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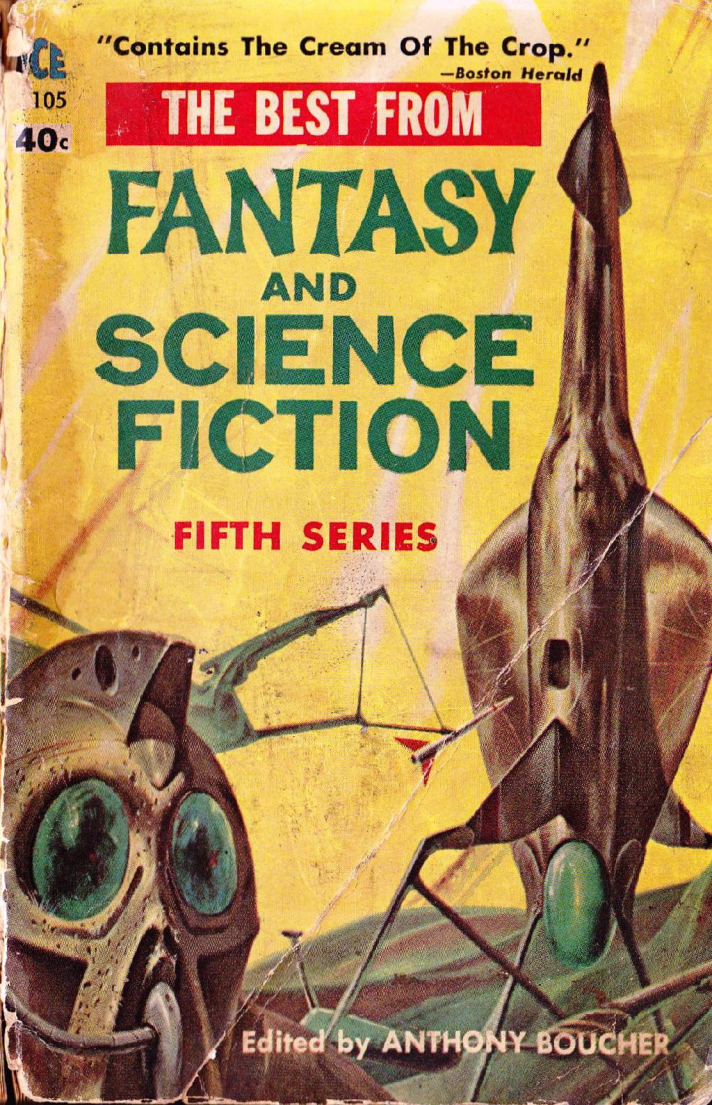
"Contains The Cream Of The Crop."
—Boston Herald

THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

FIFTH SERIES



Edited by ANTHONY BOUCHER

"READERS OF SCIENCE-FICTION WILL FIND THIS A STORE-HOUSE OF THE BEST." —*Tulsa World*

"In this collection from files of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* Mr. Boucher presents a distillate of the essence that gives his magazine its distinctive flavor. Here are the delicate fantasies, the sophisticated whimsies, the tongue-in-cheek ironies and slapstick, the emphasis on the small detailed canvas that has given the *Magazine of F and SF* its almost *New Yorker* slant. The stories are uniformly competent and well-constructed and, if Mr. Boucher's love of the droll and the precious tempers his selection, the result is still excellent."

—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Excerpt from the Introduction to the hard-bound edition:

In two respects, this collection differs from earlier volumes in the annual series. In addition to the usual variety ranging from short-shorts to short novelets, this book includes an assortment of vignettes—short-short-shorts, running under 500 words apiece. And, for the first time, I have suspended the arbitrary and (I think) foolish rule of only-one-entry-to-each-author in order to bring you what truly seems to me the best from F&SF. So you'll find Isaac Asimov represented by a vignette and a long story, Charles Beaumont by a solo and a collaboration, Mildred Clingerman by two contrasting shorts, and Fredric Brown by two of his inimitable "vinnies."

Imaginative fiction can evoke a sense of strangeness and wonder in matters alien; more important, perhaps, it can teach one to recognize the strangeness and wonder that lie at the root of all things. You can see what I mean in the stories here by such veterans as Arthur Clarke or Zenna Henderson or such a newcomer as Alice Jones, and most particularly in Beaumont's solo entry.

But first turn to Fredric Brown's proem, and with him learn to *imagine.*

ANTHONY BOUCHER

Berkeley, California

The Best From FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION

Fifth Series

Edited by

ANTHONY BOUCHER

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THE BEST FROM FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION: Fifth Series

An Ace Book, by arrangement with Doubleday & Co., Inc.

All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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This collection is dedicated to

MILFORD, PENNSYLVANIA

and

TUCSON, ARIZONA

for their production of a wholly unfair percentage of the best in fantasy and science fiction

CONTENTS

FREDRIC BROWN

IMAGINE: A PROEM

IMAGINE GHOSTS, GODS AND DEVILS.

Imagine hells and heavens, cities floating in the sky and cities sunken in the sea.

Unicorns and centaurs. Witches, warlocks, jinns and banshees.

Angels and harpies. Charms and incantations. Elementals, familiars, demons.

Easy to imagine, all of those things: mankind has been imagining them for thousands of years.

Imagine spaceships and the future.

Easy to imagine; the future is really coming and there'll be spaceships in it.

Is there then anything that's *hard* to imagine?

Of course there is.

Imagine a piece of matter and yourself inside it, yourself aware, thinking and therefore knowing you exist, able to move that piece of matter that you're in, to make it sleep or wake, make love or walk uphill.

Imagine a universe—infinite or not, as you wish to picture it—with a billion, billion, billion suns in it.

Imagine a blob of mud whirling madly around one of those suns.

Imagine yourself standing on that blob of mud, whirling with it, whirling through time and space to an unknown destination.

Imagine!

DAMON KNIGHT

In its second issue, F&SF published what is still one of my favorite stories: that wry and logical variant of the Last Man theme, Damon Knight's Not With a Bang. *(Formally, damon knight should be written with minuscules, like e. e. cummings; but printers and copyreaders are apt to be stuffy about such niceties.) Since then, Knight has proved himself (in numerous magazines, professional and amateur) to be the ablest critic of science-fantasy now writing. He is also easily one of the ablest creators, as in this zany and entrancing adventure, which begins with pratfalls and goes on through speculations on luck, randomness and time to an unexpected ending which explains many things in your own life . . . and incidentally the origin of the Manhattan skyline. If that synopsis sounds a bit wacky . . . well, I don't know where you'll find a wackier (or more enjoyable) tale of future speculation than this.*

YOU'RE ANOTHER

IT WAS a warm spring Saturday, and Johnny Bornish spent the morning in Central Park. He drew sailors lying on the grass with their girls; he drew old men in straw hats, and Good Humor men pushing their carts. He got two quick studies of children at the toy-boat pond, and would have had another, a beauty, except that somebody's damned big Dalmatian, romping, blundered into him and made him sit down hard in the water.

A bright-eyed old gentleman solemnly helped him arise. Johnny thought it over, then wrung out his wet pants in the men's rest room, put them back on and spread himself like a starfish in the sun. He dried before his sketchbook did, so he

took the bus back downtown, got off at Fourteenth Street and went into Mayer's.

The only clerk in sight was showing an intricate folding easel to a tweedy woman who didn't seem to know which end was which. Johnny picked up the sketchbook he wanted from a pile on the table, and pottered around looking at lay figures, paper palettes and other traps for the amateur. He glimpsed some interesting textured papers displayed in the other aisle and tried to cross over to them, but misjudged his knobby-kneed turning circle, as usual, and brought down a cascade of little paint cans. Dancing for balance, somehow he managed to put one heel down at an unheard-of angle, buckle the lid of one of the cans and splash red enamel all over hell.

He paid for the paint, speechless, and got out. He had dropped the sketchbook somewhere, he discovered. Evidently God did not care for him to do any sketching today.

Also, he was leaving little red heel-prints across the pavement. He wiped off his shoe as well as he could with some newspaper from the trashbasket at the corner, and walked down to the Automat for coffee.

The cashier scooped in his dollar and spread two rows of magical dimes on the marble counter, all rattling at once like angry metal insects. They were alive in Johnny's palm; one of them got away, but he lunged for it and caught it before it hit the floor.

Flushed with victory, he worked his way through the crowd to the coffee dispenser, put a china cup under the spigot and dropped his dime in the slot. Coffee streamed out, filled his cup and went on flowing.

Johnny watched it for a minute. Coffee went on pouring over the lip and handle of the cup, too hot to touch, splashing through the grilled metal and gurgling away somewhere below.

A white-haired man shouldered him aside, took a cup from the rack and calmly filled it at the spigot. Somebody else followed his example, and in a moment there was a crowd.

After all, it was his dime. Johnny got another cup and waited his turn. An angry man in a white jacket disappeared

violently into the crowd, and Johnny heard him shouting something. A moment later the crowd began to disperse.

The jet had stopped. The man in the white jacket picked up Johnny's original cup, emptied it, set it down on a busboy's cart, and went away.

Evidently God did not care for him to drink any coffee, either. Johnny whistled a few reflective bars of "Dixie" and left, keeping a wary eye out for trouble.

At the curb a big pushcart was standing in the sunshine, flaming with banana yellows, apple reds. Johnny stopped himself. "Oh, no," he said, and turned himself sternly around, and started carefully down the avenue, hands in pockets, elbows at his sides. On a day like what this one was shaping up to be, he shuddered to think what he could do with a pushcart full of fruit.

How about a painting of that? Semi-abstract—"Still Life in Motion." Flying tangerines, green bananas, dusty Concord grapes, stopped by the fast shutter of the artist's eye. By Cézanne, out of Henry Moore. By heaven, it wasn't bad.

He could see it, big and vulgar, about a 36 by 30—(stretchers: he'd have to stop at Mayer's again, or on second thought somewhere else, for stretchers), the colors grayed on a violet ground, but screaming at each other all the same like a gaggle of parakeets. Black outlines here and there, weaving a kind of cockeyed carpet pattern through it. No depth, no light-and-dark—flat Easter-egg colors, glowing as enigmatically as a Parrish cut up into jigsaw pieces. Frame it in oyster-white moulding—wham! The Museum of Modern Art!

The bananas, he thought, would have to go around this way, distorted, curved like boomerangs up in the foreground. Make the old ladies of Oshkosh duck. That saturated buttery yellow, transmuted to a poisonous green . . . He put out a forefinger absently to stroke one of the nearest, feeling how the chalky smoothness curved up and around into the dry hard stem.

"How many, Mac?"

For an instant Johnny thought he had circled the block, back to the same pushcart: then he saw that this one had

only bananas on it. He was at the corner of Eleventh Street; he had walked three blocks, blind and deaf.

"No bananas," he said hurriedly, backing away. There was a shriek in his ear. He turned; it was a glitter-eyed tweedy woman, brandishing an enormous handbag.

"Can't you watch where you're—"

"Sorry, ma'am," he said, desperately trying to keep his balance. He toppled off the curb, grabbing at the pushcart. Something slithery went out from under his foot. He was falling, sliding like a bowling ball, feet first toward the one upright shaft that supported the end of the pushcart. . . .

The first thing that he noticed, as he sat there up to his chest in bananas, with the swearing huckster holding the cart by main force, was that an alert, white-haired old gentleman was in the front rank of the crowd, looking at him.

The same one who—?

And come to think of it, that tweedy woman—

Ridiculous.

All the same, something began to twitch in his memory. Ten confused minutes later he was kneeling asthmatically on the floor in front of his closet, hauling out stacks of unframed paintings, shoeboxes full of letters and squeezed paint tubes, a Scout ax (for kindling), old sweaters and mildewed magazines, until he found a battered suitcase.

In the suitcase, under untidy piles of sketches and watercolors, was a small cardboard portfolio. In the portfolio were two newspaper clippings.

One was from the *Post*, dated three years back: it showed Johnny, poised on one heel in a violent adagio pose, being whirled around by the stream of water from a hydrant some Third Avenue urchins had just opened. The other was two years older, from the *Journal*: in this one Johnny seemed to be walking dreamily up a wall—actually, he had just slipped on an icy street in the upper Forties.

He blinked incredulously. In the background of the first picture there were half a dozen figures, mostly kids.

Among them was the tweedy woman.

In the background of the second, there was only one. It was the white-haired old man.

Thinking it over, Johnny discovered that he was scared. He had never actually enjoyed being the kind of buffoon who gets his shirttail caught in zippers, is trapped by elevators and revolving doors, and trips on pebbles; he had accepted it humbly as his portion, and in between catastrophes he'd had a lot of fun.

But suppose somebody was *doing* it to him?

A lot of it was not funny, look at it any way you like. There was the time the bus driver had closed the door on Johnny's foot and dragged him for three yards, bouncing on the pavement. He had got up with nothing worse than bruises—but what if that passenger hadn't seen him in time?

He looked at the clippings again. There they were, the same faces—the same clothing, even, except that the old man was wearing an overcoat. Even in the faded half-tones, there was a predatory sparkle from his rimless eyeglasses; and the tweedy woman's sharp beak was as threatening as a hawk's.

Johnny felt a stifling sense of panic. He felt like a man waiting helplessly for the punch line of a long bad joke; or like a mouse being played with by a cat.

Something bad was going to happen next.

The door opened; somebody walked in. Johnny started, but it was only the Duke, brawny in a paint-smeared undershirt, with a limp cigarette in the corner of his mouth. The Duke had a rakish Errol Flynn mustache, blending furrily now into his day-old beard, and a pair of black, who-are-you-varlet brows. He was treacherous, clever, plausible, quarrelsome, ingenious, a great brawler and seducer of women—in short, exactly like Cellini, except he had no talent.

"*Hiding?*" said Duke, showing his big teeth.

Johnny became aware that, crouched in front of the closet that way, he looked a little as if he were about to dive into it and pull overcoats over his head. He got up stiffly, tried to put his hands in his pockets, and discovered he still had the clippings. Then it was too late. Duke took them gently, inspected them with a judicial eye and stared gravely at Johnny.

