivac that had first tamed the Sun, and almost as complicated as Earth's Planetary AC (the largest) that had first solved the problem of hyperspatial travel and had made trips to the stars possible.

"So many stars, so many planets," sighed Jerroddine, busy with her own thoughts. "I suppose families will be going to new planets forever, the way we are now."

"Not forever," said Jerrodd, with a smile. "It will all

stop someday, but not for billions of years. Many billions. Even the stars run down, you know. Entropy must increase."

"What's entropy, daddy?" shrilled Jerrodette II.

"Entropy, little sweet, is just a word which means the amount of running-down of the universe. Everything runs down, you know, like your little walkie-talkie robot, remember?"

"Can't you just put in a new power-unit, like with my robot?"

"The stars *are* the power-units, dear. Once they're gone, there are no more power-units."

Jerrodette I at once set up a howl. "Don't let them, daddy. Don't let the stars run down."

"Now look what you've done," whispered Jerrodine, exasperated.

"How was I to know it would frighten them?" Jerrodd whispered back.

"Ask the Microvac," wailed Jerrodette I. "Ask him how to turn the stars on again."

"Go ahead," said Jerrodine. "It will quiet them down." (Jerrodette II was beginning to cry, also).

Jerrodd shrugged. "Now, now, honeys. I'll ask Microvac. Don't worry, he'll tell us."

He asked the Microvac, adding quickly, "Print the answer."

Jerrodd cupped the strip of thin celluloid and said cheerfully, "See now, the Microvac says it will take care of everything when the time comes so don't worry."

Jerrodine said, "And now, children, it's time for bed. We'll be in our new home soon."

Jerrodd read the words on the celluloid again before destroying it: INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR MEANINGFUL ANSWER.

He shrugged and looked at the visiplat. X-23 was just ahead.

VJ-23X of Lameth stared into the black depths of the three-dimensional, small-scale map of the Galaxy and said, "Are we ridiculous, I wonder, in being so concerned about the matter?"

MQ-17J of Nicron shook his head. "I think not. You know the Galaxy will be filled in five years at the present rate of expansion."

Both seemed in their early twenties, both were tall and perfectly formed.

"Still," said VJ-23X, "I hesitate to submit a pessimistic report to the Galactic Council."

"I wouldn't consider any other kind of report. Stir them up a bit. We've got to stir them up."

VJ-23X sighed. "Space is infinite. A hundred billion Galaxies are there for the taking. More."

"A hundred billion is *not* infinite and it's getting less infinite all the time. Consider! Twenty thousand years ago, mankind first solved the problem of utilizing stellar energy, and a few centuries later, interstellar travel became possible. It took mankind a million years to fill one small world and then only fifteen thousand years to fill the rest of the Galaxy. Now the population doubles every ten years—"

VJ-23X interrupted. "We can thank immortality for that."

"Very well. Immortality exists and we have to take it into account. I admit it has its seamy side, this immortality. The Galactic AC has solved many problems for us, but in solving the problem of preventing old age and death, it has undone all its other solutions."

"Yet you wouldn't want to abandon life, I suppose."

"Not at all," snapped MQ-17J, softening it at once to, "Not yet. I'm by no means old enough. How old are you?"

"Two hundred twenty-three. And you?"

"I'm still under two hundred. But to get back to my point. Population doubles every ten years. Once this Galaxy is filled, we'll have filled another in ten years. Another ten years and we'll have filled two more. Another decade, four more. In a hundred years, we'll have filled a thousand Galaxies. In a thousand years, a million Galaxies. In ten thousand years, the entire known Universe. Then what?"

VJ-23X said, "As a side issue, there's a problem of transportation. I wonder how many sunpower units it will take to move Galaxies of individuals from one Galaxy to the next."

"A very good point. Already, mankind consumes two sunpower units per year."

"Most of it's wasted. After all, our own Galaxy alone

pours out a thousand sunpower units a year and we only use two of those."

"Granted, but even with a hundred percent efficiency, we only stave off the end. Our energy requirements are going up in a geometric progression even faster than our population. We'll run out of energy even sooner than we run out of Galaxies. A good point."

"We'll just have to build new stars out of interstellar gas."

"Or out of dissipated heat?" asked MQ-17J, sarcastically.

"There may be some way to reverse entropy. We ought to ask the Galactic AC."

VJ-23X was not really serious, but MQ-17J pulled out his AC-contact from his pocket and placed it on the table before him.

"I've half a mind to," he said. "It's something the human race will have to face someday."

He stared somberly at his small AC-contact. It was only two inches cubed and nothing in itself, but it was connected through hyperspace with the great Galactic AC that served all mankind. Hyperspace considered, it was an integral part of the Galactic AC.

MQ-17J paused to wonder if someday in his immortal life he would get to see the Galactic AC. It was on a little world of its own, a spider webbing of force-beams holding the matter within which surges of sub-mesons took the place of the old clumsy molecular valves. Yet despite its subetheric workings, the Galactic AC was known to be a full thousand feet across.

MQ-17J asked suddenly of his AC-contact, "Can entropy ever be reversed?"

VJ-23X looked startled and said at once, "Oh, say, I didn't really mean to have you ask that."

"Why not?"

"We both know entropy can't be reversed. You can't turn smoke and ash back into a tree."

"Do you have trees on your world?" asked MQ-17J.

The sound of the Galactic AC startled them into silence. Its voice came thin and beautiful out of the small AC-contact on the desk. It said: THERE IS INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR A MEANINGFUL ANSWER.

VJ-23X said, "See!"

The two men thereupon returned to the question of the report they were to make to the Galactic Council.

Zee Prime's mind spanned the new Galaxy with a faint interest in the countless twists of stars that powdered it. He had never seen this one before. Would he ever see them all? So many of them, each with its load of humanity. But a load that was almost a dead weight. More and more, the real essence of men was to be found out here, in space.

Minds, not bodies! The immortal bodies remained back on the planets, in suspension over the eons. Sometimes they roused for material activity but that was growing rarer. Few new individuals were coming into existence to join the incredibly mighty throng, but what matter? There was little room in the Universe for new individuals.

Zee Prime was roused out of his reverie upon coming across the wispy tendrils of another mind.

"I am Zee Prime," said Zee Prime. "And you?"

"I am Dee Sub Wun. Your Galaxy?"

"We call it only the Galaxy. And you?"

We call ours the same. All men call their Galaxy their Galaxy and nothing more. Why not?"

"True. Since all Galaxies are the same."

"Not all Galaxies. On one particular Galaxy the race of man must have originated. That makes it different."

Zee Prime said, "On which one?"

"I cannot say. The Universal AC would know."

"Shall we ask him? I am suddenly curious."

Zee Prime's perceptions broadened until the Galaxies themselves shrank and became a new, more diffuse powdering on a much larger background. So many hundreds of billions of them, all with their immortal beings, all carrying their load of intelligences with minds that drifted freely through space. And yet one of them was unique among them all in being the original Galaxy. One of them had, in its vague and distant past, a period when it was the only Galaxy populated by man.

Zee Prime was consumed with curiosity to see this Galaxy and he called out: "Universal AC! On which Galaxy did mankind originate?"

The Universal AC heard, for on every world and throughout space, it had its receptors ready, and each

receptor led through hyperspace to some unknown point where the Universal AC kept itself aloof.

Zee Prime knew of only one man whose thoughts had penetrated within sensing distance of Universal AC, and he reported only a shining globe, two feet across, difficult to see.

"But how can that be all of Universal AC?" Zee Prime had asked.

"Most of it," had been the answer, "is in hyperspace. In what form it is there I cannot imagine."

Nor could anyone, for the day had long since passed, Zee Prime knew, when any man had any part of the making of a Universal AC. Each Universal AC designed and constructed its successor. Each, during its existence of a million years or more, accumulated the necessary data to build a better and more intricate, more capable successor in which its own store of data and individuality would be submerged.

The Universal AC interrupted Zee Prime's wandering thoughts, not with words but with guidance. Zee Prime's mentality was guided into the dim sea of Galaxies and one in particular enlarged into stars.

A thought came, infinitely distant but infinitely clear. THIS IS THE ORIGINAL GALAXY OF MAN.

But it was the same after all, the same as any other, and Zee Prime stifled his disappointment.

Dee Sub Wun, whose mind had accompanied the other, said suddenly, "And is one of these stars the original star of Man?"

The Universal AC said, "MAN'S ORIGINAL STAR HAS GONE NOVA. IT IS A WHITE DWARF."

"Did the men upon it die?" asked Zee Prime, startled and without thinking.

The Universal AC said, "A NEW WORLD, AS IN SUCH CASES, WAS CONSTRUCTED FOR THEIR PHYSICAL BODIES IN TIME."

"Yes, of course," said Zee Prime, but a sense of loss overwhelmed him even so. His mind released its hold on the original Galaxy of Man, let it spring back and lose itself among the blurred pinpoints. He never wanted to see it again.

Dee Sub Wun said, "What is wrong?"

"The stars are dying. The original star is dead."

"They must all die. Why not?"

"But when all energy is gone, our bodies will finally die, and you and I with them."

"It will take billions of years."

"I do not wish it to happen even after billions of years. Universal AC! How may stars be kept from dying?"

Dee Sub Wun said in amusement, "You're asking how entropy might be reversed in direction."

And the Universal AC answered: "THERE IS AS YET INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR A MEANINGFUL ANSWER."

Zee Prime's thoughts fled back to his own Galaxy. He gave no further thought to Dee Sub Wun, whose body might be waiting on a Galaxy a trillion light-years away, or on the star next to Zee Prime's own. It didn't matter.

Unhappily, Zee Prime began collecting interstellar hydrogen out of which to build a small star of his own. If the stars must someday die, at least some could yet be built.

Man considered with himself, for in a way, Man, mentally, was one. He consisted of a trillion, trillion, trillion ageless bodies, each in its place, each resting quiet and incorruptible, each cared for by perfect automatons, equally incorruptible, while the minds of all the bodies freely melted one into the other, indistinguishable.

Man said, "The Universe is dying."

Man looked about at the dimming Galaxies. The giant stars, spendthrifts, were gone long ago, back in the dimmest of the dim, far past. Almost all stars were white dwarfs, fading to the end.

New stars had been built of the dust between the stars, some by natural processes, some by Man himself, and those were going, too. White dwarfs might yet be crashed together and of the mighty forces so released, new stars built, but only one star for every thousand white dwarfs destroyed, and those would come to an end, too.

Man said, "Carefully husbanded, as directed by the Cosmic AC, the energy that is even yet left in all the Universe will last for billions of years."

"But even so," said Man, "eventually it will all come to an end. However it may be husbanded, however stretched out, the energy once expended is gone and cannot be restored. Entropy must increase forever to the maximum."

Man said, "Can entropy not be reversed? Let us ask the Cosmic AC."

The Cosmic AC surrounded them but not in space. Not a fragment of it was in space. It was in hyperspace and made of something that was neither matter nor energy. The question of its size and nature no longer had meaning in any terms that Man could comprehend.

"Cosmic AC," said Man, "how can entropy be reversed?"

The Cosmic AC said, "THERE IS AS YET INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR A MEANINGFUL ANSWER."

Man said, "Collect additional data."

The Cosmic AC said, "I WILL DO SO. I HAVE BEEN DOING SO FOR A HUNDRED BILLION YEARS. MY PREDECESSORS HAVE BEEN ASKED THIS QUESTION MANY TIMES. ALL THE DATA I HAVE REMAINS INSUFFICIENT."

"Will there come a time," said Man, "when data will be sufficient or is the problem insoluble in all conceivable circumstances?"

The Cosmic AC said, "NO PROBLEM IS INSOLUBLE IN ALL CONCEIVABLE CIRCUMSTANCES."

Man said, "When will you have enough data to answer the question?"

The Cosmic AC said, "THERE IS AS YET INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR A MEANINGFUL ANSWER."

"Will you keep working on it?" asked Man.

The Cosmic AC said, "I WILL."

Man said, "We shall wait."

The stars and Galaxies died and snuffed out, and space grew black after ten trillion years of running down.

One by one Man fused with AC, each physical body losing its mental identity in a manner that was somehow not a loss but a gain.

Man's last mind paused before fusion, looking over a space that included nothing but the dregs of one last dark star and nothing besides but incredibly thin matter, agitated randomly by the tag ends of heat wearing out, asymptotically, to the absolute zero.

Man said, "AC, is this the end? Can this chaos not be reversed into the Universe once more? Can that not be done?"

AC said, "THERE IS AS YET INSUFFICIENT DATA FOR A MEANINGFUL ANSWER."

Man's last mind fused and only AC existed—and that in hyperspace.

Matter and energy had ended and with it space and time. Even AC existed only for the sake of the one last question that it had never answered from the time a half-drunken computer ten trillion years before had asked the question of a computer that was to AC far less than was a man to Man.

All other questions had been answered, and until this last question was answered also, AC might not release his consciousness.

All collected data had come to a final end. Nothing was left to be collected.

But all collected data had yet to be completely correlated and put together in all possible relationships.

A timeless interval was spent in doing that.

And it came to pass that AC learned how to reverse the direction of entropy.

But there was now no man to whom AC might give the answer of the last question. No matter. The answer—by demonstration—would take care of that, too.

For another timeless interval, AC thought how best to do this. Carefully, AC organized the program.

The consciousness of AC encompassed all of what had once been a Universe and brooded over what was now Chaos. Step by step, it must be done.

And AC said, "LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

And there was light—

STRANGER STATION

BY DAMON KNIGHT (1922-)

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Isacc, I loved this story when I first read it more than thirty years ago, and I still do. You know I'm a nice, caring guy, but I like my aliens without redeeming qualities (well, not always), the kind of fellow they dealt with in the film Alien. The extraterrestrial found in Damon Knight's second contribution to the best of 1956 is just such a swell fellow. (MHG)

Ah, there, Marty, we can't agree on everything. I thought that perhaps we did, but we've come across a quibble here. I always view extraterrestrial aliens as the emotional equivalents of our enemies here on Earth. Here on Earth, we always have the sneaking feeling that our enemies are human beings and may conceivably have human emotions and that keeps us from banging them around the way we really want to. However, if we are dealing with extraterrestrial aliens—why, they are not human and we can vent our spleens all we want. But that, Marty, gives us practice in truly hating our enemies, which gives us a head start on atrocities and genocide.

Sure, I enjoy a really villainous villain as well as anyone (there have never been villains as good as sneering, power-mad Nazis) but my own villains are invariably human beings (either literally or figuratively) who can make out a decent case for themselves. I consider that good practice for the kind of world where it's either compromise or mutual annihilation. Call me crazy, but of the two I prefer compromise. (IA)

The clang of metal echoed hollowly down through the Station's many vaulted corridors and rooms. Paul Wesson stood listening for a moment as the rolling echoes died away. The maintenance rocket was gone, heading back to Home; they had left him alone in Stranger Station.

Stranger Station! The name itself quickened his imagination. Wesson knew that both orbital stations had been named a century ago by the then British administration of the satellite service; "Home" because the larger, inner station handled the traffic of Earth and its colonies; "Stranger" because the outer station was designed specifically for dealings with foreigners . . . beings from outside the solar system. But even that could not diminish the wonder of Stranger Station, whirling out here alone in the dark—waiting for its once-in-two-decades visitor. . . .

One man, out of all Sol's billions, had the task and privilege of enduring the alien's presence when it came. The two races, according to Wesson's understanding of the subject, were so fundamentally different that it was painful for them to meet. Well, he had volunteered for the job, and he thought he could handle it—the rewards were big enough.

He had gone through all the tests, and against his own expectations he had been chosen. The maintenance crew had brought him up as dead weight, drugged in a survival hamper; they had kept him the same way while they did their work, and then had brought him back to consciousness. Now they were gone. He was alone.

. . . But not quite.

