



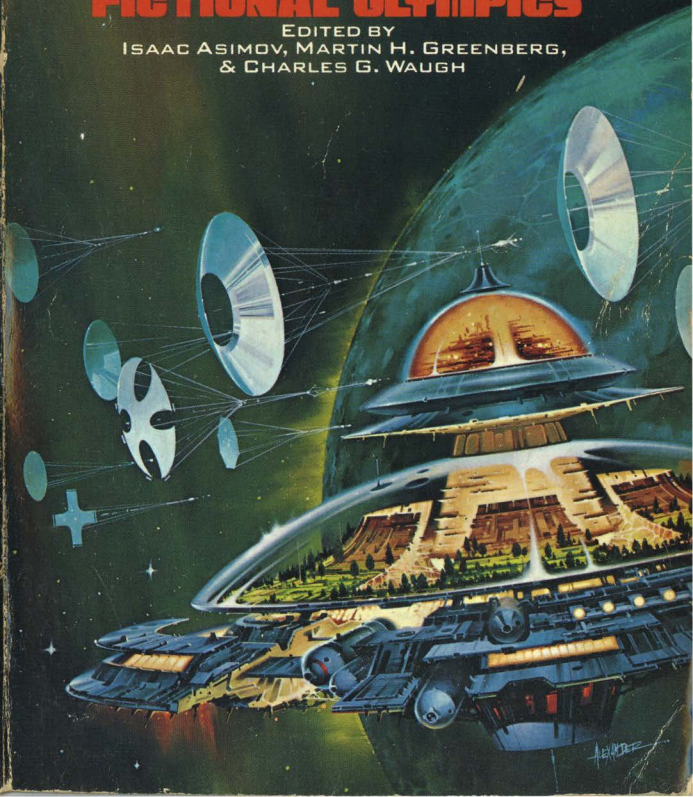
ISAAC ASIMOV'S

WONDERFUL WORLDS OF
SCIENCE FICTION

2

THE SCIENCE FICTIONAL OLYMPICS

EDITED BY
ISAAC ASIMOV, MARTIN H. GREENBERG,
& CHARLES G. WAUGH



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Isaac Asimov's Wonderful Worlds of Science Fiction #2

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ISAAC ASIMOV, MARTIN H. GREENBERG,
AND CHARLES G. WAUGH



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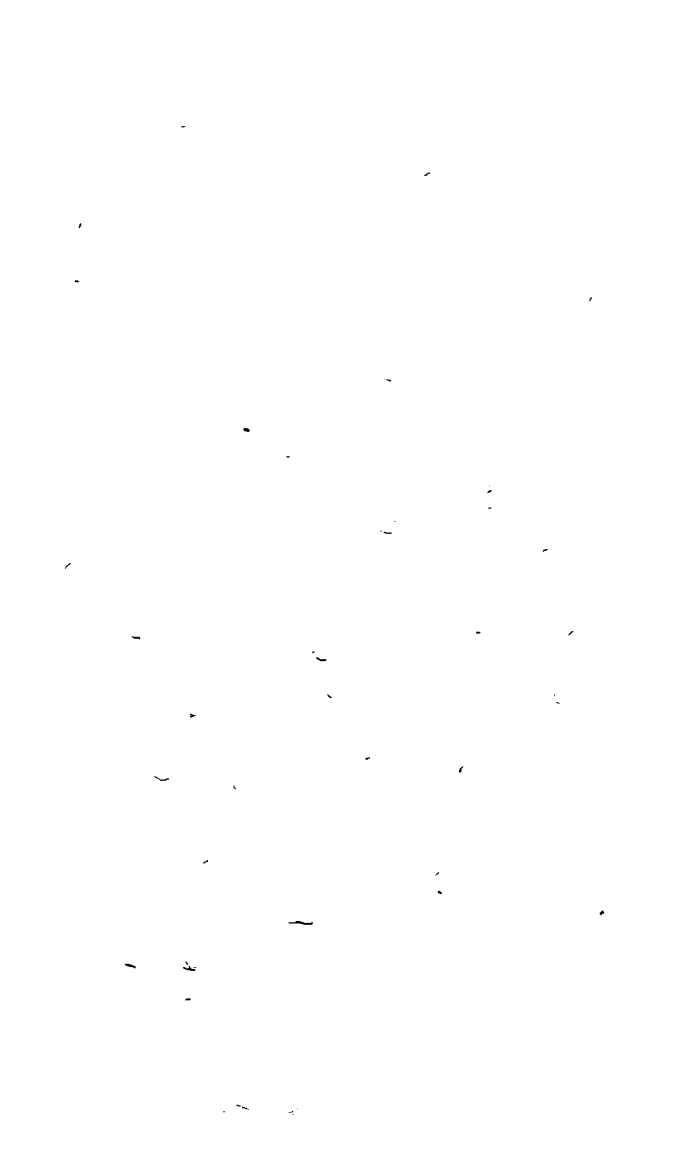
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Introduction: Competition!

by Isaac Asimov

The first games we know of in western literature are those described in the twenty-third book of the *Iliad*, in which the funeral rites of Achilles' friend Patroclus are described. As part of the rites, the Greek chieftains participated in games designed to show their athletic vigor.

There was a chariot race, a boxing match, a wrestling match, a footrace, a gladiatorial contest, an archery match, and a spear-throwing competition. All these things were elements of combat, and they remind one of the play of young animals, in which there is always an element of the skills that will be needed in the serious business of life. The kitten pouncing on a leaf will someday be pouncing on a mouse; the two puppies snarling and biting at each other in exuberant fun will someday be doing the same thing in earnest to establish domination, win food, or gain a mate.

Competition, in other words, is a deadly serious thing.

Passing out of legend and into history, it was the Greeks who made important rituals out of games, holding them periodically as part of religious festivals. The most important of these were the quadrennial competitions held at Olympia, in southwestern Greece, in honor of the supreme god, Zeus. We refer to them as the Olympic Games.

According to tradition, the first Olympic Games were held in 776 B.C., and they were held every four years thereafter without a break for nearly twelve centuries, until the Christian Roman

Emperor, Theodosius, put an end to them because they were a pagan festival (which they were).

During the twelve-century period in which they were celebrated, the Olympic Games were open to contestants from every Greek-speaking city, wherever it might be located, from the Crimea to Spain. The games were, in fact, one of the three great bonds that held together the thousand independent cities of Greece. (The other two were the Greek language and the Homeric poems.) So important were the games that even wars were adjourned long enough to allow contestants to travel to and from Olympia and to compete in peace.

For fifteen centuries after Theodosius had put an end to them, the Olympic Games remained a historic memory, but then they were reinstituted in 1896. Since then, they have been held every four years except when World Wars I and II were in progress. (It is a measure of the decline of civilization that nowadays the games are adjourned for war rather than vice versa.)

Ideally, in the Olympic Games it is amateurs that compete; that is, the contestants do not do it for money, but for glory. In ancient times, the only award for winning was a crown of leaves. However, human beings are human beings and we need not think that the crown of leaves was all, just because it was supposed to be all. Winners gained imperishable glory; great poets wrote odes in their praise; they were honored in all sorts of ways and their names were inscribed in the record books. If they did not make money directly, their status as winners made it possible for them to gain in many ways. (Nowadays, the amateur winners can make money by endorsing products, for instance. No one says they must die of starvation.)

There are two aspects of games, however, which don't figure much in the idealism with which they are surrounded. The Olympics, ancient and modern, may be hymns to amateurism and glory, but the uglier aspects of nationalism leave their mark. It is not the contestant only who wins, but the city or the nation he or she represents. In modern times, certainly, there is a constant adding up of medals for each nation, and a steady drumbeat of national pride or national resentment over winning and losing. Right now, in particular, it is considered extremely important whether the United States or the Soviet Union is ahead in medals. That would not be at all bad if it were a substitute for

war, but it is very bad when war remains a possibility and the bad blood over sports adds to the hatreds that might spark a war.

Then, too, the audience does not necessarily merely watch and approve of athletic skill and endurance. They do not even merely let themselves be influenced by irrelevant causes such as national pride. They often back their opinions, whether shrewd or nationalistic, by money and bet (in the aggregate) huge sums on the outcome.

This is especially true of professional athletic contests, where one might wonder sometimes if there is any interest in the outcome at all, except as a matter of personal profit and loss. Is it conceivable, for instance, that crowds will watch a horserace or a football game without betting on it?

It is not surprising, then, that emotions run ridiculously high among spectators. Soccer games, the favorite spectator sport outside the United States, are sometimes bloodbaths, as spectators turn upon each other violently at some decision of the referee that fills one side with glee and the other with fury. Or, out of delight at victory or rage at defeat, spectators may turn recklessly on the city in which the contest has taken place, inflicting severe damage upon it.

It is not surprising, then, when science fiction writers, whose business it is to investigate the potentialities of the future, imagine such competitive madness as reaching new extremes. They portray violence not in order to slaver over it but to show, dramatically, the absolute insanity of it. Many of the stories in this anthology are of this type and are very powerful indeed.

One more point should be stressed. We think of the Olympic Games as primarily athletic contests, but the ancient Greeks did not limit them to muscular effort at all. They considered the whole body, mind as well as muscle, to be important, and productions of tragedies and comedies, as well as readings of literary works, were also among the contests.

With that in mind, this anthology, *The Science Fictional Olympics*, does not confine itself to athletics alone, but concerns itself with as many different facets of competition as possible, trying to show their uses and abuses.

Decide for yourselves whether the uses are worth the abuses, and while you're deciding, you will enjoy the stories very much.

Run to Starlight

by George R. R. Martin

*George "Railroad" Martin is one of the brightest stars of contemporary science fiction. Still only in his mid-thirties, he already has won three Hugos and one Nebula Award for his short fiction and received critical acclaim both for his sf and for his horror/occult novels like *Fevre Dream* (1982) and *Armageddon Rag* (1983). The best of his short science fiction can be found in *A Song for Lya* and *Other Stories* (1976) and *Songs of Stars and Shadows* (1977). Martin once worked as a sportswriter, a talent he brings to "Run to Starlight." He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.*

Hill stared dourly at the latest free-fall football results from the Belt as they danced across the face of his desk console, but his mind was elsewhere. For the seventeenth time that week, he was silently cursing the stupidity and shortsightedness of the members of the Starport City Council.

The damn councilmen persisted in cutting the allocation for an artificial gravity grid out of the departmental budget every time Hill put it in. They had the nerve to tell him to stick to "traditional" sports in planning his recreational program for the year.

The old fools had no idea of the way free-fall football was catching on throughout the system, although he'd tried to explain it to them God knows how many times. The Belt sport should be

an integral part of any self-respecting recreational program. And on Earth, that meant you had to have a gravity grid. He'd planned on installing it beneath the stadium, but now—

The door to his office slid open with a soft hum. Hill looked up and frowned, snapping off the console. An agitated Jack De Angelis stepped through.

"What is it now?" Hill snapped.

"Uh, Rog, there's a guy here I think you better talk to," De Angelis replied. "He wants to enter a team in the City Football League."

"Registration closed on Tuesday," Hill said. "We've already got twelve teams. No room for any more. And why the hell can't you handle this? You're in charge of the football program."

"This is a special case," De Angelis said.

"Then make an exception and let the team in if you want to," Hill interrupted. "Or don't let them in. It's your program. It's your decision. Must I be bothered with every bit of trivia in this whole damned department?"

"Hey, take it easy, Rog," De Angelis protested. "I don't know what you're so steamed up about. Look, I . . . hell, I'll show you the problem." He turned and went to the door. "Sir, would you step in here a minute?" he said to someone outside.

Hill started to rise from his seat, but sank slowly back into the chair when the visitor appeared in the doorway.

De Angelis was smiling. "This is Roger Hill, the director of the Starport Department of Recreation," he said smoothly. "Rog, let me introduce Remjhard-nei, the head of the Brish'diri trade mission to Earth."

Hill rose again, and offered his hand numbly to the visitor. The Brish'dir was squat and grotesquely broad. He was a good foot shorter than Hill, who stood six feet four, but still gave the impression of dwarfing the director somehow. A hairless, bullet-shaped head was set squarely atop the alien's massive shoulders. His eyes were glittering green marbles sunk in the slick, leathery gray skin. There were no external ears, only small holes on either side of the skull. The mouth was a lipless slash.

Diplomatically ignoring Hill's openmouthed stare, Remjhard bared his teeth in a quick smile and crushed the director's hand in his own. "I am most pleased to meet you, sir," he said in fluent English, his voice a deep bass growl. "I have come to

enter a football team in the fine league your city so graciously runs."

Hill gestured for the alien to take a seat, and sat down himself. De Angelis, still smiling at his boss's stricken look, pulled another chair up to the desk for himself.

"Well, I . . ." Hill began uncertainly. "This team, is it a . . . a Brish'diri team?"

Remjhard smiled again. "Yes," he answered. "Your football, it is a fine game. We of the mission have many times watched it being played on the 3V wallscreens your people were so kind as to install. It has fascinated us. And now some of the half-men of our mission desire to try to play it." He reached slowly into the pocket of the black-and-silver uniform he wore, and pulled out a folded sheet of paper.

"This is a roster of our players," he said, handing it to Hill. "I believe the newsfax said such a list is required to enter your league."

Hill took the paper and glanced down at it uncertainly. It was a list of some fifteen Brish'diri names, neatly typed out. Everything seemed to be in order, but still—

"You'll forgive me, I hope," Hill said, "but I'm somewhat unfamiliar with the expressions of your people. You said . . . half-men? Do you mean children?"

Remjhard nodded, a quick inclination of his bulletlike head. "Yes. Male children, the sons of mission personnel. All are aged either eight or nine Earth seasons."

Hill silently sighed with relief. "I'm afraid it's out of the question, then," he said. "Mr. De Angelis said you were interested in the City League, but that league is for boys aged eighteen and up. Occasionally we'll admit a younger boy with exceptional talent and experience, but never anyone this young." He paused briefly. "We do have several leagues for younger boys, but they've already begun play. It's much too late to add another team at this point."

"Pardon, Director Hill, but I think you misunderstand," Remjhard said. "A Brish'dir male is fully mature at fourteen Earth years. In our culture, such a person is regarded as a full adult. A nine-year-old Brish'dir is roughly equivalent to an eighteen-year-old Terran male in terms of physical and intellectual development. That is why our half-men wish to register for this league and not one of the others, you see."

"He's correct, Rog," De Angelis said. "I've read a little about the Brish'diri, and I'm sure of it. In terms of maturity, these youngsters are eligible for the City League."

Hill threw De Angelis a withering glance. If there was one thing he didn't need at the moment, it was a Brish'diri football team in one of his leagues, and Remjhard was arguing convincingly enough without Jack's help.

"Well, all right," Hill said. "Your team may well be of age, but there are still problems. The Rec Department sports program is for local residents only. We simply don't have room to accommodate everyone who wants to participate. And your home planet is, as I understand, several hundred light-years beyond the Starport city limits." He smiled.

"True," Remjhard said. "But our trade mission has been in Starport for six years. An ideal location due to your city's proximity to Grissom Interstellar Spaceport, from which most of the Brish'diri traders operate while on Earth. All of the current members of the mission have been here for two Earth years, at least. We are Starport residents, Director Hill. I fail to understand how the location of Brishun enters into the matter at hand."

Hill squirmed uncomfortably in his seat, and glared at De Angelis, who was grinning. "Yes, you're probably right again," he said. "But I'm still afraid we won't be able to help you. Our junior leagues are touch football, but the City League, as you might know, is tackle. It can get quite rough at times. State safety regulations require the use of special equipment. To make sure no one is injured seriously. I'm sure you understand. And the Brish'diri . . ."

He groped for words, anxious not to offend. "The—uh—physical construction of the Brish'diri is so different from the Terran that our equipment couldn't possibly fit. Chances of injury would be too great, and the department would be liable. No. I'm sure it couldn't be allowed. Too much risk."

"We would provide special protective equipment," Remjhard said quietly. "We would never risk our own offspring if we did not feel it safe."

Hill started to say something, stopped, and looked to De Angelis for help. He had run out of good reasons why the Brish'diri couldn't enter the league.

Jack smiled. "One problem remains, however," he said,

coming to the director's rescue. "A bureaucratic snag, but a difficult one. Registration for the league closed on Tuesday. We've already had to turn away several teams, and if we make an exception in your case, well . . ." De Angelis shrugged. "Trouble. Complaints. I'm sorry, but we must apply the same rule to all."

Remjhard rose slowly from his seat, and picked up the roster from where it lay on the desk. "Of course," he said gravely. "All must follow the regulations. Perhaps next year we will be on time." He made a formal half-bow to Hill, turned, and walked from the office.

When he was sure the Brish'dir was out of earshot, Hill gave a heartfelt sigh and swiveled to face De Angelis. "That was close," he said. "Christ, a Baldy football team. Half the people in this town lost sons in the Brish'diri War, and they still hate them. I can imagine the complaints."

Hill frowned. "And you! Why couldn't you just get rid of them right away instead of putting me through that?"

De Angelis grinned. "Too much fun to pass up," he said. "I wondered if you'd figure out the right way to discourage him. The Brish'diri have an almost religious respect for laws, rules, and regulations. They wouldn't think of doing anything that would force someone to break a rule. In their culture, that's just as bad as breaking a rule yourself."

Hill nodded. "I would have remembered that myself if I wasn't so paralyzed at the thought of a Brish'diri football team in one of our leagues," he said limply. "And now that that's over with, I want to talk to you about that gravity grid. Do you think there's any way we could rent one instead of buying it outright? The council might go for that. And I was thinking . . ."

A little over three hours later, Hill was signing some equipment requisitions when the office door slid open to admit a brawny, dark-haired man in a nondescript gray suit.

"Yes?" the director said, a trifle impatiently. "Can I help you?"

The dark-haired man flashed a government ID as he took a seat. "Maybe you can. But you certainly haven't so far. I'll tell you that much. My name's Tomkins. Mac Tomkins. I'm from the Federal E.T. Relations Board."

Hill groaned. "I suppose it's about that Brish'diri mess this morning," he said, shaking his head in resignation.

"Yes," Tomkins cut in at once. "We understand that the Brish'diri wanted to register some of their youngsters for a local football league. You forbade it on a technicality. We want to know why."

"Why?" said Hill incredulously, staring at the government man. "Why? For god's sake, the Brish'diri War was only over seven years ago. Half of those boys on our football teams had brothers killed by the Bulletbrains. Now you want me to tell them to play football with the subhuman monsters of seven years back? They'd run me out of town."

Tomkins grimaced, and looked around the room. "Can that door be locked?" he asked, pointing to the door he had come in by.

"Of course," Hill replied, puzzled.

"Lock it, then," Tomkins said. Hill adjusted the appropriate control on his desk.

"What I'm going to tell you should not go beyond this room," Tomkins began.

Hill cut him off with a snort. "Oh, come now, Mr. Tomkins. I may be only a small-time sports official, but I'm not stupid. You're hardly about to impart some galaxy-shattering top secret to a man you met a few seconds ago."

Tomkins smiled. "True. The information's not secret, but it is a little ticklish. We would prefer that every Joe in the street doesn't know about it."

"All right, I'll buy that for now. Now, what's this all about? I'm sorry if I've got no patience with subtlety, but the most difficult problem I've handled in the last year was the protest in the championship game in the Class B Soccer League. Diplomacy just isn't my forte."

"I'll be brief," Tomkins said. "We—E.T. Relations, that is—we want you to admit the Brish'diri team into your football league."

"You realize the furor it would cause?" Hill asked.

"We have some idea. In spite of that, we want them admitted."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because of the furor if they aren't admitted." Tomkins paused to stare at Hill for a second, then apparently reached a decision of some sort and continued. "The Earth-Brishun War

was a ghastly, bloody deadlock, although our propaganda men insist on pretending it was a great victory. No sane man on either side wants it resumed. But not everyone is sane."

The agent frowned in distaste. "There are elements among us who regard the Brish'diri—or the Bulletbrains, or Baldies, or whatever you want to call them—as monsters, even now, seven years after the killing has ended."

"And you think a Brish'diri football team would help to overcome the leftover hates?" Hill interrupted.

"Partially. But that's not the important part. You see, there is also an element among the Brish'diri that regards humans as subhuman—vermin to be wiped from the galaxy. They are a very virile, competitive race. Their whole culture stresses combat. The dissident element I mentioned will seize on your refusal to admit a Brish'diri team as a sign of fear, an admission of human inferiority. They'll use it to agitate for a resumption of the war. We don't want to risk giving them a propaganda victory like that. Relations are too strained as it is."

"But the Brish'dir I spoke to . . ." Hill objected. "I explained it all to him. A rule. Surely their respect for law . . ."

"Remjhard-nei is a leader of the Brish'diri peace faction. *He* personally will defend your position. But he and his son were disappointed by the refusal. They will talk. They already have been talking. And that means that eventually the war faction will get hold of the story and turn it against us."

"I see. But what can I do at this point? I've already told Remjhard that registration closed Tuesday. If I understand correctly, his own morality would never permit him to take advantage of an exception now."

Tomkins nodded. "True. You can't make an exception. Just change the rule. Let in all the teams you refused. Expand the league."

Hill shook his head, wincing. "But our budget . . . it couldn't take it. We'd have more games. We'd need more time, more referees, more equipment."

Tomkins dismissed the problem with a wave of his hand. "The government is already buying the Brish'diri special football uniforms. We'd be happy to cover all your extra costs. You'd get a better recreational program for all concerned."

Hill still looked doubtful. "Well—"

"Moreover," Tomkins said, "we might be able to arrange a

government grant or two to bolster other improvements in your program. Now, how about it?"

Hill's eyes sparkled with sudden interest. "A grant? How big a grant? Could you swing a gravity grid?"

"No problem," said Tomkins. A slow grin spread across his face.

Hill returned the grin. "Then, mister, Starport's got itself a Brish'diri football team. But, oh, are they going to scream!" He flicked on the desk intercom. "Get Jack De Angelis in here," he ordered. "I've got a little surprise for him."

The sky above Starport Municipal Stadium was bleak and dreary on a windy Saturday morning a week later, but Hill didn't mind it at all. The stadium force bubble kept out the thin, wet drizzle that had soaked him to the bone on the way to the game, and the weather fitted his mood beautifully.

Normally, Hill was far too busy to attend any of his department's sporting events. Normally *everyone* was too busy to attend the department's sporting events. The Rec Department leagues got fairly good coverage in the local newspaper, but they seldom drew many spectators. The record was something like four hundred people for a championship game a few years ago.

Or rather, that *was* the record, Hill reminded himself. No more. The stadium was packed today, in spite of the hour, the rain, and everything else. Municipal Stadium was *never* packed except for the traditional Thanksgiving Day football game between Starport High and its archrival Grissom City Prep. But today it was packed.

Hill knew why. It had been drilled into him the hard way after he had made the damn fool decision to let the Brish'diri into the league. The whole city was up in arms. Six local teams had withdrawn from the City League rather than play with the "inhuman monsters." The office switchboard had been flooded with calls daily, the vast majority of them angry denunciations of Hill. A city council member had called for his resignation.

And that, Hill reflected glumly, was probably what it would come to in the end. The local newspaper, which had always been hard-line conservative on foreign affairs, was backing the drive to force Hill out of office. One of its editorials had reminded him gleefully that Starport Municipal Stadium was dedicated to those who had given their lives in the Brish'diri War, and had screamed

about "desecration." Meanwhile, on its sports pages, the paper had taken to calling the Brish'diri team "the Baldy Eagles."

Hill squirmed uncomfortably in his seat on the fifty-yard line, and prayed silently that the game would begin. He could feel the angry stares on the back of his neck, and he had the uneasy impression that he was going to be hit with a rock any second now.

Across the field, he could see the camera installation of one of the big 3V networks. All five of them were here, of course; the game had gotten planetwide publicity. The newsfax wires had also sent reporters, although they had seemed a little confused about what kind of a story this was. One had sent a political reporter, the other a sportswriter.

Out on the stadium's artificial grass, the human team were running through a few plays and warming up. Their bright-red uniforms were emblazoned with "Ken's Computer Repair" in white lettering, and they wore matching white helmets. They looked pretty good, Hill decided from watching them practice. Although they were far from championship caliber. Still, against a team that had never played football before, they should mop up.

De Angelis, wearing a pained expression and a ref's striped shirt, was out on the field talking to his officials. Hill was taking no chances with bad calls in this game. He made sure the department's best men were on hand to officiate.

Tomkins was also there, sitting in the stands a few seconds away from Hill. But the Brish'diri were not. Remjhard wanted to attend, but E.T. Relations, on Hill's advice, had told him to stay at the mission. Instead, the game was being piped to him over closed-circuit 3V.

Hill suddenly straightened in his seat. The Brish'diri team, which called itself the Kosg-Anjehn after a flying carnivore native to Brishun, had arrived, and the players were walking slowly out onto the field.

There was a brief instant of silence, and then someone in the crowd started booing. Others picked it up. Then others. The stadium was filled with the boos. Although, Hill noted with relief, not everyone was joining in. Maybe there were some people who saw things his way.

The Brish'diri ignored the catcalls. Or seemed to, at any rate.

Hill had never seen an angry Brish'dir, and was unsure how one would go about showing his anger.

The Kosg-Anjehn wore tight-fitting black uniforms, with odd-looking elongated silver helmets to cover their bullet-shaped heads. They looked like no football team Hill had ever seen. Only a handful of them stood over five feet, but they were all as squat and broad as a tackle for the Packers. Their arms and legs were thick and stumpy, but rippled with muscles that bulged in the wrong places. The helmeted heads, however, gave an impression of frailty, like eggshells ready to shatter at the slightest impact.

Two of the Brish'diri detached themselves from the group and walked over to De Angelis. Evidently they felt they didn't need a warm-up, and wanted to start immediately. De Angelis talked to them for an instant, then turned and beckoned to the captain of the human team.

"How do you think it'll go?"

Hill turned. It was Tomkins. The E.T. agent had spotted him and struggled through the crowd to his side.

"Hard to say," the director replied. "The Brish'diri have never really played football before, so the odds are they'll lose. Being from a heavy-gravity planet, they'll be stronger than the humans, so that might give them an edge. But they're also a lot slower from what I hear."

"I'll have to root them home," Tomkins said with a smile. "Bolster the cause of interstellar relations and all that."

Hill scowled. "*You* root them home if you like. I'm pulling for the humans. Thanks to you, I'm in enough trouble already. If they catch me rooting for the Brish'diri, they'll tear me to shreds."

He turned his attention back to the field. The Computermen had won the toss, and elected to receive. One of the taller Brish'diri was going back to kick off.

"Tuhgayh-dei," Tomkins provided helpfully. "The son of the mission's chief linguist." Hill nodded.

Tuhgayh-dei ran forward with a ponderous, lumbering gallop, nearly stopped when he finally reached the football, and slammed his foot into it awkwardly but hard. The ball landed in the upper tier of the stands, and a murmur went through the crowd.

"Pretty good," Tomkins said. "Don't you think?"

"Too good," replied Hill. He did not elaborate.

The humans took the ball on their twenty. The Computermen went into a huddle, broke it with a loud clap, and ran to their positions. A ragged cheer went up from the stands.

The humans went down into the three-point stance. Their Brish'diri opponents did not. The alien linemen just stood there, hands dangling at their sides, crouching a little.

"They don't know much about football," Hill said. "But after that kickoff, I wonder if they have to."

The ball was snapped, and the quarterback for Ken's Computer Repair, a rangy former high school star named Sullivan, faded back to pass. The Brish'diri rushed forward in a crude blitz, and crashed into the human linemen.

An instant later, Sullivan was lying facedown in the grass, buried under three Brish'diri. The aliens had blown through the offensive line as if it didn't exist.

That made it second and fifteen. The humans huddled again, came out to another cheer, not quite so loud as the first one. The ball was snapped. Sullivan handed off to a beefy fullback, who crashed straight ahead.

One of the Brish'diri brought him down before he went half a yard. It was a clumsy tackle, around the shoulders. But the force of the contact knocked the fullback several yards in the wrong direction.

When the humans broke from their huddle for the third time, the cheer could scarcely be heard. Again Sullivan tried to pass. Again the Brish'diri blasted through the line en masse. Again Sullivan went down for a loss.

Hill groaned. "This looks worse every minute," he said.

Tomkins didn't agree. "I don't think so. They're doing fine. What difference does it make who wins?"

Hill didn't bother to answer that.

There was no cheering when the humans came out in punt formation. Once more the Brish'diri put on a strong rush, but the punter got the ball away before they reached him.

It was a good, deep kick. The Kosg-Anjehn took over on their own twenty-five-yard line. Marhdaln-nei, Remjhard's son, was the Brish'diri quarterback. On the first play from scrimmage, he handed off to a halfback, a runt built like a tank.

The Brish'diri blockers flattened their human opponents almost effortlessly, and the runt plowed through the gaping hole, ran over two would-be tacklers, and burst into the clear. He was

horribly slow, however, and the defenders finally brought him down from behind after a modest thirty-yard gain. But it took three people to stop him.

On the next play, Marhdaln tried to pass. He got excellent protection, but his receivers, trudging along at top speed, had defensemen all over them. And the ball, when thrown, went sizzling over the heads of Brish'diri and humans alike.

Marhdaln returned to the ground again after that, and handed off to the runt halfback once more. This time he tried to sweep around end, but was hauled to the ground after a gain of only five yards by a quartet of human tacklers.

That made it third and five. Marhdaln kept to the ground. He gave the ball to his other halfback, and the brawny Brish'dir smashed up the middle. He was a little faster than the runt. When he got in the clear, only one man managed to catch him from behind. And one wasn't enough. The alien shrugged off the tackle and lumbered on across the goal line.

The extra-point try went under the crossbar instead of over it. But it still nearly killed the poor guy in the stands who tried to catch the ball.

Tomkins was grinning. Hill shook his head in disgust. "This isn't the way it's supposed to go," he said. "They'll kill us if the Brish'diri win."

The kickoff went out of the stadium entirely this time. On the first play from the twenty, a Brish'diri lineman roared through the line and hit Sullivan just as he was handing off. Sullivan fumbled.

Another Brish'dir picked up the loose ball and carried it into the end zone while most of the humans were still lying on the ground.

"My God," said Hill, feeling a bit numb. "They're too strong. They're too damn strong. The humans can't cope with their strength. Can't stop them."

"Cheer up," said Tomkins. "It can't get much worse for your side."

But it did. It got a lot worse.

On offense, the Brish'diri were well-nigh unstoppable. Their runners were all short on speed, but made up for it with muscle. On play after play, they smashed straight up the middle behind a wall of blockers, flicking tacklers aside like bothersome insects.

And then Marhdaln began to hit on his passes. Short passes,

of course. The Brish'diri lacked the speed to cover much ground. But they could outjump any human, and they snared pass after pass in the air. There was no need to worry about interceptions. The humans simply couldn't hang on to Marhdaln's smoking pitches.

On defense, things were every bit as bad. The Computermen couldn't run against the Brish'diri line. And Sullivan seldom had time to complete a pass, for the alien rushers were unstoppable. The few passes he did hit on went for touchdowns; no Brish'dir could catch a human from behind. But those were few and far between.

When Hill fled the stadium in despair at the half, the score was Kosg-Anjehn 37, Ken's Computer Repair 7.

The final score was 57-14. The Brish'diri had emptied their bench in the second half.

Hill didn't have the courage to attend the next Brish'diri game later in the week. But nearly everyone else in the city showed up to see if the Kosg-Anjehn could do it again.

They did. In fact, they did even better. They beat Anderson's Drugs by a lopsided 61-9 score.

After the Brish'diri won their third contest, 43-17, the huge crowds began tapering off. The Starport Municipal Stadium was only three-quarters full when the Kosg-Anjehn rolled over the Stardusters, 38-0, and a mere handful showed up on a rainy Thursday afternoon to see the aliens punish the United Veterans Association, 51-6. And no one came after that.

For Hill, the Brish'diri win over the U.V.A.-sponsored team was the final straw. The local paper made a heyday out of that, going on and on about the "ironic injustice" of having the U.V.A. slaughtered by the Brish'diri in a stadium dedicated to the dead veterans of the Brish'diri War. And Hill, of course, was the main villain in the piece.

The phone calls had finally let up by that point. But the mail had been flowing into his office steadily, and most of it was not very comforting. The harassed rec director got a few letters of commendation and support, but the bulk of the flood speculated crudely about his ancestry or threatened his life and property.

Two more city councilmen had come out publicly in favor of Hill's dismissal after the Brish'diri defeated the U.V.A. Several others on the council were wavering, while Hill's supporters,

who backed him strongly in private, were afraid to say anything for the record. The municipal elections were simply too close, and none of them was willing to risk his political skin.

And of course the assistant director of recreation, next in line for Hill's job, had wasted no time in saying *he* would certainly never have done such an unpatriotic thing.

With disaster piling upon disaster, it was only natural that Hill reacted with something less than enthusiasm when he walked into his office a few days after the fifth Kosg-Anjehn victory and found Tomkins sitting at his desk waiting for him.

"And what in the hell do you want now?" Hill roared at the E.T. Relations man.

Tomkins looked slightly abashed, and got up from the director's chair. He had been watching the latest free-fall football results on the desk console while waiting for Hill to arrive.

"I've got to talk to you," Tomkins said. "We've got a problem."

"We've got lots of problems," Hill replied. He strode angrily to his desk, sat down, flicked off the console, and pulled a sheaf of papers from a drawer.

"This is the latest of them," he continued, waving the papers at Tomkins. "One of the kids broke his leg in the Starduster game. It happens all the time. Football's a rough game. You can't do anything to prevent it. In a normal case, the department would send a letter of apology to the parents, our insurance would pay for it, and everything would be forgotten.

"But not in this case. Oh, no. This injury was inflicted while the kid was playing against the Brish'diri. So his parents are charging negligence on our part and suing the city. So our insurance company refuses to pay up. It claims the policy doesn't cover damage by inhuman, superstrong, alien monsters. Bah! How's that for a problem, Mr. Tomkins? Plenty more where that came from."

Tomkins frowned. "Very unfortunate. But my problem is a lot more serious than that." Hill started to interrupt, but the E.T. Relations man waved him down. "No, please, hear me out. This is very important."

He looked around for a seat, grabbed the nearest chair, and pulled it up to the desk. "Our plans have backfired badly," he began. "There has been a serious miscalculation—our fault

entirely, I'm afraid. E.T. Relations failed to consider *all* the ramifications of this Brish'diri football team."

Hill fixed him with an iron stare. "What's wrong now?"

"Well," Tomkins said awkwardly, "we knew that refusal to admit the Kosg-Anjehn into your league would be a sign of human weakness and fear to the Brish'diri war faction. But once you admitted them, we thought the problem was solved.

"It wasn't. We went wrong when we assumed that winning or losing would make no difference to the Brish'diri. To us, it was just a game. Didn't matter who won. After all, Brish'diri and Terrans would be getting to know each other, competing harmlessly on even terms. Nothing but good could come from it, we felt."

"So?" Hill interrupted. "Get to the point."

Tomkins shook his head sadly. "The point is, we didn't know the Brish'diri would win so *big*. And so *regularly*." He paused. "We—uh—we got a transmission late last night from one of our men on Brishun. It seems the Brish'diri war faction is using the one-sided football scores as propaganda to prove the racial inferiority of humans. They seem to be getting a lot of mileage out of it."

Hill winced. "So it was all for nothing. So I've subjected myself to all this abuse and endangered my career for absolutely nothing. Great! That was all I needed, I tell you."

"We still might be able to salvage something," Tomkins said. "That's why I came to see you. If you can arrange it for the Brish'diri to *lose*, it would knock holes in that superiority yarn and make the war faction look like fools. It would discredit them for quite a while."

"And just how am I supposed to *arrange* for them to lose, as you so nicely put it? What do you think I'm running here, anyway, professional wrestling?"

Tomkins just shrugged lamely. "I was hoping you'd have some ideas," he said.

Hill leaned forward, and flicked on his intercom. "Is Jack out there?" he asked. "Good. Send him in."

The lanky sports official appeared less than a minute later. "You're on top of this city football mess," Hill said. "What's the chances the Kosg-Anjehn will lose?"

De Angelis looked puzzled. "Not all that good, offhand," he replied. "They've got a damn fine team."

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a notebook. "Let me check their schedule," he continued, thumbing through the pages. He stopped when he found the place.

"Well, the league's got a round-robin schedule, as you know. Every team plays every other team once, best record is champion. Now the Brish'diri are currently 5-0, and they've beaten a few of the better teams. We've got ten teams left in the league, so they've got four games left to play. Only, two of those are with the weakest teams in the league, and the third opponent is only mediocre."

"And the fourth?" Hill said hopefully.

"That's your only chance. An outfit sponsored by a local tavern, the Blastoff Inn. Good team. Fast, strong. Plenty of talent. They're also 5-0, and should give the Brish'diri some trouble." De Angelis frowned. "But, to be frank, I've seen both teams, and I'd still pick the Brish'diri. That ground game of theirs is just too much." He snapped the notebook shut and pocketed it again.

"Would a close game be enough?" Hill said, turning to Tomkins again.

The E.T. Relations man shook his head. "No. They have to be beaten. If they lose, the whole season's meaningless. Proves nothing but that the two races can compete on roughly equal terms. But if they win, it looks like they're invincible, and our stature in Brish'diri eyes takes a nosedive."

"Then they'll have to lose, I guess," Hill said. His gaze shifted back to De Angelis. "Jack, you and me are going to have to do some hard thinking about how the Kosg-Anjehn can be beaten. And then we're going to call up the manager of the Blastoff Inn team and give a few tips. You have any ideas?"

De Angelis scratched his head thoughtfully. "Well . . ." he began. "Maybe we . . ."

During the two weeks that followed, De Angelis met with the Blastoff Inn coach regularly to discuss plans and strategy, and supervised a few practice sessions. Hill, meanwhile, was fighting desperately to keep his job, and jotting down ideas on how to beat the Brish'diri during every spare moment.

Untouched by the furor, the Kosg-Anjehn won its sixth game handily, 40-7, and then rolled to devastating victories over the circuit's two cellar-dwellers. The margins were 73-0 and 62-7.

That gave them an unblemished 8-0 ledger with one game left to play.

But the Blastoff Inn team was also winning regularly, although never as decisively. It too would enter the last game of the season undefeated.

The local paper heralded the showdown with a sports-page streamer on the day before the game. The lead opened, "The stakes will be high for the entire human race tomorrow at Municipal Stadium, when Blastoff Inn meets the Brish'diri Baldy Eagles for the championship of the Department of Recreation City Football League."

The reporter who wrote the story never dreamed how close to the truth he actually was.

The crowds returned to the stadium for the championship game, although they fell far short of a packed house. The local paper was there too. But the 3V networks and the newsfax wires were long gone. The novelty of the story had worn off quickly.

Hill arrived late, just before game time, and joined Tomkins on the fifty-yard line. The E.T. agent seemed to have cheered up somewhat. "Our guys looked pretty good during the warm-up," he told the director. "I think we've got a chance."

His enthusiasm was not catching, however. "Blastoff Inn might have a chance, but I sure don't," Hill said glumly. "The city council is meeting tonight to consider a motion calling for my dismissal. I have a strong suspicion that it's going to pass, no matter who wins this afternoon."

"Hmmm," said Tomkins, for want of anything better to say. "Just ignore the old fools. Look, the game's starting."

Hill muttered something under his breath and turned his attention back to the field. The Brish'diri had lost the toss once more, and the kickoff had once again soared out of the stadium. It was first and ten for Blastoff Inn on its own twenty.

And at that point the script suddenly changed.

The humans lined up for the first play of the game, but with a difference. Instead of playing immediately in back of the center, the Blastoff quarterback was several yards deep, in a shotgun formation.

The idea, Hill recalled, was to take maximum advantage of human speed, and mount a strong passing offense. Running against the Brish'diri was all but impossible, he and De Angelis

had concluded after careful consideration. That meant an aerial attack, and the only way to provide that was to give the Blastoff quarterback time to pass. Ergo, the shotgun formation.

The hike from center was dead on target, and the Blastoff receivers shot off downfield, easily outpacing the ponderous Brish'diri defensemen. As usual, the Kosg-Anjehn crashed through the line en masse, but they had covered only half the distance to the quarterback before he got off the pass.

It was a long bomb, a psychological gambit to shake up the Brish'diri by scoring on the first play of the game. Unfortunately, the pass was slightly overthrown.

Hill swore.

It was now second and ten. Again the humans lined up in a shotgun offense, and again the Blastoff quarterback got off the pass in time. It was a short, quick pitch to the sideline, complete for a nine-yard gain. The crowd cheered lustily.

Hill wasn't sure what the Brish'diri would expect on third and one. But whatever it was, they didn't get it. With the aliens still slightly off balance, Blastoff went for the bomb again.

This time it was complete. All alone in the open, the fleet human receiver snagged the pass neatly and went all the way in for the score. The Brish'diri never laid a hand on him.

The crowd sat in stunned silence for a moment when the pass was caught. Then, when it became clear that there was no way to prevent the score, the cheering began, and peaked slowly to an earsplitting roar. The stadium rose to its feet as one, screaming wildly.

For the first time all season, the Kosg-Anjehn trailed. A picture-perfect placekick made the score 7-0 in favor of Blastoff Inn.

Tomkins was on his feet, cheering loudly. Hill, who had remained seated, regarded him dourly. "Sit down," he said. "The game's not over yet."

The Brish'diri soon underlined that point. No sooner did they take over the ball than they came pounding back upfield, smashing into the line again and again. The humans alternated between a dozen different defensive formations. None of them seemed to do any good. The Brish'diri steamroller ground ahead inexorably.

The touchdown was an anticlimax. Luckily, however, the extra-point try failed. Tuhgayh-dei lost a lot of footballs, but he had still not developed a knack for putting his kicks between the crossbars.

The Blastoff offense took the field again. They looked determined. The first play from scrimmage was a short pass over the middle, complete for fifteen yards. Next came a tricky double pass. Complete for twelve yards.

On the following play, the Blastoff fullback tried to go up the middle. He got creamed for a five-yard loss.

"If they stop our passing, we're dead," Hill said to Tomkins, without taking his eyes off the field.

Luckily, the Blastoff quarterback quickly gave up on the idea of establishing a running game. A prompt return to the air gave the humans another first down. Three plays later, they scored. Again the crowd roared.

Trailing now, 14-6, the Brish'diri once more began to pound their way upfield. But the humans, elated by their lead, were a little tougher now. Reading the Brish'diri offense with confident precision, the defensemen began gang-tackling the alien runners.

The Kosg-Anjehn drive slowed down, then stalled. They were forced to surrender the ball near the fifty-yard line.

Tomkins started pounding Hill on the back. "You did it," he said. "We stopped them on offense too. We're going to win."

"Take it easy," Hill replied. "That was a fluke. Several of our men just happened to be in the right place at the right time. It's happened before. No one ever said the Brish'diri scored every time they got the ball. Only most of the time."

Back on the field, the Blastoff passing attack was still humming smoothly. A few accurate throws put the humans on the Kosg-Anjehn's thirty.

And then the aliens changed formations. They took several men off the rush, and put them on pass defense. They started double-teaming the Blastoff receivers. Except it wasn't normal double-teaming. The second defender was playing far back of the line of scrimmage. By the time the human had outrun the first Brish'diri, the second would be right on top of him.

"I was afraid of something like this," Hill said. "We're not the only ones who can react to circumstances."

The Blastoff quarterback ignored the shift in the alien defense, and stuck to his aerial game plan. But his first pass from the thirty, dead on target, was batted away by a Brish'diri defender who happened to be right on top of the play.

The same thing happened on second down. That made it third

and ten. The humans called time out. There was a hurried conference on the sidelines.

When action resumed, the Blastoff offense abandoned the shotgun formation. Without the awesome Brish'diri blitz to worry about, the quarterback was relatively safe in his usual position.

There was a quick snap, and the quarterback got rid of the ball equally quickly, an instant before a charging Brish'dir bore him to the ground. The halfback who got the handoff streaked to the left in an end run.

The other Brish'diri defenders lumbered toward him en masse to seal shut the sideline. But just as he reached the sideline, still behind the line of scrimmage, the Blastoff halfback handed off to a teammate streaking right.

A wide grin spread across Hill's face. A reverse!

The Brish'diri were painfully slow to change directions. The human swept around right end with ridiculous ease and shot upfield, surrounded by blockers. The remaining Brish'diri closed in. One or two were taken out by team blocks. The rest found it impossible to lay their hands on the swift, darting runner. Dodging this way and that, he wove a path neatly between them and loped into the end zone.

Once more the stadium rose to its feet. This time Hill stood up too.

Tomkins was beaming again. "Ha!" he said. "I thought you were the one who said we couldn't run against them."

"Normally we can't," the director replied. "There's no way to run over or through them, so runs up the middle are out. End runs are better, but if they're in their normal formation, that too is a dreary prospect. There is no way a human runner can get past a wall of charging Brish'diri.

"However, when they spread out like they just did, they give us an open field to work with. We can't go over or through them, no, but we sure as hell can go *between* them when they're scattered all over the field. And Blastoff Inn has several excellent open-field runners."

The crowd interrupted him with another roar to herald a successful extra-point conversion. It was now 21-6.

The game was far from over, however. The human defense was not nearly as successful on the next series of downs. Instead of relying exclusively on the running game, Marhdaln-nei kept

his opponents guessing, with some of his patented short, hard pop passes.

To put on a more effective rush, the Blastoff defense spread out at wide intervals. The offensive line thus opened up, and several humans managed to fake out slower Brish'diri blockers and get past them to the quarterback. Marhdaln was even thrown for a loss once.

But the Blastoff success was short-lived. Marhdaln adjusted quickly. The widely spread human defense, highly effective against the pass, was a total failure against the run. The humans were too far apart to gang-tackle. And there was no way short of mass assault to stop a Brish'dir in full stride.

After that, there was no stopping the Kosg-Anjehn, as Marhdaln alternated between the pass and the run according to the human defensive formation. The aliens marched upfield quickly for their second touchdown.

This time, even the extra point was on target.

The Brish'diri score had taken some of the steam out of the crowd, but the Blastoff Inn offense showed no signs of being disheartened when they took the field again. With the aliens back in their original blitz defense, the human quarterback fell back on the shotgun once more.

His first pass was overthrown, but the next three in a row were dead on target and moved Blastoff to the Kosg-Anjehn forty. A running play, inserted to break the monotony, ended in a six-yard loss. Then came another incomplete pass. The toss was perfect, but the receiver dropped the ball.

That made it third and ten, and a tremor of apprehension went through the crowd. Nearly everyone in the stadium realized that the humans had to keep scoring to stay in the game.

The snap from center was quick and clean. The Blastoff quarterback snagged the ball, took a few unhurried steps backward to keep at a safe distance from the oncoming Brish'diri rushers, and tried to pick out a receiver. He scanned the field carefully. Then he reared back and unleashed a bomb.

It looked like another touchdown. The human had his alien defender beaten by a good five yards and was still gaining ground. The pass was a beauty.

But then, as the ball began to spiral downward, the Brish'diri defender stopped suddenly in midstride. Giving up his hopeless

chase, he craned his head around to look for the ball, spotted it, braced himself—

—and jumped.

Brish'diri leg muscles, evolved for the heavy gravity of Brishun, were far more powerful than their human counterparts. Despite their heavier bodies, the Brish'diri could easily outjump any human. But so far they had only taken advantage of that fact to snare Marhdaln's pop passes.

But now, as Hill blinked in disbelief, the Kosg-Anjehn defenseman leaped at least five feet into the air to meet the descending ball in midair and knock it aside with a vicious backhand slap.

The stadium moaned.

Forced into a punting situation, Blastoff Inn suddenly seemed to go limp. The punter fumbled the snap from center, and kicked the ball away when he tried to pick it up. The Brish'dir who picked it up got twenty yards before he was brought down.

The human defense this time put up only token resistance as Marhdaln led his team downfield on a series of short passes and devastating runs.

It took the Brish'diri exactly six plays to narrow the gap to 21-19. Luckily, Tuhgayh-nei missed another extra point.

There was a loud cheer when the Blastoff offense took the field again. But right from the first play after the kickoff, it was obvious that something had gone out of them.

The human quarterback, who had been giving a brilliant performance, suddenly became erratic. To add to his problems, the Brish'diri were suddenly jumping all over the field.

The alien kangaroo pass defense had several severe limitations. It demanded precise timing and excellent reflexes on the part of the jumpers, neither of which was a Brish'diri forte. But it was a disconcerting tactic that the Blastoff quarterback had never come up against before. He didn't know quite how to cope with it.

The humans drove to their own forty, bogged down, and were forced to punt. The Kosg-Anjehn promptly marched the ball back the other way and scored. For the first time in the game, they led.

The next Blastoff drive was a bit more successful, and reached the Brish'diri twenty before it ground to a halt. The humans salvaged the situation with a field goal.

The Kosg-Anjehn rolled up another score, driving over the goal line just seconds before the half ended.

The score stood at 31-24 in favor of the Brish'diri.

And there was no secret about the way the tide was turning.

It had grown very quiet in the stands.

Tomkins, wearing a worried expression, turned to Hill with a sigh. "Well, maybe we'll make a comeback in the second half. We're only down seven. That's not so bad."

"Maybe," Hill said doubtfully. "But I don't think so. They've got all the momentum. I hate to say so, but I think we're going to get run out of the stadium in the second half."

Tomkins frowned. "I certainly hope not. I'd hate to see what the Brish'diri war faction would do with a really lopsided score. Why, they'd—" He stopped, suddenly aware that Hill wasn't paying the slightest bit of attention. The director's eyes had wandered back to the field.

"Look," Hill said, pointing. "By the gate. Do you see what I see?"

"It looks like a car from the trade mission," the E.T. agent said, squinting to make it out.

"And who's that getting out?"

Tomkins hesitated. "Remjhard-nei," he said at last.

The Brish'dir climbed smoothly from the low-slung black vehicle, walked a short distance across the stadium grass, and vanished through the door leading to one of the dressing rooms.

"What's he doing here?" Hill asked. "Wasn't he supposed to stay away from the games?"

Tomkins scratched his head uneasily. "Well, that's what we advised. Especially at first, when hostility was at its highest. But he's not a *prisoner*, you know. There's no way we could force him to stay away from the games if he wants to attend."

Hill was frowning. "Why should he take your advice all season and suddenly disregard it now?"

Tomkins shrugged. "Maybe he wanted to see his son win a championship."

"Maybe. But I don't think so. There's something funny going on here."

By the time the second half was ready to begin, Hill was feeling even more apprehensive. The Kosg-Anjehn had taken the

field a few minutes earlier, but Remjhard had not reappeared. He was still down in the alien locker room.

Moreover, there was something subtly different about the Brish'diri as they lined up to receive the kickoff. Nothing drastic. Nothing obvious. But somehow the atmosphere was changed. The aliens appeared more carefree, more relaxed. Almost as if they had stopped taking their opponents seriously.

Hill could sense the difference. He'd seen other teams with the same sort of attitude before, in dozens of other contests. It was the attitude of a team that already knows how the game is going to come out. The attitude of a team that knows it is sure to win—or doomed to lose.

The kickoff was poor and wobbly. A squat Brish'dir took it near the thirty and headed upfield. Two Blastoff tacklers met him at the thirty-five.

He fumbled.

The crowd roared. For a second the ball rolled loose on the stadium grass. A dozen hands reached for it, knocking it this way and that. Finally, a brawny Blastoff lineman landed squarely on top of it and trapped it beneath him.

And suddenly the game turned around again.

"I don't believe it," Hill said. "That was it. The break we needed. After that touchdown pass was knocked aside, our team just lost heart. But now, after this, look at them. We're back in this game."

The Blastoff offense raced onto the field, broke their huddle with an enthusiastic shout, and lined up. It was first and ten from the Brish'diri twenty-eight.

The first pass was deflected off a bounding Brish'dir. The second, however, went for a touchdown.

The score was tied.

The Kosg-Anjehn held on to the kickoff this time. They put the ball in play near the twenty-five.

Marhdaln opened the series of downs with a pass. No one, human or Brish'dir, was within ten yards of where it came down. The next play was a run. But the Kosg-Anjehn halfback hesitated oddly after he took the handoff. Given time to react, four humans smashed into him at the line of scrimmage. Marhdaln went back to the air. The pass was incomplete again.

The Brish'diri were forced to punt.

Up in the stands, Tomkins was laughing wildly. He began

slapping Hill on the back again. "Look at that! Not even a first down. We held them. And you said they were going to run us out of the stadium."

A strange half-smile danced across the director's face. "Ummm," he said. "So I did." The smile faded.

It was a good, solid punt, but Blastoff's deep man fielded it superbly and ran it back to the fifty. From there, it took only seven plays for the human quarterback, suddenly looking cool and confident again, to put the ball in the end zone.

Bouncing Brish'diri had evidently ceased to disturb him. He simply threw the ball through spots where they did not happen to be bouncing.

This time the humans missed the extra point. But no one cared. The score was 37-31. Blastoff Inn was ahead again.

And they were ahead to stay. No sooner had the Kosg-Anjehn taken over again than Marhdaln threw an interception. It was the first interception he had thrown all season.

Naturally, it was run back for a touchdown.

After that, the Brish'diri seemed to revive a little. They drove three-quarters of the way down the field, but then they bogged down as soon as they got within the shadow of the goalposts. On fourth and one from the twelve-yard line, the top Brish'diri runner slipped and fell behind the line of scrimmage.

Blastoff took over. And scored.

From then on, it was more of the same.

The final score was 56-31. The wrong team had been run out of the stadium.

Tomkins, of course, was in ecstasy. "We did it. I knew we could do it. This is perfect, just perfect. We humiliated them. The war faction will be totally discredited now. They'll never be able to stand up under the ridicule." He grinned and slapped Hill soundly on the back once again.

Hill winced under the blow, and eyed the E.T. man dourly. "There's something funny going on here. If the Brish'diri had played all season the way they played in the second half, they never would have gotten this far. Something happened in that locker room during the halftime."

Nothing could dent Tomkins's grin, however. "No, no," he said. "It was the fumble. That was what did it. It demoralized

them, and they fell apart. They just clutched, that's all. It happens all the time."

"Not to teams this good, it doesn't," Hill replied. But Tomkins wasn't around to hear. The E.T. agent had turned abruptly and was weaving his way through the crowd, shouting something about being right back.

Hill frowned and turned back to the field. The stadium was emptying quickly. The rec director stood there for a second, still looking puzzled. Then suddenly he vaulted the low fence around the field, and set off across the grass.

He walked briskly across the stadium and down into the visitors' locker room. The Brish'diri were changing clothes in sullen silence, and filing out of the room slowly to the airbus that would carry them back to the trade mission.

Remjhard-nei was sitting in a corner of the room.

The Brish'dir greeted him with a slight nod. "Director Hill. Did you enjoy the game? It was a pity our half-men failed in their final test. But they still performed creditably, do you not think?"

Hill ignored the question. "Don't give me the bit about failing, Remjhard. I'm not as stupid as I look. Maybe no one else in the stadium realized what was going on out there this afternoon, but I did. You didn't lose that game. You threw it. Deliberately. And I want to know why!"

Remjhard stared at Hill for a long minute. Then, very slowly, he rose from the bench on which he was seated. His face was blank and expressionless, but his eyes glittered in the dim light.

Hill suddenly realized that they were alone in the locker room. Then he remembered the awesome Brish'diri strength, and took a hasty step backward, away from the alien.

"You realize," Remjhard said gravely, "that it is a grave insult to accuse a Brish'dir of dishonorable conduct?"

The emissary took another careful look around the locker room to make sure the two of them were alone. Then he took another step toward Hill.

And broke into a wide smile when the director, edging backward, almost tripped over a locker.

"But, of course, there is no question of dishonor here," the alien continued. "Honor is too big for a half-man's play. And, to be sure, in the rules that you furnished us, there was no

provision requiring participants to . . .” He paused. “. . . to play at their best, shall we say?”

Hill, untangling himself from the locker, sputtered. “But there are unwritten rules, traditions. This sort of thing simply is not sporting.”

Remjhard was still smiling. “To a Brish’di, there is nothing as meaningless as an unwritten rule. It is a contradiction in terms, as you say.”

“But *why*?” said Hill. “That’s what I can’t understand. Everyone keeps telling me that your culture is virile, competitive, proud. Why should you throw the game? Why should you make yourself look bad? *Why*?”

Remjhard made an odd, gurgling noise. Had he been a human, Hill would have thought he was choking. Instead, he assumed he was laughing.

“Humans amuse me,” the Brish’di said at last. “You attach a few catch phrases to a culture, and you think you understand it. And if something disagrees with your picture, you are shocked.

“I am sorry, Director Hill. Cultures are not that simple. They are very complex mechanisms. A word like *pride* does not describe everything about the Brish’di.

“Oh, we are proud. Yes. And competitive. Yes. But we are also intelligent. And our values are flexible enough to adjust to the situation at hand.”

Remjhard paused again, and looked Hill over carefully. Then he decided to continue. “This football of yours is a fine game, Director Hill. I told you that once before. I mean it. It is very enjoyable, a good exercise of mind and body.

“But it is only a game. Competing in games is important, of course. But there are larger competitions. More important ones. And I am intelligent enough to know which one gets our first priority.

“I received word from Brishun this afternoon about the use to which the Kosg-Anjehn victories were being put. Your friend from Extra Terrestrial Relations must have told you that I rank among the leaders of the Brish’di Peace Party. I would not be here on Earth otherwise. None of our opponents is willing to work with humans, whom they consider animals.

“Naturally I came at once to the stadium and informed our half-men that they must lose. And they, of course, complied.

They too realize that some competitions are more important than others.

"For in losing, we have won. Our opponents on Brishun will not survive this humiliation. In the next Great Choosing, many will turn against them. And I, and others at the mission, will profit. And the Brish'diri will profit.

"Yes, Director Hill," Remjhard concluded, still smiling, "we are a competitive race. But competition for control of a world takes precedence over a football game."

Hill was smiling himself by now. Then he began to laugh. "Of course," he said. "And when I think of the ways we pounded our heads out to think of strategies to beat you. When all we had to do was tell you what was going on." He laughed again.

Remjhard was about to add something when suddenly the locker-room door swung open and Tomkins stalked in. The E.T. agent was still beaming.

"Thought I'd find you here, Hill," he began. "Still trying to investigate those conspiracy theories of yours, eh?" He chuckled and winked at Remjhard.

"Not really," Hill replied. "It was a harebrained theory. Obviously it was the fumble that did it."

"Of course," Tomkins said. "Glad to hear it. Anyway, I've got good news for you."

"Oh? What's that? That the world is saved? Fine. But I'm still out of a job come tonight."

"Not at all," Tomkins replied. "That's what my call was about. We've got a job for you. We want you to join E.T. Relations."

Hill looked dubious. "Come now," he said. "Me? An E.T. agent? I don't know the first thing about it. I'm a small-time local bureaucrat and sports official. How am I supposed to fit into E.T. Relations?"

"As a sports director," Tomkins replied. "Ever since this Brish'diri thing broke, we've been getting dozens of requests from other alien trade missions and diplomatic stations on Earth. They all want a crack at it too. So, to promote goodwill and all that, we're going to set up a program. And we want you to run it. At double your present salary, of course."

Hill thought about the difficulties of running a sports program for two dozen wildly different types of extraterrestrials.

Then he thought about the money he'd get for doing it.

Then he thought about the Starport City Council.

"Sounds like a fine idea," he said. "But tell me. That gravity grid you were going to give to Starport—is that transferable too?"

"Of course," Tomkins said.

"Then I accept." He glanced over at Remjhard. "Although I may live to regret it when I see what the Brish'diri can do on a basketball court."

The Mickey Mouse Olympics

by Tom Sullivan

Tom Sullivan has an extremely diverse background. He was an athlete, a gambler, a coach, and a "Rube Goldberg" entrepreneur. During that time he competed internationally in two sports, was on a Pan-American all-star water polo team, aspired—unsuccessfully—to become an animator in the Disney empire, and was a member of Mensa. He now resides in Lathrup Village, Michigan, where he is a city commissioner, teacher, husband, and father of two young children. He is also the author of some eight short stories and a novel, Diapason (1978).

As a former world-class athlete, he certainly knows of what he speaks.

A world apart, two specially chartered airliners took to the sky within an hour of each other. First there was the Aeroflot Soviet colossus lifting off the runway of the secret development base near Minsk. Forty minutes later a Pan Am curl-winged behemoth left the maximum-security training complex at Provo, Utah. Each flight maintained a fighter escort in international air space. Each followed a path guaranteed free of man-made weather by its crisis-detection satellite overhead.

To the personnel on board it was unbreached boredom. Occasionally someone made a boast: "We will *bury* them, eh, Nikita?"

"Hey, Stilt, when we start shootin', those suckers gonna bleed red!"

The landings were accomplished on isolated runways of Havana's José Martí Airport. The triple-wire fences were two hundred meters away. In each case a telephoto lens foreshortened the distance.

"*Podyelka!*" screamed the Russian when he saw the films of the American disembarkment hours later.

"Fraud!" echoed the American at his own private screening of the Russians' arrival.

The next afternoon they stood side by side in the jammed Olympic stadium, mouthing the oath of brotherhood and fair play. A Babel. One hundred sixteen countries. Sixty-eight languages. When it was done, and the crowd's roar had chilled the platform, Duncan Sherman poured a syrupy smile onto his Russian counterpart.

"Mr. Smerdyakov," he said with benign formality, "I believe we can dispense with a translator."

Giorgi Smerdyakov allowed his own smile to fill out. "Yes. I speak a little English, Mr. Shuer-mann."

Politely but boldly they took each other's measure. The Russian saw a scruffy, tweed-bearded man, white and gray, perhaps an ex-athlete, atrophied now, with an indoor skin—a below-ground skin. The American observed a face like an omelette, pan-shaped, slightly askew; the USSR executive chairman had never laced a sport shoe, he felt sure already, and he doubted that the cherubic Smerdyakov could even reach his socks without pulling a hamstring.

"I trust you had a pleasant flight," said Sherman.

"Very pleasant. And you had a smooth landing, I hope."

"Didn't you see it?"

Smerdyakov was caught off guard momentarily, but then Sherman's teeth flashed, and they shared a treacherous laugh.

"I hope the fog didn't spoil your pictures," the Russian said. "We had to use a computer to sharpen ours."

"Ah, Smerdyakov, could a little fog keep us from seeing those weight lifters of yours—the ones that had to get off the plane sideways?"

"The suitcases were bulky." Smerdyakov waved his hand fussily. "We were concerned about that four-meter basketball

player of yours, yes? He didn't bump his head, did he? Or was it a female high jumper? My trainer insists it was wearing lipstick!"

"You must have seen Stilt carrying his girl friend on his shoulders. Our tallest is barely nine feet. About three times the height of one of your dwarfs."

"Drawers . . . ?" Smerdyakov feigned a language gap.

"Munchkins. You know, mice . . . midgets. Little folk?"

"Our gymnastics team is young." Smerdyakov shrugged helplessly. "But let me congratulate you on that odd bone structure so many of your athletes have. For us to equal it, we would have to violate every rule laid down at the second Olympic Convention on Genetic Manipulation."

Like all the Russian staff, Smerdyakov had a doctorate in genetic engineering. Sherman resented that. He couldn't afford to get into details. So he straightened dutifully as the Olympic torch passed by. Round the track it went, an unruly presence in an otherwise respectful pavane. Up the steps it went, to the top of the stadium. There it, too, straightened. Flags fluttered. The Olympic chain ascended hydraulically—a Walt Disney touch. Who else could afford to build the facilities? After the Games the second and fourth rings in the chain would become mouse ears. The flame now leaped to its dish and pillared upward. Another roar avalanched onto the platform where Smerdyakov and Sherman stood. Champagne was poured among the reps.

"To my friend Sheur-mann," Smerdyakov addressed. And delivered a toast in Russian that sent his vestigial translator into hysterics.

Sherman nodded gratefully. "To Smerdyakov," he said, lifting his glass. "ah-May ightning-lay ike-stray is-hay ass-ay!"

Sherman was at the track and field stadium before the events officially started the next morning, watching the athletes arrive, dictating notes to his Man Friday. As the homogenized delegations cast off their sweat suits for warm-up, he hit upon a scheme for identifying those without numbers. "Autograph?" he would ask, tapping pad and pencil in the face of a select athlete. "Auto-graph, pl-lease?" The flattered participant would then sign, while Man Friday snapped a picture. This was necessary because no head-to-head international competition had taken place in fifteen months. That was because of the mandatory chromo-

some tests. And the chromosome tests were required because of genetic cheating. No one wanted a ruling in an Olympic year.

Sherman saw his first sideshow when the Russian women came out on the field. He could tell they were women because the CCCP was on the left jacket breast as distinguished from the men's right-sided monogram. When the jackets were off, there was no distinction. But what really jarred ol' Sherman—what really filled the mold cast of suspicion and shaped to nonhuman form—were the jumpers.

"My Gaw-d . . ." he drawled.

"A flea circus," Man Friday acknowledged tersely.

With piano-wire legs proportioned as uniformly as sausage links, the Russian bevy looked like the insect equivalent of mermaids. In unison they began loosening up. Their jack-in-the-box knee bends, frenetic locomotive drill, and gazellelike bounding erased any doubts.

"Protest, protest, protest," Sherman whispered, rapidly snapping his fingers.

Man Friday grabbed a fistful of forms from his attaché case. But salt 'n' pepper whiskers were already flowing amid the low orbital ballet. "Autograph—get the camera ready. Felix—autograph, please." Man Friday wrestled with attaché, protest forms, and camera.

Suddenly basso profundo erupted and one of the females advanced on Sherman, rubbing the air in front of her with bunched fingers as if wiping a splat from a windshield.

"It is the coach, sir," said Felix.

Sherman held ground.

"She says, if you come near her girls again, she'll have Ludmilla kick you in the . . . in the . . ."

"Got it, Felix," Sherman grinned falsely in retreat, saluting with his pencil. A few of the girls giggled. Deeply.

"See that? See that? Touchy. No way, Felix. There's no way they can survive a protest." Sherman drew himself erect, slowed his voice. "Fill it out. A blanket challenge. We'll get the names later."

"What'll I charge, sir?"

"Charge anything. Say you saw them rubbing their hind legs together and chirping. Say their calves are longer than their thighs. We want a chromosome match-up with their parents,

dammit! And if necessary their great-great-grandparents—right back to the jackrabbits!”

“Yes, sir,” said Felix.

The Russian translation of this scene concurrently took place in Gymnasium-4 of the Multi-Sports Hall, to which Smerdyakov had gone in response to a panic call from the Soviet wrestling coach.

The American team lay basking like lizards at the side of a mat on which a freestyle paperweight match ensued between a thyroidal cretin from the Ukraine and a Yankee pyramidal hump. The pyramidal hump sported its apex between its shoulder blades.

“I could hang my hat on that!” the Russian coach pointed.

Smerydakov’s eyes bugged, his chin retracting into the folds of his neck.

“We’ve won all our contests but the American ones,” the coach shrilled. “They are impossible to pin. Hunchbacks. All of them. We can’t even win on points. Pankin bruised his chest executing a hug.”

“Protest the losses. When does Korolenko wrestle the American?”

“Next.”

The Ukrainian cretin had the American by the legs and was wheeling him around the circle on his hump. Smerdyakov dropped to all fours and beat the mat. The American promptly scissored his opponent down for the count.

“Korolenko!” called the Russian coach.

Up stood Korolenko, stripping off his sweats. His coach massaged him with a pair of gloves, and the dry rasp was audible throughout the gym.

“He’s got scales!” came an incredulous whisper from the capitalist side.

The Quasimodo of the moment balked at the edge of the circle, no longer sure of his quarry. “Is eczema contagious?” he was heard to quail. The American trainer assured him that the scruffy corn husk from Siberia had merely peeled in the Cuban sun. But at first touch the American wrung his hand, and when the Russian clutched him with piggish grunts, he screamed as if impaled.

“That ain’t skin!” he appealed with a forlorn look to the side.

“This guy’s an alligator.”

The referee spoke mostly Japanese but understood screams. He motioned Korolenko close for examination.

"He's been fibreglassed," the American clamored, indicating the rows of abrasions on his torso. "I ain't wrestling no pineapple."

By this time both teams had edged forward in bilingual outrage. The official, who refrained from touching the specimen, suddenly straightened and announced in Oriental English, "No-o foe-lin sub-stints." He then chopped the air smartly with both hands, bidding the bout resume, and, when the American gingerly donned his jacket and savagely denounced his foe as a "Communist cactus," the beleaguered ref declared a forfeit.

Smerdyakov shrugged and sat down opposite the American coach at the scorers' table to fill out another protest.

And so it went the first week until the Olympic Committee, as a sign of helplessness, convened a private meeting of the two antagonists at the Havana Libre Hotel.

Sherman, more tweed than ever, his skin a deeper-below-ground skin than before, and inhabiting a blue blazer he had not climbed out of for thirty-six hours, appeared first. Smerdyakov dallied psychologically long at a nearby coffee shop but showed up equally worn, his fat and flexible face delivered of cherubic charm, a postpregnancy landscape, rilled, jellied. The two of them faced each other across the polished table, regarding each other's lapel pins.

"Gentlemen," began the wise old Olympic patriarch sitting peripherally to them, "we are all sorely tried. . . ."

Whatever else he said was inconsequential. Smerdyakov knew it. Sherman knew it. The two other Executive Committee members knew it. The grinning Cuban who seemed to have wandered in by mistake knew it. Each loathed the transcultural experience of an old man's speech. They had not come to be assuaged. They had come to cross swords, to bleed, and then—if enough blood of the right color was spilled—to bury.

"On behalf of the United States," Sherman flickered to life at the proper moment, "and for the sake of the integrity of the Games, I demand gene scans of the following Soviet entries: Ivan Spadunka, center—"

"Spadunka!"

"... center forward, Soviet basketball team," Sherman overrode Smerdyakov's dismay.

"We'll trade you a gene scan of Spadunka for a gene scan of the humanoid you call Stilt!"

"... and of pole vaulters Olka K. and Mikhail C.," Sherman continued undaunted, "discus thrower Pyotr I.—"

"Inber or Izmaylov?"

"The one with the cast-iron forearms."

"All our field athletes have fine supinator and pronator development," declared Smerdyakov.

"Then I want scans of all of them."

"And what do you expect to find? Evidence of chemical synthesis?"

"You wouldn't be that clumsy."

Smerdyakov laughed smugly. A laugh deep inside the neck and shoulders. Internal peep show.

"We suspect they are *chimeras*," Sherman said slowly. "Reaggregated genes you've somehow controlled at the blastocyst stage—four parents, eight parents, whatever, pick and choose . . ."

"Ab-surd!" A touch too much anger. Smerdyakov attempted to cover it with reckless scorn. "Eight parents! Of course. Eight models of mediocrity instead of two. Makes sense. Something from nothing, yes, Shuer-mann? If you find the genetic model for this kind of development in anyone's ancestors, I'll be glad to call Inber and Izmaylov home myself. Why not? We can simply enter their parents!"

"No, we won't find the right genetic model," Sherman agreed. "But we should be able to prove that their gene scans don't meet any possible permutations of the gene scans of any human parents you produce."

Smerdyakov began thumping the table. "Proof, proof, proof, Shuer-mann! None of this guilt by omission of evidence. Would your capitalist justice admit such foolishness? Where is the sire for this genetic circus you accuse us of?"

"Popeye!" Sherman blurted sarcastically.

"Pup-eye?" Smerdyakov blinked. "Who is Pup-eye?"

"We aren't dealing with legalities," said Sherman. "We're dealing with Olympic admissibility."

"Who is Pup-eye?" Smerdyakov asked the patriarch.

"Pop-eye," that august being informed him.

"Pope-eye," the Cuban was heard to repeat with inner amusement.

Smerdyakov looked concerned. The *Popeye*. Could it be the English equivalent of the actual sources they had used?

". . . and unless convincing genealogies are forthcoming for all the entrants under question, they must be disqualified and stripped of their medals," Sherman was concluding.

"Genealogies?" Smerdyakov sopranoed. "The American neurotic wants us to have pedigrees! Incredible. First he invents an army of mutations, insulting the flower of Soviet youth; then he finds an ancestor for them—this . . . this mysterious Poop-eye, who probably exists only in imperialist folklore; and now . . . now he takes it upon himself to strip us of our medals! Curiously he makes no mention of Soviet protests. But I too have a list." He waved the paper loose from his jacket pocket. "Fencers whose arms are longer than their legs, water polo players with dewclaws who secrete oil like seals, and this goalie of theirs they call Pon-toon! No need to go on. No need to tell you about the phone call to Spadunka at 3 A.M. announcing that his pregnant wife, Vera, had been arrested naked on a statue of Lenin in Novgorod. No need to mention the anonymous gifts our athletes receive—radios that don't turn off, an ant farm with a secret exit! No, I merely ask that the Americans on *my* list be suspended from further competition until their gene scans are also approved. We look for Poop-eyes, too!"

Sherman snapped his fingers. "The medal count, Felix."

"Gold: twenty-eight/twenty-eight. Silver: sixteen/eleven, them. Bronze: twenty-three/twenty-two, us. That's without any protests upheld, of course."

"And without the fifteen hundred free, which is in the bag." Sherman stirred a lime rickey and eyed the swimming pool on TV. He had given up troubleshooting on the front line and turned his hotel suite into a nerve center with five phones and a television after finding out his blood was nectar to Cuban mosquitoes. "How does it figure if all the protests are upheld, Felix?"

Man Friday sighed like a steamed lobster. "Just about a dead heat in gold and silver. They might edge us in bronze."

"Nobody looks at bronze. The way I see it, when all the dust settles today, this fifteen hundred will be the difference. That's the way I see it. You see it that way, Felix?"

"I don't know, sir. The Russians haven't seen Thompson swim yet. They might protest. I . . ."

A long pause brought Sherman's glance. "What?"

"Isn't that Smerdyakov, sir?"

"Where?"

"There. Back of the starting blocks."

Sherman leaned close enough to count the electronic dots on the TV, several of which, it seemed to him, did approximate the silly-putty face of Giorgi Smerdyakov.

"That no-good nik. That crummy Commie!" Sherman felt a transcendental tingle flowing down the back of his neck. Euphoria before death. Thompson was the last sure thing the United States had. If they couldn't pull this out before tomorrow, it meant losing. An eternity of losing for him. He saw himself as the final contestant, acknowledging defeat at cocktail parties, vaguely introduced, shunned, whispered about—"That's Sherman; he blew it in Havana."

Sherman arrived bloodless at the natatorium but managed to stroll casually through the press of dewed flesh and crisp white linen on the deck. The pool was a caldron of warm-up; the officials were trying to organize backup timers behind the automatic touch-pads. Smerdyakov regarded his approach with cynicism.

"Giorgi-ii!" Sherman affected. "I just had to see you to tell you I'm glad we got that awful protest meeting behind us. It was a chance to get rid of our frustrations, eh? And now it's the next-to-last day of competition and all is forgiven—the committee has forgotten us, the athletes have done their thing, the spirit of the Games has come through, eh, Giorgi?"

Smerdyakov sucked his lips into a thoughtful moue.

"Oh, come now," Sherman laughed adolescently, "we've done *our* jobs. We should just sit back and let things happen."

Smerdyakov continued to inhale his lips until one of the freestylers flip-turned and laid a wave at their feet.

"Hey!" Sherman said as they backed away. "Guess what. I just came from the diving annex, where I withdrew our protest against your diver, Baba . . . Babalus . . . the one that looks like a flying squirrel."

"The one that took fifth?" Giorgi smiled.

"Fifth? Oh, did he? Fifth, he took. Well, he might move up if there are any other protests. Anyway, we thought it was time

to—uh, in fact . . . in fact, we've been thinking of withdrawing all our protests. Of course, that could only be part of a *mutual* gesture."

Someone kicked into the wall. Aquatic thunder. A waiting teammate launched off the block. Slap! The sound seemed to fit the sting on Smerdyakov's face. "Eat spinach," he said.

Sherman's eyelids fluttered. "No need to get vulgar, Giorgi—"

"Eat spinach, *Poop-eye*. You see, we have our sources. The Soviet-American Cultural Society in Armenia traced down your imperialist mythology. We are not stupid. And we can keep medal counts as well as you. I suppose you think we will just overlook this . . . this amphibian Thompson of yours. The one who doesn't warm up. The one with the special shoes—he appears to have very few bones below the ankles, Sheur-mann."

"Thompson? Thompson. The one with osteogenesis of the feet?"

"Quite select of the disease, wouldn't you say? And another thing, we are told he doesn't breathe during the race. Is that so, Sheur-mann? For fifteen hundred meters he doesn't breathe? Even amphibians breathe, though often through a blowhole in the top of the head."

"He breathes very rapidly, Giorgi. I swear it. And his mouth is unusually elastic. He can catch air with the slightest turn."

"How remarkable. We will be filming the race to see."

They sat on deck chairs twenty feet apart behind the timers. When the pool was cleared and the officials readied, the championship heat was marshaled to the blocks. Thompson, aided by teammates on either side, and wearing footgear resembling calf-length ski boots, doddered to lane 4. The long, limp appendages that emerged from the boots could have been windsocks or, as Smerdyakov said with a lustrous grin, albino galoshes. Hardly less intriguing to the Russian was Thompson's topknot. Except for a circular ticket at the crown of his head, the swimmer was smoothly bald.

"Amphibians!" Smerdyakov called sprightly, tapping the top of his head.

Soviet cameras rolled.

The Last Day.