"Not flattering," he said. "Is that blood on your forehead?"

Johnny investigated; his fingers came away a little red, not much. "I fell down," he said uncomfortably.

"My boy," Duke told him, "you are troubled. Confide in your old uncle."

"I'm just —Look, Duke, I'm busy. Did you want something?"

"Only to be your faithful counselor and guide," said Duke, pressing Johnny firmly into a chair. "Just lean back loosen the sphincters and say the first thing that comes into your mind." He looked expectant.

"Ugh," said Johnny.

Duke nodded sagely. "A visceral reaction. Existentialist. You wish to rid yourself of yourself—get away from it all. Tell me, when you walk down the street, do you feel the buildings are about to close on you? Are you being persecuted by little green men who come out of the woodwork? Do you feel an overpowering urge to leave town?"

"Yes," said Johnny truthfully.

Duke looked mildly surprised. "Well?" he asked, spreading his hands.

"Where would I go?"

"I recommend sunny New Jersey. All the towns have different names—fascinating. Millions of them. Pick one at random. Hackensack, Perth Amboy, Passaic, Teaneck, Newark? No? You're quite right—too suggestive. Let me see. Something farther north? Provincetown. Martha's Vineyard—lovely this time of the year. Or Florida—yes, I can really see you, Johnny, sitting on a rotten wharf in the sunshine, fishing with a bent pin for pompano. Peaceful, relaxed, carefree . . ."

Johnny's fingers stirred the change in his pocket. He didn't know what was in his wallet—he never did—but he was sure it wasn't enough. "Duke, have you seen Ted Edwards this week?" he asked hopefully.

"No. Why?"

"Oh. He owes me a little money, is all. He said he'd pay me today or tomorrow."

"If it's a question of money—" said the Duke after a moment.

Johnny looked at him incredulously.

Duke was pulling a greasy wallet out of his hip pocket. He paused with his thumb in it. "Do you really want to get out of town, Johnny?"

"Well, sure, but—"

"Johnny, what are friends *for*? Really, I'm wounded. Will fifty help?"

He counted out the money and stuffed it into Johnny's paralyzed palm. "Don't say a word. Let me remember you just as you are." He made a frame of his hands and squinted through it. He sighed, then picked up the battered suitcase and went to work with great energy throwing things out of the dresser into it. "Shirts, socks, underwear. Necktie. Clean handkerchief. There you are." He closed the lid. He pumped Johnny's hand, pulling him toward the door. "Don't think it hasn't been great, because it hasn't. So on the ocean of life we pass and speak to one another. Only a look and a voice; then darkness and silence."

Johnny dug in his heels and stopped. "What's the matter?" Duke inquired.

"I just realized—I can't go now. I'll go tonight. I'll take the late train."

Duke arched an eyebrow. "But why wait, Johnny? When the sunne shineth, make hay. When the iron is hot, strike. The tide tarrieth for no man."

"They'll see me leave," said Johnny, embarrassed.

Duke frowned. "You mean the little green men actually are after you?" His features worked; he composed them with difficulty. "Well, this is— Pardon me. A momentary aberration. But now don't you see, Johnny, you haven't got any time to lose. If they're following you, they must know where you live. How do you know they won't come here?"

Johnny, flushing, could think of no adequate reply. He had wanted to get away under cover of darkness, but that would mean another five hours at least. . . .

"Look here," said Duke suddenly, "I know the very thing.

Biff Feldstein—works at the Cherry Lane. Your own mother won't admit she knows you. Wait here."

He was back in fifteen minutes, with a bundle of old clothes and an object which turned out, on closer examination, to be a small brown beard.

Johnny put it on unwillingly, using gunk from a tube Duke had brought along. Duke helped him into a castoff jacket, color indistinguishable, shiny with grease, and clapped a beret on his head. The result, to Johnny's horrified gaze, looked like an old-time Village phony or a peddler of French postcards. Duke inspected him judicially. "It's magnificent, but it isn't war," he said. "However, we can always plant vines. *Allons!* I am the grass; I cover all!"

Walking toward Sixth at a brisk pace, a hand firmly on Johnny's elbow, Duke suddenly paused. "Ho!" he said. He sprang forward, bent, and picked something up.

Johnny stared at it glassily. It was a five-dollar bill.

Duke was calmly putting it away. "Does that happen to you often?" Johnny asked.

"Now and again," said Duke. "Merely a matter of keeping the eyes in focus."

"Luck," said Johnny faintly.

"Never think it," Duke told him. "Take the word of an older and wiser man. You make your own luck in this world. Think of Newton. Think of O'Dwyer. Hand stuck in the jam jar? You asked for it. Now the trouble with you—"

Johnny, who had heard this theory before, was no longer listening. Look, he thought, at all the different things that had had to happen so that Duke could pick up that fiver. Somebody had to lose it, to begin with—say because he met a friend just as he was about to put the bill away, and stuffed it in his pocket instead so he could shake hands, and then forgot it, reached for his handkerchief— All right. Then it just had to happen that everybody who passed this spot between then and now was looking the other way, or thinking about something else. And Duke, finally, had to glance

down at just the right moment. It was all extremely improbable, but it happened, somewhere, every day.

And also every day, somewhere, people were being hit by flowerpots knocked off tenth-story window ledges, and falling down manholes, and walking into stray bullets fired by law enforcement officers in pursuit of malefactors. Johnny shuddered.

"Oh-oh," said Duke suddenly. "Where's a cab? Ah—Cabby!" He sprang forward to the curb, whistling and waving.

Looking around curiously, Johnny saw a clumsy figure hurrying toward them down the street. "There's Mary Finigan," he said, pointing her out.

"I know," said Duke irascibly. The cab was just pulling in toward them, the driver reaching back to open the door. "Now here we go, Johnny—"

"But I think she wants to talk to you," said Johnny. "Hadn't we—"

"No time now," said Duke, helping him in with a shove. "She's taken to running off at the mouth—that's why I had to give her up. Get moving!" he said to the driver, and added to Johnny, "Among other things, that is. . . . Here will be an old abusing of God's patience, and the King's English."

As they pulled away into traffic, Johnny had a last glimpse of the girl standing on the curb watching them. Her dark hair was straggling down off her forehead; she looked as if she had been crying.

Duke said comfortably, "Every man, as the saying is, can tame a shrew but he that hath her. Now there, John boy, you have just had an instructive object lesson. Was it luck that we got away from that draggle-tailed ear-bender? It was not. . . ."

But, thought Johnny, it was. What if the cab hadn't come along at just the right time?

"—in a nutshell, boy. Only reason you have bad luck, you go hunting for it."

"That isn't the reason," said Johnny.

He let Duke's hearty voice fade once more into a kind of

primitive background music, like the muttering of the extras in a Tarzan picture when the Kalawumbas are about to feed the pretty girl to the lions. It had just dawned on him, with the dazzling glow of revelation, that the whole course of anybody's life was determined by improbably accidents. Here he stood, all five feet ten and a hundred thirty pounds of him—a billion-to-one shot from the word go. (What were the chances against any given sperm's uniting with any given ovum? *More* than a billion to one—unimaginable.) What if the apple hadn't fallen on Newton's head? What if O'Dwyer had never left Ireland? And what did free will have to do with the decision not to become, say, a Kurdish herdsman, if you happened to be born in Ohio?

. . . It meant, Johnny thought, that if you could control the random factors—the way the dice fall in a bar in Sacramento, the temper of a rich uncle in Keokuk, the moisture content of the clouds over Sioux Falls at 3:03 CST, the shape of a pebble in a Wall Street newsboy's sock—you could do anything. You could make an obscure painter named Johnny Bornish fall into the toy-boat pond in Central Park and get red paint all over his shoe and knock down a pushcart. . . .

But why would you want to?

The airport waiting room was a little like a scene out of *Things to Come*, except that the people were neither white-robed, leisurely nor cool.

Every place on every bench was taken. Duke found a couple of square feet of floor space behind a pillar and settled Johnny there, seated on his upended suitcase.

"Now you're all set. Got your ticket. Got your magazine. Okay." Duke made an abrupt menacing gesture in order to look at his wristwatch.

"Got to run. Now remember, boy—send me your address as soon as you get one, so I can forward your mail and so on. Oh: almost forgot." He scribbled on a piece of paper, handed it over. "Mere formality. Payable at any time. Sign here."

He had written, "I O U $50." Johnny signed, feeling a little more at home with Duke.

"Right. Oll korrect."

"Duke," said Johnny suddenly. "Mary's pregnant, isn't she?" His expression was thoughtful.

"It has been known to happen," said Duke good-humoredly.

"Why don't you give her a break?" Johnny asked with difficulty.

Duke was not offended. "How? Speak the truth to me, Johnny—do you see me as a happy bridegroom? Well—" He pumped Johnny's hand. "The word must be spoken that bids you depart—Though the effort to speak it should shatter my heart—Though in silence, with something I pine—Yet the lips that touch liquor must never touch mine!" With a grin that seemed to linger, like the Cheshire Cat's, he disappeared into the crowd.

II

Uncomfortably astride his suitcase, solitary among multitudes, Johnny found himself thinking in words harder and longer at a time than he was used to. The kind of thinking he did when he was painting, or had painted, or was about to paint was another process altogether, and there were days on end when he did nothing else. He had a talent, Johnny Bornish. A talent is sometimes defined as a gift of the gods, a thing that most people, who have not had one, confuse with a present under a Christmas tree.

It was not like that at all. It tortured and delighted him, and took up so much room in his skull that a lot of practical details couldn't get in. Without exaggeration, it obsessed him, and when occasionally, as now, its grip relaxed, Johnny had the comical expression of a man who has just waked up to find his pocket picked and a row of hotfoot scars around his shoes.

He was thinking about luck. It was all right to talk about everybody making his own, and to a certain extent he supposed it was true, but Duke *was* the kind of guy who found money on the street. Such a thing had happened to Johnny only once in his life, and then it wasn't legal tender, but a

Japanese coin—copper, heavy, about the size of a half dollar, with a chrysanthemum symbol on one side and a character on the other. He thought of it as his lucky piece; he had found it on the street, his last year in high school, and here—he took it out of his pocket—it still was.

. . . Which, when you came to think of it, was odd. He was not superstitious about the coin, or especially fond of it. He called it a lucky piece for want of a better name, because the word "keepsake" had gone out of fashion; and in fact he believed that his luck in the last ten years had been lousy. The coin was the only thing he owned that was anywhere near that old. He had lost three wristwatches, numberless fountain pens, two hats, three or four cigarette lighters, and genuine U. S. nickels and dimes by the handful. But here was the Japanese coin.

Now, how could you figure a thing like that, unless it was luck . . . or *interference?*

Johnny sat up straighter. It was a foolish notion, probably born of the fact that he hadn't had any lunch; but he was in a mood to read sinister significance into almost anything.

He already knew that the old man and the tweedy woman had been interfering in his life for at least five years, probably longer. Somehow, they were responsible for the "accidents" that kept happening to him—and *there* was a foolish and sinister notion for you, if you liked. Believing that, how could he help wondering about other odd things that had happened to him, no matter how small . . . like finding and keeping a Japanese coin?

With that kind of logic, you could prove anything. And yet, he couldn't rid himself of the idea.

Idly, he got up holding the coin and dropped it into a nearby waste can. He sat down on his suitcase again with a feeling of neurosis well quelled. If the coin somehow found its way back to him, he'd have evidence for thinking the worst of it; if it didn't, as of course it wouldn't, small loss.

"Excuse me," said a thinnish prim-faced little man in almost clerical clothes. "I believe you dropped this. A Japanese coin. Quite nice."

Johnny found his tongue. "Uh, thank you. But I don't want it—you keep it."

"Oh, *no*," said the little man, and walked stiffly away.

Johnny stared after him, then at the coin. It was lumpishly solid, a dirty-looking brown, nicked and rounded at the edges. Ridiculous!

His mistake, no doubt, had been in being too obvious. He palmed the coin, trying to look nonchalant. After a while he lit a cigarette, dropped it, and as he fumbled for it, managed to shove the coin under the leg of the adjoining bench.

He had taken one puff on the retrieved cigarette when a large hulk in a gray suit, all muscles and narrowed eyes, knelt beside him and extracted the coin. The hulk looked at it carefully, front and back; weighed it in his palm, rang it on the floor, and finally handed it over to Johnny. "This yours?" he asked in a gravelly voice.

Johnny nodded. The hulk said nothing more, but watched grimly until Johnny put the coin away in his pocket. Then he got up, dusted off his knees, and went away into the crowd.

Johnny felt a cold lump gather at the pit of his stomach. The fact that he had seen this same routine in at least half a dozen bad movies gave him no comfort; he did not believe in the series of natural coincidences that made it impossible to get rid of the neatly wrapped garbage, or the incriminating nylon stocking, or whatever.

He stood up. It was already twenty minutes after his plane's scheduled departure time. He *had* to get rid of the thing. It was intolerable to suppose that he couldn't get rid of it. Of course he could get rid of it.

The low false roof of the baggage counter looked promising. He picked up his suitcase and worked his way toward it, and got there just as the p.a. system burst forth with *"Flight number mnglang for Buzzclickville, now loading at Gate Lumber Lide."* Under cover of this clamor, Johnny swiftly took the coin out of his pocket and tossed it out of sight on the roof.

Now what? Was somebody going to fetch a ladder, and

climb up there after the coin, and come down and hand it to him?

Nothing at all happened, except that the voice on the p. a. emitted its thunderous mutter again, and this time Johnny caught the name of his destination, Jacksonville.

Feeling better, he stopped at the newsstand for cigarettes. He paid for them with a half dollar, which was promptly slapped back into his palm.

"*Flight number sixteen for Jagznbull, now loading at Gate Number Nine,*" said the p. a.

After a moment Johnny handed back the cigarettes, still staring at the Japanese coin that lay, infuriatingly solid, on his palm. . . . He had had a fifty-cent piece in his pocket; it didn't seem to be there now; argal, he had thrown it up on top of the baggage counter. A natural mistake. Only, in ten years of carrying the coin around with him, he had never once mistaken it for a half buck, or vice versa, until now.