"Welcome to Stranger Station, Sergeant Wesson," said a pleasant voice. "This is your alpha network speaking. I'm here to protect and serve you in every way. If there's anything you want, just ask me." It was a neutral voice, with a kind of professional friendliness in it, like that of a good schoolteacher or rec supervisor.

Wesson had been warned, but he was still shocked at the human quality of it. The alpha networks were the last word in robot brains—computers, safety devices, personal servants, libraries, all wrapped up in one, with something so close to "personality" and "free will" that experts were still arguing the question. They were rare and fantastically expensive; Wesson had never met one before.

"Thanks," he said now, to the empty air. "Uh—what do I call you, by the way? I can't keep saying, 'Hey, alpha network.'"

"One of your recent predecessors called me Aunt Nettie," was the response.

Wesson grimaced. Alpha network—Aunt Nettie. He hated puns; that wouldn't do. "The aunt part is all right," he said. "Suppose I call you Aunt Jane. That was my mother's sister; you sound like her, a little bit."

"I am honored," said the invisible mechanism politely. "Can I serve you any refreshments now? Sandwiches? A drink?"

"Not just yet," said Wesson. "I think I'll look the place over first."

He turned away. That seemed to end the conversation as far as the network was concerned. A good thing; it was all right to have it for company, speaking when spoken to, but if it got talkative . . .

The human part of the Station was in four segments: bedroom, living room, dining room, bath. The living room was comfortably large and pleasantly furnished in greens and tans: the only mechanical note in it was the big instrument console in one corner. The other rooms, arranged in a ring around the living room, were tiny; just space enough for Wesson, a narrow encircling corridor, and the mechanisms that would serve him. The whole place was spotlessly clean, gleaming and efficient in spite of its twenty-year layoff.

This is the gravy part of the run, Wesson told himself. The month before the alien came—good food, no work, and an alpha network for conversation. "Aunt Jane, I'll have a small steak now," he said to the network. "Medium rare, with hashed brown potatoes, onions and mushrooms, and a glass of lager. Call me when it's ready."

"Right," said the voice pleasantly. Out in the dining room, the autochef began to hum and cluck self-importantly. Wesson wandered over and inspected the instrument console. Airlocks were sealed and tight, said the dials; the air was cycling. The Station was in orbit, and rotating on its axis with a force at the perimeter, where Wesson was, of one *g*. The internal temperature of this part of the Station was an even seventy-three degrees.

The other side of the board told a different story; all

the dials were dark and dead. Sector Two, occupying a volume some eighty-eight thousand times as great as this one, was not yet functioning.

Wesson had a vivid mental image of the Station, from photographs and diagrams—a five-hundred-foot duralumin sphere, onto which the shallow thirty-foot disk of the human section had been stuck apparently as an afterthought. The whole cavity of the sphere, very nearly—except for a honeycomb of supply and maintenance rooms, and the all-important, recently enlarged vats—was one cramped chamber for the alien . . .

“Steak’s ready!” said Aunt Jane.

The steak was good, bubbling crisp outside the way he liked it, tender and pink inside. “Aunt Jane,” he said with his mouth full, “this is pretty soft, isn’t it?”

“The steak?” asked the voice, with a faintly anxious note.

Wesson grinned. “Never mind,” he said. “Listen, Aunt Jane, you’ve been through this routine—how many times? Were you installed with the Station, or what?”

“I was not installed with the Station,” said Aunt Jane primly. “I have assisted at three contacts.”

“Um. Cigarette,” said Wesson, slapping his pockets. The autochef hummed for a moment, and popped a pack of G.I.’s out of a vent. Wesson lit up. “All right,” he said, “you’ve been through this three times. There are a lot of things you can tell me, right?”

“Oh, yes, certainly. What would you like to know?”

Wesson smoked, leaning back reflectively, green eyes narrowed. “First,” he said, “read me the Pigeon report—you know, from the *Brief History*. I want to see if I remember it right.”

“Chapter Two,” said the voice promptly. “First contact with a non-Solar intelligence was made by Commander Ralph C. Pigeon on July 1, 1987, during an emergency landing on Titan. The following is an excerpt from his official report:

“ ‘While searching for a possible cause for our mental disturbance, we discovered what appeared to be a gigantic construction of metal on the far side of the ridge. Our distress grew stronger with the approach to this construction, which was polyhedral and approximately five times the length of the *Cologne*.

"Some of those present expressed a wish to retire, but Lt. Acuff and myself had a strong sense of being called or summoned in some indefinable way. Although our uneasiness was not lessened, we therefore agreed to go forward and keep radio contact with the rest of the party while they returned to the ship.

"We gained access to the alien construction by way of a large, irregular opening. . . . The internal temperature was minus seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit; the atmosphere appeared to consist of methane and ammonia. . . . Inside the second chamber, an alien creature was waiting for us. We felt the distress which I have tried to describe, to a much greater degree than before, and also the sense of summoning or pleading. . . . We observed that the creature was exuding a thick yellowish fluid from certain joints or pores in its surface. Though disgusted, I managed to collect a sample of this exudate, and it was later forwarded for analysis. . . .

"The second contact was made ten years later by Commodore Crawford's famous Titan Expedition—"

"No, that's enough," said Wesson. "I just wanted the Pigeon quote." He smoked, brooding. "It seems kind of chopped off, doesn't it? Have you got a longer version in your memory banks anywhere?"

There was a pause. "No," said Aunt Jane.

"There was more to it when I was a kid," Wesson complained nervously. "I read that book when I was twelve, and I remember a long description of the alien . . . that is, I remember its being there." He swung around. "Listen, Aunt Jane—you're a sort of universal watchdog, that right? You've got cameras and mikes all over the Station?"

"Yes," said the network, sounding—was it Wesson's imagination?—faintly injured.

"Well, what about Sector Two—you must have cameras up there, too, isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"All right, then you can tell me. What do the aliens look like?"

There was a definite pause. "I'm sorry, I can't tell you that," said Aunt Jane.

"No," said Wesson, "I didn't think you could. You've got orders not to, I guess, for the same reason those

history books have been cut since I was a kid. Now, what would the reason be? Have you got any idea, Aunt Jane?"

There was another pause. "Yes," the voice admitted.

"Well?"

"I'm sorry, I can't—"

"—tell you that," Wesson repeated along with it. "All right. At least we know where we stand."

"Yes, Sergeant. Would you like some dessert?"

"No dessert. One other thing. *What happens to Station watchmen, like me, after their tour of duty?*"

"They are upgraded to Class Seven, students with unlimited leisure, and receive outright gifts of seven thousand stellors, plus free Class One housing. . . ."

"Yeah, I know all that," said Wesson, licking his dry lips. "But here's what I'm asking you. The ones you know—what kind of shape were they in when they left here?"

"The usual human shape," said the voice brightly. "Why do you ask, Sergeant?"

Wesson made a discontented gesture. "Something I remember from a bull session at the Academy. I can't get it out of my head; I know it had something to do with the Station. Just a part of a sentence—'blind as a bat, and white bristles all over.' Now, would that be a description of the alien . . . or the watchman when they came to take him away?"

Aunt Jane went into one of her heavy pauses. "All right, I'll save you the trouble," said Wesson. "You're sorry, you can't tell me that."

"I *am* sorry," said the robot sincerely.

As the slow days passed into weeks, Wesson grew aware of the Station almost as a living thing. He could feel its resilient metal ribs enclosing him, lightly bearing his weight with its own as it swung. He could feel the waiting emptiness "up there" and he sensed the alert electronic network that spread around him everywhere, watching and probing, trying to anticipate his needs.

Aunt Jane was a model companion. She had a record library of thousands of hours of music; she had films to show him, and micro-printed books that he could read on the scanner in the living room; or if he preferred, she

would read to him. She controlled the Station's three telescopes, and on request would give him a view of Earth, or the Moon, or Home. . . .

But there was no news. Aunt Jane would obligingly turn on the radio receiver if he asked her, but nothing except static came out. That was the thing that weighed most heavily on Wesson, as time passed: the knowledge that radio silence was being imposed on all ships in transit, on the orbital stations, and on the planet-to-space transmitters. It was an enormous, almost a crippling handicap. Some information could be transmitted over relatively short distances by photophone, but ordinarily the whole complex traffic of the spacelanes depended on radio.

But this coming alien contact was so delicate a thing that even a radio voice, out here where the Earth was only a tiny disc twice the size of the Moon, might upset it. It was so precarious a thing, Wesson thought, that only one man could be allowed in the Station while the alien was there, and to give that man the company that would keep him sane, they had to install an alpha network. . . .

"Aunt Jane?"

The voice answered promptly, "Yes, Paul."

"This distress that the books talk about—you wouldn't know what it is, would you?"

"No, Paul."

"Because robot brains don't feel it, right?"

"Right, Paul."

"So tell me this—why do they need a man here at all? Why can't they get along with just you?"

A pause. "I don't know, Paul." The voice sounded faintly wistful. Were those gradations of tone really in it, Wesson wondered, or was his imagination supplying them?

He got up from the living room couch and paced restlessly back and forth. "Let's have a look at Earth," he said. Obediently the viewing screen on the console glowed into life: there was the blue Earth, swimming deep below him, in its first quarter, jewel-bright. "Switch it off," Wesson said.

"A little music?" suggested the voice, and immediately began to play something soothing, full of woodwinds.

"No," said Wesson. The music stopped.

Wesson's hands were trembling; he had a caged and frustrated feeling.

The fitted suit was in its locker beside the airlock. Wesson had been topside in it once or twice; there was nothing to see up there, just darkness and cold. But he had to get out of this squirrel cage. He took the suit down and began to get into it.

"Paul," said Aunt Jane anxiously, "are you feeling nervous?"

"Yes," he snarled.

"Then don't go into Sector Two," said Aunt Jane.

"Don't tell me what to do, you hunk of tin!" said Wesson with sudden anger. He zipped up the front of his suit with a vicious motion.

Aunt Jane was silent.

Seething, Wesson finished his check-off and opened the lock door.

The airlock, an upright tube barely large enough for one man, was the only passage between Sector One and Sector Two. It was also the only exit from Sector One; to get here in the first place, Wesson had had to enter the big lock at the "south" pole of the sphere, and travel all the way down inside, by drop hole and catwalk. He had been drugged unconscious at the time, of course. When the time came, he would go out the same way; neither the maintenance rocket nor the tanker had any space, or time, to spare.

At the "north" pole, opposite, there was a third airlock, this one so huge it could easily have held an interplanetary freighter. But that was nobody's business—no human being's.

In the beam of Wesson's helmet lamp, the enormous central cavity of the Station was an inky gulf that sent back only remote, mocking glimmers of light. The near walls sparkled with hoarfrost. Sector Two was not yet pressurized; there was only a diffuse vapor that had leaked through the airseal and had long since frozen into the powdery deposit that lined the walls. The metal rang cold under his shod feet; the vast emptiness of the chamber was the more depressing because it was airless, unwarmed and unlit. *Alone*, said his footsteps; *alone*. . . .

He was thirty yards up the catwalk when his anxiety suddenly grew stronger. Wesson stopped in spite of him-

self, and turned clumsily, putting his back to the wall. The support of the solid wall was not enough. The catwalk seemed threatening to tilt underfoot, dropping him into the lightless gulf.

Wesson recognized this drained feeling, this metallic taste at the back of his tongue. It was fear.

The thought ticked through his head, *They want me to be afraid*. But why? Why now? Of what?

Equally suddenly, he knew. The nameless pressure tightened, like a great fist closing, and Wesson had the appalling sense of something so huge that it had no limits at all, descending, with a terrible endless, swift slowness. . . .

It was time.

His first month was up.

The alien was coming.

As Wesson turned, gasping, the whole huge structure of the Station around him seemed to dwindle to the size of an ordinary room . . . and Wesson with it, so that he seemed to himself like a tiny insect, frantically scuttling down the walls toward safety.

Behind him as he ran, the Station *boomed*.

In the silent rooms, all the lights were burning dimly. Wesson lay still, looking at the ceiling. Up there his imagination formed a shifting, changing image of the alien—huge, shadowy, formlessly menacing.

Sweat had gathered in globules on his brow. He stared, unable to look away.

"That was why you didn't want me to go topside, huh, Aunt Jane?" he said hoarsely.

"Yes. The nervousness is the first sign. But you gave me a direct order, Paul."

"I know it," he said vaguely, still staring fixedly at the ceiling. "A funny thing. . . . Aunt Jane?"

"Yes, Paul?"

"You won't tell me what it looks like, right?"

"No, Paul."

"I don't want to know. Lord, I don't *want* to know. . . . Funny thing, Aunt Jane, part of me is just pure funk. I'm so scared I'm nothing but jelly—"

"I know," said the voice gently.

"—and part is real cool and calm, as if it didn't matter. Crazy, the things you think about. You know?"

"What things, Paul?"

He tried to laugh. "I'm remembering a kids' party I went to twenty . . . twenty-five years ago. I was, let's see, I was nine. I remember, because that was the same year my father died.

"We were living in Dallas then, in a rented mobilehouse, and there was a family in the next tract with a bunch of redheaded kids. They were always throwing parties; nobody liked them much, but everybody always went."

"Tell me about the party, Paul."

He shifted on the couch. "This one, this one was a Halloween party. I remember the girls had on black and orange dresses, and the boys mostly wore spirit costumes. I was about the youngest kid there, and I felt kind of out of place. Then all of a sudden one of the redheads jumps up in a skull mask, hollering, 'C'mon, everybody get ready for hidden-seek.' And he grabs *me*, and says, 'You be it,' and before I can even move, he shoves me into a dark closet. And I hear that door lock behind me."

He moistened his lips. "And then—you know, in the darkness—I feel something hit my *face*. You know, cold and clammy, like, I don't know, something dead. . . .

"I just hunched up on the floor of that closet, waiting for that thing to touch me again. You know? That thing, cold and kind of gritty, hanging up there. You know what it was? A cloth glove, full of ice and bran cereal. A joke. Boy, that was one joke I never forgot. . . . Aunt Jane?"

"Yes, Paul."

"Hey, I'll bet you alpha networks make great psychs, huh? I could lie here and tell you anything, because you're just a machine—right?"

"Right, Paul," said the network sorrowfully.

"Aunt Jane, Aunt Jane. . . . It's no use kidding myself along. I can *feel* that thing up there, just a couple of yards away."

"I know you can, Paul."

"I can't stand it, Aunt Jane."

"You can if you think you can, Paul."

He writhed on the couch. "It's—it's dirty, it's clammy. My God, is it going to be like that for *five months*? I can't, it'll kill me, Aunt Jane."

There was another thunderous boom, echoing down

through the structural members of the Station. "What's that?" Wesson gasped. "The other ship—casting off?"

"Yes. Now he's alone, just as you are."

"Not like me. He can't be feeling what I'm feeling. Aunt Jane, you don't know. . . ."

Up there, separated from him only by a few yards of metal, the alien's enormous, monstrous body hung. It was that poised weight, as real as if he could touch it, that weighed down his chest.

Wesson had been a space dweller for most of his adult life, and knew even in his bones that if an orbital station ever collapsed, the "under" part would not be crushed but would be hurled away by its own angular momentum. This was not the oppressiveness of planetside buildings, where the looming mass above you seemed always threatening to fall: this was something else, completely distinct, and impossible to argue away.

It was the scent of danger, hanging unseen up there in the dark, waiting, cold and heavy. It was the recurrent nightmare of Wesson's childhood—the bloated unreal shape, nō-color, no-size, that kept on hideously falling toward his face. . . . It was the dead puppy he had pulled out of the creek that summer in Dakota . . . wet fur, limp head, cold, cold, *cold*. . . .

With an effort, Wesson rolled over on the couch and lifted himself to one elbow. The pressure was an insistent chill weight on his skull; the room seemed to dip and swing around him in slow, dizzy circles.

Wesson felt his jaw muscles contorting with the strain as he knelt, then stood erect. His back and legs tightened; his mouth hung painfully open. He took one step, then another, timing them to hit the floor as it came upright.