Thompson's world-record performance was under protest. The Olympic Committee procrastinated. Someone had sent

Smerdyakov seven Popeye comics and a package of frozen spinach. The mosquitoes around Sherman fed.

Sherman was watching a replay of the final equestrian event, grand prix jumping. Uncle Sam had another gold—temporarily. Fool's gold. "It's down to the boxing, Felix," he said. "Look at that nag. She doesn't jump, she hops. Should've been destroyed. Would you let a protest like that go by? It's down to the boxing, Felix."

One of the phones rang. Felix answered. "Smerdyakov," he said.

Sherman took the phone and clamped it on his head like a hot compress. "Hello, Popeye," he said wearily.

"How dare you call that animal a horse!" screamed Smerdyakov.

"It's got four legs and a tail, doesn't it? That qualifies it in the Soviet stable."

"Shuer-mann. We want that creature x-rayed!"

"Sorry. The race was over two hours ago. She's dead."

"Dead?" Smerdyakov's frayed voice cracked.

"Broke a leg on the way back to the stable. Had to shoot her."

"Remarkable! An autopsy will do."

"Already buried."

"We will exhume the beast."

"Cremated. We buried the urn."

"Really, Sheur-mann—"

"You can autopsy yours, though."

"Ours?"

"The thing that took the silver—a rump, a tail, sort of a head? The one we are protesting. He's dead, right?"

". . . of course."

"Thought so. We figured one of your cossacks spurred him to death."

"Very funny. He died of natural causes. We put him on a plane that crashed in your Bermuda Triangle."

"It's been nice talking to you."

"Nice talking to you, Sheur-mann. How are your mosquito bites?"

"Fine. How are your Popeye comics?"

"Excellent. This Bluto—ha, ha. Well . . . goodbye."

"Goodbye, Popeye."

Sherman handed the phone to Man Friday. "It's down to the boxing, Felix," he said.

* * *

He thought it was fitting that the final distillation of the brotherhood of nations in friendly competition should be two guys in the ring trying to beat each other's brains out. Even with headgear the heavyweights could deliver mickey finns. And the American boy had dynamite hands. So far as they could tell, the Soviet was a ballroom dancer. He glided, bowed, swept, dipped, and occasionally peppered his opponents with pretty but ineffectual volleys. His boxing was elegant, but no one had seen him take a punch in the qualifying matches. He had the brittle features of a ballerina. Well-scrubbed. Cleanly sculpted eyes. A porcelain jaw. Sherman got on the phone to the team manager at the arena. "The *head*, Bronson," he said. "Make sure he goes to the head. He can't outbox the man. He's got to put his lights out." Bronson let Sherman know how much he appreciated the interference, and the two men barked goodbye.

But he needn't have bothered to call. The kid chugged out of his corner at the bell like a wind-up toy. For the first round he pummeled, lambasted, and blasted. The Russian flitted and flicked. It couldn't last. Round 2 saw the American lash, beat, strike, cuff, and buffet. Solid hits. Crushing hits. The brittle nose became a Chuckle. But, except for that, the Soviet boxer seemed completely undaunted. He danced the same blithe dance, scored the same powdery tattoos, even stared the same serene stare. "He's been hypnotized," the Americans complained. A short but profound conversation with the Russian convinced the ref otherwise. Monotonously the American's assault continued. He smote. He thwacked. He Thumped, Thrashed, Drubbed, Pelted, and Trounced. Finally he FLOGGED and SCOURGED his sa-shaying enemy, gloves whipping like windmills, then minnow tails, then dropping to his sides. . . . In came the feminine taps. Down went the American, physically and emotionally exhausted, crying and clutching the great Isadora's knees.

"I don't believe it," Sherman murmured.

"I'll deliver the protest in person," Felix said, reaching for the attaché case.

The phone calls came late in the day. One to Smerdyakov, one to Sherman, informing them that *all* protests had been upheld.

"All?" said Sherman. "But that's inconceivable!"

"What kind of Poop-eye Olympics is this?" choked Smerdyakov.

Stunned, they slumped in their separate chairs in separate suites.

"How could they uphold every protest?" Sherman said to himself. "I thought they might turn them all *down*, but uphold them? How could they uphold every protest? How could they?"

Felix dragged in twenty minutes later with a torn computer printout of the complete international protest results and medal redistribution. "Every major country with a genetic-development program . . ." he tried to begin, and then let the paper fall into Sherman's lap.

Sherman felt his hair going white as he read. He was looking into his grave. "Twenty-eighth?" he whispered hoarsely. "We finished twenty-eight?"

"Tied with the Soviet Union," said Felix.

"Sri Lanka? Sri Lanka won?"

"Just ahead of Liechtenstein."

The phone rang.

"Sheur-mann," came soothingly over the line. "My dear Sheur-mann. We are ruined." Smerdyakov vented a few tight sobs. "Forgive me, Duncan. May I call you Duncan? I know your pain is great, too. What are we to do?"

Sherman choked, swallowed. "The first thing I'm going to do," he announced unsteadily, "is to open the windows of this room and let all the mosquitoes in. Then I'm going to take off my clothes and lie down on the bed . . ."

"Ah, Duncan . . . no."

". . . and if I'm still alive in the morning, I'm going to shave off my beard, buy a ticket for a public flight, and go back to my farm in Virginia."

"I wish it were so easy for me, Duncan. They will take away my car, my apartment, my free tickets to the Bolshoi. . . . Do you think . . . do you think the American embassy in Havana might—uh, might . . . ?"

"They would be very glad to see you, Giorgi. Very glad. Just don't mention my name, and they will be very glad to see you."

"Yes, yes, I understand. And do you think you might need a farmhand—that is, I'm very good at developing hybrids—"

"No question about it, Giorgi. No question . . . well, one question."

"Anything, comra—er, Duncan."

"How the hell did your boy take so much punishment in that

fight today? He was like a thumb puppet in there. I thought he was getting his brains knocked out."

Giorgi sighed. "A thumb puppet. Not bad. A thumb puppet has no brains, yes? Not in his head, yes? Kuchka has no brains in his head, either."

"Giorgi. You didn't. But where . . . ?"

"You didn't see him sit down, did you?"

"Ah, Giorgi, Giorgi," Sherman chuckled. "See you in Virginia."

Dream Fighter

by Bob Shaw

Belfast-born Bob Shaw is a vastly underrated writer who has been producing superior science fiction for almost twenty years. He is perhaps best known for his novel Orbitsville (1975) and his story "Light of Other Days." However, this is just the tip of the iceberg, for Shaw offers readers a substantial body of excellent material, including the novels The Palace of Eternity (1969), One Million Tomorrows (1970), and Medusa's Children (1979), and the story collection Tomorrow Lies in Ambush (1973) among many others. "Dream Fighter" is one of his best and most neglected stories.

Rowan and his wife had to carry their own cases up three flights of stairs and along a sad brown corridor. Some of the lighting fixtures were broken, and the others served only to create dirty orange smudges on the walls. Jane stopped outside the room the desk clerk had assigned them and looked about her with a mixture of disdain and weariness.

"Some hotel," she said. "Why do you allow Sammy to book us into places like this?"

"It's only for one night," Rowan told her.

"It's always only for one night. I can't go on like this much longer, Victor."

"We'll be taking a break soon."

"I don't see how. The money you get for one fight these days barely sees us through to the next."

"It's better than no money, which is what we'd have if I . . ."

The weight of the cases in Rowan's hands suddenly became unbearable. "Do you mind if we continue the conversation inside? If we're paying for the room, we might as well make use of it."

Jane nodded, turned the key in the lock, and pushed the door open. Just beyond it, in the shabby dimness of the room, stood a grinning, scaly horror—part man, part dragon—which raised a clawed hand in menace. Jane drew breath sharply, but stood her ground.

"Victor," she said. "*Victor!*"

"I'm sorry," Rowan mumbled. He closed his mind, painfully, and the creature vanished into nothingness.

"You're losing control." Jane strode forward, through the spot where the apparition had been, and slung her case onto a bed. "Isn't that a sign it's time to quit?"

"How in hell can I quit?" Rowan kicked the door shut behind him, dropped the cases, and lay down on the other bed. The soft, walnut-sized bump on top of his head was throbbing, aching, flooding him with disquiet. He cupped his hand over it, feeling the unnatural warmth through his cropped hair, and tried to relax.

"Victor, you're in no condition to fight." Jane spoke softly as she knelt beside him. Grateful for the warmth in her voice, Rowan turned to his wife. The years had honed the original prettiness of her face into taut economical planes which Rowan saw as beauty.

"I'll be all right," he said. "If I beat Grumman tonight, the purse will be enough to let us . . ." He stopped speaking as Jane began to shake her head.

"Victor, you've lost twelve fights in a row. Against third-raters. And Grumman's supposed to be *good*."

"Perhaps he's not all that good."

"He's too good for you." There was no malice or reproach in Jane's words. "Five years ago it would have been different, but now . . . I mean, I can't understand how Sammy even got you the fight."

"You know who to put your money on, then." Rowan refer-

ring to his wife's small ritual bet, which lately had become a monetary sacrifice.

"Never," she said. "Now, you'd better get some rest."

Rowan closed his eyes and courted sleep, but his nerves were charged with awareness of the contest which was only a few hours away. There was an agitation, a restless traffic along all his neural pathways, and his exo-brain—that seat of supranormal power—seemed to crouch on top of his skull like a tiny animal with a disparate life of its own, scheming and dreaming. . . .

The taxi in which Sammy Kling rode downtown had been old even before they had ripped out its gasoline engine and put in a battery-powered unit. He perched on the narrow rear seat, staring out at the shabby streets with eyes which had lost some of their usual glitter. *How come*, he asked himself, *that so many good cities got clobbered in the Dust-Up, while dumps like this survived?*

He was a flinty little man, normally immune to his surroundings, but he was in a mood of vulnerability brought on by the telephone call he had received some minutes earlier. It had lasted about twenty seconds, consisting of nothing more than a terse instruction from Tucks Raphael, Grumman's manager, to meet him at his hotel. Raphael had hung up without waiting for Kling's assent.

The fact that he could be treated in such a manner, Kling realized, was an indication of how far he had sunk in the world. There was a time when he had owned pieces of four good fighters, but one had died and two had burned up. The one who remained, Vic Rowan, was fading fast and should have been put out to pasture years earlier. Kling had, of course, brought on other men, but his judgment was not what it used to be—or the game was changing—and none of them had amounted to anything. Now he was paying the penalty for being a loser—living in cheap hotels, eating synthetic pap, having to go running when men like Tucks Raphael crooked their fingers.

When the taxi dropped him at the Sheraton, he paid, without any argument, the exorbitant sum demanded by the driver and went inside. Raphael's suite was only on the fourth floor, but Kling—too dispirited to walk—paid the elevator surcharge and rode up. Two hard-looking men showed him into the well-lit silvery room where Raphael was lounging in a deep chair and making a telephone call. Raphael had grown fatter and shinier in

the years since Kling had last seen him, but Kling's attention was absorbed by the younger man who was standing at a window. Built more like an old-style boxer than a dream fighter, Ferdy Grumman had pale gray eyes fringed with white lashes. In contrast to the powerful musculature of his body, his mouth was small and womanly, pursed in permanent distaste. His scalp was shaved to reveal the irregular blister of exo-brain centered on top of his skull.

Kling stared at him for a moment, then—as their eyes met—he felt an icy sensation of dread, a fierce projection of hatred, and he knew at once that Grumman was a borderline psycho, a man whose main reason for fighting was that monsters were devouring his soul. He quickly averted his gaze and saw Grumman's pink lips twitch in satisfaction.

Poor Rowan, Kling thought. Poor, gentle, faded-out Rowan hasn't a chance. Tonight could finish him.

The thought inspired in Kling a rare flash of guilt about his profession. Several different kinds of mutant had appeared in the human race in the years following the Dust-Up, all of them characterized by the extrusion of extra cortical tissue through the fontanel. There were the straightforward telepaths—many of whom had been killed before the UN had extended special protection—and there were the seers, and those with limited powers of telekinesis. Their abilities had proved useful to society in one way or another, and they had found profitable roles, but there had also been a sprinkling of Unclassifiables, including those individuals whose “gift” it was to make others see things which did not exist.

They functioned partly by instinctive control of radiation fields around them—the images they created could be photographed—but there was also an element of telepathy, because the visions were much more realistic and more detailed to the naked eye than to the camera. In a tired and shabby world the opportunity for a new kind of spectator sport had been seized at once, and the trade of dream fighter had come into existence. There were countries where the sport was illegal because of the psychological wear and tear on the combatants, and—in the dreadful presence of Grumman—Kling understood the reasoning. . . .

“Hello, Sammy,” Raphael said, setting the telephone down. “How you been?”

“Okay, Tucks. I'm getting along okay.”

Raphael smiled disbelievingly. "Have you met my boy Ferdy?"

"No. Hello." Kling nodded towards Grumman and looked away again, unwilling to face the eyes. Grumman did not acknowledge the greeting in any way.

Raphael's smile broadened. "My Ferdy is going to be the next area champion, and I'm making him contender before the end of the year."

"That's fast," Kling commented, knowing it was expected of him.

"You bet it's fast. That's why he's got to get in ten straight wins in the next five weeks. That's my program for him, and I'm not taking no chances with it. No chances at all."

Kling nodded. "Why did you want to see me?"

"It's like this. Ferdy will destroy Vic Rowan tonight, but because this is a big operation with a lot of heavy money involved, I'm handing you two K. For insurance, if you know what I mean."

Kling fought to control the pounding in his chest. "You want Vic to throw the fight?"

"He won't be throwing it," Raphael explained with mock patience. "I'm generous. I'm giving you and Rowan a thousand each just to accept defeat gracefully."

"It's a waste of money," Grumman said in a sullen monotone. "I'm going to turn Rowan's brain into mush and let it run out of his eyes."

Raphael waved him to silence. "What do you say, Sammy?"

Kling's brain was analyzing the situation with cryogenic efficiency. Rowan was going to lose, anyway. The last shreds of his reputation were going, and it was becoming difficult to match him. He was so certain to lose that there was no need even to tell about the fix. And with two thousand monits in his pocket he, Sammy Kling, could quit the fight game and go into something which offered better returns and more security. The decision was easy to make.

"You've got yourself a deal, Tucks," he said. "The figure was two K?"

"It's all there." Raphael took a long envelope from an inner pocket of his jacket and handed it to Kling.

"Thanks, Tucks." Kling turned to leave and was almost at the door when Raphael called him.

"Sammy! Vic Rowan used to be good, didn't he?"

"People say that."

"Just remember," Raphael said. "You and Rowan have taken my money. I've bought you. And if there's any funny business tonight, I'll put you both through the meat grinder. Got it?"

Kling nodded silently and hurried out of the room.

Rowan brushed his hair, trying not to touch the now-burning lump, and turned to his wife. "Are you coming to the fight?"

"To help carry you out afterwards?" Jane exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke. "No, thanks."

"I've only been carried out once."

"It doesn't matter. Besides, I've heard how Grumman fights and I don't want to see it." She continued flicking the pages of a magazine with studied disinterest. Jane was always tense and withdrawn just before a fight, but this time something in her manner alarmed Rowan.

"You'll be here when I get back, won't you?"

"I've nowhere else to go, Victor."

"I . . ." Rowan gave up the struggle to find the right words. He closed the door and went down the three flights of stairs to where Sammy Kling was waiting with a taxi. The little man looked perfectly normal but a vague signal from his exo-brain suggested to Rowan that Kling had things on his mind.

"All right, Sammy?" he said as he got into the waiting vehicle.

"I'm all right," Kling replied gloomily. "A bit worried about you, though."

"Why?"

"I don't like some of the things I hear about Grumman. Listen, Vic, when you feel him getting the edge on you—don't wreck yourself trying to stop him. Just bow out, huh?"

Rowan felt a stab of annoyance. "Why is everybody so worked up about Ferdy Grumman?"

"I don't think you should risk getting your brains scrambled, that's all," Kling muttered. "It's up to you, of course."

"I know it is." Rowan sat without speaking for the rest of the short journey to the stadium. He knew he was going to lose again, that he no longer had the vital drive to win, but some remnant of his former self resented being written off so casually. The perverse notion crossed his mind that it would be worth

beating Grumman for nothing more than the pleasure of seeing Jane's face when she heard the news.

At the amber-lit stadium he got the checking-in formalities over with as quickly as possible, and was glad to reach the solitude of a preparation room. It was an important part of the system that dream fighters did not meet prior to a bout, especially in the final minutes when antagonism was high and control of their powers most likely to slip. He lay on the simple bed and half heard, half felt the occasional eruptions of cheering from the crowd in the arena above. Grumman and he were fourth on the bill, a good position, and the audience would be receptive when they went on. Lying perfectly still, scarcely breathing, Rowan made himself ready for the struggle ahead.

When the signal came—a double chime from the loudspeaker on the wall—he rose without haste and went along the corridor to the ramp which ascended to the arena. A strongly built man he recognized as Grumman emerged from another corridor and reached the foot of the ramp at the same time. Rowan was instantly aware of his opponent's chilling psychic aura, but he went through it, like a swimmer breasting an icy tide, and held out his hand.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said.

Grumman looked down at the outstretched hand and conjured a piece of brown, smoking filth into it. The image was too close to Rowan's sphere of influence to last for more than a fraction of a second before he blanked it out of existence, but the accompanying mental shockwave had the force of a physical blow. Face unchanged, pale eyes staring, Grumman walked on up the ramp. Rowan followed him, barely aware of the reverberating announcements which boomed across the amphitheater, cursing himself for having given Grumman the opportunity to take the psychological advantage.

At the head of the ramp, one on each side, were two low circular bases. Grumman went to the one on the left. Rowan turned right and was still a couple of paces from his base when there was an abrupt silence, followed by the sound of a woman screaming. He spun and found himself facing a thirty-foot-high demon.

A red light began flashing in the judges' kiosk, to indicate that Grumman had made a foul play by leading off before the signal. Rowan's senses were swamped by the reality of the beast tower-

ing over him. He had seen many monsters during his career, beings designed to inspire fear and thus weakness, but this one was in a class of its own. Its face was a compound of things human and things animal, and of things the earth had never seen. Its body was grotesquely deformed, yet true to alien symmetries—black, powerful, matted with hair in some places, glistening naked in others. And above all, the demon was obscene, massively sexual, with an overpowering realization of detail which had the intended effect of cowing the beholder's mind. Rowan was closest to the apparition, and he took the full projected force of it.

He moved backwards, instinctively, and felt his way onto his base, filled with an intense reluctance to go on with the fight. It would mean entering a strange intimacy with the demon's creator, and that was something which should not be asked of him. He considered quitting in that first moment, by stepping down from the base, then came the understanding that he was reacting exactly as his opponent intended, which was something a dream fighter should never do. That was what such contests were basically all about—the forces of nightmare, the conquering of minds by the use of no weapon but fear itself.

Habits developed over many years caused him to probe at the towering demon with intangible sensors, and he found the image *hard*. That meant Grumman was playing a one-shot, concentrating all his powers into a single protagonist with which he intended to win the contest. The discovery surprised Rowan, because it hinted at a lack of flexibility which was dangerous for any fighter trying to make the big time. He gathered his strength, opened the shutters of his mind, and put up a scaly, slope-shouldered dinosaur, equal in height to the demon but many times greater in apparent mass. There was a gasp of appreciation from the encircling terraces.

Rowan caused the dinosaur to lunge forward, but the black demon—moving with incredible speed—swung a razored hand at its throat. And connected. The movement was carried out so naturally, with such a coordinated and perfect simulation of reality, that Rowan was momentarily convinced, and—in being convinced—yielded control of his own image. There was a huge fountaining of dark blood, and the dinosaur fell sideways, its head almost torn off. Rowan automatically dissolved the writhing creature into nothingness, while he fought to regain control

of his own terror. Caught unawares, he had still been involved with the dinosaur when it was killed, and now a part of his subconscious knew what it was like to be ripped asunder by organic knives. Unbidden, in spite of all his efforts to prevent it, a lethal fear began to seep through him.

The demon knotted arms above its head in silent triumph, and a seemingly tiny Grumman performed the same gestures, like a puppet gyrating at the feet of its master.

Rowan forced himself to rally. His exo-brain was on fire, pulsing with agony, but he took command of it, and—perhaps reacting against the demon's associations with evil—put up a giant knight in full medieval armor. The warrior was equipped with a two-handed sword which he swung against the demon in a glittering sweep, but the blow never landed. The demon was too fast, too ferocious. Again Rowan was convinced, and again he yielded control. The bright armor was slashed open like foil, the blood spurted, and another part of Rowan died.

After that he tried a two-headed python which was torn apart even as it materialized around the demon's neck. And a bat-winged creature which Grumman's demon dismembered with contemptuous ease.

Each time, Rowan was unable to disengage quickly enough, and the resulting neural punishment brought him to his knees. His exo-brain was a blob of white-hot metal searing through his skull. He clasped the top of his head with both hands and rocked backwards and forwards, peering through slitted eyes. The crowd, sensing that the crisis point had been reached, ceased to make any sound.

It's time to step down, Rowan told himself. *You don't have to die again. Just step down off the base, and it will all be over, and you can have a rest.* His involuntary swaying movements grew more violent as his body, unconcerned with matters of pride or prestige, fought against the dictates of his intellect.

"Go ahead, old man—fall over." Grumman's gloating whisper reached him across stellar distances. "This is the time to do it. Just fall over."

Rowan stared at him uncomprehendingly. Everybody expected him to do the same thing. Jane. Sammy. Grumman. They all wanted him to fall over. In a way it seemed a good idea not to fight any longer, and yet . . .

Rowan brought his eyes to a focus on the opposite base and

made an astonishing discovery. Grumman was concentrating his attention on Rowan, indulging a personal enmity, instead of monitoring the image which loomed above him. Rowan glanced upwards and saw that the edges of the huge demon had softened slightly, that some of the oppressive detail had been allowed to blur. He waited for a full second while, from the depths of his memory, he summoned up an old friend—one who had settled many issues for him in the past.

Valerius was a professional soldier, a scarred and weather-beaten veteran who had served with three different legions in Syria, Gaul, and Britain. He had withstood rain, snow, and desert heat with equal stoicism, and he had slain the varied enemies of Rome with impartial efficiency, regardless of whether they wore silks or skins, regardless of which gods those enemies believed to be giving them protection. He was a stolid, unimaginative man—as plain, functional and uncompromising as the short sword he carried—and in all his years of service he had never encountered a creature which could survive having an iron blade driven through its guts. And, as Valerius saw things, this meant that no such creature existed.

Rowan—knowing by heart every detail, every rivet and thong of the legionary's equipment and armor—snapped him into existence in microseconds. He was much smaller than the demon, a sign that Rowan's strength was nearly spent, but his sword was sharp, and he struck with economical swiftness. The blade went deep into the demon's protruding belly, and puslike fluids gouted. Rowan heard Grumman grunt with pain and surprise, and he guessed at once that the younger man had never experienced neuro-shock before.

This is what it's like, he thought savagely, directing onto the demon a flurry of hacking blows which transmitted their fury to its creator, convulsing him with sympathetic shock. Grumman turned his eyes upward, guiding the black demon as it made a snapping rush, but Valerius—his body protected by a long Roman shield—struck at the face with almost clinical exactitude.

Grumman whimpered and fell backwards from his base. His demon vanished as he struck the floor.

The fight had ended.

In spite of his exhaustion, Rowan kept Valerius in existence long enough for him to acknowledge the cheers of the crowd with upraised sword, and then gradually dissolved him out. *They*

shouldn't have written us off, he told the fading warrior. *They should never write a man off.*

It was late, and the stadium had emptied, before Rowan broke free of the local sports reporters. He had spent some time trying to find Sammy Kling and finally had had to go to the promoter's office alone and collect the winner's purse, a check for five hundred monits. Puzzled by Sammy's absence, Rowan waited on the front steps of the building for a few minutes, nodding as the box-office staff bade him good night and the stadium was sectionally plunged into blackness. He debated calling a taxi, then decided that walking back to the hotel would ease the dull pounding in his head. The aftertaste of victory was less pleasant than it had seemed in memory.

He lit a cigarette and walked north on a shadowed street.

The car drew in beside him with feline swiftness, its sleek haunches speckled with rain, and four men got out of it. They closed on Rowan without speaking. Sensing their purpose, he ducked his head and tried to run, but two of them hit him at the same time, with what felt like mailed fists, and he went down. Within seconds he had been dragged into an alley, and there followed a nightmarish period during which he was systematically kicked from neck to groin. Eventually the blood-red explosions of pain seemed to diminish, and he realized, with gratitude, that he was escaping into unconsciousness.

"That's enough," a voice said from somewhere above him. "He's got to know what's happening."

The assault on his body ceased, and the dim figures redeployed. In the faint light from the street one of them appeared to be holding an ordinary garden spade. Rowan became aware of an even greater threat than that of simply being bludgeoned, and he tried to fight against it.

"Hold his head steady." The dark figure moved over him, foreshortening like Grumman's demon, and his head was clamped in place on the wet concrete.

"No," Rowan pleaded. "No!"

"Yes, Rowan," the voice told him. "And don't say you weren't warned."

The spade drove downwards across his skull, shearing through skin and extraneous brain tissue alike. And, in that ultimate pang of agony, Rowan was born into the world of normal men.

Perhaps two hours elapsed before he found the strength to get to his feet and resume walking back to the hotel. The streets seemed unusually quiet, but he was unable to decide if the impression was a genuine one or something subjective, stemming from the newly found silence within his head. Occasional cars ghosted by without stopping, their occupants undisturbed by the sight of a drunk staggering homewards with a bloodied handkerchief pressed to his scalp.

The hotel lobby was deserted, enabling him to climb the three flights of stairs without being seen. When he fumbled open the room door, there was darkness beyond, but the tiny beacon of a cigarette near the window signaled that Jane was awake and waiting for him.

"Where have you been, Victor?" she said quietly. "What happened to you?"

The concern in his wife's voice reminded Rowan that she had her own kind of dreams, better dreams than those which had just ceased to dominate his own life.

"What do you want first," he said, forcing his body to remain upright for the necessary moment, "the bad news, or the good news?"

The Kokod Warriors

by Jack Vance

Jack Vance is a prolific (some fifty books of fantasy and science fiction to date) and talented (he has won two Hugo Awards and a Nebula) man who has achieved great popularity for his vivid and unique worlds of what can only be called "science-fantasy." He is also the author of a dozen works of mystery and suspense, including one that won the coveted Edgar Allan Poe Award of the Mystery Writers of America. His first book, The Dying Earth (1950), is an acknowledged classic of magical fantasy.

1

Magnus Ridolph sat on the Glass Jetty at Providencia, fingering a quarti-quartino of Blue Ruin. At his back rose Granatee Head; before him spread Milles-Iles Ocean and the myriad little islands, each with its trees and neoclassic villa. A magnificent blue sky extended overhead; and beneath his feet, under the glass floor of the jetty, lay Coral Canyon, with schools of sea-moths flashing and flickering like metal snowflakes. Magnus Ridolph sipped his liqueur and considered a memorandum from his bank describing a condition barely distinguishable from poverty.

He had been perhaps too trusting with his money. A few months previously, the Outer Empire Investment and Realty

Society, to which he had entrusted a considerable sum, had been found to be bankrupt. The Chairman of the Board and the General Manager, a Mr. See and a Mr. Holpers, had been paying each other unexpectedly large salaries, most of which had been derived from Magnus Ridolph's capital investment.

Magnus Ridolph sighed, glanced at his liqueur. This would be the last of these; hereafter he must drink *vin ordinaire*, a fluid rather like tarragon vinegar, prepared from the fermented rind of a local cactus.

A waiter approached. "A lady wishes to speak to you, sir."

Magnus Ridolph preened his neat white beard. "Show her over, by all means."

The waiter returned; Magnus Ridolph's eyebrows went S-shape as he saw his guest: a woman of commanding presence, with an air of militant and dignified virtue. Her interest in Magnus Ridolph was clearly professional.

She came to an abrupt halt. "You are Mr. Magnus Ridolph?"

He bowed. "Will you sit down?"

The woman rather hesitantly took a seat. "Somehow, Mr. Ridolph, I expected someone more—well . . ."

Magnus Ridolph's reply was urbane. "A younger man, perhaps? With conspicuous biceps, a gun on his hip, a space helmet on his head? Or perhaps my beard alarms you?"

"Well, not exactly that, but my business—"

"Ah, you came to me in a professional capacity?"

"Well, yes. I would say so."

In spite of the memorandum from his bank—which now he folded and tucked into his pocket—Magnus Ridolph spoke with decision. "If your business requires feats of physical prowess, I beg you hire elsewhere. My janitor might satisfy your needs: an excellent chap who engages his spare time moving barbells from one elevation to another."

"No, no," said the woman hastily. "I'm sure you misunderstand; I merely pictured a different sort of individual. . . ."

Magnus Ridolph cleared his throat. "What is your problem?"

"Well—I am Martha Chickering, secretary of the Women's League Committee for the Preservation of Moral Values. We are fighting a particularly disgraceful condition that the law refuses to abate. We have appealed to the better nature of the persons

involved, but I'm afraid that financial gain means more to them than decency."

"Be so kind as to state your problem."

"Are you acquainted with the word"—she spoke it as if it were a social disease—"Kokod?"

Magnus Ridolph nodded gravely, stroked his neat white beard. "Your problem assumes form."

"Can you help us, then? Every right-thinking person condemns the goings-on—brutal, undignified, nauseous . . ."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "The exploitation of the Kokod natives is hardly commendable."

"Hardly commendable!" cried Martha Chickering. "It's despicable! It's trafficking in blood! We execrate the sadistic beasts who patronize bullfights—but we condone, even encourage the terrible things that take place on Kokod while Holpers and See daily grow wealthier."

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Magnus Ridolph. "Bruce Holpers and Julius See?"

"Why, yes." She looked at him questioningly. "Perhaps you know them?"

Magnus Ridolph sat back in his chair, turned the liqueur down his throat. "To some slight extent. We had what I believe is called a business connection. But no matter, please continue. Your problem has acquired a new dimension, and beyond question the situation is deplorable."

"Then you agree that the Kokod Syndicate should be broken up? You will help us?"

Magnus Ridolph spread his arms in a fluent gesture. "Mrs. Chickering, my good wishes are freely at your disposal; active participation in the crusade is another matter and will be determined by the fee your organization is prepared to invest."

Mrs. Chickering spoke stiffly. "Well, we assume that a man of principle might be willing to make certain sacrifices—"

Magnus Ridolph sighed. "You touch me upon a sensitive spot, Mrs. Chickering. I shall indeed make a sacrifice. Rather than the extended rest I had promised myself, I will devote my abilities to your problem. . . . Now let us discuss my fee—no, first, what do you require?"

"We insist that the gaming at Shadow Valley Inn be halted. We want Bruce Holpers and Julius See prosecuted and punished. We want an end put to the Kokod wars."

Magnus Ridolph looked off into the distance and for a moment was silent. When at last he spoke, his voice was grave. "You list your requirements on a descending level of feasibility."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Ridolph."

"Shadow Valley Inn might well be rendered inoperative by means of a bomb or an epidemic of Mayerheim's Bloat. To punish Holpers and See, we must demonstrate that a nonexistent law has been criminally violated. And to halt the Kokod wars, it will be necessary to alter the genetic heritage, glandular makeup, training, instinct, and general outlook on life of each of the countless Kokod warriors."

Mrs. Chickering blinked and stammered; Magnus Ridolph held up a courteous hand. "However, that which is never attempted never transpires; I will bend my best efforts to your requirements. My fee—well, in view of the altruistic ends in prospect, I will be modest; 1,000 munits a week and expenses. Payable, if you please, in advance."

Magnus Ridolph left the jetty, mounted Granatee Head by steps cut into the green-veined limestone. On top, he paused by the wrought-iron balustrade to catch his breath and enjoy the vista over the ocean. Then he turned and entered the blue lace and silver filigree lobby of the Hotel des Mille Iles.

Presenting a bland face to the scrutiny of the desk clerk he sauntered into the library, where he selected a cubicle, settled himself before the mnemiphot. Consulting the index for Kokod, he punched the appropriate keys.

The screen came to life. Magnus Ridolph inspected first a series of charts which established that Kokod was an exceedingly small world of high specific gravity.

Next appeared a projection of the surface, accompanied by a slow-moving strip of descriptive matter:

Although a small world, Kokod's gravity and atmosphere make it uniquely habitable for men. It has never been settled, due to an already numerous population of autochthones and a lack of valuable minerals.

Tourists are welcomed at Shadow Valley Inn,

a resort hotel at Shadow Valley. Weekly packets connect Shadow Valley Inn with Starport.

Kokod's most interesting feature is its population.

The chart disappeared, to be replaced by a picture entitled "Typical Kokod Warrior (from Rock River Tumble)," and displaying a manlike creature two feet tall. The head was narrow and peaked; the torso was that of a bee—long, pointed, covered with yellow down. Scrawny arms gripped a four-foot lance; a stone knife hung at the belt. The chitinous legs were shod with barbs. The creature's expression was mild, almost reproachful.

A voice said, "You will now hear the voice of Sam 192 Rock River."

The Kokod warrior inhaled deeply; wattles beside his chin quivered. From the mnemiphot screen issued a high-pitched stridency. Interpretation appeared on a panel to the right.

"I am Sam 192, squadronite, Company 14 of the Advance Force, in the service of Rock River Tumble. Our valor is a source of wonder to all; magnificent stele is rooted deep, and exceeded in girth only by the steles of Rose Slope Tumble and crafty Shell Strand Tumble.

"This day I have come at the invitation of the (untranslatable) of Small Square Tumble, to tell of our victories and immensely effective strategies."

Another sound made itself heard: a man speaking falsetto in the Kokod language. The interpretation read:

Question: Tell us about life in Rock River Tumble.

Sam 192: It is very companionable.

Q: What is the first thing you do in the morning?

A: We march past the matrons, to assure ourselves of a properly martial fecundity.

Q: What do you eat?

A: We are nourished in the fields. (Note: The Kokod metabolism is not entirely understood; apparently they ferment organic material in a crop, and oxidize the resultant alcohols.)

Q: Tell us about your daily life.

A: We practice various disciplines, deploy in the basic formations, hurl weapons, train the kinderalms, elevate the veterans.

Q: How often do you engage in battle?

A: When it is our time: when the challenge has issued and the appropriate Code of Combat agreed upon with the enemy.

Q: You mean you fight in various styles?

A: There are 97 conventions of battle which may be employed: for instance, Code 48, by which we overcame strong Black Glass Tumble, allows the lance to be grasped only by the left hand and permits no severing of the leg tendons with the dagger. Code 69, however, insists that the tendons must be cut before the kill is made and the lances are used thwart-wise, as bumpers.

Q: Why do you fight? Why are there wars?

A: Because the steles of the other tumbles would surpass ours in size, did we not fight and win victories.

(Note: the stele is a composite tree growing in each tumble. Each victory is celebrated by the addition of a shoot, which joins and augments the main body of the stele. The Rock River Stele is 17 feet in diameter, and is estimated to be 4,000 years old. The Rose Slope Stele is 18 feet in diameter, and the Shell Strand Stele is almost 20 feet in diameter.)

Q: What would happen if warriors from Frog Pond Tumble cut down Rock River Stele?

Sam 192 made no sound. His wattles blew out; his head bobbed. After a moment he turned, marched out of view.

Into the screen came a man wearing shoulder tabs of Commonwealth Control. He looked after Sam 192 with an expression of patronizing good humor that Magnus Ridolph considered insufferable.

"The Kokod warriors are well known through the numerous sociological studies published on Earth, of which the most authoritative is perhaps the Carlisle Foundation's *Kokod: A Militaristic Society*, mnemiphot code AK-SK-RD-BP.

"To summarize, let me state that there are 81 tumbles, or castles, on Kokod, each engaged in highly formalized warfare with all the others. The evolutionary function of this warfare is the prevention of overpopulation on a small world. The Tumble Matrons are prolific, and only these rather protean measures assure a balanced ecology.

"I have been asked repeatedly whether the Kokod warriors fear death. My belief is that identification with the home tumble is so intense that the warriors have small sense of individuality. Their sole ambition is winning battles, swelling the girth of their stele and so glorifying their tumble."

The man spoke on. Magnus Ridolph reached out, speeded up the sequence.

On the screen appeared Shadow Valley Inn—a luxurious building under six tall parasol trees. The commentary read: “At Shadow Valley Inn, genial co-owners Julius See and Bruce Holpers greet tourists from all over the universe.”

Two cuts appeared—a dark man with a lowering broad face, a mouth uncomfortably twisted in a grin; the other, lanky, with a long head sparsely thatched with red excelsior. “See” and “Holpers” read the subheadings.

Magnus Ridolph halted the progression of the program, studied the faces for a few seconds, then allowed the sequence to continue.

“Mr. See and Mr. Holpers,” ran the script, “have ingeniously made use of the incessant wars as a means of diverting their guests. A sheet quotes odds on each day’s battle—a pastime which arouses enthusiasm among sporting visitors.”

Magnus Ridolph turned off the mnemiphot, sat back in the chair, stroked his beard reflectively. “Where odds exist,” he said to himself, “there likewise exists the possibility of upsetting the odds. . . . Luckily, my obligation to Mrs. Chickering will in no way interfere with a certain measure of subsidiary profits. Or better, let us say, recompense.”

II

Alighting from the Phoenix Line packet, the *Hesperornis*, Ridolph was startled momentarily by the close horizons of Kokod. The sky seemed to begin almost at his feet.

Waiting to transfer the passengers to the inn was an overdecorated charabanc. Magnus Ridolph gingerly took a seat, and when the vehicle lurched forward a heavy woman scented with musk was thrust against him. “Really!” complained the woman.

“A thousand apologies,” replied Magnus Ridolph, adjusting his position. “Next time I will take care to move out of your way.”

The woman brushed him with a contemptuous glance and turned to her companion, a woman with the small head and robust contour of a peacock.

“Attendant!” the second woman called presently.

"Yes, Madame."

"Tell us about these native wars; we've heard so much about them."

"They're extremely interesting, Madame. The little fellows are quite savage."

"I hope there's no danger for the onlookers?"

"None whatever; they reserve their unfriendliness for each other."

"What time are the excursions?"

"I believe the Ivory Dune and the Eastern Shield Tumbles march tomorrow; the scene of battle no doubt will center around Muscadine Meadow, so there should be three excursions. To catch the deployments, you leave the inn at 5:00 A.M.; for the onslaught at 6:00 A.M.; and 7:00 or 8:00 for the battle proper."

"It's ungodly early," the matron commented. "Is nothing else going on?"

"I'm not certain, Madame. The Green Ball and the Shell Strand might possibly war tomorrow, but they would engage according to Convention 4, which is hardly spectacular."

"Isn't there anything close by the inn?"

"No, Madame. Shadow Valley Tumble only just finished a campaign against Marble Arch, and are occupied now in repairing their weapons."

"What are the odds on the first of these—the Ivory Dune and the Eastern Shield?"

"I believe eight gets you five on Ivory Dune, and five gets you four on Eastern Shield."

"That's strange. Why aren't the odds the same both ways?"

"All bets must be placed through the inn management, Madame."

The carry-all rattled into the courtyard of the inn. Magnus Ridolph leaned forward. "Kindly brace yourself, Madame; the vehicle is about to stop, and I do not care to be held responsible for a second unpleasant incident."

The woman made no reply. The charabanc halted; Magnus Ridolph climbed to the ground. Before him was the inn and behind a mountainside, dappled with succulent green flowers on lush violet bushes. Along the ridge grew tall, slender trees like poplars, vivid black and red. A most colorful world, decided Magnus Ridolph, and, turning, inspected the view down the valley. There were bands and layers of colors—pink, violet,

yellow, green, graying into a distant dove color. Where the mouth of the valley gave on the river penepain, Magnus Ridolph glimpsed a tall conical edifice. "One of the tumbles?" he inquired of the charabanc attendant.

"Yes sir—the Meadow View Tumble. Shadow Valley Tumble is further up the valley, behind the inn."

Magnus Ridolph turned to enter the inn. His eyes met those of a man in a severe black suit—a short man with a dumpy face that looked as if it had been compressed in a vise. Ridolph recognized the countenance of Julius See. "Well, well, this is a surprise indeed," said Magnus.

See nodded grimly. "Quite a coincidence. . . ."

"After the unhappy collapse of Outer Empire Realty and Investment I feared—indeed, I dreaded—that I should never see you again." And Magnus Ridolph watched Julius See with mild blue eyes blank as a lizard's.

"No such luck," said See. "As a matter of fact, I run this place. Er, may I speak to you a moment inside?"

"Certainly, by all means."

Ridolph followed his host through the well-appointed lobby into an office. A thin-faced man with thin red hair and squirrel teeth rose quickly to his feet. "You'll remember my partner, Bruce Holpers," said See with no expression in his voice.

"Of course," said Ridolph. "I am flattered that you honor me with your personal attention."

See cut the air with his hand—a small petulant gesture. "Forget the smart talk, Ridolph. . . . What's your game?"

Magnus Ridolph laughed easily. "Gentlemen, gentlemen—"

"Gentlemen my foot! Let's get down to brass tacks. If you've got any ideas left over from that Outer Empire deal, put them away."

"I assure you—"

"I've heard stories about you, Ridolph, and what I brought you in to tell you was that we're running a nice quiet place here, and we don't want any disturbance."

"Of course not," agreed Ridolph.

"Maybe you came for a little clean fun, betting on these native chipmunks; maybe you came on a party that we won't like."

Ridolph held out his hands guilelessly. "I can hardly say I'm

flattered. I appear at your inn, an accredited guest; instantly you take me aside and admonish me."

"Ridolph," said See, "you have a funny reputation, and a normal sharpshooter never knows what side you're working on."

"Enough of this," said Magnus sternly. "Open the door, or I shall institute a strong protest."

"Look," said See ominously, "we own this hotel. If we don't like your looks, you'll camp out and rustle your own grub until the next packet—which is a week away."

Magnus Ridolph said coldly, "You will become liable to extensive damages if you seek to carry out your threat; in fact, I defy you, put me out if you dare!"

The lanky red-haired Holpers laid a nervous hand on See's arm. "He's right, Julie. We can't refuse service or the Control yanks our charter."

"If he misbehaves or performs, we can put him out."

"You have evidence, then, that I am a source of annoyance?"

See stood back, hands behind him. "Call this little talk a warning, Ridolph. You've just had your warning."

Returning to the lobby, Magnus Ridolph ordered his luggage sent to his room, and inquired the whereabouts of the Commonwealth Control officer.

"He's established on the edge of Black Bog, sir; you'll have to take an air-car unless you care for an all-night hike."

"You may order out an air-car," said Magnus Ridolph.

Seated in the well-upholstered tonneau, Ridolph watched Shadow Valley Inn dwindle below. The sun, Pi Sagittarius, which had already set, once more came into view as the car rose to clear Basalt Mountain, then sank in a welter of purples, greens and reds—a phoenix dying in its many-colored blood. Kokod twilight fell across the planet.

Below passed a wonderfully various landscape: lakes and parks, meadows, cliffs, crags, sweeping hillside slopes, river valleys. Here and there Ridolph sensed shapes in the fading light—the hivelike tumbles. As evening deepened into dove-colored night, the tumbles flickered with dancing orange sparks of illumination.

The air-car slanted down, slid under a copse of trees shaped like featherdusters. Magnus Ridolph alighted, stepped around to the pilot's compartment.

"Who is the Control officer?"

"His name is Clark, sir, Everley Clark."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I'll be no more than twenty minutes. Will you wait, please?"

"Yes, sir. Very well, sir."

Magnus Ridolph glanced sharply at the man: a suggestion of insolence behind the formal courtesy? . . . He strode to the frame building. The upper half of the door hung wide; cheerful yellow light poured out into the Kokod night. Within, Magnus Ridolph glimpsed a tall pink man in neat tan gabardines. Something in the man's physiognomy struck a chord of memory; where had he seen this round pink face before? He rapped smartly on the door; the man turned his head and rather glumly arose. Magnus Ridolph saw the man to be him of the mnemiphot presentation on Kokod, the man who had interviewed the warrior, Sam 192.

Everley Clark came to the door. "Yes? What can I do for you?"

"I had hoped for the privilege of a few words with you," replied Magnus Ridolph.

Clark blew out his cheeks, fumbled with the door fastenings. "By all means," he said hollowly. "Come in, sir." He motioned Magnus Ridolph to a chair. "Won't you sit down? My name is Everley Clark."

"I am Magnus Ridolph."

Clark evinced no flicker of recognition, responding with only a blank stare of inquiry.

Ridolph continued a trifle frostily, "I assume that our conversation can be considered confidential?"

"Entirely, sir. By all means." Clark showed a degree of animation, went to the fireplace, stood warming his hands at an imaginary blaze.

Ridolph chose his words for their maximum weight. "I have been employed by an important organization which I am not at liberty to name. The members of this organization—who I may say exert a not negligible political influence—feel that Control's management of Kokod business has been grossly inefficient and incorrect."

"Indeed!" Clark's official affability vanished as if a pink spotlight had been turned off.

Magnus Ridolph continued soberly. "In view of these charges, I thought it my duty to confer with you and learn your opinions."

Clark said grimly. "What do you mean—'charges'?"

"First, it is claimed that the gambling operations at Shadow Valley Inn are—if not illegal—explicitly, shamelessly and flagrantly unmoral."

"Well?" said Clark bitterly. "What do you expect me to do? Run out waving a Bible? I can't interfere with tourist morals. They can play merry hell, run around naked, beat their dogs, forge checks—as long as they leave the natives alone, they're out of my jurisdiction."

Magnus Ridolph nodded sagely. "I see your position clearly. But a second and more serious allegation is that in allowing the Kokod wars to continue day in and day out, Control condones and tacitly encourages a type of brutality which would not be allowed on any other world of the Commonwealth."

Clark seated himself, sighed deeply. "If you'll forgive me for saying so, you sound for all the world like one of the form letters I get every day from women's clubs, religious institutes and anti-vivisectionist societies." He shook his round pink face with sober emphasis. "Mr. Ridolph, you just don't know the facts. You come up here in a lather of indignation, you shoot off your mouth and sit back with a pleased expression—good deed for the day. Well, it's not right! Do you think I enjoy seeing these little creatures tearing each other apart? Of course not—although I admit I've become used to it. When Kokod was first visited, we tried to stop the wars. The natives considered us damn fools, and went on fighting. We enforced peace, by threatening to cut down the steles. This meant something to them; they gave up the wars. And you never saw a sadder set of creatures in your life. They sat around in the dirt; they contracted a kind of roup and died by the droves. None of them cared enough to drag the corpses away. Four tumbles were wiped out; Cloud Crag, Yellow Bush, Sunset Ridge and Vinegrass. You can see them today, colonies thousands of years old, destroyed in a few months. And all this time the Tumble-matrons were producing young. No one had the spirit to feed them, and they starved or ran whimpering around the planet like naked little rats."

"Ahem," said Magnus Ridolph. "A pity."

"Fred Exman was adjutant here then. On his own authority he ordered the ban removed, told them to fight till they were blue in the face. The wars began half an hour later, and the natives have been happy and healthy ever since."

"If what you say is true," Magnus Ridolph remarked mildly, "I have fallen into the common fault of wishing to impose my personal tenor of living upon creatures constitutionally disposed to another."

Clark said emphatically, "I don't like to see those sadistic bounders at the hotel capitalizing on the wars, but what can I do about it? And the tourists are no better: morbid unhealthy jackals, enjoying the sight of death. . . ."

Magnus Ridolph suggested cautiously, "Then it would be safe to say that, as a private individual, you would not be averse to a cessation of the gambling at Shadow Valley Inn?"

"Not at all," said Everley Clark. "As a private citizen, I've always thought that Julius See, Bruce Holpers and their guests represented mankind at its worst."

"One more detail," said Magnus Ridolph. "I believe you speak and understand the Kokod language?"

"After a fashion—yes," Clark grimaced in apprehension. "You realize I can't compromise Control officially?"

"I understand that very well."

"Just what do you plan, then?"

"I'll know better after I witness one or two of these campaigns."

III

Soft chimes roused Magnus Ridolph; he opened his eyes into the violet gloom of a Kokod dawn. "Yes?"

The hotel circuit said, "Five o'clock, Mr. Ridolph. The first party for today's battle leaves in one hour."

"Thank you." Ridolph swung his bony legs over the edge of the air-cushion, sat a reflective moment. He gained his feet, gingerly performed a set of calisthenic exercises.

In the bathroom he rinsed his mouth with tooth-cleanser, rubbed depilatory on his cheeks, splashed his face with cold water, applied tonic to his trim white beard.

Returning to the bedroom, he selected a quiet gray and blue outfit, with a rather dashing cap.

His room opened upon a terrace facing the mountainside; as he strolled forth, the two women whom he had encountered in the charabanc the day previously came past. Magnus Ridolph bowed, but the women passed without even a side glance.

"Cut me dead, by thunder," said Magnus Ridolph to himself.

"Well, well." And he adjusted his cap to an even more rakish angle.

In the lobby a placard announced the event of the day:

IVORY DUNE TUMBLE
vs.
EASTERN SHIELD TUMBLE
at Muscadine Meadow.

All bets must be placed with the attendant.

Odds against Ivory Dune: 8:13

Odds against Eastern Shield: 5:4

In the last hundred battles Ivory Dune has won 41 engagements, Eastern Shield has won 59.

Excursions leave as follows:

For deployment: 6:00 A.M.

For onslaught: 7:00 A.M.

For battle proper: 8:00 A.M.

It is necessary that no interference be performed in the vicinity of the battle. Any guest infringing on this rule will be barred from further wagering. There will be no exceptions.

At a booth nearby, two personable young women were issuing betting vouchers. Magnus Ridolph passed quietly into the restaurant, where he breakfasted lightly on fruit juice, rolls and coffee, finishing in ample time to secure a place with the first excursion.

The observation vehicle was of that peculiar variety used in conveying a large number of people across a rough terrain. The car proper was suspended by a pair of cables from a kite-copter which flew five hundred feet overhead. The operator, seated in the nose of the car, worked pitch and attack by remote control, and so could skim quietly five feet over the ground, hover over waterfalls, ridges, ponds, other areas of scenic beauty with neither noise nor the thrash of driven air to disturb the passengers.

Muscadine Meadow was no small distance away; the operator lofted the ship rather abruptly over Basalt Mountain, then slid on a long slant into the northeast. Pi Sagittarius rolled up into the sky like a melon, and the grays, greens, reds, purples of the Kokod countryside shone up from below, rich as Circassian tapestry.

"We are near the Eastern Shield," the attendant announced in a mellifluous baritone. "The tumble is a trifle to the right, beside that bold face of granite whence it derives its name. If you look closely you will observe the Eastern Shield armies already on the march."

Bending forward studiously, Magnus Ridolph noticed a brown and yellow column winding across the mountainside. To their rear he saw first the tall stele, rising two hundred feet, spraying over at the top into a fountain of pink, black and light green foliage; then below, the conical tumble.

The car sank slowly, drifted over a wooded patch of broken ground, halted ten feet above a smooth green meadow.

"This is the Muscadine," announced the guide. "At the far end you can see Muscadine Tumble and Stele, currently warring against Opal Grotto, odds 9 to 7 both ways. . . . If you will observe along the line of bamboo trees you will see the green caps of the Ivory Dune warriors. We can only guess their strategy, but they seem to be preparing a rather intricate offensive pattern—"

A woman's voice said peevishly, "Can't you take the car up higher so we can see everything?"

"Certainly, if you wish, Mrs. Chaim."

Five hundred feet above, copter blades slashed the air; the car wafted up like thistledown.

The guide continued, "The Eastern Shield warriors can be seen coming over the hill. . . . It seems as if they surmise the Ivory Dune strategy and will attempt to attack the flank. . . . There!" His voice rose animatedly. "By the bronze tree! The scouts have made a brush. . . . Eastern Shield lures the Ivory Dune scouts into ambush. . . . They're gone. Apparently today's code is 4, or possibly 36, allowing all weapons to be used freely, without restriction."

An old man with a nose like a raspberry said, "Put us down, driver. From up here we might as well be back at the inn."

"Certainly, Mr. Pilby."

The car sank low. Mrs. Chaim sniffed and glared.

The meadow rose from below; the car grounded gently on glossy dark green creepers. The guide said, "Anyone who wishes may go further on foot. For safety's sake, do not approach the battle more closely than three hundred feet; in any event the inn assumes no responsibility of any sort whatever."

"Hurry," said Mr. Pilby sharply: "The onslaught will be over before we're in place."

The guide good-naturedly shook his head. "They're still sparring for position, Mr. Pilby. They'll be dodging and feinting half an hour yet; that's the basis of their strategy—neither side wants to fight until they're assured of the best possible advantage." He opened the door. With Pilby in the lead, several dozen of the spectators stepped down on Muscadine Meadow, among them Magnus Ridolph, Mrs. Chaim and her peacock-shaped friend, whom she addressed as "Mrs. Borgage."

"Careful, ladies and gentlemen," called the guide, "Not too close to the battle."

"I've got my money on Eastern Shield," said Mrs. Borgage with heavy archness. "I'm going to make sure there's no funny business."

Magnus Ridolph inspected the scene of battle. "I'm afraid you are doomed to disappointment, Mrs. Borgage. In my opinion, Ivory Dune has selected the stronger position; if they hold on their right flank, give a trifle at the center, and catch the Eastern Shield forces on two sides when they close in, there should be small doubt as to the outcome of today's encounter."

"It must be wonderful to be so penetrating," said Mrs. Borgage in a sarcastic undertone to Mrs. Chaim.

Mr. Pilby said, "I don't think you see the battleground in its entire perspective, sir. The Eastern Shield merely needs to come in around that line of trees to catch the whole rear of the Ivory Dune line—"

"But by so doing," Magnus Ridolph pointed out, "they leave their rear unguarded; clearly Ivory Dune has the advantage of maneuver."

To the rear a second excursion boat landed. The doors opened, there was a hurrying group of people. "Has anything happened yet?" "Who's winning?"

"The situation is fluid," declared Pilby.

"Look, they're closing in!" came the cry. "It's the onslaught!"

Now rose the piping of Kokod war hymns: from Ivory Dune throats the chant sacred and long-beloved at Ivory Dune Tumble, and countering, the traditional paeon of the Eastern Shield.

Down the hill came the Eastern Shield warriors, half-bent forward.

A thud and clatter—battle. The shock of small bodies, the dry

whisper of knife against lance, the hoarse orders of leg-leaders and squadronites.

Forward and backward, green and black mingled with orange and white. Small bodies were hacked apart, dryly dismembered; small black eyes went dead and dim; a hundred souls raced all together, pell-mell, for the Tumble Beyond the Sky.

Forward and backward moved the standard-bearers—those who carried the sapling from the sacred stele, whose capture would mean defeat for one and victory for the other.

On the trip back to the inn, Mrs. Chaim and Mrs. Borgage sat glum and solitary while Mr. Pilby glowered from the window.

Magnus Ridolph said affably to Pilby, "In a sense, an amateur strategist, such as myself, finds these battles a trifle tedious. He needs no more than a glance at the situation, and his training indicates the logical outcome. Naturally, none of us are infallible, but given equal forces and equal leadership, we can only assume that the forces in the better position will win."

Pilby lowered his head, chewed the corners of his mustache. Mrs. Chaim and Mrs. Borgage studied the landscape with fascinated absorption.

"Personally," said Ridolph, "I never gamble. I admire a dynamic attack on destiny, rather than the suppliance and passivity of the typical gambler; nevertheless, I feel for you all in your losses, which I hope were not too considerable?"

There was no reply. Magnus Ridolph might have been talking to empty air. After a moment Mrs. Chaim muttered inaudibly to the peacock-shaped Mrs. Borgage, and Mr. Pilby slouched even deeper in his seat. The remainder of the trip was passed in silence.

After a modest dinner of cultivated Bylandia protein, a green salad, and cheese, Magnus Ridolph strolled into the lobby, inspected the scratch sheet.

The announcement read:

TOMORROW'S FEATURED BATTLE:
VINE HILL TUMBLE
vs
ROARING CAPE TUMBLE
near Pink Stone Table.

Odds against Vine Hill Tumble: 1:3

Odds against Roaring Cape Tumble: 4:1

All bets must be placed with the attendant.

In the last hundred engagements Vine Hill Tumble has won 77, Roaring Cape has won 23.

Turning away, Magnus Ridolph bumped into Julius See, who was standing, rocking on his heels, his hands behind his back.

"Well, Ridolph, think you'll maybe take a flyer?"

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "A wager on Roaring Cape Tumble might prove profitable."

"That's right."

"On the other hand, Vine Hill is a strong favorite."

"That's what the screamer says."

"What would be your own preference, Mr. See?" asked Magnus Ridolph ingenuously.

"I don't have any preference. I work 23 to 77."

"Ah, you're not a gambling man, then?"

"Not any way you look at it."

Ridolph rubbed his beard and looked reflectively toward the ceiling. "Normally I should say the same of myself. But the wars offer an amateur strategist an unprecedented opportunity to test his abilities, and I may abandon the principles of a lifetime to back my theories."

Julius See turned away. "That's what we're here for."

"Do you impose a limit on the bets?"

See paused, looked over his shoulder. "We usually call 100,000 munits our maximum pay-off."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "Thank you." He crossed the lobby, entered the library. On one wall was a map of the planet, with red discs indicating the location of each tumble.

Magnus Ridolph located Vine Hill and Roaring Cape Tumbles, and found Pink Stone Table, the latter near an arm of Drago Bay. Magnus Ridolph went to a rack, found a large-scale physiographic map of the area under his consideration. He took it to a table and spent half an hour in deep concentration.

He rose, replaced the map, sauntered through the lobby and out the side entrance. The pilot who had flown him the previous evening rose to his feet smartly. "Good evening, Mr. Ridolph. Intending another ride?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," Magnus Ridolph admitted. "Are you free?"

"In a moment, as soon as I turn in my day's report."

Ridolph looked thoughtfully after the pilot's hurrying figure. He quietly stepped around to the front entrance. From the vantage of the open door he watched the pilot approach Bruce Holpers and speak hastily.

Holpers ran a lank white hand through his red hair, gave a series of nervous instructions. The pilot nodded sagely, turned away. Magnus Ridolph returned by the route he had come.

He found the pilot waiting beside the ship. "I thought I had better notify Clark that I was coming," said Ridolph breezily. "in case the car broke down, or there were any accident, he would understand the situation and know where to look for me."

The pilot's hands hesitated on the controls. Magnus Ridolph said, "Is there game of any sort on Kokod?"

"No, sir, none whatever."

"A pity, I am carrying with me a small target pistol with which I had hoped to bag a trophy or two. . . . Perhaps I'll be able to acquire one or two of the native weapons."

"That's quite unlikely, sir."

"In any case," said Magnus Ridolph cheerily, "you might be mistaken, so I will hold my weapon ready?"

The pilot looked straight ahead.

Magnus Ridolph climbed into the back seat. "To the Control office, then."

"Yes, Mr. Ridolph."

IV

Everley Clark greeted his visitor cautiously; when Ridolph sat back in a basket chair, Clark's eyes went everywhere in the room but to those of his guest.

Magnus Ridolph lit an *aromatique*. "Those shields on the wall are native artifacts, I presume?"

"Yes," said Clark quickly. "Each tumble has its distinct colors and insignia."

"To Earthly eyes, the patterns seem fortuitous, but naturally and inevitably Kokod symbology is unique. . . . A magnificent display. Does the collection have a price?"

Clark looked doubtfully at the shields. "I'd hate to let them

go—although I suppose I could get others. These shields are hard to come by; each requires many thousand hours of work. They make the lacquer by a rather painstaking method, grinding pigment into a vehicle prepared from the boiled-down dead."

Ridolph nodded. "So that's how they dispose of the corpses."

"Yes; it's quite a ritual."

"About those shields—would you take ten thousand munits?"

Clark's face mirrored indecision. Abruptly he lit a cigarette. "Yes, I'd have to take ten thousand munits; I couldn't afford to refuse."

"It would be a shame to deprive you of a possession you obviously value so highly," said Magnus Ridolph. He examined the backs of his hands critically. "If ten thousand munits means so much to you, why do you not gamble at the inn? Surely with your knowledge of Kokod ways, your special information . . ."

Clark shook his head. "You can't beat that kind of odds. It's a sucker's game, betting at the inn."

"Hmm." Magnus Ridolph frowned. "It might be possible to influence the course of a battle. Tomorrow, for instance, the Vine Hill and Roaring Cape Tumbles engage each other, on Pink Stone Table, and the odds against Roaring Cape seem quite attractive."

Clark shook his head. "You'd lose your shirt betting on Roaring Cape. All their veterans went in the Pyrite campaign."

Magnus Ridolph said thoughtfully, "The Roaring Cape might win, if they received a small measure of assistance."

Clark's pink face expanded in alarm like a trick mask. "I'm an officer of the Commonwealth! I couldn't be party to a thing like that! It's unthinkable!"

Magnus Ridolph said judiciously, "Certainly the proposal is not one to enter upon hastily; it must be carefully considered. In a sense, the Commonwealth might be best served by the ousting of Shadow Valley Inn from the planet, or at least the present management. Financial depletion is as good a weapon as any. If, incidentally, we were to profit, not an eyebrow in the universe could be justifiably raised. Especially since the part that you might play in the achievement would be carefully veiled. . . ."

Clark shoved his hands deep in his pockets, stared a long moment at Magnus Ridolph. "I could not conceivably put myself in the position of siding with one tumble against another. If I

did so, what little influence I have on Kokod would go up in smoke."

Magnus Ridolph shook his head indulgently. "I fear you imagine the two of us carrying lances, marching in step with the warriors, fighting in the first ranks. No, no, my friend, I assure you I intend nothing quite so broad."

"Well," snapped Clark, "just what do you intend?"

"It occurred to me that if we set out a few pellets of a sensitive explosive, such as fulminate of mercury, no one could hold us responsible if tomorrow the Vine Hill armies blundered upon them, and were thereby thrown into confusion."

"How would we know where to set out these pellets? I should think—"

Magnus Ridolph made an easy gesture. "I profess an amateur's interest in military strategy; I will assume responsibility for that phase of the plan."

"But I have no fulminate of mercury," cried Clark, "no explosive of any kind!"

"But you do have a laboratory?"

Clark assented reluctantly. "Rather a makeshift affair."

"Your reagents possibly include fuming nitric acid and iodine?"

"Well—yes."

"Then to work. Nothing could suit our purpose better than nitrogen iodide."

The following afternoon Magnus Ridolph sat in the outdoor café overlooking the vista of Shadow Valley. His right hand clasped an eggshell goblet of Methedean wine; his left held a mild cigar. Turning his head, he observed the approach of Julius See, and, a few steps behind, like a gaunt red-headed ghost, his partner, Bruce Holpers.

See's face was compressed into layers: a smear of black hair, creased forehead, barred eyebrows, eyes like a single dark slit, pale upper lip, mouth, wide sallow chin. Magnus Ridolph nodded affably. "Good evening, gentlemen."

See came to a halt, as two steps later, did Bruce Holpers.

"Perhaps you can tell me the outcome of today's battle?" asked Magnus Ridolph. "I indulged myself in a small wager, breaking the habit of many years, but so far I have not learned whether the gods of chance have favored me."

"Well, well," said See throatily. "'The gods of chance' you call yourself."

Magnus Ridolph turned him a glance of limpid inquiry. "Mr. See, you appear disturbed; I hope nothing is wrong?"

"Nothing special, Ridolph. We had a middling bad day—but they average out with the good ones."

"Unfortunate. . . . I take it, then, that the favorite won? If so, my little wager has been wiped out."

"Your little 25,000-munit wager, eh? And half a dozen other 25,000-munit wagers placed at your suggestion?"

Magnus Ridolph stroked his beard soberly. "I believe I did mention that I thought the odds against Roaring Cape interesting, but now you tell me that Vine Hill has swept the field."

Bruce Holpers uttered a dry cackle. See said harshly, "Come off it, Ridolph. I suppose you're completely unaware that a series of mysterious explosions" ("Land mines," interrupted Holpers, "that's what they were.") "threw Vine Hill enough off stride so that Roaring Cape mopped up Pink Stone Table with them."

Magnus Ridolph sat up.

"Is that right, indeed? Then I have won after all!"

Julius See became suddenly silky, and Bruce Holpers, teetering on heel and toe, glanced skyward. "Unfortunately, Mr. Ridolph, so many persons had placed large bets on Roaring Cape that on meeting the odds, we find ourselves short on cash. We'll have to ask you to take your winnings out in board and room."

"But gentlemen!" protested Magnus Ridolph. "A hundred thousand munits! I'll be here until doomsday!"

See shook his head. "Not at our special Ridolph rates. The next packet is due in five days. Your bill comes to 20,000 munits a day. Exactly 100,000 munits."

"I'm afraid I find your humor a trifle heavy," said Magnus Ridolph frostily.

"It wasn't intended to make you laugh," said See. "Only us. I'm getting quite a kick out of it. How about you, Bruce?"

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed Holpers.

Magnus Ridolph rose to his feet. "There remains to me the classical recourse. I shall leave your exorbitant premises."

See permitted a grin to widen his lips. "Where are you going to leave to?"

"He's going to Roaring Cape Tumble," snickered Holpers. "They owe him a lot."

"In connection with the 100,000 munits owed me, I'll take a note, an IOU. Oddly enough, 100,000 munits is almost exactly what I lost in the Outer Empire Realty and Investment failure."

See grinned sourly. "Forget it, Ridolph, give it up—an angle that didn't pay off."

Magnus Ridolph bowed, marched away. See and Holpers stood looking after him. Holpers made an adenoidal sound. "Think he'll move out?"

See grunted. "There's no reason why he should. He's not getting the hundred thousand anyway; he'd be smarter sitting tight."

"I hope he does go; he makes me nervous. Another deal like today would wipe us out. Six hundred thousand munits—a lot of scratch to go in ten minutes."

"We'll get it back. . . . Maybe we can rig a battle or two ourselves."

Holpers' long face dropped, and his teeth showed. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea. First thing you know Commonwealth Control would be—"

"Pah!" spat See. "What's Control going to do about it? Clark has all the fire and guts of a Leghorn pullet."

"Yes, but—"

"Just leave it to me."

They returned to the lobby. The desk clerk made an urgent motion. "Mr. Ridolph has just checked out! I don't understand where—"

See cut him off with a brusque motion. "He can camp under a stele for all I care."

Magnus Ridolph sat back in the most comfortable of Everley Clark's armchairs and lit a cigarette. Clark watched him with an expression at once wary and obstinate. "We have gained a tactical victory," said Magnus Ridolph, "and suffered a strategic defeat."

Everley Clark knit his brows uneasily. "I don't quite follow you. I should think—"

"We have diminished the financial power of Shadow Valley Inn, and hence, done serious damage. But the blow was not decisive and the syndicate is still viable. I was unable to collect

my 100,000 munits, and also have been forced from the scene of maximum engagement. By this token we may fairly consider that our minimum objectives have not been gained."

"Well," said Clark, "I know it hurts to have to admit defeat, but we've done our best and no one can do more. Considering my position, perhaps it's just as well that—"

"If conditions were to be allowed to rest on the present basis," said Magnus Ridolph, "there might be reason for some slight relaxation. But I fear that See and Holpers have been too thoroughly agitated by their losses to let the matter drop."

Everley Clark eyed Magnus Ridolph in perturbation. "But what can they do? Surely I never—"

Magnus Ridolph shook his head gravely. "I must admit that both See and Holpers accused me of setting off the explosions which routed the Vine Hill Tumble. Admission of guilt would have been ingenuous; naturally I maintained that I had done nothing of the sort. I claimed that I had no opportunity to do so, and further, that the Ecologic Examiner aboard the *Hesperornis* who checked my luggage would swear that I had no chemicals whatsoever among my effects. I believe that I made a convincing protestation."

Everley Clark clenched his fists in alarm, hissed through his teeth.

Magnus Ridolph, looking thoughtfully across the room, went on. "I fear that they will ask themselves the obvious questions. 'Who has Magnus Ridolph most intimately consorted with, since his arrival on Kokod?' 'Who, besides Ridolph, has expressed disapproval of Shadow Valley Inn?' "

Everley Clark rose to his feet, paced back and forth. Ridolph continued in a dispassionate voice: "I fear that they will include these questions and whatever answers come to their minds in the complaint which they are preparing for the Chief Inspector at Methedon."

Clark slumped into a chair, sat staring glassily at Magnus Ridolph. "Why did I let you talk me into this?" he asked hollowly.

Magnus Ridolph rose to his feet in his turn, paced slowly, tugging at his beard. "Certainly, events have not taken the trend we would have chosen, but strategists, amateur of otherwise, must expect occasional setbacks."

"Setbacks!" bawled Clark. "I'll be ruined! Disgraced! Drummed out of the Control!"

"A good strategist is necessarily flexible," mused Magnus Ridolph. "Beyond question, we now must alter our thinking; our primary objective becomes saving you from disgrace, expulsion, and possible prosecution."

Clark ran his hands across his face. "But—what can we do?"

"Very little, I fear," Magnus Ridolph said frankly. He puffed a moment on his cigarette, shook his head doubtfully. "There is one line of attack which might prove fruitful. . . . Yes, I think I see a ray of light."

"How? In what way? You're not planning to confess?"

"No," said Magnus Ridolph. "We gain little, if anything, by that ruse. Our only hope is to discredit Shadow Valley Inn. If we can demonstrate that they do not have the best interests of the Kokod natives at heart, I think we can go a long way toward weakening their allegations."

"That might well be, but—"

"If we could obtain iron-clad proof, for instance, that Holpers and See are callously using their position to wreak physical harm upon the natives, I think you might consider yourself vindicated."

"I suppose so. But doesn't the idea seem—well, impractical? See and Holpers have always fallen over backwards to avoid anything of that sort."

"So I would imagine. Er, what is the native term for Shadow Valley Inn?"

"Big Square Tumble, they call it."

"As the idea suggests itself to me, we must arrange that a war is conducted on the premises of Shadow Valley Inn, that Holpers and See are required to take forcible measures against the warriors!"

V

Everley Clark shook his head. "Devilish hard. You don't quite get the psychology of these tribes. They'll fight till they fall apart to capture the rallying standard of another tumble—that's a sapling from the sacred stele, of course—they won't be dictated to, or led or otherwise influenced."

"Well, well," said Magnus Ridolph. "In that case, your

position is hopeless." He came to a halt before Clark's collection of shields. "Let us talk of pleasanter matters."

Everley Clark gave no sign that he had heard.

Magnus Ridolph stroked one of the shields with reverent fingertips. "Remarkable technique, absolutely unique in my experience. I assume that this rusty orange is one of the others?"

Everley Clark made an ambiguous sound.

"A truly beautiful display," said Magnus Ridolph. "I suppose there's no doubt that—if worse comes to worst in our little business—you will be allowed to decorate your cell at the Regional Penitentiary as you desire."

Everley Clark said in a thick voice, "Do you think they'll go that far?"

Ridolph considered. "I sincerely hope not. I don't see how we can prevent it unless"—he held up a finger—"unless—"

"What?" croaked Clark.

"It is farcically simple; I wonder at our own obtuseness."

"What? What? For Heaven's sake, man—"

"I conceive one certain means by which the warriors can be persuaded to fight at Shadow Valley Inn."

Everley Clark's face fell. "Oh. Well, how, then?"

"Shadow Valley Inn or Big Square Tumble, if you like, must challenge the Kokod warriors to a contest of arms."

Everley Clark's expression became more bewildered than ever. "But that's out of the question. Certainly Holpers and See would never . . ."

Magnus Ridolph rose to his feet. "Come," he said, with decision. "We will act on their behalf."

Clark and Magnus Ridolph walked down the Shell Strand. On their right the placid blue-black ocean transformed itself into surf or mingled meringue and whipped-cream; on the left bulked the Hidden Hills. Behind towered the magnificent stele of the Shell Strand Tumble; ahead soared the almost equally impressive stele of the Sea Stone Tumble, toward which they bent their steps. Corps of young warriors drilled along the beach; veterans of a hundred battles who had grown stiff, hard and knobby came down from the forest bearing faggots of lance-stock. At the door to the tumble, infant warriors scampered in the dirt like rats.

Clark said huskily, "I don't like this, I don't like it a bit. . . . If it ever gets out—"

"Is such a supposition logically tenable?" asked Magnus

Ridolph. "You are the only living man who speaks the Kokod language."

"Suppose there is killing—slaughter?"

"I hardly think it likely."

"It's not impossible. And think of these little warriors—they'll be bearing the brunt—"

Magnus Ridolph said patiently, "We have discussed these points at length."

Clark muttered, "I'll go through with it . . . but God forgive us both if—"

"Come, come," exclaimed Magnus Ridolph. "let us approach the matter with confidence; apologizing in advance to your deity hardly maximizes our morale. . . . Now, what is protocol at arranging a war?"

Clark pointed out a dangling wooden plate painted with one of the traditional Kokod patterns. "That's the Charter Board: all I need to do is—well, watch me."

He strode up to the board, took a lance from the hands of a blinking warrior, smartly struck the object. It resonated a dull musical note.

Clark stepped back, and through his nose passed the bagpipe syllables of the Kokod language.

From the door of the tumble stepped a dozen blank-faced warriors, listening attentively.

Clark wound up his speech, turned, scuffed dirt toward the magnificent Sea Stone stele.

The warriors watched impassively. From within the stele came a torrent of syllables. Clark replied at length, then turned on his heel and rejoined Magnus Ridolph. His forehead was damp. "Well, that's that. It's all set. Tomorrow morning at Big Square Tumble."

"Excellent," said Magnus Ridolph briskly. "Now to Shell Strand Tumble, then Rock River, and next Rainbow Cleft."

Clark groaned. "You'll have the entire planet at odds."

"Exactly," said Magnus Ridolph. "After our visit to Rainbow Cleft, you can drop me off near Shadow Valley Inn, where I have some small business."

Clark darted him a suspicious sideglance. "What kind of business?"

"We must be practical," said Magnus Ridolph. "One of the necessary appurtenances to a party at war on Kokod is a rallying

standard, a sacred sapling, a focus of effort for the opposing force. Since we can expect neither Holpers nor See to provide one, I must see to the matter myself."

Ridolph strolled up Shadow Valley, approached the hangar where the inn's aircraft were housed. From the shadow of one of the fantastic Kokod trees, he counted six vehicles: three carryalls, two air-cars like the one which had conveyed him originally to the Control station, and a sleek red sportster evidently the personal property of either See or Holpers.

Neither the hangarmen nor the pilots were in evidence; it might well be their dinner hour. Magnus Ridolph sauntered carelessly forward, whistling an air currently being heard along far-off boulevards.

He cut his whistle off sharply, moved at an accelerated rate. Fastidiously protecting his hands with a bit of rag, he snapped the repair panels from each of the observation cars, made a swift abstraction from each, did likewise for the air-cars. At the sleek sportster he paused, inspected the lines critically.

"An attractive vehicle," he said to himself, "one which might creditably serve the purposes for which I intend it."

He slid back the door, looked inside. The starter key was absent.

Steps sounded behind him. "Hey," said a rough voice, "what are you doing with Mr. See's car?"

Magnus Ridolph withdrew without haste.

"Offhand," he said, "what would you estimate the value of this vehicle?"

The hangarman paused, glowering and suspicious. "Too much not to be taken care of."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "Thirty thousand munits, possibly."

"Thirty thousand on Earth. This is Kokod."

"I'm thinking of offering See a 100,000 munits."

The hangarman blinked. "He'd be crazy not to take it."

"I suppose so," sighed Magnus Ridolph. "But first, I wanted to satisfy myself as to the craft's mechanical condition. I fear it has been neglected."

The hangarman snorted in indignation. "Not on your life."

Magnus Ridolph frowned. "That tube is certainly spitting. I can tell by the patina along the enamel."

"No such thing!" roared the hangarman. "That tube flows like a dream."

Ridolph shook his head. "I can't offer See good money for a defective vehicle. . . . He'll be angry to lose the sale."

The hangarman's tone changed. "I tell you, that tube's good as gold. . . . Wait, I'll show you."

He pulled a key ring from his pocket, plugged it into the starter socket. The car quivered free of the ground, eager for flight. "See? Just what I told you."

Magnus Ridolph said doubtfully, "It seems to be working fairly well now. . . . You get on the telephone and tell Mr. See that I am taking his car for a trial spin, a final check. . . ."

The mechanic looked dumbly at Magnus Ridolph, slowly turned to the speaker on the wall.

Magnus Ridolph jumped into the seat. The mechanic's voice was loud. "The gentleman that's buying your boat is giving it the once-over. Don't let him feed you no line about a bum tube; the ship is running like oil down a four-mile bore. Don't take nothing else. . . . What? . . . Sure he's here; he said so himself. . . . A little schoolteacher guy with a white beard like a nanny-goat. . . ." The sound from the telephone caused him to jump back sharply. Anxiously, he turned to look where he had left Magnus Ridolph and Julius See's sleek red air-car.

Both had disappeared.

Mrs. Chaim roused her peacock-shaped friend Mrs. Borgage rather earlier than usual. "Hurry, Altamira; we've been so late these last few mornings, we've missed the best seats in the observation car."

Mrs. Borgage obliged by hastening her toilet; in short order the two ladies appeared in the lobby. By a peculiar coincidence both wore costumes of dark green, a color which each thought suited the other not at all. They paused by the announcement of the day's war in order to check the odds, then turned into the dining room.