"*Flight number sixteen . . .*"

The tweedy woman, Johnny realized with a slow chill crawling down his back, had been ahead of him in the art store, talking to a clerk. She couldn't have been following him —on the bus, in a cab, or any other way; there wouldn't have been time. She had known where he was going, and when he was going to get there.

It was as if, he thought, while the coin seemed to turn fishily cold and smooth in his fingers, it was just as if the two of them, the tweedy woman and the old man, had planted a sort of beacon on him ten years ago, so that wherever and whenever he went, he was a belled cat. It was as if they might be looking in a kind of radarscope, when it pleased them, and seeing the track of his life like a twisted strand of copper wire coiling and turning. . . .

But of course there was no escape, if that was true. His track went winding through the waiting room and onto a particular aircraft and down again, where that plane landed, and into a particular room and then a particular restaurant, so that a day from now, a month, a year, ten years from now,

they could reach out and touch him wherever he might be.

There was no escape, because there was a peculiarity built into this brown Japanese coin, a combination of random events that added up to the mirth-provoking result that he simply couldn't lose it.

He looked around wildly, thinking *Blowtorch. Monkey wrench. Sledge hammer.* But there wasn't anything. It was a great big phony Things-to-Comeish airport wildcat waiting room, without a tool in it anywhere.

A pretty girl came out from behind the counter to his right, swinging up the hinged section of counter and letting it down again behind her. Johnny stared after her stupidly, then at the way she had come out. His scalp twitched. He stepped to the counter, raised the hinged section.

A bald man a few feet away stopped talking to wave a telephone handset at Johnny. "No admittance here, sir! No admittance!"

Johnny put the Japanese coin down at an angle on the place that supported the end of the hinged section. He made sure it was the Japanese coin. He wedged it firmly.

The bald man dropped his telephone and came toward him, hand outstretched.

Johnny slammed the hinged section down as hard as he could. There was a dull *bonk,* and an odd feeling of tension; the lights seemed to blur. He turned and ran. Nobody followed him.

The plane was a two-engined relic that looked faintly Victorian from the outside; inside, it was a slanting dark cavern with an astonishing number of seats crammed into it. It smelled like a locker room. Johnny stumbled down the narrow aisle to what seemed to be the only remaining place, next to a large dark gentleman in an awning-striped tie.

He sat down, a little awkwardly. He had had a peculiar feeling ever since he had bashed the coin with the counter section, and the worst of it was that he couldn't pin it down. It was a physical something-wrong feeling, like an upset stomach or too little sleep or a fever coming on, but it wasn't exactly any of those things. He was hungry, but not that hungry. He

thought the trouble might be with his eyes, but whenever he picked out anything as a test, it looked perfectly normal and he could see it fine. It was in his skin, perhaps? A kind of not-quite-prickling that . . . No, it wasn't his skin.

It was a little like being drunk, at the fraction of an instant when you realize how drunk you are and regret it . . . it was like that, but not very much. And it was partly like the foreboding, stronger and more oppressive than before—*Something bad was going to happen.*

The pilot and copilot walked up the aisle and disappeared into the forward compartment. The door was shut; the stewardess, back in the tail, was poring over the papers on her clipboard. After a while the starters whined and the engines came to life; Johnny, who had flown only once before, and on a scheduled airline at that, was startled to find what a devil of a racket they made. There was another interminable wait, and then the plane was crawling forward, swinging its nose around, crawling a little faster, while an endless blank expanse of concrete slipped by—lumbering along, then, like some huge, preposterous and above all flightless bird—and lifting incredibly, a few inches up, airborne, the runway falling back, tilted, dwindling until they were up, high above the mist on the water, steady as a hammock in the rasping monotone drone of the engines.

Something went *flip* at the corner of Johnny's vision. He turned his head.

Flop.

It was a little metallic disk that went *flip* up the carpet like a tiddlywink or a Mexican jumping bean, and paused for an instant while his jaw began to come loose at the hinge, and went *flop*. It lay on the carpet next to his seat, and went *hop*.

It landed on his knee, a little brown metallic disk with a chrysanthemum design, bent across the middle. He brushed at it. It hopped, and clung to his hand like a magnet to steel.

"Good heavens!" said an explosive voice in his ear.

Johnny had no attention to spare. He had taken hold of the coin with his other hand—a horrid feeling; it clung clam-

mily to his fingers, and pulled away from his palm with reluctance—and now he was trying to scrape it off against the fabric of the seat. It was like trying to scrape off his own skin. He gave up and furiously began shaking his hand.

"Here, friend, don't do that!" The dark man in the next seat half rose, and there was a moment of confusion; Johnny heard a sharp click, and thought he saw something leap from the dark man's vest pocket. Then, for an instant, he had clinging to his fingers a brown Japanese coin *and* a pair of glittering pince-nez. And then the two had somehow twisted together in a nasty, writhing way that hurt his eyes to watch, and uncurled again—no coin, no pince-nez, but an impossible little leather change purse.

Had the coin ever been a coin at all? Was the change purse a change purse?

"Now look what you've done! *Ugh!*" The dark man, his face contorted with passion, reached gingerly fingers toward the purse. "Don't move, friend. Let me—"

Johnny pulled away a trifle. "Who are you?"

"F.B.I.," said the dark man impatiently. He flapped a billfold at Johnny; there was some kind of official-looking shield inside. "Now you have torn it, my God! Hold that still—just like that. Don't move." He pulled back his sleeves like a conjuror, and began to reach very cautiously for the little brown bit of leather that clung to Johnny's hand.

The thing twitched slightly in his fingers. The next moment, people all around them began getting up and crowding into the aisle, heading for the single washroom back in the tail of the plane.

Palpably, the plane tilted. Johnny heard the stewardess shrieking, "One at a time! One at a time! Take your seats, everyone—you're making the airplane tail-heavy!"

"Steady, steady," moaned the dark man. "Hold it absolutely still!"

Johnny couldn't. His fingers twitched again, and abruptly all the passenges in the aisle were tumbling the other way, fighting to get away from the dangerous tail. The stewardess came helplessly after them, squalling futile orders.

"Am I doing that?" Johnny gasped, staring in horror at the thing in his palm.

"The gadget is. Hold it steady, friend—"

But his hand twitched again, and abruptly all the passengers were back in their seats, quietly sitting as if nothing had happened. Then a chorus of shrieks arose. Looking out the window, Johnny saw a terrifying sea of treetops just below, where nothing but empty air had been the moment before. As the plane nosed up sharply, his hand moved again—

And the shrieks grow louder. Up ahead loomed a blue-violet wall of mountain, topless, gigantic.

His fingers twitched still again: and once more the plane was droning peaceably along between earth and heaven. The passengers were bored or sleeping. There was no mountain, and no trees.

Sweat was beaded on the dark man's forehead. "Now . . ." he said, gritting his teeth and reaching again.

"Wait a minute," said Johnny, pulling away again. "Wait—This is some kind of top secret thing, is it, that I'm not supposed to have?"

"Yes," said the dark man, agonized. "I tell you, friend, don't move it!"

The purse was slowly changing color, turning a watery violet around the edges.

"And you're from the F.B.I.?" Johnny asked, staring hard at the dark man.

"Yes! Hold it steady—"

"No," said Johnny. His voice had a disposition to tremble, but Johnny held it firmly in check. "You forgot about your ears," he said. "Or are they too hard to change?"

The dark man showed his teeth. "What are you talking about?"

"The *ears*," Johnny said, "and the jawbone. No two people have ears alike. And before, when you were the old man, your neck was too thick. It bothered me, only I was too busy to think about it." He swallowed hard. "I'm thinking about it now. You don't want me to move this thing?"

"Right, friend, right."

"Then tell me what this is all about."

The dark man made placating gestures. "I can't do that, friend. I really can't. Look—"

The tiny weight shifted in Johnny's hand. "—out!" shouted the dark man.

Tiny flickerings gathered in the air around them. In the plane window, the clear blue of the sky abruptly vanished. Instead, Johnny saw a tumbling waste of gray cloud. Rain drummed against the window, and the plane heeled suddenly as if a gust had caught it.

Scattered shrieks arose from up forward. Johnny swallowed a large lump, and his fingers twitched. The flickering came again.

The cloud and rain were gone; the sky was an innocent blue again. "*Don't* do that," said the dark man. "Listen, look: you want to know something? Watch me try to tell you." He moistened his lips and began, "When you have trouble—" but on the fourth word his throat seemed to tighten and lock. His lips went on moving, his eyes bulged with effort, but nothing came out.

After a moment he relaxed, breathing heavily. "You see?" he said.

"You can't talk," said Johnny. "About that. Literally."

"Right! Now, friend, if you'll just allow me—"

"Easy. Tell me the truth: is there any way you can get around this, whatever it is, this block or whatever?" He let his fingers twitch, deliberately, as he spoke. "Any gadget, or anything you can take?"

The dark man glanced nervously out the window, where blue sky had given way to purple twilight and a large sickle moon. "Yes, but—"

"There is? What?"

The man's throat tightened again as he tried to speak.

"Well, whatever it is, you'd better use it," said Johnny. He saw the dark man's face harden with resolution, and jerked his hand away just in time as the dark man grabbed—

III

There was a whirling moment, then the universe steadied. Johnny clutched at the seat with his free hand. The plane and all the passengers were gone. He and the dark man were sitting on a park bench in the sunshine. Two pigeons took alarm and flapped heavily away.

The dark man's face was twisted unhappily. "Now you have done it! Oh, what time is it, anyway?" He plucked two watches out of his vest and consulted them in turn. "Wednesday, friend, at the latest! Oh, oh, they'll—" His mouth worked soundlessly.

"Wednesday?" Johnny managed. He looked around. They were sitting in Union Square Park, the only ones there. There were plenty of people on the streets, all hurrying, most of them women. It looked like a Wednesday, all right.

He opened his mouth, and shut it again carefully. He looked down at the limp bit of leather and metal in his hand. Start from the beginning. What did he know?

The coin, which had evidently been some kind of telltale or beacon, had in some way joined itself, after Johnny had damaged it, to some other instrument of the dark man's—apparently the gadget that enabled him to control probability, and move from one time to another, and small chores like that.

In their present fused state, the two gadgets were ungovernable—dangerous, the dark man seemed to think—and no good to anybody.

And that was absolutely all he knew.

He didn't know where the dark man and his companion had come from, what they were up to, anything that would be useful to know, and he wasn't getting any nearer finding out.

—Except that there was some way of loosening the dark man's tongue. Drugs, which were out of the question—liquor—

Well, he thought, sitting up a trifle straighter, there was no harm in trying, anyhow. It might not work, but it was the pleasantest thought he had had all afternoon.

He said, "Come on," and stood up carefully; but his motion must have been too abrupt, because the scene around them melted and ran down into the pavement, and they were standing, not in the park, but on the traffic island at Sheridan Square.

It looked to be a little after noon, and the papers on the stand at Johnny's elbow bore today's date.

He felt a little dizzy. Say it was about one o'clock: then he hadn't got out to the airport yet; he was on his way there now, with Duke, and if he could hop a fast cab, he might catch himself and tell himself not to go. . . .

Johnny steadied his mind by a strenuous effort. He had, he told himself, one single, simple problem now in hand, and that was how to get to a bar. He took a careful step toward the edge of the island. The thing in his hand bobbled; the world reeled and steadied.

With the dark man beside him, Johnny was standing on the gallery of the Reptile Room of the Museum of Natural History. Down below, the poised shapes of various giant lizards looked extremely extinct and very dry.

Johnny felt the rising rudiments of a vast impatience. At this rate, it was clear enough, he would never get anywhere he wanted to go, because every step changed the rules. All right then; if Mahomet couldn't go to the mountain—

The dark man, who had been watching him, made a strangled sound of protest.

Johnny ignored him. He swung his hand sharply down. And up. And down.

The world swung around them like a pendulum, twisting and turning. Too far! They were on a street corner in Paris. They were in a dark place listening to the sound of machinery. They were in the middle of a sandstorm, choking, blinding—

They were sitting in a rowboat on a quiet river. The dark man was wearing flannels and a straw hat.

Johnny tried to move the thing in his hand more gently: it was as if it had a life of its own; he had to hold it back.

Zip!

They were seated on stools at a marble-topped counter. Johnny saw a banana split with a fly on it.

Zip!

A library, a huge low-ceilinged place that Johnny had never seen before.

Zip!

The lobby of the Art Theatre; a patron bumped into Johnny, slopping his demitasse.

Zip!

They were sitting opposite each other, the dark man and he, at a table in the rear of Dorrie's Bar. Dust motes sparkled in the late afternoon sun. There was a highball in front of each of them.

Gritting his teeth, Johnny held his hand perfectly upright while he lowered it, so slowly that it hardly seemed to move, until it touched the worn surface of the table. He sighed. "Drink up," he said.

With a wary eye on the thing in Johnny's hand, the dark man drank. Johnny signaled the bartender, who came over with a faintly puzzled expression. "How long you guys been here?"

"I was just going to ask you," said Johnny at random. "Two more."

The bartender retired and came back looking hostile with the drinks, after which he went down to the farthermost end of the bar, turned his back on them and polished glasses.

Johnny sipped his highball. "Drink up," he told the dark man. The dark man drank.

After the third swift highball, the dark man looked slightly walleyed. "How you feeling?" Johnny asked.

"Fine," said the dark man carefully. "Jus' fine." He dipped two fingers into his vest pocket, drew out a tiny flat pillbox and extracted from it an even tinier pill, which he popped into his mouth and swallowed.

"What was that?" said Johnny suspiciously.

"Just a little pill."

Johnny looked closely at him. His eyes were clear and steady; he looked exactly as if he had not drunk any high-

balls at all. "Let me hear you say 'The Leith police dismisseth us,' " said Johnny.

The dark man said it.

"Can you say that when you're drunk?" Johnny demanded.

"Don't know, friend. I never tried."