The right side of the console, the one that had been dark, was lighted. Pressure in Sector Two, according to the indicator, was about one and a third atmospheres. The airlock indicator showed a slightly higher pressure of oxygen and argon; that was to keep any of the alien atmosphere from contaminating Sector One, but it also meant that the lock would no longer open from either side. Wesson found that irrationally comforting.

"Lemme see Earth," he gasped.

The screen lighted up as he stared into it. "It's a long

way down," he said. A long, long way down to the bottom of that well. . . . He had spent ten featureless years as a servo tech in Home Station. Before that, he'd wanted to be a pilot, but had washed out the first year—couldn't take the math. But he had never once thought of going back to Earth.

Now, suddenly, after all these years, that tiny blue disk seemed infinitely desirable.

"Aunt Jane, Aunt Jane, it's beautiful," he mumbled.

Down there, he knew, it was spring; and in certain places, where the edge of darkness retreated, it was morning: a watery blue morning like the sea light caught in an agate, a morning with smoke and mist in it; a morning of stillness and promise. Down there, lost years and miles away, some tiny dot of a woman was opening her microscopic door to listen to an atom's song. Lost, lost, and packed away in cotton wool, like a specimen slide: one spring morning on Earth.

Black miles above, so far that sixty Earths could have been piled one on another to make a pole for his perch, Wesson swung in his endless circle within a circle. Yet, fast as the gulf beneath him was, all this—Earth, Moon, orbital stations, ships; yes, the Sun and all the rest of his planets, too—was the merest sniff of space, to be pinched up between thumb and finger.

Beyond—there was the true gulf. In that deep night, galaxies lay sprawled aglitter, piercing a distance that could only be named in a meaningless number, a cry of dismay: O, O, O. . . .

Crawling and fighting, blasting with energies too big for them, men had come as far as Jupiter. But if a man had been tall enough to lie with his boots toasting in the Sun and his head freezing at Pluto, still he would have been too small for that overwhelming emptiness. Here, not at Pluto, was the outermost limit of man's empire: here the Outside funneled down to meet it, like the pinched waist of an hourglass: here, and only here, the two worlds came near enough to touch. Ours—and Theirs.

Down at the bottom of the board now, the golden dials were faintly alight, the needles trembling ever so little on their pins.

Deep in the vats, the vats, the golden liquid was trick-

ling down: "*Though disgusted, I took a sample of the exudate and it was forwarded for analysis. . . .*"

Space-cold fluid, trickling down the bitter walls of the tubes, forming little pools in the cups of darkness; goldenly agleam there, half alive. The golden elixir. One drop of the concentrate would arrest aging for twenty years—keep your arteries soft, tonus good, eyes clear, hair pigmented, brain alert.

That was what the tests of Pigeon's sample had showed. That was the reason for the whole crazy history of the "alien trading post"—first a hut on Titan, then later, when people understood more about the problem, Stranger Station.

Once every twenty years, an alien would come down out of Somewhere, and sit in the tiny cage we had made for him, and make us rich beyond our dreams—rich with life—and still we did not know why.

Above him, Wesson imagined he could see that sensed body a-wallow in the glacial blackness, its bulk passively turning with the Station's spin, bleeding a chill gold into the lips of the tubes: drip, drop.

Wesson held his head. The pressure inside made it hard to think; it felt as if his skull were about to fly apart. "Aunt Jane," he said.

"Yes, Paul." The kindly, comforting voice: like a nurse. The nurse who stands beside your cot while you have painful, necessary things done to you. Efficient, trained friendliness.

"Aunt Jane," said Wesson, "do you know why they keep coming back?"

"No," said the voice precisely. "It is a mystery."

Wesson nodded. "I had," he said, "an interview with Gower before I left Home. You know Gower? Chief of the Outerworld Bureau. Came up especially to see me."

"Yes?" said Aunt Jane encouragingly.

"Said to me, 'Wesson, you got to find out. Find out if we can count on them to keep up the supply. You know? There's fifty million more of us,' he says, 'than when you were born. We need more of the stuff, and we got to know if we can count on it. Because,' he says, 'you know what would happen if it stopped?' Do you know, Aunt Jane?"

"It would be," said the voice, "a catastrophe."

"That's right," Wesson said respectfully. "It would. Like, he says to me, 'What if the people in the Nefud area were cut off from the Jordan Valley Authority? Why, there'd be millions dying of thirst in a week.

"'Or what if the freighters stopped coming to Moon Base. Why,' he says, 'there'd be thousands starving and smothering to death.'

"He says, 'Where the water is, where you can get food and air, people are going to settle and get married, you know? and have kids.'

"He says, 'If the so-called longevity serum stopped coming. . . .' Says, 'Every twentieth adult in the Sol family is due for his shot this year.' Says, 'Of those, almost twenty percent are one hundred fifteen or older.' Says, 'The deaths in that group in the first year would be at least three times what the actuarial tables call for.' " Wesson raised a strained face. "I'm thirty-four, you know?" he said. "That Gower, he made me feel like a baby."

Aunt Jane made a sympathetic noise.

"Drip, drip," said Wesson hysterically. The needles of the tall golden indicators were infinitesimally higher. "Every twenty years we need more of the stuff, so somebody like me has to come out and take it for five lousy months. And one of *them* has to come out and sit there, and *drip*. Why, Aunt Jane? What for? Why should it matter to them whether we live a long time or not? Why do they keep on coming back? What do they take *away* from here?"

But to these questions, Aunt Jane had no reply.

All day and every day, the lights burned cold and steady in the circular gray corridor around the rim of Sector One. The hard gray flooring had been deeply scuffed in that circular path before Wesson ever walked there: the corridor existed for that only, like a treadmill in a squirrel cage; it said "Walk," and Wesson walked. A man would go crazy if he sat still, with that squirming, indescribable pressure on his head; and so Wesson paced off the miles, all day and every day, until he dropped like a dead man in the bed at night.

He talked, too, sometimes to himself, sometimes to the listening alpha network; sometimes it was difficult to tell which. "Moss on a rock," he muttered, pacing. "Told

him, wouldn't give twenty mills for any damn shell. . . . Little pebbles down there, all colors." He shuffled on in silence for a while. Abruptly: "I don't see *why* they couldn't have given me a cat."

Aunt Jane said nothing. After a moment Wesson went on, "Nearly everybody at Home has a cat, for God's sake, or a goldfish or something. You're all right, Aunt Jane, but I can't *see* you. My God, I mean if they couldn't send a man a woman for company, what I mean, my God, I never liked *cats*." He swung around the doorway into the bedroom, and absentmindedly slammed his fist into the bloody place on the wall.

"But a cat would have been *something*," he said.

Aunt Jane was still silent.

"Don't pretend your damn feelings are hurt, I know you, you're only a damn machine," said Wesson. "Listen, Aunt Jane, I remember a cereal package one time that had a horse and a cowboy on the side. There wasn't much room, so about all you saw was their faces. It used to strike me funny how much they looked alike. Two ears on the top with hair in the middle. Two eyes. Nose. Mouth with teeth in it. I was thinking, we're kind of distant cousins, aren't we, us and the horses. But compared to that thing up there—we're *brothers*. You know?"

"Yes," said Aunt Jane quietly.

"So I keep asking myself, why couldn't they have sent a horse, or a cat, *instead* of a man? But I guess the answer is because only a man could take what I'm taking. God, only a man. Right?"

"Right," said Aunt Jane with deep sorrow.

Wesson stopped at the bedroom doorway again and shuddered, holding onto the frame. "Aunt Jane," he said in a low, clear voice, "you take pictures of *him* up there, don't you?"

"Yes, Paul."

"And you take pictures of me. And then what happens? After it's all over, who looks at the pictures?"

"I don't know," said Aunt Jane humbly.

"You don't know. But whoever looks at 'em, it doesn't do any good. Right? We got to find out why, why, why. . . . And we never do find out, do we?"

"No," said Aunt Jane.

"But don't they figure that if the man who's going

through it could see him, he might be able to tell something? That other people couldn't? Doesn't that make sense?"

"That's out of my hands, Paul."

He sniggered. "That's funny. Oh, that's funny." He chortled in his throat, reeling around the circuit.

"Yes, that's funny," said Aunt Jane.

"Aunt Jane, tell me what happens to the watchmen."

". . . I can't tell you that, Paul."

He lurched into the living room, sat down before the console, beat on its smooth, cold metal with his fists. "What are you, some kind of monster? Isn't there any blood in your veins, damn it, or oil or *anything*?"

"Please, Paul—"

"Don't you see, all I want to know, can they talk? Can they tell anything after their tour is over?"

". . . No, Paul."

He stood upright, clutching the console for balance. "They can't? No, I figured. And you know why?"

"No."

"Up there," said Wesson obscurely. "Moss on the rock."

"Paul, what?"

"We get changed," said Wesson, stumbling out of the room again. "We get changed. Like a piece of iron next to a magnet. Can't help it. You—nonmagnetic, I guess. Goes right through you, huh, Aunt Jane? You don't get changed. You stay here, wait for the next one."

". . . Yes," said Aunt Jane.

"You know," said Wesson, pacing, "I can tell how he's lying up there. Head *that* way, tail the other. Am I right?"

"Yes," said Aunt Jane.

Wesson stopped. "Yes," he said intently. "So you *can* tell me what you see up there, can't you, Aunt Jane?"

"No. Yes. It isn't allowed."

"Listen, Aunt Jane, *we'll die* unless we can find out what makes those aliens tick! Remember that." Wesson leaned against the corridor wall, gazing up. "He's turning now—around this way. Right?"

"Well, what else is he doing? Come on, Aunt Jane, tell me!"

A pause. "He is twitching his—"

"What?"

"I don't know the words."

"My God, my God," said Wesson, clutching his head, "of course there aren't any words." He ran into the living room, clutched the console and stared at the blank screen. He pounded the metal with his fist. "You've got to show me, Aunt Jane, come on and show me, show me!"

"It isn't allowed," Aunt Jane protested.

"You've got to do it just the same, or we'll *die*, Aunt Jane—millions of us, billions, and it'll be your fault, get it, *your fault*, Aunt Jane!"

"*Please*," said the voice. There was a pause. The screen flickered to life, for an instant only. Wesson had a glimpse of something massive and dark, but half transparent, like a magnified insect—a tangle of nameless limbs, whiplike filaments, claws, wings. . . .

He clutched the edge of the console.

"Was that all right?" Aunt Jane asked.

"Of course! What do you think, it'll kill me to look at it? Put it back, Aunt Jane, put it back!"

Reluctantly, the screen lighted again. Wesson stared, and went on staring. He mumbled something.

"What?" said Aunt Jane.

"*Life of my love, I loathe thee*," said Wesson, staring. He roused himself after a moment and turned away. The image of the alien stayed with him as he went reeling into the corridor again; he was not surprised to find that it reminded him of all the loathsome, crawling, creeping things the Earth was full of. That explained why he was not supposed to see the alien, or even know what it looked like—because that fed his hate. And it was all right for him to be afraid of the alien, but he was not supposed to hate it. . . . Why not? Why not?

His fingers were shaking. He felt drained, steamed, dried up and withered. The one daily shower Aunt Jane allowed him was no longer enough. Twenty minutes after bathing the acid sweat dripped again from his armpits, the cold sweat was beaded on his forehead, the hot sweat was in his palms. Wesson felt as if there were a furnace inside him, out of control, all the dampers drawn. He knew that under stress, something of the kind did happen to a man: the body's chemistry was altered—more adrenaline, more glycogen in the muscles; eyes brighter, diges-

tion retarded. That was the trouble—he was burning himself up, unable to fight the thing that tormented him, nor run from it.

After another circuit, Wesson's steps faltered. He hesitated, and went into the living room. He leaned over the console, staring. From the screen, the alien stared blindly up into space. Down in the dark side, the golden indicators had climbed: the vats were more than two-thirds filled.

. . . To *fight*, or *run*. . .

Slowly Wesson sank down in front of the console. He sat hunched, head bent, hands squeezed tight between his knees, trying to hold on to the thought that had come to him.

If the alien felt a pain as great as Wesson's—or greater—Stress might alter the alien's body chemistry, too.

Life of my love, I loathe thee.

Wesson pushed the irrelevant thought aside. He stared at the screen, trying to envisage the alien, up there, wincing in pain and distress—sweating a golden sweat of horror. . . .

After a long time, he stood up and walked into the kitchen. He caught the table edge to keep his legs from carrying him on around the circuit. He sat down.

Humming fondly, the autochef slid out a tray of small glasses—water, orange juice, milk. Wesson put the water glass to his stiff lips; the water was cool and hurt his throat. Then the juice, but he could drink only a little of it; then he sipped the milk. Aunt Jane hummed approvingly.

Dehydrated—how long had it been since he had eaten, or drunk? He looked at his hands. They were thin bundles of sticks, ropy-veined, with hard yellow claws. He could see the bones of his forearms under the skin, and his heart's beating stirred the cloth at his chest. The pale hairs on his arms and thighs—were they blond or white?

The blurred reflections in the metal trim of the dining room gave him no answers—only pale faceless smears of gray. Wesson felt light-headed and very weak, as if he had just ended a bout of fever. He fumbled over his ribs and shoulder bones. He was thin.

He sat in front of the autochef for a few minutes more, but no food came out. Evidently Aunt Jane did not think he was ready for it, and perhaps she was right. *Worse for*

them than for us, he thought dizzily. *That's why the Station's so far out; why radio silence, and only one man aboard. They couldn't stand it at all, otherwise. . . .* Suddenly he could think of nothing but sleep—the bottomless pit, layer after layer of smothering velvet, numbing and soft. . . . His leg muscles quivered and twitched when he tried to walk, but he managed to get to the bedroom and fall on the mattress. The resilient block seemed to dissolve under him. His bones were melting.

He woke with a clear head, very weak, thinking cold and clear: *When two alien cultures meet, the stronger must transform the weaker with love or hate.* “Wesson’s Law,” he said aloud. He looked automatically for pencil and paper, but there was none, and he realized he would have to tell Aunt Jane, and let her remember it.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“Never mind, remember it anyway. You’re good at that, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Paul.”

“All right. . . . I want some breakfast.”

He thought about Aunt Jane, so nearly human, sitting up here in her metal prison, leading one man after another through the torments of hell . . . nursemaid, protector, torturer. They must have known that something would have to give. . . . But the alphas were comparatively new; nobody understood them very well. Perhaps they really thought that an absolute prohibition could never be broken.

. . . the stronger must transform the weaker. . . .

I’m the stronger, he thought. *And that’s the way it’s going to be.* He stopped at the console, and the screen was blank. He said angrily, “Aunt Jane!” And with a guilty start, the screen flickered into life.

Up there, the alien had rolled again in his pain. Now the great clustered eyes were staring directly into the camera; the coiled limbs thrashed in pain: the eyes were staring, asking, pleading. . . .

“No,” said Wesson, feeling his own pain like an iron cap, and he slammed his hand down on the manual control. The screen went dark. He looked up, sweating, and saw the floral picture over the console.

The thick stems were like antennae, the leaves tho-

raxes, the buds like blind insect eyes. The whole picture moved slightly, endlessly, in a slow waiting rhythm.

Wesson clutched the hard metal of the console and stared at the picture, with sweat cold on his brow, until it turned into a calm, meaningless arrangement of lines again. Then he went into the dining room, shaking, and sat down.

After a moment he said, "Aunt Jane, does it get worse?"

"No. From now on, it gets better."

"How long?" he asked vaguely.

"One month."

A month, getting "better" . . . that was the way it had always been, with the watchman swamped and drowned, his personality submerged. Wesson thought about the men who had gone before him—Class Seven citizenship, with unlimited leisure, and Class One housing, yes, sure—in a sanatorium.

His lips peeled back from his teeth, and his fists clenched hard. *Not me!* he thought.