They ate a hurried breakfast, set out for the loading platform. Mrs. Borgage, pausing to catch her breath and enjoy the freshness of the morning, glanced toward the roof of the inn. Mrs. Chaim rather impatiently looked over her shoulder. "Whatever are you staring at, Altamira?"

Mrs. Borgage pointed. "It's that unpleasant little man Ridolph

... I can't fathom what he's up to. He seems to be fixing some sort of branch to the roof."

Mrs. Chaim sniffed. "I thought the management had turned him out."

"Isn't that Mr. See's air-car on the roof behind him?"

"I really couldn't say," replied Mrs. Chaim. "I know very little of such things." She turned away toward the loading platform, and Mrs. Borgage followed.

Once more they met interruption; this time in the form of the pilot. His clothes were disarranged; his face had suffered scratching and contusion. Running wild-eyed, he careened into the two green-clad ladies, disengaged himself and continued without apology.

Mrs. Chaim bridled in outrage. "Well, I never!" She turned to look after the pilot. "Has the man gone mad?"

Mrs. Borgage, peering ahead to learn the source of the pilot's alarm, uttered a sharp cry.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Chaim irritably.

Mrs. Borgage clasped her arm with bony fingers. "Look."

VI

During the subsequent official investigation, Commonwealth Control Agent Everley Clark transcribed the following eyewitness account:

"I am Joe 234, Leg-leader of the Fifteenth Brigade, the Fanatics, in the service of the indomitable Shell Strand Tumble.

"We are accustomed to the ruses of Topaz Tumble and the desperate subtleties of Star Throne; hence the ambush prepared by the giant warriors of Big Square Tumble took us not at all by surprise.

"Approaching by Primary Formation 17, we circled the flat space occupied by several flying contrivances, where we flushed out a patrol spy. We thrashed him with our lances, and he fled back toward his own forces.

"Continuing, we encountered a first line of defense consisting of two rather ineffectual warriors accoutered in garments of green cloth. These we beat, also, according to Convention 22, in force during the day. Uttering terrible cries, the two warriors retreated, luring us toward prepared positions inside the tumble itself. High on the roof the standard of Big Square Tumble rose,

plain to see. No deception there, at least! Our strategic problem assumed a clear form; how best to beat down resistance and win to the roof.

"Frontal assault was decided upon; the signal to advance was given. We of the Fifteenth were first past the outer defense—a double panel of thick glass which we broke with rocks. Inside we met a spirited defense which momentarily threw us back.

"At this juncture occurred a diversion in the form of troops from the Rock River Tumble, which, as we now know, the warriors of the Big Square Tumble had rashly challenged for the same day. The Rock River warriors entered by a row of flimsy doors facing the mountain, and at this time the Big Square defenders violated Convention 22, which requires that the enemy be subdued by blows of the lance. Flagrantly they hurled glass cups and goblets, and by immemorial usage we were allowed to retaliate in kind.

"At the failure of this tactic, the defending warriors withdrew to an inner bastion, voicing their war-cries.

"The siege began in earnest; and now the Big Square warriors began to pay the price of their arrogance. Not only had they pitted themselves against Shell Strand and Rock River, but they likewise had challenged the redoubtable Rainbow Cleft and Sea Stone, conquerors of Rose Slope and Dark Fissure. The Sea Stone warriors, led by their Throw-away Legion, poured through a secret rear entrance, while the Rainbow Cleft Special Vanguard occupied the Big Square main council hall.

"A terrible battle raged for several minutes in a room designed for the preparations of nourishments, and again the Big Square warriors broke code by throwing fluids, pastes, and powders—a remission which the alert Shell Strand warriors swiftly copied.

"I led the Fanatic Fifteenth outside, hoping to gain exterior access to the roof, and thereby win the Big Square standard. The armies of Shell Strand, Sea Stone, Rock River and Rainbow Cleft now completely surrounded Big Square Tumble, a magnificent sight which shall live in my memory till at last I lay down my lance.

"In spite of our efforts, the honor of gaining the enemy standard went to a daredevil squad from Sea Stone, which scaled a tree to the roof and so bore away the trophy. The defenders, ignorant of or ignoring the fact that the standard had been taken,

broke the code yet again, this time by using tremendous blasts of water. The next time Shell Strand wars with Big Tumble we shall insist on one of the Conventions allowing any and all weapons; otherwise we place ourselves at a disadvantage.

"Victorious, our army, together with the troops of Sea Stone, Rock River and Rainbow Cleft, assembled in the proper formations and marched off to our home tumbles. Even as we departed, the great Black Comet Tumble dropped from the sky to vomit further warriors for Big Square. However, there was no pursuit, and unmolested we returned to the victory rituals."

Captain Bussey of the Phoenix Line packet *Archaeornix*, which had arrived as the Kokod warriors marched away, surveyed the wreckage with utter astonishment. "What in God's name happened to you?"

Julius See stood panting, his forehead clammy with sweat. "Get me guns," he cried hoarsely. "Get me a blaster; I'll wipe out every damn hive on the planet. . . ."

Holpers came loping up, arms flapping the air. "They've completely demolished us; you should see the lobby, the kitchen, the day rooms! A shambles—"

Captain Bussey shook his head in bewilderment. "Why in the world should they attack you? They're supposed to be a peaceable race . . . except toward each other, of course."

"Well, something got into them," said See, still breathing hard. "They came at us like tigers—beating us with their damn little sticks. . . . I finally washed them out with firehoses."

"What about your guests?" asked Captain Bussey in sudden curiosity.

See shrugged. "I don't know what happened to them. A bunch ran off up the valley, smack into another army. I understand they got beat up as good as those that stayed."

"We couldn't even escape in our aircraft," complained Holpers. "not one of them would start. . . ."

A mild voice interrupted. "Mr. See, I have decided against purchasing your air-car, and have returned it to the hangar."

See slowly turned, the baleful aura of his thoughts almost tangible. "You, Ridolph. . . . I'm beginning to see daylight. . . ."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Come on, spill it!" See took a threatening step forward.

Captain Bussey said, "Careful, See, watch your temper."

See ignored him. "What's your part in all this, Ridolph?"

Magnus Ridolph shook his head in bewilderment. "I'm completely at a loss. I rather imagine that the natives learned of your gambling on events they considered important, and decided to take punitive steps."

The ornamental charabanc from the ship rolled up; among the passengers was a woman of notable bust, correctly tinted, massaged, coiffed, scented and decorated. "Ah!" said Magnus Ridolph. "Mrs. Chickering! Charming!"

"I could stay away no longer," said Mrs. Chickering. "I had to know how—our business was proceeding."

Julius See leaned forward curiously. "What kind of business do you mean?"

Mrs. Chickering turned him a swift contemptuous glance; then her attention was attracted by two women who came hobbling from the direction of the inn. She gasped, "Olga! Altamira! What on Earth—"

"Don't stand there gasping," snapped Mrs. Chaim. "Get us clothes. Those frightful savages tore us to shreds."

Mrs. Chickering turned in confusion to Magnus Ridolph. "Just what has happened? Surely you can't have—"

Magnus Ridolph cleared his throat. "Mrs. Chickering, a word with you aside." He drew her out of earshot of the others. "Mrs. Chaim and Mrs. Borgage—they are friends of yours?"

Mrs. Chickering cast an anxious glance over her shoulder. "I can't understand the situation at all," she muttered feverishly. "Mrs. Chaim is the president of the Woman's League and Mrs. Borgage is treasurer. I can't understand them running around with their clothing in shreds. . . ."

Magnus Ridolph said candidly, "Well, Mrs. Chickering, in carrying out your instructions, I allowed scope to the natural combativeness of the natives, and perhaps they—"

"Martha," came Mrs. Chaim's grating voice close at hand, "what is your connection with this man? I have reason to suspect that he is mixed up in this terrible attack. Look at him!" Her voice rose furiously. "They haven't laid a finger on him! And the rest of us!"

Martha Chickering licked her lips. "Well, Olga, dear, this is Magnus Ridolph. In accordance with last month's resolution, we hired him to close down the gambling here at the inn."

Magnus Ridolph said in his suavest tones, "Following which,

Mrs. Chaim and Mrs. Borgage naturally thought it best to come out and study the situation at first hand; am I right?"

Mrs. Chaim and Mrs. Borgage glared. Mrs. Chaim said, "If you think, Martha Chickering, that the Woman's League will in any way recognize this rogue—"

"My dear Mrs. Chaim," protested Magnus Ridolph.

"But Olga—I promised him 1,000 munits a week!"

Magnus Ridolph waved his hand airily. "My dear Mrs. Chickering, I prefer that any sums due me be distributed among worthy charities. I have profited during my short stay here—"

"See!" came Captain Bussey's voice. "For God's sake, man, control yourself!"

Magnus Ridolph, turning, found See struggling in the grasp of Captain Bussey. "Try and collect!" See cried out to Magnus Ridolph. He angrily thrust Captain Bussey's arms aside, stood with hands clenching and unclenching. "Just try and collect!"

"My dear Mr. See, I have already collected."

"You've done nothing of the sort—and if I catch you in my boat again, I'll break your scrawny little neck!"

Magnus Ridolph held up his hand. "The 100,000 munits I wrote off immediately; however, there were six other bets which I placed by proxy; these were paid, and my share of the winnings came to well over 300,000 munits. Actually, I regard this sum as return of the capital which I placed with the Outer Empire Investment and Realty Society, plus a reasonable profit. Everything considered, it was a remunerative as well as instructive investment."

"Ridolph," muttered See, "one of these days—"

Mrs. Chaim shouldered forward. "Did I hear you say 'Outer Empire Realty and Investment Society'?"

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I believe that Mr. See and Mr. Holpers were responsible officials of the concern."

Mrs. Chaim took two steps forward. See frowned uneasily; Bruce Holpers began to edge away. "Come back here!" cried Mrs. Chaim. "I have a few words to say before I have you arrested."

Magnus Ridolph turned to Captain Bussey. "You return to Methedeeon on schedule, I assume?"

"Yes," said Captain Bussey dryly.

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I think I will go aboard at once, since there will be considerable demand for passage."

"As you wish," said Captain Bussey.

"I believe No. 12 is your best cabin?"

"I believe so," said Captain Bussey.

"Then kindly regard Cabin No. 12 as booked."

"Very well, Mr. Ridolph."

Magnus Ridolph looked up the mountainside. "I noticed Mr. Pilby running along the ridge a few minutes ago. I think it would be a real kindness if he were notified that the war is over."

"I think so too," said Captain Bussey. They looked around the group. Mrs. Chaim was still engaged with Julius See and Bruce Holpers. Mrs. Borgage was displaying her bruises to Mrs. Chickering. No one seemed disposed to act on Magnus Ridolph's suggestion.

Magnus Ridolph shrugged, climbed the gangway into the *Archaeornyx*. "Well, no matter. In due course he will very likely come by himself."

Getting Through University

by Piers Anthony

Piers Anthony is a fascinating writer who is one of the great success stories of the sf/fantasy field. A professional (in every sense of the term) writer for over twenty years, he emerged in the early 1980s as a publishing phenomenon, with several books on the major best-seller lists. His huge and still growing readership is as diverse as his fiction, which now totals more than forty books. His magical world of Xanth, which began with A Spell for Chameleon (1977) and currently involves seven novels including Dragon on a Pedestal (1983), is particularly popular, as is his new "Bio of a Space Tyrant" sf series.

But Mr. Anthony is also a fine short story writer, as he proves in "Getting Through University," an account of one of the most difficult sports facing college students of the future.

I

He entered the booth when his turn came and waited somewhat apprehensively for it to perform. The panel behind shut him in and ground tight.

The interior was dark and unbearably hot, making sweat break out and stream down his body. Then the temperature dropped so

precipitously that the moisture crystallized upon his skin and flaked away with the violence of his shivering. The air grew thick and bitter, then gaspingly rare. Light blazed, then faded into impenetrable black. A complete sonic spectrum of noise smote him, followed by crushing silence. His nose reacted to a gamut of irritation. He sneezed.

Abruptly it was spring on a clover hillside, waft of nectar and hum of bumblebee. The air was refreshingly brisk. The booth had zeroed in on his metabolism.

"Identity?" a deceptively feminine voice inquired from nowhere, and a sign flashed with the word printed in italics, English.

"My name is Dillingham," he said clearly, remembering his instructions. "I am a male mammalian biped evolved on planet Earth. I am applying for admission to the School of Prosthodontics as an initiate of the appropriate level."

After a pause the booth replied sweetly: "Misinformation. You are a quadruped."

"Correction," Dillingham said quickly. "I am *evolved* from quadruped." He spread his hands and touched the wall. "Technically tetrapod, anterior limbs no longer employed for locomotion. Digits possess sensitivity, dexterity—"

"Noted." But before he could breathe relief, it had another objection: "Earth planet has not yet achieved galactic accreditation. Application invalid."

"I have been sponsored by the Dental League of Electrolus," he said. He saw already how far he would have gotten without that potent endorsement.

"Verified. Provisional application granted. Probability of acceptance after preliminary investigation: twenty-one percent. Fee: Thirteen thousand, two hundred five dollars, four cents, seven mills, payable immediately."

"Agreed," he said, appalled at both the machine's efficiency in adapting to his language and conventions and the cost of application. He knew that the fee covered only the seventy-hour investigation of his credentials; if finally admitted as a student, he would have to pay another fee of as much as a hundred thousand dollars for the first term. If rejected, he would get no rebate.

His sponsor, Electrolus, was paying for it, finding it expedient to ship him here rather than to keep him where his presence might be an embarrassment. Electrolus did not want him on hand

to give further advice that might show up the oversights of its own practitioners.

If he failed to gain admission, there would be no consequence—except that his chance to really improve himself would be gone. He could never afford training at the University on his own, even if the sponsorship requirement should be waived. He had traveled all over the galaxy since unexpectedly leaving Earth, solving alien dental problems by luck and approximation, but he was not the type of man to relish such uncertainties. He had to have advanced training.

Even so, he hoped that what the university had to offer was worth it. Over thirteen thousand dollars had already been drained from the Electrolus account here by his verbal agreement—for a twenty-one per cent probability of acceptance!

“Present your anterior limb, buccal surface forward.”

He put out his left hand again, deciding that buccal in this context equated with the back of the hand. He was nervous in spite of the assurance he had been given that this process was harmless. A mist appeared around it, puffed and vanished, leaving an iridescent band clasped around, or perhaps bonded into, the skin of his wrist.

The opposite side of the booth opened, and he stepped into a lighted corridor. He held up his hand and saw that the left of it was bright while the right was dead. This remained even when he twisted his wrist, the glow independent of his motion. He proceeded left.

At the end of the passage was a row of elevators. Other creatures of diverse proportions moved toward these, guided by glows on their appendages. His own guided him to a particular unit. Its panel was open, and he entered.

The door closed as he took hold of the supportive bars. The unit moved, not up or down as he had expected, but backwards. He clung desperately to the support as the fierce acceleration hurled him at the door.

There was something like a porthole in the side through which he could make out racing lights and darkneses. If these were stationary sources of contrast, his velocity was phenomenal. His stomach jumped as the vehicle dipped and tilted; then it was plummeting down as though dropped from a cliff.

Dillingham was reminded of an amusement park he had vis-

ited as a child on Earth; there had been a ride through the dark something like this. He was sure that the transport system of the university had not been designed for thrills, however; it merely reflected the fact that there was a long way to go and many others in line. The elevators would not function at all for any creature not wearing University identification. Established galactics took such things in stride without even noticing.

Finally it decelerated and stopped.

The door opened, and he stepped dizzily into his residence for the duration, suppressing incipient motion-sickness.

The apartment was attractive enough. The air was sweet, the light moderate, the temperature comfortable. Earthlike vines decorated the trellises, and couches fit for humanoids were placed against the walls. In the center of the main room stood a handsome but mysterious device.

Something emerged from an alcove. It was a creature resembling an oversized pincushion with legs, one of which sported the ubiquitous iridescent band. It honked.

"Greetings, roommate," a speaker from the central artifact said. Dillingham realized that it was a multiple-dialect translator.

"How do you do," he said. The translator honked, and the pincushion came all the way into the room.

"I am from no equivalent term," it said in tootles.

Dillingham hesitated to comment, until he realized that the confusion was the translator's fault. There was no name in English for Pincushion's planet, since Earth knew little of galactic geography and nothing of interspecies commerce. "Substitute 'pincushion' for the missing term," he advised the machine, "and make the same kind of adjustment for any of my terms which may not be renderable into Pincushion's dialect." He turned to the creature. "I am from Earth. I presume you are also here to make application for admittance to the School of Prosthodontics?"

The translator honked, once. Dillingham waited, but that was all.

Pincushion honked. "Yes, of course. I'm sure all beings assigned to this dormitory are 1.0 gravity, oxygen-imbibing ambulators applying as students. The administration is very careful to group compatible species."

Apparently a single honk could convey a paragraph. Perhaps

there were frequencies he couldn't hear. Then again, it might be the inefficiency of his own tongue. "I'm new to all this," he admitted. "I know very little of the ways of the galaxy, or what is expected of me here."

"I'll be happy to show you around," Pincushion said. "My planet has been sending students here for, well, not a long time, but several centuries. We even have a couple of instructors here, at the lower levels." There was a note of pride in the rendition. "Maybe one of these millennia we'll manage to place a supervisor."

Already Dillingham could imagine the prestige that would carry.

II

At that moment the elevator-vehicle disgorged another passenger. This was a tall oaklike creature with small leaflike tentacles fluttering at its sides. The bright University band circled the center mark. It looked at the decorative vines of the apartment and spoke with the whistle of wind through dead branches: "Appalling captivity."

The sound of the translator seemed to bring its attention to the other occupants. "May your probability of acceptance be better than mine," it said by way of greeting. "I am a humble modest branch from Tree trunk (the translator learned quickly) and despite my formidable knowledge of prosthodontica my percentage is a mere sixty."

Somewhere in there had been a honk, so Dillingham knew that simultaneous translations were being performed. This device made the little dual-track transcoders he had used before seem primitive.

"You are more fortunate than I," Pincushion replied. "I stand at only forty-eight per cent."

They both looked at Dillingham. Pincushion had knobby stalks that were probably eyes, and Tree trunk's apical disks vibrated like the greenery of a poplar sapling.

"Twenty-one per cent," he said sheepishly.

There was an awkward silence. "Well, these are only estimates based upon the past performance of your species," Pincushion said. "Perhaps your predecessors were not apt."

"I don't think I *had* any predecessors," Dillingham said.

"Earth isn't accredited yet." He hesitated to admit that Earth hadn't even achieved true space travel. He had never been embarrassed for his planet before, though when he thought about it, he realized that he had never had occasion to consider himself a planetary citizen before, either.

"Experience and competence count more than some machine's guess, I'm sure," Treetrunk said. "I've been practicing on my world for six years. If you're—"

"Well, I did practice for ten years on Earth."

"You see—that will probably triple your probability when they find out," Pincushion said encouragingly. "They just gave you a low probability because no one from your planet has applied before."

He hoped they were right, but his stomach didn't settle. He doubted that as sophisticated a setup as the galactic University would have to stoop to such crude approximation. The administration already knew quite a bit about him from the preliminary application, and his ignorance of galactic method was sure to count heavily against him. "Are there—references here?" he inquired. "Facilities? If I could look them over—"

"Good idea!" Pincushion said. "Come—the operatory is this way, and there is a small museum of equipment."

There was. The apartment had an annex equipped with an astonishing array of dental technology. There was enough for him to study for years before he could be certain of mastery. He decided to concentrate on the racked texts first, after learning that they could be fed into the translator for ready assimilation in animated projection.

"Standard stuff," Treetrunk said, making a noise like chafing bark. "I believe I'll take an estivation."

As Dillingham returned to the main room with an armful of the boxlike texts, the elevator loosed another creature. This was a four-legged cylinder with a head tapered like that of an anteater and peculiarly thin-jointed arms terminating in a series of thorns.

It occurred to him that such physical structure would be virtually ideal for dentistry. The thorns were probably animate rotary burrs, and the elongated snout might reach directly into the patient's mouth for inspection of close work without the imposition of a mirror. After the initial introductions, he asked Anteater how his probability stood.

"Ninety-eight per cent," the creature replied in an offhand manner. "Our kind seldom miss. We're specialized for this sort of thing."

Specialization—there was the liability of the human form, Dillingham thought. Men were among the most generalized of Earth's denizens, except for their developed brains—and obviously these galactics had similar intellectual qualities, and had been in space so long they were able to adapt physically for something as narrow as dentistry. The outlook for him remained bleak.

A robotlike individual and a native from Electrolus completed the apartment's complement. He hadn't known that his sponsor-planet was entering one of its own in the same curriculum, though it didn't affect him particularly.

Six diverse creatures, counting himself—all dentists on their home worlds, all specializing in prosthodontics, all eager to pass the entrance examinations. All male, within reasonable definition—the university was very strict about the proprieties. This was only one apartment in a small city reserved for applicants. The university proper occupied the entire planet.

They learned all about it that evening at the indoctrination briefing, guided to the lecture-hall by a blue glow manifested on each identification band. The hall was monstrous; only the oxygen-breathers attended this session, but they numbered almost fifty thousand. Other halls catered to differing life-forms simultaneously.

The university graduated over a million highly skilled dentists every term and had a constant enrollment of twenty times that number. Dillingham didn't know how many terms it took to graduate—the program might be variable—but the incidence of depletion seemed high. Even the total figure represented a very minor proportion of the dentistry in the galaxy. This proportion was extremely important, however, since mere admission as a freshman student required qualifications that would equip the individual as a graduate elsewhere.

There were generally only a handful of University graduates on any civilized planet. These were automatically granted life tenures as instructors at the foremost planetary colleges, or established as consultants for the most challenging cases available. Even the dropouts had healthy futures.

Instructors for the University itself were drawn from its own most gifted graduates. The top one hundred, approximately—of

each class of a million—were siphoned off for special training and retained, and a greater number was recruited from the lower-ranking body of graduates: individuals who demonstrated superior qualifications in subsequent galactic practice. A few instructors were even recruited from nongraduates, when their specialties were so restricted and their skills so great that such exceptions seemed warranted.

The administrators came largely from the University of Administration, dental division, situated on another planet; they wielded enormous power. The University President was the virtual dictator of the planet, and his pronouncements had the force of law in dental matters throughout the galaxy. Indeed, Dillingham thought as he absorbed the information, if there were any organization that approached galactic overlordship, it was the association of University Presidents. They had the authority—by their own declaration—and the power to quarantine any world found guilty of willful malpractice in any of the established University fields, and since any quarantine covered *all* fields, it was devastating. An abstract was run showing the consequence of the last absolute quarantine: within a year that world had collapsed in anarchy. What followed was not at all pretty.

Dillingham saw that the level of skill engendered by University training did indeed transcend any ordinary practice. No one on Earth had any inkling of the techniques considered commonplace here. His imagination was saturated with the marvel of it all. His dream of knowledge for the sake of knowledge was a futile one; such training was far too valuable to be reserved for the satisfaction of the individual. No wonder graduates became public servants! The investment was far less monetary than cultural and technological, for the sponsoring planet.

His roommates were largely unimpressed. "Everyone knows the universities wield galactic power," Treetrunk said. "This is only one school of many, and hardly the most important. Take Finance, now—"

"Or Transportation," Pincushion added. "Every spaceship, every stellar conveyor, designed and operated by graduates of—"

"Or Communication," Anteater said. "Comm U has several campuses, even, and they're not dinky little planets like this one, either. Civilization is impossible without communications. What's a few bad teeth, compared to that?"

Dillingham was shocked. "But all of you are dentists. How can you take such tremendous knowledge and responsibility so casually?"

"Oh, come now," Anteater said. "The technology of dentistry hasn't changed in millennia. It's a staid, dated institution. Why get excited?"

"No point in letting ideology go to our heads," Treetrunk agreed. "I'm coming here because this training will set me up for life on my home world. I won't have to set up a practice at all; I'll be a consultant. It's the best training in the galaxy—we all know that—but we must try to keep it in perspective."

The others signified agreement. Dillingham saw that he was a minority of one. All the others were interested in the training not for its own sake but for the monetary and prestigious benefits they could derive from a degree.

And all of them had much higher probabilities of admission than he. Was he wrong?

III

Next day they undertook a battery of field tests. Dillingham had to use the operatory equipment to perform specified tasks: excavation, polishing, placement of amalgam, measurement, manufacture of assorted impressions—on a number of familiar and unfamiliar jaws. He had to diagnose and prescribe. He had to demonstrate facility in all phases of laboratory work—facility he now felt woefully deficient in. The equipment was versatile, and he had no particular difficulty adjusting to it, but it was so well made and precise that he was certain his own abilities fell far short of those for whom it was intended.

The early exercises were routine, and he was able to do them easily in the time recommended. Gradually, however, they became more difficult, and he had to concentrate as never before to accomplish the assignments at all, let alone on schedule. There were several jaws so alien that he could not determine their modes of action and had to pass them by even though the treatment seemed simple enough. But he remembered his recent experiences with galactic dentition, and the unsuspected mechanisms of seemingly ordinary teeth, and so refused to perform repairs even on a dummy jaw that might be more harmful than no repair at all.

During the rest breaks he chatted with his companions, all in neighboring operatories, and learned to his dismay that none of them were having difficulties. "How can you be sure of the proper occlusal on #17?" he asked Treetrunk. "There was no upper mandible present for comparison."

"That was an Oopoo jaw," Treetrunk rustled negligently. "Oopoos have no uppers. There's just a bony plate, perfectly regular. Didn't you know that?"

"You recognize all the types of jaw in the galaxy?" Dillingham asked him, hardly crediting it.

"Certainly. I have read at least one text on the dentures of every accredited species. We Treetrunks never forget."

Eidetic memory! How could a mere man compete with a creature who was able to peruse a million or more texts and retain every detail of each? He understood more and more plainly why his probability of success was so low. He was beginning to wonder whether it had not been set unrealistically high, in fact.

"What was #36, the last one?" Pincushion inquired. "I didn't recognize it, and I thought I knew them all."

Treetrunk became slightly wilted.

"I never saw that one before," he admitted. "It must have been extra-galactic, or a theoretic simulacrum designed to test our extrapolation."

"The work was obvious, however," Anteater observed. "I polished it off in four seconds."

"Four seconds!" All the others were amazed.

"Well, we *are* adapted for this sort of routine," Anteater said patronizingly. "Our burrs are built in, and all the rest of it. My main delay is generally in diagnosis. But #36 was a straightforward labial cavity requiring a plastoid substructure and metallic overlay, heated to 540 degrees Centigrade for thirty-seven microseconds."

"Thirty-nine microseconds," Treetrunk corrected him, a shade smugly. "You forgot to allow for the red shift in the overhead beam. But that's still remarkable time."

"I employed my natural illumination, naturally," Anteater said, just as smugly, flashing a yellow light from his snout. "No distortion there. But I believe my alloy differs slightly from what is considered standard, which may account for the difference. Your point is good, nevertheless. I hope none of the others forgot that adjustment?"

The Electrolyte settled an inch. "I did," he confessed.

Dillingham was too stunned to be despondent. Had all of them diagnosed #36 so readily, and were they all so perceptive as to be automatically aware of the wavelength of a particular beam of light? Or were there such readings available through the equipment, that he didn't know about, and wouldn't be competent to use if he *did* know? He had pondered that jaw for the full time allotted and finally given it up untouched. True, the cavity had appeared to be perfectly straightforward, but it was too clean to ring true. Could—

The buzzer sounded for the final session, and they dispersed to their several compartments.

Dillingham was contemplating #41 with mounting frustration when he heard Treetrunk, via the translator extension, call to Anteater. "I can't seem to get this S-curve excavation right," he complained. "Would you lend me your snout?"

A joke, of course, Dillingham thought. Discussion of cases after they were finished was one thing, but consultation during the exam—!

"Certainly," Anteater replied. He trotted past Dillingham's unit and entered Treetrunk's compartment. There was the muted beep of his high-speed proboscis drill. "You people confined to manufactured tools labor under such a dreadful disadvantage," he remarked. "It's a wonder you can qualify at all!"

"Hmph," Treetrunk replied good-naturedly . . . and later returned the favor by providing a spot diagnosis based on his knowledge of an obscure chapter of an ancient text, to settle a case that had Anteater in doubt. "It isn't as though we were competing against each other," he said. "Every point counts!"

Dillingham plowed away, upset. Of course there had been nothing in the posted regulations forbidding such procedure, but he had taken it as implied. Even if galactic ethics differed from his own in this respect, he couldn't see his way clear to draw on any knowledge or skill other than his own. Not in this situation.

Meanwhile, #41 was a different kind of problem. The directive, instead of saying "Do what is necessary," as it had for the #36 they had discussed during the break, was this time specific. "Create an appropriate mesiocclusodistal metal-alloy inlay for the afflicted fifth molar in this humanoid jaw."

This was perfectly feasible. Despite its oddities as judged by

Earthly standards, it *was* humanoid and therefore roughly familiar to him. So men did not have more than three molars in a row; he now knew that other species *did*. He had by this time mastered the sophisticated equipment well enough to do the job in a fraction of the time he had required on Earth. He could have the inlay shaped and cast within the time limit.

The only trouble was his experience, and observation indicated that the specified reconstruction was not proper in this case. It would require the removal of far more healthy dentin than was necessary, for one thing. In addition, there was evidence of persistent inflammation in the gingival tissue that could herald periodontal disease.

He finally disobeyed the instructions and placed a temporary filling. He hoped he would be given the opportunity to explain his action, though he was afraid he had already failed the exam. There was just too much to do, he knew too little, and the competition was too strong.

IV

The field examination was finished in the afternoon, and nothing was scheduled for that evening. Next day the written exam—actually a combination of written, verbal and demonstrative questions—was due, and everyone except Tree trunk was deep in the texts. Tree trunk was dictating a letter home, the translator blanked out so that his narration would not disturb the others.

Dillingham pored over the three-dimensional pictures and captions produced by the tomes while listening to the accompanying lecture. There was so much to master in such a short time! It was fascinating—but he could handle only a tiny fraction of it. He wondered what phenomenal material remained to be presented in the courses themselves, since all the knowledge of the galaxy seemed to be required just to pass the entrance exam. Tooth transplantation? Tissue regeneration? Restoration of the enamel itself, rather than crude metal fillings?

The elevator opened. A creature rather like a walking oyster emerged. Its yard-wide shell opened to reveal eyestalks and a comparatively dainty mouth. "This is the—dental yard?" it inquired timorously.

"Great purple quills!" Pincushion swore quietly. "One of those

insidious panhandlers. I thought they'd cleared such obtusities out long ago."

Tree trunk, closest to the door, looked up and switched on his section of the translator. "The whole planet is dental, idiot," he snapped after the query had been repeated for him. "This is a private dormitory."

The oyster persisted. "But you are off-duty dentists? I have a terrible toothache—"

"We are *applicants*," Tree trunk informed it imperiously. "What you want is the clinic. Please leave us alone."

"But the clinic is closed. Please—my jaw pains me so that I cannot eat. I am an old clam—"

Tree trunk impatiently switched off the translator and resumed his letter. No one else said anything.

Dillingham could not let this pass. Tree trunk had disconnected himself, but the translator still functioned for the other languages. "Isn't there some regular dentist you can see who can relieve the pain until morning? We are studying for a very important examination."

"I have no credit—no money for private service," Oyster wailed. "The clinic is closed for the night, and my tooth—"

Dillingham looked at the pile of texts before him. He had so little time, and the material was so important. He had to make a good score tomorrow to mitigate today's disaster.

"Please," Oyster whined. "It pains me so—"

He gave up. He was not sure regulations permitted it, but he had to do something. There was a chance he could at least relieve the pain. "Come with me," he said.

Pincushion waved his pins, actually sensitive cilia capable of intricate maneuvering. "Not in our operatory," he protested. "How can we concentrate with that going on?"

Dillingham restrained his unreasonable anger and took the patient to the elevator. After some errors, he located a vacant testing operatory elsewhere in the application section. Fortunately the translators were everywhere, so he could converse with the creature and clarify its complaint.

"The big flat one," it said as it propped itself awkwardly in the chair and opened its shell. "It hurts."

He took a look. The complaint was valid; most of the teeth had conventional plasticene filings, but one had somehow been dislodged from the proximal surface of a molar: a Class II restoration.

The gap was packed with rancid vegetable matter—seaweed?—and was undoubtedly quite uncomfortable.

"You must understand," he cautioned the creature, "that I am not a regular dentist here, or even a student. I have neither the authority nor the competence to do any work of a permanent nature on your teeth. All I can do is clean out the cavity and attempt to relieve the pain so that you can get along until the clinic opens in the morning. Then an authorized dentist can do the job properly. Do you understand?"

"It hurts," Oyster repeated.

Dillingham located the creature's planet in the directory and punched out the formula for the suitable anesthetic. The dispenser gurgled and rolled out a cylinder and swab. He opened the former and dabbed with the latter around the affected area, restraining his irritation at the patient's evident inability to sit still even for this momentary operation. While waiting for it to take effect, he requested more information from the translator, which he had discovered was also quite a versatile instrument.

"Dominant species of Planet Oyster," the machine reported. "Highly intelligent, nonspecialized, emotionally stable life-form." Dillingham tried to reconcile this with what he had already observed of his patient, and concluded that individuals must vary considerably from the norm. He listened to further vital information, and soon had a fair idea of Oyster's general nature and the advisable care of his dentition. There did not seem to be any factors inhibiting his treatment of this complaint.

He applied a separator, over the patient's protest, and cleaned out the impacted debris with a spoon excavator without difficulty, but Oyster shied away at sight of the rotary diamond burr. "Hurts!" he protested.

"I have given you adequate local anesthesia," Dillingham explained. "You should feel nothing except a slight vibration in your jaw, which will not be uncomfortable. This is a standard drill, the same kind I'm sure you've seen many times before." As he spoke, he marveled at what he now termed standard. The burr was shaped like nothing—literally—on Earth and rotated at 150,000 r.p.m.—several times the maximum employed back home. It was awesomely efficient.

Oyster shut mouth and shell firmly. "Hurts!" his whisper emerged through clenched defenses.

Dillingham thought despairingly of the time this was costing him. If he didn't return to his texts soon, he would forfeit his remaining chance to pass the written exam.

He sighed and put away the power tool. "Perhaps I can clean it with the hand instruments," he said. "I'll have to use this rubber dam, though, since this will take more time."

One look at the patient convinced him otherwise. Regretfully he put away the rubber square that would have kept the field of operation dry and clean while he worked.

He had to break through the overhanging enamel with a chisel, the patient wincing every time he lifted the mallet and doubling the necessity for the assistant he didn't have. A power mallet would have helped, but that, too, was out. It was a tedious and difficult task. He had to scrape off every portion of the ballroom cavity from an awkward angle, hardly able to see what he was doing since he needed a third hand for the dental mirror.

It *would* have to be a Class II—jammed in the side of the molar facing the adjacent molar, both sturdy teeth with very little give. A Class II was the very worst restoration to attempt in makeshift fashion. He could have accelerated the process by doing a slipshod job, but it was not in him to skimp even when he knew it was only for a night. Half an hour passed before he performed the toilet: blowing out the loose debris with a jet of warm air, swabbing the interior with alcohol, drying again.

"Now I'm going to block this with a temporary wax," he told Oyster. "This will not stand up to intensive chewing, but should hold you comfortably until morning." Not that the warning was likely to make much difference. The trouble had obviously started when the original fillings came loose, but it had been weeks since that had happened. Evidently the patient had not bothered to have it fixed until the pain became unbearable—and now that the pain was gone, Oyster might well delay longer, until the work had to be done all over again. The shortsighted refuge from initial inconvenience was hardly a monopoly of Earthly sufferers.

"No," Oyster said, jolting him back to business. "Wax tastes bad."

"This is guaranteed tasteless to most life-forms, and it is only for the night. As soon as you report to the clinic—"

"Tastes bad!" the patient insisted, starting to close his shell.

Dillingham wondered again just what the translator had meant by "highly intelligent . . . emotionally stable." He kept his peace and dialed for amalgam.

"Nasty color," Oyster said.

"But this is pigmented red, to show that the filling is intended as temporary. It will hardly show, in this location. I don't want the clinic to have any misunderstanding."

The shell clamped all the way shut, nearly pinning his fingers. "Nasty color!"

It occurred to him that more was involved than capricious difficulty. Did this patient intend to go to the clinic at all? Oyster might be angling for a permanent filling. "What color does suit you?"

"Gold."

It figured. Well, better to humor the patient, rather than try to force him into a more sensible course. Dillingham could make a report to the authorities, who could then roust out Oyster and check the work properly.

At his direction, the panel extruded a ribbon of gold foil. He placed this in the miniature annealing oven and waited for the slow heat to act.

"You're burning it up!" Oyster protested.

"By no means. It is necessary to make the gold cohesive, for better service. You see—"

"Hot," Oyster said. So much for helpful explanations. He could have employed noncohesive metal, but this was a lesser technique that didn't appeal to him.

V

At length he had suitable ropes of gold for the slow, delicate task of building up the restoration inside the cavity. The first layer was down; once he malleted it into place—

The elevator burst asunder. A second oyster charged into the operatory waving a translucent tube. "Villain!" it exclaimed. "What are you doing to my grandfather?"

Dillingham was taken aback. "Your *grandfather*? I'm trying to make him comfortable until—"

The newcomer would have none of it. "You're torturing him!"

My poor, dear, long-suffering grandfather! Monster! How could you?"

"But I'm only—"

Young Oyster leveled the tube at him. Dillingham noticed irrelevantly that its end was solid. "Get away from my grandfather. I saw you hammering spikes into his venerable teeth, you sadist! I'm taking him home!"

Dillingham did not move. He considered this a stance of necessity, not courage. "Not until I complete this work. I can't let him go out like this, with the excavation exposed."

"Beast! Pervert! *Humanoid!*" the youngster screamed. "I'll volatilize you!"

Searing light beamed from the solid tube. The metal mallet in Dillingham's hand melted and dripped to the floor.

He leaped for the oyster and grapped for the weapon. The giant shell clamped shut upon his hand as they fell to the floor. He struggled to right himself, but discovered that the creature had withdrawn all its appendages and now was nothing more than a two-hundred-pound clam—with Dillingham's left hand firmly pinioned.

"Assaulter of innocents!" the youngster squeaked from within the shell. "Unprovoked attacker. Get your foul paw out of my ear!"

"Friend, I'll be glad to do that—as soon as you let go," he gasped. What a situation for a dentist!

"Help! Butchery! Genocide!"

Dillingham finally found his footing and hauled on his arm. The shell tilted and lifted from the floor, but gradually the trapped hand slid free. He quickly sat on the shell to prevent it from opening again and surveyed the damage.

Blood trickled from multiple scratches along the wrist, and his hand smarted strenuously, but there was no serious wound.

"Let my grandson go!" the old oyster screamed now. "You have no right to muzzle him like that! This is a free planet!"

Dillingham marveled once more at the translator's description. These just did not seem to be reasonable creatures. He stood up quickly and picked up the fallen tube.

"Look, gentlemen—I'm very sorry if I have misunderstood your conventions, but I must insist that the young person leave."

Young Oyster peeped out of his shell. "Unwholesome creature! Eater of sea-life! How dare you make demands on us?"

Dillingham pointed the tube at him. He had no idea how to fire it, but hoped the creature could be bluffed. "Please leave at once. I will release your grandfather as soon as the work is done."

The youngster focused on the weapon and obeyed, grumbling. Dillingham touched the elevator lock as soon as he was gone.

The oldster was back in the chair. Somehow the adjustment had changed, so that this was now a basket-like receptacle, obviously more comfortable for this patient. "You are more of a being than you appear," Oyster remarked. "I was never able to handle that juvenile so efficiently."

Dillingham contemplated the droplets of metal splattered on the floor. That heat-beam had been entirely too close—and deadly. His hands began to shake in delayed reaction. He was not a man of violence, and his own quick reaction had surprised him. The stress of recent events had certainly gotten to him, he thought ruefully.

"But he's a good boy, really," Oyster continued. "A trifle impetuous—but he inherited that from me. I hope you won't report this little misunderstanding."

He hadn't thought of that, but of course it was his duty to make a complete report on the melee and the reason for it. Valuable equipment might have been damaged, not to consider the risk to his own welfare. "I'm afraid I must," he said.

"But they are horribly strict!" the oldster protested. "They will throw him into a foul salty cesspool! They'll boil him in vinegar every hour! His children will be stigmatized!"

"I can't take the law into my own hands. The court—or whatever it is here—must decide. I must make an accurate report."

"He was only looking out for his ancestor. That's very important to our culture. He's a good—"

The Oyster paused. His shell quivered, and the soft flesh within turned yellow.

Dillingham was alarmed, "Sir—are you well?"

The translator spoke on its own initiative. "The Oyster shows the symptoms of severe emotional shock. His health will be endangered unless immediate relief is available."

All he needed was a dying galactic on top of everything else! "How can I help him?" The shell was gradually sagging closed with an insidious suggestiveness.

"The negative emotional stimulus must be alleviated," the translator said. "At his age, such disturbances are—"

Dillingham took one more look at the visibly putrifying creature. "All right!" he shouted desperately. "I'll withhold my report!"

The collapse ceased. "You won't tell anyone?" the oldster inquired from the murky depths. "No matter what?"

"No one." Dillingham was not at all happy, but saw no other way out. Better silence than a dead patient.

The night was well advanced when he finished with the Oyster and sent him home. He had forfeited his study period and, by the time he was able to relax, much of his sleep as well. He would have to brave the examination without preparation.

It was every bit as bad as he had anticipated. His mind was dull from lack of sleep, and his basic store of information was meager indeed on the galactic scale. The questions would have been quite difficult even if he had been fully prepared. There were entire categories he had to skip because they concerned specialized procedures buried in his unread texts. If only he had had time to prepare!

The others were having trouble too. He could see them humped over their tables, or under them, depending on physiology, scribbling notes as they figured ratios and tolerances and indices of material properties. Even Treetrunk looked hard-pressed. If Treetrunk, with a galactic library of dental information filed in his celluloid brain, could wilt with the effort, how could a poor humanoid from a backward planet hope to succeed?

But he carried on to the discouraging end, knowing that his score would damn him but determined to do his best whatever the situation. It seemed increasingly ridiculous, but he still wanted to be admitted to the university. The thought of deserting this stupendous reservoir of information and technique was appalling.

During the afternoon break he collapsed on his bunk and slept. One day remained, one final trial—the interrogation by the Admissions Advisory Council. This, he understood, was the roughest gauntlet of all; more applications were rejected on the basis of this interview than from both other tests combined.

An outcry woke him in the evening. "The probabilities are

being posted!" Pincushion honked, prodding him with a spine that was not, despite its appearance, sharp.

"Mine's twenty-one per cent, not a penny more," Dillingham muttered sleepily. "Low—too low."

"The *revised* probs!" Pincushion said. "Based on the test scores. The warning buzzer just sounded."

Dillingham snapped awake. He remembered now; no results were posted for the field and written exams. Instead the original estimates of acceptance were modified in the light of individual data. This provided unlikely applicants with a graceful opportunity to bow out before subjecting themselves to the indignity of a negative recommendation by the AA Council. It also undoubtedly simplified the work of that council by cutting down on the number of interviewees.

They clustered in a tense semicircle around the main translator. The results would be given in descending order. Dillingham wondered why more privacy in such matters wasn't provided, but assumed that the University had its reasons. Possibly the constant comparisons encouraged better effort, or weeded out the quitters that much sooner.

"Anteater," the speaker said. It paused. "Ninety-six per cent."

Anteater twitched his nose in relief. "I must have guessed right on those stress formulations," he said. "I knew I was in trouble on those computations."

"Treetrunk—eighty-five per cent." Treetrunk almost uprooted himself with glee. "A twenty-five per cent increase!" he exulted. "I must have maxed the written portion after all!"

"Robot—sixty-eight per cent." The robotoid took the news impassively.

The remaining three fidgeted, knowing that their scores had to be lower.

"Pincushion—fifty per cent." The creature congratulated himself on an even chance, though he obviously had hoped to do better.

"Electrolyte—twenty-three per cent."

The rocklike individual rolled toward his compartment. "I was afraid of that. I'm going home."

The rest watched Dillingham sympathetically, anticipating the worst. It came. "Earthman—three per cent," the speaker said plainly.

The last reasonable hope was gone. The odds were thirty to one against him, and his faith in miracles was small. The others scattered, embarrassed for him, while Dillingham stood rigid.

He had known he was in trouble—but this! To be given, on the basis of thorough testing, practically no chance of admission . . .

He was forty-one years old. He felt like crying.

VI

The Admissions Advisory Council was alien even by the standards he had learned in the galaxy. There were only three members—but as soon as this occurred to him, he realized that this would be only the fraction of the Council assigned to his case. There were probably hundreds of interviews going on at this moment, as thousands of applicants were processed.

One member was a honeycomb of gelatinous tissue suspended on a trellislike framework. The second was a mass of purple sponge. The third was an undulating something confined within a tank—a water-breather, if that liquid was water. If it breathed.

The speaker set in the wall of the tank came to life. This was evidently the spokesman, if any were required. "We do not interview many with so low a probability of admission as students," Tank said. "Why did you persist?"

Why, indeed? Well, he had nothing further to lose by forthrightness. "I still want to enter the University. There is still a chance."

"Your examination results are hardly conducive to admission as a student," Tank said, and it was amazing how much scorn could be infused into the tone of the mechanical translation. "While your field exercises were fair, your written production was incompetent. You appear to be ignorant of all but the most primitive and limited aspects of prosthodontistry. Why should you wish to undertake training for which your capacity is plainly insufficient?"

"Most of the questions of the second examination struck me as relating to basic information, rather than potential," Dillingham said woodenly. "If I had that information already, I would not stand in such need of the training. I came here to learn."

"An intriguing attitude. We expect, nevertheless, a certain minimum background. Otherwise our efforts are wastefully diluted."

For this Dillingham had no answer. Obviously the ranking specialists of the galaxy should not be used for elementary instructions. He understood the point—yet something in him would not capitulate. There had to be more to this hearing than an automatic decision on the basis of tests whose results could be distorted by participant cooperation on the one hand, and circumstantial denial of study-time on the other. Why have an advisory board at all, if that were all?

"I am concerned with certain aspects of your field work," the honeycomb creature said. He spoke by vibrating his tissue in the air, but the voice emerged from his translator. "Why did you neglect particular items?"

"Do you mean #17? I was unfamiliar with the specimen and therefore could not repair it competently."

"You refused to work on it merely because it was new to your experience?" Again the towering scorn.

That did make it sound bad. "No. I would have done something if I had had more evidence of its nature. But the specimen was not complete. I felt that there was insufficient information presented to justify attempted repairs."

"You could not have hurt an inert model very much. Surely you realized that even an incorrect repair would have brought you to a better score than total failure?"

He had not known that. "I assumed that these specimens stood in lieu of actual patients. I gave them the same consideration I would have given a living, feeling creature. Neglect of a cavity in the tooth of a live patient might lead to the eventual loss of that tooth—but an incorrect repair could have caused more serious damage. Sometimes it is better not to interfere."

"Explain."

"When I visited the planet Electrolus I saw that the metallic restorations in native teeth were indirectly interfering with communication, which was disastrous to the well-being of the individual. This impressed upon me how dangerous well-meaning ignorance could be, even in so simple a matter as a filling."

"The chairman of the Dental League of planet Electrolus is a University graduate. Are you accusing him of ignorance?"

Oh-oh. "Perhaps the problem had not come to his attention," Dillingham said, trying to evade the trap.

"We will return to that at another time," the purple sponge said grimly. The applicant's reasoning hardly seemed to impress this group.

"You likewise ignored item #36," Honeycomb said. "Was your reasoning the same?"

"Yes. The jaw was so alien to my experience that I could not safely assume that there was anything wrong with it, let alone attempt to fix it. I suppose I was foolish not to fill the labial cavity, but that would have required an assumption I was not equipped to make."

"How much time did you spend—deciding not to touch the cavity?" Honeycomb inquired sweetly.

"Half an hour." Pointless to explain that he had gone over every surface of #36 looking for some confirmation that its action was similar to that of any of the jaws he was familiar with. "If I may inquire now—what was the correct treatment?"

"None. It was a healthy jaw."

Dillingham's breath caught. "You mean if I had filled that theoretic cavity—"

"You would have destroyed our extragalactic patient's health."

"Then my decision on #36 helped my examination score!"

"No. Your decision was based on uncertainty, not upon accurate diagnosis. It threw your application into serious question."

He shut his mouth and waited.

"You did not follow instructions on #41," Honeycomb said. "Why?"

"I felt the instructions were mistaken. The placement of an MOD inlay was unnecessary for the correction of the condition, and foolish in the face of the peril the tooth was in from gingivitis. Why perform expensive and complicated reconstruction, when untreated gum disease threatens to nullify it soon anyway?"

"Would that inlay have damaged the function of the tooth in any way?"

"Yes, in the sense that no reconstruction can be expected to perform as well as the original. But even if there were no difference, that placement was functionally unnecessary. The expense and discomfort to the patient must also be considered. The dentist owes it to his patient to advise him of—"

"You are repetitive. Do you place your judgment before that of the University?"

Trouble again. "I must act on my own best judgment, when I am charged with the responsibility. Perhaps, with University training, I would have been able to make a more informed decision."

"Kindly delete the pleading," Honeycomb said.

Something was certainly wrong somewhere. All his conjectures seemed to go against the intent of this institution. Did its standards, as well as its knowledge, differ so radically from his own? Could all of his professional instincts be wrong?

"Your performance on the written examination was extremely poor," Sponge said. "Are you naturally stupid, or did you fail to apply yourself properly?"

"I could have done better if I had studied more."

"You failed to prepare yourself?"

Worse and worse. "Yes."

"You were aware of the importance of the examination?"

"Yes."

"You had suitable texts on hand?"

"Yes."

"Yet you did not bother to study them."

"I wanted to, but—" Then he remembered his promise to the Oyster. He could not give his reason for failing to study. If this trio picked up any hint of that episode, it would not relent until everything were exposed. After suffering this much of its interrogation, he retained no illusions about the likely fate of young Oyster. No wonder the grandfather had been anxious!

"What is your pretext for such neglect?"

"I can offer none."

The color of the sponge darkened. "We are compelled to view with disfavor an applicant who neither applies himself nor cares to excuse his negligence. This is not the behavior we expect in our students."

Dillingham said nothing. His position was hopeless—but he still couldn't give up until they made his rejection final.

VII

Tank resumed the dialog. "You have an interesting record. Alarming in some respects. You came originally from planet Earth—one of the aborigine cultures. Why did you desert your tribe?"

They had such unfortunate ways of putting things! "I was contacted by a galactic voyager who required prosthodontic repair. I presume he picked my name out of the local directory." He described his initial experience with the creatures he had dubbed, facetiously, the North Nebulites, or Enens.

"You operated on a totally unfamiliar jaw?" Tank asked abruptly.

"Yes." Under duress, however. Should he remind them?

"Yet you refused to do similar work on a dummy jaw at this University." Honeycomb put in.

They were sharp. "I did what seemed necessary at the time."

"Don't your standards appear inconsistent, even to you?" Sponge inquired.

Dillingham laughed, not happily. "Sometimes they do." How much deeper could he bury himself?

Tank's turn. "Why did you accompany the aliens to their world?"

"I did not have very much choice."

"So you did not come to space in search of superior prosthodontic techniques?"

"No. It is possible that I might have done so, however, had I known of their availability at the time."

"Yes, you have repeatedly expressed your interest," Tank said. "Yet you did not bother to study from the most authoritative texts available on the subject in the galaxy, when you had the opportunity and the encouragement to do so."

Once again his promise prevented him from replying. He was coming to understand why his roommates had shown so little desire to spend time helping the supplicant. It appeared, in retrospect, to be a sure passport to failure.

Could he have passed—that is, brought his probability up to a reasonable level—had he turned away that plea? Should he have sacrificed that one creature, for the sake of the hundreds he

might have helped later, with proper training? He *had* been shortsighted.

He knew he would do the same thing again, in similar circumstances. He just didn't have the heart to be that practical. At the same time, he could see why the businesslike University would have little use for such sentimentality.

"On planet Gleep," Tank said, surprising him by using his own ludicrous term for the next world he had visited, "you filled a single cavity with twenty-four tons of gold alloy."

"Yes."

"Are you not aware that gold, however plentiful it may be on Gleep, remains an exceptionally valuable commodity in this galaxy? Why did you not develop a less wasteful substitute?"

Dillingham tried to explain about the awkwardness of that situation, about the pressure of working within the cavernous mouth of a three-hundred-foot sea creature, but it did seem that he had made a mistake. He could have employed a specialized cobalt-chromium-molybdenum alloy that would have been strong, hard, resilient and resistant to corrosion, and might well have been superior to gold in that particular case. He had worried, for example, about the weight of such a mass of gold, and this alternate, far lighter, would have alleviated that concern. It was also much cheaper stuff. He had not thought about these things at the time. He said so.

"Didn't you consult your Enen associates?"

"I couldn't. The English/Enen transcoder was broken." But that was no excuse for not having had them develop the chrome-cobalt alloy earlier. He had allowed his personal preference for the more familiar gold to halt his quest for improvement.

"Yet you *did* communicate with them later, surmounting that problem."

He was becoming uncomfortably aware that this group had done its homework. The members seemed to know everything about him. "I discovered by accident that the English-Gleep and Gleep-Enen transcoders could be used in concert. I had not realized that at the time."

"Because you were preoccupied with the immediate problem?"

"I think so."

"But not too preoccupied to notice decay in the neighboring teeth."

"No." It did look foolish now, to have been so concerned

with future dental problems, while wasting many tons of valuable metal on the work in progress. How did that jibe with his more recent concern for the Oyster's problem, to the exclusion of the much larger University picture? Was there any coherent rationale to his actions, or was he continually rationalizing to excuse his errors?

Was the seeming unfairness of this interview merely a way of proving this to him?

But Tank wasn't finished. "You next embarked with a passing diplomat of uncertain reputation who suggested a way to free you from your commitment to Gleep."

"He was very kind." Dillingham did not regret his brief association with Trach, the galactic who resembled a trachodon dinosaur.

"He resembled one of the vicious predators of your planet's past—yet you trusted your person aboard his ship?"

"I felt, in the face of galactic diversity of species, that it was foolish to judge by appearances. One has to be prepared to extend trust, if one wants to receive it."

"You believe that?" Honeycomb demanded.

"I try to." It was so hard to defend himself against the concentrated suspicion of the council.

"You do not seem to trust the common directives of this University, however."

What answer could he make to that? They had him in another conflict.

"Whereupon you proceeded to investigate *another* unfamiliar jaw," Tank said. "Contrary to your expressed policy. 'Why?'"

"Trach had befriended me, and I wanted to help him."

"So you put friendship above policy," Sponge said. "Convenient."

"And did you help him?" Tank again. It was hard to remember who said what, since they were all so murderously sharp.

"Yes. I adapted a sonic instrument that enabled him to clean his teeth efficiently."

"And what was your professional fee for this service?"

Dillingham reined his mounting temper. "Nothing. I was not thinking in such terms."

"A moment ago you were quite concerned about costs."

"I was concerned about unnecessary expense to the patient. That strikes me as another matter."

"And the dinosaur told you about the University of Dentistry?" Sponge put in.

"Yes, among other things. We conversed quite a bit."

"And so you decided to attend, on hearsay evidence."

"That's not fair!"

"Is the color in your face a sign of distress?"

Dillingham realized that they were now deliberately needling him and shut up. Why should he allow himself to get excited over a minor slur, after passing over major ones? All he could do that way was prove he was unstable, and therefore unfit.

"And did you seriously believe," Sponge persisted nastily, "that you had any chance at all to be admitted as a student here?"

Again he had no answer.

"On planet Electrolus you provoked a war by careless advice," Honeycomb said. "Whereupon you conspired to be exiled—to this University. What kind of reception did you anticipate here, after such machinations?"

So that was it! They resented the circumstances of his application. What use to explain that he had *not* schemed, that Trach had cleverly found a solution to the Electrolus problem that satisfied all parties? This trio would only twist that into further condemnation.

"I made mistakes on that planet, as I did elsewhere," he said at last. "I hoped to learn to avoid such errors in the future by enrolling in a corrective course of instruction. It was ignorance, not devious intent, that betrayed me. I still think this University has much to offer me."

"The question at hand," Tank said portentously, "is what *you* have to offer the University. Have you any further statements you fancy might influence our decision?"

"I gather from your choice of expression that it has already been made. In that case I won't waste any more of your time. I am ready for it."

"We find you unsuitable for enrollment at this University as a student," Tank said. "Please depart by the opposite door."

So as not to obstruct the incoming interviewees! Very neat. Dillingham stood up wearily. "Thank you for your consideration,"

he said formally, keeping the irony out of his tone. He walked to the indicated exit.

"One moment, applicant," Honeycomb said. "What are your present plans?"

He wondered why the creature bothered to ask. "I suppose I'll return to practice wherever I'm needed—or wanted," he said. "I may not be the finest dentist available, or even adequate by your standards—but I love my profession, and there is much I can still do." But why was it that the thought of returning to Earth, which he was free to do now and where he *was* adequate, no longer appealed? Had the wonders he had glimpsed here spoiled him for the backwoods existence? "I would have preferred to add the University training to my experience; but there is no reason to give up what I already have just because my dream has been denied."

He walked away from them.

VII

The hall did not lead to the familiar elevators. Instead, absent-mindedly following the wrist-band glow, he found himself in an elegant apartment. He turned, embarrassed to have blundered into the wrong area, but a voice stopped him.

"Please sit down, Earthman."

It was the old Oyster he had treated two days before. He was not adept at telling aliens of identical species apart, but he could not mistake this one. "What are you doing here?"

"We all have to dwell somewhere," Oyster indicated a couch adaptable to a wide variety of forms. "Make yourself comfortable. I have thoughts to exchange with you."

Dillingham marveled at the change in his erstwhile patient. This was no longer a suffering, unreasonable indigent. Yet—

"Surely it occurred to you, Doctor, that there are only three groups upon this planet? The applicants, the students—and the University personnel. Which of these do you suppose should lack proper dental care? Which should lack the typical University identification?"

"You—" Dillingham stared at him, suddenly making connections. "You have no band—but the elevator worked for you! It was a put-up job!"

"It was part of your examination," Oyster said.

"I failed."

"What has given you that impression?"

"The Admissions Advisory Council found me unfit to enter this University."

"You are mistaken."

Dillingham faced him angrily, not appreciating this business at all. "I don't know who are or why you were so determined to interfere with my application, but you succeeded nicely. They rejected me."

"Perhaps we should verify this," Oyster said, unperturbed. He spoke into the translator: "Summon Dr. Dillingham's advisory subgroup."

They came—the Sponge, the Honeycomb, the Tank, riding low conveyors. "Sir," they said respectfully.

"What was your decision with regard to this man's application?"

Tank replied. "We found this humanoid to be unsuitable for enrollment at this University as a student."

Dillingham nodded. Whatever internecine politics were going on here, at least that point was clear.

"Did you discover this applicant to be deficient in integrity?" Oyster inquired softly. It was the gentle tone of complete authority.

"No, sir," Tank said.

"Professional ethics?"

"No, sir."

"Professional caution?"

"No, sir."

"Humility?"

"No, sir."

"Temper control "

"No, sir."

"Compassion? Courage? Equilibrium?"

"That is for you to say, sir."

Oyster glanced at Dillingham. "So it would seem. What, then, gentlemen, *did* you find the applicant suitable for?"

"Administration, sir."

"Indeed. Dismissed, gentlemen."

"Yes, Director." The three left hastily.

Dillingham started. "Yes, *who*?"

"There is, you see, a qualitative distinction between the potential manual trainee and the potential administrator," Oyster said.

"Your roommates were evaluated as students—and they certainly have things to learn. Oh, technically they are proficient enough—quite skilled, in fact, though none had the opportunity to exhibit the depth of competence manifested in adversity that you did. But in attitude—well, there will be considerable improvement there, or they will hardly graduate from *this* school. I daresay you know what I mean."

"But—"

"We are equipped to inculcate mechanical dexterity and technical comprehension. Of course the techniques tested in the Admissions Examination are primitive ones; none of them are employed in advanced restoration. Our interrogatory schedule is principally advisory, to enable us to program for individual needs.

"Character, on the other hand, is far more difficult to train—or to assess accurately in a controlled situation. It is far more reliable if it comes naturally, which is one reason we don't always draw from graduates, or even promising students. We are quite quick to investigate applicants possessing the personality traits we require, and this has nothing to do with planet or species. A promising candidate may emerge from any culture, even the most backward, and is guaranteed from none. No statistical survey is reliable in pinpointing the individual we want. In exceptional cases, it becomes a personal matter, a nonobjective thing. Do you follow me?"

Dillingham's mind was whirling.

"It sounds almost as though you want me to—"

"To undertake training at University expense leading to the eventual assumption of my own position: Director of the School of Prosthodontics."

He was speechless standing there.

"I am anticipating a promotion, you see," Oyster confided.

"The vacancy I leave is my responsibility. I would not suffer a successor to whom I would not trust the care of my own teeth."

"But I couldn't possibly—I haven't the—"

"Have no concern. You adapted beautifully when thrust from your protected environment into galactic society, and this will be no more difficult. The University of Administration has a comprehensive program that will guarantee your competence for the position, and of course you will serve as my assistant for several

years until you get the hang of it. We are not rushed. You will not be subjected to the ordeal unprepared; that unpleasantness is over."

Dillingham still found this hard to grasp. "Your grandson—what if I'd—"

"I shall have to introduce you more formally to that young security officer. He is not, unfortunately, my grandson; but he *is* the finest shot with the single-charge laser on the planet. We try to make our little skits realistic."

Dillingham remembered the metal mallet dripping to the floor—no freak interception after all. And the way the youngster had retreated before the tube . . . which, being single-shot, was no longer functional. Realism, yes.

That reminded him. "That tooth of yours I filled. I *know* that wasn't—"

"Wasn't fake. You are correct. I nursed that cavity along for three months, using it to check our prospects. It is a very good thing I won't need it any more, because you spoiled it utterly."

"I—"

"You did such a professional job that I should have to have a new cavity cultured for my purpose. No experienced practitioner would mistake it now for a long-neglected case even if I yanked out the gold and reimpacted it. *That*, Doctor, is the skill that impresses me—the skill that remains after the machinery is incapacitated. But of course that's part of it; good intentions mean nothing unless backed by authoritative discretion and ability. You were very slow, but you handled that deliberately obstructive patient very well. Had it been otherwise—"

"But why me? I mean, you could have selected anyone—"

Oyster put a friendly smile into his voice. "Hardly, Doctor. I visited eleven dormitories that evening, before I came to yours—with no success. All contained prospects whose record and field-work showed the potential. You selected yourself from this number and carried it through honorably. More correctly, you presented yourself as a candidate for the office; we took it from there."

"You certainly did!"

"Portions of your prior record were hard to believe, I admit. It was incredible that a person who had as little galactic background as you had should accomplish so much. But now we are

satisfied that you do have the touch, the ability to do the right thing in an awkward or unfamiliar situation. That, too, is essential for the position."

Dillingham fastened on one incongruity. "I—I selected *myself*?"

"Yes, Doctor. When you demonstrated your priorities."

"My priorities? I don't—"

"When you sacrificed invaluable study time to offer assistance to a creature you believed was in pain."

For the Sake of Grace

by **Suzette Haden Elgin**

Suzette Haden Elgin is a very talented writer who holds a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of California, San Diego. The winner of the Academy of American Poets Award for 1955, she has also worked as a folk music performer, French teacher, guitar teacher, and an Associate Professor of Linguistics at San Diego State University. In science fiction she is best known for her "Coyote Jones" series of novels, including The Communitpaths (1970), Furthest (1971), At the Seventh Level (1972), and Star-Anchored, Star-Angered (1979). We wish she would write more in the sf field.

The Khadilh ban-harihn frowned at the disk he held in his hand, annoyed and apprehensive. There was always, of course, the chance of malfunction in the com-system. He reached forward and punched the transmit button again with one thumb, and the machine clicked to itself fitfully and delivered another disk in the message tray. He picked it up, looked at it and swore a round assortment of colorful oaths, since no women were present.

There on the left was the matrix-mark that identified his family, the ban-harihn symbol quite clear; no possibility of error there. And from it curled the suitable number of small lines, yellow for the females, green for the males, one for each member of his household, all decorously in order. Except for one.

The yellow line that represented at all times that state of being of his wife, the Khadilha Althea, was definitely not as it should have been. It was interrupted at quarter-inch intervals by a small black dot, indicating that all was not well with the Khadilha. And the symbol at the end of the line was not the blue cross that would have classified the difficulty as purely physical; it was the indeterminate red star indicating only that the problem, whatever it was, could be looked upon as serious or about to become serious.

The Khadilh sighed. That could mean anything, from his wife's misuse of their credit cards through a security leak by one of her servants to an unsuitable love affair—although his own knowledge of the Khadilha's chilly nature made him consider the last highly unlikely. The only possible course for him was to ask for an immediate full report.

And just what, he wondered, would he do, if the report were to make it clear that he was needed at home at once? One did not simply pick up one's gear and tootle off home from the outposts of the Federation. It would take him at the very least nine months to arrive in his home city-cluster, even if he were able to command a priority flight with suspended-animation berths and warp facilities. Damn the woman anyway, what could she be up to?

He punched the button for voice transmittal, and the com-system began to hum at him, indicating readiness for dialing. He dialed, carefully selecting the planet code, since his last attempt to contact his home, on his wife's birthday, had resulted in a most embarrassing conversation with a squirmy-tentacled creature that he had gotten out of its (presumed) bed in the middle of its (presumed) sleep. And he'd had to pay in full for the call, too, all intergalactic communication being on a buyer-risk basis.

"... three-three-two-three-two ..." he finished, very cautiously, and waited. The tiny screen lit up, and the words STAND BY appeared, to be replaced in a few seconds by SCRIBE (FEMALE) OF THE HOUSEHOLD BAN-HARIHN, which meant he had at least dialed correctly. The screen cleared and the words were replaced by the face of his household Scribe, so distorted by distance as to be only by courtesy a face, but with the ban-harihn matrix-mark superimposed in green and yellow across the screen as security.

He spoke quickly, mindful of the com-rates at this distance.

"Scribe ban-harihn, this morning the state-of-being disk indicated some difficulty in the condition of the Khadilha Althea. Please advise if this condition could be described as an emergency."

After the usual brief lag for conversion to symbols, the reply was superimposed over the matrix-mark, and the Khadilh thought as usual that these tiny intergalactic screens became so cluttered before a conversation was terminated that one could hardly make out the messages involved.

The message in this case was "Negative," and the Khadilh smiled; the Scribe was even more mindful than he of the cost of this transmittal.

He pushed the erase button and finished with, "Thank you, Scribe ban-harihn. You will then prepare at once a written report, in detail, and forward it to me by the fastest available means. Should the problem intensify to emergency point, I now authorize a com-system transmittal to that effect, to be initiated by any one of my sons. Terminate."

The screen went blank and the Khadilh, just for curiosity, punched one more time that state-of-being control. The machine delivered another disk, and sure enough, there it was again, black dots, red star and all. He threw it into the disposal, shrugged his shoulders helplessly and ordered coffee. There was nothing whatever that he could do until he received the Scribe's report.

However, if it should turn out that he had wasted the cost of an intergalactic transmittal on some petty household dispute, there was going to be hell to pay, he promised himself, and a suitable punishment administered to the Khadilha by the nearest official of the Women's Discipline Unit. There certainly ought to be some way to make the state-of-being codes a bit more detailed so that everything from war to an argument with a servingwoman didn't come across on the same symbol.

The report arrived by Tele-bounce in four days. Very wise choice, he thought approvingly, since the Bounce machinery was totally automatic and impersonal. It was somewhat difficult to read, since the Scribe had specified that it was to be delivered to him without transcription other than into verbal symbols, and it was therefore necessary for him to scan a roll of yellow paper with a message eight symbols wide and seemingly miles long. He read only enough to convince him that no problem of discre-

tion could possibly be involved, and then he ran the thing through the transcribe slot, receiving a standard letter on white paper in return.

"To the Khadilh ban-harihn" it read, "as requested, the following report from the Scribe of his household:

"Three days ago, as the Khadilh is no doubt aware, the festival of the Spring Rains were celebrated here. The entire household, with the exception of the Khadilh himself, was present at a very large and elaborate procession held to mark the opening of the Alaharibahn-khalida Trance Hours. A suitable spot for watching the procession, entirely in accordance with decorum, had been chosen by the Khadilha Althea, and the women of the household were standing in the second row along the edge of the street set aside for the women.

"There had been a number of dancers, bands, and so on, followed by thirteen of the Poets of this city-cluster. The Poets had almost passed, along with the usual complement of exotic animals and mobile flowers and the like, and no untoward incident of any kind had occurred, when quite suddenly the Khadilh's daughter Jacinth was approached by (pardon my liberty of speech) the Poet Anna-Mary, who is, as the Khadilh knows, a female. The Poet leaned from her mount, indicating with her staff of bells that it was her wish to speak to the Khadilh's daughter, and halting the procession to do so. It was at this point that the incident occurred which has no doubt given rise to the variant marking in the state-of-being disk line for the Khadilha Althea. Quite unaccountably, the Khadilha, rather than sending the child forward to speak with the Poet (as would have been proper), grabbed the child Jacinth by the shoulders, whirling her around and covering her completely with her heavy robes so that she could neither speak nor see.

"The Poet Anna-Mary merely bowed from her horse and signaled for the procession to continue, but she was quite white and obviously offended. The family made a show of participating in the rest of the day's observances, but the Khadilh's sons took the entire household home by midafternoon, thereby preventing the Khadilha from participating in the Trance Hours. This was no doubt a wise course.

"What sequel there may have been to this, the Scribe does not know, as no announcement has been made to the household. The Scribe here indicates her respect and subservience to the Khadilh.

"Terminate with thanks."

"Well!" said the Khadilh. He laid the letter down on the top of his desk, thinking hard, rubbing his beard with one hand.

What could reasonably be expected in the way of repercussions from a public insult to an elderly—and touchy—Poet? It was hard to say.

As the only female Poet on the planet, the Poet Anna-Mary was much alone; as her duties were not arduous, she had much time to brood. And though she was a Poet, she remained only a female, with the female's inferior reasoning powers. She was accustomed to reverent homage, to women holding up their children to touch the hem of her robe. She could hardly be expected to react with pleasure to an insult in public, and from a female.

It was at his sons that she would be most likely to strike, through the University, he decided, and he could not chance that. He had worked too hard, and they had worked too hard, to allow a vindictive female, no matter how lofty her status, to destroy what they had built up. He had better go home and leave the orchards to take care of themselves; important as the lush peaches of Earth were to the economy of his home planet, his sons were of even greater importance.

It was not every family that could boast of five sons in the University, all five selected by competitive examination for the Major in Poetry. Sometimes a family might have two sons chosen, but the rest would be refused, as the Khadilh himself had been refused, and would then have to be satisfied with the selection of Law or Medicine or Government or some other of the Majors. He smiled proudly, remembering the respectful glances of his friends when each of his sons in turn had placed high in the examinations and been awarded the Poet Major, his oldest son entering at the Fourth Level. And when the youngest had been chosen, thus releasing the oldest from the customary vow of celibacy—since to impose it would have meant the end of the family line, an impossible situation—the Khadilh had had difficulty in maintaining even a pretense of modesty. The meaning, of course, was that he would have as grandson the direct offspring of a Poet, something that had not happened within his memory or his father's memory. He had been given to understand, in fact, that it had been more than three hundred years since all sons of any one family had entered the Poetry courses. (A family

having only one son was prohibited by law from entering him in the Poetry Examinations, they told him.)

Yes, he must go home, and the hell with the peaches of Earth. Let them rot, if the garden-robots could not manage them.

He went to the corn-system and punched through a curt transmittal of his intention, and then set to pulling the necessary strings to obtain a priority flight.

When the Khadilh arrived at his home, his sons were lined up in his study, waiting for him, each in the coarse brown student's tunic that was compulsory, but with the scarlet Poet's stripe around the hem to delight his eyes. He smiled at them, saying, "It is a pleasure to see you once more, my sons; you give rest to my eyes and joy to my heart."

Michael, the oldest, answered in kind.

"It is our pleasure to see you, Father."

"Let us all sit down," said the Khadilh, motioning them to their places about the study table that stood in the center of the room. When they were seated, he struck the table with his knuckles, in the old ritual, three times slowly.

"No doubt you know why I have chosen to abandon my orchards to the attention of the garden-robots and return home so suddenly," he said. "Unfortunately, it has taken me almost ten months to reach you. There was no more rapid way to get home to you, much as I wished for one."

"We understand, Father," said his oldest son.

"Then, Michael," went on Khadilh, "would you please bring me up to date on the developments here since the incident at the procession of the Spring Rains."

His son seemed hesitant to speak, his black brows drawn together over his eyes, and the Khadilh smiled at him encouragingly.

"Come, Michael," he said, "surely it is not courteous to make your father wait in this fashion!"

"You will realize, Father," said the young man slowly, "that it has not been possible to communicate with you since the time of your last transmittal. You will also realize that this matter has not been one about which advice could easily be requested. I have had no choice but to make decisions as best I could."

"I realize that. Of course."

"Very well, then. I hope you will not be angry, Father."

"I shall indeed be angry if I am not told at once exactly what

has occurred this past ten months. You make me uneasy, my son."

Michael took a deep breath and nodded. "All right, Father," he said. "I will be brief."

"And quick."

"Yes, Father. I took our household away from the festival as soon as I decently could without creating talk; and when we arrived at home, I sent the Khadilha at once to her quarters, with orders to stay there until you should advise me to the contrary."

"Quite right," said the Khadilh. "Then what?"

"The Khadilha disobeyed me, Father."

"Disobeyed you? In what way?"

"The Khadilha Althea disregarded my orders entirely, and she took our sister into the Small Corridor, and there she allowed her to look into the cell where our aunt is kept, Father."

"My God!" shouted the Khadilh. "And you made no move to stop her?"

"Father," said Michael ban-harihn, "you must realize that no one could have anticipated the actions of the Khadilha Althea. We would certainly have stopped her had we known, but who would have thought that the Khadilha would disobey the order of an adult male? It was assumed that she would go to her quarters and remain there."

"I see."

"I did not contact the Women's Discipline Unit," Michael continued. "I preferred that such an order should come from you, Father. However, orders were given that the Khadilha should be restricted to her quarters, and no one has been allowed to see her except the servingwomen. The wires to her com-system were disconnected, and provision was made for suitable medication to be added to her diet. You will find her very docile, Father."

The Khadilh was trembling with indignation.

"Discipline will be provided at once, my son," he said. "I apologize for the disgusting behavior of the Khadilha. But please go on—what of my daughter?"

"That is perhaps the most distressing thing of all."

"In what way?"

Michael looked thoroughly miserable.

"Answer me at once," snapped the Khadilh, "and in full."

"Our sister Jacinth," said his second son, Nicolas, "was

already twelve years of age at the time of the festival. When she returned from the Small Corridor, without notice to any one of us, she announced her intention by letter to the Poet Anna-Mary—her intention to compete in the examinations for the Major of Poetry.”

“And the Poet Anna-Mary—”

“Turned the announcement immediately over to the authorities at the Poetry Unit,” finished Michael. “Certainly she made no attempt to dissuade our sister.”

“She is amply revenged then for the insult of the Khadilha,” said the Khadilh bitterly. “Were there any other acts on the part of the Poet Anna-Mary?”

“None, Father. Our sister has been cloistered by government order since that time, of course, to prevent contamination of the other females.”

“Oh, dear God,” breathed the Khadilh, “how could such a thing have touched my household—for the second time?”

He thought a moment. “When are the examinations, then? I’ve lost all track of time.”

“It has been ten months, Father.”

“In about a month, then?”

“In three weeks.”

“Will they let me see Jacinth?”

“No, Father,” said Michael. “And, Father—”

“Yes, Michael?”

“It is my shame and my sorrow that this should have been the result of your leaving your household in my care.”

The Khadilh reached over and grasped his hand firmly.

“You are very young, my son,” he said, “and you have nothing to be ashamed of. When the females of a household take it upon themselves to upset the natural order of things and to violate the rules of decency, there is very little anyone can do.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“Now,” said the Khadilh, turning to face them all, “I suggest that the next thing to do would be to initiate action by the Women’s Discipline Unit. Do you wish me to have the Khadilha placed on Permanent Medication, my sons?”

He hoped they would not insist upon it, and was pleased to see that they did not.

“Let us wait, Father,” said Michael, “until we know the outcome of the examinations.”

"Surely the outcome is something about which there can be no question!"

"Could we wait, Father, all the same?"

It was the youngest of the boys. As was natural, he was still overly squeamish, still a bit tender. The Khadilh would not have had him be otherwise.

"A wise decision," he said. "In that case, once I have bathed and had my dinner, I will send for the Lawyer an-ahda. And you may go, my sons."

The boys filed out, led by the solemn Michael, leaving him with no company but the slow dance of a mobile flower from one of the tropical stars. It whirled gently in the middle of the corner hearth, humming to itself and giving off showers of silver sparks from time to time. He watched it suspiciously for a moment, and then pushed the com-system buttons for his Housekeeper. When the face appeared on the screen he snapped at it.

"Housekeeper, are you familiar with the nature of the mobile plant that someone has put in my study?"

The Housekeeper's voice, frightened, came back at once. "The Khadilh may have the plant removed—should I call the Gardener?"