Johnny sighed. Look at it any way you liked, the man had been high, at least, before he swallowed that one tiny pill. And now he was cold sober. After a moment, glowering, he pounded on his glass with a swizzle stick until the bartender came and took his order for two more drinks. "Doubles," said Johnny as an afterthought. When they arrived, the dark man drank one down and began to look faintly glassy-eyed. He took out his pillbox.

Johnny leaned forward. "Who's that standing outside?" he whispered hoarsely.

The dark man swiveled around. "Where?"

"They ducked back," said Johnny. "Keep watching." He brought his free hand out of his trousers pocket, where it had been busy extracting the contents of a little bottle of antihistamine tablets he had been carrying around since February. They were six times the size of the dark man's pills, but they were the best he could do. He slid the pillbox out from under the dark man's fingers, swiftly emptied it onto his own lap, dumped the cold tablets into it and put it back.

"I don't see anybody, friend," said the dark man anxiously. "Was it a man or—" He picked out one of the bogus tablets, swallowed it, and looked surprised.

"Have another drink," said Johnny hopefully. The dark man, still looking surprised, swilled it down. His eyes closed slowly and opened again. They were definitely glassy.

"How do you feel now?" Johnny asked.

"Dandy, thanks. *Vad heter denna ort?*" The dark man's face spread and collapsed astonishingly into a large, loose, foolish smile.

It occurred to Johnny that he might have overdone it. "How was that again?" Swedish, it had sounded like, or some other Scandinavian language . . .

"*Voss hot ir gezugt?*" asked the dark man wonderingly. He

batted his head with the heel of his hand several times. *"Favor de desconectar la radio."*

"The radio isn't—" began Johnny, but the dark man interrupted him. Springing up suddenly he climbed onto the bench, spread his arms and began singing in a loud operatic baritone. The melody was that of the Toreador Song from *Carmen,* but the dark man was singing his own words to it, over and over: *"Dove è il gabinetto?"*

The bartender was coming over with an unpleasant expression. "Cut that out!" Johnny whispered urgently. "You hear? Sit down, or I'll move this thing again!"

The dark man glanced at the object in Johnny's hand. "You don't scare me, bud. Go ahead and move it. *Me cago en su* highball." He began singing again.

Johnny fumbled three five-dollar bills out of his wallet—all he had—and shoved them at the bartender as he came up. The bartender went away.

"Well, why were you scared before, then?" Johnny asked, furiously.

"Simple," said the dark man. *"Vänta ett ögenblick,* it'll come back to me. Sure." He clapped a hand to his brow. *"Herr Gott im Himmel!"* he said, and sat down abruptly.

"Don't move it," he said. He was pale and sweat-beaded. *"Why not?"*

"No control," whispered the dark man. "The instrument is tuned to you—sooner or later you're going to meet yourself. Two bodies can't occupy the same spacetime, friend." He shuddered. *"Baom!"*

Johnny's hand and wrist, already overtired, were showing a disposition to tremble. He had the hand propped against a bowl of pretzels, and that helped some, but not enough. Johnny was close to despair. The chief effect of the drinks seemed to have been to make the dark man babble in six or seven foreign tongues. The anti-drink pills were safely in his pocket; there was a fortune in those, no doubt, just as a by-product of this thing if he ever got out of it alive—but that seemed doubtful.

All the same, he checked with a glare the dark man's tenta-

tive move toward the object in his hand. His voice shook. "Tell me now, or I'll wave this thing until something happens. I haven't got any more patience! What are you after? What's it all about?"

"*Un autre plat des pets de nonne, s'il vous plaît, garçon,*" murmured the dark man.

"And cut that out," said Johnny. "I mean it!" Intentionally or not, his hand slipped, and he felt the table shudder under them.

Zip!

They were sitting at a narrow table in the Sixth Avenue Bickford's, full of the echoing clatter of inch-thick crockery.

"Well?" said Johnny, close to hysteria. The glasses on the table between them were full of milk, not whisky. Now he was in for it. Unless he could break the dark man's nerve before he sobered up—or unless, which was unlikely in the extreme, they happened to hit another bar—

"It's like this, friend," said the dark man. "I'm the last surviving remnant of the race of Lemurians, see, and I like to persecute people. I'm bitter, because you upstarts have taken over the world. You can't—"

"Who's the lady I saw you with?" Johnny asked sourly.

"Her? She's the last surviving remnant of the Atlanteans. We have a working agreement, but we hate each other even more than—"

Johnny's fingers were clammy with sweat around the limp leather that clung to them. He let his hand twitch, not too much.

Zip!

They were sitting facing each other on the hard cane seats of an almost empty subway train, rackety-clacking headlong down its dark tunnel like a consignment to hell. "Try again," said Johnny through his teeth.

"It's like this," said the dark man. "I'll tell you the truth. This whole universe isn't real, get me? It's just a figment of your imagination, but you got powers you don't know how to control, and we been trying to keep you confused, see, because otherwise—"

"Then you don't care if I do this!" said Johnny, and he made a fist around the leather purse and slammed it on his knee.

Zip!

A wind thundered in his ears, snatched the breath from his mouth. He could barely see the dark man, through a cloud of flying sleet, hunkered like himself on a ledge next to nowhere. "We're observers from the Galactic Union," the dark man shouted. "We're stationed here to keep an eye on you people on account of all them A-bomb explosions, because—"

"Or this!" Johnny howled, and jerked his fist again.

Zip!

They were sprawled on a freezing plain, staring at each other in the icy glitter of starlight. "I'll tell you!" said the dark man. "We're time travelers, and we got to make sure you never marry Piper Laurie, because—"

Gently, Johnny told himself.

Zip!

They were sliding side by side down the giant chute in the fun house at Jantzen's Beach in Portland, Oregon. "Listen!" said the dark man. "You're a mutant superman, see? Don't get sore—we had to test you before we could lead you into your glorious heritage of—"

As Johnny started to get to his feet, the movement jarred the thing in his hand, and—

Zip!

They were standing on the observation platform on top of the Empire State. It was a cold, raw day. The dark man was shivering—cold, or frightened enough to talk, to too frightened to stay drunk? His voice trembled: "Okay, this is it, friend. You aren't human—you're an android, but such a good imitation, you don't even know it. But we're your inventors, see—"

Gently: it was the little jumps that were dangerous, Johnny reminded himself.

Zip! They were in a revolving door, and *zip!* Johnny was on the staircase of his own rooming house, looking down at the dark man who was goggling up at him, trying to say

something, and *zip!* they were standing beside a disordered banana cart while a cold chill ran up Johnny's spine, and—

"All right!" the dark man shouted. There was raw sincerity in his voice. "I'll tell you the truth, but *please—*"

Johnny's hand tilted in spite of himself.

Zip!

They were on the top deck of a Fifth Avenue bus parked at the curb, waiting for a load. Johnny lowered his hand with infinite care to the shiny rail top of the seat ahead. "Tell," he said.

The dark man swallowed. "Give me a chance," he said in an undertone. "I can't tell you—if I do, they'll break me, I'll never get a post again—"

"Last chance," said Johnny, looking straight ahead. "*One . . . Two . . .*"

"It's a livie," the dark man said, pronouncing the first *i* long. His voice was resigned and dull.

"A what?"

"Livie. Like movies. You know. You're an actor."

"What is this now?" said Johnny uneasily. "I'm a painter. What do you mean, I'm an ac—"

"You're an *actor, playing* a painter!" said the dark man. "You actors! Dumb cows! You're an actor! Understand? It's a *livie.*"

"What is the livie about?" Johnny asked carefully.

"It's a musical tragedy. All about poor people in the slums."

"I don't live in the slums," said Johnny indignantly.

"*In the slums.* You want to tell me, or should I tell you? It's a big dramatic show. You're the comic *relief.* Later on you *die.*" The dark man stopped short, and looked as if he wished he had stopped shorter. "A detail," he said. "Not important. We'll fix it up, next script conference." He put his hands to his temples suddenly. "Oh, why was I decanted?" he muttered. "Glorm will split me up the middle. He'll pulverize me. He'll shove me back into the—"

"You're serious?" said Johnny. His voice cracked. "What is this, I die? I die how?" He twitched uncontrollably.

Zip!

The Fifth Avenue bus was gone. They were sitting in the second row of a movie theater. The house lights had just gone up; the audience was shuffling out. Johnny seized the dark man by the shirt front.

"I forget," said the dark man sullenly. "You fall off something, I think. Right before the end of the livie, when the hero gets to bed with the girl. You want to know who's the hero? Somebody you know. Duke—"

"Fall off what?" said Johnny, tightening his grip.

"Off a building. Into a trash can. Half."

"Comic relief?" said Johnny with an effort.

"Sure. Pratfalls! You'll steal the livie! The lookers'll have heart attacks laughing!"

The sounds of the departing audience abruptly stopped. The walls and ceiling flickered alarmingly; when they steadied, Johnny saw with total bewilderment that they were in a different room altogether. It was nowhere he had ever been before—nowhere, he realized abruptly, with his heart racing, that he ever *could* have been before.

Out across the great silvery bowl, under a cloud-high ceiling, men were floating in the air like gnats, some drifting, some moving quickly around a bulbous metal shape that hung over the center of the huge room. Down below, twenty feet lower than the balcony on which they sat, there was a little puff of light and exploding shape—a brilliant unfolding that lasted only an instant, leaving a crazy memory of moving trees and buildings. After a moment, it happened again.

Johnny was aware that the dark man, beside him, had stiffened and somehow shrunk into himself.

He turned. Behind them, in the eerie stillness, a silvery man came striding through a doorway.

"*Glorm,*" said the dark man, gasping, "*ne estis mia kulpo. Li—*"

Glorm said, "*Fermu vian truon.*" He was slender and sinewy, dressed in something that looked like tinfoil. He had bulging eyes under a broad shelf of brow. He turned them on Johnny. "Now you vill give me d'in*strument*," he said.

Johnny found his breath. The bit of leather in his hand, he discovered, was now as rigid as if it were part of an invisible pillar in the air; but he tightened his grip on it, anyhow. "Why should I give it to you?" he demanded.

Glorm gestured impatiently. "Vait." He turned to look out over the enormous sunken bowl, and his voice suddenly echoed everywhere, somehow a hundred times magnified: "*Gi spinul!*"

Again came that flowering of color and movement under the hanging bulge of metal: but this time it sprang into full life, and didn't collapse again.

Fascinated, Johnny stared down over the balcony rim. The floor of the bowl was gone now, buried by a glittering marble street. On either side were white buildings, all porticoes and pillars, and down at the end loomed something that looked like the Parthenon, only as big as the main UN building in New York.

The street was aboil with people, drawfed by distance. They scattered as a four-horse chariot came hurtling past, then flowed together again. Johnny could hear them muttering angrily, like so many bees. There was a curious acrid scent in the air.

Puzzled, he glanced at Glorm and the dark man. "What's that?" he asked, pointing.

Glorm made a gesture. "Rome," said the dark man, shaking as if with a chill. "They're making a spectacle back in 44 B.C. This here's the scene where Julius Caesar burns the place down because they won't make him Emperor."

Sure enough; the acrid scent was stronger; down below, a thin veil of gray-black smoke was beginning to arise. . . .

"But he didn't," Johnny protested, stung. "That isn't even Rome—the Parthenon's in Athens."

"It used to be," said the dark man. His teeth were chattering. "We changed it. The last outfit that made livies there, they were okay on the little scenes, but they didn't understand spectacle. Glorm"—he cast a furtive glance at the silver man, and raised his voice slightly—"he understands spectacle."

"Let me get this straight now," said Johnny with a thick

tongue. "You went to all the trouble of building that phony set, with that crazy Parthenon and all, when you could just go back in time and shoot the real thing?"

"*Bona!*" shouted Glorm's amplified voice. "*Gi estu presata!*" The scene down below whirled in upon itself and winked out.

Glorm turned impatiently to Johnny. "Now," he said. "You not un*der*stand. Dat vich you see dere *is* vat you call d'real ding. Ve not built set—built not set—no set—*Kiel oni gi diras?*"

" 'We din't build no set,' " said the dark man.

"*Putra lingvo!* Ve din build no set. Ve made dat Romans build it. Dey din build no set—dey build Rome, dif*fer*ent. Un*der*stand? No*body* din build no set! Real Rome! Real fire! Real dead! Real hi*story!*"

Johnny gaped at him. "You mean—you're changing history, just to make movies?"

"Livies," the dark man muttered.

"Livies, then. You must all be loopies. Where does that leave the people up in the future? Look—where are we now? What time?"

"Your calendar, uh, 4400-something. About twenty-five hundred years from your time."

"Twenty-five hundred— Well, what does it do to you, when you change the Romans all around?"

"Noddin'," said Glorm emphatically.

"Noddin'?" said Johnny, obtusely.

"Noddin' at all. Vat happens to dog ven you cut off his modder's tail?"

Johnny thought about it. "Noddin'."

"*Korekti.* You dink it is big job?"

Johnny nodded.

"It *is* a big job. But ve do it tventy, forty times *every* year. You know how many people live on d'planet now?" Without pausing, he answered himself. "Tirty billion. You know how many go to livies? Half. Fifteen billion. Seven times more people dan live on d'planet in your time. Old, young. Stupid, smart. Livies got to en*ter*tain dem all. Not like your Holly-

vood. Dat vas not art, not spec*tacle*. Ven d'people tink, deep down"—he tapped his head—"something is true, den I make it true, and it *is* true! Dat is art! Dat is spec*tac*le!"

"You haven't changed New York much, anyway," said Johnny in self-defense.

Glorm's bulging eyes grew bulgier. "Not change!" He snorted, turned. His amplified voice rang out again: "*Donu all me flugantan kvieton de Nov-Jorko natura!*"

There was a stirring of floating figures out around the hanging bulge of metal. Glorm cracked his knuckles impatiently. After a long moment the floor of the bowl blossomed again.

Johnny caught his breath.

The illusion was so perfect that the floor seemed to have dropped away: a thousand feet down, Manhattan Island lay spread in the morning sunlight; he could see ships at anchor in the harbor, and the clear glints of the Hudson and the East River running up northward into the mists over the Bronx.