He spread his hands on the cool metal to steady them. He said, "How much longer do they usually stay able to talk?"

"You are already talking longer than any of them. . . ."

Then there was a blank. Wesson was vaguely aware, in snatches, of the corridor walls moving past, and the console glimpsed, and of a thunderous cloud of ideas that swirled around his head in a beating of wings. The aliens: what did they want? And what happened to the watchmen in Stranger Station?

The haze receded a little and he was in the dining room again, staring vacantly at the table. Something was wrong.

He ate a few spoonfuls of the gruel the autochef served him, then pushed it away; the stuff tasted faintly unpleasant. The machine hummed anxiously and thrust a poached egg at him, but Wesson got up from the table.

The Station was all but silent. The resting rhythm of the household machines throbbed in the walls, unheard. The blue-lit living room was spread out before him like an empty stage setting, and Wesson stared as if he had never seen it before.

He lurched to the console and stared down at the pictured alien on the screen: heavy, heavy, a-sprawl with

pain in the darkness. The needles of the golden indicators were high, the enlarged vats almost full. *It's too much for him*, Wesson thought with grim satisfaction. The peace that followed the pain had not descended as it was supposed to; no, not this time!

He glanced up at the painting over the console: heavy crustacean limbs that swayed gracefully in the sea. . . .

He shook his head violently. *I won't let it; I won't give in!* He held the back of one hand close to his eyes. He saw the dozens of tiny cuneiform wrinkles stamped into the skin over the knuckles, the pale hairs sprouting, the pink shiny flesh of recent scars. *I'm human*, he thought. But when he let his hand fall onto the console, the bony fingers seemed to crouch like crustaceans' legs, ready to scuttle.

Sweating, Wesson stared into the screen. Pictured there, the alien met his eyes, and it was as if they spoke to each other, mind to mind, an instantaneous communication that needed no words. There was a piercing sweetness to it, a melting, dissolving luxury of change into something that would no longer have any pain. . . . A pull, a calling.

Wesson straightened up slowly, carefully, as if he held some fragile thing in his mind that must not be handled roughly, or it would disintegrate. He said hoarsely, "Aunt Jane!"

She made some responsive noise.

He said, "Aunt Jane, I've got the answer! The whole thing! Listen, now wait—listen!" He paused a moment to collect his thoughts. "*When two alien cultures meet, the stronger must transform the weaker with love or hate. Remember? You said you didn't understand what that meant. I'll tell you what it means. When these—monsters—met Pigeon a hundred years ago on Titan, they knew we'd have to meet again. They're spreading out, colonizing, and so are we. We haven't got interstellar flight yet, but give us another hundred years, we'll get it. We'll wind up out there, where they are. And they can't stop us. Because they're not killers, Aunt Jane, it isn't in them. They're nicer than us. See, they're like the missionaries, and we're the South Sea Islanders. They don't kill their enemies, oh no—perish the thought!*"

She was trying to say something, to interrupt him, but he rushed on. "Listen! The longevity serum—that was a

lucky accident. But they played it for all it's worth. Slick and smooth—they come and give us the stuff free—they don't ask for a thing in return. Why not? Listen.

"They come here, and the shock of that first contact makes them sweat out that golden gook we need. Then, the last month or so, the pain always eases off. Why? Because the two minds, the human and alien, they stop fighting each other. Something gives way, it goes soft, and there's a mixing together. And that's where you get the human casualties of this operation—the bleary men that come out of here not even able to talk human language anymore. Oh, I suppose they're happy—happier than I am!—because they've got something big and wonderful inside 'em. Something that you and I can't even understand. But if you took them and put them together again with the aliens who spent time here, *they could all live together—they're adapted.*

"That's what they're aiming for!" He struck the console with his fist. "Not now—but a hundred, two hundred years from now! When we start expanding out to the stars—when we go a-conquering—we'll have already been conquered! Not by weapons, Aunt Jane, not by hate—by love! Yes, love! *Dirty, stinking, low-down, sneaking love!*"

Aunt Jane said something, a long sentence, in a high, anxious voice.

"What?" said Wesson irritably. He couldn't understand a word.

Aunt Jane was silent. "What, what?" Wesson demanded, pounding the console. "Have you got it through your tin head or not? *What?*"

Aunt Jane said something else, tonelessly. Once more, Wesson could not make out a single word.

He stood frozen. Warm tears started suddenly out of his eyes. "Aunt Jane—" he said. He remembered, *You are already talking longer than any of them.* Too late? Too late? He tensed, then whirled and sprang to the closet where the paper books were kept. He opened the first one his hand struck.

The black letters were alien squiggles on the page, little humped shapes, without meaning.

The tears were coming faster, he couldn't stop them:

tears of weariness, tears of frustration, tears of hate. "Aunt Jane!" he roared.

But it was no good. The curtain of silence had come down over his head. He was one of the vanguard—the conquered men, the ones who would get along with their strange brothers, out among the alien stars.

The console was not working anymore; nothing worked when he wanted it. Wesson squatted in the shower stall, naked, with a soup bowl in his hands. Water droplets glistened on his hands and forearms; the pale short hairs were just springing up, drying.

The silvery skin of reflection in the bowl gave him back nothing but a silhouette, a shadow man's outline. He could not see his face.

He dropped the bowl and went across the living room, shuffling the pale drifts of paper underfoot. The black lines on the paper, when his eye happened to light on them, were worm shapes, crawling things, conveying nothing. He rolled slightly in his walk; his eyes were glazed. His head twitched, every now and then, sketching a useless motion to avoid pain.

Once the bureau chief, Gower, came to stand in his way. "You fool," he said, his face contorted in anger, "you were supposed to go on to the end, like the rest. Now look what you've done!"

"I found out, didn't I?" Wesson mumbled, and as he brushed the man aside like a cobweb, the pain suddenly grew more intense. Wesson clasped his head in his hands with a grunt, and rocked to and fro a moment, uselessly, before he straightened and went on. The pain was coming in waves now, so tall that at their peak his vision dimmed out, violet, then gray.

It couldn't go on much longer. Something had to burst.

He paused at the bloody place and slapped the metal with his palm, making the sound ring dully up into the frame of the Station: *rroom, rroom*.

Faintly an echo came back: *boo-oom*.

Wesson kept going, smiling a faint and meaningless smile. He was only marking time now, waiting. Something was about to happen.

The kitchen doorway sprouted a sudden sill and tripped

him. He fell heavily, sliding on the floor, and lay without moving beneath the slick gleam of the autochef.

The pressure was too great: the autochef's clucking was swallowed up in the ringing pressure, and the tall gray walls buckled slowly in. . . .

The Station lurched.

Wesson felt it through his chest, palms, knees and elbows: the floor was plucked away for an instant and then swung back.

The pain in his skull relaxed its grip a little. Wesson tried to get to his feet.

There was an electric silence in the Station. On the second try, he got up and leaned his back against a wall. *Cluck*, said the autochef suddenly, hysterically, and the vent popped open, but nothing came out.

He listened, straining to hear. What?

The Station bounced beneath him, making his feet jump like a puppet's; the wall slapped his back hard, shuddered and was still; but far off through the metal cage came a long angry groan of metal, echoing, diminishing, dying. Then silence again.

The Station held its breath. All the myriad clickings and pulses in the walls were suspended; in the empty rooms the lights burned with a yellow glare, and the air hung stagnant and still. The console lights in the living room glowed like witchfires. Water in the dropped bowl, at the bottom of the shower stall, shone like quicksilver, waiting.

The third shock came. Wesson found himself on his hands and knees, the jolt still tingling in the bones of his body, staring at the floor. The sound that filled the room ebbed away slowly and ran down into the silences: a resonant metallic sound, shuddering away now along the girders and hull plates, rattling tinnily into bolts and fittings, diminishing, noiseless, gone. The silence pressed down again.

The floor leaped painfully under his body: one great resonant blow that shook him from head to foot.

A muted echo of that blow came a few seconds later, as if the shock had traveled across the Station and back.

The bed, Wesson thought, and scrambled on hands and knees through the doorway, along a floor curiously tilted, until he reached the rubbery block.

The room burst visibly upward around him, squeezing the block flat. It dropped back as violently, leaving Wesson bouncing helplessly on the mattress, his limbs flying. It came to rest, in a long reluctant groan of metal.

Wesson rolled up on one elbow, thinking incoherently, *Air, the airlock*. Another blow slammed him down into the mattress, pinched his lungs shut, while the room danced grotesquely over his head. Gasping for breath in the ringing silence, Wesson felt a slow icy chill rolling toward him across the room . . . and there was a pungent smell in the air. *Ammonia!* he thought; and the odorless, smothering methane with it.

His cell was breached. The burst membrane was fatal: the alien's atmosphere would kill him.

Wesson surged to his feet. The next shock caught him off-balance, dashed him to the floor. He arose again, dazed and limping; he was still thinking confusedly, *The airlock, get out*.

When he was halfway to the door, all the ceiling lights went out at once. The darkness was like a blanket around his head. It was bitter cold now in the room and the pungent smell was sharper. Coughing, Wesson hurried forward. The floor lurched under his feet.

Only the golden indicators burned now: full to the top, the deep vats brimming, golden-lipped, gravid, a month before the time. Wesson shuddered.

Water spurted in the bathroom, hissing steadily on the tiles, rattling in the plastic bowl at the bottom of the shower stall. The lights winked on and off again. In the dining room, he heard the autochef clucking and sighing. The freezing wind blew harder: he was numb with cold to the hips. It seemed to Wesson abruptly that he was not at the top of the sky at all, but down, *down* at the bottom of the sea . . . trapped in this steel bubble, while the dark poured in.

The pain in his head was gone, as if it had never been there, and he understood what that meant: Up there, the great body was hanging like butcher's carrion in the darkness. Its death struggles were over, the damage done.

Wesson gathered a desperate breath, shouted, "Help me! The alien's dead! He kicked the Station apart—the methane's coming in! Get help, do you hear me? *Do you hear me?*"

Silence. In the smothering blackness, he remembered: *She can't understand me anymore. Even if she's alive.*

He turned, making an animal noise in his throat. He groped his way on around the room, past the second doorway. Behind the walls, something was dripping with a slow cold tinkle and splash, a forlorn night sound. Small, hard, floating things rapped against his legs. Then he touched a smooth curve of metal: the airlock.

Eagerly he pushed his feeble weight against the door. It didn't move. Cold air was rushing out around the door frame, a thin knife-cold stream, but the door itself was jammed tight.

The suit! He should have thought of that before. If he just had some pure air to breathe, and a little warmth in his fingers . . . But the door of the suit locker would not move, either. The ceiling must have buckled.

And that was the end, he thought, bewildered. There were no more ways out. But there *had* to be— He pounded on the door until his arms would not lift anymore; it did not move. Leaning against the chill metal, he saw a single light blink on overhead.

The room was a wild place of black shadows and swimming shapes—the book leaves, fluttering and darting in the airstream. Schools of them beat wildly at the walls, curling over, baffled, trying again; others were swooping around the outer corridor, around and around: he could see them whirling past the doorways, dreamlike, a white drift of silent paper in the darkness.

The acrid smell was harsher in his nostrils. Wesson choked, groping his way to the console again. He pounded it with his open hand, crying weakly: he wanted to see Earth.

But when the little square of brightness leaped up, it was the dead body of the alien that Wesson saw.

It hung motionless in the cavity of the Station, limbs dangling stiff and still, eyes dull. The last turn of the screw had been too much for it; but Wesson had survived. . . .

For a few minutes.

The dead alien face mocked him; a whisper of memory floated into his mind: *We might have been brothers.* . . . All at once Wesson passionately wanted to believe it—wanted to give in, turn back. That passed. Wearily he let himself sag into the bitter *now*, thinking with thin defi-

ance, It's done—hate wins. You'll have to stop this big giveaway—can't risk this happening again. And we'll hate you for that—and when we get out to the stars—

The world was swimming numbly away out of reach. He felt the last fit of coughing take his body, as if it were happening to someone else besides him.

The last fluttering leaves of paper came to rest. There was a long silence in the drowned room.

Then:

“Paul,” said the voice of the mechanical woman brokenly; “Paul,” it said again, with the hopelessness of lost, unknown, impossible love.

2066: ELECTION DAY

BY MICHAEL SHAARA (1929-)

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION
DECEMBER

Michael Shaara is the only winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction to have regularly appeared in the science fiction magazines (am I right about this, Isaac?), an honor he received for THE KILLER ANGELS (1974), his wonderful novel of the Civil War. The great bulk of his sf was published in the 1950s and early 1960s, and most of the best of it can be found in his collection SOLDIER BOY (1982), including the excellent "Grenville's Planet." THE HERALD (1981) is science fiction but was not published as such.

"2066: Election Day" is an excellent representative of social science fiction speculation at its best, and along with such stories as Isaac's "Franchise," and Robert Heinlein's "Beyond Doubt," is part of a small but important group of sf stories about electoral politics. There is a presidential election next year (as I write this) and perhaps some thought should be given to adopting the system set forth in this story—but then again, you might not feel that way after reading it. (MHG)

If there is another sf writer who has won a Pulitzer Prize, I'm not aware of it. Of course, Carl Sagan won a Pulitzer Prize, but he's only written a single science fiction novel, and he won the Prize for his nonfiction. No one, as far as I know, has won a Pulitzer Prize for an actual science fiction novel (and before you say anything—I know quite well that if anyone ever does, it won't be I).

The implication in "2066: Election Day" as well as in

my "Evitable Conflict," written in 1949, is that there will come a time when no human being will be able to govern the United States (let alone the world). The job will simply be too complex. For a while in recent years we thought (or at least some of us did) that Ronald Reagan was proving the opposite, but we now see (as I always saw) that he found the job easy because he just didn't do it.

Incidentally, the year 2066 is not a presidential election year. That comes only in those years whose number is evenly divisible by four, as 1980, 1984, and 1988 are. They are always leap years, except (three times out of four) when they end in 00. The year 2000 will be a leap year and a presidential election year, but the year 1900 was not a leap year but was still a presidential election year. The year 2066 (which, divided by four, yields 516 with 2 left over) is neither an election year nor a leap year. I just thought you'd like to know. Of course, there might be a Constitutional amendment, but I hope not. (IA)

Early that afternoon Professor Larkin crossed the river into Washington, a thing he always did on Election Day, and sat for a long while in the Polls. It was still called the Polls, in this year 2066 A.D., although what went on inside bore no relation at all to the elections of primitive American history. The Polls was now a single enormous building which rose out of the green fields where the ancient Pentagon had once stood. There was only one of its kind in Washington, only one Polling Place in each of the forty-eight states, but since few visited the Polls nowadays, no more were needed.

In the lobby of the building, a great hall was reserved for visitors. Here you could sit and watch the many-colored lights dancing and flickering on the huge panels above, listen to the weird but strangely soothing hum and click of the vast central machine. Professor Larkin chose a deep soft chair near the long line of booths and sat down. He sat for a long while smoking his pipe, watching the people go in and out of the booths with strained, anxious looks on their faces.

Professor Larkin was a lean, boyish-faced man in his late forties. With the pipe in his hand he looked much more serious and sedate than he normally felt, and it often bothered him that people were able to guess his

profession almost instantly. He had a vague idea that it was not becoming to look like a college professor, and he often tried to change his appearance—a loud tie here, a sport coat there—but it never seemed to make any difference. He remained what he was, easily identifiable, Professor Harry L. (Lloyd) Larkin, Ph.D., Dean of the Political Science Department at a small but competent college just outside of Washington.

It was his interest in Political Science which drew him regularly to the Polls at every election. Here he could sit and feel the flow of American history in the making, and recognize, as he did now, perennial candidates for the presidency. Smiling, he watched a little old lady dressed in pink, very tiny and very fussy, flit doggedly from booth to booth. Evidently her test marks had not been very good. She was clutching her papers tightly in a black-gloved hand, and there was a look of prim irritation on her face. But *she* knew how to run this country, by George, and one of these days *she* would be President. Harry Larkin chuckled.