"All I wanted to know is the sex of the blasted thing," he bellowed at her. "Is it male or female?"

"Male, Khadilh, of the genus—"

He cut off the message while she was still telling him of the plant's pedigree. It was male; therefore it could stay. He would talk to it, while he ate his dinner, about the incredible behavior of his Khadilha.

The Lawyer an-ahda leaned back in the chair provided for him and smiled at his client.

"Yes, ban-harihn," he said amiably, having known the Khadilh since they were young men at the University, "what can I do to help the sun shine more brightly through your window?"

"This is a serious matter," said the Khadilh.

"Ah."

"You heard—never mind being polite and denying it—of my wife's behavior at the procession of the Spring Rains. I see that you did."

"Very impulsive," observed the Lawyer. "Most unwise. Undisciplined."

"Indeed it was. However, worse followed."

"Oh? The Poet Anna-Mary has tried for revenge, then?"

"Not in the sense that you mean, no. But worse has happened, my old friend, far worse."

"Tell me." The Lawyer leaned forward attentively, listening, and when the Khadilh had finished, he cleared his throat.

"There isn't anything to be done, you know," he said. "You might as well know it at once."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing. The law provides that any woman may challenge and claim her right to compete in the Poetry Examinations, provided she is twelve years of age and a citizen of this planet. If she is not accepted, however, the penalty for having challenged and failed is solitary confinement for life, in the household of her family. And once she has announced to the Faculty by signed communication that she intends to compete, she is cloistered until the day of the examinations, and she may not change her mind. The law is very clear on this point."

"She is very young."

"She is twelve. That is all the law requires."

"It's a cruel law."

"Not at all! Can you imagine, ban-harihn, the chaos that would result if every emotional young female, bored with awaiting marriage in the women's quarters, should decide that she had a vocation and claim her right to challenge? The purpose of the law is to discourage foolish young girls from creating difficulties for their households, and for the state. Can you just imagine, if there were only a token penalty, and chaperons had to be provided by the Faculty, and separate quarters provided, and—"

"Yes, I suppose I see! But why should women be allowed to compete at all? No such idiocy is allowed in the other Professions."

"The law provides that since the Profession of Poetry is a religious office, there must be a channel provided for the rare occasion when the Creator might see fit to call a female to His service."

"What nonsense!"

"There is the Poet Anna-Mary, ban-harihn."

"And how many others?"

"She is the third."

"In nearly nine thousand years! Only three in so many centuries, and yet no exception can be made for one little twelve-year-old girl?"

"I am truly sorry, my friend," said the Lawyer. "You could try a petition to the Council, of course, but I am quite sure—*quite* sure—that it would be of no use. There is too much public reaction to a female's even attempting the examinations, because it seems blasphemous even to many very broad-minded people. The Council would not dare to make an exception."

"I could make a galactic appeal."

"You could."

"There would be quite a scandal, you know, among the peoples of the galaxy, if they knew of this penalty being enforced on a child."

"My friend, my dear ban-harihn—think of what you are saying. You would create an international incident, an intergalactic international incident, with all that implies, bring down criticism upon our heads, most surely incur an investigation of our religious customs by the intergalactic police, which would in turn call for a protest from our government, which in its turn—"

"You know I would not do it."

"I hope not. It would parallel the Trojan War for folly, my friend—all that for the sake of one female child!"

"We are a barbaric people."

The Lawyer nodded. "After ten thousand years, you know, if barbarism remains it becomes very firmly entrenched."

The Lawyer rose to go, throwing his heavy blue cloak around him. "After all," he said, "it is only one female child."

It was all very well, thought the Khadilh when his friend was gone, all very well to say that. The Lawyer no doubt never had had the opportunity to see the result of a lifetime of solitary confinement in total silence, or he would have been less willing to see a child condemned to such a fate.

The Khadilh's sister had been nearly thirty, and yet unmarried, when she had chosen to compete, and she was forty-six now. It had been an impulse of folly, born of thirty years of boredom, and the Khadilh blamed his parents. Enough dowry should have been provided to make even Grace, ugly as she was, an acceptable bride for someone, somewhere.

The room in the Small Corridor, where she had been confined since her failure, had no window, no com-system, nothing. Her

food was passed through a slot in one wall, as were the few books and papers which she was allowed—all these things being very rigidly regulated by the Women's Discipline Unit.

It was the duty of the Khadilha Althea to go each morning to the narrow grate that enclosed a one-way window into the cell and to observe the prisoner inside. On the two occasions when that observation had disclosed physical illness, a dart containing an anesthetic had been fired through the food slot, and Grace had been rendered unconscious for the amount of time necessary to let a Doctor enter the cell and attend to her. She had had sixteen years of this, and it was the Khadilha who had had to watch her, through the first years when she alternately lay stuporous for days and then screamed and begged for release for days . . . and now she was quite mad. The Khadilh had observed her on two occasions when his wife had been too ill to go, and he had found it difficult to believe that the creature who crawled on all fours from one end of the room to the other, its matted hair thick with filth in spite of the servomechanisms that hurried from the walls to retrieve all waste and dirt, was his sister. It gibbered and whined and clawed at its flesh—it was hard to believe that it was human. And it had been only sixteen years. Jacinth was twelve!

The Khadilh called his wife's quarters and announced to her servingwomen that they were all to leave her. He went rapidly through the corridors of his house, over the delicate arched bridge that spanned the tea gardens around the women's quarters, and into the rooms where she stayed. He found her sitting in a small chair before the fireplace, watching the mobile plants that danced there to be near the warmth of the fire. As his sons had said, she was quite docile, and in very poor contact with reality.

He took a capsule from the pocket of his tunic and gave it to her to swallow, and when her eyes were clear of the mist of her drugged dreams, he spoke to her.

"You see that I have returned, Althea," he said. "I wish to know why my daughter has brought this ill fortune upon our household."

"It is her own idea," said the Khadilha in a bitter voice. "Since the last of her brothers was chosen, she has been thus determined, saying that it would be a great honor for our house should all of the children of ban-harihn be accepted for the faith."

It was as if a light had been turned on.

"This was not an impulse, then!" exclaimed the Khadilh.

"No. Since she was nine years old she has had this intention."

"But why was I not told? Why was I given no opportunity—"

He stopped abruptly, knowing that he was being absurd. No woman would bother her husband with the problems of rearing a female child. But now he began to understand.

"She did not even know," his wife was saying, "that there was a living female Poet, although she had heard from someone that such a possibility existed. It was, she insisted, a matter of knowledge of the heart. When the Poet Anna-Mary singled her out at the procession . . . why, then, she was sure. Then she knew, she said, that she had been chosen."

Of course. That in itself, being marked out for notice before the crowd, would have convinced the child that her selection was ordained by Divine choice. He could see it all now. And the Khadilha had taken the child to see her aunt in her cell in a last desperate attempt to dissuade her.

"The child is strong-willed for a female," he mused, "if the sight of poor Grace did not shake her."

His wife did not answer, and he sat there, almost too tired to move. He was trying to place the child Jacinth in his mind's eye, but it was useless. It had been at least four years since he had seen her, dressed in a brief white shift that all little girls wore: he remembered a slender child, he remembered dark hair—but then all little girls among his people were slender and dark-haired.

"You don't even remember her," said his wife, and he jumped, irritated at her shrewdness.

"You are quite right," he said. "I don't. Is she pretty?"

"She is beautiful. Not that it matters now."

The Khadilh thought for a moment, watching his wife's stoic face, and then, choosing his words with care, he said, "It had been my intention to register a complaint with the Women's Discipline Unit for your behavior, Khadilha Althea."

"I expected you to do so."

"You have had a good deal of experience with the agents of the WDU—the prospect does not upset you?"

"I am indifferent to it."

He believed her. He remembered very well the behavior of his wife at her last impregnation, for it had required four agents from the Unit to subdue her and fasten her to their marriage bed. And yet he knew that many women went willingly, even eagerly,

to their appointments with their husbands. It was at times difficult for him to understand why he had not had Althea put on Permanent Medication from the very beginning; certainly, it would not have been difficult to secure permission to take a second, more womanly wife. Unfortunately he was soft-hearted, and she had been the mother of his eldest son, and so he had put up with her, relying upon his concubines for feminine softness and ardor. Certainly Althea had hardened, with the years, not softened.

"I have decided," he finished abruptly, "that your behavior is not so scandalous as I had thought. I am not sure that I would not have reacted just as you did under the circumstances, if I had known the girl's plans. I will make no complaint, therefore."

"You are indulgent."

He scanned her face, still lovely for all her years, for signs of impertinence, but there were none, and he went on: "However, you understand that our eldest son must decide for himself if he wishes to forgo his own complaint. Your disobedience to him was your first, you know. I have become accustomed to it."

He turned on his heel and left her, amused at his own weakness, but he canceled the Medication order when he went past the entrance to her quarters. She was a woman, she had meant to keep her daughter from becoming what Grace had become; it was not so hard to understand, after all.

The family did not go to the University on the day of the examinations. They waited at home, prepared for the inevitable as well as they could prepare.

Another room, near the room where Grace was kept, had been made ready by the weeping servingwomen, and it stood open now, waiting.

The Khadilh had had his wife released from her quarters for the day, since she would have only the brief moment with her daughter, and thereafter would have only the duty of observing her each morning as she did her sister-in-law. She sat at his feet now in their common room, making no sound, her face bleached white, wondering, he supposed, what she would do now. She had no other daughter; there were no other sisters. She would be alone in the household except for her servingwoman, until such a time as Michael should, perhaps, provide her with a granddaughter. His heart ached for her, alone in a household of men, and five of

them, before very long, to be allowed to speak only in the rhymed couplets of the Poets.

"Father?"

The Khadilh looked up, surprised. It was his youngest son, the boy James.

"Father," said the boy, "could she pass? I mean, is it possible that she could pass?"

Michael answered for him. "James, she is only twelve, and a female. She has had no education; she can only just barely read. Don't ask foolish questions. Don't you remember the examinations?"

"I remember," said James firmly. "Still, I wondered. There is the poet Anna-Mary."

"The third in who knows how many hundreds of years, James," Michael said. "I shouldn't count on it if I were you."

"But is it possible?" the boy insisted. "Is it possible, Father?"

"I don't think so, son," said the Khadilh gently. "It would be a very curious thing if an untrained twelve-year-old female could pass the examinations that I could not pass myself, when I was sixteen, don't you think?"

"And then," said the boy, "she may never see anyone again, so long as she lives, never speak to anyone, never look out a window, never leave that little room?"

"Never."

"That is a cruel law!" said the boy. "Why has it not been changed?"

"My son," said the Khadilh, "it is not something that happens often, and the Council has many, many other things to do. It is an ancient law, and the knowledge that it exists offers to bored young females something exciting to think about. It is intended to frighten them, my son."

"One day, when I have power enough, I shall have it changed."

The Khadilh raised his hand to hush the laughter of the older boys. "Let him alone," he snapped. "He is young, and she is his sister. Let us have a spirit of compassion in this house, if we must have tragedy."

A thought occurred to him, then. "James," he said, "you take a great deal of interest in this matter. Is it possible that you were somehow involved in this idiocy of your sister's?"

At once he knew he had struck a sensitive spot; tears sprang to the boy's eyes and he bit his lip fiercely.

"James—in what way were you involved? What do you know of this affair?"

"You will be angry, my father," said James, "but that is not the worst. What is worse is that I will have condemned my sister to—"

"James," said the Khadilh, "I have no interest in your self-accusations. Explain at once, simply and without dramatics."

"Well, we used to practice, she and I," said the boy hastily, his eyes on the floor. "I did not think I would pass, you know. I could see it—all of the others would pass, and I would not, and there I would be, the only one. People would say, there he goes, the only one of the sons of the ban-harihn who could not pass the Poetry exam."

"And?"

"And so we practiced together, she and I," he said. "I would set the subject and the form and do the first stanza, and then she would write the reply."

"When did you do this? Where?"

"In the gardens, Father, ever since she was little. She's very good at it, she really is, Father."

"She can rhyme? She knows the forms?"

"Yes, Father! And she *is* good, she has a gift for it—Father, she's much better than I am. I am ashamed to say that, of a female, but it would be a lie to say anything else."

The things that went on in one's household! The Khadilh was amazed and dismayed, and he was annoyed besides. Not that it was unusual for brothers and sisters, while still young, to spend time together, but surely one of the servants, or one of the family, ought to have noticed that the two little ones were playing at Poetry?

"What else goes on in my house, beneath the blind eyes and deaf ears of those I entrust with its welfare?" he demanded furiously, and no one hazarded an answer. He made a sound of disgust and went to the window to look out over the gardens that stretched down to the narrow river behind the house. It had begun to rain, a soft green rain not much more than a mist, and the river was blurred velvet through the veil of water. Another time he would have enjoyed the view; indeed, he might well have sent for his pencils and his sketching pad to record its beauty. But this was not a day for pleasure.

Unless, of course, Jacinth did pass.

It was, on the face of it, an absurdity. The examinations for Poetry were far different than those for the other Professions. In the others it was a straightforward matter: one went to the examining room, an examination was distributed, one spent perhaps six hours in such exams, and they were then scored by computer. Then, in a few days, there would come the little notice by com-system, stating that one had or had not passed the fitness exams for Law or Business or whatever.

Poetry was a different matter. There were many degrees of fitness, all the way from the First Level, which fitted a man for the lower offices of the faith, through five more subordinate levels, to the Seventh Level. Very rarely did anyone enter the Seventh Level. Since there was no question of being promoted from one level to another, a man being placed at his appropriate rank by the examinations at the very beginning, there were times when the Seventh Level remained vacant for as long as a year. Michael had been placed at the Fourth Level instead of the First, like the others of his sons, and the Khadilh had been awed at the implications.

For Poetry there was first an examination of the usual kind, marked by hand and scored by machine; just as in the other Professions. But then, if that exam was passed, there was something unique to do. The Khadilh had not passed that exam and he had no knowledge of what came next, except that it involved the computers.

"Michael," he said, musing, "how does it go exactly, the Poetry exam by the computer?"

Michael came over to stand beside him. "You mean, should Jacinth pass the written examination, even if just by chance, then what happens?"

"Yes. Tell me."

"It's simple enough. You go into the booths where the computer panels are and push a READY button. Then the computer gives you your instructions."

"For example?"

"Let's see. For example, it might say—SUBJECT: LOVE OF COUNTRY . . . FORM: SONNET. UNRESTRICTED BUT RHYMED . . . STYLE: FORMAL, SUITABLE FOR AN OFFICIAL BANQUET. And then you would begin."

"Are you allowed to use paper and pen, my son?"

"Oh, no, Father." Michael was smiling, no doubt, thought

the Khadilh, at his father's innocence. "No paper or pencil. And you begin at once."

"No time to think."

"No, Father, none."

"Then what?"

"Then, sometimes, you are sent to another computer, one that gives more difficult subjects. I suppose it must be the same all the way to the Seventh Level, except that the subject would grow more difficult."

The Khadilh thought it over. For his own office of Khadilh, which meant little more than "Administrator of Large Estates and Households," he had had to take one oral examination, and that had been in ordinary straightforward prose, and the examiner had been a man, not a computer, and he still remembered the incredible stupidity of his answers. He had sat flabbergasted at the things that issued from his mouth, and he had been convinced that he could not possibly have passed the training that boys received in prosody, none of the summer workshops in the different forms, scarcely even an acquaintance with the history of the classics. Surely she would be too terrified to speak? Why, the simple modesty of her femaleness ought to be enough to keep her mute, and then she would fail, even if she should somehow be lucky enough to pass the written exam. Damn the girl!

"Michael," he asked, "what is the level of the Poet Anna-Mary?"

"Second Level, Father."

"Thank you, my son. You have been very helpful—you may sit down now, if you like."

He stood a moment more, watching the rain, and then went back and sat down again by his wife. Her hands flew, busy with the little needles used to make the complicated hoods the Poets wore. She was determined that her sons should, in accordance with the ancient tradition, have every stitch of their installation garments made by her hands, although no one would have criticized her as if she had had the work done by others, since she had so many sons needing the garments. He was pleased with her, for once, and he made a mental note to have a gift sent to her later.

The bells rang in the city, signaling the four o'clock Hour of Meditation, and the Khadilh's sons looked at one another,

hesitating. By the rules of their Major that hour was to be spent in their rooms, but their father had specifically asked that they stay with him.

The Khadilh sighed, making another mental note, that he must sigh less. It was an unattractive habit.

"My sons," he said, "you must conform to the rules of your Major. Please consider that my first wish."

They thanked him and left the room, and there he sat, watching first the darting fingers of the Khadilha and then the dancing of the mobile flowers, until shadows began to streak across the tiled floor of the room. Six o'clock came, and then seven, and still no word. When his sons returned, he sent them away crossly, seeing no reason why they should share in his misery.

By the time the double suns had set over the river he had lost the compassion he had counseled for the others and become furious with Jacinth as well as the system. That one insignificant female child could create such havoc for him and for his household amazed him. He began to understand the significance of the rule; the law began to seem less harsh. He had missed his dinner and he had spent his day in unutterable tedium. His orchards were doubtless covered with insects and dying of thirst and neglect, his bank account was depleted by the expense of the trip home, the cost of extra garden-robots on Earth, the cost of the useless visit from the Lawyer. And his nervous system was shattered, and the peace of his household destroyed. All this from the antics of one twelve-year-old female child! And when she had to be shut up, there would be the necessity of living with her mother as she watched the child deteriorate into a crawling mass of filth and madness as Grace had done. Was his family cursed, that its females should bring down the wrath of the universe at large in this manner?

He struck his fists together in rage and frustration, and the Khadilha jumped, startled.

"Shall I send for music, my husband?" she asked. "Or perhaps you would like to have your dinner served here? Perhaps you would like a good wine?"

"Perhaps a dozen dancing girls!" he shouted. "Perhaps a Venusian flame-tiger! Perhaps a parade of Earth elephants and a Tentacle Bird from the Extreme Moons! May all the suffering gods take pity upon me!"

"I beg your pardon," said the Khadilha. "I have angered you."

"It is not you who have angered me," he retorted; "it is that miserable female of a daughter that you bore me, who has caused me untold sorrow and expense that has angered me!"

"Very soon now," pointed out the Khadilha softly, "she will be out of your sight and hearing forever; perhaps then she will anger you less."

The Khadilha's wit, sometimes put to uncomfortable uses, had been one of the reasons he had kept her all these years. At this moment, however, he wished her stupider and timider and a thousand light-years away.

"Must you be right, at a time like this?" he demanded. "It is unbecoming in a woman."

"Yes, my husband."

"It grows late."

"Yes, indeed."

"What could they be doing over there?"

He reached over to the com-system and instructed the Housekeeper to send someone with a videocolor console. It was just possible that somewhere in the galaxy something was happening that would distract him from his misery.

He skimmed the videobands rapidly, muttering. There was a new drama by some unknown avant-garde playwright, depicting a liaison between the daughter of a Council member and a servomechanism. There was a game of jidra, both teams apparently from the Extreme Moons, if their size could be taken as any indication. There were half a dozen variety programs, each worse than the last. Finally he found a newsband and leaned forward, his ear caught by the words of the improbably sleek young man reading the announcements.

Had he said—yes! He had. He was announcing the results of the examinations in Poetry. "—ended at four o'clock this afternoon, with only eighty-three candidates accepted out of almost three thousand who—"

"Of course!" he shouted. How stupid he had been not to have realized, sooner, that since all members of Poetry were bound by oath to observe the four o'clock Hour of Meditation, the examinations would have had to end by four o'clock! But why, then, had no one come to notify them or to return their daughter? It was very near nine o'clock.

The smallest whisper of hope touched him. It was possible, just possible, that the delay was because even the callous members of the Poetry Unit were finding it difficult to condemn a little girl to a life of solitary confinement. Perhaps they were meeting to discuss it, perhaps something was being arranged, some loophole in the law being found that could be used to prevent such a travesty of justice.

He switched off the video and punched the call numbers of the Poetry Unit on the com-system. At once the screen was filled by the embroidered hood and bearded face of a Poet, First Level, smiling helpfully through the superimposed matrix-mark of his household.

The Khadilh explained his problem, and the Poet smiled and nodded.

"Messengers are on their way to your household at this moment, Khadilh ban-harihn," he said. "We regret the delay, but it takes time, you know. All these things take time."

"What things?" demanded the Khadilh. "And why are you speaking to me in prose? Are you not a Poet?"

"The Khadilh seems upset," said the Poet in a soothing voice. "He should know that those Poets who serve the Poetry Unit as communicators are excused from the laws of verse-speaking while on duty."

"Someone is coming now?"

"Messengers are on their way."

"On foot? By Earth-style robot-mule? Why not a message by com-system?"

The Poet shook his head. "We are a very old profession, Khadilh ban-harihn. There are many traditions to be observed. Speed, I fear, is not among those traditions."

"What message are they bringing?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you that," said the Poet patiently.

Such control! thought the Khadilh. Such unending saintlike tolerance! It was maddening.

"Terminate with thanks," said the Khadilh, and turned off the bland face of the Poet. At his feet the Khadilha had set aside her work and sat trembling. He reached over and patted her hand, wishing there were some comfort he could offer.

Had they better go ahead and call for dinner? He wondered if either of them would be able to eat.

"Althea," he began, and at that moment the servingwomen

showed in the messengers of the Poetry Unit, and the Khadilh rose to his feet.

"Well?" he demanded abruptly. He would be damned if he was going to engage in the usual interminable preliminaries. "Where is my daughter?"

"We have brought your daughter with us, Khadilh ban-harihn."

"Well, where is she?"

"If the Khadilh will only calm himself."

"I am calm! Now where is my daughter?"

The senior messenger raised one hand, formally, for silence, and in an irritating singsong he began to speak.

"The daughter of the Khadilh ban-harihn will be permitted to approach and to speak to her parents for one minute only, by the clock which I hold, giving to her parents whatever message of farewell she should choose. Once she has given her message, the daughter of the Khadilh will be taken away and it will not be possible for the Khadilh or his household to communicate with her again except by special petition from the Council."

The Khadilh was dumbfounded. He could feel his wife shaking uncontrollably beside him—was she about to cause a second scandal?

"Leave the room if you cannot control your emotion, Khadilha," he ordered her softly, and she responded with an immediate and icy calm of bearing. Much better.

"What do you mean," he asked the messenger, "by stating that you are about to take my daughter away again? Surely it is not the desire of the Council that she be punished outside the confines of my house!"

"Punished?" asked the messenger. "There is no punishment in question, Khadilh. It is merely that the course of study which she must follow henceforth cannot be provided for her except at the Temple of the University."

It was the Khadilh's turn to tremble now. She had passed!

"Please," he said hoarsely, "would you make yourself clear? Am I to understand that my daughter has passed the examination?"

"Certainly," said the messenger. "This is indeed a day of great honor for the household of the ban-harihn. You can be most proud, Khadilh, for your daughter has only just completed the final examination and has been placed in Seventh Level. A festival will be declared, and an official announcement will be made. A day of holiday will be ordered for all citizens of the

planet Abba, in all city-clusters and throughout the countryside. It is a time of great rejoicing!"

The man went on and on, his curiously contrived-sounding remarks unwinding amid punctuating sighs and nods from the other messengers, but the Khadilh did not hear any more. He sank back in his chair, deaf to the list of the multitude of honors and happenings that would come to pass as a result of this extraordinary thing. Seventh Level! How could such a thing be?

Dimly he was aware that the Khadilha was weeping quite openly, and he used one numb hand to draw her veils across her face.

"Only one minute, by the clock," the messenger was saying. "You do understand? You are not to touch the Poet-Candidate, nor are you to interfere with her in any way. She is allowed one message of farewell, nothing more."

And then they let his daughter, this stranger who had performed a miracle, whom he would not even have recognized in a crowd, come forward into the room and approach him. She looked very young and tired, and he held his breath to hear what she would say to him.

However, it was no message of farewell that she had to give them. Said the Poet-Candidate, Seventh Level, Jacinth ban-harihn: "You will send someone at once to inform my Aunt Grace that I have been appointed to the Seventh Level of the Profession of Poetry; permission has been granted by the Council for the breaking of her solitary confinement for so long as it may take to make my aunt understand just what has happened."

And then she was gone, followed by the messengers, leaving only the muted tinkling showers of sparks from the dancing flowers and the soft drumming of the rain on the roof to punctuate the silence.

The National Pastime

by *Norman Spinrad*

Norman Spinrad is the author of a dozen or more excellent novels and short story collections, two of which, Bug Jack Barron (1969) and The Iron Dream (1972), are two of the most important sf works of the early 1970s. He is also an outstanding short story writer, and his collections, including No Direction Home (1975) and The Star-Spangled Future (1979), are major works in their own right. A former President of the Science Fiction Writers of America, he still serves that organization in important ways. He recently moved to California after many years as a New Yorker.

The Founding Father

I know you've got to start at the bottom in the television business, but producing sports shows is my idea of cruel and unusual punishment. Sometime in the dim past, I had the idea that I wanted to make films, and the way to get to make films seemed to be to run up enough producing and directing credits on television, and the way to do *that* was to take whatever came along, and what came along was an offer to do a series of sports specials on things like kendo, sumo wrestling, jousting, Thai boxing: in short, ritual violence. This was at the height (or the depth) of the antiviolence hysteria, when you couldn't so much

as show the bad guy getting an on-camera rap in the mouth from the good guy on a moron western. The only way you could give the folks what they really wanted was in the All-American wholesome package of a sporting event. Knowing this up front—unlike the jerks who warm chairs as network executives—I had no trouble producing the kind of sports specials the network executives knew people wanted to see without quite knowing why, and thus I achieved the status of boy genius. Which, alas, ended up in my being offered a long-term contract as a producer in the sports department that was simply too rich for me to pass up, I mean I made no bones about being a crass materialist.

So try to imagine my feelings when Herb Dieter, the network sports programming director, calls me in to his inner sanctum and gives me the Word. "Ed," he tells me, "as you know, there's now only one major football league, and the opposition has us frozen out of the picture with long-term contracts with the NFL. As you also know, the major league football games are clobbering us in the Sunday afternoon ratings, which is prime time as far as sports programming is concerned. And as you know, a sports programming director who can't hold a decent piece of the Sunday afternoon audience is not long for this fancy office. And as you know, there is no sport on God's green earth that can compete with major league football. Therefore, it would appear that I have been presented with an insoluble problem.

"Therefore, since you are the official boy genius of the sports department, Ed, I've decided that you must be the solution to my problem. If I don't come up with something that will hold its own against pro football by the beginning of next season, my head will roll. Therefore, I've decided to give you the ball and let you run with it. Within ninety days, you will have come up with a solution or the fine print boys will be instructed to find a way for me to break your contract."

I found it very hard to care one way or the other. On the one hand, I liked the bread I was knocking down, but on the other, the job was a real drag and it would probably do me good to get my ass fired. Of course the whole thing was unfair from my point of view, but who could fault Dieter's logic; he personally had nothing to lose by ordering his best creative talent to produce a miracle or be fired. Unless I came through, *he* would be fired, and then what would he care about gutting the sports department,

it wouldn't be his baby anymore. It wasn't very nice, but it was the name of the game we were playing.

"You mean all I'm supposed to do is invent a better sport than football in ninety days, Herb, or do you mean something more impossible?" I couldn't decide whether I was trying to be funny or not.

But Dieter suddenly had a 20-watt bulb come on behind his eyes (about as bright as he could get). "I do believe you've hit on it already, Ed," he said. "We can't get any pro football, so you're right, you've got to *invent* a sport that will outdraw pro football. Ninety days, Ed. And don't take it too hard; if you bomb out, we'll see each other at the unemployment office."

So there I was, wherever *that* was. I could easily get Dieter to do for me what I didn't have the willpower to do for myself and get me out of the stinking sports department—all I had to do was *not* invent a game that would outdraw pro football. On the other hand, I liked living the way I did, and I didn't like the idea of losing *anything* because of failure.

So the next Sunday afternoon, I eased out the night before's chick, turned on the football game, smoked two joints of Aca-pulco Gold and consulted my muse. It was the ideal set of conditions for a creative mood: I was being challenged, but if I failed, I gained too, so I had no inhibitions on my creativity. I was stoned to the point where the whole situation was a game without serious consequences; I was ~~hanging~~ loose.

Watching two football teams pushing each other back and forth across my color television screen, it once again occurred to me how much football was a ritual sublimation of war. This seemed perfectly healthy. Lots of cultures are addicted to sports that are sublimations of the natural human urge to clobber people. Better the sublimation than the clobbering. People dig violence, whether anyone likes the truth or not, so it's a public service to keep it on the level of a spectator sport.

Hmmm . . . that was probably why pro football had replaced baseball as the National Pastime in a time when people, having had their noses well rubbed in the stupidity of war, needed a war substitute. How could you beat something that got the American armpit as close to the gut as that?

And then from the blue grass mountaintops of Mexico, the flash hit me: the only way to beat football was at its own game!

Start with football itself, and convert it into something that was an even *closer* metaphor for war, something that could be called—

!!COMBAT FOOTBALL!!

Yeah, yeah, Combat football, or better, COMBAT football. Two standard football teams, standard football field, standard football rules, except:

Take off their pads and helmets and jerseys and make it a warm-weather game that they play in shorts and sneakers like boxing. More meaningful, more intimate violence. Violence is what sells football, so give 'em a bit more violence than football, and you'll draw a bit more than football. The more violent you can make it and get away with it, the better you'll draw.

Yeah . . . and you could get away with punching, after all boxers belt each other around and they still allow boxing on television; sports have too much All-American Clean for the antiviolence freaks to attack, in fact, where their heads are at, they'd *dig* Combat football. Okay. So in ordinary football, the defensive team tackles the ball carrier to bring him to his knees and stop the play. So in Combat, the defenders can slug the ball carrier, kick him, tackle him, why not, anything to bring him to his knees and stop the play. And to make things fair, the ball carrier can slug the defenders to get them out of his way. If the defense slugs an offensive player who doesn't have possession, it's ten yards and an automatic first down. If anyone but the ball carrier slugs a defender, it's ten yards and a loss of down.

Presto: Combat football!

And the final touch was that it was a game that any beer-sodden moron who watched football could learn to understand in sixty seconds, and any tout who dug football would have to like Combat better.

The boy genius had done it again! It even made sense after I came down.

Farewell to the Giants

Jeez, I saw a thing on television last Sunday you wouldn't believe. You really oughta watch it next week, I don't care who the Jets or the Giants are playing. I turned on the TV to watch

the Giants game and went to get a beer, and when I came back from the kitchen I had some guy yelling something about today's professional Combat football game, and it's not the NFL announcer, and it's a team called the New York Sharks playing a team called the Chicago Thunderbolts, and they're playing in L.A. or Miami, I didn't catch which, but someplace with palm trees anyway, and all the players are bare-ass! Well, not really bare-ass, but all they've got on is sneakers and boxing shorts with numbers across the behind—blue for New York, green for Chicago. No helmets, no pads, no protectors, no jerseys, no nothing!

I check the set and sure enough I've got the wrong channel. But I figured I could turn on the Giants game anytime, what the hell, you can see the Giants all the time, but what in hell is *this*?

New York kicks off to Chicago. The Chicago kick-runner gets the ball on about the 10—bad kick—and starts upfield. The first New York tackler reaches him and goes for him and the Chicago player just belts him in the mouth and runs by him! I mean, with the ref standing there watching it, and no flag thrown! Two more tacklers come at him on the 20. One dives at his legs, the other socks him in the gut. He trips and staggers out of the tackle, shoves another tackler away with a punch in the chest, but he's slowed up enough so that three or four New York players get to him at once. A couple of them grab his legs to stop his motion, and the others knock him down, at about the 25. Man, what's going on here?

I check my watch. By this time the Giants game has probably started, but New York and Chicago are lined up for the snap on the 25, so I figure what the hell, I gotta see some more of this thing, so at least I'll watch one series of downs.

On first down, the Chicago quarterback drops back and throws a long one way downfield to his flanker on maybe the New York 45; it looks good, there's only one player on the Chicago flanker, he beats this one man and catches it, and it's a touchdown, and the pass looks right on the button. Up goes the Chicago flanker, the ball touches his hands—and pow, right in the kisser! The New York defender belts him in the mouth and he drops the pass. Jeez, what a game!

Second and ten. The Chicago quarterback fades back, but it's a fake, he hands off to his fullback, a gorilla who looks like he weighs about two-fifty, and the Chicago line opens up a little

hole at left tackle and the fullback hits it holding the ball with one hand and punching with the other. He belts out a tackler, takes a couple of shots in the gut, slugs a second tackler, and then someone has him around the ankles; he drags himself forward another half yard or so, and then he runs into a good solid punch and he's down on the 28 for a three-yard again.

Man, I mean *action*! What a game! Makes the NFL football look like something for faggots! Third and seven, you gotta figure Chicago for the pass, right? Well on the snap, the Chicago quarterback just backs up a few steps and pitches a short one to his flanker at about the line of scrimmage. The blitz is on and everyone comes rushing in on the quarterback and before New York knows what's happening, the Chicago flanker is five yards downfield along the left sideline and picking up speed. Two New York tacklers angle out to stop him at maybe the Chicago 40, but he's got up momentum and one of the New York defenders runs right into his fist—I could hear the thud even on television—and falls back right into the other New York player, and the Chicago flanker is by them, the 40, the 45, he angles back toward the center of the field at midfield, dancing away from one more tackle, then on maybe the New York 45 a real fast New York defensive back catches up to him from behind, tackles him waist-high, and the Chicago flanker's motion is stopped as two more tacklers come at him. But he squirms around inside the tackle and belts the tackler in the mouth with his free hand, knocks the New York back silly, breaks the tackle, and he's off again downfield with two guys chasing him—40, 35, 30, 25, he's running away from them. Then from way over the right side of the field, I see the New York safety man running flat out across the field at the ball carrier, angling toward him so it looks like they'll crash like a couple of locomotives on about the 15, because the Chicago runner just doesn't see this guy. Ka-boom! The ball carrier running flat out runs right into the fist of the flat out safety at the 15 and he's knocked about ten feet one way and the football flies ten feet the other way, and the New York safety scoops it up on the 13 and starts upfield, 20, 25, 30, 35, and then slam, bang, whang, half the Chicago team is all over him, a couple of tackles, a few in the gut, a shot in the head, and he's down. First and ten for New York on their own 37. And that's just the first series of downs!

Well let me tell you, after that you know where they can stick the Giants game, right? This Combat football, that's the real way to play the game, I mean it's football and boxing all together, with a little wrestling thrown in, it's a game with *balls*. I mean, the *whole* game was like the first series. You oughta take a look at it next week. Damn, if they played the thing in New York we could even go out to the game together. I'd sure be willing to spend a couple of bucks to see something like that.

Commissioner Gene Kuhn Addresses the First Annual Owners' Meeting of the National Combat Football League

Gentlemen, I've been thinking about the future of our great sport. We're facing a double challenge to the future of Combat football, boys. First of all, the NFL is going over to Combat rules next season, and since you can't copyright a sport (and if you could the NFL would have us by the short hairs anyway) there's not a legal thing we can do about it. The only edge we'll have left is that they'll have to at least wear heavy uniforms because they play in regular cities up north. But they'll have the stars, and the stadiums, and the regular home town fans and fatter television deals.

Which brings me to our second problem, gentlemen, namely that the television network which created our great game is getting to be a pain in our sport's neck, meaning that they're shafting us in the crummy percentage of the television revenue they see fit to grant us.

So the great task facing our great National Pastime, boys, is to ace out the network by putting ourselves in a better bargaining position on the television rights while saving our million-dollar asses from the NFL competition, which we just cannot afford.

Fortunately, it just so happens your commissioner has been on the ball, and I've come up with a couple of new gimmicks that I am confident will insure the posterity and financial success of our great game while stiff-arming the NFL and the TV network nicely in the process.

Number one, we've got to improve our standing as a live spectator sport. We've got to start drawing big crowds on our own if we want some clout in negotiating with the network.

Number two, we've got to give the customers something the NFL can't just copy from us next year and clobber us with.

There's no point in changing the rules again because the NFL can always keep up with us there. But one thing the NFL is locked into for keeps is the whole concept of having teams represent cities; they're committed to that for the next twenty years. We've only been in business four years and our teams never play in the damned cities they're named after because it's too cold to play bare-ass Combat in those cities during the football season, so it doesn't have to mean anything to us.

So we make two big moves. First, we change our season to spring and summer so we can play up north where the money is. Second, we throw out the whole dumb idea of teams representing cities; that's old-fashioned stuff. That's crap for the coyotes. Why not six teams with *national* followings? Imagine the clout that'll give us when we renegotiate the TV contract. We can have a flexible schedule so that we can put any game we want into any city in the country any time we think that city's hot and draw a capacity crowd in the biggest stadium in town.

How are we gonna do all this? Well look boys, we've got a six-team league, so instead of six cities, why not match up our teams with six national groups?

I've taken the time to draw up a hypothetical league lineup just to give you an example of the kind of thing I mean. Six teams: the Black Panthers, the Golden Supermen, the Psychedelic Stompers, the Caballeros, the Gay Bladers and the Hog Choppers. We do it all up the way they used to do with wrestling, you know, the Black Panthers are all spades with naturals, the Golden Supermen are blond astronaut types in red-white-and-blue bunting, the Psychedelic Stompers have long hair and groupies in miniskirts up to their navels and take rock bands to their games, the Caballeros dress like gauchos or something, whatever makes Latin types feel feisty, the Gay Bladers and Hog Choppers are mostly all-purpose villains—the Bladers are black-leather-and-chainmail faggots and the Hog Choppers we recruit from outlaw motorcycle gangs.

Now that is a *league*, gentlemen? Identification is the thing, boys. You gotta identify your teams with a large enough group of people to draw crowds, but why tie yourself to something local like a city? This way, we got a team for the spades, a team for the frustrated Middle Americans, a team for the hippies and

kids, a team for the spics, a team for the faggots, and a team for the motorcycle nuts and violence freaks. And any American who can't identify with any of these teams is an odds-on bet to hate one or more of them enough to come out to the game to see them stomped. I mean, who wouldn't want to see the Hog Choppers and the Panthers go at each other under Combat rules?

Gentlemen, I tell you it's creative thinking like this that made our country great, and it's creative thinking like this that will make Combat football the greatest goldmine in professional sports.

Stay Tuned, Sportsfans . . .

Good afternoon, Combat fans, and welcome to today's major league Combat football game between the Caballeros and the Psychedelic Stompers brought to you by the World Safety Razorblade Company, with the sharpest, strongest blade for your razor in the world.

It's 95 degrees on this clear New York day in July, and a beautiful day for a Combat football game, and the game here today promises to be a real smasher, as the Caballeros, only a game behind the league-leading Black Panthers, take on the fast-rising, hard-punching Psychedelic Stompers and perhaps the best running back in the game today, Wolfman Ted. We've got a packed house here today, and the Stompers, who won the toss, are about to receive the kickoff from the Caballeros. . . .

And there it is, a low bullet into the end zone, taken there by Wolfman Ted. The Wolfman crosses the goal line, he's up to the 5, the 10, the 14, he brings down number 71 Pete Lopez with a right to the windpipe, crosses the 15, takes a glancing blow to the head from number 56 Diaz, is tackled on the 18 by Porfirio Rubio, number 94, knocks Rubio away with two quick rights to the head, crosses the 20, and takes two rapid blows to the midsection in succession from Beltran and number 30 Orduna, staggers and is tackled low from behind by the quick-recovering Rubio and slammed to the ground under a pile of Caballeros on the 24.

First and ten for the Stompers on their own 24. Stompers quarterback Ronny Seede brings his team to the line of scrim-

mage in a double flanker formation with Wolfman Ted wide to the right. A long count—

The snap, Seede fades back to—

A quick hand-off to the Wolfman charging diagonally across the action toward left tackle, and the Wolfman hits the line on a dead run, windmilling his right fist, belting his way through one, two, three Caballeros, getting two, three yards, then taking three quick ones to the ribcage from Rubio, and staggering right into number 41 Manuel Cardozo, who brings him down on about the 27 with a hard right cross.

Hold it! A flag on the play! Orduna number 30 of the Caballeros and Dickson number 83 of the Stompers are wailing away at each other on the 26! Dickson takes two hard ones and goes down, but as Orduna kicks him in the ribs, number 72, Merling of the Stompers, grabs him from behind and now there are six or seven assistant referees breaking it up. . . .

Something going on in the stands at about the 50 too—a section of Stompers rooters mixing it up with the Caballero fans—

But now they've got things sorted out on the field, and it's 10 yards against the Caballeros for striking an ineligible player, nullified by a 10-yarder against the Stompers for illegal offensive striking. So now it's second and seven for the Stompers on their own 27—

It's quieted down a bit there about the 50-yard line, but there's another little fracas going in the far end zone and a few groups of people milling around in the aisles of the upper grandstand—

There's the snap, and Seede fades back quickly, dances around, looks downfield, and throws one intended for number 54, Al Viper, the left end at about the 40. Viper goes up for it, he's got it—

And takes a tremendous shot along the base of his neck from number 18 Porfirio Rubio! The ball is jarred loose. Rubio dives for it, he's got it, but he takes a hard right in the head from Viper, then a left. Porfirio drops the ball and goes at Viper with both fists! Viper knocks him sprawling and dives on top of the ball, burying it and bringing a whistle from the head referee as Rubio rains blows on his prone body. And here come the assistant referees to pull Porfirio off as half the Stompers come charging downfield toward the action—

They're at it again near the 50-yard line! About forty rows of fans going at each other. There goes a smoke bomb!

They've got Rubio away from Viper now, but three or four Stompers are trying to hold Wolfman Ted back and Ted has blood in his eye as he yells at number 41, Cardozo. Two burly assistant referees are holding Cardozo back. . . .

There go about a hundred and fifty special police up into the midfield stands. They've got their Mace and prods out. . . .

The head referee is calling an official's time out to get things organized, and we'll be back to live National Combat Football League action after this message. . . .

The Circus Is In Town

"We've got a serious police problem with Combat football," Commissioner Minelli told me after the game between the Golden Supermen and the Psychedelic Stompers last Sunday in which the Supermen slaughtered the Stompers 42-14, and during which there were ten fatalities and 189 hospitalizations among the rabble in the stands.

"Every time there's a game, we have a riot, your honor," Minelli (who had risen through the ranks) said earnestly. "I recommend that you should think seriously about banning Combat football. I really think you should."

This city is hard enough to run without free advice from politically ambitious cops. "Minelli," I told him, "you are dead wrong on both counts. First of all, not only has there *never* been a riot in New York during a Combat football game, but the best studies show that the incidence of violent crimes and social violence diminishes from a period of three days before a Combat game clear through to a period five days afterward, not only here, but in every major city in which a game is played."

"But only this Sunday ten people were killed and nearly two hundred injured, including a dozen of my cops—"

"In the *stands*, you nitwit, not in the streets!" Really, the man was too much!

"I don't see the difference—"

"Ye gods, Minelli, can't you see that Combat football keeps a hell of a lot of violence off the streets? It keeps it in the stadium, where it belongs. The Romans understood that two thousand

years ago! We can hardly stage gladiator sports in this day and age, so we have to settle for a civilized substitute."

"But what goes on in there is murder. My cops are taking a beating. And we've got to assign two thousand cops to every game. It's costing the taxpayers a fortune, and you can bet *someone* will be making an issue out of it in the next election."

I do believe that the lout was actually trying to pressure me. Still, in his oafish way, he had put his finger on the one political disadvantage of Combat football: the cost of policing the games and keeping the fan clubs in the stands from tearing each other to pieces.

And then I had one of those little moments of blind inspiration when the pieces of a problem simply fall into shape as an obvious pattern of solution.

Why bother keeping them from tearing each other to pieces?

"I think I have the solution, Minelli," I said. "Would it satisfy your sudden sense of fiscal responsibility if you could take all but a couple dozen cops off the Combat football games?"

Minelli looked at me blankly. "Anything less than two thousand cops there would be mincemeat by halftime," he said.

"So why send them in there?"

"Huh?"

"All we really need is enough cops to guard the gates, frisk the fans for weapons, seal up the stadium with the help of riot doors, and make sure no one gets out till things have simmered down inside."

"But they'd tear each other to ribbons in there with no cops!"

"So let them. I intend to modify the conditions under which the city licenses Combat football so that anyone who buys a ticket legally waives his right to police protection. Let them fight all they want. Let them really work out their hatreds on each other until they're good and exhausted. Human beings have an incurable urge to commit violence on each other. We try to sublimate that urge out of existence, and we end up with irrational violence on the streets. The Romans had a better idea—give the rabble a socially harmless outlet for violence. We spend billions on welfare to keep things pacified with bread, and where has it gotten us? Isn't it about time we tried circuses?"

As American as Apple Pie

Let me tell it to you, brother, we've sure been waiting for the Golden Supermen to play the Panthers in *this* town again, after the way those blond mothers cheated us 17-10 the last time and wasted three hundred of the brothers! Yeah man, they had those stands packed with honkies trucked in from as far away as Buffalo—we just weren't ready, is why we took the loss.

But this time we planned ahead and got ourselves up for the game even before it was announced. Yeah, instead of waiting for them to announce the date of the next Panther-Supermen game in Chicago and then scrambling with the honkies for tickets, the Panther Fan Club made under-the-table deals with ticket brokers for blocks of tickets for whenever the next game would be, so that by the time today's game was announced, we controlled two-thirds of the seats in Daley Stadium and the honkies had to scrape and scrounge for what was left.

Yeah man, today we pay them back for that last game! We got two-thirds of the seats in the stadium and Eli Wood is back in action and we gonna just go out and *stomp* those mothers today!

Really, I'm personally quite cynical about Combat; most of us who go out to the Gay Bladers games are. After all, if you look at it straight on, Combat football is rather a grotty business. I mean, look at the sort of people who turn out at Supermen or Panthers or for God's sake *Caballero* games: the worst sort of proletarian apes. Aside from us, only the Hogs have any semblance of class, and the Hogs have beauty only because they're so incredibly up-front gross, I mean all that shiny metal and black leather!

And of course that's the only real reason to go to the Blader games: for the spectacle. To see it and to be part of it! To see semi-naked groups of men engaging in violence and to be violent yourself—and especially with those black-leather-and-chainmail Hog Lovers!

Of course I'm aware of the cynical use the loathsome government makes of Combat. If there's nastiness between the blacks and P.Rs. in New York, they have the league schedule a Panther-

Caballero game and let them get it out on each other safely in the stadium. If there's college campus trouble in the Bay Area, it's a Stomper-Supermen game in Oakland. And us and the Hogs when just *anyone* anywhere needs to release general hostility. I'm not stupid, I know that Combat football is a tool of the Establishment. . . .

But Lord, it's just so much bloody *fun*!

We gonna have some fun today! The Hogs is playing the Stompers and that's the wildest kind of Combat game there is! Those crazy freaks come to the game stoned out of their minds, and you know that at least Wolfman Ted is playing on something stronger than pot. There are twice as many chicks at Stomper games than with any other team the Hogs play because the Stomper chicks are the only chicks besides ours who aren't scared out of their boxes at the thought of being locked up in a stadium with twenty thousand hot-shot Hogger rape artists like us!

Yeah, we get good and stoned, and the Stomper fans get good and stoned, and the Hogs get stoned, and the Stompers get stoned, and then we all groove on beating the piss out of each other, *whoo*-whee! And when we win in the stands, we drag off the pussy and gang-bang it.

Oh yeah, Combat is just good clean dirty fun!

It makes you feel good to go out to a Supermen game, makes you feel like a real American is supposed to, like a man. All week you've got to take crap from the niggers and the spics and your goddamn crazy doped-up kids and hoods and bums and faggots in the streets, and you're not even supposed to think of them as niggers and spics and crazy doped-up kids and bums and hoods and faggots. But Sunday you can go out to the stadium and watch the Supermen give it to the Panthers, the Caballeros, the Stompers, the Hogs, or the Bladers and maybe kick the crap out of a few people whose faces you don't like yourself.

It's a good healthy way to spend a Sunday afternoon, out in the open air at a good game when the Supermen are hot and we've got the opposition in the stands outnumbered. Combat's a great thing to take your kid to, too!

I don't know, all my friends go to the Caballero games, we go together and take a couple of six-packs of beer apiece, and get *muy boracho* and just have some crazy fun, you know? Sometimes I come home a little cut up and my wife is all upset and tries to get me to promise not to go to the Combat games anymore. Sometimes I promise, just to keep her quiet, she can get on my nerves, but I never really mean it.

Hombre, you know how it is, women don't understand these things like men do. A man has got to go out with his friends and feel like a man sometimes. It's not too easy to find ways to feel *muy macho* in this country, *amigo*. The way it is for us here, you know. It's not as if we're hurting anyone we shouldn't hurt. Who goes out to the Caballero games but a lot of difty gringos who want to pick on us? So it's a question of honor, in a way, for us to get as many *amigos* as we can out to the Caballero games and show those *cabrones* that we can beat them anytime, no matter how drunk we are. In fact, the drunker we are, the better it is. ¿Tu sabes?"

Baby, I don't know what it is, maybe it's just a chance to get it all out. It's a unique trip, that's all, there's no other way to get that particular high, that's why I go to Stompers games. Man, the games don't mean anything to me as games; games are like *games*, dig. But the whole Combat scene is its own reality.

You take some stuff—acid is a groovy high but you're liable to get wasted, lots of speed and some grass or hash is more recommended—when you go in, so that by the time the game starts you're really loaded. And then man, you just groove behind the violence. There aren't any cops to bring you down. What chicks are there are there because they dig it. The people you're enjoying beating up on are getting the same kicks beating up on you, so there's no guilt hang-up to get between you and the total experience of violence.

Like I say, it's a unique trip. A pure violence high without any hang-ups. It makes me feel good and purged and kind of together just to walk out of that stadium after a Combat football trip and know I survived; the danger is groovy too. Baby, if you can dig it, Combat can be a genuine mystical experience.

Hogs Win It All, 21-17, 1578(23)-989(14)!

Anaheim, October 8. It was a slam-bang finish to the National Combat Football League Pennant Race, the kind of game Combat fans dream about. The Golden Supermen and the Hog Choppers in a dead-even tie for first place playing each other in the last game of the season, winner take all, before nearly 60,000 fans. It was a beautiful sunny 90-degree Southern California day as the Hogs kicked off to the Supermen before a crowd that seemed evenly divided between Hog Lovers who had motorcycled in all week from all over California and Supermen Fans whose biggest bastion is here in Orange County.

The Supermen scored first blood midway through the first period when quarterback Bill Johnson tossed a little screen pass to his right end, Seth West, on the Hog 23, and West slugged his way through five Hog tacklers, one of whom sustained a mild concussion, to go in for the touchdown. Rudolf's conversion made it 7-0, and the Supermen Fans in the stands responded to the action on the field by making a major sortie into the Hog Lover section at midfield, taking out about 20 Hog Lovers, including a fatality.

The Hog fans responded almost immediately by launching an offensive of their own in the bleacher seats, but didn't do much better than hold their own. The Hogs and the Supermen pushed each other up and down the field for the rest of the period without a score, while the Supermen Fans seemed to be getting the better of the Hog Lovers, especially in the midfield sections of the grandstand, where at least 120 Hog Lovers were put out of action.

The Supermen scored a field goal early in the second period to make the score 10-0, but more significantly, the Hog Lovers seemed to be dogging it, contenting themselves with driving back continual Supermen Fan sorties, while launching almost no attacks of their own.

The Hogs finally pushed in over the goal line in the final minutes of the first half on a long pass from quarterback Spike Horrible to his flanker Greasy Ed Lee to make the score 10-7 as the half ended. But things were not nearly as close as the field

score looked, as the Hog Lovers in the stands were really taking their lumps from the Supermen Fans who had bruised them to the extent of nearly 500 take-outs including 5 fatalities, as against only 300 casualties and 3 fatalities chalked up by the Hog fans.

During the halftime intermission, the Hog Lovers could be seen marshaling themselves nervously, passing around beer, pot and pills, while the Supermen Fans confidently passed the time entertaining themselves with patriotic songs.

The Supermen scored again halfway through the third period, on a handoff from Johnson to his big fullback Tex McGhee on the Hog 41. McGhee slugged his way through the left side of the line with his patented windmill attack, and burst out into the Hog secondary swinging and kicking. There was no stopping the Texas Tornado, though half the Hog defense tried, and McGhee went 41 yards for the touchdown, leaving three Hogs unconscious and three more with minor injuries in his wake. The kick was good, and the Supermen seemed on their way to walking away with the championship, with the score 17-7, and the momentum, in the stands and on the field, going all their way.

But in the closing moments of the third period, Johnson threw a long one downfield intended for his left end, Dick Whitfield. Whitfield got his fingers on the football at the Hog 30, but Hardly Davidson, the Hog cornerback, was right on him, belted him in the head from behind as he touched the ball, and then managed to catch the football himself before either it or Whitfield had hit the ground. Davidson got back to midfield before three Supermen tacklers took him out of the rest of the game with a closed eye and a concussion.

All at once, as time ran out in the third period, the 10-point Supermen lead didn't seem so big at all as the Hogs advanced to a first down on the Supermen 35 and the Hog Lovers in the stands beat back Supermen Fan attacks on several fronts, inflicting very heavy losses.

Spike Horrible threw a five-yarder to Greasy Ed Lee on the first play of the final period, then a long one into the end zone intended for his left end, Kid Filth, which the Kid dropped as Gordon Jones and John Lawrence slugged him from both sides as soon as he became fair game.

It looked like a sure pass play on third and five, but Horrible surprised everyone by fading back into a draw and handing the

ball off to Loser Ludowicki, his fullback, who plowed around right end like a heavy tank, simply crushing and smashing through tacklers with his body and fists, picked up two key blocks on the 20 and 17, knocked Don Barnfield onto the casualty list with a tremendous haymaker on the 7, and went in for the score.

The Hog Lovers in the stands went Hog-wild. Even before the successful conversion by Knuckleface Bonner made it 17-14, they began blitzing the Supermen Fans on all fronts, letting out everything they had seemed to be holding back during the first three quarters. At least 100 Supermen Fans were taken out in the next three minutes, including two quick fatalities, while the Hog Lovers lost no more than a score of their number.

As the Hog Lovers continued to punish the Supermen Fans, the Hogs kicked off to the Supermen, and stopped them after two first downs, getting the ball back on their own 24. After marching to the Supermen 31 on a sustained and bloody ground drive, the Hogs lost the ball again when Greasy Ed Lee was rabbit-punched into a fumble.

But the Hog fans still sensed the inevitable and pressed their attack during the next two Supermen series of downs, and began to push the Supermen Fans toward the bottom of the grandstand.

Buoyed by the success of their fans, the Hogs on the field recovered the ball on their own 29 with less than two minutes to play when Chain Mail Dixon belted Tex McGhee into a fumble and out of the game.

The Hogs crunched their way upfield yard by yard, punch by punch, against a suddenly shaky Supermen opposition, all at once, the whole season came down to one play:

With the score 17-14 and 20 seconds left on the clock, time enough for one or possibly two more plays, the Hogs had the ball third and four on the 18-yard line of the Golden Supermen.

Spike Horrible took the snap as the Hog Lovers in the stands launched a final lay-out offensive against the Supermen Fans, who by now had been pushed to a last stand against the grandstand railings at fieldside. Horrible took about ten quick steps back as if to pass, and then suddenly ran head down fist flailing at the center of the Supermen line with the football tucked under his arm.

Suddenly Greasy Ed Lee and Loser Ludowicki raced ahead of their quarterback, hitting the line and staggering the tacklers a split second before Horrible arrived, throwing them just off balance enough for Horrible to punch his way through with three quick rights, two of them k.o. punches. Virtually the entire Hog team roared through the hole after him, body-blocking, and elbowing, and crushing tacklers to the ground. Horrible punched out three more tacklers as the Hog Lovers pushed the first contingent of fleeing Supermen Fans out into the field, and went in for the game- and championship-winning touchdown with two seconds left on the clock.

When the dust had cleared, not only had the Hog Choppers beaten the Golden Supermen 21-17, but the Hog Lovers had driven the Golden Supermen Fans from their favorite stadium, and had racked up a commanding advantage in the casualty statistics, 1,578 casualties and 23 fatalities inflicted, as against only 989 and 14.

It was a great day for the Hog Lovers and a great day in the history of our National Pastime.

The Voice of Sweet Reason

Go to a Combat football game? Really, do you think I want to risk being injured or possibly killed? Of course I realize that Combat is a practical social mechanism for preserving law and order, and to be frank, I find the spectacle rather stimulating. I watch Combat often, almost every Sunday.

On television, of course. After all, everyone who is anyone in this country knows very well that there are basically two kinds of people in the United States: people who go out to Combat games and people for whom Combat is strictly a television spectator sport.

A Day for Dying

by Charles Nuetzel

Charles Nuetzel is a California-based writer who was closely associated with the Powell line of paperbacks that in the 1960s produced a number of interesting science fiction novels, collections, and anthologies, including Images of Tomorrow (1969), a collection of sf stories of his own. He also edited a very good but very rare sf anthology, If This Goes On (1965).

"A Day for Dying" features a special kind of gladiatorial contest, one we would never want to participate in!

Realizing that it was probably the last time I would ever see them, I watched the tall, endless buildings rush past the police ground-car. They were glassy structures, colored in rainbow brightness, slipping by one after another. The people walked the night-streets and moved into neoned clubs happily, as on every night of their lives, unaware of the hard fact that they could be snapped away to the Tele-Games, without even a moment to say good-by to their loved ones.

I, Charles David Travers, a peace-loving Citizen of the 22nd Century, had been arrested for some unnamed crime, to appear in the Tele-Games of March 8th, 2134. And yet the world around me continued as usual.

Finally we arrived at the Tele-Games Court, a large white building that reached upward to disappear into the night sky. The

officer who had presented me with the official papers now ushered me out of the car, up the steps into the building.

The walk through the Courthouse was a flashing series of dark impressions that disappeared almost immediately. I was pushed into a small courtroom, invisible death hanging from its clean white walls.

The gray-faced judge stared down at me as if made of cold steel.

"Charles David Travers, for Judgment, sir," my escort announced like a robot. "Case 2-9963567489, of Los Angeles Major, California."

The judge looked at me. He said, "You are brought before the High Court for treason against the State. How do you plead?"

Every muscle knotted in disbelief. "I've done nothing. This is a farce. You have the wrong man."

The judge asked, "You *are* Charles David Travers, son of David Jay Travers and Joan Marianne Travers? You have a mistress by the name of Julie Thorson? You work at the International Message Service as a file clerk, Code-5B? You are a collector of old books, adventure novels, and are in the habit of spending hours in libraries and in your one-room bachelor apartment reading? You are the Charles David Travers who wrote an article in college defending the concept of the Tele-Games as a logical means of controlling the world population and relieving our civilization of criminals, of giving the Citizens the kind of violent entertainment they so highly desire? An article which had its tongue-in-cheek subtle double-meaning—obvious, now, in light of what we have learned about your true activities."

"Yes, but—"

"Then there is no mistake," the judge announced with finality. "You have been the companion of Julie Thorson for the last six months, working with her in an attempt to overthrow the government. You are guilty of first-degree treason. Miss Thorson has confessed."

"It's a lie!" I shouted.

"Silence! You will appear before the National Tele-Games of March 8th as a Man-at-Arms to do battle to the death. In the event you should be the sole survivor, you will be freed, never again to be sentenced to the Tele-Games. So is the fair judgment of the State's Justice."

Dazed, I followed the guard out of the courtroom and down a

series of corridors. He stopped before two large iron doors and presented an identification card to the guard there, who allowed him to lead me into the inner chambers of the Central Los Angeles prison.

I was led to a narrow door marked 71134. The guard ordered me into the cell with a wave of his arm. The door closed behind me like the clanging of some morbid trap.

It was a voice that cut into my agony. It was filled with a mixture of surprise and pained horror. "Charlie!"

All the emotions rushed up in a flood, choking all senses like invisible fingers blotting out sanity. Whipping around, I saw the tall woman who had been my mistress these last months. But I couldn't equate this beautiful creature with the one with whom I'd shared silent walks through building-top parks or companionable evenings in my apartment or simply dancing gracefully in the dim nightclubs, chatting happily over a dinner and cocktails. This couldn't be that same woman!

Madness clutched at my brain.

There stood the creature that had placed me here. Through the emotion of wild fury I looked at her voluptuous body, draped in a green glowing cloth that wound around her slim waist and angular hips above firm thighs, dropping like silken waves about every beautiful and loving curve of her body. She didn't seem real, standing there in the drab coldness of the cell, her arms stretched out in offering.

Sanity snapped like a thread.

"You lying tramp!" I yelled, leaping. My hands gripped her silken white throat; my fingers squeezed the air back into her lungs, trapping it there.

Maybe it was the look of surprised horror in her large brown eyes that jolted sanity back into my shocked brain. My hands lowered as I slowly stepped back.

"Those lies . . . I've never done anything against the State."

She clutched at her throat, gasping for air, and finally said, "Charles . . . believe me—I didn't tell them *anything*! So help me God!"

"Then why?" I managed, confusion defeating all hatred.

"Why do they have the Games? Why is a person sent to his death for voicing objection against the State? Or getting drunk in public, or being late paying his bills? There doesn't have to be any logical reason!" she blurted.

"But they had to have some reason!"

"You were my companion. Oh, Charlie, believe me, I'd do anything to get you out of this!" Her eyes pleaded with me to forgive her. They blurred with moisture and then closed, tears running down her creamy cheeks.

How could I hate her? She had been created for love. And I knew she returned my love. Looking at her I felt a flood of overwhelming emotion.

Helplessly I folded an arm about her waist, gently raised her chin until our eyes met. And as I looked at her, reality slipped away to become a fantasy of love.

"Oh, Charlie, thank God!" she breathed. "I was afraid you wouldn't understand! Or forgive."

After that the insanity of need overwhelmed all other considerations. There was only my sensations and Julie's form.

Some time later I was aware of Julie moving from me. I sat up and asked, "How'd they pick you up? Why?"

She shook her head. "They brought me to the Games Judge and announced that I was guilty of treasons against the State, sentenced me to the Arena and brought me here. The next thing I knew you were in the cell. That's the whole truth, Charlie." She shrugged. "We're living in the most terrible Police State mankind ever devised. In our grandparents' day it was different."

I merely nodded, aware she spoke the truth. Yesterday I would have refused to believe.

My own grandfather had told me that in his youth there were television shows of violence, but they were plays written by fiction writers, performed by professional actors. Violence was the keynote. Then sporting events became more popular than drama, because of the real violence. It was a logical step to take hardened criminals, already condemned to die, and let them fight to the death for the home audience. Freeing the winner always promised a more exciting battle. With universal peace, an overcrowded world, unemployment and depression, the development of the Tele-Games became a natural evolution. Now it was an international institution that fed the greedy public with the blood-violence it so craved. People were killed. But they were other people! That made the difference.

It might have been only a couple of hours or a day before two uniformed guards stepped into the cell and ordered me out. I was taken into a small room where several rows of chairs were facing

a blank wall. As I sat, the guards flanking me, the door opened and five grim-looking officers stepped in; four seated themselves directly behind us and the fifth, a major, stood in front of me.

"You, Charles Travers, have one way to lower the sentence against you. Placing you with Miss Thorson was a waste of time; therefore, we will show you part of the recording of her interview." He then sat.

The room darkened and the wall glowed into shimmering blue life. To all appearances, it disappeared to reveal another room beyond; in reality, it was one of those huge Tri-D screens.

The major was standing in front of Julie on the screen. "You've been seeing Travers for months. What is his connection with the underground movement?"

"I can't tell you."

"Miss Thorson, you don't seem to realize your position."

"I'm fully aware," she spat out. "We don't give information about our activities."

The major nodded to one of his companions who held a small steel box. "This will give the information we want."

Julie's eyes flashed toward the box and then jerked back to the officer. Her shoulders sagged as she announced in a cold voice: "Charles Travers is my contact. He got me into this. I don't know anything else."

The screen went dead and the lights snapped on. The real major stepped in front of me. "The rest of the information's classified. We used the Brain-box to check it out. There's no reason for you to deny connection with the Underground Nationalist Movement"

Sweat broke out over my body. No matter what I claimed, they wouldn't believe me.

The major said, "Just tell us who your contacts are."

I shook my head. "I don't know what you're talking about. She was lying."

The major nodded and one of his assistants stepped forward with a Brain-box.

I looked at the mental probe and then shrugged, remaining silent.

One of the men clamped a small band on my forehead. The man holding the box pressed a button and reality blacked out . . . then the room snapped back into place.

I blinked and looked at the major. It seemed as if a great, terrible pressure had been lifted.

The major frowned, grimacing in puzzlement. "It would seem Miss Thorson lied—or one of you has been conditioned."

A gnawing cut at my stomach. "How could I afford conditioning? Only the Government has the machinery for that!" I stood, rage tensing every muscle.

"There are ways. If you are a member of the underground, there would be ways." The major laughed. "But it makes no difference. You have been sentenced—even if wrongly—and it will be carried out."

Violence snapped sanity as he turned. I leaped, grabbing his flabby throat. A great feeling of power came over me as I gazed into his reddening features; his eyes were popping out and his tongue was convulsively struggling for air. Then I felt the other men clawing at my arms and body. Something hit the back of my head, but I didn't release the major's neck until another hard object slammed once more at the base of my skull.

I had awakened in the blackness of a cell hours before, unable to see anything. It was a small place with little room for my six feet to stretch out. There wasn't any bed or covers, just hard steel to sleep on. Time passed slowly; then guards came to take me to a huge chamber packed with over a thousand people, locked behind large barred doors.

I was standing there for some time before a gentle hand touched my shoulder. I turned to see Julie. Her face was white and drawn, her lips thin, pale trembling lines.

"I . . . had to lie," she stammered. "The cell was tapped."

I tried to feel the hate that should be inside me, but it wouldn't come. No emotion at all affected me. "There's nothing we can do about it."

"I have to make you understand what you're dying for." She hesitated, then pulled me aside, away from the guards. "I was arrested trying to make contact with a man. I had to lie to save him. He's very important."

"What's his name?"

She shook her head sadly. "I can't tell you. You might use the name to save yourself."

I started to argue the point, then shrugged. No matter what, I'd be sent into the Arena—to my death. The chances of survival were reduced to zero. Yet there was still hope as long as I lived.

I found myself reviewing all the major combats I'd witnessed in the National Events. They were bloody battles between inexperienced citizens armed with clubs, rapiers, broadswords and spears. No modern-day weapons were allowed for fear they might be used against the guards or the cameramen who were lodged just above the fighting area. The Arena was surrounded by an army of Games Police with weapons that could cut down every occupant of the Arena at a moment's notice. I'd seen, in viewing countless Games, that many people stood frozen in fear, letting themselves be killed. Others, more realistic, would keep outside the range of the battle until it narrowed down to a few combatants. This I hoped to do. After that, if I survived, I'd try to join the underground movement. But it was useless to tell Julie that; she wouldn't believe me.

The two of us stood together, holding hands. Finally we were ordered out through a corridor in single file, to another larger room lined with armed Games Police. There we were handed primitive weapons for the Event.

I was given a small short sword, like the ones the Romans had used in battle. It was light and made of strong steel—unlike Roman weapons.

It was the thought of personal survival on which I focused as we were herded like a mass of dumb animals into the confines of the Arena.

At that point something unexpected happened to me, like a cutting off of all sensation. It was a sharp mental shifting, a release from fear, as if a switch had been pulled, disconnecting emotion.

I looked at Julie, letting my eyes run along her flesh, but felt nothing. It was as if I had suddenly become a zombie, without any desire other than the want to kill.

I automatically swung the short sword in the air in front of me. My huge arms flexed as I stood there in the middle of the Arena, surrounded by fellow citizens, awaiting the command to kill.

Then it came. A loud blast of horns.

My sword swung into the skull of a man standing next to me. I didn't wait to let others defend themselves. The short sword moved, cutting into arms, chests, heads and necks, creating a bloody passage of death until a mass of bodies were clattering

my passage. Then I was facing a tall man carrying a huge broadsword.

He swung the weapon right at my head. Ducking to one side, I whipped the point of my blade toward his chest; it cut lightly into the flesh, drawing a thin line of red. He swung again, a slicing blow at my stomach. With speed and skill I shouldn't have possessed, I leaped in close and rammed the short sword deep into his gut, twisting with sadistic delight. Withdrawing my sword, I turned and dropped the edge of the bloody blade into a woman's skull. The weapon wrenched from my hand locked in the bony tissue of her head.

Turning, I picked up the broadsword from my fallen male antagonist of a moment before and swung it in a circle through the neck of one man and across the chest of a woman whose body sliced open, the insides bursting out like a bloody fountain.

I made a path of dead bodies before me, like cutting wheat in the fields; then I spotted Julie holding a Scottish broadsword and making a path of death much like my own, without any emotion on her face. There wasn't time to marvel at Julie's unnatural skill; she should have died in the first moments.

It's amazing how fast a couple of thousand people will die when all are enemies of each other. It seemed but minutes before less than a dozen people still lived and I found myself without an opponent. My eyes searched the Arena. I spotted Julie still alive, cutting down a tall muscular man with one swing of her blade. She looked savagely magnificent standing there, the broadsword clutched in her hands, long hair hanging loose and flying as she turned to make another kill. But now there was none other than myself.

It seemed strangely ironic, even fantastic, that it should have ended this way.

She rushed at me calmly, a primitive, mindless killer. Her blade swung at my right arm, but merely cut the outer layer of flesh. It was enough to make me accept real danger. Her light sword, built for fast movement, might easily prove superior to my heavy weapon.

Instinct snapped my broadsword toward her head. It would be over quickly. At least she would die without much pain, I told myself.

But her sword met my blade with superhuman strength. Then the point jerked out and flicked at my chest, just missing. Our

eyes met at that moment, but there was only a black expression on her face.

In the next minutes we exchanged blows which must have given the Tele-Games' viewers the greatest excitement in their lives.

We weren't two amateurs battling to the death; we were expert fighters. Where either of us had learned our skill was impossible even to guess. How could I have known the truth?

I moved with all the sweeping speed in my muscles, attempting to put a quick end to the duel. It was as if some Fate had made us almost perfectly matched. Each was skilled to perfection; each was seeking the death of a former lover.

Then she suddenly leaped forward, the point of her sword reaching for my chest. I sidestepped, using every muscle in my body. At the same time my sword moved in an arc toward Julie's middle.

She had been caught off balance, unable to check the forward movement. My blade sliced cleanly across her midsection.

Oddly I felt nothing but relief. It was over. I'd survived.

Then I noticed something so alarming that I couldn't believe it at first. Where Julie's body was cut open appeared an odd, twisted mass of wires, circuits and plastic flesh.

Without thinking, without wanting to guess what this implied, I collapsed over her form as if exhausted. My hands turned her body so that the gaping hole was hidden from view. How much this explained!

I stood and walked to the Freedom Door, the cameras following my every action. As I stepped from the Arena, I was surrounded by international reporters, eager with questions that I answered until a small dark man stepped up. He said, "Come, follow me."

His attitude was so much that of an Official of the Games that I followed automatically. He carried a pass that let us through the guarded corridors and out into the streets of Los Angeles. He indicated a car parked in front of the building and we got in.

As we pulled away from the curb and sped hurriedly down the street, I demanded in alarm, "Where are you taking me?"

"I'm Julie Thorson's contact," was his answer. "All will be explained shortly."

"But Julie was—"

"An android?" He smiled in a strange, almost sad manner. "Everything will be explained."

We drove in silence through the streets for half an hour before stopping at a small building in the outskirts of the city. He escorted me into the house and I found myself in a living room filled with people.

All stood and turned, looking at me.

What I saw then scared me far more than anything I'd experienced in the last days. There, standing before me, was Julie Thorson, quite alive and beautiful! I started to take a step forward when a man beside her turned and began to speak. I stood there, stunned.

"You see, Charlie," he said, "we secretly developed perfect androids; we gave them truthful memory backgrounds up to a point and then added a fictional background to hide information that we couldn't let the authorities know about. We had to find out how perfectly they had been made, to see if it was possible to fool the Government Officials. Of course nobody, outside of those in this room, knows about our discovery. And nobody would even imagine such a thing if the evidence were put before his eyes."

He paused, smiling sadly, then continued, "You see how valuable this will be in our efforts to overthrow the now existing governments and end the Tele-Games. Agents who have inhuman strength and ability, programmed to know nothing other than the 'instinctive' missions given them. The Brain-boxes will reveal nothing. We even had to give our androids sexual drives and a sense of synthetic excitement; the absence of such small things might prove a giveaway. That explains why you were able to enjoy a seemingly normal sensual relation with . . . your Julie Thorson. The experiment worked out perfectly. We couldn't have wished for more."

I stood there dazed, shocked into believing what I saw and heard. It all fit perfectly together.

"What about me, now?" was my only question.

"After you have taped a full report you will be reprogrammed," said the real Charles David Travers.

The People Trap

by Robert Sheckley

Robert Sheckley has one of the sharpest minds in science fiction. Few writers can take an aspect of popular culture, a historical event, or a public personality and turn it on its head with as much cleverness and as consistently. Once a reader acquires a taste for Sheckley he is hopelessly hooked. Although he has written a dozen good novels, it is as a short story writer that he excels. We would recommend all of his collections, but most especially Untouched by Human Hands (1953), Can You Feel Anything When I Do This? (1971), and The Wonderful Worlds of Robert Sheckley (1979). "The People Trap" is an exciting look into a very chilling future.

It was Land Race Day—a time of vaunting hope and unrelieved tragedy, a day which epitomized the unhappy 21st century. Steve Baxter had tried to reach the Starting Line early, like the other contestants, but had miscalculated the amount of time he would require. Now he was in trouble. His Participant's Badge had gotten him through the outer, exocrowd without incident. But neither badge nor brawn could be relied upon to carry a man through the obdurate inner core of humanity which made up the endocrowd.

Baxter estimated this inner mass at 8.7 density—not far from the pandemic level. A flash point might occur at any moment,

despite the fact that the authorities had just aerosoled the endocrowd with tranquilizers. Given time, a man might circle around them, but Baxter had only six minutes.

Despite the risk, he pushed his way directly into their ranks. On his face he wore a fixed smile—absolutely essential when dealing with a high-density human configuration. He could see the Starting Line now, a raised dais in Jersey City's Glebe Park. The other contestants were already there. Another twenty yards, Steve thought; if only the brutes don't stampede!

But deep within the core-crowd he still had to penetrate the final nuclear mob. This was composed of bulky, slack-jawed men with unfocused eyes—agglutinating hysterophiliacs, in the jargon of the pandemiologists. Jammed together sardine fashion, reacting as a single organism, these men were incapable of anything but blind resistance and irrational fury toward anything that tried to penetrate their ranks.

Steve hesitated for a moment. The nuclear mob, more dangerous than the fabled water buffaloes of antiquity, glared at him, their nostrils flared, their heavy feet shuffling ominously.

Without allowing himself time to think, Baxter plunged into their midst. He felt blows on his back and shoulders and heard the terrifying "urrr" of a maddened endomob. Shapeless bodies jammed against him, suffocating him, relentlessly pressing closer and closer.

Then, providentially, the authorities turned on the Muzak. This ancient and mysterious music, which for over a century had pacified the most intractable berserkers, did not fail now. The endomob was decibeled into a temporary immobility, and Steve Baxter clawed his way through to the Starting Line.

The Chief Judge had already begun to read the Prospectus. Every contestant, and most of the spectators, knew this document by heart. Nevertheless, by law the Terms had to be stated.

"Gentlemen," the Judge read, "you are here assembled to take part in a Race for the acquisition of Public Domain lands. You fifty fortunate men have been chosen by public lottery from fifty million registrants in the South Westchester region. The Race will proceed from this point to the Registration Line at the Land Office in Times Square, New York—an adjusted approximate mean distance of 5.7 statute miles. You contestants are permitted to take any route; to travel on the surface, above, or

below ground. The only requirement is that you finish in person, substitutes not being permitted. The first ten Finalists—”

The crowd became deathly still.

“—will each receive one acre of unencumbered land complete with house and farming implements. And each Finalist will also be granted free government transportation to his freehold, for himself and for his immediate family. And this aforesaid acre shall be his to have and to hold, free and clear, perpetually unalienable, as long as the sun shines and water flows, for him and his heirs, even unto the third generation!”

The crowd sighed when they heard this. Not a man among them had ever seen an unencumbered acre, much less dreamed of possessing one. An acre of land entirely for yourself and your family, an acre which you didn't have to share with anyone—well, it was simply beyond the wildest fantasy.

“Be it further noted,” the Judge went on, “the government accepts no responsibility for deaths incurred during this Contest. I am obliged to point out that the unweighted average mortality rate for Land Races is approximately 68.9%. Any Contestant who so wishes may withdraw now without prejudice.”

The Judge waited, and for a moment Steve Baxter considered dropping the whole suicidal idea. Surely he and Adele and the kids and Aunt Flo and Uncle George could continue to get by somehow in their cozy one-room apartment in Larchmont's Fred Allen Memorial Median Income Housing Cluster . . . after all, he was no man of action, no muscled bravo or hairy-fisted brawler. He was a Systems Deformation consultant, and a good one. And he was also a mild-mannered ectomorph with stringy muscles and a distinct shortness of breath. Why in God's name should he thrust himself into the perils of darkest New York, most notorious of the Jungle Cities?

“Better give it up, Steve,” a voice said, uncannily echoing his thoughts.