The first thing he noticed was that the chaotic checkerboard of low buildings spread over the whole island: the cluster of skyscrapers at the southern tip, and the scattering at midtown, were missing.

"Guess vat year," said Glorm's voice.

He frowned. "About 1900?" But that couldn't be right, he thought uneasily—there were too many bridges: more, even than in his own time.

Glorm laughed heartily. "Dat vich you see is Nov-York, 1956—before ve change it. You dink you *in*vent sky*scrap*ers? Oh, no. Me *in*vent it."

"For *Wage Slaves of Broadway*," said the dark man reverently. "That was his first livie. What a spectacle!"

"Now you un*der*stand?" Glorm asked patronizingly. "Long time I vanted to tell dis to actor, see his face. Good—you un*der*stand now." His lean face was shining. "You are actor—I am producer, director. Producer, director is ever*y*thing. Actor is dirt! So you vill give me d'in*stru*ment."

"Won't," said Johnny weakly.

"You vill," Glorm said. "In a minute you have to let go."

Johnny discovered with shock that his hand was growing numb. So this was what they had all been stalling for, all this time. And now they'd got it. He *was* about to let go; he could feel it. So—

"Listen!" he said desperately. "What about the people in the future?—I mean your future. Do they make livies, too? If they do, are you an actor to them?"

Glorm's face tautened with fury. "*Kracajo!*" he said. "Vait *un*til—" He stared at the thing in Johnny's hand, and his fingers clenched.

Johnny's grip loosened. He was going to let go, and then what? Back to his own time, and more pratfalls, leading inexorably to—

His whole arm was tired. He was going to have to let go. . . . And there was nothing he could do about it. That endless chain of tinkerers, Glorms standing on each other's shoulders, all the way up into the unguessable future—that was too big to change. It was, he supposed, no more frightening or terrible than other kinds of macrocosmic tyranny the human mind had imagined; it would be possible to live with it, if only his part weren't so unpleasant. . . .

His hand dropped.

Smiling, Glorm reached out to the suspended bit of leather. His fingers did something to it that Johnny couldn't follow, and abruptly it sagged into his palm.

It shuddered and flickered there for a moment like a top running down. All at once it split into a brown coin and a pair of pince-nez. The flickering came again—a blur of bright shapes: fountain pen, notebook, watch, cigarette lighter —then both objects came to rest, tiny and metallic and dead.

Glorm put them into a fold of his clothing.

"*Bona,*" he said indifferently over his shoulder. "*Resendu tion al Nov-Jorkon.*"

Desperation limbered Johnny's tongue. He started talking before he even knew what he was going to say. "What if I don't stay in New York?"

Glorm paused, looking annoyed. "*Kio?*"

"You've got your gadget back," said Johnny, as the idea took shape in his head. "All right, but what are you going to do if I decide to move to Chicago, or someplace? Or get myself arrested and sent to jail? I mean, you can shuffle the probabilities around—but if I try hard enough, I can put myself where it's *impossible* to have what you want to have happen, happen." He took a deep breath. "See what I mean?"

"*Plejmalpuro*," said Glorm. From his expression, he saw.

"Listen," Johnny said. "Let me get the picture. This Duke you say is the hero—that's the Duke I know?" He got a nod from Glorm. "And that was part of the script, when he helped me get out of town?"

"Dress rehearsal," said the dark man. "You fall in a swamp in Florida—come up all over mud and leeches. A real boff."

Johnny shuddered, and turned his mind resolutely away from leeches and falls from high buildings. . . . "What I want to know is, what was Duke's angle? Why did he think he wanted to get me out of town?"

They told him. The answer was brutally simple, and Johnny had been half afraid that he knew it already.

He waited until his nails unclenched from his palms, and he felt able to talk sensibly again. And even then, he found he had nothing to say. How could you talk to people who would do a thing like that and call it art, or entertainment? It was logical, he supposed, that a culture whose taste demanded Glorm's ruthless spectacles should have such a concept of a "hero." It was also terryfying.

His time was running out again. But the answer to that one occurred to him, too.

If Duke were here, what would he say?

"Okay, look," Johnny said rapidly, "I'm just spitballing, you understand, talking off the top of my head—"

Glorm and the dark man leaned forward with interested, wary expressions.

"—but here's how I see it. Instead of this clown type for your comedy relief, we have this suave man-of-the-world type. It's a switch. A really great, uh, producer-director could

put it over. I can really see it. Take for instance—here, show me where it says in the script. . ."

Johnny materialized on the quiet side street a few steps from his door. He felt heavy and tired. The sun was still high over the tops of the old buildings; it was about two thirty—an hour and a half after Duke had left him at the airport.

He leaned against a railing and waited. Sure enough, here came Mary Finigan across the street, her hair uncombed, dark circles under her eyes.

"Go home, Mary," he said.

She was startled. "What's the matter, isn't he there? I mean, Duke called me—he said he was at your place—"

"He's got an ax," said Johnny. "I'm telling you the truth. He was going to kill you in my apartment, with my Scout ax that I use for kindling, with my fingerprints on it."

When she was gone, Johnny went on around the corner and into the foyer. Duke was there with his hand in Johnny's mailbox. He turned around and swore, and his hand twitched a long fat envelope out of the box. "What the devil are you doing here, Johnny?"

"I decided not to go."

Duke leaned against the wall, grinning. "Well, every coming together again gives a foretaste of the resurrection. Whew!" He glanced at the envelope he was holding as if he had just noticed it. "Now I wonder what this might be."

"You know what it is," said Johnny without rancor. "Ted Edwards' fifty bucks that he owed me. That was what gave you the idea, when he told you he'd put it in the mail. Then this Mary business came up, and I suppose it just seemed to you like a God-given opportunity."

Duke's eyes were narrow and hard. "You know about that, too, do you? What were you planning to do about it, would you tell an old friend that?"

"Nothing," said Johnny. "Just give me my I O U, and we'll call it square."

Duke fished in his pocket for the folded scrap of paper and

handed it over. He peered into Johnny's eyes, looking baffled. "Well, well. You're sure, are you?"

Johnny nodded and turned to go up the stairs.

"I believe you are," said Duke. He was shaking his head, arms akimbo. "Johnny, my boy, you're a character."

Johnny looked down at him for a moment. "You're another," he said.

All too often, British writers of science fiction have insisted upon envisioning a purely American future, with space dominated by American spacemen from American spaceports. Arthur C. Clarke is too wise a writer to succumb to the superficial commercialism ("American markets pay better, don't they?") which has prompted such treason; and in such novels as the classic PRELUDE TO SPACE *and the brilliant recent* EARTHLIGHT *he has seen to it that Britain (as is indeed logical and probable) claims her honored share in the conquest of space. Now he writes of a situation never before touched on in science fiction—a moving situation which is bound to arise in time, and which only an Englishman (and one as talented as Clarke) could write.*

THIS EARTH OF MAJESTY

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars . . .
This happy breed of men, this little world . . .
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

King Richard II, II, i

"WHEN he comes aboard," said Captain Saunders, as he waited for the landing ramp to extrude itself, "what the devil shall I call him?"

There was a thoughtful silence while the navigation officer and the assistant pilot considered this problem in etiquette. Then Mitchell locked the main control panel, and the ship's multitudinous mechanisms lapsed into unconsciousness as power was withdrawn from them.

"The correct address," he drawled slowly, "is *Your Royal Highness.*"

"Huh!" snorted the captain. "I'll be damned if I'll call anyone *that!*"

"In these progressive days," put in Chambers helpfully, "I believe that *Sir* is quite sufficient. But there's no need to worry if you forget: it's been a long time since anyone went to the Tower. Besides, this Henry isn't as tough a proposition as the one who had all the wives."

"From all accounts," added Mitchell, "he's a very pleasant young man. Quite intelligent, too. He's often been known to ask people technical questions that they couldn't answer."

Captain Saunders ignored the implications of this remark, beyond resolving that if Prince Henry wanted to know how a Field Compensation Drive generator worked, then Mitchell could do the explaining. He got gingerly to his feet—they'd been operating on half a gravity during flight, and now they were on Earth he felt like a ton of bricks—and started to make his way along the corridors that led to the lower airlock. With an oily purring, the great curving door sidestepped out of his way. Adjusting his smile, he walked out to meet the television cameras and the heir to the British throne.

The man who would, presumably, one day be Henry IX of England was still in his early twenties. He was slightly below average height, and had fine-drawn, regular features that really lived up to all the genealogical clichés. Captain Saunders, who came from Dallas and had no intention of being impressed by any prince, found himself unexpectedly moved by the wide, sad eyes. They were eyes that had seen too many receptions and parades, that had had to watch countless totally uninteresting things, that had never been allowed to stray far from the carefully planned official routes. Looking at that proud but weary face, Captain Saunders glimpsed for the first time the ultimate loneliness of royalty. All his dislike of that institution became suddenly trivial against its real defect: what was wrong with the Crown was the unfairness of inflicting such a burden on any human being. . . .

The passageways of the *Centaurus* were too narrow to allow for general sightseeing, and it was soon clear that it

suited Prince Henry very well to leave his entourage behind. Once they had begun moving through the ship, Saunders lost all his stiffness and reserve, and within a few minutes was treating the Prince exactly like any other visitor. He did not realize that one of the earliest lessons royalty has to learn is that of putting people at their ease.

"You know, Captain," said the Prince wistfully, "this is a big day for us. I've always hoped that one day it would be possible for spaceships to operate from England. But it still seems strange to have a port of our own here, after all these years. Tell me—did you ever have much to do with rockets?"

"Well, I had some training on them, but they were already on the way out before I graduated. I was lucky: some older men had to go back to school and start all over again—or else abandon space completely if they couldn't convert to the new ships."

"It made as much difference as that?"

"Oh yes—when the rocket went, it was as big as the change from sail to steam. That's an analogy you'll often hear, by the way. There was a glamor about the old rockets, just as there was about the old windjammers. These modern ships haven't got it.—When the *Centaurus* takes off, she goes up as quietly as a balloon—and as slowly, if she wants to. But a rocket blastoff shook the ground for miles, and you'd be deaf for days if you were too near the launching apron. Still, you'll know all that from the old news recordings."

The Prince smiled.

"Yes," he said. "I've often run through them at the palace. I think I've watched every incident in all the pioneering expeditions. I was sorry to see the end of rockets, too. But we could never have had a spaceport here on Salisbury Plain—the vibration would have shaken down Stonehenge!"

"Stonehenge?" queried Saunders as he held open a hatch and let the Prince through into Hold Number 3.

"Ancient monument—one of the most famous stone circles in the world. It's really impressive, and about three thousand years old. See it if you can—it's only ten miles from here."

Captain Saunders had some difficulty in suppressing a

smile. What an odd country this was: where else he wondered, would you find contrasts like this? It made him feel very young and raw when he remembered that, back home, the Alamo was ancient history, and there was hardly anything in the whole of Texas as much as five hundred years old. For the first time he began to realize what tradition meant: it gave Prince Henry something that he could never possess. Poise—self-confidence, yes, that was it. And a pride that was somehow free from arrogance, because it took itself so much for granted that it never had to be asserted.

It was surprising how many questions Prince Henry managed to ask in the thirty minutes that had been allotted for his tour of the freighter. They were not the routine questions that people asked out of politeness, quite uninterested in the answers. H.R.H. Prince Henry knew a lot about spaceships, and Captain Saunders felt completely exhausted when he handed his distinguished guest back to the reception committee, which had been waiting outside the *Centaurus* with well-simulated patience.

"Thank you very much, Captain," said the Prince as they shook hands in the airlock. "I've not enjoyed myself so much for ages. I hope you have a pleasant stay in England, and a successful voyage." Then his retinue whisked him away and the port officials, frustrated until now, came aboard to check the ship's papers.

"Well," said Mitchell when it was all over, "what did you think of our Prince of Wales?"

"He surprised me," answered Saunders frankly. "I'd never have guessed he was a prince. I always thought they were kind of dumb. But hell, he *knew* the principles of the Field Drive! Has he ever been up in space?"

"Once, I think. Just a hop above the atmosphere in a Space Force ship. It didn't even reach orbit before it came back again—but the Prime Minister nearly had a fit. There were questions in the House and editorials in the *Times*. Everyone decided that the heir to the throne was too valuable to risk in these newfangled inventions. So, though he has the rank of

Commodore in the Royal Space Force, he's never even been to the Moon."

"The poor guy," said Captain Saunders.

He had three days to burn, since it was not the Captain's job to supervise the loading of the ship or the preflight maintenance. Saunders knew skippers who hung around breathing heavily on the necks of the servicing engineers, but he wasn't that type. Besides, he wanted to see London. He had been to Mars and Venus and the Moon, but this was his first visit to England. Mitchell and Chambers filled him with useful information and put him on the monorail to London before dashing off to see their own families. They would be returning to the spaceport a day before he did, to check that everything was in order. It was a great relief having officers one could rely on so implicitly: they were unimaginative and cautious, but thoroughgoing almost to a fault. If *they* said that everything was shipshape, Saunders knew he could take off without qualms.

The sleek streamlined cylinder whistled across the carefully tailored landscape. It was so close to the ground and traveling so swiftly that one could only gather fleeting impressions of the towns and fields that flashed by. Everything, thought Saunders, was so incredibly compact, and on such a Lilliputian scale. There were no open spaces, no fields more than a mile long in any direction. It was enough to give a Texan claustrophobia—particularly a Texan who also happened to be a space pilot.

The sharply defined edge of London appeared like the bulwarks of some walled city on the horizon. With few exceptions, the buildings were quite low—perhaps fifteen or twenty stories in height. The monorail shot through a narrow canyon, over a very attractive park, across a river that was presumably the Thames, and then came to rest with a steady, powerful surge of deceleration. A loudspeaker announced, in a modest voice that seemed afraid of being overheard: "This is Paddington. Passengers for the North please remain seated." Saunders pulled his baggage down from the rack and headed out into the station.