But it did prove one thing. The great American dream was still intact. The tests were open to all. And anyone could still grow up to be President of the United States.

Sitting back in his chair, Harry Larkin remembered his own childhood, how the great battle had started. There were examinations for everything in those days—you could not get a job streetcleaning without taking a civil-service examination—but public office needed no qualification at all. And first the psychologists, then the newspapers, had begun calling it a national disgrace. And, considering the caliber of some of the men who went into public office, it *was* a national disgrace. But then psychological testing came of age, really became an exact science, so that it was possible to test a man thoroughly—his knowledge, his potential, his personality. And from there it was a short but bitterly fought step to—SAM.

SAM. UNCLE SAM, as he had been called originally, the last and greatest of all electronic brains. Harry Larkin peered up in unabashed awe at the vast battery of lights which flickered above him. He knew that there was more to SAM than just this building, more than all the other forty-eight buildings put together, that SAM was actually

an incredibly enormous network of electronic cells which had its heart in no one place, but its arms in all. It was an unbelievably complex analytical computer which judged a candidate far more harshly and thoroughly than the American public could ever have judged him. And crammed in its miles of memory banks lay almost every bit of knowledge mankind had yet discovered. It was frightening, many thought of it as a monster, but Harry Larkin was unworried.

The thirty years since the introduction of SAM had been thirty of America's happiest years. In a world torn by continual war and unrest, by dictators, puppet governments, the entire world had come to know and respect the American President for what he was: the best possible man for the job. And there was no doubt that he was the best. He had competed for the job in fair examination against the cream of the country. He had to be a truly remarkable man to come out on top.

The day was long since past when just any man could handle the presidency. A full century before men had begun dying in office, cut down in their prime by the enormous pressures of the job. And that was a hundred years ago. Now the job had become infinitely more complex, and even now President Creighton lay on his bed in the White House, recovering from a stroke, an old, old man after one term of office.

Harry Larkin shuddered to think what might have happened had America not adopted the system of "the best qualified man." All over the world this afternoon men waited for word from America, the calm and trustworthy words of the new President, for there had been no leader in America since President Creighton's stroke. His words would mean more to the people, embroiled as they were in another great crisis, than the words of their own leaders. The leaders of other countries fought for power, bought it, stole it, only rarely earned it. But the American President was known the world over for his honesty, his intelligence, his desire for peace. Had he not those qualities, "old UNCLE SAM" would never have elected him.

Eventually, the afternoon nearly over, Harry Larkin rose to leave. By this time the President was probably already elected. Tomorrow the world would return to

peace. Harry Larkin paused in the door once before he left, listened to the reassuring hum from the great machine. Then he went quietly home, walking quickly and briskly toward the most enormous fate on Earth.

"My name is Reddington. You know me?"

Harry Larkin smiled uncertainly into the phone.

"Why . . . yes, I believe so. You are, if I'm not mistaken, general director of the Bureau of Elections."

"Correct," the voice went on quickly, crackling in the receiver, "and you are supposed to be an authority on Political Science, right?"

"Supposed to be?" Larkin bridled. "Well, it's distinctly possible that I—"

"All right, all right," Reddington blurted. "No time for politeness. Listen, Larkin, this is a matter of urgent national security. There will be a car at your door—probably be there when you put this phone down. I want you to get into it and hop on over here. I can't explain further. I know your devotion to the country, and if it wasn't for that I would not have called you. But don't ask questions. Just come. No time. Good-bye."

There was a click. Harry Larkin stood holding the phone for a long shocked moment, then he heard a pounding at the door. The housekeeper was out, but he waited automatically before going to answer it. He didn't like to be rushed, and he was confused. Urgent national security? Now what in blazes—

The man at the door was an Army major. He was accompanied by two young but very large sergeants. They identified Larkin, then escorted him politely but firmly down the steps into a staff car. Larkin could not help feeling abducted, and a completely characteristic rage began to rise in him. But he remembered what Reddington had said about national security and so sat back quietly with nothing more than an occasional grumble.

He was driven back into Washington. They took him downtown to a small but expensive apartment house he could neither identify nor remember, and escorted him briskly into an elevator. When they reached the suite upstairs they opened the door and let him in, but did not follow him. They turned and went quickly away.

Somewhat ruffled, Larkin stood for a long moment in

the hall by the hat table, regarding a large rubber plant. There was a long sliding door before him, closed, but he could hear an argument going on behind it. He heard the word "SAM" mentioned many times, and once he heard a clear sentence: ". . . Government by machine. I will not tolerate it!" Before he had time to hear any more, the doors slid back. A small, square man with graying hair came out to meet him. He recognized the man instantly as Reddington.

"Larkin," the small man said, "glad you're here." The tension on his face showed also in his voice. "That makes all of us. Come in and sit down." He turned back into the large living room. Larkin followed.

"Sorry to be so abrupt," Reddington said, "but it was necessary. You will see. Here, let me introduce you around."

Larkin stopped in involuntary awe. He was used to the sight of important men, but not so many at one time, and never so close. There was Secretary Kell, of Agriculture; Wachsmuth, of Commerce; General Vines, Chief of Staff; and a battery of others so imposing that Larkin found his mouth hanging embarrassingly open. He closed it immediately.

Reddington introduced him. The men nodded one by one, but they were all deathly serious, their faces drawn, and there was now no conversation. Reddington waved him to a chair. Most of the others were standing, but Larkin sat.

Reddington sat directly facing him. There was a long moment of silence during which Larkin realized that he was being searchingly examined. He flushed, but sat calmly with his hands folded in his lap. After a while Reddington took a deep breath.

"Dr. Larkin," he said slowly, "what I am about to say to you will die with you. There must be no question of that. We cannot afford to have any word of this meeting, any word at all, reach anyone not in this room. This includes your immediate relatives, your friends, anyone—anyone at all. Before we continue, let me impress you with that fact. This is a matter of the gravest national security. Will you keep what is said here in confidence?"

"If the national interests—" Larkin began, then he said abruptly, "of course."

Reddington smiled slightly.

"Good. I believe you. I might add that just the fact of your being here, Doctor, means that you have already passed the point of no return . . . well, no matter. There is no time. I'll get to the point."

He stopped, looking around the room. Some of the other men were standing and now began to move in closer. Larkin felt increasingly nervous, but the magnitude of the event was too great for him to feel any worry. He gazed intently at Reddington.

"The Polls close tonight at eight o'clock." Reddington glanced at his watch. "It is now six-eighteen. I must be brief. Doctor, do you remember the prime directive that we gave to SAM when he was first built?"

"I think so," said Larkin slowly.

"Good. You remember then that there was one main order. SAM was directed to elect, quote, *the best qualified man*. Unquote. Regardless of any and all circumstances, religion, race, so on. The orders were clear—the best qualified man. The phrase has become world famous. But unfortunately"—he glanced up briefly at the men surrounding him—"the order was a mistake. Just whose mistake does not matter. I think perhaps the fault lies with all of us, but—it doesn't matter. What matters is this: SAM will not elect a president."

Larkin struggled to understand. Reddington leaned forward in his chair.

"Now follow me closely. We learned this only late this afternoon. We are always aware, as you no doubt know, of the relatively few people in this country who have a chance for the presidency. We know not only because they are studying for it, but because such men as these are marked from their childhood to be outstanding. We keep close watch on them, even to assigning the Secret Service to protect them from possible harm. There are only a very few. During this last election we could not find more than fifty. All of those people took the tests this morning. None of them passed."

He paused, waiting for Larkin's reaction. Larkin made no move.

"You begin to see what I'm getting at? *There is no qualified man.*"

Larkin's eyes widened. He sat bolt upright.

"Now it hits you. If none of those people this morning passed, there is no chance at all for any of the others tonight. What is left now is simply crackpots and malcontents. They are privileged to take the tests, but it means nothing. SAM is not going to select anybody. Because sometime during the last four years the presidency passed the final limit, the ultimate end of man's capabilities, and with scientific certainty we know that there is probably no man alive who is, according to SAM's directive, qualified."

"But," Larkin interrupted, "I'm not quite sure I follow. Doesn't the phrase 'elect the best qualified man' mean that we can at least take the best we've got?"

Reddington smiled wanly and shook his head.

"No. And that was our mistake. It was quite probably a psychological block, but none of us ever considered the possibility of the job surpassing human ability. Not then, thirty years ago. And we also never seemed to remember that SAM is, after all, only a machine. He takes the words to mean exactly what they say: Elect the best, comma, *qualified*, comma, man. But do you see, if there is *no* qualified man, SAM cannot possibly elect the best. So SAM will elect no one at all. Tomorrow this country will be without a president. And the result of that, more than likely, will mean a general war."

Larkin understood. He sat frozen in his chair.

"So you see our position," Reddington went on wearily. "There's nothing we can do. Reelecting President Creighton is out of the question. His stroke was permanent, he may not last the week. And there is no possibility of tampering with SAM, to change the directive. Because, as you know, SAM is foolproof, had to be. The circuits extend through all forty-eight states. To alter the machine at all requires clearing through all forty-eight entrances. We can't do that. For one thing, we haven't time. For another, we can't risk letting the world know there is no qualified man."

"For a while this afternoon, you can understand, we were stumped. What could we do? There was only one answer, we may come back to it yet. Give the presidency itself to SAM—"

A man from across the room, whom Larkin did not recognize, broke in angrily.

"Now Reddington, I told you, that is government by machine! And I will not stand—"

"What else can you *do!*" Reddington whirled, his eyes flashing, his tension exploding now into rage. "Who else knows all the answers? Who else can compute in two seconds the tax rate for Mississippi, the parity levels for wheat, the probable odds on a military engagement? Who else but SAM! And why didn't we do it long ago, just feed the problems to *him*, SAM, and not go on killing man after man, great men, *decent* men like poor Jim Creighton, who's on his back now and dying because people like you—" He broke off suddenly and bowed his head. The room was still. No one looked at Reddington. After a moment he shook his head. His voice, when he spoke, was husky.

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry. This leads nowhere." He turned back to Larkin.

Larkin had begun to feel the pressure. But the presence of these men, of Reddington's obvious profound sincerity, reassured him. Creighton had been a great president; he had surrounded himself with some of the finest men in the country. Larkin felt a surge of hope that such men as these were available for one of the most critical hours in American history. For critical it was, and Larkin knew as clearly as anyone there what the absence of a president in the morning—no deep reassurance, no words of hope—would mean. He sat waiting for Reddington to continue.

"Well, we have a plan. It may work, it may not. We may all be shot. But this is where you come in. I hope for all our sakes you're up to it."

Larkin waited.

"The plan," Reddington went on, slowly, carefully, "is this. SAM has one defect. We can't tamper with it. But we *can* fool it. Because when the brain tests a man, it does not at the same time identify him. We do the identifying ourselves. So if a man named Joe Smith takes the personality tests and another man also named Joe Smith takes the Political Science tests, the machine has no way of telling them apart. Unless our guards supply the difference, SAM will mark up the results of both tests to one Joe Smith. We can clear the guards, no problem

there. The first problem was to find the eight men to take the eight tests."

Larkin understood. He nodded.

"Exactly. Eight specialists," Reddington said. "General Vines will take the Military; Burden, Psychology; Wachsmuth, Economics; and so on. You, of course, will take the Political Science. We can only hope that each man will come out with a high enough score in his own field so that the combined scores of our mythical 'candidate' will be enough to qualify him. Do you follow me?"

Larkin nodded dazedly. "I think so. But—"

"It should work. It has to work."

"Yes," Larkin murmured, "I can see that. But who, who will actually wind up—"

"As president?" Reddington smiled very slightly and stood up.

"That was the most difficult question of all. At first we thought there was no solution. Because a president must be so many things—consider. A president blossoms instantaneously, from nonentity, into the most important job on earth. Every magazine, every newspaper in the country immediately goes to work on his background, digs out his life story, anecdotes, sayings, and so on. Even a very strong fraud would never survive it. So the first problem was believability. The new president must be absolutely believable. He must be a man of obvious character, of obvious intelligence, but more than that, his former life must fit the facts: he must have had both the time and the personality to prepare himself for the office.

"And you see immediately what all that means. Most businessmen are out. Their lives have been too social, they wouldn't have had the time. For the same reason all government and military personnel are also out, and we need hardly say that anyone from the Bureau of Elections would be immediately suspect. No. You see the problem. For a while we thought that the time was too short, the risk too great. But then the only solution, the only possible chance, finally occurred to us.

"The only believable person would be—a professor. Someone whose life has been serious but unhurried, devoted to learning but at the same time isolated. The only really believable person. And not a scientist, you understand, for a man like that would be much too overbalanced

in one direction for our purpose. No, simply a professor, preferably in a field like Political Science, a man whose sole job for many years has been teaching, who can claim to have studied in his spare time, his summers—never really expected to pass the tests and all that, a humble man, you see—”

“Political Science,” Larkin said.

Reddington watched him. The other men began to close in on him.

“Yes,” Reddington said gently. “Now do you see? It is our only hope. Your name was suggested by several sources, you are young enough, your reputation is well known. We think that you would be believable. And now that I’ve seen you”—he looked around slowly—“I for one am willing to risk it. Gentlemen, what do you say?”

Larkin, speechless, sat listening in mounting shock while the men agreed solemnly, one by one. In the enormity of the moment he could not think at all. Dimly, he heard Reddington.

“I know. But, Doctor, there is no time. The Polls close at eight. It is now almost seven.”

Larkin closed his eyes and rested his head on his hands. Above him, Reddington went on inevitably.

“All right. You are thinking of what happens after. Even if we pull this off and you are accepted without question, what then? Well, it will simply be the old system all over again. You will be at least no worse off than presidents before SAM. Better even, because if worse comes to worst, there is always SAM. You can feed all the bad ones to him. You will have the advice of the cabinet, of the military staff. We will help you in every way we can, some of us will sit with you on all conferences. And you know more about this than most of us, you have studied government all your life.

“But all this, what comes later is not important. Not now. If we can get through tomorrow, the next few days, all the rest will work itself out. Eventually we can get around to altering SAM. But we must have a president in the morning. You are our only hope. You can do it. We all know you can do it. At any rate there is no other way, no time. Doctor,” he reached out and laid his hand on Larkin’s shoulder, “shall we go to the Polls?”

It passed, as most great moments in a man’s life do,

with Larkin not fully understanding what was happening to him. Later he would look back to this night and realize the enormity of the decision he had made, the doubts, the sleeplessness, the responsibility and agony toward which he moved. But in that moment he thought nothing at all. Except that it was Larkin's country, Larkin's America. And Reddington was right. There was nothing else to do. He stood up.

They went to the Polls.

At 9:30 that evening, sitting alone with Reddington back at the apartment, Larkin looked at the face of the announcer on the television screen, and heard himself pronounced President-elect of the United States.

Reddington wilted in front of the screen. For a while neither man moved. They had come home alone, just as they had gone into the Polls one by one in the hope of arousing no comment. Now they sat in silence until Reddington turned off the set. He stood up and straightened his shoulders before turning to Larkin. He stretched out his hand.

"Well, may God help us," he breathed, "we did it."

Larkin took his hand. He felt suddenly weak. He sat down again, but already he could hear the phone ringing in the outer hall. Reddington smiled.

"Only a few of my closest friends are supposed to know about that phone. But every time anything big comes up—" He shrugged. "Well," he said, still smiling, "let's see how it works."

He picked up the phone and with it an entirely different manner. He became amazingly light and cheerful, as if he was feeling nothing more than the normal political goodwill.

"Know him? Of course I know him. Had my eye on the guy for months. Really nice guy, wait'll you meet him . . . yup, college professor, Political Science, written a couple of books . . . must know a hell of a lot more than Poli Sci, though. Probably been knocking himself out in his spare time. But those teachers, you know how it is, they don't get any pay, but all the spare time in the world. . . . Married? No, not that I know of—"

Larkin noticed with wry admiration how carefully Reddington had slipped in that bit about spare time,

without seeming to be making an explanation. He thought wearily to himself, I hope that I don't have to do any talking myself. I'll have to do a lot of listening before I can chance any talking.