Baxter turned and saw Edward Freihoff St. John, his wealthy and obnoxious neighbor from Larchmont. St. John, tall and elegant and whipcord-strong from his days on the paddleball courts. St. John, with his smooth, satyrine good looks, whose hooded eyes were too frequently turned toward Adele's blond loveliness.

“You'll never make it, Stevie baby,” St. John said.

"That is possible," Baxter said evenly. "But you, I suppose, will make it?"

St. John winked and laid a forefinger alongside his nose in a knowing gesture. For weeks he had been hinting about the special information he had purchased from a venal Land Race Comptroller. This information would vastly improve his chances of traversing Manhattan Borough—the densest and most dangerous urban concentration in the world.

"Stay out of it, Stevie baby," St. John said, in his peculiar rasping voice. "Stay out, and I'll make it worth your while. Whaddaya say, sweetie pie?"

Baxter shook his head. He did not consider himself a courageous man, but he would rather die than take a favor from St. John. And in any event, he could not go on as before. Under last month's Codicil to the Extended Families Domicile Act, Steve was now legally obliged to take in three unmarried cousins and a widowed aunt, whose one-room sub-basement apartment in the Lake Placid industrial complex had been wiped out by the new Albany-Montreal Tunnel.

Even with anti-shock injections, ten persons in one room were too many. He simply had to win a piece of land!

"I'm staying," Baxter said quietly.

"OK, sucker," St. John said, a frown marring his hard, sardonic face. "But remember, I warned you."

The Chief Judge called out, "Gentlemen, on your marks!"

The contestants fell silent. They toed the Starting Line with slitted eyes and compressed mouths.

"Get ready!"

A hundred sets of leg muscles bunched as fifty determined men leaned forward.

"Go!"

And the race was on!

A blare of supersonics temporarily paralyzed the surrounding mob. The contestants squirmed through their immobile ranks, and sprinted over and around the long lines of stalled automobiles. Then they fanned out, but tended mainly to the east, toward the Hudson River and the evil-visaged city that lay on its far shore, half concealed in its sooty cloak of unburned hydrocarbons.

Only Steve Baxter had not turned to the east.

Alone among the contestants, he had swung north, toward the

George Washington Bridge and Bear Mountain City. His mouth was tight, and he moved like a man in a dream.

In distant Larchmont, Adele Baxter was watching the race on television. Involuntarily, she gasped. Her eight-year-old son Tommy cried, "Mom, Mom, he's going north to the bridge! But it's closed this month, he can't get through that way!"

"Don't worry, darling!" Adele said. "Your father knows what he's doing."

She spoke with an assurance she did not feel. And, as the figure of her husband was lost in the crowds, she settled back to wait—and to pray. Did Steve know what he was doing? Or had he panicked under pressure?

The seeds of the problem were sewn in the 20th century, but the terrible harvest was reaped a hundred years later. After uncounted millennia of slow increase, the population of the world suddenly exploded, doubled, and doubled again. With disease checked and food supplies assured, death rates continued to fall as birth rates rose. Caught in a nightmare of geometric progression, the ranks of humanity swelled like runaway cancers.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, those ancient policemen, could no longer be relied upon to maintain order. Pestilence and famine had been outlawed, and war was too luxurious for this subsistence age. Only death remained—much diminished, a mere shadow of his former self.

Science, with splendid irrationality, continued to work insensately toward the goal of more life for more people.

And *people* marched on, still increasing, crowding the earth with their numbers, stifling the air and poisoning the water, eating their processed algae between slices of fish-meal bread, dimly awaiting a catastrophe to thin out their unwieldy ranks, and waiting in vain.

The quantitative increase in numbers produced qualitative changes in human experience. In a more innocent age, adventure and danger had been properties of the waste places—the high mountains, bleak deserts, steaming jungles. But by the 21st century most of these places were being utilized in the accelerating search for living space. Adventure and danger were now to be found in the monstrous, ungovernable cities.

In the cities one found the modern equivalent of savage tribes, fearsome beasts and dread diseases. An expedition into New

York or Chicago required more resourcefulness and stamina, more ingenuity, than those lighthearted Victorian jaunts to Everest or the source of the Nile.

In this pressure-pot world, land was the most precious of commodities. The government parceled it out as it became available, by means of regional lotteries culminating in land races. These contests were patterned after those held in the 1890s for the opening of the Oklahoma Territory and the Cherokee Strip.

The land races were considered equitable and interesting—both sporty and sporting. Millions watched the races, and the tranquilizing effect of vicarious excitement upon the masses was duly noted and approved. This in itself was sufficient justification for the races.

Additionally, the high mortality rate among the contestants had to be considered an asset. It didn't amount to much in absolute numbers, but a stifled world was grateful for even the smallest alleviation.

The race was three hours old. Steve Baxter turned on his little transistor radio and listened to the latest reports. He heard how the first group of contestants had arrived at the Holland Tunnel, and had been turned back by armored policemen. Others, more devious, had taken the long southern trek to Staten Island, and were presently approaching the approaches of the Verrazzano Bridge. Freihoff St. John, all by himself, flashing a deputy mayor's badge, had been allowed past the Lincoln Tunnel barricades.

But now it was time for Steve Baxter's gamble. Grim-faced, with quiet courage, he entered the infamous Free Port of Hoboken.

It was dusk on the Hoboken foreshore. Before him, in a sweeping crescent, lay the trim, swift ships of the Hoboken smuggling fleet, each with its gleaming Coast Guard medallion. Some already had cargo lashed to their decks—cases of cigarettes from North Carolina, liquor from Kentucky, oranges from Florida, goof balls from California, guns from Texas. Each case bore the official marking CONTRABAND—TAX PAID. For in this unhappy day and age, the hard-pressed government was forced to tax even illegal enterprises, and thus to give them a quasi-legal status.

Choosing his moment carefully, Baxter stepped aboard a rak-

ish marijuana runner and crouched down between the aromatic bales. The craft was ready for imminent departure; if he could only conceal himself during the short passage across the river—

"Har! What in hell have we here?"

A drunken second engineer, coming up unexpectedly from the fo'c'sle, had caught Baxter unawares. Responding to his shout, the rest of the crew swarmed onto the deck. They were a hard-bitten, swaggering lot, feared for their casually murderous ways. These were the same breed of godless men who had sacked Weehawken some years ago, had put Fort Lee to the torch and pillaged all the way to the gates of Englewood. Steve Baxter knew that he could expect no mercy from them.

Nevertheless, with admirable coolness, he said, "Gentlemen, I am in need of transportation across the Hudson, if you please."

The ship's captain, a colossal mestizo with a scarred face and bulging muscles, leaned back and bellowed with laughter.

"Ye seek passage of *uns*?" he declared in the broad Hobokenese patois. "Think ee we be the Christopher Street ferry, hai?"

"Not at all, sir. But I had hoped—"

"To the boneyard wit yer hopes!"

The crew roared at the witticism.

"I am willing to pay for my passage," Steve said, with quiet dignity.

"*Pay* is it?" roared the captain. "Aye, we sometimes sell passages—nonstop to midstream, and thence straight down!"

The crew redoubled its laughter.

"If it is to be, then let it so be," Steve Baxter said. "I request only that you permit me to drop a postcard to my wife and children."

"Woife and tuckins?" the captain enquired. "Why didn't yer mention! Had that lot myself aforetime ago, until waunders did do marvain to the lot."

"I am sorry to hear that," Steve said, with evident sincerity.

"Aye." The captain's iron visage softened. "I do remember how, in oftens colaim, the lectle blainsprites did leap giner on the saern; yes, and it was roses all til diggerdog."

"You must have been very happy," Steve said. He was following the man's statements with difficulty.

"I maun do," the captain said.

A bowlegged little forebow deckman thrust himself forward.

"Hi, Captain, let's do for him and get underway before the pot rots on the spot."

"Who you giving orders at, ye mangy, scut-faced hogifier!" the captain raved. "By Big Jesus, we'll let the pot rot til I say not! And as for doing him—nay, I'll do one deed for me blainsprites, shiver me if I won't!" Turning to Baxter he said, "We'll carry ye, laddie, and for naught ought loot."

Thus, fortuitously, Steve Baxter had touched upon a bitter-sweet memory in the captain's recollection, and had thereby won respite. The marijuana men pushed off, and soon the sleek craft was breasting the fallow-gray-green waves of the Hudson.

But Steve Baxter's respite was short-lived. In midstream, just after they entered Federal waters, a powerful searchlight flashed out of the evening gloom and an officious voice ordered them to heave to. Evil luck had steered them straight into the path of a destroyer on the Hudson patrol.

"Damn them!" the captain raved. "Tax and kill, that's all they know! But we'll show them our mettle! To the guns, bullies!"

Swiftly the crew peeled the tarpaulins from the .50-caliber machine guns, and the boat's twin diesels roared defiance. Twisting and dodging, the pot runner raced for the sanctuary of the New York shore. But the destroyer, forereaching, had the legs of her, and machine guns were no match for four-inch cannon. Direct hits splintered the little ship's toe rail, exploded in the great cabin, smashed through the main topforests, and chopped down the starboard mizzen halyards.

Surrender or death seemed the only options. But, weatherwise, the captain sniffed the air. "Hang on, hearties!" he screamed. "There's a wester do be coming!"

Shells rained around them. Then, out of the west, a vast and impenetrable smog bank rolled in, blanketing everything in its inky tentacles. The battered little kif ship slid away from the combat; and the crew, hastily donning respirators, gave thanks to the smoldering trashlands of Secaucus. As the captain remarked, it is an ill wind that blows no good.

Half an hour later they docked at the 79th Street Pier. The captain embraced Steve warmly and wished him good fortune. And Steve Baxter continued on his journey.

The broad Hudson was behind him. Ahead lay thirty-odd downtown blocks and less than a dozen crosstown blocks. Ac-

according to the latest radio report, he was well ahead of the other contestants, ahead even of Freihoff St. John, who still had not emerged from the labyrinth at the New York end of the Lincoln Tunnel. He seemed to be doing very nicely, all things considered.

But Baxter's optimism was premature. New York was not conquered so easily. Unknown to him, the most dangerous parts of his journey still lay before him.

After a few hours' sleep in the back of an abandoned car, Steve proceeded southward on West End Avenue. Soon it was dawn—a magical hour in the city, when no more than a few hundred early-risers were to be found at any given intersection. High overhead were the crenelated towers of Manhattan, and above them the clustered television antennae wove a faerie tapestry against a dun and ocher sky. Seeing it like that, Baxter could imagine what New York had been like a hundred years ago, in the gracious, easygoing days before the population explosion.

He was abruptly shaken out of his musings. Appearing as if from nowhere, a party of armed men suddenly barred his path. They wore masks, wide-brimmed black hats and bandoliers of ammunition. Their aspect was both villainous and picturesque.

One of them, evidently the leader, stepped forward. He was a craggy-featured old man with a heavy black mustache and mournful red-rimmed eyes. "Stranger," he said, "let's see yore pass."

"I don't believe I have one," Baxter said.

"Damned right you don't," the old man said. "I'm Pablo Steinmetz, and I issue all the passes around here, and I don't recollect ever seeing you afore in these parts."

"I'm a stranger here," Baxter said. "I'm just passing through."

The black-hatted men grinned and nudged each other. Pablo Steinmetz rubbed his unshaven jaw and said, "Well, sonny, it just so happens that you're trying to pass through a private toll road without permission of the owner, who happens to be me; so I reckon that means you're illegally trespassing."

"But how could anyone have a private toll road in the heart of New York City?" Baxter said.

"It's mine 'cause I say it's mine," Pablo Steinmetz said, fingering the notches on the stock of his Winchester 78. "That's just the way it is, stranger, so I reckon you'd better pay or play."

Baxter reached for his wallet and found it was missing.

Evidently the pot boat captain, upon parting, had yielded to his baser instincts and picked his pocket.

"I have no money," Baxter said. He laughed uneasily. "Perhaps I should turn back."

Steinmetz shook his head. "Going back's the same as going forward. It's toll road either way. You still gotta pay or play."

"Then I guess I'll have to play," Baxter said. "What do I do?"

"You run," old Pablo said, "and we take turns shooting at you, aiming only at the upper part of your head. First man to bring you down wins a turkey."

"That is infamous!" Baxter declared.

"It is kinda tough on you," Steinmetz said mildly. "But that's the way the mortar crumbles. Rules is rules, even in an anarchy. So, therefore, if you will be good enough to break into a wild sprint for freedom . . ."

The bandits grinned and nudged each other and loosened their guns in their holsters and pushed back their wide-brimmed black hats. Baxter readied himself for the death-run—

And at that moment, a voice cried, "Stop!"

A woman had spoken. Baxter turned and saw that a tall, redheaded girl was striding through the bandit ranks. She was dressed in toreador pants, plastic galoshes and Hawaiian blouse. The exotic clothing served to enhance her bold beauty. There was a paper rose in her hair, and a string of cultured pearls set off the slender line of her neck. Never had Baxter seen a more flamboyant loveliness.

Pablo Steinmetz frowned. "Flame!" he roared. "What in tarnation are you up to?"

"I've come to stop your little game, Father," the girl said coolly. "I want a chance to talk to this tanglefoot."

"This is man's business," Steinmetz said. "Stranger, git set to run!"

"Stranger, don't move a muscle!" Flame cried, and a deadly little derringer appeared in her hand.

Father and daughter glared at each other. Old Pablo was the first to break the tableau.

"Damn it all, Flame, you can't do this," he said. "Rules is rules, even for you. This here illegal trespasser can't pay, so he's gotta play."

"That's no problem," Flame announced. Reaching inside her

blouse she extracted a shiny silver double eagle. "There!" she said, throwing it at Pablo's feet. "I've done the paying, and just maybe I'll do the playing, too. Come along, stranger."

She took Baxter by the hand and led him away. The bandits watched them go and grinned and nudged each other until Steinmetz scowled at them. Old Pablo shook his head, scratched his ear, blew his nose, and said, "Consarn that girl!"

The words were harsh, but the tone was unmistakably tender.

Night came to the city, and the bandits pitched camp on the corner of 69th Street and West End Avenue. The black-hatted men lounged in attitudes of ease before a roaring fire. A juicy brisket of beef was set out on a spit, and packages of flash-frozen green vegetables were thrown into a capacious black cauldron. Old Pablo Steinmetz, easing the imaginary pain in his wooden leg, drank deep from a jerrycan of pre-mixed martinis. In the darkness beyond the campfire you could hear a lonely poodle howling for his mate.

Steve and Flame sat a little apart from the others. The night, silent except for the distant roar of garbage trucks, worked its enchantment upon them both. Their fingers met, touched and clung.

Flame said at last, "Steve, you—you do like me, don't you?"

"Why of course I do," Baxter replied, and slipped his arm around her shoulders in a brotherly gesture not incapable of misinterpretation.

"Well, I've been thinking," the bandit girl said. "I've thought . . ." She paused, suddenly shy, then went on. "Oh, Steve, why don't you give up this suicidal race? Why don't you stay here with me! I've got land, Steve, real land—a hundred square yards in the New York Central switchyard! You and I, Steve, we could farm it together!"

Baxter was tempted—what man would not be? He had not been unaware of the feelings which the beautiful bandit girl entertained for him, nor was he entirely unresponsive to them. Flame Steinmetz's haunting beauty and proud spirit, even without the added attraction of land, might easily have won any man's heart. For a heartbeat he wavered, and his arm tightened around the girl's slim shoulders.

But then, fundamental loyalties reasserted themselves. Flame was the essence of romance, the flash of ecstasy about which a

man dreams throughout his life. Yet Adele was his childhood sweetheart, his wife, the mother of his children, the patient helpmate of ten long years together. For a man of Steve Baxter's character, there could be no other choice.

The imperious girl was unused to refusal. Angry as a scalded puma, she threatened to tear out Baxter's heart with her fingernails and serve it up lightly dusted in flour and toasted over a medium fire. Her great flashing eyes and trembling bosom showed that this was no mere idle imagery.

Despite this, quietly and impacably, Steve Baxter stuck to his convictions. And Flame realized sadly that she would never have loved this man were he not replete with the very high principles which rendered her desires unattainable.

So, in the morning, she offered no resistance when the quiet stranger insisted upon leaving. She even silenced her irate father, who swore that Steve was an irresponsible fool who should be restrained for his own good.

"It's no use, Dad—can't you see that?" she asked. "He must lead his own life, even if it means the end of his life."

Pablo Steinmetz desisted, grumbling. Steve Baxter set out again upon his desperate Odyssey.

Downtown he traveled, jostled and crowded to the point of hysteria, blinded by the flash of neon against chrome, deafened by the incessant city noises. He came at last into a region of proliferating signs:

ONE WAY

DO NOT ENTER

KEEP OFF THE MEDIAN

CLOSED SUNDAYS AND HOLIDAYS

CLOSED WEEKENDS

LEFT LANE *MUST* TURN LEFT!

Winding through this maze of conflicting commands, he stumbled accidentally into that vast stretch of misery known as Central Park. Before him, as far as the eye could see, every square foot of land was occupied by squalid lean-tos, mean tepees, disreputable shacks, and noisome stews. His sudden appearance among the brutalized park inhabitants excited comment, none of it favorable. They got it into their heads that he was a Health Inspector, come to close down their malarial wells, slaughter their trichinoidal hogs and vaccinate their scabrous

children. A mob gathered around him, waving their crutches and mouthing threats.

Luckily, a malfunctioning toaster in central Ontario triggered off a sudden blackout. In the ensuing panic, Steve made good his escape.

But now he found himself in an area where the street signs had long ago been torn down to confuse the tax assessors. The sun was hidden behind a glaring white overcast. Not even a compass could be used because of the proximity of vast quantities of scrap iron—all that remained of the city's legendary subway system.

Steve Baxter realized that he was utterly and hopelessly lost.

Yet he persevered, with a courage surpassed only by his ignorance. For uncounted days he wandered through the nondescript streets, past endless brownstones, mounds of plate glass, automobile cairns, and the like. The superstitious inhabitants refused to answer his questions, fearing he might be an FBI man. He staggered on, unable to obtain food or drink, unable even to rest for fear of being trampled by the crowds.

A kindly social worker stopped him just as Baxter was about to drink from a hepatic fountain. This wise, gray-haired old man nursed him back to health in his own home—a hut built entirely of rolled newspapers near the moss-covered ruins of Lincoln Center. He advised Baxter to give up his impetuous quest and to devote his life to assisting the wretched, brutalized, superfluous masses of humanity that pullulated on all sides of him.

It was a noble ideal, and Steve came near to wavering; but then, as luck would have it, he heard the latest race results on the social worker's venerable Hallicrafter.

Many of the contestants had met their fates in urban-idiosyncratic ways. Friehoff St. John had been imprisoned for second-degree litterbugging. And the party that crossed the Verrazano Bridge had subsequently disappeared into the snow-capped fastnesses of Brooklyn Heights and had not been heard from again.

Baxter realized that he was still in the running.

His spirits were considerably lifted when he started forth once again. But now he fell into an overconfidence more dangerous than the most profound depression. Journeying rapidly to the south, he took advantage of a traffic lull to step onto an express

walkaway. He did this carelessly, without a proper examination of the consequences.

Irrevocably committed, he found to his horror that he was on a one-way route, no turns permitted. This walkaway, he now saw, led nonstop to the *terra incognita* of Jones Beach, Fire Island, Patchogue, and East Hampton.

The situation called for immediate action. To his left was a blank concrete wall. To his right there was a waist-high partition marked NO VAULTING ALLOWED BETWEEN 12:00 NOON AND 12:00 MIDNIGHT, TUESDAYS, THURSDAYS AND SATURDAYS.

Today was Tuesday afternoon—a time of interdiction. Nevertheless, without hesitation, Steve vaulted over the barrier.

Retribution was swift and terrible. A camouflaged police car emerged from one of the city's notorious ambushes. It bore down upon him, firing wildly into the crowd. (In this unhappy age, the police were required by law to fire wildly into the crowd when in pursuit of a suspect.)

Baxter took refuge in a nearby candy store. There, recognizing the inevitable, he tried to give himself up. But this was not permitted because of the overcrowded state of the prisons. A hail of bullets kept him pinned down while the stern-faced policemen set up mortars and portable flamethrowers.

It looked like the end, not only of Steve Baxter's hopes, but of his very life. Lying on the floor among gaudy jawbreakers and brittle licorice whips, he commended his soul to God and prepared to meet his end with dignity.

But his despair was as premature as his earlier optimism had been. He heard sounds of a disturbance, and, raising his head, saw that a group of armed men had attacked the police car from the rear. Turning to meet this threat, the men in blue were enfiladed from the flank and wiped out to the last man.

Baxter came out to thank his rescuers and found Flame O'Rourke Steinmetz at the head. The beautiful bandit girl had been unable to forget the soft-spoken stranger. Despite the mumbled objections of her drunken father, she had shadowed Steve's movements and come to his rescue.

The black-hatted men plundered the area with noisy abandon. Flame and Steve retired to the shadowy solitude of an abandoned Howard Johnson's restaurant. There, beneath the peeling orange gables of a gentler, more courteous age, a tremulous love scene was enacted between them. It was no more than a brief, bitter-

sweet interlude, however. Soon, Steve Baxter plunged once again into the ravening maelstrom of the city.

Advancing relentlessly, his eyes closed to slits against the driving smog storm and his mouth a grim white line in the lower third of his face, Baxter won through to 49th Street and 8th Avenue. There, in an instant, conditions changed with that disastrous suddenness typical of a jungle city.

While crossing the street, Baxter heard a deep, ominous roar. He realized that the traffic light had changed. The drivers, frenzied by days of waiting and oblivious to minor obstacles, had simultaneously floored their accelerators. Steve Baxter was directly in the path of a vehicular stampede.

Advance or retreat across the broad boulevard was clearly impossible. Thinking fast, Baxter flung aside a manhole cover and plunged underground. He made it with perhaps a half second to spare. Overhead, he heard the shrieks of tortured metal and the heavy impact of colliding vehicles.

He continued to press ahead by way of the sewer system. This network of tunnels was densely populated, but was marginally safer than the surface roads. Steve encountered trouble only once, when a jackroller attacked him along the margin of a sediment tank.

Toughened by his experiences, Baxter subdued the bravo and took his canoe—an absolute necessity in some of the lower passageways. Then he pushed on, paddling all the way to 42nd Street and 8th Avenue before a flash flood drove him to the surface.

Now, indeed, his long-desired goal was near to hand. Only one more block remained; one block, and he would be at the Times Square Land Office!

But at this moment he encountered the final, shattering obstacle that wrote *finis* to all his dreams.

In the middle of 42nd Street, extending without visible limit to the north and south, there was a wall. It was a cyclopean structure, and it had sprung up overnight in the quasi-sentient manner of New York architecture. This, Baxter learned, was one side of a gigantic new upper middle income housing project. During its construction, all traffic for Times Square was being rerouted via the Queens-Battery tunnel and the East 37th Street Shunpike.

Steve estimated that the new route would take him no less than three weeks, and would lead him through the uncharted Garment District. His race, he realized, was over.

Courage, tenacity and righteousness had failed; and, were he not a religious man, Steve Baxter might have contemplated suicide. With undisguised bitterness he turned on his little transistor radio and listened to the latest reports.

Four contestants had already reached the Land Office. Five others were within a few hundred yards of the goal, coming in by the open southern approaches. And, to compound Steve's misery, he heard that Freihoff St. John, having received a plenary pardon from the Governor, was on his way once more, approaching Times Square from the east.

At this blackest of all possible moments, Steve felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw that Flame had come to him again. Although the spirited girl had sworn to have nothing further to do with him, she had relented. This mild, even-tempered man meant more to her than pride; more, perhaps, than life itself.

What to do about the wall? A simple matter for the daughter of a bandit chief! If one could not go around it or through it or under it, why, one must then go over it! And to this purpose she had brought ropes, boots, pitons, crampons, hammers, axes—a full complement of climbing equipment. She was determined that Baxter should have one final chance at his heart's desire—and that Flame O'Rourke Steinmetz should accompany him, and not accept no for an answer!

They climbed, side by side, up the building's glass-smooth expanse. There were countless dangers—birds, aircraft, snipers, wise guys—all the risks of the unpredictable city. And, far below, old Pablo Steinmetz watched, his face like corrugated granite.

After an eternity of peril they reached the top and started down the other side—and Flame slipped!

In horror Baxter watched the slender girl fall to her doom in Times Square, to die impaled upon the needle-sharp point of a car's aerial. Baxter scrambled down and knelt beside her, almost out of his head with grief. . . .

And, on the other side of the wall, old Pablo sensed that something irrevocable had happened. He shuddered, his mouth

writhed in anticipation of grief, and he reached blindly for a bottle.

Strong hands lifted Baxter to his feet. Uncomprehendingly, he looked up into the kindly red face of the Federal Land Clerk.

It was difficult for him to realize that he had completed the race. With curiously deadened emotions he heard how St. John's pushiness and hauteur had caused a riot in the explosive Burmese Quarter of East 42nd Street, and how St. John had been forced to claim sanctuary in the labyrinthine ruins of the Public Library, from which refuge he still had not been able to extricate himself.

But it was not in Steve Baxter's nature to gloat, even when gloating was the only conceivable response. All that mattered to him was that he had won, had reached the Land Office in time to claim the last remaining acre of land.

All it had cost was effort and pain, and the life of a young bandit girl.

Time was merciful, and some weeks later, Steve Baxter was not thinking of the tragic events of the race. A government jet had transported him and his family to the town of Cormorant in the Sierra Nevada mountains. From Cormorant, a helicopter brought them to their prize. A leathery Land Office Marshal was on hand to greet them and to point out their new freehold.

Their land lay before them, sketchily fenced, on an almost vertical mountainside. Surrounding it were other, similarly fenced acres, stretching as far as the eye could see. The land had recently been strip-mined; it existed now as a series of gigantic raw slashes across a dusty, dun-colored earth. Not a tree or a blade of grass could be seen. There was a house, as promised; more precisely, there was a shack. It looked as if it might last until the next hard rain.

For a few minutes the Baxters stared in silence. Then Adele said, "Oh, Steve."

Steve said, "I know."

"It's our new land," Adele said.

Steve nodded. "It's not very—pretty," he said hesitantly.

"Pretty? What do we care about that?" Adele declared. "It's *ours*, Steve, and there's a whole acre of it! We can *grow* things here, Steve!"

"Well, maybe not at first—"

"I know, I know! But we'll put this land back into shape, and

then we'll plant it and harvest it! We'll *live* here, Steve! Won't we?"

Steve Baxter was silent, gazing over his dearly won land. His children—Tommy and blond little Amelia—were playing with a clod of earth. The U.S. Marshal cleared his throat and said, "You can still change your mind, you know."

"What?" Steve asked.

"You can still change your mind, go back to your apartment in the city. . . . I mean, some folks think it's sorta crude out here, sorta not what they was expecting. . . ."

"Oh, Steve, no!" his wife moaned.

"No, Daddy, no!" his children cried.

"Go *back*?" Baxter asked. "I wasn't thinking of going *back*. I was just *looking* at it all. Mister, I never saw so much land all in one piece in my whole life!"

"I know," the Marshal said softly. "I been twenty years out here and the sight of it still gets to me."

Baxter and his wife looked at each other ecstatically. The Marshal rubbed his nose and said, "Well, I reckon you folks won't be needin' me no more." He exited unobtrusively.

Steve and Adele gazed out over their land. Then Adele said, "Oh, Steve, Steve! It's all ours! And you won it for us—you did it all by yourself!"

Baxter's mouth tightened. He said, very quietly, "No, honey, I didn't do it all alone, I had some help."

"Someday I'll tell you about it," Baxter said. "But right now—let's go into our house."

Hand in hand they entered the shack. Behind them, the sun was setting in the opaque Los Angeles smog. It was as happy an ending as could be found in the latter half of the 21st century.

Why Johnny Can't Speed

by Alan Dean Foster

While Alan Dean Foster has written more than fifteen science fiction novels, he is best known for his novelizations of other people's screenplays, especially Alien (1979), The Black Hole (1979), and Outland (1981), not to mention his Star Trek Log series. This has tended to obscure his more important novels like Icerigger (1974) and Cachalot (1980). With Friends Like These (1977) is an outstanding collection of his shorter work.

"Why Johnny Can't Speed" beat out a goodly number of fine stories for inclusion in this book, and you'll soon see why.

DEAR MR. AND MRS. MERWIN:

IT IS MY PAINFUL DUTY TO HAVE TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON, ROBERT L. MERWIN, WAS KILLED IN COMMUTER ACTION ON THE SOUTHBOUND SAN DIEGO FREEWAY IN THE VICINITY OF THE SECOND IRVINE RANCH TURNOFF, ORANGE COUNTY.

FROM WHAT OUR EVALUATORS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO RECONSTRUCT, YOUNG ROBERT APPARENTLY DISPUTED A LANE CHANGE WITH A BLACK GM CADDY MARAUDER. NO VIOLATION OF THE NORTH AMERICAN TRAFFIC CODE HAS COME TO MY NOTICE, BUT I WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED SHOULD ANY SUCH COME TO LIGHT. NORMAL INVESTIGATIONS ARE PROCEEDING. THE OTHER

VEHICLE INVOLVED IS KNOWN TO ORANGE COUNTY POLICE. ITS OWNER WAS QUESTIONED BUT NOT DETAINED. DETAILS AND PARTICULARS ARE ENCLOSED. PLEASE ACCEPT MY PERSONAL CONDOLENCES.

YOURS SINCERELY,
 GEORGE WILSON ANGEL
 CHIEF, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA DIVISION
 CALIFORNIA DISTRICT HIGHWAY PATROL
 ENCL: 1 RPT. ACCID.
 1 RPT. CORONER

Frank Merwin refolded the letter, replaced it in its envelope and laid it on the flange of the lamp stand, near the radio. He held his wife a little more tightly. Her sobbing had become less than hysterical, now that the terrible initial shock had somewhat worn. He managed to keep his own emotions pretty well in check, but then he had driven the Los Angeles area for some twenty years and was correspondingly toughened. When he finally spoke again there was as much bitterness in his voice as sorrow.

"Geez, Myrt, oh, geez."

He eased her down onto the big white couch, walked to the center of the room and paused there, hands clenching and unclenching, clasped behind his back. The woven patterns in the floor absorbed his attention.

"Goddamn it, Myrtle, I told him! I *told* him! 'Look, son, if you insist on driving all the way to Diego by yourself, at least take the Pontiac! Have some sense,' I told him! I don't know what's with the kids these days, hon. You'd think he'd listen to me just this once, wouldn't you? Me, who once drove all the way from Indianapolis to L.A. and was challenged only twice on the way—only *twice*. Myrt, but no, he hadda be a big shot! 'Listen, Dad. This is something I've got to work out for myself. With my own car,' he tells me! I knew he'd have trouble in that VW. And I often told him so, too.

"But no, all he could think of to say was, 'Pops, the worst that can happen is I've gotta outmaneuver some other car, right? You've seen the way that bug corners, haven't you, huh? And if I get into a tough scrape, any other VW on the road is bound by oath to support me—in most actions anyway.'

"Whatta you tell a kid like that, Myrt? How do you get through to him?" His face registered utter bafflement. His wife's crying had slowed to a trickle. She was dabbing at her eyes with one of his old handkerchiefs.

"I don't know either, dear. I still don't understand why he had to drive down there. Why couldn't he have taken the Trans, Frank? Why?"

"Oh, you know why. What would his *friends* have said? 'Here's Bobby Merwin, too scared to drive his own rod,' and that sort of crud." His sarcasm was getting edgier. "Still felt he had to prove himself a man, the idiot! He'd already soloed on the freeways—why did he feel the need to try a cross-country expedition? But damn it, if he had to display his guts, why couldn't he have done so in the big car? Not even a professionally customized VW can mount much stuff.

"And on top of everything else, you'd think he'd have had the sense to shy off that kind of an argument. He had Driver's Training! Who ever heard of a VW disputing position with a Cad—a Marauder, no less! Where were his 'friends,' huh? I warned him about the light stretches between here and Diego, where flow is light, help is more than a hornblast away and some psycho can surprise you from behind an on-ramp!"

He paused to catch his breath, walked back to the lamp stand and picked up the letter. Familiar with the contents, he glanced at it only briefly this time. He offered it to his wife but she declined, so he returned it to the stand.

"You know what I have to do now, I suppose?"

She nodded, sniffing.

"Bob was taking that gift to a friend in Diego. I'm bound to see that it's delivered."

She looked up at him without much hope. She knew Frank.

"I don't suppose—"

He shook his head. His expression was gentle but firm.

"No, hon. I'm taking it down myself. I refuse to ship it and I certainly won't ride the Trans. Not after all these years. No, I'm going down the same way Bob went, by the same route. I'll have the J.J. tuned first, though."

She looked around dully, plucking fitfully at the delicate covering of the couch.

"I suppose you'll at least take it in to—"

"Hector? Certainly. In spite of what he charges he's damn

well worth the money. Best mechanic around. I enjoy doing business with him. Know I'm getting my credit's worth, at least. We couldn't have me going somewhere else—now could we? Wouldn't want him to get the idea we're prejudiced or something. I've been going to him for, oh, five years. Almost forgotten what he is—"

"Going all the way down to Diego, eh, Mr. Merwin?" said the wiry *chicano*. He was trying to rub some of the grease off his hands. The filthy rag he was using already appeared incapable of taking on any more of the tacky, blue-black gunk.

"Yeah. So you'll understand, Hector, when I say the J.J.'s got to be in tiptop shape."

"*Ciertamente!* You want to open her up, please?"

Frank nodded and moved over to where the J.J. rested, just inside the rolled-up armor grille entrance to the big garage. He slid into the deep pile of the driver's bucket, flipped the three keys on the combination ignition, and then jabbed the hood release switch. As soon as the hood started up he climbed out, leaving the keys in the ON position. Hector was already bent over the car's power plant, staring intently into the works.

"Well, Mr. Merwin, from what I can see your engine at least is in excellent condition, yes, excellent! You want me to fill 'her up?"

Frank nodded wordlessly. He wasn't at all surprised at the mechanic's rapid inspection of the engine. After all, the J.J. had been given the best of professional care and the benefits of his own considerable work since he'd purchased her. Hector did not look up as he set about releasing the protective panels over the right-side .70 caliber.

"If I may ask, how do you plan to go?"

Frank had the big meerschaum out and was tamping tobacco into it.

"Hmm. I'll go down Burbank to the San Diego Freeway and get on there. It'd be a little faster to get on the Ventura, but on a trip of this length that little bit of time saved would be negligible and I don't see the point in fighting the interchange."

Hector nodded approvingly. "Quite wise. You know, Mr. Merwin, you've got two pretty bad stretches on this trip. Very iffy. I read—about your son. I sorrow. The *jornada de la muerte* comes eventually to all of us."

Frank paused in lighting the pipe. "Couldn't be helped," he said tightly. "Bob didn't realize what was—what he was getting into, that's all. I blame myself, too, but what could I do? He was eighteen and by law there wasn't anything I could do to hold him back. He simply took on more than he could handle."

One of Hector's grease monks had wheeled over a bulky ammo cart. The mechanic waved the assistant off and proceeded about the loading himself. Frank appreciated the gesture.

"A Cad, wasn't it?"

"It was." He was leaning over the mechanic's shoulder, better to follow the loading process. Never could tell what you might have to do for yourself on the road. "What are you giving me? Explosive or armor-piercing?"

"Mixed." Hector slammed down the box-load cover to the heavy gun. It clicked shut, locked. He moved away to get a small, curved ladder, wheeled it back. At the top he began checking over the custom roof turret. "Both, alternating sequence. True, it's more expensive, but after all your son's car was destroyed by a Marauder. A black one?"

"Yes, that's right," said Frank, only mildly surprised. "How'd you find out?"

"Oh, among the trade the word gets passed along. I know of this particular vehicle, I believe. Owner does a lot of his own work, I understand. That's tough to tangle with, Mr. Merwin. Might you be thinking of—"

Frank shrugged, looked the other way. "Never know who you'll bump into on the roads these days, Hector. I've never been one to run from a dogfight."

"I did not mean to imply that you would. We all know your driver's combat record, Mr. Merwin. There are not all that many aces living in the Valley."

He gestured meaningfully at the side of the car. Eleven silhouettes were imprinted there. Four mediums, four compacts—crazy people. Gutsy, but crazy. Two sports cars—kids—a Jag and a Vet, as he recalled. He smiled in reminiscence. Speed wasn't *everything*. And one large gold stamping. He ran his hand over the impressions fondly. That big gold one, he'd gotten that baby on the legendary drive out from Indianapolis, back in '83—no, '82. The Imperial had been rough and, face it, he'd been lucky as hell, too young to know better. Ricochet shots were always

against the odds, but hell, anyone could shoot at *tires*! So he'd thought twenty-odd years ago. Now he knew better—didn't he?

He wondered if Bob had tried something equally insane.

"Yes, well, you watch yourself, Mr. Merwin. A Marauder is bad news straight from the factory. Properly customized, it could mount enough stuff to take on a Greyhound busnought."

"Don't worry about me, Hector. I can take care of myself." He was checking the nylon sheathing on the rear tires. "Besides, the J.J. mounts a few surprises of her own!"

It was already warm outside, even at five in the morning. The weather bureau had forecast a high of 101° for downtown L.A. He'd miss most of that, but even with air-control and climate-conditioning things could get hot. He turned on the climate-cool as he backed the blue sedan out of the garage, put it in drive, and rolled toward the Burbank artery.

It was still too early for the real rush hour and he had little company on the feeder route as he moved past Van Nuys Boulevard toward the Sepulveda on-ramp. A Rambler at the light was slow in getting away at the change of signal. He blasted the horn once and the frantic driver of the vehicle marked heavily as neutral made haste to get out of his way. Theoretically all cars on the surface streets were equal. But some were more equal than others.

The Sepulveda on-ramp was an excellent one for entering the system for reasons other than merely being an easier way to pass through the Ventura interchange. Instead of sloping upward as most on-ramps did, it allowed the driver to descend a high hill. This enabled older cars to pick up a lot of valuable acceleration easily and also provided the driver with an aerial overview of the traffic pattern below.

He passed the commuter carpark at the Kester Trans station. It was just beginning to fill as the more passive commuters parked their personal vehicles in favor of the public Trans. He felt a surge of contempt, the usual reaction of the independent motorist to milk-footed drivers willfully abandoning their vehicular freedom for the crowding and crumpling of the mass-transit systems. What sort of person did it take, he wondered for the umpteenth time, to trade away his birthright for simple sardine-can safety? The country was definitely losing its backbone. He shook his

head woefully as his practiced eye gauged the pattern shifting beneath him.

Mass Trans had required and still required a lot of money. One way in which the governments involved (meaning those of most industrial, developed nations) went about obtaining the necessary amounts was to cut back the expensive motorized forces needed to regulate the far-flung freeway systems. As the cutbacks increased, it gradually became accepted custom among the remaining overworked patrols to allow drivers to settle their own disputes. This custom was finalized by the Supreme Court's handing down of the famous *Brier v. Matthews and the State of Texas* decision of '79, in which it was ruled that all attempts to regulate interstate, nonstop highway systems were in direct violation of the First Amendment.

Any motorist who didn't feel up to potential arguments was provided with a safe, quiet alternative means of transportation in the new Mass Trans systems, most of which ran down the center and sides of the familiar freeway routes, high above the frantic traffic. Benefits were immediate. Less pollution from even the fine turbine-steam-electric engines of the private autos, an end to many downtown parking problems in the big cities—and more. For the first time since their inception the freeways, even at rush hour, became negotiable at speeds close to those envisioned by their builders. And psychiatrists began to advise driving as excellent therapy for persons afflicted with violent or even homicidal instincts.

There were a few—un-American dirty commie pinko symps, no doubt—who decried the resultant proliferation of “argumentative” devices among high-powered autos. Some laughable folk even talked of an “arms race” among automakers. German cars made their biggest incursions into foreign markets in decades. Armor plating, bulletproof glassalloy, certain weaponry—how else did those nuts expect a decent man to Drive with Confidence?

He gunned the engine and the supercharged sedan roared down the on-ramp, gathering unnecessary but impressive momentum as it went. Frank had always believed in an aggressive entrance. *Let 'em know where you stand right away or they'll ride all over you.* The tactic was hardly needed in this instance—there were only two other cars in his entrance pattern, both in the far two lanes.

He switched slowly until he was behind them, looking into

rear- and side-view mirror carefully for fast-approaching others. The lanes behind were clear and he had no trouble attaining the fourth lane of the five. Safer here. Plenty of room for feisty types to pass on either side and he could still maintain a decent speed without competing with dragsters. He pushed the J.J. up to an easy seventy-five miles per and settled back for the long drive.

He spotted only two wrecks as he sped smoothly through the Sepulveda pass—about normal for this early in the day. The helicrane crew were probably in the process of changing shifts, so these wrecks would lie a bit longer than at other, busier times of day.

His first view of action came as he approached the busy Wilshire on-ramps. Two compacts squared off awkwardly. The slow lane was occupied by a four-door Toyota. A Honda coupe, puffing mightily to build speed up the on-grade, came off the ramp at a bad position. It required one or the other to slow for a successful entrance and the sedan, having superior position, understandably refused to be the one. Instead of taking the quiet course, the Honda maintained its original approach speed and fired an unannounced broadside from its small—.25 cal., Frank judged—window-mounted swivel gun. The sedan swerved crazily for a moment as its driver, startled, lost control for a few seconds. Then it straightened out and regained its former attitude. Frank and the cars behind him slowed to give the combatants plenty of lane space in which to operate.

The armor glass was taking the attack and the sedan began to return fire—about equal, standard factory equipment, he guessed. They were already reaching the end of the entrance lane. Desperately, refusing to concede the match, the coupe cut sharply at the nose of the sedan. The sedan's owner swerved easily into the second lane and then cut tightly back. At this angle his starboard gun bore directly on the coupe. A loud bang heralded a shattered tire. With a short, almost slow-motion bump, the coupe hit the guard rail and flipped over out of sight. In his rear-view mirror Frank could just make out the first few wisps of smoke as he shot past the spot.

Now that the fight was over, Frank floored the accelerator again, throwing the victorious driver a fast salute. It was returned gracefully. Considering his limited stuff, the fellow had

done very well. He'd handled that figure C with ease, but the maneuver would have been useless against a larger car. Frank's own, for example. Still, compact drivers were a special breed and often made up for their lack of power, engine and fire in sheer guts. He still watched "Don Railman and his Supersub" religiously on the early Sunday Tele, even though the ratings were down badly from last season. He'd also never forget that time when a "Weekly Caripper's Telemannual" with old Ev Kelly had done a special on a hand-tooled Mighty Mite, low bore, cut down, with the Webcor antitank gun cleverly concealed in the front trunk. No, it paid not to take the compacts, even the subs, too lightly.

He passed the Santa Monica interchange without trouble. In fact, the only thing resembling a confrontation he had on the whole L.A. portion of the drive occurred a few minutes later as he swept past the Los Angeles Sub-International Airport rampings.

A new Vet, all shiny and gold, blasted up behind him. It stayed there, tailgating. That in itself was a fighting provocation. He could see the driver clearly—a young girl, probably in her late teens. About Bob's age, he thought tightly. No doubt Daddy dear had bought the bomb for her. She honked at him sharply, insistently. He ignored her. She could pass him to either side with ease. Instead she fired a low burst of tracers across his rear deck. When he resolutely continued to ignore her she pouted, then pulled alongside. Giggling, she drew him an obscene gesture which even his not-so-archaic mind could identify. He jerked hard on the wheel, then back. Her haughty expression disappeared instantly, to be replaced by one of fright. When she saw it was merely a feint on his part, she smiled again, although much less arrogantly, and shot ahead at a good hundred miles per.

Stupid kid better watch her manners, never live to make 20,000 miles. Maybe he should have given her a lesson, burnt off a tire, perhaps. Oh, well. He had a long way to drive. Let someone else play teacher.

He became quiet and watchful as he left Santa Ana and entered the Irvine area. There was little commuter traffic here and only a few harmless beachers this early in the day. He saw only one car in the Cad's class, and that was an old yellow Thunderhood. Wasn't sure whether or not to be disappointed or relieved as he pulled into the San Clemente rest stop for breakfast.

He could have eaten at home but preferred to slip out without waking Myrtle. He'd have a couple of eggs, some toast and jam, and enjoy a view of the Pacific along with his coffee, despite the low clouds which had been rolling in for the last twenty minutes. He hoped it wouldn't rain, even though rain would cut the heat. Weather was one reason he always avoided the safer but longer desert routes. Thundershowers inland were forecast, and even the best tactical driver could be outmatched in a heavy downpour. He preferred to be in a situation where his talents could operate without complications wished on him by nature.

A few warm drops, fat and heavy, hit him as he left the diner. It had grown much darker and the humidity was fierce. Still, Irvine was behind him now. Best to make speed down to Diego and get home before dark.

He had only the well-policed Camp Pendleton lanes ahead and then the near-deserted Oceanside-to-La Jolla run before he'd hit any real traffic again. Contrary to early predictions, the California population had spread inland instead of along the largely state-owned coast. If he'd had sense to buy that hundred acres near Mojave before the airport had gone in there . . .

On the left he could see the old Presidential Palace shining on its solitary hill. He waved nostalgically, then speeded up slightly as he approached the Pendleton cutoff.

The drizzle remained so light he didn't even bother with wipers. Pendleton was passed quickly and he had no reason to stop in Oceanside. Soon he was cruising among rolling, downy hills, mellow in the diffused sunlight. A few cattle were the only living creatures in evidence, along with a few big crows circling lazily overhead in the moist air. Once a cycle pack roared noisily past, long twenties damp with dew. Two tricycles headed up the front and rear of the pack, but the ugly snouts of their recoilless rifles were covered against a possible downpour. They took no notice of him, rumbling past at a solid ninety-five miles an hour. He had no wish to tangle with a gang, not in this empty territory. A good driver could knock out three or four of the big Harley-Davidsons and Yamahas easily enough, but the highly maneuverable bikes could swarm over anything smaller than a bus or trailer with ease, magnifying the effect of their light weaponry.

Maybe he could buy some land out here. He gazed absently at the green-and-gold hills, devoid of housing tracts and supermarkets. Not another Mojave, maybe, but still . . .

A sharp honking snapped his attention reflexively to his mirrors. He recognized the license of the big black coupe almost at the instant he identified the make and model. You're south of your territory, fella, he thought grimly. His hands clenched tightly on the wheel as he slid over one lane.

The Cad pulled up beside him, preparatory to passing. He judged the moment precisely, then tripped a switch on his center console. The portside flame thrower erupted in a jet of orange flame. The Cad jerked like a singed kitten. Instantly Frank cut over to the far lane, putting as much distance as possible between him and the big car, staying slightly ahead of the other.

A long dark streak showed clearly on the coupe's front, a deep gash in the tire material. The Cad would have trouble if it tried any sharp moves in his direction now and Frank saw no problem in holding his present position. Now he could duck at the first off-ramp if need arose. He activated the roof turret, an expensive option, but one which had proven its worth time and again. Myrtle had opted for the big grenade launcher, but Frank and the GM salesman had convinced her that while showiness might be fine for impressing the neighbors, on the road it was performance that counted. The twin fifties in the turret commenced hammering away at the Cad, nicking big chips of armorglass and battle sheathing from its front.

Frank was feeling confident until a violent explosion rocked him nastily and forced him to throw emergency power to the steering. Frightened, he glanced over his shoulder. Thank God for the automatic sprinklers! The rear of the car above the left wheel was completely gone, as was most of the rear deck. Twisted, blackened metal and torn insulation smoked and groaned. A look at the Cad confirmed his worst fears and sent more sweat pouring down his shirt collar. No wonder this Marauder had acquired such a reputation! In place of the standard, heavy Cad machine guns, a Mark IV rocket launcher protruded from the rear trunk! Fortunately the shot had hit at a bad angle or he'd be missing a wheel and his ability to maneuver would have been drastically, perhaps fatally, reduced. He did an S just in time. Another rocket shrieked past his bumper.

The turret fifties were doing their jobs, but it was slow, too slow! Another rocket strike would finish him and now the Cad had its big guns going, too. He wished to hell he was in the cab

of a big United Truckers tractor-trailer, high above the concrete, with another driver and a gunner on the twin 60mm's. A crack appeared in his rear window as the Cad's guns concentrated their fire. He turned and twisted, accelerated and slowed, not daring to give his opponent another clear shot with those Mark IVs.

Chance time, Frank, baby. Remember Salt Lake City!

He cut hard left. The Cad cut right to get behind him. At the proper (yes, yes!) second he dropped an emergency switch.

The rear back-up lights dropped off the J.J. At the same time a violent *crrump!* threw him forward so hard he could feel the cross-harness bite into his chest. Fighting desperately for control and cursing all the way, he slammed into the resilient center divider with a jolt that rattled his teeth, two wheels spinning crazily off the pavement, then cut all the way back across the five lanes. Fighting a busted something all the way, he managed to wrestle the battered sedan to a tired halt on the gravel shoulder.

Panting heavily, he undid the safety harness, staggered out of the car, bracing himself against the metal sides. Behind him, a quarter mile or so down the empty road, a thick plume of roiling black smoke billowed up from a pile of twisted metal, plastics, and ceramics, all intertwined with bright orange flame. The big bad black Cad was quite finished. He took one step in its direction, then stopped, dizzy by the effort. No driver could survive that inferno. In his eagerness to get behind the sedan, the Cad's driver had shot over at least one, possibly both of the proximity mines Frank had released from where his back-up lights had been. Maybe revenge was an outdated commodity today, but he still felt exhilarated. And Myrtle might complain initially but he knew damn well she'd be pleased inside.

He became aware of something wet trickling down his cheek, more than could have come from the sporadically dripping sky. His hand told him a piece of his left ear was missing. The blood was staining his good driving blouse. Absently he dabbed at the nick with a handkerchief. His rear glass must have gone at the last possible minute. A look confirmed it, showing two neat holes and a third questionable one in his rear window. Umm. He'd had closer calls before—and this one was worth it! At least there'd be one license plate to lay on Bob's grave.

He sighed. Better stop off in Carlsbad and get that ear taken care of. Damnation, if only that boy had paid some attention in Driver's Ed. Eighteen years old and he'd never learned what his old man had known for years.

Be Safe. Drive Offensively.

Nothing in the Rules

by L. Sprague de Camp

The handsome and urbane L. Sprague de Camp has been a professional writer for well over forty years and is still producing excellent science fiction, fantasy, and nonfiction. His biography of Robert E. Howard, the creator of Conan the Barbarian, is a landmark study, as was his biography of H. P. Lovecraft. As a fiction writer, de Camp has always had a wonderful sense of humor and the ability to make the incredible real.

"Nothing in the rules" is the first of two stories in this book on the sport of competitive swimming "A Glint of Gold" is the other.

Not many spectators turn out for a meet between two minor women's swimming clubs, and this one was no exception. Louis Connaught, looking up at the balcony, thought casually that the single row of seats around it was about half full, mostly with the usual bored-looking assortment of husbands and boy friends, and some of the Hotel Creston's guests who had wandered in for want of anything better to do. One of the bellboys was asking an evening-gowned female not to smoke, and she was showing irritation. Mr. Santalucia and the little Santalucias were there as usual to see mamma perform. They waved down at Connaught.

Connaught—a dark devilish-looking little man—glanced over to the other side of the pool. The girls were coming out of the

shower rooms, and their shrill conversation was blurred by the acoustics of the pool room into a continuous buzz. The air was faintly steamy. The stout party in white duck pants was Laird, coach of the Knickerbockers and Connaught's arch rival. He saw Connaught and boomed: "Hi, Louie!" The words rattled from wall to wall with a sound like a stick being drawn swiftly along a picket fence. Wambach of the A.A.U. Committee, who was refereeing, came in with his overcoat still on and greeted Laird, but the booming reverberations drowned his words before they got over to Connaught.

Then somebody else came through the door; or rather, a knot of people crowded through it all at once, facing inward, some in bathing suits and some in street clothes. It was a few seconds before Coach Connaught saw what they were looking at. He blinked and looked more closely, standing with his mouth half open.

But not for long. "*Hey!*" he yelled in a voice that made the pool room sound like the inside of a snare drum in use. "*Protest! PROTEST! You can't do that!*"

It had been the preceding evening when Herbert Laird opened his front door and shouted, "H'lo, Mark, come on in." The chill March wind was making a good deal of racket but not as much as all that. Laird was given to shouting on general principles. He was stocky and bald.

Mark Vining came in and deposited his briefcase. He was younger than Laird—just thirty, in fact—with octagonal glasses and rather thin severe features that made him look more serious than he was, which was fairly serious.

"Glad you could come, Mark," said Laird. "Listen, can you make our meet with the Crestons tomorrow night?"

Vining pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I guess so. Loomis decided not to appeal, so I don't have to work nights for a few days anyhow. Is something special up?"

Laird looked sly. "Maybe. Listen, you know that Mrs. Santalucia that Louie Connaught has been cleaning up with for the past couple of years? I think I've got that fixed. But I want you along to think up legal reasons why my scheme's O.K."

"Why," said Vining cautiously. "What's your scheme?"

"Can't tell you now. I promised not to. But if Louie can win by entering a freak—a woman with webbed fingers—"

"Oh, look here, Herb, you know those webs don't really help her—"

"Yes, yes, I know all the arguments. You've already got more water-resistance to your arms than you've got muscle to overcome it with, and so forth. But I know Mrs. Santalucia has webbed fingers; and I know she's the best woman swimmer in New York. And I don't like it. It's bad for my prestige as a coach." He turned and shouted into the gloom: "Iantha!"

"Yes?"

"Come here, will you please? I want you to meet my friend Mr. Vining. Here, we need some light."

The light showed the living room as usual buried under disorderly piles of boxes of bathing suits and other swimming equipment, the sale of which furnished Herbert Laird with most of his income. It also showed a young woman coming in in a wheel chair.

One look gave Vining a feeling that, he knew, boded no good for him. He was unfortunate in being a pushover for any reasonably attractive girl, and at the same time being cursed with an almost pathological shyness where women were concerned. The facts that both he and Laird were bachelors and took their swimming seriously were the main ties between them.

This girl was more than reasonably attractive. She was, thought the dazzled Vining, a wow, a ten-strike, a direct sixteen-inch hit. Her smooth, rather flat features and high cheekbones had a hint of Asian or American Indian, and went oddly with her light-gold hair, which, Vining could have sworn, had a faint greenish tinge. A blanket was wrapped around her legs.

He came out of his trance as Laird introduced the exquisite creature as "Miss Delfoiros."

Miss Delfoiros didn't seem exactly overcome. As she extended her hand, she said with a noticeable accent: "You are not from the newspapers, Mr. Vining?"

"No," said Vining. "Just a lawyer. I specialize in wills and probates and things. Not thinking of drawing up yours, are you?"

She relaxed visibly and laughed. "No. I 'ope I shall not need one for a long, long time."

"Still," said Vining seriously, "you never know—"

Laird bellowed: "Wonder what's keeping that sister of mine. Dinner ought to be ready. *Martha!*" He marched out, and Vin-

ing heard Miss Laird's voice, something about "--but Herb, I had to let those things cool down--"

Vining wondered with a great wonder what he should say to Miss Delfoiros. Finally he said, "Smoke?"

"Oh, no, thank you very much. I do not do it."

"Mind if I do?"

"No, not at all."

"Whereabouts do you hail from?" Vining thought the question sounded both brusque and silly. He never did get the hang of talking easily under this circumstances.

"Oh, I am from Kip—Cyprus, I mean. You know, the island."

"Really? That makes you a British subject, doesn't it?"

"Well . . . no, not exactly. Most Cypriots are, but I am not."

"Will you be at this swimming meet?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You don't"—he lowered his voice—"know what scheme Herb's got up his sleeve to beat La Santalucia?"

"Yes . . . no . . . I do not . . . what I mean is, I must not tell."

More mystery, thought Vining. What he really wanted to know was why she was confined to a wheel chair; whether the cause was temporary or permanent. But you couldn't ask a person right out, and he was still trying to concoct a leading question when Laird's bellow wafted in: "All right, folks, soup's on!" Vining would have pushed the wheel chair in, but before he had a chance, the girl had spun the chair around and was half-way to the dining room.

Vining said: "Hello, Martha, how's the school-teaching business?" But he wasn't really paying much attention to Laird's capable spinster sister. He was gaping at Miss Delfoiros, who was quite calmly emptying a teaspoonful of salt into her water glass and stirring.

"What . . . what?" he gulped.

"I 'ave to," she said. "Fresh water makes me—like what you call drunk."

"Listen, Mark!" roared his friend. "Are you sure you can be there on time tomorrow night? There are some questions of eligibility to be cleared up, and I'm likely to need you badly."

"Will Miss Delfoiros be there?" Vining grinned, feeling very foolish inside.

"Oh, sure. Iantha's out . . . say, listen, you know that little eighteen-year-old Clara Havranek? She did the hundred in one-o-five yesterday. She's championship material. We'll clean the Creston Club yet—" He went on, loud and fast, about what he was going to do to Louie Connaught's girls. The while, Mark Vining tried to concentrate on his own food, which was good, and on Iantha Delfoiros, who was charming but evasive.

There seemed to be something special about Miss Delfoiros's food, to judge by the way Martha Laird had served it. Vining looked closely and saw that it had the peculiarly dead and clammy look that a dinner once hot but now cold has. He asked about it.

"Yes," she said, "I like it cold."

"You mean you don't eat *anything* hot?"

She made a face. "'ot food? No, I do not like it. To us it is—"

"Listen, Mark! I hear the W.S.A. is going to throw a post-season meet in April for novices only—"

Vining's dessert lay before him a full minute before he noticed it. He was too busy thinking how delightful Miss Delfoiros's accent was.

When dinner was over, Laird said, "Listen, Mark, you know something about these laws against owning gold? Well, look here—" He led the way to a candy box on a table in the living room. The box contained, not candy, but gold and silver coins. Laird handed the lawyer several of them. The first one he examined was a silver crown, bearing the inscription "Carolus II Dei Gra" encircling the head of England's Merry Monarch with a wreath in his hair—or, more probably, in his wig. The second was an eighteenth-century Spanish dollar. The third was a Louis d'Or.

"I didn't know you went in for coin collecting, Herb," said Vining. "I suppose these are all genuine?"

"They're genuine all right. But I'm not collecting 'em. You might say I'm taking 'em in trade. I have a chance to sell ten thousand bathing caps, if I can take payment in those things."

"I shouldn't think the U.S. Rubber Company would like the idea much."

"That's just the point. What'll I do with 'em after I get 'em? Will the government put me in jail for having 'em?"

"You needn't worry about that. I don't think the law covers old coins, though I'll look it up to make sure. Better call up the American Numismatic Society—they're in the phone book—and they can tell you how to dispose of them. But look here, what the devil is this? Ten thousand bathing caps to be paid for in pieces-of-eight? I never heard of such a thing."

"That's it exactly. Just ask the little lady here." Laird turned to Iantha, who was nervously trying to signal him to keep quiet. "The deal's her doing."

"I did . . . did—" She looked as if she were going to cry. "'Erbert, you should not have said that. You see," she said to Vining, "we do not like to 'ave a lot to do with people. Always it causes us troubles."

"Who," asked Vining, "do you mean by 'we'?"

She shut her mouth obstinately. Vining almost melted. But his legal instincts came to the surface. If you don't get a grip on yourself, he thought, you'll be in love with her in another five minutes. And that might be a disaster. He said firmly: "Herb, the more I see of this business the crazier it looks. Whatever's going on, you seem to be trying to get me into it. But I won't let you before I know what it's all about."

"Might as well tell him, Iantha," said Laird. "He'll know when he sees you swim tomorrow, anyhow."

She said: "You will not tell the newspaper men, Mr. Vining?"

"No. I won't say anything to anybody."

"You promise?"

"Of course. You can depend on a lawyer to keep things under his hat."

"Under his—I suppose you mean not to tell. So, look." She reached down and pulled up the lower end of the blanket.

Vining looked. Where he expected to see feet, there was a pair of horizontal flukes, like those of a porpoise.

Louis Connaught's having kittens, when he saw what his rival coach had sprung on him, can thus be easily explained. First he doubted his own senses. Then he doubted whether there was any justice in the world.

Meanwhile Mark Vining proudly pushed Iantha's wheel chair in among the cluster of judges and timekeepers at the starting end of the pool. Iantha herself, in a bright green bathing cap, held her blanket around her shoulders, but the slate-gray tail with

its flukes was smooth and the flukes were horizontal; artists who show mermaids with scales and a vertical tail fin, like a fish's, simply don't know their zoology.

"All right, all right," bellowed Laird. "Don't crowd around. Everybody get back to where they belong. Everybody, please."

One of the spectators, leaning over the rail of the balcony to see, dropped a fountain pen into the pool. One of the Connaught's girls, a Miss Black, dove in after it. Ogden Wambach, the referee, poked a finger at the skin of the tail. He was a well-groomed, gray-haired man.

"Laird," he said, "is this a joke?"

"Not at all. She's entered in the back stroke and all the free styles, just like any other club member. She's even registered with the A.A.U."

"But . . . but . . . I mean, is it alive? Is it real?"

Iantha spoke up. "Why do you not ask me those questions, Mr. . . . Mr. . . . I do not know you—"

"Good grief," said Wambach. "It talks! I'm the referee, Miss—"

"Delfoiros. Iantha Delfoiros."

"My word. Upon my word. That means—let's see—Violet Porpoise-tail, doesn't it? *Delphis plus oura*—"

"You know Greek? Oh, 'ow nice!" She broke into a string of Romaic.

Wambach gulped a little. "Too fast for me, I'm afraid. And that's *modern* Greek, isn't it?"

"Why, yes. I am modern, am I not?"

"Dear me. I suppose so. But is that tail really real? I mean, it's not just a piece of costumery?"

"Oh, but yes." Iantha threw off the blanket and waved her flukes.

"Dear me," said Ogden Wambach. "Where are my glasses? You understand, I just want to make sure there's nothing spurious about this."

Mrs. Santalucia, a muscular-looking lady with a visible mustache and fingers webbed down to the first joint, said, "You mean I gotta swim against *her*?"

Louis Connaught had been sizzling like a dynamite fuse. "You can't do it!" he shrilled. "This is a woman's meet! I protest!"

"So what?" said Laird.

"But you can't enter a fish in a woman's swimming meet! Can you, Mr. Wambach?"

Mark Vining spoke up. He had just taken a bunch of papers clipped together out of his pocket, and was running through them.

"Miss Delfoiros," he asserted, "is not a fish. She's a mammal."

"How do you figure that?" yelled Connaught.

"Look at her."

"Um-m-m," said Ogden Wambach. "I see what you mean."

"But," howled Connaught, "she still ain't human!"

"There is a question about that, Mr. Vining," said Wambach.

"No question at all. There's nothing in the rules against entering a mermaid, and there's nothing that says the competitors have to be human."

Connaught was hopping about like an overwrought cricket. He was now waving a copy of the current A.A.U. swimming, diving and water polo rules. "I still protest! Look here! All through here it only talks about two kinds of meets, men's and women's. She ain't a woman, and she certainly ain't a man. If the Union had wanted to have meets for mermaids they'd have said so."

"Not a woman?" asked Vining in a manner that juries learned meant a rapier thrust at an opponent. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Connaught. I looked the question up." He frowned at his sheaf of papers. "Webster's International Dictionary, Second Edition, defines a woman as 'any female person.' And it further defines 'person' as 'a being characterized by conscious apprehension, rationality and a moral sense.' " He turned to Wambach. "Sir, I think you'll agree that Miss Delfoiros has exhibited conscious apprehension and rationality during her conversation with you, won't you?"

"My word . . . I really don't know what to say, Mr. Vining . . . I suppose she has, but I couldn't say—"

Horwitz, the scorekeeper, spoke up. "You might ask her to give the multiplication table." Nobody paid him any attention.

Connaught exhibited symptoms alarmingly suggestive of apoplexy. "But you can't— What are you talking about . . . conscious ap-ap—"

"Please, Mr. Connaught!" said Wambach. "When you shout that way I can't understand you because of the echoes."

Connaught mastered himself with a visible effort. Then he looked crafty. "How do I know she's got a moral sense?"

Vining turned to Iantha. "Have you ever been in jail, Iantha?"

Iantha laughed. "What a funny question, Mark! But of course, I have not."

"That's what *she* says," sneered Connaught. "How you gonna prove it?"

"We don't have to," said Vining loftily. "The burden of proof is on the accuser, and the accused is legally innocent until proved guilty. That principle was well established by the time of King Edward the First."

"That wasn't the kind of moral sense I meant," cried Connaught. "How about what they call moral turp-turp— You know what I mean."

"Hey," growled Laird, "what's the idea? Are you trying to cast— What's the word, Mark?"

"Aspersions?"

"—cast aspersions on one of my swimmers? You watch out, Louie. If I hear you be— What's the word, Mark?"

"Besmirching her fair name?"

"—besmirching her fair name I'll drown you in your own tank."

"And after that," said Vining, "we'll slap a suit on you for slander."

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" said Wambach. "Let's not have any more personalities, please. This is a swimming meet, not a lawsuit. Let's get to the point."

"We've made ours," said Vining with dignity. "We've shown that Iantha Delfoiros is a woman, and Mr. Connaught has stated, himself, that this is a woman's meet. Therefore, Miss Delfoiros is eligible. Q.E.D."

"Ahem," said Wambach. "I don't quite know— I never had a case like this to decide before."

Louis Connaught almost had tears in his eyes; at least he sounded as if he did. "Mr. Wambach, you can't let Herb do this to me. I'll be a laughingstock."

Laird snorted. "How about your beating me with your Mrs. Santalucia? I didn't get any sympathy from you when people

laughed at me on account of that. And how much good did it do me to protest against her fingers?"

"But," wailed Connaught, "if he can enter this Miss Delfurrus, what's to stop somebody from entering a trained sea lion or something? Do you want to make competitive swimming into a circus?"

Laird grinned. "Go ahead, Louie. Nobody's stopping you from entering anything you like. How about it, Ogden? Is she a woman?"

"Well . . . really . . . oh, dear—"

"Please!" Iantha Delfoiros rolled her violet-blue eyes at the bewildered referee. "I should so like to swim in this nice pool with all these nice people!"

Wambach sighed. "All right, my dear, you shall!"

"Whoopee!" cried Laird, the cry being taken up by Vining, the members of the Knickerbocker Swimming Club, the other officials, and lastly the spectators. The noise in the enclosed space made sensitive eardrums wince.

"Wait a minute," yelled Connaught when the echoes had died. "Look here, page 19 of the rules. 'Regulation Costume, Women: Suits must be of dark color, with skirt attached. Leg is to reach—' and so forth. Right here it says it. She can't swim the way she is, not in a sanctioned meet."

"That's true," said Wambach. "Let's see—"

Horwitz looked up from his little score-sheet-littered table. "Maybe one of the girls has a halter she could borrow," he suggested. "That would be *something*."

"Halter, phooey!" snapped Connaught. "This means a regular suit with legs and skirt, and everybody knows it."

"But she hasn't got any legs!" cried Laird. "How could she get into—"

"That's just the permt! If she can't wear a suit with legs, and the rules say you gotta have legs, she can't wear the regulation suit, and she can't compete! I gotcha that time! Ha-ha, I'm sneering!"

"I'm afraid not, Louie," said Vining, thumbing his own copy of the rule book. He held it up to the light and read: "'Note.—These rules are approximate, the idea being to bar costumes which are immodest, or will attract undue attention and comment. The referee shall have the power'—et cetera, et cetera. If we cut the legs out of a regular suit, and she pulled the rest of it on over

her head, that would be modest enough for all practical purposes. Wouldn't it, Mr. Wambach?"

"Dear me—I don't know—I suppose it would."

Laird hissed to one of his pupils, "Hey, listen, Miss Havranek! You know where my suitcase is? Well,—you get one of the extra suits out of it, and there's a pair of scissors in with the first-aid things. You fix that suit up so Iantha can wear it."

Connaught subsided. "I see now," he said bitterly, "why you guys wanted to finish with a 300-yard free style instead of a relay. If I'd'a' known what you were planning—and, you, Mark Vining, if I ever get in a jam, I'll go to jail before I hire you for a lawyer, so help me."

Mrs. Santalucia had been glowering at Iantha Delfoiros. Suddenly she turned to Connaught. "Thissa no fair. I swim against people. I no gotta swim against moimaids."

"Please, Maria, don't you desert me," wailed Connaught.

"I no swim tonight."

Connaught looked up appealingly to the balcony. Mr. Santalucia and the little Santalucias, guessing what was happening, burst into a chorus of: "Go on, mamma! You show them, mamma!"

"Aw right. I swim one, maybe two races. If I see I no got a chance, I no swim no more."

"That's better, Maria. It wouldn't really count if she beat you anyway." Connaught headed for the door, saying something about "telephone" on the way.

Despite the delays in starting the meet, nobody left the pool room through boredom; in fact the empty seats in the balcony were full by this time and people were standing up behind them. Word had got around the Hotel Creston that something was up.

By the time Louis Connaught returned, Laird and Vining were pulling the altered bathing suit on over Iantha's head. It didn't reach quite as far as they expected, having been designed for a slightly slimmer swimmer. Not that Iantha was fat. But her human part, if not exactly plump, was at least comfortably upholstered, so that no bones showed. Iantha squirmed around in the suit a good deal, and threw a laughing remark in Greek to Wambach, whose expression showed that he hoped it didn't mean what he suspected it did.

Laird said, "Now listen, Iantha, remember not to move till the

gun goes off. And remember that you swim directly over the black line on the bottom, not between two lines."

"Are they going to shoot a gun? Oh, I am afraid of shooting!"

"It's nothing to be afraid of; just blank cartridges. They don't hurt anybody. And it won't be so loud inside that cap."

"Herb," said Vining, "won't she lose time getting off, not being able to make a flat dive like the others?"

"She will. But it won't matter. She can swim a mile in *four* minutes, without really trying."

Ritchey, the starter, announced the 50-yard free style. He called: "All right, everybody, line up." Iantha slithered off her chair and crawled over to the starting platform. The other girls were all standing with feet together, bodies bent forward at the hips, and arms pointing backward. Iantha got into a curious position of her own, with her tail under her and her weight resting on her hands and flukes.

"Hey! Protest!" shouted Connaught. "The rules say that all races, except back strokes, are started with dives. What kind of a dive do you call that?"

"Oh, dear," said Wambach. "What—"

"That," said Vining urbanely, "is a mermaid dive. You couldn't expect her to stand upright on her tail."

"But that's just it!" cried Connaught. "First you enter a nonregulation swimmer. Then you put a nonregulation suit on her. Then you start her off with a nonregulation dive. Ain't there anything you guys do like other people?"

"But," said Vining, looking through the rule book, "it doesn't say—here it is. 'The start in all races shall be made with a dive.' But there's nothing in the rules about what kind of dive shall be used. And the dictionary defines a dive simply as a 'plunge into water.' So if you jump in feet first holding your nose, that's a dive for the purpose of the discussion. And in my years of watching swimming meets I've seen some funnier starting-dives than Miss Delfoiros's."

"I suppose he's right," said Wambach.

"O.K., O.K.," snarled Connaught. "But the next time I have a meet with you and Herb, I bring a lawyer along too, see?"

Ritchey's gun went off. Vining noticed that Iantha flinched a little at the report, and perhaps was slowed down a trifle in getting off by it. The other girls' bodies shot out horizontally to

smack the water loudly, but Iantha slipped in with the smooth, unhurried motion of a diving seal. Lacking the advantage of feet to push off with, she was several yards behind the other swimmers before she really got started. Mrs. Santalucia had taken her usual lead, foaming along with the slow strokes of her webbed hands.

Iantha didn't bother to come to the surface except at the turn, where she had been specifically ordered to come up so the judge of the turns wouldn't raise arguments as to whether she had touched the end, and at the finish. She hardly used her arms at all, except for an occasional flip of her trailing hands to steer her. The swift up-and-down flutter of the powerful tail-flukes sent her through the water like a torpedo, her wake appearing on the surface six or eight feet behind her. As she shot through the as yet unruffled waters at the far end of the pool on the first leg, Vining, who had gone around to the side to watch, noticed that she had the power of closing her nostrils tightly under water, like a seal or hippopotamus.

Mrs. Santalucia finished the race in the very creditable time of 29.8 seconds. But Iantha Delfoiros arrived, not merely first, but in the time of 8.0 seconds. At the finish she didn't reach up to touch the starting-platform, and then hoist herself out by her arms the way human swimmers do. She simply angled up sharply, left the water like a leaping trout, and came down with a moist smack on the concrete, almost bowling over a timekeeper. By the time the other contestants had completed the turn she was sitting on the platform with her tail curled under her. As the girls foamed laboriously down the final leg, she smiled dazzlingly at Vining, who had had to run to be in at the finish.

"That," she said, "was much fun, Mark. I am so glad you and 'Erbert put me in these races."

Mrs. Santalucia climbed out and walked over to Horwitz's table. That young man was staring in disbelief at the figures he had just written.

"Yes," he said, "that's what it says. Miss Iantha Delfoiros, 8.0; Mrs. Maria Santalucia, 29.8. Please don't drip on my score sheets, lady. Say, Wambach, isn't this a world's record or something?"

"My word!" said Wambach. "It's less than half the existing short-course record. Less than a third, maybe; I'd have to check it. Dear me. I'll have to take it up with the Committee. I don't

know whether they'd allow it; I don't think they will, even though there isn't any specific rule against mermaids."

Vining spoke up. "I think we've complied with all the requirements to have records recognized, Mr. Wambach. Miss Delfoiros was entered in advance like all the others."

"Yes, yes, Mr. Vining, but don't you see, a record's a serious matter. No ordinary human being could ever come near a time like that."

"Unless he used an outboard motor," said Connaught. "If you allow contestants to use tail fins like Miss Delfurrus, you ought to let 'em use propellers. I don't see why these guys should be the only ones to be let bust rules all over the place, and then think up lawyer arguments why it's O.K. I'm gonna get me a lawyer, too."

"That's all right, Ogden," said Laird. "You take it up with the Committee, but we don't really care much about the records anyway, so long as we can lick Louie here." He smiled indulgently at Connaught, who sputtered with fury.

"I no swim," announced Mrs. Santalucia. "This is all crazy business. I no get a chance."

"Now, Maria," said Connaught, taking her aside, "just once more, won't you please? My reputation—" The rest of his words were drowned in the general reverberation of the pool room. But at the end of them the redoubtable female appeared to have given into his entreaties.

The 100-yard free style started in much the same manner as the 50-yard. Iantha didn't flinch at the gun this time, and got off to a good start. She skimmed along just below the surface, raising a wake like a tuna-clipper. These waves confused the swimmer in the adjacent lane, who happened to be Miss Breitenfeld of the Creston Club. As a result, on her first return leg, Iantha met Miss Breitenfeld swimming athwart her—Iantha's—lane, and rammed the unfortunate girl amidships, Miss Breitenfeld went down without even a gurgle, spewing bubbles.

Connaught shrieked: "Foul! Foul!" though in the general uproar it sounded like "Wow, wow!" Several swimmers who weren't racing dove in to the rescue, and the race came to a stop in general confusion and pandemonium. When Miss Breitenfeld was hauled out it was found that she had merely had the wind knocked out of her and had swallowed considerable water.

Mark Vining, looking around for Iantha, found her holding

onto the edge of the pool and shaking her head. Presently she crawled out, crying: "Is she 'urt? Is she 'urt? Oh, I am so sorree! I did not think there would be anybody in my lane, so I did not look ahead."

"See?" yelled Connaught. "See, Wambach? See what happens? They ain't satisfied to walk away with the races with their fish-woman. No, they gotta try to cripple my swimmers by butting their slats in. Herb," he went on nastily, "why dontcha get a pet swordfish? Then when you rammed one of my poor girls she'd be out of competition for good."

"Oh," said Iantha. "I did not mean . . . it was an accident!"

"Accident my foot!"

"But it was. Mr. Referee, I do not want to bump people. My 'ead 'urts, and my neck also. You think I try to break my neck on purpose?" Iantha's altered suit had crawled up under her armpits, but nobody noticed particularly.

"Sure it was an accident," bellowed Laird. "Anybody could see that. And, listen, if anybody was fouled it was Miss Delfoiros."

"Certainly," chimed in Vining. "She was in her own lane, and the other girl wasn't."

"Oh, dear me," said Wambach. "I suppose they're right again. This'll have to be reswum anyway. Does Miss Breitenfeld want to compete?"

Miss Breitenfeld didn't but the others lined up again. This time the race went off without untoward incident. Iantha again made a spectacular leaping finish, just as the other three swimmers were halfway down the second of their four legs.

When Mrs. Santalucia emerged this time, she said to Connaught: "I swim no more. That is final."

"Oh, but Maria—" It got him nowhere. Finally he said, "Will you swim in the races that she don't enter?"

"Is there any?"

"I think so. Hey, Horowitz, Miss Delfurrus ain't entered in the breast stroke, is she?"

Horowitz looked. "No, she isn't," he said.

"That something. Say, Herb, how come you didn't put your fish-woman in the breast stroke?"

Vining answered for Laird. "Look at your rules, Louie. 'The feet shall be drawn up simultaneously, the knees bent and open,' etcetera. The rules for back stroke and free style don't say anything about how the legs shall be used, but those for breast

stroke do. So no legs, no breast stroke. We aren't giving you a chance to make any legitimate protests."

"Legitimate protests!" Connaught turned away, sputtering.