As he made for the entrance to the Underground, he passed a bookstall and glanced at the magazines on display. About half of them, it seemed, carried photographs of Prince Henry or other members of the Royal Family. This, thought Saunders, was altogether too much of a good thing. He also noticed that all the evening papers showed the Prince entering or leaving the *Centaurus,* and bought copies to read in the subway—he begged its pardon, the "tube."

The editorial comments had a monotonous similarity. At last, they rejoiced, England need no longer take a back seat among the spacegoing nations. Now it was possible to operate a space fleet without requiring a million square miles of desert: the wilent, gravity-defying ships of today could land, if need be, in Hyde Park, without even disturbing the ducks on the Serpentine. Saunders found it odd that this sort of patriotism had managed to survive into the age of space, but he guessed that the British had felt it pretty badly when they had to borrow launching sites from the Australians, the Americans and the Russians.

The London Underground was still, after a century and a half, the best transport system in the world, and it deposited Saunders safely at his destination less than ten minutes after he had left Paddington. In ten minutes the *Centaurus* could have covered fifty thousand miles; but space, after all, was not quite so crowded as this. Nor were the orbits of spacecraft so tortuous as the streets Saunders had to negotiate to reach his hotel. All attempts to straighten out London had failed dismally, and it was fifteen minutes before he completed the last hundred yards of his journey.

He stripped off his jacket and collapsed thankfully on his bed. Three quiet, carefree days all to himself: it seemed too good to be true.

It was. He had barely taken a deep breath when the phone rang.

"Captain Saunders? I'm so glad we found you. This the B.B.C. We have a program called *In Town Tonight* and we were wondering . . ."

The thud of the airlock door was the sweetest sound Saunders had heard for days. Now he was safe: nobody could get at him here in his armored fortress, which would soon be far out in the freedom of space. It was not that he had been treated badly: on the contrary, he had been treated altogether too well. He had made four (or was it five?) appearances on various TV programs; he had been to more parties than he could remember; he had acquired several hundred new friends and (the way his head felt now) forgotten all his old ones.

"Who started the rumor," he said to Mitchell as they met at the port, "that the British were reserved and standoffish? Heaven help me if I ever meet a *demonstrative* Englishman."

"I take it," replied Mitchell, "that you had a good time."

"Ask me tomorrow," Saunders replied. "I'll be at home then."

"I saw you on the quiz program last night," remarked Chambers. "You looked pretty ghastly."

"Thank you: that's just the sort of sympathetic encouragement I need at the moment. I'd like to see you think of a synonym for *jejune* after you'd been up until three in the morning."

"Vapid," replied Chambers promptly.

"Insipid," said Mitchell, not to be outdone.

"You win. Let's have those overhaul schedules and see what the engineers have been up to."

Once seated at the control desk, Captain Saunders quickly became his usual efficient self. He was home again, and his training took over. He knew exactly what to do, and would do it with automatic precision. To right and left of him, Mitchell and Chambers were checking their instruments and calling the control tower.

It took them an hour to carry out the elaborate preflight routine. When the last signature had been attached to the last sheet of instructions, and the last red light on the monitor panel had turned to green, Saunders flopped back in his seat and lit a cigarette. They had ten minutes to spare before take-off.

"One day," he said, "I'm going to come to England incognito to find what makes the place tick. I don't understand how you can crowd so many people onto one little island without its sinking."

"Huh," snorted Chambers. "You should see Holland. That makes England look as wide open as Texas."

"And then there's this Royal Family business. Do you know, wherever I went everyone kept asking me how I got on with Prince Henry, what we'd talked about, didn't I think he was a fine guy, and so on. Frankly, I got fed up with it. I can't imagine how you've managed to stand it for a thousand years."

"Don't think that the Royal Family's been popular all the time," replied Mitchell. "Remember what happened to Charles I? And some of the things we said about the early Georges were quite as rude as the remarks your people made later."

"We just happen to like tradition," said Chambers. "We're not afraid to change when the time comes, but as far as the Royal Family is concerned . . . well, it's unique and we're rather fond of it. Just the way you feel about the Statue of Liberty."

"Not a fair example. I don't think it's right to put human beings up on a pedestal and treat them as if they're—well, minor deities. Look at Prince Henry, for instance. Do you think he'll ever have a chance of doing the things he really wants to do? I saw him three times on TV when I was in London. The first time he was opening a new school somewhere; then he was giving a speech to the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers at the Guildhall (I swear I'm not making *that* up) and finally he was receiving an address of welcome from the Mayor of Podunk, or whatever your equivalent is." ("Wigan," interjected Mitchell.) "I think I'd rather be in jail than live that sort of life. Why can't you leave the poor guy alone?"

For once, neither Mitchell nor Chambers rose to the challenge. Indeed, they maintained a somewhat frigid silence. That's torn it, thought Saunders. I should have kept my big

mouth shut; now I've hurt their feelings. I should have remembered that advice I read somewhere: "The British have two religions: cricket and the Royal Family. Never attempt to criticize either."

The awkward pause was broken by the radio from the spaceport controller.

"Control to *Centaurus*. Your flight lane clear. OK to lift."

"Takeoff program starting . . . *now!*" replied Saunders, throwing the master switch. Then he leaned back, his eyes taking in the entire control panel, his hands clear of the board but ready for instant action.

He was tense but completely confident. Better brains than his—brains of metal and crystal and flashing electron streams—were in charge of the *Centaurus* now. If necessary, he could take command, but he had never yet lifted a ship manually and never expected to do so. If the automatics failed, he would cancel the takeoff and sit here on Earth until the fault had been cleared.

The main field went on, and weight ebbed from the *Centaurus*. There were protesting groans from the ship's hull and structure as the strains redistributed themselves. The curved arms of the landing cradle were carrying no load now; the slightest breath of wind would carry the freighter away into the sky.

Control called from the tower: "Your weight now zero: check calibration."

Saunders looked at his meters. The upthrust of the field should now exactly equal the weight of the ship, and the meter readings should agree with the totals on the loading schedules. In at least one instance this check had revealed the presence of a stowaway on board a spaceship—the gauges were as sensitive as that.

"One million, five hundred and sixty thousand, four hundred and twenty kilograms," Saunders read off from the thrust indicators. "Pretty good—it checks to within fifteen kilos. The first time I've been underweight, though. You could have taken on some more candy for that plump girl friend of yours in Port Lowell, Mitch."

The assistant pilot gave a rather sickly grin. He had never quite lived down a blind date on Mars which had given him a completely unwarranted reputation for preferring statuesque blondes.

There was no sense of motion, but the *Centaurus* was now climbing up into the summer sky as her weight was not only neutralized but reversed. To the watchers below, she would be a swiftly mounting star, a silver globule falling through and beyond the clouds. Around her, the blue of the atmosphere was deepening into the eternal darkness of space. Like a bead moving along an invisible wire, the freighter was following the pattern of radio waves that would lead her from world to world.

This, thought Captain Saunders, was his twenty-sixth take-off from Earth. But the wonder would never die, nor would he ever outgrow the feeling of power it gave him to sit here at the control panel, the master of forces beyond even the dreams of Mankind's ancient gods. No two departures were ever the same: some were into the dawn, some towards the sunset, some above a cloud-veiled Earth, some through clear and sparkling skies. Space itself might be unchanging, but on Earth the same pattern never recurred, and no man ever looked twice at the same landscape of the same sky. Down there the Atlantic waves were marching eternally towards Europe, and high above them—but so far below the *Centaurus!*—the glittering bands of cloud were advancing before the same winds. England began to merge into the continent, and the European coastline became foreshortened and misty as it sank hull-down beyond the curve of the world. At the frontier of the west, a fugitive stain on the horizon, was the first hint of America. With a single glance, Captain Saunders could span all the leagues across which Columbus had labored half a thousand years ago.

With the silence of limitless power, the ship shook itself free from the last bonds of Earth. To an outside observer, the only sign of the energies it was expending would have been the dull red glow from the radiation fins around the vessel's

equator, as the heat loss from the mass-converters was dissipated into space.

"14:03:45," wrote Captain Saunders neatly in the log. "Escape velocity attained. Course deviation negligible."

There was little point in making the entry. The modest twenty-five thousand miles an hour which had been the almost unattainable goal of the first astronauts had no practical significance now, since the *Centaurus* was still accelerating and would continue to gain speed for hours. But it had a profound psychological meaning. Until this moment, if power had failed, they would have fallen back to Earth. But now gravity could never recapture them: they had achieved the freedom of space, and could take their pick of the planets. In practice, of course, there would be several kinds of hell to pay if they did not pick on Mars and deliver their cargo according to plan. But Captain Saunders, like all spacemen, was fundamentally a romantic. Even on a milk run like this he would sometimes dream of the ringed glory of Saturn, or the somber Neptunian wastes, lit by the distant fires of the shrunken sun.

One hour after takeoff, according to the hallowed ritual, Chambers left the course computer to its own devices and produced the three glasses that lived beneath the chart table. As he drank the traditional toast to Newton, Oberth and Einstein, Saunders wondered how this little ceremony had originated. Space crews had certainly been doing it for at least sixty years: perhaps it could be traced back to the legendary rocket engineer who made the remark: "I've burnt more alcohol in sixty seconds than you've ever sold across this lousy bar."

Two hours later the last course-correction that the tracking stations on Earth could give them had been fed into the computer. From now on, until Mars came sweeping up ahead, they were on their own. It was a lonely thought, yet a curiously exhilarating one. Saunders savored it in his mind. There were just the three of them here—and no one else within a million miles.

In the circumstances, the detonation of an atomic bomb

could hardly have been more shattering than the modest knock on the cabin door.

Captain Saunders had never been so startled in his life. With a yelp that had already left him before he had a chance to suppress it, he shot out of his seat and rose a full yard before the ship's residual gravity field dragged him back. Chambers and Mitchell, on the other hand, behaved with traditional British phlegm. They swiveled in their bucket seats, stared at the door, and then waited for their Captain to take action.

It took Saunders several seconds to recover. Had he been confronted with what might be called a normal emergency, he would already have been halfway into a spacesuit. But a diffident knock on the door of the control cabin, when everyone in the ship was sitting inside, was not a fair test.

A stowaway was simply impossible. The danger had been so obvious, right from the beginning of commercial spaceflight, that the most stringent precautions had been taken against it. One of his officers, Saunders knew, would always have been on duty during loading; no one could possibly have crept in unobserved. Then there had been the detailed preflight inspection, carried out by both Mitchell and Chambers. Finally, there was the weight check at the moment before takeoff; *that* was conclusive. No, a stowaway was totally . . .

The knock on the door sounded again. Captain Saunders clenched his fists and squared his jaw. In a few minutes, he thought, some romantic idiot was going to be very, very sorry.

"Open the door, Mr. Mitchell," Saunders growled. In a single long stride, the assistant pilot crossed the cabin and jerked open the hatch.

For an age, it seemed, no one spoke. Then the stowaway, wavering slightly in the low gravity, came into the cabin. He was completely self-possessed, and looked very pleased with himself.

"Good afternoon, Captain Saunders," he said. "I must apologize for this intrusion."

Saunders swallowed hard. Then, as the pieces of the jigsaw fell into place, he looked first at Mitchell, then at Chambers. Both of his officers stared guilelessly back at him with expressions of ineffable innocence. "So *that's* it," he said bitterly. There was no need for any explanations: everything was perfectly clear. It was easy to picture the complicated negotiations, the midnight meetings, the falsification of records, the offloading of non-essential cargoes that his trusted colleagues had been conducting behind his back. He was sure it was a most interesting story, but he didn't want to hear about it now. He was too busy wondering what the Manual of Space Law would have to say about a situation like this, though he was already gloomily certain that it would be of no use to him at all.

It was too late to turn back, of course: the conspirators wouldn't have made an elementary miscalculation like that. He would just have to make the best of what looked like being the trickiest voyage in his career.

He was still trying to think of something to say when the PRIORITY signal started flashing on the radio board. The stowaway looked at his watch.

"I was expecting that," he said. "It's probably the Prime Minister. I think I'd better speak to the poor man."

Saunders thought so too.

"Very well, Your Royal Highness," he said sulkily.

It was the Prime Minister all right, and he sounded very upset. Several times he used the phrase "your duty to your people" and once there was a distinct catch in his throat as he said something about "devotion of your subjects to the Crown."

While this emotional harangue was in progress, Mitchell leaned over to Saunders and whispered in his ear:

"The old boy's on a sticky wicket, and he knows it. The people will be behind the Prince when they hear what's happened. Everybody knows he's been trying to get into space for years."

"Shush!" said Chambers. The Prince was speaking, his

words winging back across the abyss that now sundered him from the island he would one day rule.

"I am sorry, Mr. Prime Minister," he said, "if I've caused you any alarm. I will return as soon as it is convenient. Someone has to do everything for the first time, and I felt the moment had come for a member of my family to leave Earth. My great-grandfathers were sailors before they became kings of a maritime nation. This will be a valuable part of my education, and will make me more fitted to carry out my duty. Good-by."

He dropped the microphone and walked over to the observation window—the only spaceward-looking port on the entire ship. Saunders watched him standing there, proud and lonely—but contented now.

No one spoke for a long time. Then Prince Henry tore his gaze away from the blinding splendor beyond the port, looked at Captain Saunders, and smiled.

"Where's the galley, Captain?" he asked. "I may be out of practice, but when I used to go scouting I was the best cook in my patrol."

Saunders slowly relaxed, then smiled back. The tension seemed to lift from the control room. Mars was still a long way off, but he knew now that this wasn't going to be such a bad trip after all.

The most attractive thing about Mildred Clingerman—as a writer, I hasten to add, to avoid misinterpretation ("or," as Elmer Davis once said, "interpretation either, for that matter")—is that no two of her stories are alike in theme or in tone; there is, thank God, no Clingerman formula. For her first entry in this volume, the Toast of Tucson presents the deft and charming tale of a marriage, a hangover, a tomcat and an Alien Observer.