In a few moments Reddington put down the phone and came back. He had on his hat and coat.

"Had to answer a few," he said briefly, "make it seem natural. But you better get dressed."

"Dressed? Why?"

"Have you forgotten?" Reddington smiled patiently. "You're due at the White House. The Secret Service is already tearing the town apart looking for you. We were supposed to alert them. Oh, by the saints, I hope that wasn't too bad a slip."

He pursed his mouth worriedly while Larkin, still dazed, got into his coat. It was beginning now. It had already begun. He was tired but it did not matter. That he was tired would probably never matter again. He took a deep breath. Like Reddington, he straightened his shoulders.

The Secret Service picked them up halfway across town. That they knew where he was, who he was, amazed him and worried Reddington. They went through the gates of the White House and drove up before the door. It was opened for him as he put out his hand, he stepped back in a reflex action, from the sudden blinding flares of the photographer's flashbulbs. Reddington behind him took him firmly by the arm. Larkin went with him gratefully, unable to see, unable to hear anything but the roar of the crowd from behind the gates and the shouted questions of the reporters.

Inside the great front doors it was suddenly peaceful again, very quiet and pleasantly dark. He took off his hat instinctively. Luckily he had been here before, he recognized the lovely hall and felt not awed but at home. He was introduced quickly to several people whose names made no impression on him. A woman smiled. He made an effort to smile back. Reddington took him by the arm again and led him away. There were people all around him, but they were quiet and hung back. He saw the respect on their faces. It sobered him, quickened his mind.

"The President's in the Lincoln Room," Reddington whispered. "He wants to see you. How do you feel?"

"All right."

"Listen."

"Yes."

"You'll be fine. You're doing beautifully. Keep just that look on your face."

"I'm not trying to keep it there."

"You aren't?" Reddington looked at him. "Good. Very good." He paused and looked again at Larkin. Then he smiled.

"It's done it. I thought it would but I wasn't sure. But it does it every time. A man comes in here, no matter what he was before, no matter what he is when he goes out, but he feels it. Don't you feel it?"

"Yes. It's like—"

"What?"

"It's like . . . when you're in here . . . you're *responsible*."

Reddington said nothing. But Larkin felt a warm pressure on his arm.

They paused at the door of the Lincoln Room. Two Secret Service men, standing by the door, opened it respectfully. They went on in, leaving the others outside.

Larkin looked across the room to the great, immortal bed. He felt suddenly very small, very tender. He crossed the soft carpet and looked down at the old man.

"Hi," the old man said. Larkin was startled, but he looked down at the broad weakly smiling face, saw the famous white hair and the still-twinkling eyes, and found himself smiling in return.

"Mr. President," Larkin said.

"I hear your name is Larkin." The old man's voice was surprisingly strong, but as he spoke now Larkin could see that the left side of his face was paralyzed. "Good name for a president. Indicates a certain sense of humor. Need a sense of humor. Reddington, how'd it go?"

"Good as can be expected, sir." He glanced briefly at Larkin. "The President knows. Wouldn't have done it without his okay. Now that I think of it, it was probably he who put the Secret Service on us."

"You're doggone right," the old man said. "They may bother the by-jingo out of you, but those boys are necessary. And also, if I hadn't let them know we knew Larkin was material—" He stopped abruptly and closed his eyes,

took a deep breath. After a moment he said: "Mr. Larkin?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have one or two comments. You mind?"

"Of course not, sir."

"I couldn't solve it. I just . . . didn't have time. There were so many other things to do." He stopped and again closed his eyes. "But it will be up to you, son. The presidency . . . must be preserved. What they'll start telling you now is that there's only one way out, let SAM handle it. Reddington, too," the old man opened his eyes and gazed sadly at Reddington, "he'll tell you the same thing, but don't you believe it."

"Sure, SAM knows all the answers. Ask him a question on anything, on levels of parity tax rates, on anything. And right quick SAM will compute you out an answer. So that's what they'll try to do, they'll tell you to take it easy and let SAM do it."

"Well, all right, up to a certain point. But, Mr. Larkin, understand this. SAM is like a book. Like a book, he knows the answers. *But only those answers we've already found out.* We gave SAM those answers. A machine is not creative, neither is a book. Both are only the product of creative minds. Sure, SAM could hold the country together. But growth, man, there'd be no more growth! No new ideas, new solutions, change, progress, development! And America *must* grow, must progress—"

He stopped, exhausted. Reddington bowed his head. Larkin remained idly calm. He felt a remarkable clarity in his head.

"But, Mr. President," he said slowly, "if the office is too much for one man, then all we can do is cut down on his powers—"

"Ah," the old man said faintly, "there's the rub. Cut down on what? If I sign a tax bill, I must know enough about taxes to be certain that the bill is the right one. If I endorse a police action, I must be certain that the strategy involved is militarily sound. If I consider farm prices . . . you see, you see, what will you cut? The office is responsible for its acts. It must remain responsible. You cannot take just someone else's word for things like that, you must make your own decisions. Already we sign

things we know nothing about, bills for this, bills for that, on somebody's word."

"What do you suggest?"

The old man cocked an eye toward Larkin, smiled once more with half his mouth, anciently worn, only hours from death, an old, old man with his work not done, never to be done.

"Son, come here. Take my hand. Can't lift it myself."

Larkin came forward, knelt by the side of the bed. He took the cold hand, now gaunt and almost translucent, and held it gently.

"Mr. Larkin," the President said. "God be with you, boy. Do what you can. Delegate authority. Maybe cut the term in half. But keep us human, please, keep us growing, keep us alive." His voice faltered, his eyes closed. "I'm very tired. God be with you."

Larkin laid the hand gently on the bed cover. He stood for a long moment looking down. Then he turned with Reddington and left the room.

Outside, he waited until they were past the Secret Service men and then turned to Reddington.

"Your plans for SAM. What do you think now?"

Reddington winced.

"I couldn't see any way out."

"But what about now? I have to know."

"I don't know. I really don't know. But . . . let me tell you something."

"Yes."

"Whatever I say to you from now on is only advice. You don't have to take it. Because understand this: however you came in here tonight, you're going out the president. You were elected. Not by the people maybe, not even by SAM. But you're President by the grace of God and that's enough for me. From this moment on you'll be President to everybody in the world. We've all agreed. Never think that you're only a fraud, because you aren't. You heard what the President said. You take it from here."

Larkin looked at him for a long while. Then he nodded once, briefly.

"All right," he said.

"One more thing."

"Yes?"

"I've got to say this. Tonight, this afternoon, I didn't really know what I was doing to you. I thought . . . well . . . the crisis came. But you had no time to think. That wasn't right. A man shouldn't be pushed into a thing like this without time to think. The old man just taught me something about making your own decisions. I should have let you make yours."

"It's all right."

"No, it isn't. You remember him in there. Well. That's you four years from tonight. If you live that long."

Now it was Larkin who reached out and patted Reddington on the shoulder.

"That's all right, too," he said.

Reddington said nothing. When he spoke again, Larkin realized he was moved.

"We have the greatest luck, this country," he said tightly. "At all the worst times we always seem to find all the best people."

"Well," Larkin said hurriedly, "we'd better get to work. There's a speech due in the morning. And the problem of SAM. And . . . oh, I've got to be sworn in."

He turned and went off down the hall. Reddington paused a moment before following him. He was thinking that he could be watching the last human President the United States would ever have. But—once more he straightened his shoulders.

"Yes, sir," he said softly, "Mr. President."

AND NOW THE NEWS ...

BY THEODORE STURGEON (1918–1985)

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We have discussed the great Ted Sturgeon at what amounts to some length in the pages of this series. Suffice it to say that he was one of the very best talents to work in the science fiction field and that his death before he could receive the Grand Master Award of the Science Fiction Writers of America simply compounded the tragedy and loss we all suffered.

He wrote, like many writers, about some of his own obsessions. In the case of "And Now the News . . . ," I don't know if this was the case—I do know that it is a terrific, gripping story of obsession, one that I have always identified with since I'm a serious news hound (and weather hound and sports hound) myself. I know you are too, Isaac. (MHG)

I, Marty, came by my passion for the news quite honestly. It was in the 1930s that I became aware of the news, and since my father owned a newsstand, I had ample opportunity to sate my appetite. That was the decade of Hitler and was followed by the half decade of World War II. For a period of thirteen years, from 1929 to 1942, the news was primarily that of gathering disaster. Depression, Nazism, and war certainly disturbed me over the years, and since Ted Sturgeon was my contemporary, it must have disturbed him too.

Of course, I have heard many people say: "Why don't the newspapers print good news?" In a way, I'd be sorry if they did, for what is news is what is unusual. You can

spend four thousand words on a spectacular air crash, but how can you find more than a hundred words to describe a smooth and uneventful flight? If they start making a big fuss about a safe flight, it would only indicate that that was very unusual. I was once seen kissing my wife in public, and that made the gossip page of the New York Post, which depressed me, for it clearly meant that for a married couple to kiss in public was a rare phenomenon equivalent to a man biting a dog. (IA)

The man's name was MacLyle, which by looking at you can tell wasn't his real name, but let's say this is fiction, shall we? MacLyle had a good job in—well—a soap concern. He worked hard and made good money and got married to a girl called Esther. He bought a house in the suburbs and after it was paid for he rented it to some people and bought a home a little farther out and a second car and a freezer and a power mower and a book on landscaping, and settled down to the worthy task of giving his kids all the things he never had.

He had habits and he had hobbies, like everybody else and (like everybody else) his were a little different from anybody's. The one that annoyed his wife the most, until she got used to it, was the news habit, or maybe hobby. MacLyle read a morning paper on the 8:14 and an evening paper on the 6:10, and the local paper his suburb used for its lost dogs and auction sales took up forty after-dinner minutes. And when he read a paper he read it, he didn't mess with it. He read Page 1 first and Page 2 next, and so on all the way through. He didn't care too much for books but he respected them in a mystical sort of way, and he used to say a newspaper was a kind of book, and so would raise particular hell if a section was missing or in upside down, or if the pages were out of line. He also heard the news on the radio. There were three stations in town with hourly broadcasts, one on the hour, one on the half hour, and one five minutes before the hour, and he was usually able to catch them all. During these five-minute periods he would look you right in the eye while you talked to him and you'd swear he was listening to you, but he wasn't. This was a particular trial to his wife, but only for five years or so. Then she stopped trying to be heard while the radio talked about

floods and murders and scandal and suicide. Five more years, and she went back to talking right through the broadcasts, but by the time people are married ten years, things like that don't matter; they talk in code anyway, and nine tenths of their speech can be picked up anytime like ticker tape. He also caught the 7:30 news on Channel 2 and the 7:45 news on Channel 4 on television.

Now it might be imagined from all this that MacLyle was a crotchety character with fixed habits and a neurotic neatness, but this was far from the case. MacLyle was basically a reasonable guy who loved his wife and children and liked his work and pretty much enjoyed being alive. He laughed easily and talked well and paid his bills. He justified his preoccupation with the news in a number of ways. He would quote Donne: ". . . *any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind* . . ." which is pretty solid stuff and hard to argue down. He would point out that he made his trains and his trains made him punctual, but that because of them he saw the same faces at the same time day after endless day, before, during, and after he rode those trains, so that his immediate world was pretty circumscribed, and only a constant awareness of what was happening all over the earth kept him conscious of the fact that he lived in a bigger place than a thin straight universe with his house at one end, his office at the other, and a railway track in between.

It's hard to say just when MacLyle started to go to pieces, or even why, though it obviously had something to do with all that news he exposed himself to. He began to react, very slightly at first; that is, you could tell he was listening. He'd *shh!* you, and if you tried to finish what you were saying he'd run and stick his head in the speaker grille. His wife and kids learned to shut up when the news came on, five minutes before the hour until five after (with MacLyle switching stations) and every hour on the half hour, and from 7:30 to 8:00 for the TV, and during the forty minutes it took him to read the local paper. He was not so obvious about it when he read his paper, because all he did was freeze over the pages like a catatonic, gripping the top corners until the sheets shivered, knotting his jaw and breathing from his nostrils with a strangled whistle.

Naturally all this was a weight on his wife Esther, who tried her best to reason with him. At first he answered her, saying mildly that a man has to keep in touch, you know; but very quickly he stopped responding altogether, giving her the treatment a practiced suburbanite gets so expert in, as when someone mentions a lawn mower just too damn early on Sunday morning. You don't say yes and you don't say no, you don't even grunt, and you don't move your head or even your eyebrows. After a while your interlocutor goes away. Pretty soon you don't hear these ill-timed annoyances any more than you appear to.

It needs to be said again here that MacLyle was, outside his peculiarity, a friendly and easygoing character. He liked people and invited them and visited them, and he was one of those adults who can really listen to a first-grade child's interminable adventures and really care. He never forgot things like the slow leak in the spare tire or antifreeze or anniversaries, and he always got the storm windows up in time, but he didn't rub anyone's nose in his reliability. The first thing in his whole life he didn't take as a matter of course was this news thing that started so small and grew so quickly.

So after a few weeks of it his wife took the bull by the horns and spent the afternoon hamstringing every receiver in the house. There were three radios and two TV sets, and she didn't understand the first thing about them, but she had a good head and she went to work with a will and the can-opening limb of a pocketknife. From each receiver she removed one tube, and one at a time, so as not to get them mixed up, she carried them into the kitchen and meticulously banged their bases against the edge of the sink, being careful to crack no glass and bend no pins, until she could see the guts of the tube rolling around loose inside. Then she replaced them and got the back panels on the sets again.

MacLyle came home and put the car away and kissed her and turned on the living room radio and then went to hang up his hat. When he returned the radio should have been warmed up but it wasn't. He twisted the knobs awhile and bumped it and rocked it back and forth a little, grunting, and then noticed the time. He began to feel a little frantic, and raced back to the kitchen and

turned on the little ivory radio on the shelf. It warmed up quickly and cheerfully and give him a clear sixty-cycle hum, but that was all. He behaved badly from then on, roaring out the information that the sets didn't work, either of them, as if that wasn't pretty evident by that time, and flew upstairs to the boys' room, waking them explosively. He turned on their radio and got another sixty-cycle note, this time with a shattering microphonic when he rapped the case, which he did four times, whereupon the set went dead altogether.

Esther had planned the thing up to this point, but no further, which was the way her mind worked. She figured she could handle it, but she figured wrong. MacLyle came downstairs like a pallbearer, and he was silent and shaken until 7:30, time for the news on TV. The living room set wouldn't peep, so up he went to the boys' room again, waking them just as they were nodding off again, and this time the little guy started to cry. MacLyle didn't care. When he found out there was no picture on the set, he almost started to cry, too, but then he heard the sound come in. A TV set has an awful lot of tubes in it and Esther didn't know audio from video. MacLyle sat down in front of the dark screen and listened to the news. *"Everything seemed to be under control in the riot-ridden border country in India,"* said the TV set. Crowd noises and a background of Beethoven's "Turkish March." *"And then—"* Cut music. Crowd noise up: gabble-wurra and a scream. Announcer over: *"Six hours later, this was the scene."* Dead silence, going on so long that MacLyle reached out and thumped the TV set with the heel of his hand. Then, slow swell, Ketelbey's "In a Monastery Garden." *"On a more cheerful note, here are the six finalists in the Miss Continuum contest."* Background music, "Blue Room," interminably, interrupted only once, when the announcer said through a childish chuckle *". . . and she meant it!"* MacLyle pounded himself on the temples. The little guy continued to sob. Esther stood at the foot of the stairs wringing her hands. It went on for thirty minutes like this. All MacLyle said when he came downstairs was that he wanted the paper—that would be the local one. So Esther faced the great unknown and told him frankly she hadn't ordered it and wouldn't again,

which of course led to a full and righteous confession of her activities of the afternoon.