While the dives were being run off, Vining, watching, became aware of an ethereal melody. First he thought it was in his head. Then he was sure it was coming from one of the spectators. He finally located the source; it was Iantha Delfoiros, sitting in her wheel chair and singing softly. By leaning nearer he could make out the words:

*"Die schonste Jungfrau sitzt
Dort ober wunderbar;
Ihr goldnes Geschmeide blitzet;
Sie kaemmt ihr goldenes Haar."*

Vining went over quietly. "Iantha," he said. "Pull your bathing suit down, and don't sing."

She complied, looking up at him with a giggle. "But that is a nice song! I learn it from a wrecked German sailor. It is about one of my people."

"I know, but it'll distract the judges. They have to watch the dives closely, and the place is too noisy as it is."

"Such a nice man you are, Mark, but so serious!" She giggled again.

Vining wondered at the subtle change in the mermaid's manner. Then a horrible thought struck him.

"Herb!" he whispered. "Didn't she say something last night about getting drunk on fresh water?"

Laird looked up. "Yes. She— The water in the pool's fresh! I never thought of that. Is she showing signs?"

"I think she is."

"Listen, Mark, what'll we do?"

"I don't know. She's entered in two more events, isn't she? Back stroke and 300-yard free style?"

"Yes."

"Well, why not withdraw her from the back stroke, and give her a chance to sober up before the final event?"

"Can't. Even with all her firsts we aren't going to win by any big margin. Louie has the edge on us in the dives, and Mrs. Santalucia'll win the breast stroke. In the events Iantha's in, if

she takes first and Louie's girl take second and third, that means five points for us but four for him, so we have an advantage of only one point. And her world's record times don't give us any more points."

"Guess we'll have to keep her in and take a chance," said Vining glumly.

Iantha's demeanor was sober enough in lining up for the back stroke. Again she lost a fraction of a second in getting started by not having feet to push off with. But once she got started, the contest was even more one-sided than the free style races had been. The human part of her body was practically out of water, skimming the surface like the front half of a speedboat. She made paddling motions with her arms, but that was merely for technical reasons; the power was all furnished by the flukes. She didn't jump out onto the starting-platform this time; for a flash Vining's heart almost stopped as the emerald-green bathing cap seemed about to crash into the tiles at the end of the pool. But Iantha had judged the distance to a fraction of an inch, and braked to a stop with her flukes just before striking.

The breast stroke was won easily by Mrs. Santalucia, though her slow plodding stroke was less spectacular than the butterfly of her competitors. The shrill cheers of the little Santalucias could be heard over the general hubbub. When the winner climbed out, she glowered at Iantha and said to Connaught: "Louie, if you ever put me in a meet wit' moimaids again, I no swim for you again, never. Now I go home." With which she marched off to the shower room.

Ritchey was just about to announce the final event, the 300-yard free style, when Connaught plucked his sleeve. "Jack," he said, "wait a second. One of my swimmers is gonna be delayed a coupla minutes." He went out a door.

Laird said to Vining: "Wonder what Louie's grinning about. He's got something nasty, I bet. He was phoning earlier, you remember."

"We'll soon see— What's that?" A hoarse bark wafted in from somewhere and rebounded from the walls.

Connaught reappeared carrying two buckets. Behind him was a little round man in three sweaters. Behind the little round man galumphed a glossy California sea lion. At the sight of the gently rippling, jade-green pool the animal barked joyously and skidded

into the water, swam swiftly about, and popped out onto the landing-platform, barking. The bark had a peculiarly nerve-racking effect in the echoing pool room.

Ogden Wambach seized two handfuls of his sleek gray hair and tugged. "Connaught!" he shouted. "What is that?"

"Oh, that's just one of my swimmers, Mr. Wambach."

"Hey, listen!" rumbled Laird. "We're going to protest this time. Miss Delfoiros is at least a woman, even if she's a kind of peculiar one. But you can't call *that* a woman."

Connaught grinned like Satan looking over a new shipment of sinners. "Didn't you just say to go ahead and enter a sea lion if I wanted to?"

"I don't remember saying—"

"Yes, Herbert," said Wambach, looking haggard. "You did say it. There didn't used to be any trouble in deciding whether a swimmer was a woman or not. But now that you've brought in Miss Delfoiros, there doesn't seem to be any place we can draw a line."

"But look here, Ogden, there is such a thing as going too far—"

"That's just what I said about you!" shrilled Connaught.

Wambach took a deep breath. "Let's not shout, please. Herbert, technically you may have an argument. But after we allowed Miss Delfoiros to enter, I think it would be only sporting to let Louis have his sea lion. Especially after you told him to get one if he could."

Vining spoke up. "Oh, we're always glad to do the sporting thing. But I'm afraid the sea lion wasn't entered at the beginning of the meet as is required by the rules. We don't want to catch hell from the Committee—"

"Oh, yes, she was," said Connaught. "See!" He pointed to one of Horowitz's sheets. "Her name's Alice Black, and there it is."

"But," protested Vining, "I thought *that* was Alice Black." He pointed to a slim dark girl in a bathing suit who was sitting on a window ledge.

"It is," grinned Connaught. "It's just a coincidence that they both got the same name."

"You don't expect us to believe *that*?"

"I don't care whether you believe or not. It's so. Ain't the sea

lion's name Alice Black?" He turned to the little fat man, who nodded.

"Let it pass," moaned Wambach. "We can't take time off to get this animal's birth certificate."

"Well, then," said Vining, "how about the regulation suit? Maybe you'd like to try to put a suit on your sea lion?"

"Don't have to. She's got one already. It grows on her. Yah, yah, yah, gotcha that time."

"I suppose," said Wambach, "that you *could* consider a natural sealskin pelt as equivalent to a bathing-suit."

"Sure you could. That's the permt. Anyway the idea of suits is to be modest, and nobody gives a care about a sea lion's modesty."

Vining made a final point. "You refer to the animal as 'her,' but how do we know it's a female? Even Mr. Wambach wouldn't let you enter a male sea lion in a women's meet."

Wambach spoke: "How do you tell on a sea lion?"

Connaught looked at the little fat man. "Well, maybe we had better not go into that here. How would it be if I put up a ten-dollar bond that Alice is a female, and you checked on her sex later?"

"That seems fair," said Wambach.

Vining and Laird looked at each other. "Shall we let 'em get away with that, Mark?" asked the latter.

Vining rocked on his heels for a few seconds. Then he said, "I think we might as well. Can I see you outside a minute, Herb? You people don't mind holding up the race a couple of minutes more, do you? We'll be right back."

Connaught started to protest about further delay, but thought better of it. Laird presently reappeared looking unwontedly cheerful.

"'Erbert!" said Iantha.

"Yes?" he put his head down.

"I'm afraid—"

"You're afraid Alice might bite you in the water? Well, I wouldn't want that—"

"Oh, no, not afraid that way. Alice, poof! If she gets nasty I give her one with the tail. But I am afraid she can swim faster than me."

"Listen, Iantha, you just go ahead and swim the best you can.

Twelve legs, remember. And don't be surprised, no matter what happens."

"What you two saying?" asked Connaught suspiciously.

"None of your business, Louie. Whatcha got in that pail? Fish? I see how you're going to work this. Wanta give up and concede the meet now?"

Connaught merely snorted.

The only competitors in the 300-yard free style race were Iantha Delfoiros and the sea lion, allegedly named Alice. The normal members of both clubs declared that nothing would induce them to get into the pool with the animal. Not even the importance of collecting a third-place point would move them.

Iantha got into her usual starting position. Beside her the little round man maneuvered Alice, holding her by an improvised leash made of a length of rope. At the far end, Connaught had placed himself and one of the buckets.

Ritchey fired his gun; the little man slipped the leash and said: "Go get 'em, Alice!" Connaught took a fish out of his bucket and wave it. But Alice, frightened by the shot, set up a furious barking and stayed where she was. Not till Iantha had almost reached the far end of the pool did Alice sight the fish at the other end. Then she slid off and shot down the water like a streak. Those who have seen sea lions merely loafing about a pool in a zoo or aquarium have no conception of how fast they can go when they try. Fast as the mermaid was, the sea lion was faster. She made two bucking jumps out of water before she arrived and oozed out onto the concrete. One gulp and the fish had vanished.

Alice spotted the bucket and tried to get her head into it. Connaught fended her off as best he could with his feet. At the starting end, the little round man had taken a fish out of the other bucket and was waving it, calling: "Here, Alice!" Alice didn't get the idea until Iantha had finished her second leg. Then she went like the proverbial bat from hell.

The same trouble occurred at the starting end of the pool; Alice didn't see why she should swim twenty-five yards for a fish when there were plenty of them a few feet away. The result was that at the halfway mark Iantha was two legs ahead. But then Alice, who was no dope as sea lions go, caught on. She caught up with and passed Iantha in the middle of her eighth leg,

droozling out of the water at each end long enough to gulp a fish and then speeding down to the other end. In the middle of the tenth leg she was ten yards ahead of the mermaid.

At that point Mark Vining appeared through the door, running. In each hand he held a bowl of goldfish by the edge. Behind him came Miss Havranek and Miss Tufts, also of the Knickerbockers, both similarly burdened. The guests of the Hotel Creston had been mildly curious when a dark, severe-looking young man and two girls in bathing suits had dashed into the lobby and made off with the six bowls. But they had been too well-bred to inquire directly about the rape of the goldfish.

Vining ran down the side of the pool to a point near the far end. There he extended his arms and inverted the bowls. Water and fish cascaded into the pool. Miss Havranek and Miss Tufts did likewise at other points along the edge of the pool.

Results were immediate. The bowls had been large, and each had contained about six or eight fair-sized goldfish. The forty-odd bright-colored fish, terrified by their rough handling, darted hither and thither about the pool, or at least went as fast as their inefficient build would permit them. Alice, in the middle of her ninth leg, angled off sharply. Nobody saw her snatch the fish; one second it was there, and the next it wasn't. Alice doubled with a swirl of flippers and shot diagonally across the pool. Another fish vanished. Forgotten were her master and Louis Connaught and their buckets. This was much more fun. Meanwhile, Iantha finished her race, narrowly avoiding a collision with the sea lion on her last leg.

Connaught hurled the fish he was holding as far as he could. Alice snapped it up and went on hunting. Connaught ran toward the starting-platform, yelling: "Foul! Foul! Protest! Protest! Foul! Foul!"

He arrived to find the timekeepers comparing watches on Iantha's swim, Laird and Vining doing a kind of war dance, and Ogden Wambach looking like the March Hare on the twenty-eighth of February. "Stop!" cried the referee. "Stop, Louie! If you shout like that you'll drive me mad! I'm almost mad now! I know what you're going to say."

"Well . . . well . . . why don't you do something, then? Why don't you tell these crooks where to head in? Why don't you have 'em expelled from the Union? Why don't you—"

"Relax, Louie," said Vining. "We haven't done anything illegal."

"What? Why, you dirty—"

"Easy, easy." Vining looked speculatively at his fist. The little man followed his glance and quieted somewhat. "There's nothing in the rules about putting fish into a pool. Intelligent swimmers, like Miss Delfoiros, know enough to ignore them when they're swimming a race."

"But . . . what . . . why you—"

Vining walked off, leaving the two coaches and the referee to fight it out. He looked for Iantha. She was sitting on the edge of the pool, paddling in the water with her flukes. Beside her were four feebly flopping goldfish laid out in a row on the tiles. As he approached, she picked one up and put the front end of it in her mouth. There was a flash of pearly teeth and a spasmodic flutter of the fish's tail, and the front half of the fish was gone. The other half followed immediately.

At that instant Alice spotted the three remaining fish. The sea lion had cleaned out the pool, and was now slithering around on the concrete, barking and looking for more prey. She galumphed past Vining toward the mermaid.

Iantha saw her coming. The mermaid hoisted her tail out of the water, pivoted where she sat, swung the tail up in a curve, and brought the flukes down on the sea lion's head with a loud *spat*. Vining, who was twenty feet off, could have sworn he felt the wind of the blow.

Alice gave a squawk of pain and astonishment and slithered away, shaking her head. She darted past Vining again, and for reasons best known to herself hobbled over to the center of the argument and bit Ogden Wambach in the leg. The referee screeched and climbed up on Horowitz's table.

"Hey," said the scorekeeper. "You're scattering my papers!"

"I still say they're publicity-hunting crooks!" yelled Connaught, waving his copy of the rule book at Wambach.

"Bunk!" bellowed Laird. "He's just sore because we can think up more stunts than he can. He started it, with his web-fingered woman."

"I'm going mad!" screamed Wambach. "You hear? Mad, mad, mad! One more word out of either of you and I'll have you suspended from the Union!"

"Ow, ow, ow!" barked Alice.

Iantha had finished her fish. She started to pull the bathing suit down again; changed her mind, pulled it off over her head, rolled it up, and threw it across the pool. Halfway across it unfolded and floated down onto the water. The mermaid then cleared her throat, took a deep breath, and, in a clear singing soprano, launched into the heart-wrenching strains of:

*"Rheingold!
Reines Gold,
Wie lauter und hell
Leuchtest hold du uns!
Um dich, du klares—"*

"Iantha!"

"What is it, Markee?" she giggled.

"I said, it's getting time to go home!"

"Oh, but I do not want to go home. I am having much fun.

*"Nun wir klagen!
Gebt uns das Gold—"*

"No, really, Iantha, we've got to go." He laid a hand on her shoulder. The touch made his blood tingle. At the same time it was plain that the remains of Iantha's carefully husbanded sobriety had gone where the woodbine twineth. The last race in fresh water had been like three oversized Manhattans. Through Vining's head ran an absurd but apt paraphrase of an old song:

*"What shall we do with a drunken mermaid
At three o'clock in the morning?"*

"Oh, Markee, always you are so serious when people are 'aving fun. But if you say 'please' I will come."

"Very well, please come. Here, put your arm around my neck, and I'll carry you to your chair."

Such, indeed was Mark Vining's intention. He got one hand around her waist and another under her tail. Then he tried to straighten up. He had forgotten that Iantha's tail was a good deal heavier than it looked. In fact, that long and powerful structure of bone, muscle, and cartilage ran the mermaid's total weight up to the surprising figure of over two hundred and fifty pounds.

The result of his attempt was to send himself and his burden headlong into the pool. To the spectators it looked as though he had picked Iantha up and then deliberately dived in with her.

He came up and shook the water out of his head. Iantha popped up in front of him.

"So!" she gurgled. "You are 'aving fun with Iantha! I think you are serious, but you want to play games! All right, I show you!" She brought her palm down smartly, filling Vining's mouth and nose with water. He struck out blindly for the edge of the pool. He was a powerful swimmer, but his street clothes hampered him. Another splash cascaded over his luckless head. He got his eyes clear in time to see Iantha's head go down and her flukes up.

"Markeeee!" The voice was behind him. He turned, and saw Iantha holding a large black block of soft rubber. This object was a plaything for users of the Hotel Creston's pool, and it had been left lying on the bottom during the meet.

"Catch!" cried Iantha gaily, and let drive. The block took Vining neatly between the eyes.

The next thing he knew he was lying on the wet concrete. He sat up and sneezed. His head seemed to be full of ammonia. Louis Connaught put away the smelling-salts bottle, and Laird shoved a glass containing a snort of whiskey at him. Beside him was Iantha, sitting on her curled-up tail. She was actually crying.

"Oh, Markee, you are not dead? You are all right? Oh, I am so sorry! I did not mean to 'it you."

"I'm all right, I guess," he said thickly. "Just an accident. Don't worry."

"Oh, I am so glad!" She grabbed his neck and gave it a hug that made its vertebrae creak alarmingly.

"Now," he said, "if I could dry out my clothes. Louie, could you . . . uh—"

"Sure," said Connaught, helping him up. "We'll put your clothes on the radiator in the men's shower room, and I can lend you a pair of pants and a sweatshirt while they're drying."

When Vining came out in his borrowed garments, he had to push his way through the throng that crowded the starting end of the pool room. He was relieved to note that Alice had disappeared. In the crowd Iantha in her wheel chair was holding court. In

front of her stood a large man in a dinner jacket and a black coat, with his back to the pool.

"Permit me," he was saying. "I am Joseph Clement. Under my management nothing you wished in the way of a dramatic or musical career would be beyond you. I heard you sing, and I know that with but little training even the doors of the Metropolitan would fly open at your approach."

"No, Mr. Clement. It would be nice, but tomorrow I 'ave to leave for 'ome." She giggled.

"But my dear Miss Delfoiros—where is your home, if I may presume to ask?"

"Cyprus."

"Cyprus? Hm-m-m—let's see, where's that?"

"You do not know where Cyprus is? You are not a nice man. I do not like you. Go away."

"Oh, but my dear, dear Miss Del—"

"Go away I said. Scram."

"But—"

Iantha's tail came up and lashed out, catching the cloaked man in the solar plexus.

Little Miss Havranek looked at her teammate, Miss Tufts, as she prepared to make her third rescue of the evening. "Poisonally," she said, "I am getting sick of pulling dopes out of this pool."

The sky was just turning gray the next morning when Laird drove his huge old town car out into the driveway of his house in the Bronx. Although he always drove himself, he couldn't resist the dirt-cheap prices at which second-hand town cars can be obtained. Now the car had the detachable top over the driver's seat in place, with good reason; the wind was driving a heavy rain almost horizontally.

He got out and helped Vining carry Iantha into the car. Vining got in the back with the mermaid. He spoke into the voice tube: "Jones Beach, Chauncey."

"Aye, aye, sir," came the reply. "Listen, Mark, you sure we remembered everything?"

"I made a list and checked it." He yawned. "I could have done with some more sleep last night. Are you sure you won't fall asleep at the wheel?"

"Listen, Mark, with all the coffee I got sloshing around in me, I won't get to sleep for a week."

"We certainly picked a nice time to leave."

"I know we did. In a coupla hours the place'll be covered six deep with reporters. If it weren't for the weather, they might be arriving now. When they do, they'll find the horse has stolen the stable door—that isn't what I mean, but you get the idea. Listen, you better pull down some of those curtains until we get out on Long Island."

"Righto, Herb."

Iantha spoke up in a small voice. "Was I very bad last night when I was drunk, Mark?"

"Not very. At least, not worse than I'd be if I went swimming in a tank of sherry."

"I am so sorry—always I try to be nice, but the fresh water gets me out of my head. And that poor Mr. Clement, that I pushed into the water—"

"Oh, he's used to temperamental people. That's his business. But I don't know that it was such a good idea on the way home to stick your tail out of the car and biff that cop under the chin with it."

She giggled. "But he looked so surprised!"

"I'll say he did! But a surprised cop is sometimes a tough customer."

"Will that make trouble for you?"

"I don't think so. If he's a wise cop, he won't report it at all. You know how the report would read: 'Attacked by mermaid at corner Broadway and Ninety-eighth Street, 11:45 p.m.' And *where* did you learn the unexpurgated version of 'Barnacle Bill the Sailor'?"

"A Greek sponge diver I met in Florida told me. 'E is a friend of us mer-folk, and he taught me my first English. 'E used to joke about my Cypriot accent when we talked Greek. It is a pretty song, is it not?"

"I don't think 'pretty' is exactly the word I'd use."

"'Oo won the meet? I never die 'ear."

"Oh, Louie and Herb talked it over, and decided they'd both get so much publicity out of it that it didn't much matter. They're leaving it up to the A.A.U., who will get a first-class headache. For instance, we'll claim we didn't foul Alice, because Louie had already disqualified her by his calling and fish-waving. You see, that's coaching, and coaching a competi-

tor during an event is illegal. But, look here, Iantha, why do you have to leave so abruptly?"

She shrugged. "My business with 'Erbert is over, and I promised to get back to Cyprus before my sister's baby was born."

"You don't lay eggs? But of course you don't. Didn't I just prove last night you were mammals?"

"Markee, what an idea! Anyway, I do not want to stay around. I like you and I like 'Erbert, but I do not like living on land. You just imagine living in water for yourself, and you get an idea. And if I stay, the newspapers come, and soon all New York knows about me. We mer-folk do not believe in letting the land men know about us."

"Why?"

"We used to be friends with them sometimes, and always it made trouble. And now they 'ave guns and go around shooting things a mile away, to collect them, my great-uncle was shot in the tail last year by some aviator man who thought he was a porpoise or something. We don't like being collected. So when we see a boat or an airplane coming, we duck down and swim away quick."

"I suppose," said Vining slowly, "that that's why there were plenty of reports of mer-folks up to a few centuries ago, and then they stopped, so that now people don't believe they exist."

"Yes. We are smart, and we can see as far as the land men can. So you do not catch us very often. That is why this business with 'Erbert, to buy ten thousand caps for the mer-folk, 'as to be secret. Not even his company will know about it. But they will not care if they get their money. And we shall not 'ave to sit on rocks drying our 'air so much. Maybe later we can arrange to buy some good knives and spears the same way. They would be better than the shell things we use now."

"I suppose you get all these old coins out of wrecks?"

"Yes. I know of one just off . . . no, I must not tell you. If the land men know about a wreck, they come with divers. Of course, the very deep ones we do not care about, because we cannot dive down that far. We 'ave to come up for air, like a whale."

"How did Herb happen to suck you in on that swimming meet?"

"Oh, I promised him when he asked—when I did not know 'ow much what-you-call-it fuss there would be. When I found

out, he would not let me go back on my promise. I think he 'as a conscience about that, and that is why he gave me that nice fish spear."

"Do you ever expect to get back this way?"

"No, I do not think so. We 'ad a committee to see about the caps, and they chose me to represent them. But now that is arranged, and there is no more reason for me going out on land again."

He was silent for a while. Then he burst out: "Iantha, I just can't believe that you're starting off this morning to swim the Atlantic, and I'll never see you again."

She patted his hand. "Maybe you cannot, but that is so. Remember, friendships between my folks and yours always make people un'appy. I shall remember you a long time, but that is all there will ever be to it."

He growled something in his throat, looking straight in front of him.

She said: "Mark, you know I like you, and I think you like me. 'Erbert 'as a moving-picture machine in his house, and he showed me some pictures of 'ow the land folk live.

"These pictures showed a custom of the people in this country, when they like each other. It is called—kissing, I think. I should like to learn that custom."

"Huh? You mean *me*?" To a man of Vining's temperament, the shock was almost physically painful. But her arms were already sliding around his neck. Presently twenty firecrackers, six Roman candles, and a skyrocket seemed to go off inside him.

"Here we are, folks," called Laird. Getting no response, he repeated the statement more loudly. A faint and unenthusiastic "Yeah" came through the voice tube.

Jones Beach was bleak under the lowering March clouds. The wind drove the rain against the car windows.

They drove down the beach road a way, till the tall tower was lost in the rain. Nobody was in sight.

The men carried Iantha down onto the beach and brought the things she was taking. These consisted of a boxful of cans of sardines, with a trap to go over the shoulders; a similar but smaller container with her personal belongings; and the fish spear, with which she might be able to pick up lunch on the way.

Iantha peeled off her land-woman's clothes and pulled on the emerald bathing cap. Vining, watching her with the skirt of his

overcoat whipping about his legs, felt as if his heart were running out of his damp shoes onto the sand.

They shook hands, and Iantha kissed them both. She squirmed down the sand and into the water. Then she was gone. Vining thought he saw her wave back from the crest of a wave, but in that visibility he couldn't be sure.

They walked back to the car, squinting against the drops. Laird said: "Listen, Mark, you look as if you'd just taken a right to the button."

Vining merely grunted. He had got in front with Laird, and was drying his glasses with his handkerchief, as if that were an important and delicate operation.

"Don't tell me you're hooked?"

"So what?"

"Well, I suppose you know there's absolutely nothing you can do about it."

"Herb!" Vining snapped angrily. "Do you have to point out the obvious?"

Laird, sympathizing with his friend's feelings, did not take offense. After they had driven awhile, Vining spoke on his own initiative. "That," he said, "is the only woman I've ever known that made me feel at ease. I could talk to her."

Later, he said, "I never felt so mixed up in my life. I doubt whether anybody else ever did, either. Maybe I ought to feel relieved it's over. But I don't."

Pause. Then: "You'll drop me in Manhattan on your way back, won't you?"

"Sure, anywhere you say. Your apartment?"

"Anywhere near Times Square will do. There's a bar there I like."

So, thought Laird, at least the normal male's instincts were functioning correctly in the crisis.

When he let Vining out on Forty-sixth Street, the young lawyer walked off into the rain whistling. The whistle surprised Laird. Then he recognized the tune as one that was written for one of Kipling's poems. But he couldn't, at the moment, think which one.

The Olympians

by Mike Resnick

Mike Resnick, author of The Soul Eater, Walpurgis III, The Branch, Birthright: The Book of Man, the "Tales of the Galactic Midway" series (published by New American Library), and the forthcoming "Tales of the Velvet Comet" series, wrote more than 200 books under pseudonyms from 1964 to 1979, before finally coming out of the closet and writing science fiction under his own name. Though primarily a novelist, he has won a number of awards for his short stories and nonfiction books.

. . . Like the Pony Express, which earned a place in human history far surpassing the importance of its accomplishments in its eleven-month lifetime, so did the cult of the Olympians receive an amount of publicity totally out of proportion to its achievements during its brief, twenty-two-month existence. This in no way is meant to denigrate those romantic idols of the early Democracy, for at that time Man needed all the heroes he could get, and certainly no group ever filled that need with the zest and flourish of the Olympians. . . .

—*Man: Twelve Millennia
of Achievement*

. . . Perhaps worthy of a passing mention are the Olympians, for it is doubtful that any other segment of humanity so accurately mirrored Man's incredible ego, his delight in humiliating other races, and . . .

—*Origin and History of the
Sentient Races, Vol. 8*

There were fifty thousand beings in the stadium, and countless billions more watching via video. And every last one of them shared the same goal: to watch him go crashing down to defeat.

"Big moment's coming up!" said Hailey, who slapped life into his legs as he lay, face down, on the rubbing table. "Today's the day we'll show 'em, big fella."

He stared dead ahead, unmoving. "You hope," he said.

"I know," said Hailey. "You're a Man, kid, and Men don't lose. Ready to meet the press yet?"

He nodded.

The door was unlatched, and a flood of reporters, human and nonhuman, pressed about him.

"Still think you're going to take him, Big John?"

He nodded. Olympians were known for their reticence. They had managers to answer questions.

"It's one hundred and thirty degrees out there," said another. "Not much oxygen, either."

He simply stared at the reporter. No question had been asked, so he offered no answer.

"Boys," said Hailey, stepping in front of him, "you know Big John's got to get emotionally up for this, so shoot your questions at me. I'll be happy to answer any of them." He flashed a confident grin at one of the video cameras.

"I didn't know Olympians had any emotions," said a Lodin XI reporter sarcastically.

"Sure they do, sure they do," jabbered Hailey. "They're just too professional to show 'em, that's all."

"Mr. Hailey," said a space-suited chlorine-breather, using his T-pack, "just exactly what does Mr. Tinsmith hope to prove by all this?"

"I'm glad you asked that question, sir," said Hailey. "Very glad indeed. It's something I'm sure a lot of your viewers have

wondered about. Well, let me put the answer this way: Big John Tinsmith is an Olympian, with all that that implies. He took his vows four years ago, swore an oath of total abstinence from sexual congress, alcoholic stimulants, detrimental narcotics, and tobacco. As a member of the cult of the Olympians, his job is identical to that of his brethren: to travel the length and breadth of the galaxy as an ambassador of Man's goodwill and sportsmanship, challenging native races to those physical contests in which they specialize."

"Then why haven't any Olympians challenged a Torqual to a wrestling match?" came a question.

"As I was saying," continued Hailey, "the natives of Emra IV pride themselves on their fleetness of foot. Foot racing is their highest form of physical sport, and so—"

"It wouldn't have to do with the fact that the Torquals go twelve hundred pounds of solid muscle, would it?" persisted the questioner.

"Well, we hadn't wanted to make it public, but Sherif Ibn ben Iskad has challenged Torqual to put up its champion for a match next month."

"Sherif Iskad!" whooped a human reporter. "Now, that *is* news! Iskad's never lost, has he?"

"No Olympian has," said Hailey. "And now that that's settled, I'll get back to the subject. Big John Tinsmith will be running against the very finest that Emra IV has to offer, and I guarantee you're going to see . . ."

On and on Hailey droned, answering those questions that appealed to him, adroitly ducking those he didn't care for. Finally, fifteen minutes before post time, he cleared the room again and turned to Tinsmith.

"How do you feel, kid?"

"Fine," said Tinsmith, who hadn't moved a muscle.

"Herb!" snapped Hailey. "Lock and bolt the door. No one comes in for ten minutes."

The trainer's assistant secured the door, and Hailey pulled out a small leather bag from beneath the rubbing table. He opened it, pulled out a number of syringes, and began going over the labels on a score or more of small bottles.

"Adrenaline," he announced, shooting a massive dose into Tinsmith's arm. "Terrain looked a little rough, too. Better have a little phenylbutazone." One dose was inserted into each calf.

"Something to make you breathe the air a little easier . . . here, this'll ease the heat a bit . . . yep, that's about it. Getting sharp?"

Tinsmith moved for the first time, sitting up on the edge of the table, his long, lean legs dangling a few inches above the polished floor. He took two deep breaths, exhaled them slowly, and nodded.

"Good," said Hailey. "Personally, I was against this race. I think it's a little soon for you yet. But Olympians can't say no, so we stalled as long as we could and then agreed to it." Tinsmith lowered himself to the floor, knelt down, and began tightening his shoes. "Now, this guy's fast, make no bones about it," said Hailey. "Damned fast. He'll knock off the first mile in under three minutes, which means you'll be so far back you probably won't be able to see him. But the Emrans are short on staying power. Figure he'll get the second mile in three and a half, the third in three and three-quarters. Save your kick until then. It's four miles and eighty yards. If you run like you trained, you ought to pull even with him a good quarter mile from the finish." Hailey chuckled. "Won't that be something, though! Have that bastard pull out by hundreds of yards and then nip him at the wire just when every goddam alien from here to the Rim thinks an Olympian has finally gone and got himself beat. Sheer beauty, I call it!"

"Ready," said Tinsmith, turning to the door.

"Just remember, kid," said Hailey. "No Olympian has ever lost. You represent the race of Man. All of its prestige rides on your shoulders. The first time one of you gets beat, that's the day the Olympians disband."

"I know," said Tinsmith tonelessly.

Hailey opened the door. "Want me to go with you? Give you a little company till you reach the track?"

"Olympians walk alone," said Tinsmith, and went out the door.

He strode through a long, narrow, winding passageway, and a few minutes later reached the floor of the massive stadium. The air was hot, oppressive. He took a deep breath, decided that the shot was working, and walked out to where the throng in the stands could see him.

They jeered.

Showing and feeling no emotion, looking neither right nor

left, he walked to where his opponent was awaiting him. The Emran was humanoid in type. He stood about five feet tall, and had huge, powerful legs. The thighs, especially, were knotted with muscle, and the feet, though splayed, looked extremely efficient. His skin was red-bronze, and both body and head were totally without hair. Tinsmith glanced at the Emran's chest: It seemed to have no greater lung capacity than his own. Next his gaze went to the Emran's nose and mouth. The former was large, the latter small, with a prominent chin. That meant there'd be no gasping for air through his mouth during the final mile; if he got tired, he'd stay that way. Satisfied, and without a look at any other part of the Emran nor any gesture of greeting, he stood at the starting line, arms folded, eyes straight ahead.

One of the officials walked over and offered him a modified T-pack, for it was well known that Olympians spoke no language not native to their home worlds. He shook his head, and the official shrugged and walked away.

Another Emran began speaking through a microphone, and the loudspeaker system produced a series of tinny echoes from all across the stadium. There were rabid cheers, and Tinsmith knew they had announced the name of the homeworld champion. A moment later came the jeers, as he heard his own name hideously mispronounced. Then the course of the race was mapped—thrice around the massive stadium on a rocky track—and finally the ground rules were read.

A coin was flipped for the inside position. Tinsmith disdained to call it, but the Emran did, and lost. Tinsmith walked over to his place on the starting line.

As he stood there, crouching, awaiting the start of the race, he glanced over at the Emran and studied him briefly. He was human enough so that Tinsmith could see the awful tension and concentration painted vividly on his already-sweating face. And why not? He was carrying a pretty big load on his shoulders, too. He was the fleetest speedster of a race of speedsters. The Emran, aware of Tinsmith's gaze, looked at him and worked his mouth into what passed for a smile. Tinsmith stared coldly back at him, expressionless.

He had nothing against this being, nor any of his past opponents; just as Iskad had nothing against all the beings he had destroyed with his muscle, just as the brilliant Kobernykov had nothing against the thousands of beings he had defeated at the gamesboards.

He didn't want to cause this opponent the shame of defeat before this vast audience of his peers.

But Olympians had no choice but to win. If any Olympian, anywhere, lost, the mythos they were building about Man's invincibility would be shattered, and they would be just one more race of talented competitors on the gamefields of the galaxy. And *that*, he knew, was unacceptable. More than that, it was unthinkable.

It was not for the adulation of Man that the Olympians competed. That was a side benefit, and an occasionally bothersome one. They lived only to hear the jeers of the other races when they stepped onto the field, a little less vocal at each successive event, and to hear them diminish throughout a contest until there was a respectful silence, perhaps mixed with awe, at the conclusion. The awe was not for the individual Olympian, but the race he represented, which was as it should be.

There was no time for further reflection, for the race began and the Emran sprinted out to a quick lead. Tinsmith tried briefly to keep up with him, then fell into stride, his long, lean legs eating up the ground with an effortless pace. For the first quarter mile he breathed through his nostrils, testing the efficacy of the stimulants; then, satisfied, he resumed his normal method of breathing, one gulp of air to every three strides.

Far ahead of him the Emran was increasing his lead, pulling out by first two hundred, then three hundred yards. The Olympian paid no attention to him. Hailey had told him what the Emran could and couldn't do, and he knew his own capabilities. If Hailey's information was right, he'd be pulling up to the Emran in about eleven minutes. And if Hailey was wrong . . .

He shook his head. Hailey was never wrong.

The crowd was cheering, screaming the name of its champion, and across the galaxy 500 billion viewers watched as the Olympian fell so far behind that the video picture couldn't accommodate both runners. And every single one of them, Tinsmith knew, human and nonhuman alike, was asking himself the same question: Could this be the day? Could this be the day that an Olympian would finally lose?

Everyone but Hailey, who sat quietly in his box, stopwatch in hand, nodding his head. The kid was going well, was obeying orders to a T. The first half in 1:49, the mile in 3:40. He picked

up his binoculars, saw that his charge was showing no signs of strain or fatigue, and leaned back, content.

At the end of the second mile the Emran's lead had not diminished, and even the handful of humans in the stadium sensed an impending upset. But then, slowly, inexorably, Tinsmith began closing the gap. After three miles, he was once again only two hundred yards behind, and as they turned up the backstretch for the final time, he had narrowed the Emran's advantage to one hundred and fifty yards.

And there the margin stayed, as first the Emran and then, more than twenty seconds later, Tinsmith hit the far turn. The Olympian peered ahead through the dust after the flying bronzed figure ahead of him.

Something was wrong! The Emran should be coming back to him by now, should be feeling the strain of that torrid early pace on those heavy, burly legs, should be shorter of stride and breath. But he wasn't. His legs were still eating up the ground, still keeping that margin between them.

Tinsmith knew then that he couldn't wait any longer, that the homestretch was too late, that his body, already beginning to feel the strain, would have to respond right now. There would be no breather for him, no tired opponent to pass at his leisure, if he was to attain the anonymity of victory, the knowledge that he was just another addition to an immense list of triumphs, rather than the last Olympian.

He spurred forward, spurred on more by fear than desire. His legs ached, the soles of his feet burned, his breath came in short, painful gasps.

Into the homestretch he raced, his body screaming for relief, his mind trying to blot out the agony. Now he was within seventy yards of the Emran, now fifty. The Emran heard the yells of the crowd, knew the Olympian was making a run at him, and forced his own tortured legs to maintain the pace.

On and on the two raced, each carrying a world on his shoulders. Tinsmith was still eating into the Emran's margin, but he was running out of racetrack. He looked up, his vision blurred, and willing the spots away from his eyes he focused on the finish wire. It hung across the track, a mere two hundred yards distant. He was thirty yards farther from it than the Emran.

He was going to lose. He knew it, felt it in every throbbing muscle, every bone-shattering stride. When they spoke of the

Olympians in future years, on worlds not yet discovered, *he* would be the one they'd name. The one who lost.

"No!" he screamed. "*No! Not me!*"

His pace increased. He was not running after the Emran any longer, he was running from every human, living or yet to be born, in the galaxy.

"*NO!*"

He was still screaming when he crossed the finish line five yards ahead of his opponent.

He wanted to collapse, to let his abused body melt and become one with the dirt and the stone on the floor of the stadium. But he couldn't. Not yet, not until he was back in the dressing room.

He was vaguely aware of one of Hailey's assistants breaking through the cordon of police and officials, racing up to support him, but he brushed him away with a sweep of his long, sweat-soaked arm. Someone else came up with a jug of water. Later he'd take it, later he'd pour quarts and gallons into his dry, rasping throat. But not now. Not in front of *them*.

The fire in his lungs was beginning to diminish, to be replaced by a dull, throbbing ache. Suddenly he remembered the cameras. He swallowed once, then drew himself up to his full height. He glanced calmly, disdainfully, at the throng of reporters, then turned and began the slow, painful trek to the dressing room.

Hailey moved as if to accompany him, then stopped. Another of Hailey's aides began to walk after him, but the trainer grabbed his arm and held him back. Hailey understood.

Olympians walked alone.

The Wind from the Sun

by Arthur C. Clarke

Along with Robert A. Heinlein and one of your editors, Arthur C. Clarke takes pride of place among science fiction's "Big Three." For many years a resident of Sri Lanka (he was once Chancellor of Moratuwa University), he came out of retirement to write 2010 (1982) a best-selling sequel to his famous 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). And although he says he is going to retire for good, we hope that he will change his mind.

"The Wind from the Sun" was originally published as "Sunjammer," and exemplifies the combination of hard science and philosophical speculation that has made the author world-famous.

The enormous disk of sail strained at its rigging, already filled with the wind that blew between the worlds. In three minutes the race would begin, yet now John Merton felt more relaxed, more at peace, than at any time for the past year. Whatever happened when the Commodore gave the starting signal, whether *Diana* carried him to victory or defeat, he had achieved his ambition. After a lifetime spent in designing ships for others, now he would sail his own.

"T minus two minutes," said the cabin radio. "Please confirm your readiness."

One by one, the other skippers answered. Merton recognized

all the voices—some tense, some calm—for they were the voices of his friends and rivals. On the four inhabited worlds, there were scarcely twenty men who could sail a sun-yacht; and they were all here, on the starting line or aboard the escort vessels, orbiting twenty-two thousand miles above the equator.

"Number One, *Gossamer*—ready to go."

"Number Two, *Santa Maria*—all O.K."

"Number Three, *Sunbeam*—O.K."

"Number Four, *Woomera*—all systems go."

Merton smiled at that last echo from the early, primitive days of astronautics. But it had become part of the tradition of space; and there were times when a man needed to evoke the shades of those who had gone before him to the stars.

"Number Five, *Lebedev*—we're ready."

"Number Six, *Arachne*—O.K."

Now it was his turn, at the end of the line; strange to think that the words he was speaking in this tiny cabin were being heard by at least five billion people.

"Number Seven, *Diana*—ready to start."

"One through Seven acknowledged." The voice from the judge's launch was impersonal. "Now *T* minus one minute."

Merton scarcely heard it; for the last time, he was checking the tension in the rigging. The needles of all the dynamometers were steady; the immense sail was taut, its mirror surface sparkling and glittering gloriously in the sun.

To Merton, floating weightless at the periscope, it seemed to fill the sky. As well it might—for out there were fifty million square feet of sail, linked to his capsule by almost a hundred miles of rigging. All the canvas of all the tea-clippers that had once raced like clouds across the China seas, sewn into one gigantic sheet, could not match the single sail that *Diana* had spread beneath the sun. Yet it was little more substantial than a soap bubble; that two square miles of aluminized plastic was only a few millionths of an inch thick.

"*T* minus ten seconds. All recording cameras on."

Something so huge, yet so frail, was hard for the mind to grasp. And it was harder still to realize that this fragile mirror could tow them free of Earth, merely by the power of the sunlight it would trap.

". . . Five, four, three, two, one, *cut!*"

Seven knife blades sliced through the seven thin lines tethering

the yachts to the motherships that had assembled and serviced them.

Until this moment, all had been circling Earth together in a rigidly held formation, but now the yachts would begin to disperse, like dandelion seeds drifting before the breeze. And the winner would be the one who first drifted past the Moon.

Aboard *Diana*, nothing seemed to be happening. But Merton knew better; though his body could feel no thrust, the instrument board told him he was now accelerating at almost one thousandth of a gravity. For a rocket, that figure would have been ludicrous—but this was the first time any solar yacht had attained it. *Diana's* design was sound; the vast sail was living up to his calculations. At this rate, two circuits of the Earth would build up his speed to escape velocity—then he could head out for the Moon, with the full force of the Sun behind him.

The full force of the Sun. He smiled wryly, remembering all his attempts to explain solar sailing to those lecture audiences back on Earth. That had been the only way he could raise money, in those early days. He might be Chief Designer of Cosmodyne Corporation, with a whole string of successful space-ships to his credit, but his firm had not been exactly enthusiastic about his hobby.

"Hold your hands out to the Sun," he'd said. "What do you feel? Heat, of course. But there's pressure as well—though you've never noticed it, because it's so tiny. Over the area of your hands, it only comes to about a millionth of an ounce.

"But out in space, even a pressure as small as that can be important—for it's acting all the time, hour after hour, day after day. Unlike rocket fuel, it's free and unlimited. If we want to, we can use it; we can build sails to catch the radiation blowing from the Sun."

At that point, he would pull out a few square yards of sail material and toss it towards the audience. The silvery film would coil and twist like smoke, then drift slowly to the ceiling in the hot-air currents.

"You can see how light it is," he'd continue. "A square mile weighs only a ton, and can collect five pounds of radiation pressure. So it will start moving—and we can let it tow us along, if we attach rigging to it.

"Of course, its acceleration will be tiny—about a thousandth of a *g*. That doesn't seem much, but let's see what it means.

"It means that in the first second, we'll move about a fifth of an inch. I suppose a healthy snail could do better than that. But after a minute, we've covered sixty feet, and will be doing just over a mile an hour. That's not bad, for something driven by pure sunlight! After an hour, we're forty miles from our starting point, and will be moving at eighty miles an hour. Please remember that in space there's no friction, so once you start anything moving, it will keep going forever. You'll be surprised when I tell you what our thousandth-of-a-*g* sailing boat will be doing at the end of a day's run. *Almost two thousand miles an hour!* If it starts from orbit—as it has to, of course—it can reach escape velocity in a couple of days. And all without burning a single drop of fuel!"

Well, he'd convinced them, and in the end he'd even convinced Cosmodyne. Over the last twenty years, a new sport had come into being. It had been called the sport of billionaires, and that was true—but it was beginning to pay for itself in terms of publicity and television coverage. The prestige of four continents and two worlds were riding on this race, and it had the biggest audience in history.

Diana had made a good start; time to take a look at the opposition. Moving very gently. Though there were shock absorbers between the control capsule and the delicate rigging, he was determined to run no risks. Merton stationed himself at the periscope.

There they were, looking like strange silver flowers planted in the dark fields of space. The nearest, South America's *Santa Maria*, was only fifty miles away; it bore a resemblance to a boy's kite—but a kite more than a mile on its side. Farther away, the University of Astrograd's *Lebedev* looked like a Maltese cross; the sails that formed the four arms could apparently be tilted for steering purposes. In contrast, the Federation of Australasia's *Woomera* was a simple parachute, four miles in circumference. General Spacecraft's *Arachne*, as its name suggested, looked like a spider web—and had been built on the same principles, by robot shuttles spiraling out from a central point. Eurospace Corporation's *Gossamer* was an identical design, on a slightly smaller scale. And the Republic of Mars's *Sunbeam* was

a flat ring, with a half-mile-wide hole in the center, spinning slowly so that centrifugal force gave it stiffness. That was an old idea, but no one had ever made it work. Merton was fairly sure that the colonials would be in trouble when they started to turn.

That would not be for another six hours, when the yachts had moved along the first quarter of their slow and stately twenty-four-hour orbit. Here at the beginning of the race, they were all heading directly away from the Sun—running, as it were, before the solar wind. One had to make the most of this lap, before the boats swung around to the other side of Earth and then started to head back into the Sun.

Time for the first check, Merton told himself, while he had no navigational worries. With the periscope, he made a careful examination of the sail, concentrating on the points where the rigging was attached to it. The shroud lines—narrow bands of unsilvered plastic film—would have been completely invisible had they not been coated with fluorescent paint. Now they were taut lines of colored light, dwindling away for hundreds of yards towards that gigantic sail. Each had its own electric windlass, not much bigger than a game fisherman's reel. The little windlasses were continually turning, playing lines in or out, as the autopilot kept the sail trimmed at the correct angle to the Sun.

The play of sunlight on the great flexible mirror was beautiful to watch. It was undulating in slow, stately oscillations, sending multiple images of the Sun marching across the heavens, until they faded away at the edges of the sail. Such leisurely vibrations were to be expected in this vast and flimsy structure; they were usually quite harmless, but Merton watched them carefully. Sometimes they could build up to the catastrophic undulations known as the wriggles, which could tear a sail to pieces.

When he was satisfied that everything was shipshape, he swept the periscope around the sky, rechecking the positions of his rivals. It was as he had hoped; the weeding-out process had begun, as the less efficient boats fell astern. But the real test would come when they passed into the shadow of the Earth; then maneuverability would count as much as speed.

It seemed a strange thing to do, now that the race had just started, but it might be a good idea to get some sleep. The two-man crews on the other boats could take it in turns, but Merton had no one to relieve him. He must rely on his physical resources—like that other solitary seaman Joshua Slocum, in his

tiny *Spray*. The American skipper had sailed *Spray* single-handed around the world; he could never have dreamed that, two centuries later, a man would be sailing single-handed from Earth to Moon—inspired, at least partly, by his example.

Merton snapped the elastic bands of the cabin seat around his waist and legs, then placed the electrodes of the sleep-inducer on his forehead. He set the timer for three hours, and relaxed.

Very gently, hypnotically, the electronic pulses throbbed in the frontal lobes of his brain. Colored spirals of light expanded beneath his closed eyelids, widening outwards to infinity. Then—nothing. . . .

The brazen clamor of the alarm dragged him back from his dreamless sleep. He was instantly awake, his eyes scanning the instrument panel. Only two hours had passed—but above the accelerometer a red light was flashing. Thrust was falling; *Diana* was losing power.

Merton's first thought was that something had happened to the sail; perhaps the antispin devices had failed, and the rigging had become twisted. Swiftly, he checked the meters that showed the tension in the shroud lines. Strange, on one side of the sail they were reading normally—but on the other the pull was dropping slowly even as he watched.

In sudden understanding, Merton grabbed the periscope, switched to wide-angle vision, and started to scan the edge of the sail. Yes—there was the trouble, and it could have only one cause.

A huge, sharp-edged shadow had begun to slide across the gleaming silver of the sail. Darkness was falling upon *Diana*, as if a cloud had passed between her and the Sun. And in the dark, robbed of the rays that drove her, she would lose all thrust and drift helplessly through space.

But, of course, there were no clouds here, more than twenty thousand miles above Earth. If there was a shadow, it must be made by man.

Merton grinned as he swung the periscope towards the Sun, switching in the filters that would allow him to look full into its blazing face without being blinded.

"Maneuver Four a," he muttered to himself. "We'll see who can play best at *that* game."

It looked as if a giant planet were crossing the face of the Sun. A great black disk had bitten deep into its edge. Twenty miles

astern, *Gossamer* was trying to arrange an artificial eclipse—specially for *Diana*'s benefit.

The maneuver was a perfectly legitimate one; back in the days of ocean racing, skippers had often tried to rob each other of the wind. With any luck, you could leave your rival becalmed, with his sails collapsing around him—and be well ahead before he could undo the damage.

Merton had no intention of being caught so easily. There was plenty of time to take evasive action; things happened very slowly when you were running a solar sailing boat. It would be at least twenty minutes before *Gossamer* could slide completely across the face of the Sun, and leave him in darkness.

Diana's tiny computer—the size of a matchbox, but the equivalent of a thousand human mathematicians—considered the problem for a full second and then flashed the answer. He'd have to open control panels three and four, until the sail had developed an extra twenty degrees of tilt; then the radiation pressure would blow him out of *Gossamer*'s dangerous shadow, back into the full blast of the Sun. It was a pity to interfere with the autopilot, which had been carefully programmed to give the fastest possible run—but that, after all, was why he was here. This was what made solar yachting a sport, rather than a battle between computers.

Out went control lines one to six, slowly undulating like sleepy snakes as they momentarily lost their tension. Two miles away, the triangular panels began to open lazily, spilling sunlight through the sail. Yet, for a long time, nothing seemed to happen. It was hard to grow accustomed to this slow-motion world, where it took minutes for the effects of any action to become visible to the eye. Then Merton saw that the sail was indeed tipping towards the Sun—and that *Gossamer*'s shadow was sliding harmlessly away, its cone of darkness lost in the deeper night of space.

Long before the shadow had vanished and the disk of the Sun had cleared again, he reversed the tilt and brought *Diana* back on course. Her new momentum would carry her clear of the danger; no need to overdo it, and upset his calculations by sidestepping too far. That was another rule that was hard to learn. The very moment you had started something happening in space, it was already time to think about stopping it.

He reset the alarm, ready for the next natural or man-made emergency; perhaps *Gossamer*, or one of the other contestants,

would try the same trick again. Meanwhile, it was time to eat, though he did not feel particularly hungry. One used little physical energy in space, and it was easy to forget about food. Easy—and dangerous; for when an emergency arose, you might not have the reserves needed to deal with it.

He broke open the first of the meal packets and inspected it without enthusiasm. The name on the label—SPACETASTIES—was enough to put him off. And he had grave doubts about the promise printed underneath. "Guaranteed crumbless." It had been said that crumbs were a greater danger to space vehicles than meteorites. They could drift into the most unlikely places, causing short circuits, blocking vital jets and getting into instruments that were supposed to be hermetically sealed.

Still, the liverwurst went down pleasantly enough; so did the chocolate and the pineapple puree. The plastic coffee-bulb was warming on the electric heater when the outside world broke in on his solitude. The radio operator on the Commodore's launch routed a call to him.

"Dr. Merton? If you can spare the time, Jeremy Blair would like a few words with you." Blair was one of the more responsible news commentators, and Merton had been on his program many times. He could refuse to be interviewed, of course, but he liked Blair, and at the moment he could certainly not claim to be too busy. "I'll take it," he answered.

"Hello, Dr. Merton," said the commentator immediately. "Glad you can spare a few minutes. And congratulations—you seem to be ahead of the field."

"Too early in the game to be sure of that," Merton answered cautiously.

"Tell me, Doctor—why did you decide to sail *Diana* yourself? Just because it's never been done before?"

"Well, isn't that a very good reason? But it wasn't the only one, of course." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "You know how critically the performance of a sun-yacht depends on its mass. A second man, with all his supplies, would mean another five hundred pounds. That could easily be the difference between winning and losing."

"And you're quite certain that you can handle *Diana* alone?"

"Reasonably sure, thanks to the automatic controls I've designed. My main job is to supervise and make decisions."

"But—two square miles of sail! It just doesn't seem possible for one man to cope with all that!"

Merton laughed.

"Why not? Those two square miles produce a maximum pull of just ten pounds. I can exert more force with my little finger."

"Well, thank you, Doctor. And good luck."

As the commentator signed off, Merton felt a little ashamed of himself. For his answer had been only part of the truth; and he was sure that Blair was shrewd enough to know it.

There was just one reason why he was here, alone in space. For almost forty years he had worked with teams of hundreds or even thousands of men, helping to design the most complex vehicles that the world had ever seen. For the last twenty years he had led one of those teams, and watched his creations go soaring to the stars. (But there were failures that he could never forget, even though the fault had not been his.) He was famous, with a successful career behind him. Yet he had never done anything by himself; always he had been one of an army.

This was his very last chance for individual achievement, and he would share it with no one. There would be no more solar yachting for at least five years, as the period of the quiet Sun ended and the cycle of bad weather began, with radiation storms bursting through the solar system. When it was safe again for these frail, unshielded craft to venture aloft, he would be too old. If, indeed, he was not too old already. . . .

He dropped the empty food containers into the waste disposal, and turned once more to the periscope. At first, he could find only five of the other yachts; there was no sign of *Woomera*. It took him several minutes to locate her—a dim, star-eclipsing phantom, neatly caught in the shadow of *Lebedev*. He could imagine the frantic efforts the Australasians were making to extricate themselves, and wondered how they had fallen into the trap. It suggested that *Lebedev* was unusually maneuverable; she would bear watching, though she was too far away to menace *Diana* at the moment.

Now the Earth had almost vanished. It had waned to a narrow, brilliant bow of light that was moving steadily towards the Sun. Dimly outlined within that burning bow was the night side of the planet, with the phosphorescent gleams of great cities showing here and there through gaps in the clouds. The disk of darkness

had already blanked out a huge section of the Milky Way; in a few minutes, it would start to encroach upon the Sun.

The light was fading. A purple, twilight hue—the glow of many sunsets, thousands of miles below—was falling across the sail, as *Diana* slipped silently into the shadow of Earth. The Sun plummeted below that invisible horizon. Within minutes, it was night.

Merton looked back along the orbit he had traced now a quarter of the way around the world. One by one he saw the brilliant stars of the other yachts wink out, as they joined him in the brief night. It would be an hour before the Sun emerged from that enormous black shield, and through all that time they would be completely helpless, coasting without power.

He switched on the external spotlight, and started to search the now darkened sail with its beam. Already, the thousands of acres of film were beginning to wrinkle and become flaccid; the shroud lines were slackening and must be wound in lest they become entangled. But all this was expected; everything was going as planned.

Forty miles astern, *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* were not so lucky. Merton learned of their troubles when the radio burst into life on the emergency circuit.

“Number Two, Number Six—this is Control. You are on a collision course. Your orbits will intersect in sixty-five minutes! Do you require assistance?”

There was a long pause while the two skippers digested this bad news. Merton wondered who was to blame; perhaps one yacht had been trying to shadow the other, and had not completed the maneuver before they were both caught in darkness. Now there was nothing that either could do; they were slowly but inexorably converging together, unable to change course by a fraction of a degree.

Yet, sixty-five minutes! That would just bring them out into sunlight again, as they emerged from the shadow of the Earth. They still had a slim chance, if their sails could snatch enough power to avoid a crash. There must be some frantic calculations going on aboard *Arachne* and *Santa Maria*.

Arachne answered first; her reply was just what Merton had expected.

“Number Six calling Control. We don’t need assistance, thank you. We’ll work this out for ourselves.”

I wonder, thought Merton. But at least it will be interesting to watch. The first real drama of the race was approaching—exactly above the line of midnight on the sleeping Earth.

For the next hour, Merton's own sail kept him too busy to worry about *Arachne* and *Santa Maria*. It was hard to keep a good watch on that fifty million square feet of dim plastic out there in the darkness, illuminated only by his narrow spotlight and the rays of the still-distant Moon. From now on, for almost half his orbit around the Earth, he must keep the whole of this immense area edge-on to the Sun. During the next twelve or fourteen hours, the sail would be a useless encumbrance; for he would be heading into the Sun, and its rays could only drive him backwards along his orbit. It was a pity that he could not furl the sail completely, until he was ready to use it again. But no one had yet found a practical way of doing this.

Far below, there was the first hint of dawn along the edge of the Earth. In ten minutes, the Sun would emerge from its eclipse; the coasting yachts would come to life again as the blast of radiation struck their sails. That would be the moment of crisis for *Arachne* and *Santa Maria*—and, indeed, for all of them.

Merton swung the periscope until he found the two dark shadows drifting against the stars. They were very close together—perhaps less than three miles apart. They might, he decided, just be able to make it. . . .

Dawn flashed like an explosion along the rim of Earth, as the Sun rose out of the Pacific. The sail and shroud lines glowed a brief crimson, then gold, then blazed with the pure white light of day. The needles of the dynamometers began to lift from their zeros—but only just. *Diana* was still almost completely weightless, for with the sail pointing towards the Sun, her acceleration was now only a few millionths of a gravity.

But *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* were crowding on all the sail they could manage, in their desperate attempt to keep apart. Now, while there was less than two miles between them, their glittering plastic clouds were unfurling and expanding with agonizing slowness, as they felt the first delicate push of the Sun's rays. Almost every TV screen on Earth would be mirroring this protracted drama; and even now, at this very last minute, it was impossible to tell what the outcome would be.

The two skippers were stubborn men. Either could have cut his sail, and fallen back to give the other a chance; but neither

would do so. Too much prestige, too many millions, too many reputations were at stake. And so, silently and softly as snowflakes falling on a winter night, *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* collided.

The square kite crawled almost imperceptibly into the circular spider's-web; the long ribbons of the shroud lines twisted and tangled together with dreamlike slowness. Even aboard *Diana*, busy with his own rigging, Merton could scarcely tear his eyes away from this silent, long-drawn-out disaster.

For more than ten minutes the billowing, shining clouds continued to merge into one inextricable mass. Then the crew capsules tore loose and went their separate ways, missing each other by hundreds of yards. With a flare of rockets, the safety launches hurried to pick them up.

That leaves five of us, thought Merton. He felt sorry for the skippers who had so thoroughly eliminated each other, only a few hours after the start of the race; but they were young men, and would have another chance.

Within minutes, the five had dropped to four. From the very beginning, Merton had had doubts about the slowly rotating *Sunbeam*. Now he saw them justified.

The Martian ship had failed to tack properly; her spin had given her too much stability. Her great ring of a sail was turning to face the Sun, instead of being edge-on to it. She was being blown back along her course at almost her maximum acceleration.

That was about the most maddening thing that could happen to a skipper—worse even than a collision, for he could blame only himself. But no one would feel much sympathy for the frustrated colonials, as they dwindled slowly astern. They had made too many brash boasts before the race, and what had happened to them was poetic justice.

Yet it would not do to write off *Sunbeam* completely. With almost half a million miles still to go, she might still pull ahead. Indeed, if there were a few more casualties, she might be the only one to complete the race. It had happened before.

However, the next twelve hours were uneventful, as the Earth waxed in the sky from new to full. There was little to do while the fleet drifted around the unpowered half of its orbit, but Merton did not find the time hanging heavily on his hands. He caught a few hours' sleep, ate two meals, wrote up his log, and became involved in several more radio interviews. Sometimes, though rarely, he talked to the other skippers, exchanging greet-

ings and friendly taunts. But most of the time he was content to float in weightless relaxation, beyond all the cares of Earth, happier than he had been for many years. He was—as far as any man could be in space—master of his own fate, sailing the ship upon which he had lavished so much skill, so much love that she had become part of his very being.

The next casualty came when they were passing the line between Earth and Sun, and were just beginning the powered half of the orbit. Aboard *Diana*, Merton saw the great sail stiffen as it tilted to catch the rays that drove it. The acceleration began to climb up from the microgravities, though it would be hours yet before it would reach its maximum value.

It would never reach it for *Gossamer*. The moment when power came on again was always critical, and she failed to survive it.

Blair's radio commentary, which Merton had left running at low volume, alerted him with the news: "Hello, *Gossamer* has the wriggles!" He hurried to the periscope, but at first could see nothing wrong with the great circular disk of *Gossamer's* sail. It was difficult to study it, as it was almost edge-on to him and so appeared as a thin ellipse; but presently he saw that it was twisting back and forth in slow, irresistible oscillations. Unless the crew could damp out these waves, by properly timed but gentle tugs on the shroud lines, the sail would tear itself to pieces.

They did their best, and after twenty minutes it seemed that they had succeeded. Then, somewhere near the center of the sail, the plastic film began to rip. It was slowly driven outwards by the radiation pressure, like smoke coiling upwards from a fire. Within a quarter of an hour, nothing was left but the delicate tracery of the radial spars that had supported the great web. Once again there was a flare of rockets as a launch moved in to retrieve the *Gossamer's* capsule and her dejected crew.

"Getting rather lonely up here, isn't it?" said a conversational voice over the ship-to-ship radio.

"Not for you, Dimitri," retorted Merton. "You've still got company back there at the end of the field. I'm the one who's lonely, up here in front." It was not an idle boast. By this time *Diana* was three hundred miles ahead of the next competitor, and Merton's lead should increase still more rapidly in the hours to come.

Aboard *Lebedev*, Dimitri Markoff gave a good-natured chuckle. He did not sound, Merton thought, at all like a man who had resigned himself to defeat.

"Remember the legend of the tortoise and the hare," answered the Russian. "A lot can happen in the next quarter-million miles."

It happened much sooner than that, when they had completed their first orbit of Earth, and were passing the starting line again—though thousands of miles higher, thanks to the extra energy the Sun's rays had given them. Merton had taken careful sights on the other yachts, and had fed the figures into the computer. The answer it gave for *Woomera* was so absurd that he immediately did a recheck.

There was no doubt of it—the Australasians were catching up at a fantastic rate. No solar yacht could possibly have such an acceleration, unless—

A swift look through the periscope gave the answer. *Woomera's* rigging, pared back to the very minimum of mass, had given way. It was her sail alone, still maintaining its shape, that was racing up behind him like a handkerchief blown before the wind. Two hours later it fluttered past, less than twenty miles away. But long before that, the Australasians had joined the growing crowd aboard the Commodore's launch.

So now it was a straight fight between *Diana* and *Lebedev*—for though the Martians had not given up, they were a thousand miles astern and no longer counted as a serious threat. For that matter, it was hard to see what *Lebedev* could do to overtake *Diana's* lead. But all the way around the second lap—through eclipse again, and the long, slow drift against the Sun, Merton felt a growing unease.

He knew the Russian pilots and designers. They had been trying to win this race for twenty years and after all, it was only fair that they should, for had not Pyotr Nikolayevich Lebedev been the first man to detect the pressure of sunlight, back at the very beginning of the twentieth century? But they had never succeeded.

And they would never stop trying. Dimitri was up to something—and it would be spectacular.

Aboard the official launch, a thousand miles behind the racing yachts, Commodore van Stratten looked at the radiogram with angry dismay. It had traveled more than a hundred million miles,

from the chain of solar observatories swinging high above the blazing surface of the Sun, and it brought the worst possible news.

The Commodore—his title, of course, was purely honorary; back on Earth he was Professor of Astrophysics at Harvard—had been half expecting it. Never before had the race been arranged so late in the season; there had been many delays, they had gambled and now, it seemed, they might all lose.

Deep beneath the surface of the Sun, enormous forces were gathering. At any moment, the energies of a million hydrogen bombs might burst forth in the awesome explosion known as a solar flare. Climbing at millions of miles an hour, an invisible fireball many times the size of Earth would leap from the Sun, and head out across space.

The cloud of electrified gas would probably miss the Earth completely. But if it did not, it would arrive in just over a day. Spaceships could protect themselves, with their shielding and their powerful magnetic screen. But the lightly built solar yachts, with their paper-thin walls, were defenseless against such a menace. The crews would have to be taken off, and the race abandoned.

John Merton still knew nothing of this as he brought *Diana* around the Earth for the second time. If all went well, this would be the last circuit, both for him and for the Russians. They had spiraled upwards by thousands of miles, gaining energy from the Sun's rays. On this lap, they should escape from Earth completely—and head outwards on the long run to the Moon. It was a straight race now. *Sunbeam's* crew had finally withdrawn, exhausted, after battling valiantly with their spinning sail for more than a hundred thousand miles.

Merton did not feel tired; he had eaten and slept well, and *Diana* was behaving herself admirably. The autopilot, tensioning the rigging like a busy little spider, kept the great sail trimmed to the Sun more accurately than any human skipper—though, by this time, the two square miles of plastic sheet must have been riddled by hundreds of micrometeorites, the pinhead-sized punctures had produced no falling off of thrust.

He had only two worries. The first was shroud line number eight, which could no longer be adjusted properly. Without any warning, the reel had jammed; even after all these years of astronautical engineering, bearings sometimes seized up in vacuum. He could neither lengthen nor shorten the line, and would have

to navigate as best he could with the others. Luckily, the most difficult maneuvers were over. From now on, *Diana* would have the Sun behind her as she sailed straight down the solar wind. And as the old-time sailors often said, it was easy to handle a boat when the wind was blowing over your shoulder.

His other worry was *Lebedev*, still dogging his heels three hundred miles astern. The Russian yacht had shown remarkable maneuverability, thanks to the four great panels that could be tilted around the central sail. All her flip-overs as she rounded Earth had been carried out with superb precision; but to gain maneuverability she must have sacrificed speed. You could not have it both ways. In the long, straight haul ahead, Merton should be able to hold his own. Yet he could not be certain of victory until, three or four days from now, *Diana* went flashing past the far side of the Moon.

And then, in the fiftieth hour of the race, near the end of the second orbit around Earth, Markoff sprang his little surprise.

"Hello, John," he said casually, over the ship-to-ship circuit. "I'd like you to watch this. It should be interesting."

Merton drew himself across to the periscope and turned up the magnification to the limit. There in the field of view, a most improbable sight against the background of the stars, was the glittering Maltese cross of *Lebedev*, very small but very clear. And then, as he watched, the four arms of the cross slowly detached themselves from the central square and went drifting away, with all their spars and rigging, into space.

Markoff had jettisoned all unnecessary mass, now that he was coming up to escape velocity and need no longer plod patiently around the Earth, gaining momentum on each circuit. From now on, *Lebedev* would be almost unsteerable—but that did not matter. All the tricky navigation lay behind her. It was as if an old-time yachtsman had deliberately thrown away his rudder and heavy keel—knowing that the rest of the race would be straight downwind over a calm sea.

"Congratulations, Dimitri," Merton radioed. "It's a neat trick. But it's not good enough—you can't catch up now."

"I've not finished yet," the Russian answered. "There's an old winter's tale in my country, about a sleigh being chased by wolves. To save himself, the driver has to throw off the passengers one by one. Did you see the analogy?"

Merton did, all too well. On this final straight lap, Dimitri no longer needed his co-pilot. *Lebedev* could really be stripped down for action.

"Alexis won't be very happy about this," Merton replied. "Besides, it's against the rules."

"Alexis isn't happy, but I'm the captain. He'll just have to wait around for ten minutes until the Commodore picks him up. And the regulations say nothing about the size of the crew—you should know that."

Merton did not answer. He was too busy doing some hurried calculations, based on what he knew of *Lebedev's* design. By the time he had finished, he knew that the race was still in doubt. *Lebedev* would be catching up with him at just about the time he hoped to pass the Moon.

But the outcome of the race was already being decided, ninety-two million miles away.

On Solar Observatory Three, far inside the orbit of Mercury, the automatic instruments recorded the whole history of the flare. A hundred million square miles of the Sun's surface suddenly exploded in such blue-white fury that, by comparison, the rest of the disk paled to a dull glow. Out of that seething inferno, twisting and turning like a living creature in the magnetic fields of its own creation, soared the electrified plasma of the great flare. Ahead of it, moving at the speed of light, went the warning flash of ultraviolet and X rays. That would reach Earth in eight minutes, and was relatively harmless. Not so the charged atoms that were following behind at their leisurely four million miles an hour—and which, in just over a day, would engulf *Diana*, *Lebedev*, and their accompanying little fleet in a cloud of lethal radiation.

The Commodore left his decision to the last possible minute. Even when the jet of plasma had been tracked past the orbit of Venus, there was a chance that it might miss the Earth. But when it was less than four hours away, and had already been picked up by the Moon-based radar network, he knew that there was no hope. All solar sailing was over for the next five or six years until the Sun was quiet again.

A great sigh of disappointment swept across the solar system. *Diana* and *Lebedev* were halfway between Earth and Moon,

running neck and neck—and now no one would ever know which was the better boat. The enthusiasts would argue the result for years; history would merely record: Race canceled owing to solar storm.

When John Merton received the order, he felt a bitterness he had not known since childhood. Across the years, sharp and clear, came the memory of his tenth birthday. He had been promised an exact scale model of the famous spaceship *Morning Star*, and for weeks he had been planning how he would assemble it, where he would hang it up in his bedroom. And then, at the last moment, his father had broken the news. "I'm sorry, John—it costs too much money. Maybe next year . . ."

Half a century and a successful lifetime later, he was a heart-broken boy again.

For a moment, he thought of disobeying the Commodore. Suppose he sailed on, ignoring the warning? Even if the race was abandoned, he could make a crossing to the Moon that would stand in the record books for generations.

But that would be worse than stupidity. It would be suicide—and a very unpleasant form of suicide. He had seen men die of radiation poisoning, when the magnetic shielding of their ships had failed in deep space. No—nothing was worth that. . . .

He felt as sorry for Dimitri Markoff as for himself; they both deserved to win, and now victory would go to neither. No man could argue with the Sun in one of its rages, even though he might ride upon its beams to the edge of space.

Only fifty miles astern now, the Commodore's launch was drawing alongside *Lebedev*, preparing to take off her skipper. There went the silver sail, as Dimitri—with feeling that he would share—cut the rigging. The tiny capsule would be taken back to Earth, perhaps to be used again—but a sail was spread for one voyage only.

He could press the jettison button now, and save his rescuers a few minutes of time. But he could not do so. He wanted to stay aboard to the very end, on the little boat that had been for so long a part of his dreams and his life. The great sail was spread now at right angles to the Sun, exerting its utmost thrust. Long ago it had torn him clear of Earth—and *Diana* was still gaining speed.

Then, out of nowhere, beyond all doubt or hesitation, he knew

what must be done. For the last time, he sat down before the computer that had navigated him halfway to the Moon.

When he had finished, he packed the log and his few personal belongings. Clumsily—for he was out of practice, and it was not an easy job to do by oneself—he climbed into the emergency survival suit.

He was just sealing the helmet when the Commodore's voice called over the radio. "We'll be alongside in five minutes, Captain. Please cut your sail so we won't foul it."

John Merton, first and last skipper of the sun-yacht *Diana*, hesitated for a moment. He looked for the last time around the tiny cabin, with its shining instruments and its neatly arranged controls, now all locked in their final positions. Then he said to the microphone: "I'm abandoning ship. Take your time to pick me up. *Diana* can look after herself."

There was no reply from the Commodore, and for that he was grateful. Professor van Stratten would have guessed what was happening—and would know that, in these final moments, he wished to be left alone.

He did not bother to exhaust the airlock, and the rush of escaping gas blew him gently out into space; the thrust he gave her then was his last gift to *Diana*. She dwindled away from him, sail glittering splendidly in the sunlight that would be hers for centuries to come. Two days from now she would flash past the Moon; but the Moon, like the Earth, could never catch her. Without his mass to slow her down, she would gain two thousand miles an hour in every day of sailing. In a month, she would be traveling faster than any ship that man had ever built.

As the Sun's rays weakened with distance, so her acceleration would fall. But even at the orbit of Mars, she would be gaining a thousand miles an hour in every day. Long before then, she would be moving too swiftly for the Sun itself to hold her. Faster than any comet that had ever streaked in from the stars, she would be heading out into the abyss.

The glare of rockets, only a few miles away, caught Merton's eye. The launch was approaching to pick him up at thousands of times the acceleration that *Diana* could ever attain. But engines could burn for a few minutes only, before they exhausted their fuel—while *Diana* would still be gaining speed, driven outwards by the Sun's eternal fires, for ages yet to come.

"Good-bye, little ship," said John Merton. "I wonder what eyes will see you next, how many thousand years from now?"

At last he felt at peace, as the blunt torpedo of the launch nosed up beside him. He would never win the race to the Moon; but his would be the first of all man's ships to set sail on the long journey to the stars.

Prose Bowl

by Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg

Bill Pronzini is a noted mystery and suspense writer whose "Nameless Detective" series is very popular in this country and abroad. Barry N. Malzberg is the author of dozens of noteworthy books in the science fiction field and a winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. Together they have coauthored four novels, including the excellent Night Screams (1979) and numerous short stories.

In 1980 "Prose Bowl" was expanded into a novel of the same name that has not received the critical attention it deserves.

Standing there at midfield in the Coliseum, in front of a hundred thousand screaming New-Sport fans and a TriDim audience estimated at thirty million, I felt a lot of different emotions: excitement, pride, tension, and maybe just a touch of fear. I still couldn't believe that I was here—Rex Sackett, the youngest ever to make it all the way through the playoffs to the Prose Bowl. But I'd done it, and if I cleared one more hurdle I would be the new world champion.

Just one more hurdle.

I looked across the Line at the old man. Leon Culp, better known as The Cranker. Fifty-seven years old, twenty million words in a career spanning almost four decades. Twice defeated in the quarter-finals, once defeated in the semi-finals two years

ago. His first time in the Prose Bowl too, and he was the sentimental favorite. I was just a kid, an upstart; by all rights, a lot of the scribes had been saying, I didn't deserve to be here at my age. But the odds-makers had made me a 3-2 favorite because of my youth and stamina and the way I had handled my opponents in the playoffs. And because there were also a lot of people who felt The Cranker couldn't win the big ones; that he depended too much on the Fuel now, that he was pretty near washed up and had made it this far only because of weak competition.

Maybe all that was true, but I wasn't so sure. Leon Culp had always been my idol; I had grown up reading and studying him, and in his time—and despite his misfortune in past Prose Bowl races—he was the best there was. I'd been in awe of him when I was a wet-behind-the-ears kid in the Junior Creative Leagues, and I was still a little in awe of him now.

It wasn't that I lacked confidence in myself. I had plenty of confidence, and plenty of desire too; I wanted to win not only for myself and the \$100,000 championship prize, but for Sally, and for Mort Taylor, the best agent in the business, and most of all for Mom and Dad, who had supported me during those first five lean years when I was struggling in the semi-pros. Still, I couldn't seem to shake that sense of nervous wonder. This wasn't any ordinary pro I was about to go up against. This was The Cranker.

It was almost time for the Face-Off to begin. The PA announcer introduced me first, because as the youngest of the contestants I was wearing the visitor's red, and I stepped out and waved at the packed stands. There was a chorus of cheers, particularly from over in G Section where Sally and Mort and the folks were sitting with the Sackett Boosters. The band struck up my old school song; I felt my eyes dampen as I listened.

When the announcer called out The Cranker's name, the cheers were even louder—but there were a few catcalls mixed in too. He didn't seem to pay any attention either way. He just stood without moving, his seamed old face set in stoic determination. In his blue uniform tunic, outlined against the hot New Year's Day sky, he looked bigger than he really was—awesome, implacable. Unbeatable.

Everybody stood up for the National Anthem. Then there was another uproar from the fans—I'd never imagined how deafening

it could get down here on the floor of the Prose Bowl—and finally the head Editor trotted out and called us over for the coin flip. I called Tails in the air, and the coin fell to the turf and came up Tails. The Head Editor moved over to me and patted my shoulders to indicate I'd won the toss; the Sackett Boosters bellowed their approval. Through all of this, Culp remained motionless and aloof, not looking at me or the Head Editor or anything else, it seemed.

We went back to the Line and got ready. I was becoming more and more tense as the Face-Off neared; the palms of my hands were slick and my head seemed empty. What if I can't think of a title? I thought. What if I can't think of an opening sentence?

"Be cool, kid," Mort Taylor had told me earlier. "Don't try to force it. The words'll come, just like they always have."

The Cranker and I stood facing each other, looking at the huge electronic scoreboards at opposite ends of the field. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Head Editor wave his red starting flag at the Line Editor; and in the next instant the two plot topics selected by the officials flashed on the board.

A. FUTURISTIC LOVE-ADVENTURE

B. MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY DETECTIVE

I had five seconds to make my choice. Both of the topics looked tough, but this was the Prose Bowl and nothing came easy in the championship. I made an arbitrary selection and yelled out "Plot B!" to the Head Editor. He unfurled his white flag with the letter B on it, and immediately the PA announcer's voice boomed, "Rex Sackett chooses Plot B!"

The crowd broke into thunderous applause; the sound of it was like a pressure against my eardrums. I could feel my pulse racing in hard irregular rhythm and my stomach was knotted up. I tried not to think about the thirty million people watching me on the Tri-Dim close-ups.

The Line Editor's claxon went off.

The Cranker and I broke for our typewriters. And all of a sudden, as I was sliding into my chair, I felt control and a kind of calm come into me. That was the way it always was with me, the way it always was with the great ones, Mort had said: no matter how nervous you were before the start of a match, once the horn sounded your professionalism took over and you forgot everything except the job you had to do.

I had a title even before I reached for the first sheet of paper beside the typewriter, and I had the first sentence as soon as I rolled the sheet into the platen. I fired out the title—THE MICAWBER DIAMOND—jabbed down the opening sentence and the rest of the narrative hook, and was into the second paragraph before I heard Culp's machine begin its amplified hammering across the Line.

A hundred thousand voices screamed for speed and continuity. The Cranker's rooting section and the Sackett Boosters made the most noise; I knew Sally would be leading the cheers on my side, and I had a sharp mental image of her in her red-and-white sweater with the big S on the front. Sweet, wonderful Sally. . . .

I hunched forward, teeth locked around the stem of my old briar, and drove through two more paragraphs of stage-setting. End of page one. I glanced up at the south-end scoreboard as I ripped the sheet out of the platen and rolled in a new one. SACKETT 226, CULP 187. I laid in half a page of flashback, working the adjectives and the adverbs to build up my count, powered through eight lines of descriptive transition, and came into the first passage of dialogue. Up on the board, what I was writing appeared in foot-high electronic printout, as if the words were emblazoned on the sky itself.