BIRDS CAN'T COUNT

EVERYBODY has his own way of weathering a hangover. Maggie's husband's way was to ignore the whole matter, stoutly denying, if pressed, that he suffered at all. Maggie never denied Mark the right to this brave pretense, but she had long ago noted that on such days the family car needed a great deal of tinkering with, which necessitated Mark's lying down under it or in it for several hours. Maggie refused any such face-saving measures. Right after breakfast on the day after the party she took to her bed, fortified with massive doses of B^1, a dull book and, for quiet companionship, Gomez, the cat.

The window cooler hummed invitingly in the darkened bedroom; the curtains belled out in the breeze, and Maggie, shedding everything but her slip, climbed gratefully into bed. The book was called *Hunting Our Feathered Friends with a Camera*, and Maggie, who knew nothing of photography or birds, began to read it in the hope of being bored into sudden sleep.

Sleep had been very elusive lately. It was silly of her to become so disturbed over shadows . . . or, more often, the lack of shadows. But how to explain her uneasiness to Mark, or to anybody? Once, last night at the party, she'd come very close to asking her friends for help or, maybe, just sympathy—

the talk had turned to ghosts and hauntings—but luckily she'd called back the words before they'd formed. The whole thing was too nebulous to talk about. From the first, Mark had labeled it paranoiac, laughing at her wide-eyed account of *something* that looked at her in the bathroom, trundled after her to the bedroom, then watched her in the kitchen while she pared potatoes. When Mark had asked where for pete's sake was there room in that small kitchen for a secret watcher, Maggie had shut up. Not for worlds would she leave herself open to Mark's delighted shouts (she could just hear him) by answering that question.

If I'd said: "On top of the refrigerator," Maggie thought drowsily, I'd never have heard the last of it.

. . . The hunting urge is deeply ingrained in man. It is no longer necessary to hunt for food; take a camera in your hands and stalk your prey. The prime hunter, anyway, from the days of the caveman, has been the artist, tracking down and recording beauty. . . . Allow your children and yourself the thrill of the chase; satisfy this primitive urge with a safe weapon, the camera. Patience . . . do not harm the nests natural setting . . . build yourself a blind . . . patience . . . catch them feeding . . . mating . . . battling . . . patience . . . quick exposure . . . patience . . .

Maggie slept.

Minutes later she woke to find Gomez, the cat, sitting on her stomach. She and Gomez, good friends, regarded each other gravely. Gomez, aware that he had her full attention, tossed his head skittishly.

"You woke me," Maggie accused.

"*Mmm-ow-rannkk?*" He was giving her the three-syllable, get-up-and-feed-me treatment. Maggie was supposed to find this coaxing irresistible.

"Blast and damn," Maggie said gently, not moving. Gomez trod heavily towards her chin.

"All *right,*" Maggie muttered. "But stop flouncing. Whoever heard of a flouncing tomcat—"

Both Maggie and Gomez froze, staring at something close to the ceiling.

"Do you see it, too?" Maggie rolled her eyes at Gomez, which so terrified him he immediately began evasive action —bounding off the bed, stumbling over her shoes, caroming off her desk, falling into the lid of her portable typewriter, his favorite sleeping spot. Gomez cowered deep in the lid, one scalloped ear doing radar duty for whatever danger hovered.

"That's my brave, contained cat," Maggie crooned through her teeth. She raised herself up on her elbows to stare at one corner of the ceiling; her eyes moved slowly with the slow movement there. But was it movement? Strictly speaking, it was not. Only some subtle shifting of the light in the room, she thought. That was all. The ceiling was blank and bare. Gradually the tumult of her heart subsided. Maggie caught sight of her face in the dressing-table mirror. She was interestingly pale.

"It's all done with mirrors, Gomez, and who's afraid of a mirror? Neither you nor I . . . a car went by, or a cloud. Take one cloud, a mirror, and a hangover; divide by . . . Wait a minute. I just thought of something."

Gomez waited, relaxing somewhat in his tight-fitting box. Maggie sat cross-legged in the middle of the double bed silently pursuing an elusive memory.

White face . . . tents . . . carnival . . .yes, the spider lady! It was one of the first dates I had with Mark, and how much I impressed him, because I saw through the illusion at once. There in the tent, behind a roped-off section, sat a huge, hairy spider with the head of a woman. The head turned and talked and laughed with the crowd, but glared at me when I began to point out to Mark the arrangement of the mirrors. It was all simple enough and fairly obvious, but not to Mark. Not to most people. Later, over coffee and doughnuts, I explained rather proudly to him that magic shows, pickpocket shows, that kind of thing, were always dull for me, because I could see so clearly what was really happening—that the way to look, to watch, was not straight on, but in a funny kind of oblique way, head tilted. Mark squeezed my hand then and made some remark about a crazy female who goes through

life with her head on one side, seeing too deeply into things. . . .

It is nice to remember young love, Maggie thought, but I'm losing the track of that thought. Oh, yes . . . and then during the war there was the General at Mark's basic training camp—he definitely lacked my peculiar ability—who came to check on the trainees' camouflaged foxholes. Mark wrote me about it. The old boy cursed them all for inept idiots who couldn't decently camouflage a flea, and then, right in front of the whole company and still cursing the obviousness of their efforts, stepped straight into one of the concealed holes and broke his leg. So . . .?

Maggie lay back on her bed, her usual abstracted look considerably deepened. Her mind wheeled around to the party last night. Something said or done then nagged at her now. What was it? It had been a good party. Nobody mad or sad or very bad. The summer bachelor had flitted about like an overweight hummingbird stealing sips of kisses . . . and almost drowned in the blonde, bless her. A mercurial young man had explained to Maggie what a bitch his first wife was, while staring rather gloomily at his second. . . . The talk had ranged from ghosts to sex, from religion to sex, from flying saucers to sex, and everybody had come out strongly on the side of the angels and sex. The rocket engineer believed passionately in the flying saucers, but—*that was it!*

He'd said: "Maggie, it's silly and sweet of you to hope for a *deus ex machina,* come to save civilization, but have you considered we may mean nothing to them emotionally? Haven't you ever watched ants struggling with a load too big for them? How much did you care? Even if, like God, you marked the fall of every sparrow, you might simply be conducting a survey or expressing colossal boredom, like the people who delight in measuring things. You know what I mean—if so-and-so were laid end to end . . ." And right there the talk had turned back to sex.

"So," Maggie said aloud, "I'm being watched. Cataloged. Maybe photographed. Either that, or I'm nuts, loony, strictly

for the birds." She grabbed the dull book and began to read again, not quite sure what she was looking for. She studied the photographs in the book, and for the first time it struck her how self-consciously posed some of the birds looked. "Hams," Maggie dismissed them. "Camera hogs." She glanced at herself in the mirror, hesitated, then got up and combed her hair and lipsticked her mouth. In the mirror she could see Gomez peering cautiously from the typewriter lid towards a spot over the window cooler. The shadowy coolness of the room lightened for a moment, and Gomez' eyes registered the change, but Maggie didn't mind. She was posing sultrily and liking the effect. Maggie had decided to cooperate for the time being and give the unseen watcher an eyeful.

Mind you, she was thinking furiously, if this is camouflage, it's out of my class . . . maybe out of this world. Then how am I to prove it? It might be easier just to go quietly nuts. . . . But I've got too much to do this week to go crazy. Next week, perhaps. What am I saying! Fie on this character, whoever it may be. With my tilted, eagle eye I will ferret him out!

Cheered, she began to do setting-up exercises. Next, she stood on her head. Unfortunately she couldn't see anything, since her only garment fell down around her ears.

Mark opened her bedroom door and peered in.

"Good God, Maggie!" he said. "What's up?"

Maggie's head emerged from the folds of the slip, and she lay full length on the rug. "Just a game," she said. "Wanta play?"

"Please, Maggie," he said plaintively. "Not just now. I've got to go polish the car."

"Idiot," Maggie said. "I'm studying photography . . . I think. Go away, you're apt to ruin the exposure."

"I am not," Mark said doggedly. "It's a love exposure, it's just that I have to—"

"—polish the car!" Maggie threatened him with a shoe. Mark sighed and withdrew, closing the door gently behind him.

Maggie got up and dressed in shirt and shorts and tried the headstand again. Gomez watched her with wide, startled

eyes. Next she bent down and peered back between her legs while turning slowly to survey all four sides of the room. Nothing. Wearily she sat a moment on the rug, rubbing her aching brow. Her eyes felt sandy, and she rubbed them, too. She glanced at Gomez and saw that he looked like two cats, one barely offsetting the other, like a color overlay on a magazine page that wasn't quite right. She rubbed her eyes harder to dispel the illusion, and just then she saw the watcher.

She and the watcher stared at each other across the intervening space and across the little black box the watcher held. Even now his image was not clear to Maggie. One moment he was there, the next he was a something-nothing, then he was gone.

Maggie rubbed furiously at her eyes again and brought him back to her vision. This time she was able to hold him there, though the image danced and swam and her eyes watered a little with the effort. It was just like any illusion, she thought; once you know the trick of looking at it, you feel stupid not to have seen it at once.

"Peekaboo," she said. "I see you. But stop wiggling."

The watcher's expression did not change. He continued to gaze at her raptly. But all the rest of him changed. He reminded Maggie of mirages she'd seen, linking and flattening mountaintops. Was he human? A moment ago, he might have been. But now he was a great whirl of gray petals with the black box and the staring eyes remaining still and cool in the center. The eyes were large, dark and unblinking. The gray petals now drooped like melted wax and flowed into stiffening horizontal lines like a stylized Christmas tree, and the liquid eyes became twin stars decorating its apex, with the black box dangling below like a gift tied to a branch. The tree dissolved and turned into a vase shape, with delicate etchings of light on the gray that reminded Maggie of fine lace.

Maggie got up purposefully and walked towards the fluidly shifting image. The watcher shrank into a small square shape that was like a window open onto cold, slanting lines of

rain. Maggie reached out a hand and touched the solid plaster wall.

"Nuts," Maggie said. "I know you're there. Come out, come out, and we'll all take tea."

The watcher's gaze now turned toward her feet, and his form lengthened and narrowed so drastically that he reminded Maggie of nothing so much as a barber pole with gray and white stripes. The barber pole grew an appendage that pointed downward. It seemed to be pointing at Gomez, who had seated himself just where Maggie might most conveniently step on him, and was yawning as unconcernedly as if the watcher did not exist, or as if he were quite used to him. The watcher grew another appendage, raised the black box, and just then a tiny shaft of light touched Gomez on the nose.

Maggie watched carefully, but Gomez did not seem to be hurt. He began to wash his face. "Is it a camera, then?" Maggie asked. No answer. She looked wildly around the room, grabbed up the framed photograph of her mother-in-law and showed it to the watcher. The staring eyes looked dubious. But by dint of using her eyebrows and all her facial muscles Maggie finally made her question clear to him. One appendage disappeared into the black box and drew out a tiny replica of Gomez yawning. It was a perfect little three-dimensional figurine, and Maggie coveted it with all her heart. She reached for it, but the wavering barber pole drew itself up stiffly, the eyes admired the figurine a few moments, glared haughtily at Maggie, and the figurine disappeared. Maggie's face expressed her disappointment.

"What about me?" Maggie pointed to herself, pantomimed the way he held the box, then touched her own nose lightly. The eyes at the top of the barber pole gazed at her blandly. The barber pole shuddered. Then the watcher pantomimed that Maggie should pick up Gomez and hold him. Maggie did, and again the little shaft of light hit Gomez on the nose.

"Hey!" Maggie said. "Did you get me, too? Let me see." No response from the watcher. "Oh well," Maggie said, "maybe that one wasn't so good. How about this pose?" She smiled and pirouetted gracefully for the watcher, but the

watcher only looked bored. There's nothing so disconcerting, Maggie thought, as a bored barber pole. She subsided into deep thought. Come to think of it, Gomez had been with her each time she'd sensed the presence of the thing.

"Blast and damn," she said. "I will not play a supporting role for any cat, even Gomez." She made fierce go-away motions to the image-maker. She shoved Gomez outside the bedroom. She created a host of nasty faces and tried them on for the watcher. She made shooing motions as if he were a chicken. Finally, in a burst of inspiration she printed the address of the Animal Shelter on a card and drew pictures of cats all around it. She held it up for the barber pole to read. The eyes looked puzzled, but willing. The little black box was being folded into itself until now it was no larger than an ice cube. The barber pole swelled into a caricature of a woman, a woman with enormous brandy-snifter-size breasts and huge flopping buttocks. The eyes were now set in a round doughy, simpering face that somehow (horribly, incomprehensibly) reminded Maggie of her own. The watcher then, gazing straight at Maggie, mimicked all the nasty faces she'd made, stood on his (her?) head, peered between his legs, smiled and pirouetted, pretended to leer at himself in a mirror, and then, very deliberately, indicated with one spiraling finger atop his head that Maggie was nuts. He gave her one look of pure male amusement and disappeared.

"Come back and fight," Maggie said. "I dare you to say that again." She rubbed her eyes without much hope, and she was right. The watcher was gone.

Rather forlornly, Maggie took to her bed again. "It's the worst hangover I've ever had," Maggie moaned. "So maybe I wasn't looking my best, but it's a bitter blow . . ."

The worst of it was, she could never tell anybody, even Mark. What woman could ever admit she had less charm than a beat-up old tomcat? "But I've found out one thing," Maggie thought. "I know now what dogs and cats stare at when people can't see anything there. . . ." But she almost wept when she remembered her old daydream—of watchers lovingly studying and guiding mankind, or at least holding

themselves ready to step in and help when the going got too rough. Suppose, though, the watchers considered mankind no more than servants to the other animals? Feeding and bathing them, providing warm houses and soft, safe beds. . . .

It was a sickening thought. Maggie harbored it for two minutes, and then resolutely dismissed it from mind.

"Fiddlesticks! He wasn't that stupid. In fact, he was a damn smart-aleck. So he liked Gomez. So what? Maybe he's a woman-hater."

She settled back against her pillow and opened the bird book:

Remember, birds can't count. When you build your blind, let two people enter it. Let one person go away, and the birds will return without fear, thinking they are safe. In this way, you will get good, natural pictures of our friends eating, fighting, and mating. . . .

Mark opened the bedroom door and walked in. "Maggie?"