Only a woman married better than fourteen years can know a man well enough to handle him so badly. She was aware that she was wrong but that was quite overridden by the fact that she was logical. It would not be logical to continue her patience, so patience was at an end. That which offendeth thee, cast it out, yea, even thine eye and thy right hand. She realized too late that the news was so inextricably part of her husband that in casting it out she cast him out too. And out he went, while whitely she listened to the rumble of the garage door, the car door speaking its sharp syllables, clear as *Exit* in a playscript; the keen of a starter, the mourn of a motor. She said she was glad and went in the kitchen and tipped the useless ivory radio off the shelf and retired, weeping.

And yet, because true life offers few clean cuts, she saw him once more. At seven minutes to three in the morning she became aware of faint music from somewhere; unaccountably it frightened her, and she tiptoed about the house looking for it. It wasn't in the house, so she pulled on MacLyle's trench coat and crept down the steps into the garage. And there, just outside in the driveway, where steel beams couldn't interfere with radio reception, the car stood where it had been all along, and MacLyle was in the driver's seat dozing over the wheel. The music came from the car radio. She drew the coat tighter around her and went to the car and opened the door and spoke his name. At just that moment the radio said ". . . and now the news," and MacLyle sat bolt upright and *shh'd* furiously. She fell back and stood a moment in a strange transition from unconditional surrender to total defeat. Then he shut the car door and bent forward, his hand on the volume control, and she went back into the house.

After the news report was over and he had recovered himself from the stab wounds of a juvenile delinquent, the grinding agonies of a derailed train, the terrors of the near crash of a C-119, and the fascination of a cabinet officer, charter member of the We Don't Trust Nobody Club, saying in exactly these words that there's a little bit of good in the worst of us and a little bit of bad in the best of us, all of which he felt keenly, he started the car

(by rolling it down the drive because the battery was almost dead) and drove as slowly as possible into town.

At an all-night garage he had the car washed and greased while he waited, after which the automat was open and he sat in it for three hours drinking coffee, holding his jaw set until his back teeth ached, and making occasional, almost inaudible noises in the back of his throat. At nine he pulled himself together. He spent the entire day with his astonished attorney, going through all his assets, selling, converting, establishing, until when he was finished he had a modest packet of cash and his wife would have an adequate income until the children went to college, at which time the house would be sold, the tenants in the older house evicted, and Esther would be free to move to the smaller home with the price of the larger one added to the basic capital. The lawyer might have entertained fears for MacLyle except for the fact that he was jovial and loquacious throughout, behaving like a happy man—a rare form of insanity, but acceptable. It was hard work but they did it in a day, after which MacLyle wrung the lawyer's hand and thanked him profusely and checked into a hotel.

When he awoke the following morning he sprang out of bed, feeling years younger, opened the door, scooped up the morning paper and glanced at the headlines.

He couldn't read them.

He grunted in surprise, closed the door gently, and sat on the bed with paper in his lap. His hands moved restlessly on it, smoothing and smoothing until the palms were shadowed and the type hazed. The shouting symbols marched across the page like a parade of strangers in some unrecognized lodge uniform, origins unknown, destination unknown, and the occasion for marching only to be guessed at. He traced the letters with his little finger, he measured the length of a word between his index finger and thumb and lifted them up to hold them before his wondering eyes. Suddenly he got up and crossed to the desk, where signs and placards and printed notes were trapped like a butterfly collection under glass—the breakfast menu, something about valet service, something about checking out. He remembered them all and had an idea of their significance—but he couldn't read them. In the drawer was stationery, with a picture of the

building and no other buildings around it, which just wasn't so, and an inscription which might have been in Cyrillic for all he knew. Telegram blanks, a bus schedule, a blotter, all bearing hieroglyphs and runes, as far as he was concerned. A phone book full of strangers' names in strange symbols.

He requested of himself that he recite the alphabet. "A" he said clearly, and "Eh?" because it didn't sound right and he couldn't imagine what would. He made a small foolish grin and shook his head slightly and rapidly, but grin or no, he felt frightened. He felt glad, or relieved—mostly happy anyway, but still a little frightened.

He called the desk and told them to get his bill ready, and dressed and went downstairs. He gave the doorman his parking check and waited while they brought the car around. He got in and turned the radio on and started to drive west.

He drove for some days, in a state of perpetual, cold, and (for all that) happy fright—roller-coaster fright, horror-movie fright—remembering the significance of a stop sign without being able to read the word STOP across it, taking caution from the shape of a railroad-crossing notice. Restaurants look like restaurants, gas stations like gas stations; if Washington's picture denotes a dollar and Lincoln's five, one doesn't need to read them. MacLyle made out just fine. He drove until he was well into one of those square states with all the mountains and cruised until he recognized the section where, years before he was married, he had spent a hunting vacation. Avoiding the lodge he had used, he took back roads until, sure enough, he came to that deserted cabin in which he had sheltered one night, standing yet, rotting a bit but only around the edges. He wandered in and out of it for a long time, memorizing details because he could not make a list, and then got back into his car and drove to the nearest town, not very near and not very much of a town. At the general store he bought shingles and flour and nails and paint—all sorts of paint, in little cans, as well as big containers of house paint—and canned goods and tools. He ordered a knockdown windmill and a generator, eighty pounds of modeling clay, two loaf pans and a mixing bowl, and a war-surplus jungle hammock. He paid cash and promised to be back in two weeks for the things the

store didn't stock, and wired (because it could be done over the phone) his lawyer to arrange for the predetermined eighty dollars a month which was all he cared to take for himself from his assets. Before he left, he stood in wonder before a monstrous piece of musical plumbing called an ophicleide which stood, dusty and majestic, in a corner. (While it might be easier on the reader to make this a French horn or a sousaphone—which would answer narrative purposes quite as well—we're done telling lies here. MacLyle's real name is concealed, his hometown cloaked, and his occupation disguised, and dammit, it really was a twelve-keyed, 1824, fifty-inch, obsolete brass ophicleide.) The storekeeper explained how his great-grandfather had brought it over from the old country and nobody had played it for two generations except an itinerant tuba player who had turned pale green on the first three notes and put it down as if it was full of percussion caps. MacLyle asked how it sounded and the man told him, terrible. Two weeks later MacLyle was back to pick up the rest of his stuff, nodding and smiling and saying not a word. He still couldn't read, and now he couldn't speak. Even more, he had lost the power to understand speech. He had paid for the purchases with a hundred-dollar bill and a wistful expression, and then another hundred-dollar bill and the storekeeper, thinking he had turned deaf and dumb, cheated him roundly but at the same time felt so sorry for him that he gave him the ophicleide. MacLyle loaded up his car happily and left. And that's the first part of the story about MacLyle's being in a bad way.

MacLyle's wife Esther found herself in a peculiar position. Friends and neighbors offhandedly asked her questions to which she did not know the answers, and the only person who had any information at all—MacLyle's attorney—was under bond not to tell her anything. She had not, in the full and legal sense, been deserted, since she and the children were provided for. She missed MacLyle, but in a specialized way; she missed the old reliable MacLyle, and he had, in effect, left her long before that perplexing night when he had driven away. She wanted the old MacLyle back again, not this untrolled stranger with the grim and spastic preoccupation with the

news. Of the many unpleasant facets of this stranger's personality, one glowed brightest, and that was that he was the sort of man who would walk out the way he did and stay away as long as he had. Ergo, he was that undesirable person just as long as he stayed away, and tracking him down would, if it returned him against his will, return to her only a person who was not the person she missed.

Yet she was dissatisfied with herself, for all that she was the injured party and had wounds less painful than the pangs of conscience. She had always prided herself on being a good wife, and had done many things in the past which were counter to her reason and her desires purely because they were consistent with being a good wife. So as time went on she gravitated away from the "what shall I do?" area into the "what ought a good wife to-do?" spectrum, and after a great deal of careful thought, went to see a psychiatrist.

He was a fairly intelligent psychiatrist, which is to say he caught on to the obvious a little faster than most people. For example he became aware in only four minutes of conversation that MacLyle's wife Esther had not come to him on her own behalf, and further, decided to hear her out completely before resolving to treat her. When she had quite finished and he had dug out enough corroborative detail to get the picture, he went into a long silence and cogitated. He matched the broad pattern of MacLyle's case with his reading and his experience, recognized the challenge, the clinical worth of the case, the probable value of the heirloom diamond pendant worn by his visitor. He placed his fingertips together, lowered his fine young head, gazed through his eyebrows at MacLyle's wife Esther, and took up the gauntlet. At the prospects of getting her husband back safe and sane, she thanked him quietly and left the office with mixed emotions. The fairly intelligent psychiatrist drew a deep breath and began making arrangements with another headshrinker to take over his other patients, both of them, while he was away, because he figured to be away quite a while.

It was appallingly easy for him to trace MacLyle. He did not go near the lawyer. The solid foundation of all skip tracers and Bureaus of Missing Persons, in their

modus operandi, is the piece of applied psychology which dictates that a man might change his name and his address, but he will seldom—*can* seldom—change the things he does, particularly the things he does to amuse himself. The ski addict doesn't skip to Florida, though he might make Banff instead of an habitual Mount Tremblant. A philatelist is not likely to mount butterflies. Hence when the psychiatrist found, among MacLyle's papers, some snapshots and brochures, dating from college days, of the towering Rockies, of bears feeding by the roadside, and especially of season after season's souvenirs of a particular resort to which he had never brought his wife and which he had not visited since he married her, it was worth a feeler, which went out in the form of a request to that state's police for information on a man of such-and-such a description driving so-and-so with out-of-state plates, plus a request that the man not be detained nor warned, but only that he, the fairly intelligent psychiatrist, be notified. He threw out other lines, too, but this is the one that hooked the fish. It was a matter of weeks before a state patrol car happened by MacLyle's favorite general store: after that it was a matter of minutes before the information was in the hands of the psychiatrist. He said nothing to MacLyle's wife Esther except good-bye for a while, and this bill is payable now, and then took off, bearing with him a bag of tricks.

He rented a car at the airport nearest MacLyle's hide-out and drove a long, thirsty, climbing way until he came to the general store. There he interviewed the proprietor, learning some eighteen hundred items about how bad business could get, how hot it was, how much rain hadn't fallen and how much was needed, the tragedy of being blamed for high markups when anyone with the brains God gave a goose ought to know it cost plenty to ship things out here, especially in the small quantities necessitated by business being so bad and all; and betwixt and between, he learned eight or ten items about MacLyle—the exact location of his cabin, the fact that he seemed to have turned into a deaf-mute who was also unable to read, and that he must be crazy because who but a crazy man would want eighty-four different half-pint cans of house paint or for that matter, live out here when he didn't have to?

The psychiatrist got loose after a while and drove off, and the country got higher and dustier and more lost every mile, until he began to pray that nothing would go wrong with the car, and sure enough, ten minutes later something had. Any car that made a noise like the one he began to hear was strictly a shot-rod, and he pulled over to the side to worry about it. He turned off the motor and the noise went right on, and he began to realize that the sound was not in the car or even near it, but came from somewhere uphill. There was a mile and a half more of the hill to go, and he drove it in increasing amazement, because that sound got louder and more impossible all the time. It was sort of like music, but like no music currently heard on this or any other planet. It was a solo voice, brass, with muscles. The upper notes, of which there seemed to be about two octaves, were wild and unmusical, the middle was rough, but the low tones were like the speech of these mountains themselves, big up to the sky, hot, and more natural than anything ought to be, basic as a bear's fang. Yet all the notes were perfect—their intervals were perfect—this awful noise was tuned like an electronic organ. The psychiatrist had a good ear, though for a while he wondered how long he'd have any ears at all, and he realized all these things about the sound, as well as the fact that it was rendering one of the more primitive fingering studies from Czerny, Book One, the droning little horror that goes: *do mi fa sol la sol fa mi, re fa sol la si la sol fa, mi sol la . . . et cetera*, inchworming up the scale and then descending hand over hand.

He saw blue sky almost under his front tires and wrenched the wheel hard over, and found himself in the grassy yard of a made-over prospector's cabin, but that he didn't notice right away because sitting in front of it was what he described to himself, startled as he was out of his professional detachment, as the craziest-looking man he had ever seen.

He was sitting under a parched, wind-warped Englemann spruce. He was barefoot up to the armpits. He wore the top half of a skivvy shirt and a hat the shape of one of those conical Boy Scout tents when one of the Boy Scouts has left the pole home. And he was playing, or anyway practicing, the ophicleide, and on his shoulders was a

little moss of spruce needles, a small shower of which descended from the tree every time he hit on or under the low B-flat. Only a mouse trapped inside a tuba during band practice can know precisely what it's like to stand that close to an operating ophicleide.

It was MacLyle all right, looming well fed and filled out. When he saw the psychiatrist's car he went right on playing, but, catching the psychiatrist's eye, he winked, smiled with the small corner of lip which showed from behind the large cup of the mouthpiece, and twiddled three fingers of his right hand, all he could manage of a wave without stopping. And he didn't stop either until he had scaled the particular octave he was working on and let himself down the other side. Then he put the ophicleide down carefully and let it lean against the spruce tree, and got up. The psychiatrist had become aware, as the last stupendous notes rolled away down the mountain, of his extreme isolation with this offbeat patient, of the unconcealed health and vigor of the man, and of the presence of the precipice over which he had almost driven his car a moment before, and had rolled up his window and buttoned the door lock and was feeling grateful for them. But the warm good humor and genuine welcome on MacLyle's sunburned face drove away fright and even caution, and almost before he knew what he was doing the psychiatrist had the door open and was stooping up out of the car, thinking, merry is a disused word but that's what he is, by God, a merry man. He called him by name, but either MacLyle did not hear him or didn't care; he just put out a big warm hand and the psychiatrist took it. He could feel hard flat calluses in MacLyle's hand, and the controlled strength an elephant uses to lift a bespangled child in its trunk; he smiled at the image, because after all MacLyle was not a particularly large man, there was just that feeling about him. And once the smile found itself there, it wouldn't go away.

He told MacLyle that he was a writer trying to soak up some of this magnificent country and had just been driving wherever the turn of the road led him, and here he was; but before he was half through he became conscious of MacLyle's eyes, which were in some indescribable way very much on him but not at all on anything he said; it was precisely as if he had stood there and hummed a

tune. MacLyle seemed to be willing to listen to the sound until it was finished, and even to enjoy it, but that enjoyment was going to be all he got out of it. The psychiatrist finished anyway and MacLyle waited a moment as if to see if there would be any more, and when there wasn't he gave out more of that luminous smile and cocked his head toward the cabin. MacLyle led the way, with his visitor bringing up the rear with some platitudes about nice place you got here. As they entered, he suddenly barked at that unresponsive back, "Can't you hear me?" and MacLyle, without turning, only waved him on.

They walked into such a clutter and clabber of colors that the psychiatrist stopped dead, blinking. One wall had been removed and replaced with glass panes; it overlooked the precipice and put the little building afloat on haze. All the walls were hung with plain white chenille bedspreads, and the floor was white, and there seemed to be much more light indoors here than outside. Opposite the large window was an oversized easel made of peeled poles, notched and lashed together with baling wire, and on it was a huge canvas, most nonobjective, in the purest and most uncompromising colors. Part of it was unquestionably this room, or at least its air of colored confusion here and all infinity yonder. The ophicleide was in the picture, painstakingly reproduced, looking like the hopper of some giant infernal machine, and in the foreground, some flowers; but the central figure repulsed him—more, it repulsed everything which surrounded it. It did not look exactly like anything familiar and, in a disturbed way, he was happy about that.

Stacked on the floor on each side of the easel were other paintings, some daubs, some full of ruled lines and overlapping planes, but all in this achingly pure color. He realized what was being done with the dozens of colors of house paint in little cans which had so intrigued the storkeeper.