SAM SLEDGE STALKED ACROSS HIS PLUSH OFFICE, LEAVING FOOT-PRINTS IN THE THICK SHAG CARPET LIKE ANGRY DOUGHNUTS. VELDA VANCE, ALLURINGLY BEAUTIFUL SECRETARY TO SLEDGE AND CHANDLER INVESTIGATIONS, LOOKED UP IN ALARM. "SOMEBODY MURDERED MILES CHANDLER LAST NIGHT," HE GRITTED TO HER, "AND STOLE THE MICAWBER DIAMOND HE WAS GUARDING."

It was solid stuff, I knew that. Not my best, but plenty good enough and just what the fans wanted. The sound of my name echoing through the great stadium put chills on my back.

"Sackett! Hack it! Sackett, hack it! Sackett hack it Sackett hack it!"

I finished the last line on page two and had the clean sheet into the machine in two seconds flat. My eyes found the scoreboard again as I pounded the keys: SACKETT 529, CULP 430. Hundred-word lead, but that was nothing in this early going. Without losing speed or concentration, I sneaked a look at what The Cranker was punching out.

THE DENEBIAN GREEN-BEAST CAME TOWARD HER, MOVING WITH A CURIOUSLY FLOWING MOTION, ITS TENTACLES SWAYING IN A SENSUAL DANCE OF ALIEN LUST. SHE STOOD FROZEN AGAINST A RUDDER OF ROCK

AND STARED AT THE THING IN HORROR. THE UNDULATING TENTACLES REACHED TOWARD HER AND THE GREEN WAVES OF DAMP WHICH THE BEAST EXUDED SENT SHUDDERS THROUGH HER.

God, I thought, that's top-line prose. He's inspired, he's pulling out all the stops.

The crowd sensed it too. I could hear his cheerleaders chanting, almost drowning out the cries from my own rooters across the way.

"Come on, Culp! Write that pulp!"

I was in the most intense struggle of my life, there was no doubt about that. I'd known it was going to be rough, but knowing it and then being in the middle of it were two different things. The Cranker was a legend in his own time; when he was right, no one had his facility, his speed, his edge with the cutting transitions, his ability to produce under stress. If he could maintain pace and narrative drive, there wasn't a writer on earth who could beat him—

SACKETT 920, CULP 874.

The score registered on my mind, and I realized with a jolt that my own pace had slacked off: Culp had cut my lead by more than half. That was what happened to you when you started worrying about your opponent and what he was doing. I could hear Mort's voice again, echoing in my memory: "The pressure will turn your head, kid, if you let it. But I don't think it will. I think you're made of the real stuff; I think you've got the guts and the heart."

THE ANGER ON MICAWBER'S FACE MELTED AWAY LIKE SOAP IN A SOAP DISH UNDER A STREAM OF HOT DIRTY WATER.

I jammed out that line and I knew I was back in the groove, beginning to crank near the top of my form. The sound of my machine climbed to a staccato pulse. Dialogue, some fast foreshadowing, a string of four adjectives that drew a burst of applause from the Sackett Boosters. I could feel my wrists starting to knot up from the strain, and there was pain in my left leg where I'd pulled a hamstring during the semi-final match against the Kansas City Flash. But I didn't pay any attention to that; I had written in pain before and I wasn't about to let it bother me now. I just kept firing out my prose.

Only I wasn't gaining back any of my lead, I saw then. The foot-high numerals read SACKETT 1163, CULP 1127. The Cranker had

hit his stride too, and he was matching me word for word, sentence for sentence.

SHE HAD NO MORE STRENGTH LEFT TO RUN. SHE WAS TRAPPED NOW, THERE WAS NO ESCAPE. A SCREAM BURST FROM HER THROAT AS THE BEAST BOUNDED UP TO HER AND DREW HER INTO ITS AWFUL CLUTCHES. BREATHING GREEN FUMES AGAINST HER FACEPLATE. IT WAS GOING TO WORK ITS WILL ON HER! IT WAS GOING TO DO UNSPEAKABLE THINGS TO HER BODY!

"Culp, Culp, Culp!"

THE NIGHT WAS DARK AND WET AND COLD AND THE RAIN FELL ON SLEDGE LIKE A MILLION TEARS FROM A MILLION LOST LOVES ON A MILLION WORLDS IN A MILLION GALAXIES.

"Sackett, Sackett, Sackett!"

Sweat streamed into my eyes, made the numerals on the board seem smeared and glistening: SACKETT 1895, CULP 1857. I ducked my head against the sleeve of my tunic and slid a new sheet into the machine. On the other side of the Line, The Cranker was sitting straight and stiff behind his typewriter, fingers flying, his shaggy head wreathed in cigarette smoke. But he wasn't just hitting the keys, he was *attacking* them—as if they, not me, were the enemy and he was trying to club them into submission.

I reached back for a little extra, raced through the rest of the transition, slammed out three paragraphs of introspection and five more of dialogue. New page. More dialogue, then another narrative hook to foreshadow the first confrontation scene. New page. Description and some cat-and-mouse action to build suspense.

AS HE WAITED IN THE DARK ALLEY FOR THE GUY WHO WAS FOLLOWING HIM, SLEDGE'S RIGHT HAND ITCHED AROUND THE GUN IN HIS POCKET. HE COULD FEEL THE OLD FAMILIAR RAGE BURNING INSIDE HIM, MAKING HIS BLOOD BOIL LIKE WATER IN A KETTLE ON THE OLD WOOD-BURNING STOVE IN HIS OLD MAN'S FOURTH-FLOOR WALK-UP IN

My typewriter locked. I heard the cheering rise to a crescendo; two hundred thousand hands commenced clapping as the Line Editor's horn blared.

End of the first quarter.

SACKETT 2500, CULP 2473

I leaned back in my chair, sleeving more wetness from my face, and took several deep breaths. The Cranker had got to his feet. He stood in a rigid posture, a fresh cigarette between his lips, and squinted toward the sidelines. His Seconds were

already on the field, running toward him with water bucket and a container of Fuel.

My own Seconds reached me a short time later. One of them extended Fuel, but even though my mouth was dry, sandy, I shook my head and gestured him away. Mort and I had agreed that I should hold off on the Fuel as long as possible; it was part of the game plan we had worked out.

By the time I finished splashing water on my face and toweling off, there was less than a minute of the time-out left. I looked over at G Section. I couldn't pick Mom and Dad out of the sea of faces, or Sally or Mort either, but just knowing they were there was enough.

I took my place, knocked dottle out of the briar, tamped in some fresh tobacco, and fired it. My mind was already racing, working ahead—a full four sentences when Culp sat down again and the Head Editor raised the red starting flag.

Claxon.

THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD. THE FOLLOWER HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH HIS PARTNER'S MURDER AND THE THEFT OF THE DIAMOND, SLEDGE WAS SURE OF THAT. HE WAS GOING TO GET SOME ANSWERS NOW, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.

And I was off, banging my machine at the same feverish pace of the first period. I cut through a full page of action, interspersing it with dialogue, drawing it out; the scene was good for another 500 words, at least. Twelve pages down and the thirteenth in the typewriter. My quality level was still good, but when I glanced up at the board, I saw that The Cranker was once again cranking at the top of his form.

BUT EVEN WHILE SHE WAS CLINGING TO THE STARFLEET CAPTAIN WHO HAD SAVED HER LIFE, SHE FELT A STRANGE SADNESS. THE GREEN-BEAST HAD BEEN DISINTEGRATED AND WAS NOTHING MORE NOW THAN A PUDDLE OF GREEN ON THE DUSTY SANDS OF DENEK, LIKE A SPLOTCH OF PAINT ON AN ALIEN CANVAS. THE HORROR WAS OVER, AND YET . . . AND YET, DESPITE HER REVULSION, THE THING HAD STIRRED SOMETHING DEEP AND PRIMITIVE INSIDE HER THAT SHE WAS ONLY JUST BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND.

"Culp, Culp—crank that pulp!"

My lead had dwindled to a mere twelve words: the scoreboard read SACKETT 3359, CULP 3347. The Cranker was making his move now, and he was doing it despite the fact that I was working at maximum speed.

The feeling of tension and uncertainty began to gnaw at me again. I fought it down, concentrated even more intensely, punching the keys so hard that pain shot up both wrists. Fresh sweat rolled off me; the hot sun lay on the back of my neck like a burning hand.

SLEDGE SNARLED, "YOU'LL TALK, ALL RIGHT!" AND SWATTED THE GUY ACROSS THE HEAD WITH HIS FORTY-FIVE. THE GUY REELED AND STAGGERED INTO THE WET ALLEY WALL. SLEDGE MOVED IN, TRANSFERRING THE GUN TO HIS LEFT HAND. HE HIT THE FOLLOWER A SECOND TIME, HIT HIM IN THE MOUTH WITH A HAND LIKE A FIST

The Head Editor's whistle blew.

And my typewriter locked, jamming my fingers.

Penalty. Penalty!

My throat closed up. I snapped my head over toward the sidelines and saw the ten-second penalty flag waving—the green-and-black one that meant "Phrasing Unacceptable." The crowd was making a magnified sound that was half excited, half groaning; I knew the TriDim cameras would have homed in on me for a series of closeups. I could feel my face reddening. First penalty of the match and I had let it happen to me.

But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that it was going to cost me the lead: The Cranker's typewriter was still clattering on at white heat, churning out words and sentences that flashed like taunts on the board.

I counted off the seconds in my mind, and when the Head Editor's flag dropped and my machine unlocked, I flailed the keys angrily, rewriting the penalty sentence: HE HIT THE FOLLOWER A SECOND TIME, HIT HIM IN THE MOUTH WITH A HAND LIKE A CEMENT BLOCK. But the damage had been done, all right. The board told me that and told everyone else too.

CULP 3899, SACKETT 3878.

The penalty seemed to have energized The Cranker, given him a psychological lift; he was working faster than ever now, with even more savagery. I felt a little wrench of fear. About the only way you could beat one of the greats was to take the lead early on and hold it. Once an experienced old pro like Culp got in front, the advantage was all his.

A quote dropped into my mind, one I'd read a long time ago in an Old-Sports history text, and it made me shiver: "Going up against the best is a little bit like going up against Death."

I had my own speed back now, but my concentration wasn't

as sharp as it had been before the penalty; a couple of times I hit the wrong keys, misspelled words, and then had to retype them. It was just the kind of penalty-reaction Mort had warned me against. "Penalties don't mean a thing," he'd said. "What you've got to watch out for is worrying about them, letting them dam up the flow or lead you into another mistake."

But it wasn't Mort out here in the hot Prose Bowl sun. It wasn't Mort going head-to-head against a legend. . . .

The amplified sound of Culp's machine seemed louder than my own, steadier, more rhythmic. Nervously I checked the board again. His stuff was coming so fast now that it might have been written by one of the experimental prose-computers instead of a pulpeteer.

SHE LOOKED OUT THROUGH THE SHIP'S VIEWSCREEN AT THE EMPTY SWEEP OF SPACE. BEHIND HER SHE COULD HEAR THE CAPTAIN TALKING TO THE BASE COMMANDER AT EARTH COLONY SEVEN, RELAYING THE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SHUTTLE-SHIP CRASH ON DENEb. "ONLY ONE SURVIVOR," HE WAS SAYING. YES, SHE THOUGHT, ONLY ONE SURVIVOR. BUT I WISH THERE HADN'T BEEN ANY. IF I'D DIED IN THE CRASH TOO, THEN I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ATTACKED BY THE GREEN-BEAST. AND I WOULDN'T BE FEELING THESE STRANGE AND TERRIBLE EMOTIONS, THIS SENSE OF UNFULFILLMENT AND DEPRIVATION.

Some of the fans were on their feet, screaming "*Cranker! Cranker!*"

CULP 4250, SACKETT 4196.

I felt light-headed, giddy with tension; but the adrenaline kept flowing and the words kept coming, pouring out of my subconscious and through the mind-haze and out into the blazing afternoon—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. Don't let him gain any more ground. Stay close. Stay close!

SLEDGE FOLLOWED THE FAT MAN THROUGH THE HEAVY DARKNESS ALONG THE RIVER. THE STENCH OF FISH AND MUD AND GARBAGE WAFTED UP FROM THE OILY BLACK WATER AND SLAPPED HIM ACROSS THE FACE LIKE A DIRTY WET TOWEL. HE DIDN'T KNOW WHERE THE FAT MAN WAS LEADING HIM, BUT I FELT SURE IT

Whistle.

Lock.

Penalty.

I looked up in disbelief and saw the Head Editor waving the purple-and-gold penalty flag that signified "Switched Person." A smattering of boos rolled down around me from the stands.

My eyes flicked to the board, and it was true, I had slipped out of third person and into first—an amateur's mistake, a kid's blunder. Shame made me duck my head; it was as if, in that moment, I could feel concentrated waves of disgust from the sixty million eyes that watched me.

The ten seconds of the penalty were like a hundred, a thousand. Because all the while The Cranker's machine ratcheted onward, not once slowing or breaking cadence. When my typewriter finally unlocked, I redid the sentence in the proper person and plunged ahead without checking the score. I didn't want to know how far behind I was now. I was afraid that if I did know, it would make me reckless with urgency and push me into another stupid error.

My throat was parched, raw and hot from pipe smoke, and for the first time I thought about the Fuel. It had been a long time since I'd wanted it in the first half of a Face-Off, but I wanted it now. Only I couldn't have it, not until halftime, not without taking a disastrous 20-second Fuel penalty. There had to be less than 600 words left to the end of the quarter, I told myself; I could hold out that long. A top-line pro could do 600 words no matter what the circumstances. A top-line pro, as The Cranker himself had once said, could do 600 words *dead*.

I forced myself to shut out everything from my mind except the prose, the story line. Old page out of the platen, new page in. Old page out, new page in. Speed, speed, but make sure of the grammar, the tense, the phrasing. Still a full 5000 words to go in the match. Still an even chance for a second-half comeback.

THE INTERIOR OF THE WAREHOUSE WAS DANK AND MUSTY AND FILLED WITH CROUCHING SHADOWS LIKE A PLATOON OF EVIL SPIRITS WAITING TO LEAP ON HIM. THEN THERE WAS A FLICKER OF LIGHT AT THE REAR AND IT TOLD SLEDGE THE FAT MAN HAD SWITCHED ON A SMALL POCKET FLASH. GUN IN HAND, HE CREPT STEALTHILY TOWARD THE

My machine locked again.

I jerked my head up, half expecting to see a penalty flag aloft for the third time. But it wasn't a penalty; it was halftime at last. The Line Editor's horn blew. The Cranker's cheering section was chanting "*Culp, Culp, Culp!*"

I had to look at the board then, at the score shining against the sky, and I did: CULP 5000, SACKETT 4796.

Some of the tension drained out of me and I sat there feeling limp, heavy with fatigue. The joints in my fingers were stiff; there was a spot of blood on the tip of my right forefinger where the skin had split near the nail. But the score was all that mattered to me at that moment, and it wasn't as bad as I'd feared. Only 204 words down. I had made up larger margins than that in my career; I could do it again.

Across the Line, Culp was on his feet and staring down at the turf with eyes that gleamed and didn't blink. He wasn't quite so imposing now, strangely. His back was bowed and his hands looked a little shaky—as though he was the one who was trailing by 204 words and facing an uphill battle in the second half.

When I pushed back my own chair and stood up, a sudden sharp pain in my tender hamstring made me clutch at the table edge. I was soaked in sweat and so thirsty I had trouble swallowing. But I didn't reach for the Fuel when my Seconds appeared; in spite of my need I didn't want to take any while I was out here, didn't want to show The Cranker and the crowd and the TriDim audience that I needed it. In the locker room, yes. Just another few minutes.

Two of Culp's Seconds began escorting him off the field toward the tunnel at the south end; he was hanging onto his Fuel container with both hands. I waved away my people and hobbled toward the north tunnel alone.

Fans showered me with roses and confetti as I came into the tunnel. That was a good sign; they hadn't given up on me. The passageway was cool, a welcome relief from the blazing sun, and empty except for the two guards who were stationed there to keep out fans, New-Sport reporters, and anyone else who might try to see me. The Prose Bowl rules were strict: each of the contestants had to spend halftime alone, locked in his respective locker room without typewriter or any other kind of writing tools. Back in '26, the year of the Postal-Rate Riots, a pro named Penny-A-Word Gordon had been disqualified for cheating when officials found out another wordsmith, hired by Gordon's agent, had written a fast 1000-word continuation during the break and delivered it to Gordon, who then revised it with a pen, memorized it, and used it to build up an early third-quarter lead. The incident had caused a pretty large scandal at the time, and the Prose Bowl people weren't about to let it happen again.

As soon as I came into the locker room, the familiar writer's-office odors of sweat, stale tobacco, and spilled Fuel assailed me and made me feel a little better. The Prose Bowl officials were also careful about creating the proper atmosphere; they wanted each of the contestants to feel at home. Behind me the door panel whispered shut and locked itself electronically, but I was already on my way to where the Fuel container sat waiting on the desk.

I measured out three ounces, tossed it off, and waited for it to work its magic. It didn't take long; the last of the tension and most of the lassitude were gone within seconds. I poured out another three ounces, set it aside, and stripped off my sodden uniform.

While I was showering, I thought about The Cranker. His performance in the first half had been flawless: no penalties, unflagging speed, front-line prose. Even his detractors wouldn't be able to find fault with it, or even the slightest indication that he was washed up and about to wilt under the pressure.

So if I was going to beat him I had to do it on talent and speed and desire—all on my own. Nothing came easy in this business or in the Prose Bowl; I'd known that all along. You had to work long and hard if you wanted to win. You had to give your all, and try to stay away from the penalties, and hope that you were good enough and strong enough to come out on top.

No, The Cranker wasn't going to beat himself. And I wasn't going to beat myself either.

I stepped out of the shower, toweled dry, bandaged the wound on my right forefinger, put on a clean tunic, and took the rest of my allotted Fuel an ounce at a time. I could feel my confidence building, solidifying again.

The digital clock on one wall said that there were still nine minutes left in the time-out. I paced around, flexing my leg to keep the hamstring from tightening up. It was quiet in there, almost too quiet—and suddenly I found myself thinking how alone I was. I wished Mort was there so we could discuss strategy; I wished the folks and Sally were there so I could tell them how I felt, how self-assured I was.

But even if they were here, I thought then, would it really make a difference? I'd still be alone, wouldn't I? You were always alone in the pros; your parents, your agent, the Editors, the girl you loved, all of them gave you as much help and

support as they could—but they weren't pulpeteers and they just didn't know what it was like to go out time after time and face the machine, the blank sheets of paper, the pressure and pain of millions of words and hundreds of Face-Offs. The only ones who did know what it was like were other pros; only your own could truly understand.

Only your own.

The Cranker?

Were we really opponents, enemies? Or were we soul brothers, bound more closely than any blood relatives because we shared the same basic loneliness?

It was an unnerving thought and I pushed it out of my head. I couldn't go out there and face Culp believing we were one and the same. It would be like going up against myself, trying to overcome myself in a contest that no one could ever win. . . .

The door panel unlocked finally, just as the three-minute warning horn blew, and I hurried out of the locker room, down the tunnel past the silent guards and back into the stadium. The last of the marching bands and majorettes were just filing off onto the sidelines. The fans were buzzing, and when they saw me emerge and trot out toward the Line, there were cheers and applause, and the Sackett band began playing my old school song again.

Culp wasn't there yet. But as I reached the Line and took my position, I heard the roar from the stands intensify and his rooting section set up a chant: "*Cranker! Cranker!*" Then I saw him, coming out of the south tunnel, not running but walking in a loose rapid gait. Halfway out, he seemed to stagger just a little, then regained his stride. When he stopped across from me I saw that his eyes were still bright and fixed, like shiny nailheads in a block of old gray wood. I wondered how much Fuel he'd had during the time-out. Not that it mattered; it wouldn't have been enough to make a difference.

The Head Editor walked out carrying his flags. I lit my pipe and Culp fired a cigarette; we were both ready. The crowd noise subsided as the Head Editor raised his red flag—and then surged again as the flag fell and the claxon sounded.

The second half was underway.

My mind was clear and sharp as I dropped into my chair. I had checked my prose printout, waiting at the Line, and I had the rest of my unfinished halftime sentence and the rest of the

paragraph already worked out; I punched it down, followed it with three fast paragraphs of descriptive narrative. Build into another action-confrontation scene? No. I was only at the half-way point in the story line, and it would throw my pacing off. I laid in a deft one-line twist, for shock value, and cut away into transition.

"That's it, Sackett! That's how to hack it!"

The approving cheers from the Sackett Boosters and from the rest of the fans were like a fresh shot of Fuel: I could feel my thoughts expanding, settling squarely into the groove. Words poured out of me; phrases, sentences, crisp images. The beat of my typewriter was steady, unrelieved, like a peal of thunder rolling across the hot blue sky.

But it wasn't the only thunder in the Prose Bowl, I realized abruptly. The Cranker's machine was making it too—louder, faster, even more intense. For the first time since the quarter had begun I glanced up at the score.

CULP 6132, SACKETT 5898.

I couldn't believe it. I had been certain that I was cutting into his lead, that I had closed to within at least 175 words; instead Culp had widened the margin by another 30. The thin edge of fear cut at me again, slicing through the confidence and that feeling of controlled power I always had when I was going good. I was throwing everything I had at the Cranker here in the third period, and it wasn't good enough—he was still pulling away.

I bit down so hard on the stem of my briar that I felt it crack between my teeth. Keep bearing down, I told myself grimly. Don't let up for a second.

HE WAS STILL THINKING ABOUT THE CASE, TRYING TO PUT THE PIECES TOGETHER, WHEN THE TELEPHONE RANG. IT WAS VELDA. "I'VE BEEN WORRIED ABOUT YOU, SAM," HER SOFT PURRING VOICE SAID, AND ALL AT ONCE HE FELT A BURNING NEED TO SEE HER. SHE WAS THE ONLY PERSON HE COULD TALK TO, THE ONE PERSON IN THE WORLD WHO UNDERSTOOD HOW HE FELT.

"Sackett, Sackett!"

But The Cranker's machine kept on soaring; The Cranker's words kept on racing across the board with relentless speed.

WHEN SHE WAS SURE THE CAPTAIN WAS ASLEEP SHE GOT OUT OF THE BUNK AND PADDED OVER TO WHERE HIS UNIFORM LAY. SHE KNEW WHAT SHE HAD TO DO NOW. SHE ACCEPTED THE TRUTH AT LAST, BECAUSE THE WHOLE TIME SHE HAD BEEN COPULATING WITH THE CAPTAIN

HER THOUGHTS HAD BEEN BACK ON DENEb. FULL TO THE SIGHT AND THE SMELL OF GREEN.

"Culp, Culp, Culp!"

The lift from the six ounces of Fuel I'd had in the locker room was gone now and the tension was back, binding the muscles in my fingers and shoulders. The sun seemed to be getting hotter, drawing tunnels of sweat from my pores, making my head throb. My words were still coming fast, but the images weren't quite as sharp as they'd been minutes ago, the quality level not quite as high. I didn't care. Speed was all that mattered now; I was willing to sacrifice quality for the maintenance of speed.

CULP 6912, SACKETT 6671.

Down by 241 now; The Cranker had only gained seven words in the last 800. But *he* had gained them, not I—I couldn't seem to narrow his lead, no matter what I did. I lifted my head, still typing furiously, and stared across at him. His teeth were bared; sweat glistened like oil on his gray skin. Yet his fingers were a sunlit blur on the keys, as if they were independent creatures performing a mad dance.

CLENCHING THE CAPTAIN'S LASER WEAPON IN HER HAND, SHE MADE HER WAY AFT TO WHERE THE LIFECRAFT WERE KEPT. SHE KNEW THE COORDINATES FOR DENEb. SHE WOULD ORDER THE LIFECRAFT'S COMPUTER TO TAKE HER THERE—TAKE HER TO THE PROMISE OF THE GREEN.

A feeling of desperation came into me. Time was running out; there were less than 500 words left to go in the quarter, less than 3000 left in the match. You could make up 250 words in the fourth period of a Face-Off, but you couldn't do it unless you had momentum. And I didn't have it, I couldn't seem to get it. It all belonged to The Cranker.

The fans continued to shriek, creating a wild counterpoint to the thunder of our machines. I imagined I could hear Mort's voice telling me to hold on, keep cranking, and Dad's voice hoarse from shouting, and Sally's voice saying "You can do it, darling, you can do it!"

CULP 7245, SACKETT 7002.

Holding. Down 245 now, but holding.

You can do it, you can do it!

SLEDGE'S EYES GLOWED AS HE LOOKED AT VELDA'S MAGNIFICENT BOSOM. VELDA, THE ONLY WOMAN HE'D WANTED SINCE HIS WIFE LEFT HIM THREE YEARS BEFORE BECAUSE SHE COULDN'T STAND HIS JOB AND

THE KIND OF PEOPLE HE DEALT WITH. THE PALMS OF HIS HANDS WERE WET, HOT AND WET WITH DESIRE.

The palms of my hands were hot and wet, but I didn't dare take the time to wipe them dry. Only 150 to go in the quarter now.

HE TOOK HER INTO HIS ARMS. THE FEEL OF HER VOLUPTUOUS BODY WAS EXQUISITE. HE CRUSHED HIS MOUTH AGAINST HERS, HEARD HER MOAN AS HIS HAND CAME UP AND SLID ACROSS THE CURVE OF HER BREAST. "TAKE ME, SAM," SHE BREATHED HUSKILY AGAINST HIS LIPS. "TEAR MY CLOTHES OFF AND GIVE ME YOUR HOT

I tore page twenty-six out of the typewriter, slapped in page twenty-seven.

LOVE. GIVE IT TO ME NOW, SAM!"

SLEDGE WANTED TO DO JUST THAT. BUT SOMETHING HELD HIM BACK. THEN HE HEARD IT—A SOUND OUT IN THE HALLWAY, A FURTIVE SCRABBLING SOUND LIKE A RAT MAKES. YEAH, HE THOUGHT, A HUMAN RAT. HE LET GO OF VELDA, PULLED OUT HIS FORTY-FIVE, AND SPUN AROUND IN A CROUCH.

My machine locked the instant after I touched the period key; the Line Editor's horn sounded.

The third quarter was over.

I sagged in my chair, only half aware of the crowd noise swelling around me, and peered up at the board. The printout and the numerals blazed like sparks of fire in the sunlight.

CULP 7500, SACKETT 7255.

A deepening fatigue seeped through me, dulling my thoughts. Dimly I saw The Cranker leaning forward across his typewriter, head cradled in his arms; his whole body heaved as if he couldn't get enough air into his lungs. What were the New-Sport announcers saying about him on the TriDim telecast? Did they believe he could maintain his grueling pace for another full quarter?

Did they think I still had a chance to win?

Down 245 with only 2500 left. . . .

Culp took his Fuel sitting down this time, with his head tilted back and his throat working spasmodically. I did the same; I felt that if I stood up my knees would buckle and I would sprawl out like a clown. The game plan called for no more than three ounces at the third-quarter break—none at all if I could hold off—but neither of us had counted on me being down as far as I was. I took a full six ounces, praying it would shore up my

flagging strength, and even then I had to force myself not to make it nine or ten.

Only it didn't do anything for me, as it had at halftime and as it usually did in competition. No lift at all. My mind remained sluggish and the muscles in my arms and wrists wouldn't relax. The only effect it had was to make my head pound and my stomach feel queasy.

With a minute of the time-out left I loaded my pipe, put a match to the tobacco. The smoke tasted foul and made my head throb all the more painfully. I laid the pipe down and did some slow deep-breathing. On his side of the Line Culp was lighting a fresh cigarette off the butt of an old one. He looked shrunken now, at least ten years older than his age of 57—not formidable at all.

You don't awe me anymore, I told him mentally, trying to psych myself up. I can beat you because I'm as good as you are, I'm *better* than you are. Better, old man, you hear me?

He didn't look at me. He hadn't looked at me once during the entire Face-Off.

The Head Editor's red flag went up. I poised my hands at the ready, shaking my head in an effort to clear away some of the fuzziness. The screaming voices of the fans seemed almost hysterical, full of anticipation and a kind of hunger, like animals waiting for the kill.

All right, I thought, this is it.

The red flag dropped and claxon blared.

ALL RIGHT, SLEDGE THOUGHT, THIS IS IT. HE

And my mind went blank.

My hands started to tremble; body fluid streamed down my cheeks. Think of a sentence, for God's sake! But it was as if my brain had contracted, squeezed up into a tiny clotted mass that blocked off all subconscious connection.

The Cranker's machine was making thunder again.

HE

Nothing.

"Come on, Sackett! Hack it, hack it!"

HE

HE

Block. I was blocked.

Panic surged through me. I hadn't had a block since my first year in the semi-pro Gothic Romance League; I'd never believed

it could happen to me in the Bigs. All the symptoms came rushing in on the heels of the panic; feeling of suffocation, pain in my chest, irregular breathing, nausea, strange sounds coming unbidden from my throat that were the beginnings, not the endings of words.

A volley of boos thudded against my eardrums, like rocks of sound stinging, hurting. I could feel myself whimpering; I had the terrible sensation of imminent collapse across my typewriter.

The stuttering roar of Culp's machine ceased for two or three seconds as he pulled out a completed page and inserted new paper, then began again with a vengeance.

A fragment of memory disgorged itself from the clotted mass inside my head: Mort's voice saying to me a long time ago, "To break a block, you begin at the beginning. Subject. Object. Noun. Verb. Preposition. Participle. Take one word at a time, build a sentence, and pretty soon the rest will come."

Subject.

Noun. Pronoun.

HE

Verb. Verb.

WENT

HE WENT

Preposition.

TO

HE WENT TO

Object.

THE DOOR AND THREW IT OPEN AND THE FAT MAN WAS THERE, CROUCHED AT THE EDGE OF THE STAIRCASE, A GUN HELD IN HIS FAT FIST. SLEDGE FELT THE RAGE EXPLODE INSIDE HIM. HE DODGED OUT INTO THE HALLWAY, RAISING HIS FORTY-FIVE. THE BIG MAN WOULD FEEL SLEDGE'S FIRE IN HIS FAT PRETTY SOON NOW.

"*Sackett, Sackett, Sackett!*"

It had all come back in a single wrenching flood; the feeling of mind-shrinkage was gone, and along with it the suffocation, the chest pain, the nausea. But the panic was still there. I had broken the momentary block, I was firing again at full speed, but how much time had I lost? How many more words had I fallen behind?

I was afraid to look up at the board. And yet I *had* to know the score, I had to know if I still had any kind of chance. Fearfully I lifted my eyes, blinking away sweat.

CULP 8015, SACKETT 7369.

The panic dulled and gave way to despair. 650 words down, with less than 2000 to go and The Cranker showing no signs of weakening. Hopeless—it was hopeless.

I was going to lose.

Most of the fans were standing, urging Culp on with great booming cries of his name; they sounded even hungrier now. It struck me then that they wanted to see him humiliate me, pour it on and crush me by a thousand words or more. Well, I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction. I wouldn't be disgraced in front of Mort and my girl and family and thirty million TriDim viewers. I wouldn't quit.

In a frenzy I pounded out the last few lines on page thirty, ripped it free and replaced it. Action, action—draw the scene out for at least three more pages. Adjectives, adverbs, similes. Words. Words.

SLEDGE KICKED THE FAT MAN IN THE GROIN AND SENT HIM TUMBLING DOWN THE STAIRS LIKE A BROKEN SCREAMING DOLL, SCREAMING OUT THE WORDS OF HIS PAIN.

Agony in my head, in my leg, in my wounded forefinger. Roaring in my ears that had nothing to do with the crowd.

CULP 8566, SACKETT 7930.

Gain of 20—twenty words! I wanted to laugh, locked the sound in my throat instead, and made myself glance across at Culp, his body curved into a humpbacked C, fingers hooked into claws, expression of torment on his wet face: the strain was starting to tell on him too. But up on the board, his prose still pouring out in letters as bright as golden blood.

SHE WAS SO TIRED AS SHE TRUDGED ACROSS THE DUSTY SANDS OF DENEb, SO VERY TIRED. BUT SHE HAD TO GO ON, SHE HAD TO FIND THE GREEN. THE BRIGHT GREEN, THE BEAUTIFUL GREEN, IT SEEMED AS IF THERE HAD NEVER BEEN ANYTHING IN HER LIFE EXCEPT THE SEARCH AND THE NEED FOR THE GREEN.

I imagined again the urgent cries from Sally, from Mom and Dad: "Don't give up, Rex! There's still hope, there's still a chance!" Then they faded, and everything else seemed to fade too. I was losing all track of time and place; I felt as if I were being closed into a kind of vacuum. I couldn't hear anything, couldn't see anything but the words, always the words appearing like great and meaningless symbols on the paper and in the sky. It was just The Cranker and me now, alone together in the

stadium. Winning and losing didn't even matter any more. All that mattered was the two of us and the job we were compelled to do.

Finished page out, new page in.

THE FAT MAN SAT BLEEDING AGAINST THE WALL WHERE SLEDGE'S SLUGS HAD HURLED HIM. HE WAS STILL ALIVE BUT NOT FOR LONG. "ALL RIGHT, SHAMUS," HE CROAKED, "I'M FINISHED, IT'S BIG CASINO FOR ME. BUT YOU'LL NEVER GET THE DIAMOND. I'LL TAKE IT TO HELL WITH ME FIRST."

Carriage return, tab key.

The board:

CULP 8916, SACKETT 8341.

And The Cranker's prose still coming, still running:

THE BEAST LOOMED BEFORE HER IN THE THICKET AND SHE FELT HER HEART SKIP A BEAT. SHE FELT DIZZY, AS IF SHE WOULD FAINT AT ANY SECOND. I CAN'T GO THROUGH WITH THIS, SHE THOUGHT. HOW CAN I GO ON LIKE THIS? I NEED

Culp's machine stopped chattering then, as if he had come to the end of a page. I was barely aware of its silence at first, but when five or six seconds had passed an awareness penetrated that it hadn't started up again. The noise from the stands seemed to have shifted cadence, to have taken on a different tenor; that penetrated too. I brought my head up and squinted across the Line.

The Cranker was sitting sideways in his chair, waving frantically at the sidelines. And as I watched, one of his Seconds came racing out with a container of Fuel. The Head Editor began waving his blue-and-yellow flag.

Fuel penalty. Culp was taking a 20-second Fuel penalty.

It was the first crack in his rigid control—but I didn't react to it one way or the other. The crack was too small and it had come too late: a 20-second penalty at this stage of the game, with the score at 8960 to 8419, wouldn't make any difference in the outcome. It might enable me to cut the final margin to 400 or less, but that was about all.

I didn't watch The Cranker take his Fuel this time; I just lowered my head and kept on punching, summoning the last reserves of my strength.

"Culp, Culp—give us the pulp!"

As soon as the chant went up from his rooters, I knew that the penalty time was about to elapse. I raised my eyes just long

enough to check the score and to see The Cranker hunched over his typewriter, little drops of Fuel leaking down over his chin like lost words.

CULP 8960, SACKETT 8536.

His machine began to hammer again.

The illusion that I was about to collapse returned, but it wasn't the result of another block; it was just exhaustion and the terrific mental pressure. My speed was holding and the words were still spewing out as I headed into the final confrontation scene. They seemed jumbled to me, incoherent, but there was no lock and no penalty flag.

SLEDGE KNEW THE UGLY TRUTH NOW AND IT WAS LIKE A KNIFE CARVING PIECES FROM THE FLESH OF HIS PSYCHE. HE KNEW WHO HAD THE MICAWBER DIAMOND AND WHO HAD HELPED THE FAT MAN MURDER HIS PARTNER.

Thirty-five pages complete and thirty-six in the typewriter.

CULP 9333, SACKETT 8946.

Less than 700 words to go. The Prose Bowl was almost over. Just you and me, Cranker, I thought. Let's get it done.

More words rolled out—fifty, a hundred.

And all at once there was a collective gasping sound from the crowd, the kind of sudden stunned reaction you hear in a packed stadium when something unexpected has happened. It got through to me, made me straighten up.

The Head Editor's brown-and-orange penalty flag, the one that meant "Confused Narrative," was up and semaphoring. I realized then that The Cranker's machine had gone silent. My eyes sought the board and read his printout in disbelief.

"I WANT YOU," SHE SAID TO THE CREATURE, "I WANT YOU AS THE SHORES OF NEPTUNE WANT THE RESTLESS PROBING SEAS AS THE SEAS WANT THE DEPTHS GARBAGE GARBAGE

I kept staring at the board, still typing, my subconscious vomiting out the words of my prose. I couldn't seem to grasp what had happened; Culp's words made no sense to me. Some of the fans were booing lustily. Over in G Section, the Sackett Boosters began chanting with renewed excitement.

"Do it, Rex! Grind that text!"

The Cranker was just sitting there behind his machine with a strange, stricken look on his face. His mouth was open, his lips moving; it seemed like he was talking to himself. Babbling to himself?

I finished page thirty-six, pulled it out blindly, and reached for another sheet of paper. Just as I brought it into the platen, Culp's machine unlocked and he hit the keys again.

But not for long.

I CAN'T WRITE THIS SHIT ANYMORE

Lock into silence. Penalty flag.

I understood: The Cranker had broken under the pressure, the crack had become a crevasse and collapsed his professional control. I had known it to happen before, but never in the Prose Bowl. And never to a pulpeter who was only a few hundred words from victory.

CULP 9449, SACKETT 9228.

The penalty flag came down.

GARBAGE

And the flag came back up, and the boos echoed like mad epithets in the hot afternoon.

Culp's face was contorted with emotion, wet with something more than sweat—something that could only be tears. He was weeping. The Cranker was *weeping*.

A sense of tragedy, of compassion touched me. And then it was gone, erased by another perception of the radiant numerals on the board—CULP 9449, SACKETT 9296—and a sudden jolt of discovery, belated by fatigue. I was only down by 150 words now; if The Cranker didn't recover at the end of this penalty, if he took yet another one, I would be able to pull even.

I could still beat him.

I could still win the Prose Bowl.

"IT WAS YOU ALL ALONG, VELDA," SLEDGE HAMMERED AT HER.

"YOU SET MILES UP FOR THE FAT MAN. NOBODY ELSE BESIDES ME AND MICAWBER KNEW HE WOULD BE GUARDING THE DIAMOND THAT NIGHT, AND MICAWBER'S IN THE CLEAR."

Penalty flag down.

ALL GARBAGE.

Penalty flag up:

Virgin paper into my typewriter. Words, sentences, paragraphs. Another half-page completed.

SHIT, The Cranker's printout said.

A rage of boos. And screams, cheers, from G Section.

SACKETT 9481, CULP 9449.

I'd caught up, I'd taken the lead. . . .

VELDA REACHED INSIDE THE FRONT OF HER DRESS, BETWEEN HER

MAGNIFICENT BREASTS. "YOU WANT THE DIAMOND?" SHE SCREAMED AT HIM. "ALL RIGHT, SAM, HERE IT IS!" SHE HURLED THE GLITTERING STONE AT HIM, THEN DOVE SIDEWAYS TO HER PURSE AND YANKED OUT A SMALL PEARL-HANDLED AUTOMATIC. BUT SHE NEVER HAD THE CHANCE TO USE IT. HATING HER, HATING HIMSELF, HATING THIS ROTTEN PAINFUL BUSINESS HE WAS IN, SLEDGE FIRED TWICE FROM THE HIP.

"Sackett, hack it! Sackett, hack it!"

More words. Clean page. More words.

SACKETT 9702, CULP 9449.

The Cranker was on his feet, stumbling away from his machine, stumbling around in circles on the lonely field, his hands clasped to his face, tears leaking through his shaky old fingers.

TEARS LEAKED FROM SLEDGE'S EYES AS HE LOOKED DOWN AT WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND TREACHEROUS VELDA LYING ON THE FLOOR. ALL HE WANTED TO DO NOW WAS TO GET OUT OF THERE, GO HOME TO SALLY; NO, SALLY HAD LEFT HIM A LONG TIME AGO AND THERE WAS NOBODY WAITING AT HOME ANY MORE. HE WAS SO TIRED HE COULDN'T THINK STRAIGHT.

Two of Culp's Seconds had come out on the grass and were steadying him, supporting him between them. Leading him away.

New page, old words. A few more words.

SLEDGE SENT THE CAR SLIDING QUICKLY THROUGH THE COLD WET RAIN, ALONG THE MEAN STREETS OF THE JUNGLE THAT WAS THE CITY. IT WAS ALMOST OVER NOW. HE NEEDED A LONG REST AND HE DIDN'T KNOW IF HE COULD GO ON DOING HIS JOB EVEN AFTER HE'D HAD IT, BUT RIGHT NOW HE DIDN'T CARE.

Pandemonium in the stands.

Word count at 9985.

AND SAM SLEDGE, AS LONELY AND EMPTY AS THE NIGHT ITSELF, DROVE FASTER TOWARD HOME.

THE END.

The claxon sounded.

Above the din the amplified voice of the PA announcer began shouting, "Final score: Rex Sackett 10,000, Leon Culp 9449. Rex Sackett is the new Prose Bowl champion!"

Fans were spilling out of the stands; security personnel came rushing out to throw a protective cordon around me. But I didn't move. I just sat and stared up at the board.

I had won.

And I didn't feel anything at all.

* * *

The Cranker was waiting for me in my locker room.

I still wasn't feeling anything when my Seconds delivered me to the door, ten minutes after the final horn. I didn't want to see anybody while I had that emptiness. Not the New-Sport reporters and the TriDim announcers who would be waiting at the victory press conference. Not even Sally, or Mom and Dad, or Mori.

I told the Seconds and the two tunnel guards that I wanted to be alone for a few minutes. Then I went into the locker room, and hurried over to the container of Fuel. I had three ounces poured out and in my hand when Culp came out of the back alcove.

"Hello, kid," he said.

I stared at him. His sudden appearance had taken me by surprise and I couldn't think of anything to say.

"I came over under the stands after they took me off," he said. "One of the guards is a friend of mine and he let me in. You mind?"

A little shakily, I took some of the Fuel. It helped me find my voice. "No," I said, "I don't mind, Cranker."

"Leon," he said. "Just plain Leon Culp. I'm not The Cranker anymore."

"Sure you are. You're still The Cranker and you're still the best there is, no matter what happened today. A legend. . . ."

He laughed—a hoarse, humorless sound. He'd had a lot more Fuel before coming over here, I could see that. Still, he looked better than he had on the field, more composed.

He said, "Legend? There aren't any legends, kid. Just pros, good and bad. And the best of us are remembered only as long as we keep on winning, stay near the top. Nobody gives a damn about the has-beens and the losers."

"The fans could never forget you—"

"The fans? Hell, you heard them out there when the pressure got to me and I lost it in the stretch. Boos, nothing but boos. It's just a game to them. You think they understand what it's like for us inside, the loneliness and the pain? You think they understand it's not a game for us at all? No, kid, the fans know I'm finished. And so does everybody else in the business."

"You're not finished," I said. "You'll come back again next season."

"Don't be naive. My agent's already called it quits, and

there's not another ten-percenter who'll touch me. Or a League Editor either. I'm through in the pros, kid."

"But what'll you do?"

"I don't know," he said. "I never saved any of the money; I'm almost as broke now as when I started thirty-five years ago. Maybe I can get a job coaching in one of the Junior Leagues—anything that'll buy bread and Fuel. It doesn't matter much, I guess."

"It matters to me."

"Does it? Well, you're a pro, you understand the way it is. I figured you might."

There seemed to be a thickness in my throat; I swallowed against it. "I understand," I said.

"Then let me give you a little advice. If you're smart, this will be your last competition too. You've got the prize money; invest it right and you can live on it for the rest of your life; you'll never have to write another line. Go out a winner, kid, because if you don't maybe someday you'll go out just like me."

He raised a hand in a kind of awkward salute and shuffled over to the door panel.

"Cranker—wait."

He turned.

"What you typed out there at the end, about the stuff we do being garbage. Did you really mean it?"

A small bitter smile curved his mouth. "What do you think, kid?" he said and turned again and went out into the tunnel. The panel slid shut behind him and he was gone.

I sat down in front of the Fuel container. But I didn't want any more of it now; I didn't need it. The emptiness was gone. I could feel again, waves of feeling.

I knew now why I had been so hollow when the Face-Off ended; talking to The Cranker had made me admit the truth. It wasn't because of exhaustion, as I'd wanted to believe. It was because everything he'd said about the business I had intuited myself on the field. And it was because of the insight I'd had at halftime—that The Cranker and I were soul brothers and in going up against him I was going up against myself, that beating him would be, and *was*, a little like beating myself.

But there was something else too, the most important thing of all. Culp was the one who had broken under the pressure, yet it could just as easily have been Rex Sackett. Could still be Rex

Sackett in some other match, some other Prose Bowl—typing GARBAGE GARBAGE and then stumbling around on a lonely field, weeping.

Go out a winner, kid, because if you don't maybe someday you'll go out just like me.

I had already made a decision; I didn't even need to think about it. Sally and my parents would be the first ones I'd tell, then Mort, and after that I would make an official announcement at the press conference.

It was all over for The Cranker and all over for me too.

This would be my last Prose Bowl.

From Downtown at the Buzzer

by George Alec Effinger

Born in Cleveland in 1947, George Alec Effinger wrote for the Marvel group of comic books and has been a free-lance writer since 1971. He currently resides in New Orleans. Effinger's frequently comic visions can be seen to good effect in such books as What Entropy Means to Me (1972), Mixed Feelings (1974), Irrational Numbers (1976), and Dirty Tricks (1978). He is also one of the very few science fiction writers to have written a large number of stories with a sports theme, excellent works that can be found in Idle Pleasures (1983). He has never received the attention he deserves. "From Downtown at the Buzzer" is one of the very few sf stories ever published about basketball.

There are a couple of things my mother will never get to experience.

I mean, there are more than a couple, of course, but there are two things that I think of immediately. First off, my mother won't ever know what it's like to see twelve space creatures in blue suits and masks staring at you while you eat breakfast and wash walls and go to the bathroom. That I know. That I can talk about. My mother can't, and just as well, I guess. But believe me, I can.

The other thing is, my mother will never, ever know the

incredible joy you get, this feeling of complete, instant gratification, when you jump into the air, twist around, and send a basketball in an absolutely perfect arc into the net maybe twenty-three feet away. You have somebody from the other team leaping up with you, his hand right in your face, but sometimes you have God on your side and nothing in the universe can keep that ball from going through that hoop. You sense it sometimes, you can feel it even before you let go of the ball, while you're still floating. Then it's just the smallest flick of the wrist, your fingertips just brushing the ball away, perfect, perfect, perfect, you don't even have to look. You land on the hardwood floor with this terrific smile on your face, and the guy who had his hand up to block you is muttering to himself, and you're talking to yourself, too, as you run downcourt to the other end. You're happy. My mother will never know that kind of happy.

Not that I do, either, very often.

Now, this newspaper is paying me a lot of money for this exclusive story, so I figure I ought to give them what they paid for. But other magazines have paid others for their exclusive stories, and they might tell stories a little different from mine. That's because no one else in the security installation knew the Cobae so well as I did.

I'll start about a year ago, about a month before I saw my first Cuba. I was a captain then, attached to Colonel James McNeill. Colonel McNeill was the commanding officer of the entire compound, and because of that I was given access to a lot of things that I really shouldn't have seen. But I saw those things, and I read the Colonel's reports, and, well, I guess that I can put two and two together as well as anybody. So from all of that, there wasn't much happening around the compound that I didn't know about.

The installation was in the middle of an awful lot of nothing, in one of the smaller parishes in southwestern Louisiana. St. Didier Parish. There was one town kind of large, Linhart, with maybe six thousand people, three movie theaters, a lot of bars. That was it for the whole parish, just about. South of us were towns full of Cajuns who trapped muskrat and nutria, or worked in the cane fields, or worked in the rice fields, or on shrimp boats or off-shore oil rigs, or netted crabs. They spoke a kind of strange mixture of English and a French no Parisian ever heard. All around us, and farther north, there were only farms. We were

tucked away in an isolated part of the parish, with only a small dirt road leading to the one main north-south route. No one on the base had anything to do with the Cajuns; come furlough time or weekend passes, it made more sense to go to New Orleans, an hour and a half, maybe two hours east of us.

We didn't have a lot to look at except fields on the other side of the wire fence. It was summer nine months of the year. The base was landscaped with a large variety of local plants, some of which I don't even know the names of. Everything flowered, and there was something blooming almost every month of the year. It was kind of nice. I liked the job.

I liked it a lot, until the Cobae showed up.

Before that, though, I wasn't exactly sure why we were there. We were a top-security installation, doing just about nothing. I was kept busy enough with day-to-day maintenance and routines. I had been transferred down from Dayton, Ohio, and it never occurred to me to ask Colonel McNeill what the hell we were supposed to be doing, surrounded by a lot of yam fields, between the marshes on the west and the swamps on the east. I mean, it just never came up. I had learned a long time ago that if I did just what I was told to do, and did it right, then everything, absolutely everything would be fine. That kind of life was very pleasant and satisfying. Everything was laid out for me, and I just took it all in order, doing task one, doing task two, doing task three. The day ended, I had free time, at regular intervals I was paid. The base had plenty of leisure facilities. It was all just great for me.

Of course, I was a captain.

My main outlet during my leisure was playing basketball. There were very good gym facilities on the base, and I've always been the competitive type, at least in situations where winning and losing didn't have much of a permanent effect on my life. I enjoy target shooting, for example, because there is no element of luck involved. It's just you, the rifle, and the target. But if you put me down in a hot spot, with people shooting back, I do believe all the fun would go right out of it.

Forget it. There were always a few other people on the base, not always male, who liked to get into the pick-up games. Every once in a while someone would show up, someone I hadn't seen on the court for weeks. Mostly, however, there were the same regulars. Tuesday and Thursday evenings, those were the big

basketball games. Those were the games that even I couldn't get into, on occasion. They were what you'd call blood games. I enjoyed watching them almost as much as I liked playing in them. Maybe I should have been watching a little closer.

All right, it was in the middle of August, and the temperature outside was in the low nineties, all the time. Every day. *All* the time. And the humidity matched the temperature, figure for figure. So we just stayed in the air-conditioned buildings and sent the enlisted men outside to take care of running errands. It takes a while to get adjusted, you know, from mild Ohio weather to high summer in subtropical Louisiana. I wasn't altogether adjusted to it. I liked my office, and I liked my air-conditioned car, and I liked my air-conditioned quarters. But there were little bits of not-air-conditioned in among those things that got to me and made me struggle to breathe. I don't think I could hack it as an African explorer, if they still have them, or as visitor to other equatorial places where the only comforts are a hand-held fan and an occasional cool drink.

Terrific. You've got the background. That's the way things were and, like I say, I was all in favor of them just going on like that until I felt like dropping dead or something. But things didn't go on like that.

At the end of August a general showed up, trailing two colonels. They were in one long black car. In three long black cars behind the brass were the Cobae. I think it would be a good idea if I kind of went into detail about the Cobae and how we happened to get them dumped in our laps.

As I learned shortly after their arrival, the Cobae had appeared on Earth sometime in July. I forget the exact date. They were very cautious. Apparently they had remained in their ship in space, monitoring things, picking and choosing, making their inscrutable minds up about God only knows what. A paper that crossed Colonel McNeill's desk, a paper that I shouldn't have seen, said that one Cobra appeared in the private apartment of the President. How he got there is still a mystery. An awful lot about the Cobra is still a mystery. Anyway, I suppose the President and his wife were a little startled. Ha. Sometimes on silent nights I like to imagine that scene. Depending on my mood, the scene can be very comic or very dramatic. Depending

on my mood of the moment, and also what the President and his wife were doing, and how genuinely diplomatic and resilient the President was.

After all, remember that the President is just a guy, too, and he's probably not crazy about strangers materializing in his bedroom. He's probably even less crazy about short, squat, really ugly creatures in his bedroom. Picture the scene for yourself. Take a few seconds, I'll wait. See?

Well, the President called for whomever he usually calls for, and there was a very frantic meeting in which nothing intelligent at all was said. There weren't contingency plans for this sort of thing. It's not often that the President of the United States has to wing it in a crisis situation. And this *was* a crisis situation, even though the Cobra hadn't said a word, moved a muscle, or even blinked, so far as anyone could determine.

Okay, imagine everyone dressed and formal and a little calmed down now, thanks to things like Valium and Librium and Jack Daniel's. Now we have a President and his advisors. *They* have a creature in a blue, shiny uniform and a mask over his face. It wasn't exactly a helmet. It covered what we call the Cobra's nose and mouth, by liberal interpretation. There was a flexible hose from the mask to a small box on the chest. The President doesn't have the faintest idea what to do. Neither does the Secretary of State, who gets the job tossed to him because it seems like his department. The potato gets tossed back and around for a while. The Cobra still hasn't done a doggone thing. As a matter of fact, no one yet has gotten around to addressing the creature (I think here I will stop calling them creatures).

Fifteen minutes after our world's first contact with intelligent life beyond our planet, someone has the bright idea to bring a scientist in.

"Who?" asked the President.

"I don't know," said the Secretary of State.

"What kind of scientist?" asked one of the advisors. "An astronomer? An ethnologist? A linguist? A sociologist? An anthropologist?"

"Call 'em all," said the President, with the kind of quick thinking that has endeared him to some of us.

"Call who all?" asked the advisor.

The President, by this time, was getting a little edgy. He was ready to start raising his voice, a sure sign that he was frustrated

and angry. Before that, however, he chose to ask one final, well-modulated question. "There must be one person out of the millions of people in this damn country to call," he said. "Someone best suited to handling this. Who is it?"

There was only silence.

After a while, as the President's face turned a little redder, one of the advisors coughed a little and spoke up. "Uh," he said, "why don't we hide this joker away somewhere. You know, somewhere really secure. Then we assemble a high-power team of specialists, and they can go on from there. How's that?"

"Wonderful," said the President, with the kind of irony that has endeared him to a few of us. "What do you think the joker will do when we try to hide him away somewhere?"

"Ask him," said the Secretary of State.

Again there was silence. This time, though, everyone looked toward the President. It was a head of state meeting an important emissary kind of thing, so it was his potato after all. You can bet he didn't like it.

Finally the President said, "He speaks English?" No one answered. After a while the Secretary of State spoke up again.

"Ask him," said the S. of S.

"An historic occasion," murmured the President. He faced the Cobra. He took a closer look and shuddered. That was the reaction we all had until we got used to their appearance. After all, the President is just a guy, too. But a well-trained guy.

"Do you speak English?" asked the President.

"Yes," said the Cobra. That brought another round of silence.

After a time the Secretary of State said, "You've heard this discussion, then. Have you understood it?"

"Yes," said the Cobra.

"Would you object to the plan, then?" asked the Secretary.

"Would you agree to being questioned by a team of our scientists, in a confidential manner?"

"No," said the Cobra, in answer to the Secretary's first question, and "Yes," to the Secretary's second.

The President took a deep breath. "Thank you," he said. "You can understand our perplexity here, and our need for discretion in the whole matter. May I ask where you are from?"

"Yes," said the Cobra.

Silence.

"Where are you from?" asked the Secretary of State.
Silence.

"Are you from our, uh, what you call, our solar system?" asked the President.

"No," said the Cobra.

"From some other star, then?" asked an emboldened advisor.

"Yes," said the Cobra.

"Which star?" asked the advisor.

Silence.

It was several minutes later that the assembled group began to realize that the Cobra was only going to answer yes-no questions. "Great," said the President. "It'll only take years to get any information that way."

"Don't worry," said an advisor. "If we pick the right people, they'll have the right questions."

"Pick them, then," said the President.

"We'll get to work on it," said another advisor.

"Right now," said the President.

"Check."

"What do we do with it in the meantime?" asked the Secretary of Defense.

"I don't know," said the President, throwing up his hands. "Put him or her or it in the Lincoln Bedroom. Make sure there are towels. Now get out of here and let me go to sleep."

"Thank you, Mr. President," said an advisor. The President just shook his head wearily.

I learned all of this from one of the advisors present at the time. This guy is now appealing a court decision that could send him to prison for five years, because of some minor thing he had done a long time ago, and which none of us understand. He's also writing a book about the Cobae affair.

I wonder how well the President slept that night.

The next morning when they came to get the Cobra, someone knocked on the door (come to think of it, what made them think that a Cobra would know what knocking on a door meant?). There was no response. The aide, one of the more courageous people in the history of our nation, sweated a little, fiddled around a little, knocked again, sweated some more, and opened the door.

Twelve Cobae stood like statues in the room. The aide shut

the door and went screaming through the halls of the Executive Mansion.

Later, when the advisors questioned the twelve Cobae, they discovered that only one would reply, and only with yes or no answers. It was assumed that this Coba was the original Coba who had appeared in the President's bedroom the evening before. There really was no logical basis on which to make this assumption, but it was made nevertheless. No one ever got around to asking the simple question that would have decided the matter; no one thought the matter was important enough to decide.

You know what the strange thing about the twelve Cobae was? You probably do. The strange thing about them was that they all looked the same. I mean, *identical*. Not the way that you say all of some ethnic group look the same. I mean that if you photographed the twelve Cobae individually, you could superimpose the pictures by projecting them on a screen, and there wouldn't be the smallest difference among them.

"Clones," said one knowledgeable man. "All grown from the same original donor."

"No," said another expert. "Even if that were the case, they would have developed differently after the cloning. There would be some minor differences."

"A very recent cloning," insisted the first.

"You don't know what you're talking about," said the second. "You're crazy." This typified the kind of discussion that the Cobae instigated among our best minds at the time.

When the Cobae had been around for a day or two, the President signed the orders creating the top-security base in St. Didier Parish, Louisiana. I was shipped down, everyone else on the base was brought in, and for a little while we worked in relative comfort and ignorance. Then the day came when the general and his colonels arrived, with the twelve Cobae right behind. The four black cars drove straight to a barracks that had been in disuse since the installation was opened. The Cobae were put in there, each in its (I get confused about the pronouns) own room. Colonel McNeill was present, and so was I. I thought I was going to throw up. That passed, but not quickly enough. Not nearly.

The general spoke with Colonel McNeill. I couldn't understand their conversation, because it was mostly whispers and nods. One of the colonels asked me if the Cobae would be

comfortable in their quarters. I said, "How should I know? Sir."

The general overheard us. He looked at the Cobae. "Will you be comfortable here?" he asked.

"Yes," said the Cobra who did all the answering.

"Is there anything you'd like now?" asked the general.

"No," said the Cobra.

"If at any time you wish anything, anything at all," said the general, "just pick up this telephone." The general demonstrated by picking up the receiver. He neglected to consider that the Cobae would have a difficult time making their wants known, limited to two words, yes and no.

A tough guard was put on the building. The general and the two colonels beat it back to their car and disappeared from the base. I looked at Colonel McNeill, and he looked at me. Neither of us had anything to say. None of this had been discussed with us beforehand, because the matter was so secret it couldn't be trusted either on paper or over normal communications channels. No codes, no scrambling, nothing could be trusted. So the general plopped the twelve Cobae on our doorstep, told us to hang tight, that scientists would arrive shortly to study the beings, and that we were doing a wonderful job.

It was a Thursday, I recall. After we left the building housing the Cobae, I went to the gym building and changed clothes. It was basketball night, Cobae or no Cobae.

I remember once, not long after the Cobae came to Louisiana, when Colonel McNeill asked me to show the aliens around. I said all right. I had gotten over my initial reaction to the Cobae. So had the men on the base. They were used to seeing the Cobae all over the installation. As a matter of fact, we became *too* used to seeing them. I'd be doing something like picking a red Jell-O over a green in the mess line, and there would be a Cobra looking over my shoulder. I'd take a shower after a basketball game, and when I walked out of the shower room a Cobra would be standing there, watching silently while I dried myself off with a towel. We didn't like it exactly, but we got used to it. Still, it was spooky the way they appeared and disappeared. I never saw one pop in or pop out, yet they did it, I guess.

From the arrival of the Cobae, our base became really super-secure. No passes, no furloughs, no letters out, no telephones. I

suppose we all understand, but none of us like it, from Colonel McNeill down to the lower enlisted men. We were told that the country and the world were slowly being prepared to accept the news of a visitation by aliens from space. I followed the careful, steady progression of media releases, prepared in Washington. It was a fairly good job, I suppose, because when the first pictures and television news films of the Cobae were made available, there was little uproar and no general panic. There was a great deal of curiosity, some of it still unsatisfied.

I was starting to tell about this particular time when I was giving a guided tour to the Cobae. I showed them all the wonderful and impressive things about the base, like the high chain link fence with electrified barbed wire on top, and the tall sentry towers with their machine gun emplacements, and the guards at the main gate and their armaments, and the enlisted men going about their duties, cleaning weapons, drilling in the heat, doubletiming from place to place. If I had been a Cobra, I think I might have written off Earth right then and there. Back to the ship or whatever, back into the sky, back to the home world.

The twelve Cobae, however, showed no sign of interest or emotion. They showed nothing. You've never seen such nothing. And all the time only the one Cobra would speak, and then only when asked a question to which he could reply with either of his two words. He understood everything, of course, but for some reason, for some crazy Cobra reason, he wouldn't use the words he understood in his answers.

I took the aliens through the gym building. I got one of the more startling surprises of my life. A game was going on; ten men were playing basketball, full court. It wasn't as rough as a Tuesday/Thursday game, but it was still plenty physical under the boards. I mentioned casually that this was one of the favorite ways of spending off-duty time. The Cobae stood, immobile, and watched. I began to move ahead, ushering them along. They would not move. I had to stay with the Cobae. I didn't see what interested them so much. I sighed. At that time, no one had any idea what a Cobra wanted or thought. I say that as if we do now. That just isn't so, even today, though we're closer to an understanding. I had no way of knowing then that the basketball game would be the link between us and these travelers through space.

Anyhow, I was stuck with the Cobae until the game ended. After that, when the players had gone to the showers, I asked if the Cobae wished to see more of the compound. The answerer said, "Yes." I showed them around some more. Nothing else was interesting to them, I guess, because they just passed in front of everything, their expression blank behind their masks. They never stopped again like they had at the basketball court.

Something about the game fascinated the Cobae. Of course, we've all tried to understand just what. People who in saner days wouldn't be caught dead inside a fieldhouse spent months analyzing basketball like it was a lost ancient art form. The rules of the game have changed a little since its beginning almost a hundred years ago, but the style of play has altered more considerably.

There are different sets of rules, though. You have professional basketball, college ball, high school ball. Minor variations among the different kinds of basketball exist to suit the game to the various levels of competition. Professional, college, high school.

And then you have playground basketball. When basketball was first invented, and during its first few decades of existence, all the players were white. In the professional leagues, this continued longer than on the lower levels. Why? Because of the same reasons that everything else remained white until the black athlete shouldered his way into a kind of competitive position.

For basketball, it was one of the greatest things to happen to the sport. The great pro players were white in the early years. Once blacks were allowed to play against them, the blacks began dominating the game. Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Julius Erving, and plenty of others have caused a reappraisal of the old strategies.

Why have blacks taken over professional basketball almost entirely? I have a theory. Sure. But it's full of generalizations, and they're as valid as most generalizations. Sort of, you know. Pretty valid, kind of.

Where do these black ballplayers come from? From ghetto neighborhoods, from poor urban and rural communities. Not without exception, of course, but it's a good enough answer. In a ghetto neighborhood, say in New York, there just isn't physical space for baseball diamonds and football fields. There are basketball courts all over, though. They can fit into a smaller space. You can see a basketball rim attached to the side of a

building, with groups of kids stuffing the ball into it, again and again.

Take white players. A lot of them come from better backgrounds. A white kid growing up in a town or suburb has a basketball hoop mounted on the garage. He plays by himself, or with a couple of friends.

On the ghetto playgrounds, basketball can be a vicious demonstration of one's identity. Six, eight black guys beneath a basketball backboard can turn the game into something almost indistinguishable from a gang war. Meanwhile the white kids are tossing the ball and catching the rebounds and tossing the ball. The black kids are using every move, every clever head fake, every deceiving twist of the body to show off their superiority. It's the only way many black youths have of asserting themselves.

One good way out of the slums is through sports. Mostly, that means basketball. The kind of basketball you learn on a ghetto court is unlike any other variety of the sport. It's the kind of ball we played on the base. I was out of my class, and I knew it. But I could play well enough so that I wasn't laughed off the floor.

The Tuesday/Thursday games were playground games, played under playground rules. There were no referees to call fouls; there *were* no fouls. It used to be said that basketball was not a contact sport, like football. Yeah. Try playing an hour with guys who came out of Harlem in New York, or Hough, in Cleveland, or Watts in Los Angeles. Those guys know just how much punishment they can deliver without being too obvious. Elbows and knees fly. You spend more time lying painfully on the floor than you do in the game. Playground moves, playground rules. Hard basketball. *Mean* basketball.

I played with black enlisted men, mostly. Teams were chosen the same way as on ghetto courts. The people who show up for the game take turns shooting the ball from the free throw line. The first five to put the ball into the net are one team. The next five are the second team. Everyone else watches. Afterward the watchers could go back to their quarters without limping. Few of the players could.

I played often because I practiced my free throws. In off-duty hours I sometimes went to the gym alone and shot free throws for a while. I was good at it. I could sink maybe eight out of ten shots, most of them swishes—when the basketball went cleanly through the hoop without hitting the backboard, without touching

the metal rim. All that you would hear was a gentle *snick* as the net-below the rim moved.

I was a good shooter. By myself, that is, without another player guarding me, waving his arms, pressing close, without the other players shouting and running. You don't get such an open shot very often during a game. Without fouls, there are no free throws. During a game I was lucky to score ten points.

The games were an hour long, no breaks. That's a lot of running up and down the court. Even the pros only play forty-eight minutes, resting some of those minutes on the bench, with plenty of time-outs called by the coaches, with breaks for half-time and fouls and free throws and television commercials. We played harder. We felt it. But on those rare occasions when I did something right, it was worth everything I had to take. It was worth it just to hear that *snick*.

There was an unwritten law; we left our ranks in the locker room. I wasn't a captain on the basketball floor. I was a white guy who wanted to play with the black enlisted men. Sometimes I did. After a while, when I showed that I could pretty well hold my own, they grudgingly accepted me, sort of, in a limited way, almost. They gave me a nickname. They called me "the short honkey."

About September the group of scientists had arrived and began their work. It went slowly because only one of the Cobae could be interviewed, and he still said only yes or no.

"Do you come from this part of the galaxy?" asked one man.

"No," said the Coba.

"Do you come from this galaxy at all?"

"No."

The scientist was left speechless. Two thoughts struck him immediately. The Cobae had come a very long way somehow; and it would be very difficult to learn where their home was. All the scientist could do was to run through a list of the identified galaxies until the Coba said yes. And the knowledge would be almost meaningless, because within that galaxy would be millions of stars, none of which could be pinpointed from Earth. The interviewer gave up the attempt. To this day, we don't know exactly where the Cobae came from.

I had, of course, made a report about the reactions of the Cobae to my guided tour, several weeks earlier. One of the

demographers thought that the interest the Cobae had shown in the basketball game was worthy of exploration. He proposed that the Cobae be allowed to watch another game.

The game the scientists chose was a Tuesday night bell-ringer. "Bell-ringer" because if you tried to grab the ball away from the strong, agile enlisted men, you got your bell rung. The Cobae were seated in an area out of bounds, along with a team of specialists watching their reactions. Of course, there weren't many reactions. There weren't any at all, while the enlisted men and I shot free throws for teams. I ended up on a pretty good team. I was set for a hard game. The first team, mine, had the ball at the start. I took the ball out of bounds and tossed it to Willy Watkins. He dribbled downcourt and passed the ball to Hilton Foster. Foster was tall and quick. His opponent stretched out both arms, but Foster slithered beneath one arm, got around his opponent, jumped, and shot. The ball banked off the backboard and into the net. We were ahead, two to nothing.

The other team in-bounded and started to take the ball downcourt. I was running to cover my defensive territory, as loose and flexible as it was. We weren't pros. We just chose a man to cover and tried to keep him from scoring. There are lots of interesting ways of doing that, some of them even sanctioned by the rules.

Anyway, as the other team brought the ball down I saw an odd sight. Five of the Cobae had stood up and were walking out onto the basketball court. The scientists had risen out of their chairs. One man turned to the remaining seven Cobae and asked if the five wanted to play. There was silence. The speaker for the group was among the five.

"Do you want to join the game?" I asked the five. I couldn't tell which among them was the speaker.

"Yes," said one Coba. Behind the masks they all looked the same. I couldn't tell which Coba had answered.

"What do I do?" I asked one of the scientists.

"Ask them if they know the rules," said one.

"Do you know and understand how this game is played?" I asked.

"Yes," said the speaker.

I stood there for a while, bewildered.

"Aw, come on," said one of the black men. "Don't let those mothers screw up the game."

"They play," said one of the scientists. The blacks were obviously angry.

"All right," I said, assuming my captain's rank again. "My team against the Cobae. You other guys go sit down." The blacks who had been put out of the game were furious, but they followed my order. I heard a lot of language that the Cobae might not have understood. At least, I hope they didn't understand.

"His team. Huh," growled one of the men as he left the court.

"What we goin' to do with these blue bastards?" asked Foster.

"Play them loose," I said. "Maybe they just want to try it for a while. Don't hit any of them."

"Just like my mama was playin'," said Bobby O. Brown.

"Yeah," I said. "Five blue monster mamas."

The scientists were busily talking into their recorders and videotaping what was happening. I gave the ball to Watkins. He took it out and tossed it in to me. I started dribbling, but there was a Cobra guarding me. He played close. I glanced over at Watkins, who was running downcourt beside me. He had a Cobra guard, too. The Cobae had started in a full-court press.

Where had they learned about a full-court press?

I passed over my Cobra's head to Foster. A Cobra nearly intercepted the ball. Foster put a good move on his Cobra guard, twisted around, and spun back in the other direction. It would have worked against me and a lot of the others on the floor, but he ran into another Cobra, who had anticipated Foster's move. Foster hit the Cobra hard, but he kept dribbling. The Cobra reached out and swiped the ball away from Foster. "Goddamn it," said Foster.

The Cobra threw a long pass to another alien downcourt. The second Cobra was all alone, and made a nice layup for the first score of the game. The aliens were winning, two to nothing. I couldn't believe it.

The game went on for the entire hour. As it progressed, my team began to play harder and harder. We had to. The Cobae were quick, anticipating moves as if they had played basketball all their lives. Our shots were blocked or our men were prevented from getting near the basket, and we had to settle for long, low-percentage shots. The Cobae were playing with perfect

teamwork, though. They had no difficulty finding one of their players open on offense. It didn't make any difference how we defended them, one player was always maneuvering clear and the Cobae with the ball always passed it to the open man (alien). After the first half hour, the Cobae were winning by a score of 48 to 20.

"Break," I called. "Take a rest." The black players walked off the court, muttering. All of them were glaring at me, at the aliens, at the scientists.

Monroe Parks passed near me. I could hear him say, "You can order me around all goddamn day, but don't mess with the game, you ofay son of a bitch." I said nothing.

I changed teams. The other men played the second half. I sat down and watched. The second half was about the same as the first. The Cobae were playing a tight game, perfect defense, amazing offense. They took no chances, but they were always in the right place. The final score was 106 to 52, in favor of the Cobae.

The scientists were just as confused as I was. I didn't care, though, right at the time. I went to the showers. The men showered, too, and none of us said a word. Not a sound. But there were some mean looks directed at me.

The following Thursday the five Cobae came to the gym for the game. The enlisted men started cursing loudly, and I had to order them to stop. Five black men played five Cobae. The Cobae won the game by 60 points.

The next Tuesday, the Cobae won by 48 points.

On Thursday, there wasn't a game, because only the Cobae and I showed up.

I wonder what would have happened if I had suggested to the speaker of the Cobae that I and two of his companions should play the remaining three Cobae.

Even though there were no more games with the Cobae, the scientific team that had come to study the aliens did not stop questioning me. It seemed to them that I was closer to the Cobae than anyone else on the base. I don't know. Against the Cobae, I

averaged about 3 points a game. Maybe they should have talked to Foster, he got a pretty regular 10.

Colonel McNeill received regular reports from Washington about how the program to reveal the presence of the aliens on Earth was going. He showed me those reports. I read them, and I was at once amused and concerned. Well, after all, maybe I *did* know the Cobae at least as well as anyone else, including the specialists who had assembled at our installation. The newspaper and television releases grew from hints and rumors to denials and finally a grudging, low-key statement that there were, in fact, a few intelligent visitors from another galaxy in seclusion somewhere in the United States.

The immediate response was not too violent, and the fellows in Washington did a good job regulating the subsequent reactions. The Soviet Union came forward with a claim that they, too, had visitors from beyond Earth. The ruler-for-life of an African nation tried to seize headlines with a related story that didn't make much sense to anyone, and I can't even remember exactly what he said. One of the scientists asked the Cobae if there were any more of them on Earth, in addition to the twelve in our compound. The speaker said no. So if the Soviet Union had their own aliens they were from somewhere else, and we never saw them in any case.

The Cobae showed a preference for remaining in their quarters, once it became evident that the basketball games were postponed indefinitely (read, "as long as the Cobae were around"). The researchers put their data together, argued, discussed, shouted, cursed, and generally behaved like children. Colonel McNeill and I ignored it all from that point on, because we still had a security installation to run. The scientists and researchers were doing their best to bend our regulations whenever it was comfortable for them to try. The colonel and I came down hard on them. I guess they didn't understand us, and we didn't understand them.

So which group of us was better qualified to understand the Cobae?

Nobody, that's who. Finally, though, about the middle of October the nominal head of the investigating team called a meeting, to which Colonel McNeill was invited. I came along, because I was indispensable or something. The meeting began as

a series of reports, one by every single professor and investigator in the camp. I can't recall another time when I was so bored. Somehow they managed to make something as awesome as creatures from another world boring. It takes a good deal of skill, many years of training, constant practice, and self-denial to do a job that huge. But boring it was. The colonel was fidgeting before the first man had gone through half of his graphs. He had plotted something against something else, and I wonder where the guy got the information. He had a nice bunch of graphs, though, very impressive, very authoritative-looking. He spoke clearly, he enunciated very well, he was neatly dressed and well-groomed, and he rarely had to refer to his notes. Still, I was ready to scream myself before he finished. I don't remember a thing he was trying to say. In the weeks that he had to study the Cobae, he apparently didn't come across a single, solitary interesting fact.

Maybe that wasn't his department. I told myself. So I waited for the second researcher. He, too, had plenty of visual aids. He took a pointer and showed how his red line moved steadily down, while his blue line made a bell-shaped curve. I waited, but he was every bit as lacking in information as his predecessor.

That's the way that it went for most of the afternoon. I think that if I had been put in charge of those statisticians and, uh, alienographers, I might have done a better job. I might be fooling myself, of course, but I think I would have tried to learn why the Cobae had come to Earth in the first place. No one could give us a clue about that. Even with yes-and-no answers they should have been able to do that. Am I getting warm? Yes. No. Am I getting cold?

I think the idea is to start big and narrow down until you have the Cobae cornered, in an intellectual sense. Ask them if they came to Earth for a definite purpose. Yes or no. If the Cobae answered no, well, they're all on vacation. If it said yes, start big again and whittle away until you learn something.

But evidently that's not the way our men and women of the study team worked. A large report was published eventually, excerpts appeared in newspapers and magazines, but not many people were satisfied. I'd still like to take my crack at the Cobae, my way. But I can't.

So, in any event, investigator after researcher after pedant after lecturer had his say. I got up after half an hour and

went to the back of the room, where two enlisted men were setting up a film projector. Both men were black. One was a regular basketball player I knew, Kennedy Turner, and the other's name I don't recall. I watched them threading the film; it was only slightly less boring than listening to the presentations. I noticed that right beside me was Colonel McNeill. He, too, was watching Turner thread film. After the film was wound into the machine, the two men turned to a slide projector.

"You want to kill the lights, please?" said the woman on the platform. Turner hastened to turn off the lights. "Roll that first reel, please," said the woman. The other enlisted man flicked a switch. I watched a few seconds of a basketball game. I saw myself embarrassed by the play of a short alien. "It seems to me, gentlemen," said the woman, "that these Cobae are governed by a single mind. I don't know how I can make the idea clearer. Perhaps the mind belongs to the Coba who always answers. But the visual input, *all* the sensory input of the twelve Cobae is correlated and examined by the central mind. That was what made the Cobae so effective in this game, although we know through our questioning that they had never seen anything similar before."

"A single governing mind?" asked a man seated in the audience.

"Yes," said the woman, "capable of overseeing everything that is happening to all twelve units of the Cobae multi-personality. The basketball game here is a perfect example. Watch. See how every human move is anticipated, even by Cobae players on the opposite side of the court. One mind is observing everything, hovering above, so to speak, and decisions and commands are addressed to the individual Cobae to deal with any eventuality."

(I'm editing this from memory, of course. We didn't know they were called Cobae until much later. We just called them beings or creatures or aliens or blue men or something like that.)

"I'd like to ask a question, if I may—"

The man was interrupted by the lights going on again.

"Not yet, please," said the woman. She stopped speaking and gasped. Everyone turned around. The twelve Cobae were in the back of the room.

The Coba speaker stepped forward. "Now you honkey chumps better dig what's going down," he said. "We got to tighten up around here, we got to get down to it. You dig where I'm coming from?"

I looked at Turner and his black companion. They were laughing so hard they could barely stand. Turner held out his hands, palms up, and the other man slapped them. Turner slapped his friend's hands. They were suddenly having a real good time.

I turned to Colonel McNeill. Everyone in the room was speechless. There was a long pause. Then the colonel whispered to me. "Uh, oh," was all he said.

A Glint of Gold

by Nicholas V. Yermakov

Nicholas Yermakov can't seem to stand still. Since beginning his writing career in 1978 he has sold over a dozen short stories, a number of nonfiction articles, and eleven novels, most recently the 'Time Wars' series written under the pseudonym Simon Hawke. Prior to becoming a full-time writer he was a disc jockey, a bartender, a radio engineer, a rock musician, an armed guard, a motorcycle salesman, a factory worker, and a tobacconist, among a host of other occupations. In his writing as in his personal life he functions at peak energy levels. To date he has broken five typewriters (four manuals and one electric).

Landry churned through the water with record-breaking speed, leaving a huge wake behind him in the pool as he kept pace with the dolphin in the lane beside him. They reached the far side of the pool together and executed the flip turn, the dolphin brushing the wall with its tail, Landry kicking off with his webbed feet. As they reached the midpoint of the second lap, the dolphin shot ahead.

Redoubling his efforts, Landry undulated like an eel, snapping his body and thrusting forward with renewed strength as the second wind hit. He began to gain on the dolphin, but after the fourth lap, he steadily lost ground. He finished almost a full length of the pool behind. As he touched the wall, the dolphin

shot up out of the water, swimming backwards as it stood on its tail, cackling at him.

"Okay, George, okay, don't rub it in," gasped Landry.

George swam over to his side and nuzzled him gently with his snout. Landry draped his hand around the dolphin's back, his webbed fingers closing around the dorsal fin as George pulled him through the water.

"All right, Landry, that will do for now, come on out. You two can play later."

Banyon watched as Landry climbed up out of the pool, the water streaming from his streamlined body. His muscles rippled as he gasped for breath. The team physician began attaching the various biosensors as he stood there, dripping.

"How do you feel?" Banyon asked him.

"Good," gasped Landry. "Really good. I thought I had him for a minute there." His chest heaved. "Damn! I really thought I had him!"

"What's the verdict?" Banyon asked the doctor.

"I'd say he's ready for the games," the older man replied.

"He's in top-notch condition. Blood pressure, respiration, pulse rate, everything is right on the button. He's in better shape now than he was in Munich."

"Munich was Munich," Banyon replied. "Peking is going to be a whole 'nother story. The Chinese have had Jao J'en-Hsi working harder than ever before and he almost cost us the gold in Munich. That race had been too close, as far as I'm concerned. And you can bet the Russians haven't been sitting on their hands, either. According to intelligence, they've got a thirteen-year-old kid who can already beat all of Landry's best times."

"How do you know?" asked Landry.

"Believe me, I know," answered Banyon, laconically. "It cost the CIA three men to find out even that much. They've got that kid under wraps. They wouldn't be going to so much trouble if they didn't really have something."

"Poor kid," said Landry. "I can imagine what he must be going through."

"Hey, none of that stuff!" snapped Banyon. "You start feeling sorry for the opposition and where does that leave you?"

"Second place?"

"You got it, sweetheart. I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk."

"Jawohl, mein Führer."

"Watch your mouth, wiseass. You may be number-one boy now, but, remember, there's plenty more where you came from."

"How can I forget?"

"Just be sure you don't."

One thousand pounds of steel slammed to the floor with a crash. The weight rolled forward, off the vulcanite matting. Six muscular men, each one looking like an anatomical chart, stopped its rolling motion and lifted it, three on either end, replacing the weight back in its proper position. Banyon watched the screen intently as the lifter prepared for his second try at the clean and jerk.

Wallford's looking tired, Banyon thought. The short, massive power lifter looked like a prize bull. He had no neck to speak of, and his shoulders were almost as wide as he was tall. His arms were at least three times the size of Banyon's thighs and his legs were like tree stumps. He moved ponderously, his breathing labored. Sweat covered his entire body so that he gleamed in the bright lights. His flanks were lathered with foam.

Banyon scowled as the lifter closed his eyes, psyching himself for his second attempt. Sitting beside him in the screening room, his giant bulk reclining in the specially built chair, the coach of the power-lifting team eyed Banyon uneasily. The coach had, himself, been an Olympic champion. Now, he wouldn't even qualify. Wallford was his protégé and a silver medalist. He had been driving himself with inhuman dedication and the effort was telling on him.

They watched as Wallford bent down to the barbell. The coach watched Banyon. He knew what was about to happen. He was worried about Banyon's reaction.

Wallford clamped his beefy hands around the barbell, moving them about to get a proper grip. When he was satisfied, he remained in the crouched-over position, his eyes closed, his breathing steady. His gargantuan chest rose as he inhaled mightily and, with a throat-rending scream, cleaned the weight. One leg shot backward, straight out, as the front leg remained bent. Every muscle in Wallford's body shivered. His face showed the merciless strain. His eyes bulged. With a superhuman effort, he raised himself straight up, rocking slightly, moving his legs to attain his balance.

Banyon sat forward in his chair, watching intently.

Wallford stood still, his legs apart, his arms bent at the elbows, the incredible weight resting on his chest. Tears were streaming from his eyes. He knew he couldn't do it. Tensing, he inhaled again and screamed a second time, but he only managed to raise the barbell a fraction of an inch above his head. He was unable to straighten his arms. They shook with the effort. Wallford refused to give up. His blood vessels stood out in relief. Then, with horrible slowness, he began to list over backwards. With a pathetic groan, he fell. The weight crashed through the floor and remained there, embedded. The six muscular men struggled to free it, but they could not. The screen went black.

The lights came back on. Banyon pursed his lips, thoughtfully. He did not look at the coach.

"What happened?"

"He dislocated his shoulder. With any luck, he'll be ready for the games, but it's going to be touch and go."

"What about Severson?"

The coach shook his head. "Wallford is our only chance to get a thousand. Severson *might* be ready next time around, but he's a cinch to lose this year."

"Yeah, well, that stinks. You're being paid to produce champions, not cripples. Concentrate on the treatments. Increase the dosages of anabolic steroids in his feed. Put him in for some muscular regeneration surgery, and while you're at it, I want more spinal reinforcement, he's a little loose there. Let's see if we can't get his weight up another thirty or forty pounds. He needs the support."

"I'm concerned about his health," the coach said, licking his lips nervously. "To be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Banyon, I don't think his heart can stand the strain."

"If it can't, I'll hold you personally responsible," said Banyon, flatly. "A silver medal won't be good enough. Not this year."

"He won't be much good to you if he's dead," the coach replied, his lips drawn tight.

Banyon looked at him for the first time, matching his stare until the larger man looked away. "He's not much good to me now, is he?"

The coach shook his head, his massive shoulders slumping in resignation.

"Do it."

* * *

"How's the team shaping up, Mr. Banyon?"

"Not bad, sir, not bad at all. In fact, they're making better progress than I expected. Though, to be perfectly frank with you, I'm a little worried about Wallford."

"Yes, I've been reading the reports. I have this chart here in front of me. His EKG *has* looked better. You think he can handle the treatments?"

"It's a gamble, of course," Banyon replied, referring to his notes, "but if it pays off, we should see him make some fantastic gains. I think he has a slightly better than fifty-percent chance of survival."

"Who else have we got lined up?"

"Severson. He's young and eager, only seventeen, and he's already crowding Wallford. Still, at five-twenty, he's a bit light. Worse comes to worse, we'll pull a bronze, saving us a little face, and write it off as a good try."

"I don't like that, Banyon. The Russians made us look pretty bad in Munich. Alexandrov swore he was going to break a thousand in Peking. I'm under a lot of pressure, you know."

"I'm doing everything I can, sir."

"Yes, well, all right. We'll cross our fingers and hope for the best. How's Landry coming along? I'm a bit disturbed about all the attention he's getting in the press. I don't want him getting overconfident, just because he swept the field last time."

"You needn't worry about Landry, sir. When they came at him waving money, for all those endorsements and all the other crap, all it took was for me to tell him he would lose his amateur standing, and that was the end of that. All he cares about is swimming. Nothing else means anything to him. He'll do just fine."

"I don't know. I've just received some disturbing news. About that Russian boy."

"Oh?"

"Remember those rumors we heard, a few years ago, about their achieving a new strain? Well, they weren't rumors. It's confirmed. This kid's the first of the batch. We almost got a photograph, but, unfortunately, our man was caught and, well, you know how these things are. . . ."

"Tough break."

"Yes, it was, rather. I wanted that photograph. We're still trying. I'd like to get some footage. According to my information,

there's a possibility that we may be able to have the kid disqualified."

"On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that he's inhuman."

Banyon exhaled noisily. "Jesus. That's one kettle of fish I wouldn't want to open, if you'll pardon the pun. We try that and it'll really hit the fan. Especially after they've just redefined the standards."

"I'm going to do what I have to do, Banyon. If it upsets a few applecarts, well, so be it. You just see that you do what you have to do."

"You can count on me, sir."

"I hope so, Banyon, I hope so. For your sake."

Landry's wide, specially made shoes made slapping sounds on the floor as he walked, slightly pigeon-toed. He spotted Tom Wallford sitting at his training table and set his tray down beside him.

"Hello, Tom. I looked for you on the tour before, but I didn't see you. You okay?"

"I couldn't go," replied the power lifter, breathing heavily. Before him, the table was crowded with his meal. It consisted of forty-seven scrambled eggs, six cartons of orange juice, a gallon of his special protein drink, five porterhouse steaks (medium rare), a bowl of vegetarian beans, stone-ground wheat bread with peanut butter (an entire loaf), a huge bowl of mixed salad greens and carrots, a smaller bowl of radishes, wild rice with shrimp, a broiled bluefish, and several bottles of food supplements.

He ate with deliberate slowness, masticating with a bovine placidity. His movements were sluggish and he was perspiring heavily. He emitted a vaguely barnlike odor.

"I hadda train. (pant, pant) I really wanted t' go, too. (pant, pant) I've never seen Peking. (pant) What was it like?"

"Cheer up," grinned Landry, putting his arm on the giant's back. There was no way he could possibly put his arm *around* him. "You didn't miss much, really. I think we were more the tourist attraction. People massed around us everywhere, although the security was pretty tight."

"Didja see the (pant, pant) Forbidden City? (pant, pant) I've seen only the (pant, pant) pictures."

"Well, yeah, but only briefly, you know? They hustled us in,

took some footage, hustled us out, the usual rush. We're only supposed to act like it's all fun. The winning is the thing."

"Urp! Excuse me. (pant) The coach says that I have t' win. (pant, pant) It's really got me worried. (pant) Igor looks fantastic, did ya see him? (pant, pant) He's as big as a house. (pant, pant) He's gonna be real hard ta beat."

"Positive mental attitude, Tom. Positive mental attitude. You've got to win it in your mind, first, remember that. You'll do it, don't you worry."

"I gotta. (pant, pant) This is gonna be my last time. (pant) I just can't take it anymore, you know. (pant, pant) It's getting so that I can hardly move. I don't know how Igor does it. (pant, pant) My father doesn't want t' see me do it anymore. He says I'll die if I don't stop."

Landry didn't have anything to say to that. He played with his food, absently.

"Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"This Russian kid that everybody's talkin' about. (pant, pant) You see him, yet?"

"No. Nobody has. He's here, though, you can bet on that. I'm sure they're up to something. I don't ever recall there being an Olympic competitor that no one's even *seen* before. Banyon says they're trying to psych me out, and the coach agrees with him, but I've known Bill too long to let him fool me. He's trained me ever since I was three. I can tell when he's not being straight with me. He's worried."

"He's going ta be the guy ta beat, that's for sure."

"He's just a small fry. Only thirteen. I'll wipe him out. That gold is mine."

Wallford grinned, ruefully. "I really wish I had your confidence."

"Hey, come on, buddy, I don't want to hear talk like that. That isn't like you. So Alexandrov's bigger than you are. So what? Remember, the bigger they are, the harder they fall."

"Maybe so, maybe so." Tom breathed like a giant bellows. "Still, I wouldn't want ta see Igor get hurt. (pant, pant) He's really not a bad guy, ya know."

"Tom, you're beautiful, you know that?"

"Thanks, Brian. You're okay, too. I really mean that."

"Yeah, I know you do. I gotta go. Look, don't eat too much, okay? You'll ruin your appetite for dinner."

Wallford chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound that seemed to come from the bottom of some giant cavern. Landry clapped him on the back and left him to his feast. Tom's father was right. It was time for him to stop.

The boy flopped weakly on the floor, twisting and turning in agony. His somewhat opaque eyes bulged wildly.

"Pozhalosta," he mewled, softly, urgently, "please, please! No more, no more. . . ."

"For God's sake," said Vladimiroff, "he's suffocating!"

The blank-faced man standing over the boy paid him no mind. He watched the child's thrashings with a clinical detachment.

"How is the time?" he asked.

A third man stood nearby with a digital watch in his hand. "One hour and five minutes," he answered.

The boy's movements became weaker and weaker. "Bozhe moi, bozhe moi," whispered Vladimiroff. "Please, I beg you. Let him breathe!"

The blank-faced man looked at Vladimiroff a moment, then nodded, curtly. The coach, Vladimiroff, and another member of the team picked the boy up by his arms and legs, raised him up over their heads and carried him to the large tank that stood on the far side of the room. They threw him in with a splash.

Instantly, the boy's gills opened, contracting and expanding quickly, pumping the water through and extracting precious oxygen. He darted about inside the tank, happily, ecstatic at being in his element again.

"Misha, Misha," said Vladimiroff, leaning against the glass wall of the tank, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. . . ."

"You think I enjoy putting the boy through all this torture?" asked the blank-faced man. "I have no choice, comrade. We have no idea how long he may be away from water. If it is discovered that his lungs are, to all intents and purposes, atrophied, we are lost."

"I curse the day that I set eyes on you, Volkov," the coach said, vehemently. "You have no heart!"

"I cannot afford a heart, comrade," the blank-faced man answered. "They are altogether too expensive these days. I will overlook your little outburst because I understand how you must feel towards the boy. But know that now is not the time to become emotional. Too much is at stake."

"Yes, indeed," replied Vladimiroff, "too much."

"Tomorrow, then," said Volkov, "we will try again. We must build up his ability to stay out in the open. It would not do to have him collapse from the platform as they play our national anthem."

As they left, Volkov turned to the third man, the one who had held the watch. "Keep him under close surveillance. We have come too far to take any chances, now."

The third man nodded, grimly.

"Where did you get this?" snapped Banyon.

Wallford stood before him, dwarfing the desk. He shifted his immense weight uneasily from one elephantine foot to the other. "Igor gave it t' me. (pant, pant) We had both done our first lifts of the day," he wheezed, "and as I went up t' shake his hand, he pressed it into my palm, (pant, pant) all folded up."

"Anyone see this?"

"Oh, no, sir, Mr. Banyon." Tom Wallford gulped for air. "I played it real cool. See, during the last games, in Munich, (pant, pant) they wouldn't let us talk much, ya know. So we got into the habit (pant, pant) of passing notes like that, so's we could talk in private, sort of."

"You think it's some kind of trick?" Banyon asked the man standing by his side.

"Oh, no, sir," Wallford answered, before the other could reply. "Igor wouldn't do a thing like that." He gasped. "I just know he wouldn't. He's a real okay guy."

The man who hadn't had a chance to answer nodded, silently.

"Okay, Tom," Banyon said. "We'll treat this thing as if it's on the level. For now. But if this leaks out, we'll be wading in it hip-deep, you got me?"

Wallford nodded.

"No more note passing. We can't take any chances of them getting wind of this. If Alexandrov catches your eye in some special way, just nod at him. He'll get the meaning. I hope. Damn, if we can pull this off . . . That's all, for now, Tom. You can go. And, listen . . . as far as you're concerned, you don't know anything. Got that?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Banyon."

"Good. Get me Landry. Tell him nothing. Just say I want to

see him right away. Pull him out of practice, anything, I don't care, just get him over here right now."

"Right, Mr. Banyon." He left, waddling, squeezing sideways through the door with difficulty.

Banyon turned to the CIA man standing at his side. "Do you have any idea how we're going to manage this?"

"Not yet," he replied. "But by the time Landry gets here, I'll think of something."

"Vladimiroff wants to defect," said Banyon.

"Holy shit."

"And he wants to bring along Mikhailov."

"The mystery kid. Well, that figures. He must be the reason. They've finally pushed him too far." Landry recalled how warmly the Soviet athletes had spoken of the kindly, paternal Russian.

"Do you have any idea why we haven't seen Mikhailov, yet?" asked Banyon.

"I thought it might be a psych-out ploy, at first. I just dismissed it from my mind. I'm here to win. What does he have, gills or something?"

Banyon stared at him, steadily.

The smile on Landry's face wilted. "Oh, my God. You're kidding."

"I only wish I was, Brian." Banyon almost never called the athletes by their first names. The significance of this did not escape the swimmer. "That's what's going to make it difficult. Mikhailov's not an air breather."

"I think I'd better sit down," said Landry, weakly.

"Go right ahead, son, I don't blame you." He waited until the swimmer sat down in the chair beside the desk. "Pour the kid a drink," said Banyon to the CIA man.

"I'm in training. . . ."

"Medicinal purposes," replied Banyon. "Besides, your training doesn't matter anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

The agent put a brandy snifter in Landry's hand and he tasted it, hesitantly.

"Let's face facts, Brian. I've suspected something like this for quite some time now. You don't stand a chance against Mikhailov. Technically speaking, the kid's not even human. But that's beside the point. We're not going to press the issue. Not until he

wins, and then we'll use it for a smokescreen. We're going to help them come over. And the coup will be even more embarrassing to the Russians if it's a gold medal winner that defects."

"You're asking me to let him win?" Landry asked, shocked.

"Stubborn, aren't you? Okay, Landry, beat him, then. If you can. But I'll put anything you want on the fact that he's going to leave you in his wake so fast your head is going to spin."

"I'll take that bet."

"Okay, wiseass, you got it. I'll name my stakes after you lose."

"Suits me."

Banyon nodded. "We've taught you well, I'll say that much. Perhaps too well. That remains to be seen. But now that your pride is satisfied, can we get down to details? If we're going to pull this off, we're going to need your help. And *that's* not open to debate."

The careful shielding of Mikhailov and all the attendant speculation resulted in a furor of incredible proportions the first time he made his appearance. France, Great Britain, Japan and Germany (the Federal Republic, naturally) immediately filed protests. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the German Democratic Republic, Cuba, and others filed counterprotests. The United States remained curiously neutral. Through it all, Landry stood out as the most vocal party of them all.

"They can say whatever they want about Mikhailov," he told the press. "I want a chance to race him. I know I can beat him and I want to show the world that I can beat him. So he's got gills? Big deal. You mean the rest of us haven't been genetically engineered? What do you think *these* are?" he asked, holding up his hands.

"But don't you think it's really a question of unfair advantage. Brian?" a celebrated American announcer asked him. "This situation brings to mind the gender scandals of the twentieth century, and with the same participants involved, I might add."

"That all depends on how you view unfair advantage," Landry countered. "We all know how many times the committee has had to redefine its standards since then. That same situation would be laughable today, with John St. Peters as the reigning king of the uneven parallel bars and Judy Yoshimada the number one contender for the gold on the still rings. The fact remains

that I came here to prove that I'm the best, and that means racing and defeating Mikhailov. It'll be a shame if I'm robbed of my chance to prove that because of some technicality."

Through it all, Mikhailov acted blissfully unconcerned. While the other racers redonned their warm-up suits, Misha paddled playfully in the pool, waving at the members of the press, the cameras and the spectators. It didn't take long for him to win them over. Finally, the decision came. Mikhailov would have to submit to a physical examination.

However, since none of the doctors were anxious to rush their findings in such a case, particularly since there was no precedent for rendering a verdict upon a man with gills as well as lungs, the events would go on as scheduled. Afterwards, the examination would be conducted, and it would be determined whether or not the young Russian would be disqualified. This seemed to satisfy everyone concerned. No one envied the doctors their task.

Landry had to admit that Mikhailov was an incredible example of genetic engineering. He was sleek and streamlined and his skin had a flat, shark-like sheen. His hands and feet were webbed, like his, but they were larger and his muscles were long and straited. His chest capacity looked huge. The most noticeable features were, of course, the gills, set in his flanks just ahead of his manta-like latissimus dorsi muscles. They seemed to possess a life of their own as they moved with a beautiful, rippling motion.

The first event was the breast stroke. And Landry lost. He couldn't believe it. From the moment that the gun was fired, Mikhailov grabbed an early lead and increased it steadily, effortlessly. In fact, he seemed to be holding back. And then, at the end of the race, as they bobbed together in the water, Misha swam over to him to give him a comradely hug. And as he did so, he whispered in his ear, in awkward English, "You will help me, won't you, Brian? Please? You'll help me to be free?"

And, in his eyes, Landry saw fear and anguish and uncertainty. He understood that if Misha was inhuman, he was, himself, no less so.

"Of course, I'll help you, Misha. I promise, you'll be free."

In bits and pieces, in short snatches of dialogue, Landry passed on to Misha the instructions he received. He also lost the backstroke competition, the butterfly, and the six-hundred-meter relay. Finally, the moment came. The moment when they had to

make their move. The moment everyone was waiting for. The grueling marathon freestyle.

In every event thus far, Landry had taken the silver medal. The gold was clearly Misha's. He had won each race decisively, with enough lead to establish the victory, but not so much as to embarrass the other competitors. He was never more than three quarters of a lap ahead of Landry. Enough speed to break all existing records, but just barely enough. The boy wasn't even trying.

It was typical Russian strategy, begun years ago by the power-lifter Alexeiev, who broke the record one pound at a time, so that he could continue breaking his own record by stages every competition. Only Misha would be breaking no more records for the Russians. Not if Landry had anything to say about it.

From the very beginning, the freestyle was a race between Landry and Mikhailov. They easily outdistanced all the other swimmers. After five hundred meters, both swimmers were ahead of all the others by at least three laps. Racing in adjoining lanes, Brian and Misha cut through the water like two torpedoes. His lungs bursting, Landry pushed his body to its ultimate limits. After the thirtieth lap of the pool, he began to hallucinate.

He no longer heard the screams of the spectators echoing in the building. His entire being was filled with a hissing white noise as he willed himself to swim faster and faster. And everything around him disappeared. He could no longer make out the flashing body of Mikhailov speeding through the water just ahead of him. Instead, his eyes perceived the gray flanks of the dolphin, George, as the mammal arched up on its tail, cackling at him derisively. His every muscle fiber burning with exertion, Landry pushed himself beyond pain. And he began to close the distance between them.

They completed the forty-fifth lap, executing the flip turn together. The crowd went wild. The two swimmers broke the surface of the water, moving like twin porpoises, side by side.

"What's the matter with him?" hissed Volkov. "Why doesn't he pull ahead?"

"The American is swimming like a madman," answered the coach, Vladimiroff. "I never would have thought him capable of such an effort. At the rate he's going, I fear his heart may give out."

"There's only one length of the pool left!" said Volkov, grabbing the coach by the arm. "They are neck-and-neck!"

"We are watching a true champion," said Vladimiroff, admiringly. "For the first time in his life, Misha has a race on his hands."

"If he does not win this race," said Volkov, "there will be hell to pay."

One man was not watching the contest. While all eyes were on the pool, his were on the tall, blank-faced man standing at Vladimiroff's side. Reaching into his coat, the CIA agent removed the small airgun from its concealed pocket. He loaded it with the liquid-crystal dart that had been designed to melt on contact and leave no traces of the tranquilizer drug. As the swimmers began the final lap, he aimed.

Outside the arena, a large van waited, its turbine engine whining. Three grim-faced men sat inside, one of them listening intently to a small headset he was holding against his ear. He nodded, once, and the other two left the van, going around to its rear doors. They opened them and waited, tensely. Inside the rear portion of the van stood a large, clear-walled tank filled with water. It bubbled as the water inside it was recycled, filtered and pumped back into the tank again.

Landry could see the far wall of the pool coming closer and closer. He had long ago ceased to listen to the screaming protestations of his muscles, and he ignored the pounding and the building pressure in his chest. Just a little farther . . . just a little farther . . .

The man with the dart gun spoke softly into his throat mike. "Now," he said, and fired.

Volkov clapped a hand to his temple. Just before he lost consciousness, he realized what was happening and he reached for Vladimiroff, but it was too late. Vladimiroff was running for the exit like a man possessed.

Hands were pulling Landry from the pool. The crowd surged forward, pushing past the security guards. Landry had no strength left to stand. All around him was cacophony. He saw Misha being raised up onto shoulders, dripping wet, and then it all happened at once. With a powerful kick, Mikhailov lunged from the shoulders he perched on, over the heads of the people crowding the poolside and into the waiting arms of the Americans.

"Asylum!" he screamed, over the din. "I wish asylum!"

They lifted him up, passing him over their heads like a limp doll and into the arms of two gangling track stars. Carrying him between them, the two athletes took off at a dead run, their long, powerful, ostrich-like legs taking immense strides as they took Mikhailov to the van, to water, and to safety. That sight was the last thing Landry saw before he fainted.

"Good morning," said Banyon, smiling slightly.

"Is Misha—"

"He's safe. It all went off like clockwork. The Russians are screaming bloody murder. They tried to claim we kidnapped their boy, but fortunately, enough people heard him screaming for asylum that it just won't wash. The reporters are having a field day."

"Where is he?" Landry asked, raising himself slightly off the bed.

"On his way to Washington. And from there to Bethesda. That's going to be his home for a while. He'll be there for observation indefinitely. Soon as he's up to it, we've got him scheduled for exploratory surgery."

"*Exploratory surgery?* What for?"

"We're going to see if we can't find out what makes him tick. They did some kind of job on him. We're going to put together a few Mikhailovs of our own. Should come in useful. This whole thing is going to save my bacon, after what happened with Wallford."

"He lost?"

"Yeah, well, you might say that. He had a heart attack. Coronary thrombosis. I'm afraid he didn't make it."

Landry sank back down onto the bed. He stared up at the ceiling, thinking of the friendly, slow-witted giant, and his eyes began to fill with tears.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Banyon said, "Mikhailov's been declared inhuman. We've furnished the committee with documented proof that he's not an air breather." He took something from his pocket and tossed it on the bed. There was a glint of gold. "You won. Congratulations."

"Get out," said Landry, his voice hollow.

"Sure thing, Brian. Whatever you say. But before you get to feeling too noble, just remember what you said when you were

spouting off for the cameras. Your own words. 'The winning is the thing.' It's what you said to Wallford, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's what I said to Wallford." The tears were flowing down his cheeks. "And that reminds me, we had a bet, remember?"

"I remember."

"All right, then. I won and I'm calling in your marker. I want out."

"Okay. If that's what you really want. But I'd think about it, if I were you. Misha's terribly alone right now. He could use a friend. And we don't really need you anymore, you know. We've got Mikhailov. I'd sleep on that, if I were you." He left.

For a long time, Landry lay awake and stared up at the ceiling. Sleep just wouldn't come.

The Survivor

by Walter F. Moudy

This will have to be a short headnote because Walter Moudy published only one science fiction novel, No Man on Earth (1964), and a handful of stories (including the novella "The Search for Man") before his death in an auto accident on his fiftieth birthday. A lawyer in Kansas City, he had come to science fiction late in life, but he had considerable talent for the field, as the powerful "The Survivor" clearly shows.

There was a harmony in the design of the arena which an artist might find pleasing. The curved granite walls which extended upward three hundred feet from its base were polished and smooth like the sides of a bowl. A fly, perhaps a lizard, could crawl up those glistening walls—but surely not a man. The walls encircled an egg-shaped area which was precisely three thousand meters long and two thousand one hundred meters wide at its widest point. There were two large hills located on either side of the arena exactly midway from its center to its end. If you were to slice the arena crosswise, your knife would dissect a third, tree-studded hill and a small, clear lake; and the two divided halves would each be the exact mirror image of the other down to the smallest detail. If you were a farmer you would notice the rich flat soil which ran obliquely from the two larger hills toward the lake. If you were an artist you might find pleasure in contemplating the rich shades of green and brown presented by

the forested lowlands at the lake's edge. A sportsman seeing the crystalline lake in the morning's first light would find his fingers itching for light tackle and wading boots. Boys, particularly city boys, would yearn to climb the two larger hills because they looked easy to climb, but not too easy. A general viewing the topography would immediately recognize that possession of the central hill would permit dominance of the lake and the surrounding lowlands.

There was something peaceful about the arena that first morning. The early-morning sun broke through a light mist and spilled over the central hill to the low dew-drenched ground beyond. There were trees with young, green leaves, and the leaves rustled softly in rhythm with the wind. There were birds in those trees, and the birds still sang, for it was spring, and they were filled with the joy of life and the beauty of the morning. A night owl, its appetite satiated now by a recent kill, perched on a dead limb of a large sycamore tree and, tucking its beak in its feathers, prepared to sleep the day away. A sleek copperhead snake, sensing the sun's approach and anticipating its soothing warmth, crawled from beneath the flat rock where it had spent the night and sought the comfort of its favorite rock ledge. A red squirrel chattered nervously as it watched the men enter the arena from the north and then, having decided that there was danger there, darted swiftly to an adjacent tree and disappeared into the security of its nest.

There were exactly one hundred of them. They stood tall and proud in their uniforms, a barely perceptible swaying motion rippling through their lines like wheat stirred by a gentle breeze. If they anticipated what was to come, they did not show it. Their every movement showed their absolute discipline. Once they had been only men—now they were killers. The hunger for blood was like a taste in their mouths; their zest for destruction like a flood which raged inside them. They were finely honed and razor-keen to kill.

Their general made his last inspection. As he passed down the lines the squad captains barked a sharp order and the men froze into absolute immobility. Private Richard Starbuck heard the rasp of the general's boots against the stones as he approached. There was no other sound, not even of men breathing. From long discipline he forced his eyes to maintain their focus on the distant point he had selected, and his eyes did not waver as the general

paused in front of him. They were still fixed on that same imaginary point. He did not even see the general.

Private Richard Starbuck was not thinking of death, although he knew he must surely die. He was thinking of the rifle which he felt securely on his shoulder and of the driving need he had to discharge its deadly pellets into human flesh. His urge to kill was dominant, but even so he was vaguely relieved that he had not been selected for the assassination squad (the suicide squad the men called it); for he still had a chance, a slim chance, to live; while the assassination squad was consigned to inevitable death.

A command was given and Private Starbuck permitted his tense body to relax. He glanced at his watch. Five-twenty-five. He still had an hour and thirty-five minutes to wait. There was a tenseness inside him which his relaxed body did not disclose. They taught you how to do that in training. They taught you lots of things in training.

The TV screen was bigger than life and just as real. The color was true and the images three-dimensional. For a moment the zoom cameras scanned the silent deserted portions of the arena. The sound system was sensitive and sharp and caught the sound made by a squirrel's feet against the bark of a black oak tree. Over one hundred cameras were fixed on the arena; yet so smooth was the transition from one camera to the next that it was as though the viewer was floating over the arena. There was the sound of marching feet, and the pace of the moving cameras quickened and then shifted to the north where one hundred men were entering the arena in perfect unison, a hundred steel-toed boots striking the earth as one. For a moment the cameras fixed on the flashing boots and the sensitive sound system recorded the thunder of men marching to war. Then the cameras flashed to the proud face of their general; then to the hard, determined faces of the men; then back again to the thundering boots. The cameras backed off to watch the column execute an abrupt halt, moved forward to focus for a moment on the general's hawklike face, and then, with the general, inspected the troops one by one, moving down the rigid lines of men and peering intently at each frozen face.

When the "at ease" order was given, the camera backed up to show an aerial view of the arena and then fixed upon one of the control towers which lined the arena's upper periphery before

sweeping slowly downward and seeming to pass into the control tower. Inside the tower a distinguished gray-haired man in his mid-forties sat beside a jovial, fat-jawed man who was probably in his early fifties. There was an expectant look on their faces. Finally the gray-haired man said:

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, I'm John Ardanyon—"

"And I'm Bill Carr," the fat-jawed man said.

"And this is it—yes, this is the big one, ladies and gentlemen. The 2050 edition of the Olympic War Games. This is the day we've all been waiting for, ladies and gentlemen, and in precisely one hour and thirty-two minutes the games will be under way. Here to help describe the action is Bill Carr, who is known to all of you sports fans all over the world. And with us for this special broadcast are some of the finest technicians in the business. Bill?"

"That's right, John. This year NSB has spared no expense to assure our viewing public that its 2050 game coverage will be second to none. So stay tuned to this station for the most complete, the most immediate coverage of any station. John?"

"That's right, Bill. This year NSB has installed over one hundred specially designed zoom cameras to ensure complete coverage of the games. We are using the latest sonic sound equipment—so sensitive that it can detect the sound of a man's heart beating at a thousand yards. Our camera crew is highly trained in the recently developed transitional-zone technique which you just saw so effectively demonstrated during the fade-in. I think we can promise you that this time no station will be able to match the immediacy of NSB."

"Right, John. And now, less than an hour and a half before the action begins, NSB is proud to bring you this prerecorded announcement from the President of the United States. Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

There was a brief flash of the White House lawn, a fade-out, and then:

"My fellow countrymen. When you hear these words, the beginning of the fifth meeting between the United States and Russia in the Olympic War Games will be just minutes away.

"I hope and I pray that we will be victorious. With the help of God, we shall be.

"But in our longing for victory, we must not lose sight of the primary purpose of these games. In the long run it is not whether

we win or lose but that the games were played. For, my fellow citizens, we must never forget that these games are played in order that the frightening specter of war may never again stalk our land. It is better that a few should decide the nation's fate, than all the resources of our two nations should be mobilized to destroy the other.

"My friends, many of you do not remember the horror of the Final War of 1998. I can recall that war. I lost my father and two sisters in that war. I spent two months in a class-two fallout shelter—as many of you know. There must never be another such war. We cannot—we shall not—permit that to happen.

"The Olympic War Games are the answer—the only answer. Thanks to the Olympic War Games we are at peace. Today one hundred of our finest fighting men will meet one hundred Russian soldiers to decide whether we shall be victorious or shall go down to defeat. The loser must pay the victor reparations of ten billion dollars. The stakes are high.

"The stakes are high, but, my fellow citizens, the cost of total war is a hundred times higher. This miniature war is a thousand times less costly than total war. Thanks to the Olympic War Games, we have a kind of peace.

"And now, in keeping with the tradition established by the late President Goldstein, I hereby declare a national holiday for all persons not engaged in essential services from now until the conclusion of the games.

"To those brave men who made the team I say: the hope and the prayers of the nation go with you. May you emerge victorious."

There was a fade-out and then the pleasant features of John Ardanyon appeared. After a short, respectful silence, he said:

"I'm sure we can all agree with the President on that. And now, here is Professor Carl Overmann to explain the computer system developed especially for NSB's coverage of the 2050 war games."

"Thank you, Mr. Ardanyon. This year, with the help of the Englewood system of evaluating intangible factors, we hope to start bringing you reliable predictions at the ten-percent casualty level. Now, very briefly, here is how the Englewood system works. . . ."

Private Richard Starbuck looked at his watch. Still forty more minutes to wait. He pulled back the bolt on his rifle and checked

once more to make sure that the first shell was properly positioned in the chamber. For the third time in the past twenty minutes he walked to one side and urinated on the ground. His throat seemed abnormally dry, and he removed his canteen to moisten his lips with water. He took only a small swallow because the rules permitted only one canteen of water per man, and their battle plan did not call for early possession of the lake.

A passing lizard caught his attention. He put his foot on it and squashed it slowly with the toe of his right boot. He noticed with mild satisfaction that the thing had left a small blood smear at the end of his boot. Oddly, however, seeing the blood triggered something in his mind, and for the first time he vaguely recognized the possibility that he could be hurt. In training he had not thought much about that. Mostly you thought of how it would feel to kill a man. After a while you got so that you wanted to kill. You came to love your rifle, like it was an extension of your own body. And if you could not feel its comforting presence, you felt like a part of you was missing. Still a person could be hurt. You might not die immediately. He wondered what it would be like to feel a misshapen chunk of lead tearing through his belly. The Russians would X their bullets too, probably. They do more damage that way.

It might not be so bad. He remembered a time four years ago when he had thought he was dying, and that had not been so bad. He remembered that at the time he had been more concerned about bleeding on the Martins' new couch. The Martins had always been good to him. Once they had thought they could never have a child of their own, and they had about half adopted him because his own mother worked and was too busy to bake cookies for him and his father was not interested in fishing or basketball or things like that. Even after the Martins had Cassandra, they continued to treat him like a favorite nephew. Mr. Martin took him fishing and attended all the basketball games when he was playing. And that was why when he wrecked the motor scooter and cut his head he had been more concerned about bleeding on the Martins' new couch than about dying, although he had felt that he was surely dying. He remembered that his first thought upon regaining consciousness was one of self-importance. The Martins had looked worried and their nine-year-old daughter, Cassandra, was looking at the blood running down his face and was crying. That was when he felt he might be

dying. Dying had seemed a strangely appropriate thing to do, and he had felt an urge to do it well and had begun to assure them that he was all right. And, to his slight disappointment, he was.

Private Richard Starbuck, formerly a star forward on the Center High basketball team, looked at his watch and wondered, as he waited, if being shot in the gut would be anything like cutting your head on the pavement. It was funny he should have thought of that now. He hadn't thought of the Martins for months. He wondered if they would be watching. He wondered, if they did, if they would recognize the sixteen-year-old boy who had bled on their living room couch four years ago. He wondered if he recognized that sixteen-year-old boy himself.

Professor Carl Overmann had finished explaining the marvels of the NSB computer system; a mousy little man from the sociology department of a second-rate university had spent ten minutes assuring the TV audience that one of the important psychological effects of the TV coverage of the games was that it allowed the people to satisfy the innate blood lust vicariously and strongly urged the viewers to encourage the youngsters to watch; a minister had spent three minutes explaining that the miniature war could serve to educate mankind to the horrors of war; an economics professor was just finishing a short lecture on the economic effects of victory or defeat.

"Well, there you have it, ladies and gentlemen," Bill Carr said when the economics professor had finished. "You all know there's a lot at stake for both sides. And now—what's that? You what? Just a minute, folks. I think we may have another NSB first." He looked off camera to his right. "Is he there? Yes, indeed, ladies and gentlemen, NSB has done it again. For the first time we are going to have—well, here he is, ladies and gentlemen, General George W. Caldwell, chief of the Olympic War Games training section. General, it's nice to have you with us."

"Thank you, Bill. It's good to be here."

"General, I'm sure our audience already knows this, but just so there will be no misunderstanding, it's not possible for either side to communicate to their people in the arena now. Is that right?"

"That's right, Bill, or I could not be here. An electronic

curtain, as it were, protects the field from any attempt to communicate. From here on out the boys are strictly on their own."

"General, do you care to make any predictions on the outcome of the games?"

"Yes, Bill, I may be going out on a limb here, but I think our boys are ready. I can't say that I agree with the neutral-money boys who have the United States a six-to-five underdog. I say we'll win."

"General, there is some thought that our defeat in the games four years ago was caused by an inferior battle plan. Do you care to comment on that?"

"No comment."

"Do you have any explanation for why the United States team has lost the last two games after winning the first two?"

"Well, let me say this. Our defeat in '42 could well have been caused by overconfidence. After all, we had won the first two games rather handily. As I recall we won the game in '38 by four survivors. But as for our defeat in '46—well, your estimate on that one is as good as mine. I will say this: General Hanley was much criticized for an unimaginative battle plan by a lot of so-called experts. Those so-called experts—those armchair generals—were definitely wrong. General Hanley's battle strategy was sound in every detail. I've studied his plans at considerable length, I can assure you."

"Perhaps the training program—?"

"Nonsense. My own exec was on General Hanley's training staff. With only slight modifications it's the same program we used for this year's games."

"Do you care to comment on your own battle plans, General?"

"Well, Bill, I wouldn't want to kill the suspense for your TV audience. But I can say this: we'll have a few surprises this year. No one can accuse us of conservative tactics, I can tell you that."

"How do you think our boys will stack up against the Russians, General?"

"Bill, on a man-to-man basis, I think our boys will stack up very well indeed. In fact, we had men in the drop-out squads who could have made our last team with no trouble at all. I'd say this year's crop is probably twenty percent improved."

"General, what do you look for in selecting your final teams?"

"Bill, I'd say that more than anything else we look for desire. Of course, a man has to be a good athlete, but if he doesn't have that killer instinct, as we say, he won't make the team. I'd say it's desire."

"Can you tell us how you pick the men for the games?"

"Yes, Bill, I think I can, up to a point. We know the Russians use the same system, and, of course, there has been quite a bit written on the subject in the popular press in recent months.

"Naturally, we get thousands of applicants. We give each of them a tough screening test—physical, mental, and psychological. Most applicants are eliminated in the first test. You'd be surprised at some of the boys who apply. The ones who are left—just under two thousand for this year's games—are put through an intensive six-month training course. During this training period we begin to get our first drop-outs, the men who somehow got past our screening system and who will crack up under pressure.

"Next comes a year of training in which the emphasis is on conditioning."

"Let me interrupt here for just a moment, General, if I may. This conditioning—is this a type of physical training?"

The general smiled tolerantly. "No, Bill, this is a special type of conditioning—both mental and physical. The men are conditioned to war. They are taught to recognize and to hate the enemy. They are taught to react instantly to every possible hostile stimulus. They learn to love their weapons and to distrust all else."

"I take it that an average training day must leave the men very little free time."

"Free time!" The general now seemed more shocked than amused. "Free time indeed. Our training program leaves no time free. We don't coddle our boys. After all, Bill, these men are training for war. No man is permitted more than two hours' consecutive sleep. We have an average of four alerts every night.

"Actually the night alerts are an important element in our selection as well as our training program. We have the men under constant observation, of course. You can tell a lot about how a man responds to an alert. Of course, all of the men are conditioned to come instantly awake with their rifles in their hands. But some would execute a simultaneous roll-away movement while at the same time cocking and aiming their weapons in the direction of the hostile sound which signaled the alert."

"How about the final six months, General?"

"Well, Bill, of course, I can't give away all our little tricks during those last six months. I can tell you in a general sort of way that this involved putting battle plans on a duplicate of the arena itself."

"And these hundred men who made this year's team—I presume they were picked during the last six months' training?"

"No, Bill, actually we only made our final selection last night. You see, for the first time in two years these men have had some free time. We give them two days off before the games begin. How the men react to this enforced inactivity can tell us a lot about their level of readiness. I can tell you we have an impatient bunch of boys out there."

"General, it's ten minutes to game time. Do you suppose our team may be getting a little nervous down there?"

"Nervous? I suppose the boys may be a little tensed up. But they'll be all right just as soon as the action starts."

"General, I want to thank you for coming by. I'm sure our TV audience has found this brief discussion most enlightening."

"It was my pleasure, Bill."

"Well, there you have it, ladies and gentlemen. You heard it from the man who should know—Lieutenant General George W. Caldwell himself. He picks the United States team to go all the way. John?"

"Thank you, Bill. And let me say that there has been considerable sentiment for the United States team in recent weeks among the neutrals. These are the men who set the odds—the men who bet their heads but never their hearts. In fact at least one oddsmaker in Stockholm told me last night that he had stopped taking anything but six-to-five bets, and you pick 'em. In other words, this fight is rated just about even here just a few minutes before game time."

"Right, John, it promises to be an exciting day, so stay tuned to this station for full coverage."

"I see the troops are beginning to stir. It won't be long now. Bill, while we wait I think it might be well, for the benefit of you younger people, to tell the folks just what it means to be a survivor in one of these games. Bill?"

"Right, John. Folks, the survivor, or survivors as the case may be, will truly become a *Survivor*. A *Survivor*, as most of you know, is exempt from all laws; he has unlimited credit; in

short, he can literally do no wrong. And that's what those men are shooting for today, John."

"Okay, Bill. And now as our cameras scan the Russian team, let us review very briefly the rules of the game. Each side has one hundred men divided into ten squads each consisting of nine men and one squad captain. Each man has a standard automatic rifle, four hand grenades, a canteen of water, and enough food to last three days. All officers are armed with side arms in addition to their automatic rifles. Two of the squads are armed with air-cooled light machine guns, and one squad is armed with a mortar with one thousand rounds of ammunition. And those, ladies and gentlemen, are the rules of the game. Once the games begin the men are on their own. There are no more rules—except, of course, that the game is not over until one side or the other has no more survivors. Bill?"

"Okay, John. Well, folks, here we are just seconds away from game time. NSB will bring you live each exciting moment—so stand by. We're waiting for the start of the 2050 Olympic War Games. Ten seconds now. Six. Four, three, two, one—the games are underway, and look at 'em go!"

The cameras spanned back from the arena to give a distant view of the action. Squad one peeled off from the main body and headed toward the enemy rear at a fast trot. They were armed with rifles and grenades. Squads two, three, and four went directly toward the high hill in the American sector, where they broke out entrenching tools and began to dig in. Squads five and six took one of the light machine guns and marched at double time to the east of the central hill, where they concealed themselves in the brush and waited. Squads seven through ten were held in reserve, where they occupied themselves by burying the ammunition and other supplies at predetermined points and in beginning the preparation of their own defense perimeters.

The cameras swung briefly to the Russian sector. Four Russian squads had already occupied the high hill in the Russian sector, and a rifle squad was being rushed to the central hill located on the north-south dividing line. A Russian machine gun squad was digging in to the south of the lake to establish a base of fire on the north side of the central hill.

The cameras returned to the American squads five and six, which were now deployed along the east side of the central hill. The cameras moved in from above the entrenched machine

gunner, paused momentarily on his right hand, which was curved lovingly around the trigger guard while his middle finger stroked the trigger itself in a manner almost obscene, and then followed the gunner's unblinking eyes to the mist-enshrouded base of the central hill where the point man of the Russian advance squad was cautiously testing his fate in a squirming, crawling advance on the lower slopes of the hill.

"This could be it!" Bill Carr's booming voice exploded from the screen like a shot. "This could be the first skirmish, ladies and gentlemen. John, how does it look to you?"

"Yes, Bill, it looks like we will probably get our first action in the east-central sector. Quite a surprise, too, Bill. A lot of experts felt that the American team would concentrate its initial push on control of the central hill. Instead, the strategy appears to be—at least as it appears from here—to concede the central hill to the Russian team but to make them pay for it. You can't see it on your screens just now, ladies and gentlemen, but the American mortar squad is now positioned on the north slope of the north hill and is ready to fire."

"All right, John. Folks, here in our booth operating as spotter for the American team is Colonel Bullock of the United States Army. Our Russian spotter is Brigadier General Vorsilov, who will from time to time give us his views on Russian strategy. Colonel Bullock, do you care to comment?"

"Well, I think it's fairly obvious, Bill, that—"

His words were interrupted by the first chilling chatter of the American light machine gun. Tracer bullets etched their brilliant way through the morning air to seek and find human flesh. Four mortar rounds, fired in rapid succession, arched over the low hill and came screaming a tale of death and destruction. The rifle squad opened fire with compelling accuracy. The Russian line halted, faltered, reformed, and charged up the central hill. Three men made it to the sheltering rocks on the hill's upper slope. The squad captain and six enlisted men lay dead or dying on the lower slopes. As quickly as it had begun the firing ended.

"How about that!" Bill Carr exclaimed. "First blood for the American team. What a fantastic beginning to these 2050 war games, ladies and gentlemen. John, how about that?"

"Right, Bill. Beautifully done. Brilliantly conceived and executed with marvelous precision. And almost unbelievable maneuver by the American team that obviously caught the Russians

completely off guard. Did you get the casualty figures on that first skirmish, Bill?"

"I make it five dead and two seriously wounded, John. Now keep in mind, folks, these figures are unofficial. Ed, can you give us a closeup on that south slope?"

The cameras scanned the hill first from a distance and then zoomed in to give a closeup of each man who lay on the bleak southern slope. The Russian captain was obviously dead with a neat rifle bullet through his forehead. The next man appeared to be sleeping peacefully. There was not a mark visible on his body; yet he too was dead as was demonstrated when the delicate sonic sound system was focused on his corpse without disclosing the whisper of a heartbeat. The third man was still living, although death was just minutes away. For him it would be a peaceful death, for he was unconscious and was quietly leaking his life away from a torn artery in his neck. The camera rested next upon the shredded corpse of the Russian point man, who had been the initial target for so many rifles. He lay on his stomach, and there were nine visible wounds in his back. The camera showed next a closeup view of a young man's face frozen in the moment of death, blue eyes, lusterless now and pale in death, framed by a face registering the shock of war's ultimate reality, his lips half opened still as if to protest his fate or to ask for another chance. The camera moved next to a body lying fetal-like near the top of the hill hardly two steps from the covering rocks where the three surviving squad members had found shelter. The camera then moved slowly down the slope seeking the last casualty. It found him on a pleasant, grassy spot beneath a small oak tree. A mortar fragment had caught him in the lower belly and his guts were spewed out on the grass like an overturned bucket of sand. He was whimpering softly, and with his free left hand was trying with almost comic desperation to place his entrails back inside his belly.

"Well, there you have it, folks," Bill Carr said. "It's official now. You saw it for yourselves thanks to our fine camera technicians. Seven casualties confirmed. John, I don't believe the American team has had its first casualty yet, is that right?"

"That's right, Bill. The Russian team apparently was caught completely off guard."

"Colonel Bullock, would you care to comment on what you've seen so far?"

"Yes, Bill, I think it's fair to say that this first skirmish gives the American team a decided advantage. I would like to see the computer's probability reports before going too far out on a limb, but I'd say the odds are definitely in favor of the American team at this stage. General Caldwell's election not to take the central hill has paid a handsome dividend here early in the games."

"General Vorsilov, would you care to give us the Russian point of view?"

"I do not agree with my American friend, Colonel Bullock," the general said with a crisp British accent. "The fourth Russian squad was given the mission to take the central hill. The central hill has been taken and is now controlled by the Russian team. Possession of the central hill provides almost absolute dominance of the lake and surrounding low land. Those of you who have studied military history know how important that can be, particularly in the later stages of the games. I emphatically do not agree that the first skirmish was a defeat. Possession of the hill is worth a dozen men."

"Comments, Colonel Bullock?"

"Well, Bill, first of all, I don't agree that the Russian team has possession of the hill. True they have three men up there, but those men are armed with nothing but rifles and hand grenades—and they are not dug in. Right now the central hill is up for grabs. I—"

"Just a minute, Colonel. Pardon this interruption, but our computer has the first probability report. And here it is! The prediction is for an American victory with a probability rating of 57.2. How about that, folks? Here early in the first day the American team, which was a decided underdog in this year's games, has jumped to a substantial lead."

Colonel Bullock spoke: "Bill, I want you to notice that man there—over there on the right-hand side of your screen. Can we have a closeup on that? That's a runner, Bill. A lot of the folks don't notice little things like that. They want to watch the machine gunners or the point man, but that man there could have a decided effect on the outcome of these games, Bill."

"I presume he's carrying a message back to headquarters, eh, Colonel?"

"That's right, Bill, and a very important message, I'll warrant. You see, an attack on the central hill from the east or south sides

would be disastrous. The Russians, of course, hold the south hill. From their positions there they could subject our boys to a blistering fire from the rear on any attack made from the south. That runner was sent back with word that there are only three Russians on the hill. I think we can expect an immediate counter-attack from the north as soon as the message has been delivered. In the meantime, squads five and six will maintain their positions in the eastern sector and try to prevent any reinforcements of the Russian position."

"Thank you, Colonel, for that enlightening analysis, and now, folks—" He broke off when the runner to whom the Colonel referred stumbled and fell.

"Wait a minute, folks. He's been hit! He's down! The runner has been shot. You saw it here, folks. Brilliant camera work. Simply great. John, how about that?"

"Simply tremendous, Bill. A really great shot. Ed, can we back the cameras up and show the folks that action again? Here it is in slow motion, folks. Now you see him (who is that, Colonel? Ted Krogan? Thank you, Colonel) here he is, folks, Private Ted Krogan from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Here he is coming around the last clump of bushes—now watch this, folks—he gets about halfway across the clearing—and there it is, folks, you can actually see the bullet strike his throat—a direct hit. Watch this camera closeup of his face, you'll see him die in front of your eyes. And there he goes—he rolls over and not a move. He was dead before he hit the ground. Bill, did any of our cameras catch where that shot came from?"

"Yes, John, the Russians have slipped a two-man sniper team in on our left flank. This could be serious, John. I don't think our boys know the runner was hit."

"Only time will tell, Bill. Only time will tell. Right now, I believe we have our first lull. Let's take thirty seconds for our stations to identify themselves."

Private Richard Starbuck's first day was not at all what he had expected. He was with the second squad, one of the three squads which were dug in on the north hill. After digging his foxhole he had spent the day staring at the south and central hills. He had heard the brief skirmish near the central hill, but he had yet to see his first Russian. He strained so hard to see something that sometimes his eyes played tricks on him. Twice his mind gave

movement to a distant shadow. Once he nearly fired at the sudden sound of a rabbit in the brush. His desire to see the enemy was almost overpowering. It reminded him of the first time Mr. Martin had taken him fishing on the lake. He had been thirteen at the time. He had stared at that still, white cork for what had seemed like hours. He remembered he had even prayed to God to send a fish along that would make the cork go under. His mind had played tricks on him that day too, and several times he had fancied the cork was moving when it was not. He was not praying today, of course—except the intensity of his desire was something like a prayer.

He spent the entire first day in a foxhole without seeing anything or hearing anything except an occasional distant sniper's bullet. When the sun went down, he brought out his rations and consumed eighteen hundred calories. As soon as it was dark, his squad was to move to the south slope and prepare their defensive positions. He knew the Russians would be similarly occupied. It was maddening to know that for a time the enemy would be exposed and yet be relatively safe because of the covering darkness.

When it was completely dark, his squad captain gave the signal, and the squad moved out to their predetermined positions and began to dig in. So far they were still following the battle plan to the letter. He dug his foxhole with care, building a small ledge halfway down on which to sit and placing some foliage on the bottom to keep it from becoming muddy, and then he settled down to wait. Somehow it was better at night. He even found himself wishing that they would not come tonight. He discovered that he could wait.

Later he slept. How long, he did not know. He only knew that when he awoke he heard a sound of air parting followed by a hard, thundering impact that shook the ground. His first instinct was to action, and then he remembered that there was nothing he could do, so he hunched down as far as possible in his foxhole and waited. He knew real fear now—the kind of fear that no amount of training or conditioning can eliminate. He was a living thing whose dominant instinct was to continue living. He did not want to die hunched down in a hole in the ground. The flesh along his spine quivered involuntarily with each fractional warning whoosh which preceded the mortar's fall. Now he knew that he could die, knew it with his body as well as with his mind. A shell landed nearby, and he heard a shrill, womanlike scream.

Bill Smith had been hit. His first reaction was one of relief. It had been Bill Smith and not he. But why did he have to scream? Bill Smith had been one of the toughest men in the squad. There ought to be more dignity than that. There ought to be a better way of dying than lying helpless in a hole and waiting for chance or fate in the form of some unseen, impersonal gunner, who probably was firing an assigned pattern anyhow, to bring you life or death.

In training, under conditions of simulated danger, he had grown to rely upon the solidarity of the squad. They faced danger together, together they could whip the world. But now he knew that in the end war was a lonely thing. He could not reach out into the darkness and draw courage from the huddled forms of his comrades from the second squad. He took no comfort from the fact that the other members of the squad were just as exposed as he. The fear which he discovered in himself was a thing which had to be endured alone, and he sensed now that when he died, that too would have to be endured alone.

"Well, folks, this is Bill Carr still bringing you our continuous coverage of the 2050 Olympic War Games. John Ardanyon is getting a few hours' sleep right now, but he'll be back at four o'clock.

"For the benefit of those viewers who may have tuned in late, let me say again that NSB will bring continuous coverage. Yes sir, folks, this year, thanks to our special owl-eye cameras, we can give you shots of the night action with remarkable clarity.

"Well, folks, the games are almost eighteen hours old, and here to bring you the latest casualty report is my old friend Max Sanders. Max?"

"Thank you, Bill, and good evening, ladies and gentlemen. The latest casualty reports—and these are confirmed figures. Let me repeat—these are confirmed figures. For the Russian team: twenty-two dead, and eight incapacitated wounded. For the American team: seventeen dead, and only six incapacitated wounded."

"Thank you, Max. Folks, our computer has just recomputed the odds, and the results are—what's this? Folks, here is a surprise. A rather unpleasant surprise. Just forty-five minutes ago the odds on an American victory were 62.1. Those odds, ladies and gentlemen, have just fallen to 53.0. I'm afraid I don't understand this at all. Professor Overmann, what do you make of this?"

"I'm afraid the computer has picked up a little trouble in the southwestern sector, Bill. As I explained earlier, the computer's estimates are made up of many factors—and the casualty reports are just one of them. Can you give us a long shot of the central hill, Ed? There. There you see one of the factors which undoubtedly has influenced the new odds. The Russian team has succeeded in reinforcing their position on the central hill with a light machine gun squad. This goes back to the first American casualty earlier today when the messenger failed to get word through for the counterattack.

"Now give me a medium shot of the American assassination squad. Back it up a little more, will you, Ed? There, that's it. I was afraid of that. What has happened, Bill, is that, unknowingly, the American squad has been spotted by a Russian reserve guard. That could mean trouble."

"I see. Well, that explains the sudden drop in the odds, folks. Now the question is, can the American assassination squad pull it off under this handicap? We'll keep the cameras over here, folks, until we have an answer. The other sectors are relatively quiet now except for sporadic mortar fire."

For the first time since the skirmish which had begun the battle, the cameras were able to concentrate their sustained attention on one small area of the arena. The assassination squad moved slowly, tortuously slow, through the brush and the deep grass which dotted the southwest sector. They had successfully infiltrated the Russian rear. For a moment the camera switched to the Russian sentry who had discovered the enemy's presence and who was now reporting to his captain. Orders were given and in a very few minutes the light machine gun had been brought back from the lake and was in position to fire on the advancing American squad. Two Russian reserve squads were positioned to deliver a deadly crossfire on the patrol. To the men in the arena it must have been pitch-dark. Even on camera there was an eerie, uneasy quality to the light that lent a ghostlike effect to the faces of the men whose fates had been determined by an unsuspected meeting with a Russian sentry. Death would have been exceedingly quick and profitless for the ten-man squad had not a Russian rifleman fired his rifle prematurely. As it was, the squad captain and six men were killed in the first furious burst of fire. The three survivors reacted instantly and disap-

peared into the brush. One died there noiselessly from a chest wound inflicted in the ambush. Another managed to kill two Russian infantrymen with hand grenades before he died. In the darkness the Russian captain became confused and sent word to his general that the entire squad had been destroyed. The general came to inspect the site and was instantly killed at short range by the lone surviving member of the assassination squad. By a series of fortuitous events the squad had accomplished its primary purpose. The Russian general was dead, and in less than two seconds so was the last man in the assassination squad.

"Well, there you have it, ladies and gentlemen. High drama here in the early hours of the morning as an American infantry squad cuts down the Russian general. Those of you who have watched these games before will know that some of the most exciting action takes place at night. In a few minutes we should have the latest probability report, but until then, how do you see it, Colonel Bullock?"

"Bill, I think the raiding squad came out of that very well indeed. They were discovered and boxed in by the enemy, yet they still fulfilled their primary mission—they killed the Russian general. It's bound to have an effect."

"General Vorsilov, do you care to comment, sir?"

"I think your computer will confirm that three for ten is a good exchange, even if one of those three happens to be a general. Of course, we had an unlucky break when one of our soldiers accidentally discharged his weapon. Otherwise we would have suffered no casualties. As for the loss of General Sarlov, no general has ever survived the games, and I venture to say no general ever will. The leadership of the Russian team will now descend by predetermined selection to the senior Russian captain."

"Thank you, General. Well, folks, here is the latest computer report. This is going to disappoint a lotta people. For an American victory, the odds now stand at 49.1. Of course, let me emphasize, folks, that such a small difference at this stage is virtually meaningless.

"Well, we seem to have another lag, folks. While our cameras scan the arena, let me remind you that each morning of the games NSB will be bringing you a special capsule rerun of the highlights of the preceding night's action.

"Well, folks, things seem to be a little quiet right now, but don't go away. In the games, anything can happen and usually

does. We lost ten good men in that last action, so maybe this is a good time to remind you ladies and gentlemen that this year NSB is giving to the parents of each one of these boys a special tape recording of the action in the arena complete with sound effects and a brand-new uniflex projector. Thus each parent will be able to see their son's participation in the games. This is a gift that I'm sure will be treasured throughout the years.

"NSB would like to take this opportunity to thank the following sponsors for relinquishing their time so we could bring you this special broadcast . . ."

Private Richard Starbuck watched the dawn edge its way over the arena. He had slept perhaps a total of two hours last night, and already a feeling of unreality was invading his senses. When the roll was called, he answered with a voice which surprised him by its impersonalness: "Private Richard Starbuck, uninjured, ammunition expended zero." Three men did not answer the roll. One of the three was the squad captain. That meant that Sergeant Collins was the new squad captain. Through discipline and habit he broke out his breakfast ration and forced himself to eat. Then he waited again.

Later that morning he fired his first shot. He caught a movement on the central hill, and this time it was not a shadow. He fired quickly, but he missed, and his target quickly disappeared. There was heavy firing in the mideastern sector, but he was no longer even curious as to what was going on unless it affected his own position. All day long he fired whenever he saw something that could have been a man on either of the Russian-held hills. Sometimes he fired when he saw nothing because it made him feel better. The Russians returned the fire, but neither side appeared to be doing any real damage against a distant, well-entrenched enemy.

Toward evening Captain Collins gave orders for him to take possession of Private Bill Smith's foxhole. It seemed like a ridiculous thing to do in broad daylight when in a couple more hours he could accomplish the same thing in almost perfect safety. They obviously intended for him to draw fire to expose the Russian positions. For a moment he hesitated, feeling the hate for Collins wash over him like a flood. Then he grasped his rifle, leaped from his hole, and ran twenty yards diagonally down the hill to Smith's foxhole. It seemed to him as if the

opposing hills had suddenly come alive. He flung himself face first to the ground and landed grotesquely on top of the once tough body of Private Bill Smith. He felt blood trickling down his arm, and for a moment he thought he had been hit, but it was only a scratch from a projecting rock. His own squad had been firing heavily, and he heard someone say: "I got one, B'god I got one." He twisted around in the foxhole trying to keep his head safely below the surface, and then he saw what it was that had made Bill Smith scream. The mortar had wrenched his left arm loose at the elbow. It dangled there now, hung in place only by a torn shirt and a small piece of skin. He braced himself and began to edge the body up past him in the foxhole. He managed to get below it and heave it over the side. He heard the excited volley of shots which followed the body's tumbling course down the hill. Somehow in his exertions he had finished wrenching the arm loose from the body. He reached down and threw that too over the side of the foxhole. And now this particular bit of earth belonged to him. He liked it better than his last one. He felt he had earned it.

The night brought a return of the mortar fire. This time he didn't care. This time he could sleep, although there was a slight twitching motion on the left side of his face and he woke up every two hours for no reason at all.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, this is John Ardanyon bringing you the start of the third day of the 2050 Olympic War Games.

"And what a night it's been, ladies and gentlemen. In a moment we'll bring you the highlights of last night's action, but first here is Bill Carr to bring you up to date on the vital statistics."

"Thank you, John. Folks, we're happy to say that in the last few hours the early trend of the night's action has been reversed and the American team once again has a substantial lead. Squad five and six were wiped out in an early-evening engagement in the mideastern sector, but they gave a good account of themselves. The Russians lost eleven men and a light machine gun in their efforts to get this thorn out of their side. And I'm happy to say the American light machine gun carried by squad six was successfully destroyed before the squad was overrun. But the big news this morning is the success of the American mortar and sniper

squads. Our mortars accounted for six dead and two seriously wounded as opposed to only two killed and one wounded by the Russian mortars. Our sniper squad, working in two-man teams, was successful in killing five men, whereas we only lost one man to enemy sniper action last night. We'll have a great shot coming up, folks, showing Private Cecil Harding from Plainview, New Jersey, killing a Russian captain in his sleep with nothing more than a sharp rock."

"Right, Bill, but before we show last night's highlights, I'm sure the folks would like to know that the score now stands forty-two fighting men for the American team as opposed to only thirty-seven for the Russians. Computerwise that figures out to a 52.5 probability for the American team. I'm sure that probability figure would be higher if the Russians were not positioned on that central hill."

"And here now are the high spots of the night's action. . . ."

On the morning of the third day, word was spread that the American general had been killed. Private Richard Starbuck did not care. He realized now that good generalship was not going to preserve his life. So far chance seemed the only decisive factor. The mortar fire grew heavier, and the word was given to prepare for an attack on the hill. He gripped his rifle, and as he waited, he hoped they would come. He wanted to see, to face his enemy. He wanted to feel again that man had the power to control his own destiny.

A few minutes after noon it began to rain, a chilling spring rain that drizzled slowly and soaked in next to the skin. The enemy mortar ceased firing. The man in the foxhole next to his was laughing somewhat hysterically and claiming he had counted the Russian mortar fire and that they had now exploded eight hundred of their thousand rounds. It seemed improbable; nevertheless Private Starbuck heard the story spread from foxhole to foxhole and presently he even began to believe it himself.

Toward evening, the sun came out briefly, and the mortars commenced firing again. This time, however, the shells landed on the far side of the hill. There was an answering fire from the American mortar, although it seemed a senseless duel when neither gunner could get a fix on the other. The duel continued after nightfall, and then, suddenly, there was silence from the American sector. In a few minutes, his worst fears were con-

firmed when a runner brought orders to fall back to new positions. An unhappy chance round had knocked out the American mortar.

There were five men left in his squad. They managed to withdraw from the south slope of the hill without further losses. Their new general, Captain Paulson, had a meeting of his surviving officers in Private Starbuck's hearing. The situation was not good, but before going into purely defensive positions, two things must be accomplished. The enemy machine gun and mortar must be destroyed. Squads seven and eight, who had been in reserve for a time and who had suffered the fewest casualties, were assigned the task. It must be done tonight. If the enemy's heavy weapons could be destroyed while the Americans still maintained possession of their remaining light machine gun, their position would be favorable. Otherwise their chances were fading. The mortar shells for the now useless American mortar were to be destroyed immediately to prevent their possible use by the enemy. And the general added almost as an afterthought, at sunrise the second squad would attack and take the central hill. They would be supported by the light machine gun if, by then, the enemy mortar had been put out of action. Questions? There were many, but none were asked.

"Colonel Bullock, this is an unusual development. Would you tell us what General Paulson has in mind?"

"Well, Bill, I think it must be pretty obvious even to the men in the field that the loss of the American mortar has drastically changed the situation. An unfortunate occurrence, unfortunate indeed. The probability report is now only 37.6 in favor of the American team. Of course, General Paulson doesn't have a computer, but I imagine he's arrived at pretty much the same conclusion.

"The two squads—seven and eight, I believe—which you see on your screens are undoubtedly being sent out in a desperation attempt—no, not desperation—in a courageous attempt to destroy the enemy mortar and light machine gun. It's a good move. I approve. Of course, you won't find this one in the books, but the fact is that at this stage of the game, the predetermined battle plans are of ever-decreasing importance."

"General Vorsilov?"

"The Americans are doing the only thing they can do, Mr. Carr, but it's only a question of time now. You can

rest assured that the Russian team will be alert to this very maneuver."

"Well, stand by, folks. This is still anybody's game. The games are not over yet—not by a long shot. Don't go away. This could be the key maneuver of the games. John?"

"While we're waiting, Bill, I'm sure the folks would like to hear a list of the new records which have already been set in this fifth meeting between the United States and Russia in the Olympic War Games. Our first record came early in the games when the American fifth and sixth squads startled the world with a brilliant demonstration of firepower and shattering the old mark set back in 2042 by killing seven men in just . . ."

On the morning of the fifth day Private Starbuck moved out as the point man for the assault on the central hill. He had trained on a replica of the hill hundreds of times, and he knew it as well as he knew the back of his own hand. Squad seven had knocked out the enemy mortar last night, so they had the support of their own light machine gun for at least part of the way. Squad eight had failed in their mission and had been killed to the last man. Private Starbuck only hoped the Russian machine gun was not in position to fire on the assault team.

At first it was like maneuvers. Their own machine gun delivered a blistering fire twenty yards ahead of them and the five squad members themselves fired from the hip as they advanced. There was only occasional and weak counterfire. They were eight yards from the top, and he was beginning to hope that, by some miracle spawned by a grotesque god, they were going to make it. Then it came. Grenades came rolling down from above, and a sustained volley of rifle fire came red hot from the depths of hell. He was hit twice in the first volley. Once in the hip, again in the shoulder. He would have gotten up, would have tried to go forward, but Captain Collins fell dead on top of him and he could not. A grenade exploded three feet away. He felt something jar his cheek and knew he had been hit again. Somehow it was enough. Now he could die. He had done enough. Blood ran down his face and into his left eye, but he made no attempt to wipe it away. He would surely die now. He hoped it would be soon.

"It doesn't look too good, folks. Not good at all. Colonel Bullock?"

"I'm afraid I have to agree, Bill. The American probability factor is down to 16.9, and right now I couldn't quarrel with the computer at all. The Russians still have sixteen fighting men, while the Americans are down to nine. The American team will undoubtedly establish a defense position around the light machine gun on the north hill, but with the Russians still in control of the central hill and still in possession of their own machine gun, it appears pretty hopeless. Pretty hopeless indeed."

He owed his life during the next few minutes to the fact that he was able to maintain consciousness. The firing had ceased all about him, and for a time he heard nothing, not even the sound of distant gunfire. This is death, he thought. Death is when you can't hear the guns any longer. Then he heard the sound of boots. He picked out a spot in the sky and forced his eyes to remain on that spot. He wished to die in peace, and they might not let him die in peace. After a while the boots moved on.

He lost consciousness shortly after that. When he awoke, it was dark. He was not dead yet, for he could hear the sounds of guns again. Let them kill each other. He was out of it. It really was not such a bad way to die, if only it wouldn't take so long. He could tolerate the pain, but he hated the waiting.

While he waited, a strange thing happened. It was as though his spirit passed from his body and he could see himself lying there on the hill. Poor forlorn body to lie so long upon a hill. Would they write poems and sing songs about Private Richard Starbuck like they did four years ago for Sergeant Ernie Stevens? No, no poems for this lonely body lying on a hill waiting to die. Sergeant Stevens had killed six men before he died. So far as he knew he had killed none.

In the recruiting pamphlet they told you that your heirs would receive one hundred thousand dollars if you died in the games. Was that why he signed up? No, no, he was willing to die now, but not for that. Surely he had had a better reason than that. Why had he done such a crazy thing? Was it the chance to be a survivor? No, not that either. Suddenly he realized something the selection committee had known long ago: he had volunteered for no other reason than the fact there was a war to be fought, and he had not wanted to be left out.

He thought of the cameras next. Had they seen him on TV? Had all the girls, all the people in his home town been watching?

Had his dad watched? Had Mr. and Mrs. Martin and their daughter watched? Had they seen him when he had drawn fire by changing foxholes? Were they watching now to see if he died well?

Toward morning, he began to wonder if he could hold out. There was only one thing left for him to do and that was to die as quietly and peacefully as possible. Yet it was not an easy thing to do, and now his wounds were beginning to hurt again. Twice he heard the boots pass nearby, and each time he had to fight back an impulse to call out to them so they could come hurry death. He did not do it. Someone might be watching, and he wanted them to be proud of him.

At daybreak there was a wild flurry of rifle and machine gun fire, and then, suddenly, there was no sound, no movement, nothing but silence. Perhaps now he could die.

The sad, dejected voice of Bill Carr was saying “. . . all over. It's all over, folks. We're waiting now for the lights to come on in the arena—the official signal that the games are over. It was close—but close only counts in horseshoes, as the saying goes. The American team made a fine last stand. They almost pulled it off. I make out only three Russian survivors, John. Is that right?”

“Just three, Bill, and one of those is wounded in the arm. Well, ladies and gentlemen, we had a very exciting finish. We're waiting now for the arena lights to come on. Wait a minute! Something's wrong! The lights are not coming on! I thought for a moment the official scorer was asleep at the switch. Bill, can you find out what the situation is? This damned computer still gives the American team a 1.4 probability factor.”

“We've located it, John. Our sonic sound system has located a lone American survivor. Can you get the cameras on the central hill over there? There he is, folks. Our spotters in the booth have just identified him as Private Richard Starbuck from Centerville, Iowa. He seems badly wounded, but he's still alive. The question is: can he fight? He's not moving, but his heart is definitely beating and we know where there's life, there's hope.”

“Right, Bill. And you can bet the three Russian survivors are a pretty puzzled group right now. They don't know what's happened. They can't figure out why the lights have not come on. Two minutes ago they were shouting and yelling a victory

chant that now seems to have been premature. Ed, give us a camera on that north hill. Look at this, ladies and gentlemen. The three Russian survivors have gone berserk. Literally berserk—they are shooting and clubbing the bodies of the American dead. Don't go away, folks. . . ."

He began to fear he might not die. His wounds had lost their numbness and had begun to throb. He heard the sounds of guns and then of boots. Why wouldn't they leave him alone? Surely the war was over. He had nothing to do with them. One side or another had won—so why couldn't they leave him alone? The boots were coming closer, and he sensed that they would not leave him alone this time. A sudden rage mingled with his pain, and he knew he could lie there no longer. For the next few seconds he was completely and utterly insane. He pulled the pin on the grenade which had been pressing against his side and threw it blindly in the direction of the sound of the boots. With an instinct gained in two years of intense training, he rolled to his belly and began to fire at the blurred forms below him. He did not stop firing even when the blurred shapes ceased to move. He did not stop firing until his rifle clicked on an empty chamber. Only then did he learn that the blurred shapes were Russian soldiers.

They healed his wounds. His shoulder would always be a little stiff, but his leg healed nicely, leaving him without a trace of a limp. There was a jagged scar on his jaw, but they did wonders with plastic surgery these days and unless you knew it was there, you would hardly notice it. They put him through a two-month reconditioning school, but it didn't take, of course. They gave him ticker tape parades, medals, and the keys to all the major cities. They warned him about the psychological dangers of being a survivor. They gave him case histories of other survivors—grim little anecdotes involving suicide, insanity, and various mental aberrations.

And then they turned him loose.

For a while he enjoyed the fruits of victory. Whatever he wanted he could have for the asking. Girls flocked around him, men respected him, governments honored him, and groups of flunkies and hangers-on were willing enough to serve his every whim. He grew bored and returned to his home town.³

It was not the same. He was not the same. When he walked down the street, mothers would draw close to their daughters and hurry on past. If he shot pool, his old friends seemed aloof and played as if they were afraid to win. Only the shopkeepers were glad to see him come in, for whatever he took, the government paid for. If he were to shoot the mayor's son, the government would pay for that too. At home his own mother would look at him with that guarded look in her eyes, and his dad was careful not to look him in the eyes at all.

He spent a lot of time in his room. He was not lonely. He had learned to live alone. He was sitting in his room one evening when he saw Cassandra, the Martins' fifteen-year-old daughter, coming home with some neighborhood kid from the early movie. He watched idly as the boy tried to kiss her goodnight. There was an awkwardness between them that was vaguely exciting. At last the boy succeeded in kissing her on the cheek, and then, apparently satisfied, went on home.

He sat there for a long time lighting one cigarette from the last one. There was a conflict inside his mind that once would have been resolved differently and probably with no conscious thought. Making up his mind, he stubbed his cigarette and went downstairs. His mother and father were watching TV. They did not look up as he walked out the front door. They never did anymore.

The Martins were still up. Mr. Martin was tying brightly colored flies for his new fly rod and Mrs. Martin was reading. They both stiffened when he entered without knocking—alarm playing over their faces like a flickering firelight. He didn't pause, but walked on upstairs without looking at them.

Mrs. Martin got to her feet and stood looking up the stairway without moving. In her eyes there was the look of a jungle tiger, who watches its mate pinned to a stake at the bottom of the pit. Mr. Martin sat staring at the brightly colored flies on his lap. For a moment there was silence. Then a girl's shrill screams announced to the Martins that war's reality was also for the very young.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

ISAAC ASIMOV has been called "one of America's treasures." Born in the Soviet Union, he was brought to the United States at the age of three (along with his family) by agents of the American government in a successful attempt to prevent him from working for the wrong side. He quickly established himself as one of this country's foremost science fiction writers and writer about everything, and although now approaching middle age, he is going stronger than ever. He long ago passed his age and weight in books, and with some 290 to his credit threatens to close in on his I.Q. His sequel to THE FOUNDATION TRILOGY—FOUNDATION'S EDGE—was one of the best-selling books of 1982 and 1983.

MARTIN H. GREENBERG has been called (in *The Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review*) "The King of the Anthologists"; to which he replied—"It's good to be the King!" He has produced more than one hundred of them, usually in collaboration with a multitude of co-conspirators, most frequently the two who have given you WITCHES. A Professor of Regional Analysis and Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, he is still trying to publish his weight.

CHARLES G. WAUGH is a Professor of Psychology and Communications at the University of Maine at Augusta who is still trying to figure out how he got himself into all this. He has also worked with many collaborators, since he is basically a very friendly fellow. He has done some fifty anthologies and single-author collections, and especially enjoys locating unjustly ignored stories. He also claims that he met his wife via computer dating—her choice was an entire fraternity or him, and she has only minor regrets.

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