In odd places around the room were clay sculptures, most mounted on pedestals made of sections of tree trunks large enough to stand firmly on their sawed ends. Some of the pedestals were peeled, some painted, and in some the bark texture or the bulges or cleft in the wood had been carried right up into the model, and in others clay had been knived or pressed into the bark all the way

down to the floor. Some of the clay was painted, some not, some ought to have been. There were free forms and gollywogs, a marsupial woman and a guitar with legs, and some, but not an overweening number, of the symbolisms which preoccupy even fairly intelligent psychiatrists. Nowhere was there any furniture per se. There were shelves at all levels and of varying lengths, bearing nail kegs, bolts of cloth, canned goods, tools and cooking utensils. There was a sort of table but it was mostly a workbench, with a vise at one end and at the other, half finished, a crude but exceedingly ingenious foot-powered potter's wheel.

He wondered where MacLyle slept, so he asked him, and again MacLyle reacted as if the words were not words, but a series of pleasant sounds, cocking his head and waiting to see if there would be any more. So the psychiatrist resorted to sign language, making a pillow of his two hands, laying his head on it, closing his eyes. He opened them to see MacLyle nodding eagerly, then going to the white-draped wall. From behind the chenille he brought a hammock, one end of which was fastened to the wall. The other end he carried to the big window and hung on a hook screwed to a heavy stud between the panes. To lie in that hammock would be to swing between heaven and earth like Mahomet's tomb, with all that sky and scenery virtually surrounding the sleeper. His admiration for this idea ceased as MacLyle began making urgent indications for him to get into the hammock. He backed off warily, expostulating, trying to convey to MacLyle that he only wondered, he just wanted to know: no, *no*, he wasn't tired, dammit; but MacLyle became so insistent that he picked the psychiatrist up like a child sulking at bedtime and carried him to the hammock. Any impulse to kick or quarrel was quenched by the nature of this and all other hammocks to be intolerant of shifting burdens, and by the proximity of the large window, which he now saw was built leaning outward, enabling one to look out of the hammock straight down a minimum of four hundred and eighty feet. So all right, he concluded, if you say so. I'm sleepy.

So for the next two hours he lay in the hammock watching MacLyle putter about the place, thinking more or less professional thoughts.

He doesn't or can't speak (he diagnosed): aphasia, motor. He doesn't or can't understand speech: aphasia, sensory. He won't or can't read and write: alexia. And what else?

He looked at all that art—if it *was* art, and any that was, was art by accident—and the gadgetry: the chuntering windmill outside, the sash-weight door closer. He let his eyes follow a length of clothesline dangling unobtrusively down the leaning center post to which his hammock was fastened, and the pulley and fittings from which it hung, and its extension clear across the ceiling to the back wall, and understood finally that it would, when pulled, open two long, narrow horizontal hatches for through ventilation. A small door behind the chenille led to what he correctly surmised was a primitive powder room, built to overhang the precipice, the most perfect no-plumbing solution for that convenience he had ever seen.

He watched MacLyle putter. That was the only word for it, and his actions were the best example of puttering he had ever seen. MacLyle lifted, shifted, and put things down, backed off to judge, returned to lay an approving hand on the thing he had moved. Net effect, nothing tangible—yet one could not say there was no effect, because of the intense satisfaction the man radiated. For minutes he would stand, head cocked, smiling slightly, regarding the half-finished potter's wheel, then explode into activity, sawing, planing, drilling. He would add the finished piece to the cranks and connecting rods already completed, pat it as if it were an obedient child, and walk away, leaving the rest of the job for some other time. With a wood rasp he carefully removed the nose from one of his dried clay figures, and meticulously put on a new one. Always there was this absorption in his own products and processes, and the air of total reward in everything. And there was time, there seemed to be time enough for everything, and always would be.

Here is a man, thought the fairly intelligent psychiatrist, in retreat, but in a retreat the like of which my science has not yet described. For observe: he has reacted toward the primitive in terms of supplying himself with his needs with his own hands and by his own ingenuity, and yet there is nothing primitive in those needs themselves. He works constantly to achieve the comforts

which his history has conditioned him to in the past—electric lights, cross ventilation, trouble-free waste disposal. He exhibits a profound humility in the low rates he pays himself for his labor: he is building a potter's wheel apparently in order to make his own cooking vessels, and since wood is cheap and clay free, his vessel can only cost him less than engine-turned aluminum by a very low evaluation of his own efforts.

His skills are less than his energy (mused the psychiatrist). His carpentry, like his painting and sculpture, shows considerable intelligence, but only moderate training; he can construct but not beautify, draw but not draft, and reach the artistically pleasing only by not erasing the random shake, the accidental cut; so that real creation in his work is, like any random effect, rare and unpredictable. Therefore his reward is in the area of satisfaction—about as wide a generalization as one can make.

What satisfaction? Not in possessions themselves, for this man could have bought better for less. Not in excellence in itself, for he obviously could be satisfied with less than perfection. Freedom, perhaps, from routine, from dominations of work? Hardly, because for all that complexity of this cluttered cottage, it had its order and its system; the presence of an alarm clock conveyed a good deal in this area. He wasn't dominated by regularity—he used it. And his satisfaction? Why, it must lie in this closed circle, himself to himself, and in the very fact of noncommunication!

Retreat . . . retreat. Retreat to savagery and you don't engineer your cross ventilation or adjust a five hundred-foot gravity flush for your john. Retreat into infancy and you don't design and build a potter's wheel. Retreat from people and you don't greet a stranger like . . .

Wait.

Maybe a stranger who had something to communicate, or some way of communication, wouldn't be so welcome. An unsettling thought, that. Running the risk of doing something MacLyle didn't like would be, possibly, a little more unselfish than the challenge warranted.

MacLyle began to cook.

Watching him, the psychiatrist reflected suddenly that this withdrawn and wordless individual was a happy one,

in his own matrix; further, he had fulfilled all his obligations and responsibilities and was bothering no one.

It was intolerable.

It was intolerable because it was a violation of the prime directive of psychiatry—at least, of that school of psychiatry to which he professed, and he was not going to confuse himself by considerations of other, less-tried theories—*It is the function of psychiatry to adjust the aberrate to society, and to restore or increase his usefulness to it.* To yield, to rationalize this man's behavior as balance, would be to fly in the face of science itself; for this particular psychiatry finds its most successful approaches in the scientific method, and it is unprofitable to debate whether or not it is or is not a science. To its practitioner it is, and that's that; it has to be. Operationally speaking, what has been found true, even statistically, must be Truth, and all other things, even Possible, kept the hell out of the toolbox. No known Truth allowed a social entity to secede this way, and, for one, this fairly intelligent psychiatrist was not going to give this—this *suicide* his blessing.

He must, then, find a way to communicate with MacLyle, and when he had found it, he must communicate to him the error of his ways. Without getting thrown over the cliff.

He became aware that MacLyle was looking at him, twinkling. He smiled back before he knew what he was doing, and obeyed MacLyle's beckoning gesture. He eased himself out of the hammock and went to the workbench, where a steaming stew was set out in earthenware bowls. The bowls stood on large plates and were surrounded by a band of carefully sliced tomatoes. He tasted them. They were obviously vine-ripened and had been speckled with a dark green paste which, after studious attention to its aftertaste, he identified as fresh basil mashed with fresh garlic and salt. The effect was symphonic.

He followed suit when MacLyle picked up his own bowl and they went outside and squatted under the old Engelmann spruce to eat. It was a quiet and pleasant occasion, and during it the psychiatrist had plenty of opportunity to size up his man and plan his campaign. He was quite sure now how to proceed, and all he needed was opportunity, which presented itself when MacLyle

rose, stretched, smiled, and went indoors. The psychiatrist followed him to the door and saw him crawl into the hammock and fall almost instantly asleep.

The psychiatrist went to his car and got out his bag of tricks. And so it was late in the afternoon, when MacLyle emerged stretching and yawning from his nap, he found his visitor under the spruce tree, hefting the ophicleide and twiddling its keys in a perplexed and investigatory fashion. MacLyle strode over to him and lifted the ophicleide away with a pleasant I'll-show-you smile, got the monstrous contraption into position, and ran his tongue around the inside of the mouthpiece, large as a demitasse. He had barely time to pucker up his lips at the strange taste there before his irises rolled up completely out of sight and he collapsed like a grounded parachute. The psychiatrist was able only to snatch away the ophicleide in time to keep the mouthpiece from knocking out MacLyle's front teeth.

He set the ophicleide carefully against the tree and straightened MacLyle's limbs. He concentrated for a moment on the pulse, and turned the head to one side so saliva would not drain down the flaccid throat, and then went back to his bag of tricks. He came back and knelt, and MacLyle did not even twitch at the bite of the hypodermics: a careful blend of the nonsoporific tranquilizers Frenquel, chlorpromazine and Reserpine, and a judicious dose of scopolamine, a hypnotic.

The psychiatrist got the water and carefully sponged out the man's mouth, not caring to wait out another collapse the next time he swallowed. Then there was nothing to do but wait, and plan.

Exactly on schedule, according to the psychiatrist's wristwatch, MacLyle groaned and coughed weakly. The psychiatrist immediately and in a firm quiet voice told him not to move. Also not to think. He stayed out of the immediate range of MacLyle's unfocused eyes and explained that MacLyle must trust him, because he was there to help, and not to worry about feeling mixed-up or disoriented. "You don't know where you are or how you got here," he informed MacLyle. He also told MacLyle, who was past forty, that he was thirty-seven years old, but he knew what he was doing.

MacLyle just lay there obediently and thought these

things over and waited for more information. He didn't know where he was or how he had gotten here. He did know that he must trust this voice, the owner of which was here to help him; that he was thirty-seven years old; and his name. In these things he lay and marinated. The drugs kept him conscious, docile, submissive and without guile. The psychiatrist observed and exulted: oh, you azacyclonol, he chanted silently to himself, you pretty piperidyl, handsome hydrochloride, subtle Serpasil. . . . Confidently he left MacLyle and went into the cabin where, after due search, he found some decent clothes and some socks and shoes and brought them out and wrapped the supine patient in them. He helped MacLyle across the clearing and into his car, humming as he did so, for there is none so happy as an expert faced with excellence in his specialty. MacLyle sank back into the cushions and gave one wondering glance at the cabin and at the blare of late light from the bell of the ophicleide; but the psychiatrist told him firmly that these things had nothing to do with him, nothing at all, and MacLyle smiled relievedly and fell to watching the scenery go by, passive as a Pekingese. As they passed the general store MacLyle stirred, but said nothing about it. Instead he asked the psychiatrist if the Ardsmere station was open yet, whereupon the psychiatrist could barely answer him for the impulse to purr like a cat: the Ardsmere station, two stops before MacLyle's suburban town, had burned down and been rebuilt almost six years ago; so now he knew for sure that MacLyle was living in a time preceding his difficulties—a time during which, of course, MacLyle had been able to talk. He crooned his appreciation for chlorpromazine (which had helped MacLyle be tranquil) and he made up a silent song, o doll o' mine, scopolamine, which had made him so very suggestible. But all of this the psychiatrist kept to himself, and answered gravely that yes, they had the Ardsmere Station operating again. And did he have anything else on his mind?

MacLyle considered this carefully, but since all the immediate questions were answered—unswervingly, he *knew* he was safe in the hands of this man, whoever he was; he knew (he thought) his correct age and that he was expected to feel disoriented; he was also under a

command not to think—he placidly shook his head and went back to watching the road unroll under their wheels. “Fallen Rock Zone,” he murmured as they passed a sign. The psychiatrist drove happily down the mountain and across the flats, back to the city where he had hired the car. He left it at the railroad station (“Rail Crossing Road,” murmured MacLyle) and made reservations for a compartment on the train, aircraft being too open and public for his purposes and far too fast for the hourly rate he suddenly decided to apply.

They had time for a silent and companionable dinner before train time, and then at last they were aboard, solid ground beneath, a destination ahead, and the track joints applauding.

The psychiatrist turned off all but one reading lamp and leaned forward. MacLyle’s eyes dilated readily to the dimmer light, and the psychiatrist leaned back comfortably and asked him how he felt. He felt fine and said so. The psychiatrist asked him how old he was, and MacLyle told him, thirty-seven, but he sounded doubtful.

Knowing that the scopolamine was wearing off but the other drugs, the tranquilizers, would hang on for a bit, the psychiatrist drew a deep breath and removed the suggestion; he told MacLyle the truth about his age, and brought him up to the here and now. MacLyle just looked puzzled for a few minutes and then his features settled into an expression that can only be described as not unhappy. “Porter,” was all he said, gazing at the push button on the partition with its little metal sign, and announced that he could read now.

The psychiatrist nodded sagely and offered no comment, being quite willing to let a patient stew in his own juice as long as he produced essence.

MacLyle abruptly demanded to know why he had lost the powers of speech and reading. The psychiatrist raised his eyebrows a little and his shoulders a good deal and smiled one of those “You-tell-me” smiles, and then got up and suggested they sleep on it. He got the porter in to fix the beds and as an afterthought told the man to come back with the evening papers. Nothing can orient a cultural expatriate better than the evening paper. The man did. MacLyle paid no attention to this, one way or the

other. He just climbed into the psychiatrist's spare pajamas thoughtfully and they went to bed.

The psychiatrist didn't know if MacLyle had awakened him on purpose or whether the train's slowing down for a watering stop had done it, or both; anyway, he awoke about three in the morning to find MacLyle standing beside his bunk looking at him fixedly. He closed his eyes and screwed them tight and opened them again, and MacLyle was still there, and now he noticed that MacLyle's reading lamp was lit and the papers were scattered all over the floor. MacLyle said, "You're some kind of doctor," in a flat voice.

The psychiatrist admitted it.

MacLyle said, "Well, this ought to make some sense to you. I was skiing out here years ago when I was a college kid. Accident, fellow I was with broke his leg. Compound. Made him comfortable as I could and went for help. Came back, he'd slid down the mountain, thrashing around, I guess. Crevasse, down in the bottom; took two days to find him, three days to get him out. Frostbite. Gangrene."

The psychiatrist tried to look as if he was following this.

MacLyle said, "The one thing I always remember, him pulling back the bandages all the time to look at his leg. Knew it was gone, couldn't keep himself from watching the stuff spread around and upward. Didn't like to; *had* to. Tried to stop him, finally had to help him or he'd hurt himself. Every ten, fifteen minutes all the way down to the lodge, fifteen hours, looking under the bandages."

The psychiatrist tried to think of something to say and couldn't, so he looked wise and waited.

MacLyle said, "That Donne, that John Donne I used to spout, I always believed that."

The psychiatrist began to misquote the thing about send not to ask for whom the bell . . .

"Yeah, that, but especially '*any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.*' I believed that," MacLyle repeated. "I believed more than that. Not only death. Damn foolishness diminishes me because I am involved. People all the time pushing people around diminishes me. Everybody hungry for a fast buck diminishes me." He picked up a sheet of newspaper and let it

slip away; it flapped off to the corner of the compartment like a huge grave-moth. "I was getting diminished to death and I had to watch it happening to me like that kid with the gangrene, so that's why." The train, crawling now, lurched suddenly and yielded. MacLyle's eyes flicked to the window, where neon beer signs and a traffic light were reluctantly being framed. MacLyle leaned close to the psychiatrist. "I just had to get uninvolved with mankind before I got diminished altogether, everything mankind did was my fault. So I did and now here I am involved again." MacLyle abruptly went to the door. "And for that, thanks."

From a dusty throat the psychiatrist asked him what he was going to do.

"Do?" asked MacLyle cheerfully. "Why, I'm going out there and diminish mankind right back." He was out in the corridor with the door closed before the psychiatrist so much as sat up. He banged it open again and leaned in. He said in the sanest of all possible voices, "Now mind you, doctor, this is only one man's opinion," and was gone. He killed four people before they got him.



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