"Hmm?" Maggie went on reading.

"I couldn't polish the car. . . ." Mark grinned at her.

"Why not?" Maggie dropped the dull book with alacrity. She knew that grin.

"I kept thinking about that new game you were playing. . . . Some type of photography, did you say? Then I know the perfect name for it."

"What?"

"It's called see-the-birdie, and it isn't a new game at all—it's just part of an old one."

Maggie stretched luxuriously and made an apparently irrelevant remark: "So long, hangover."

The word "golem," in Hebrew, meant originally anything incomplete or not fully formed: a needle without an eye, a woman who has not conceived . . . or a man without a soul—an automaton. It is in this last meaning that the word occurs so often and so wondrously in Jewish legend that it is familiar even to gentiles; and it may be no accident that modern robotics derieves from the Czech author Čapek, since the greatest golem *of all these robot-precursors was created in Prague.* THE GOLEM *has been the title of at least two classic horror films; Avram Davidson, however, sees no horror in the theme, but rather a gentle, shrewd and delightful humor.*

THE GOLEM

THE GRAY-FACED person came along the street where old Mr. and Mrs. Gumbeiner lived. It was afternoon, it was autumn, the sun was warm and soothing to their ancient bones. Anyone who attended the movies in the twenties or the early thirties has seen that street a thousand times. Past these bungalows with their half-double roofs Edmund Lowe walked arm-in-arm with Leatrice Joy and Harold Lloyd was chased by Chinamen waving hatchets. Under these squamous palm trees Laurel kicked Hardy and Woolsey beat Wheeler upon the head with codfish. Across these pocket-handkerchief-sized lawns the juveniles of the Our Gang Comedies pursued one another and were pursued by angry fat men in golf knickers. On this same street—or perhaps on some other one of five hundred streets exactly like it.

Mrs. Gumbeiner indicated the gray-faced person to her husband.

"You think maybe he's got something the matter?" she asked. "He walks kind of funny, to me."

"Walks like a *golem,*" Mr. Gumbeiner said indifferently.

The old woman was nettled.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "*I* think he walks like your cousin."

The old man pursed his mouth angrily and chewed on his pipestem. The gray-faced person turned up the concrete path, walked up the steps to the porch, sat down in a chair. Old Mr. Gumbeiner ignored him. His wife stared at the stranger.

"Man comes in without a hello, good-by, or howareyou, sits himself down and right away he's at home. . . . The chair is comfortable?" she asked. "Would you like maybe a glass tea?"

She turned to her husband.

"Say something, Gumbeiner!" she demanded. "What are you, made of wood?"

The old man smiled a slow, wicked, triumphant smile.

"Why should *I* say anything?" he asked the air. "Who am I? Nothing, that's who."

The stranger spoke. His voice was harsh and monotonous.

"When you learn who—or, rather, what—I am, the flesh will melt from your bones in terror." He bared porcelain teeth.

"Never mind about my bones!" the old woman cried. "You've got a lot of nerve talking about my bones!"

"You will quake with fear," said the stranger. Old Mrs. Gumbeiner said that she hoped he would live so long. She turned to her husband once again.

"Gumbeiner, when are you going to mow the lawn?"

"All mankind—" the stranger began.

"*Shah!* I'm talking to my husband. . . . He talks *eppis* kind of funny, Gumbeiner, no?"

"Probably a foreigner," Mr. Gumbeiner said, complacently.

"You think so?" Mrs. Gumbeiner glanced fleetingly at the stranger. "He's got a very bad color in his face, *nebbich.* I suppose he came to California for his health."

"Disease, pain, sorrow, love, grief—all are nought to—"

Mr. Gumbeiner cut in on the stranger's statement.

"Gall bladder," the old man said. "Guinzburg down at the *shule* looked exactly the same before his operation. Two pro-

fessors they had in for him, and a private nurse day and night."

"I am not a human being!" the stranger said loudly.

"Three thousand seven hundred fifty dollars it cost his son, Guinzburg told me. 'For you, Poppa, nothing is too expensive —only get well,' the son told him."

"*I am not a human being!*"

"Ai, is that a son for you!" the old woman said, rocking her head. "A heart of gold, pure gold." She looked at the stranger. "All right, all right, I heard you the first time. Gumbeiner! I asked you a question. When are you going to cut the lawn?"

"On Wednesday, *odder* maybe Thursday, comes the Japaneser to the neighborhood. To cut lawns is *his* profession. *My* profession it to be a glazier—retired."

"Between me and all mankind is an inevitable hatred," the stranger said. "When I tell you what I am, the flesh will melt—"

"You said, you said already," Mr. Gumbeiner interrupted.

"In Chicago where the winters were as cold and bitter as the Czar of Russia's heart," the old woman intoned, "you had strength to carry the frames with the glass together day in and day out. But in California with the golden sun to mow the lawn when your wife asks, for this you have no strength. Do I call in the Japaneser to cook for you supper?"

"Thirty years Professor Allardyce spent perfecting his theories. Electronics, neuronics—"

"Listen, how educated he talks," Mr. Gumbeiner said, admiringly. "Maybe he goes to the University here?"

"If he goes to the University, maybe he knows Bud?" his wife suggested.

"Probably they're in the same class and he came to see him about the homework, no?"

"Certainly he must be in the same class. How many classes are there? Five *in ganzen*: Bud showed me on his program card." She counted off on her fingers. "Television Appreciation and Criticism, Small Boat Building, Social Adjustment, The American Dance . . . The American Dance—*nu*, Gumbeiner—"

"Contemporary Ceramics," her husband said relishing the syllables. "A fine boy, Bud. A pleasure to have him for a boardner."

"After thirty years spent in these studies," the stranger, who had continued to speak unnoticed, went on, "he turned from the theoretical to the pragmatic. In ten years' time he had made the most titanic discovery in history: he made mankind, *all* mankind, superfluous: he made *me*."

"What did Tillie write in her last letter?" asked the old man.

The old woman shrugged.

"What should she write? The same thing. Sidney was home from the Army, Naomi has a new boy friend—"

"*He made* ME!"

"Listen, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is," the old woman said; "maybe where you came from is different, but in *this* country you don't interrupt people the while they're talking. . . . Hey. Listen—what do you mean, he *made* you? What kind of talk is that?"

The stranger bared all his teeth again, exposing the too pink gums.

"In his library, to which I had a more complete access after his sudden and as yet undiscovered death from entirely natural causes, I found a complete collection of stories about androids, from Shelley's *Frankenstein* through Capek's R.U.R. to Asimov's—"

"Frankenstein?" said the old man, with interest. "There used to be Frankenstein who had the soda-*wasser* place on Halstead Street: a Litvack, *nebbich*."

"What are you talking?" Mrs. Gumbeiner demanded. "His name was Franken*thal*, and it wasn't on Halstead, it was on Roosevelt."

"—clearly shown that all mankind has an instinctive antipathy towards androids and there will be an inevitable struggle between them—"

"Of course, of course!" Old Mr. Gumbeiner clicked his teeth against his pipe. "I am always wrong, you are always right. How could you stand to be married to such a stupid person all this time?"

"I don't know," the old woman said. "Sometimes I wonder, myself. I think it must be his good looks." She began to laugh. Old Mr. Gumbeiner blinked, then began to smile, then took his wife's hand.

"Foolish old woman," the stranger said; "why do you laugh? Do you not know I have come to destroy you?"

"What!" old Mr. Gumbeiner shouted. "Close your mouth, you!" He darted from his chair and struck the stranger with the flat of his hand. The stranger's head struck against the porch pillar and bounced back.

"When you talk to my wife, talk respectable, you hear?"

Old Mrs. Gumbeiner, cheeks very pink, pushed her husband back in his chair. Then she leaned forward and examined the stranger's head. She clicked her tongue as she pulled aside a flap of gray, skinlike material.

"Gumbeiner, look! He's all springs and wires inside!"

"I *told* you he was a *golem,* but no, you wouldn't listen," the old man said.

"You said he *walked* like a *golem.*"

"How could he walk like a *golem* unless he *was* one?"

"All right, all right. . . . You broke him, so now fix him."

"My grandfather, his light shines from Paradise, told me that when MoHaRaL—Moreyny Ha-Rav Löw—his memory for a blessing, made the *golem* in Prague, three hundred? four hundred years ago? he wrote on his forehead the Holy Name."

Smiling reminiscently, the old woman continued, "And the *golem* cut the rabbi's wood and brought his water and guarded the ghetto."

"And one time only he disobeyed the Rabbi Löw, and Rabbi Löw erased the *Shem Ha-Mephorash* from the *golem's* forehead and the *golem* fell down like a dead one. And they put him up in the attic of the *shule* and he's still there today if the Communisten haven't sent him to Moscow. . . . This is not just a story," he said.

"*Avadda* not!" said the old woman.

"I myself have seen both the *shule* and the rabbi's grave," her husband said, conclusively.

"But I think this must be a different kind *golem*, Gumbeiner. See, on his forehead: nothing written."

"What's the matter, there's a law I can't write something there? Where is that lump clay Bud brought us from his class?"

The old man washed his hands, adjusted his little black skullcap, and slowly and carefully wrote four Hebrew letters on the gray forehead.

"Ezra the Scribe himself couldn't do better," the old woman said, admiringly. "Nothing happens," she observed, looking at the lifeless figure sprawled in the chair.

"Well, after all, am I Rabbi Löw?" her husband asked, deprecatingly. "No," he answered. He leaned over and examined the exposed mechanism. "This spring goes here . . . this wire comes with this one . . ." The figure moved. "But this one goes where? And this one?"

"Let be," said his wife. The figure sat up slowly and rolled its eyes loosely.

"Listen, Reb *Golem*," the old man said, wagging his finger. "Pay attention to what I say—you understand?"

"Understand . . ."

"If you want to stay here, you got to do like Mr. Gumbeiner says."

"Do-like-Mr.-Gumbeiner-says . . ."

"*That's* the way I like to hear a *golem* talk. Malka, give here the mirror from the pocketbook. Look, you see your face? You see on the forehead, what's written? If you don't do like Mr. Gumbeiner says, he'll wipe out what's written and you'll be no more alive."

"No-more-alive . . ."

"*That's* right. Now, listen. Under the porch you'll find a lawnmower. Take it. And cut the lawn. Then come back. Go."

"Go . . ." The figure shambled down the stairs. Presently the sound of the lawnmower whirred through the quiet air in the street just like the street where Jackie Cooper shed huge tears on Wallace Beery's shirt and Chester Conklin rolled his eyes at Marie Dressler.

"So what will you write to Tillie?" old Mr. Gumbeiner asked.

"What should I write?" old Mrs. Gumbeiner shrugged. "I'll write that the weather is lovely out here and that we are both, Blessed be the Name, in good health."

The old man nodded his head slowly, and they sat together on the front porch in the warm afternoon sun.

Zenna Henderson began the chronicles of The People with Ararat *(F&SF, October,* 1952)*—which is currently available, for any of you who were so unlucky as to miss it, in the Bantam anthology* FRONTIERS IN SPACE*—and continued them in* Gilead *(F&SF, August,* 1954)*, two stories which demonstrated conclusively that the tale of interstellar aliens may be neither an adventurous melodrama nor an intellectual exercise, but a deep wellspring of warmth and emotion. Even if you have not read the earlier stories, you'll find their background clearly set forth in this latest report on The People, which tells of a Group who attempted to deny their heritage and to sell the proud birthright of the stars for a bitter mess of*

POTTAGE

YOU GET tired of teaching after a while. Well, maybe not of teaching itself because it's insidious and remains a tug in the blood for all of your life, but there comes a day when you look down at the paper you're grading or listen to an answer you're giving a child and you get a *boinnng!* feeling. And each reverberation of the *boing* is a year in your life, another set of children through your hands, another beat in monotony and it's frightening. The value of the work you're doing doesn't enter into it at that moment and the monotony is bitter on your tongue.

Sometimes you can assuage that feeling by consciously savoring those precious days of pseudo-freedom between the time you receive your contract for the next year and the moment you sign it. Because you *can* escape at that moment, but somehow—you don't.

But I did, one spring. I quit teaching. I didn't sign up again. I went chasing after—after what? Maybe excitement—maybe a dream of wonder—maybe a new, bright, wonderful

world that just *must* be somewhere else because it isn't here-and-now. Maybe a place to begin again so I'd never end up at the same frightening emotional dead end. So I quit.

But by late August the emptiness inside me was bigger than boredom, bigger than monotony, bigger than lusting after freedom. It was almost terror to have September nearly here and not care that in a few weeks school starts—tomorrow school starts—First Day of School. So, almost at the last minute, I went to the Placement Bureau. Of course it was too late to try to return to my other school, and besides, the mold of the years there still chafed in too many places.

"Well," said the Placement Director as he shuffled his end-of-the-season cards, past Algebra and Home Ec and PE and High School English, "there's always Bendo." He thumbed out a battered-looking 3 x 5. "There's *always* Bendo."

And I took his emphasis and look for what they were intended as and sighed.

"Bendo?"

"Small school. One room. Mining town—or used to be. Ghost town now." He sighed wearily and let down his professional hair. "Ghost people, too. Can't keep a teacher there more than a year. Low pay—fair housing—at someone's home. No community activities—no social life. No city within fifty or so miles. No movies. No nothing but children to be taught. Ten of them this year. All grades."

"Sounds like the town I grew up in," I said. "Except we had two rooms and lots of community activities."

"I've been to Bendo." The Director leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. "Sick community. Unhappy people. No interest in anything. Only reason they have a school is because it's the law. Law-abiding, anyway. Not enough interest in anything to break a law, I guess."

"I'll take it," I said quickly before I could think beyond the feeling that this sounded about as far back as I could go to get a good running start at things again.

He glanced at me quizzically. "If you're thinking of lighting a torch of high reform to set Bendo afire with enthusiasm, forget it. I've seen plenty of king-sized torches fizzle out there."

"I have no torch," I said. "Frankly I'm fed to the teeth with bouncing bright enthusiasm and huge PTAs and activities until they come out your ears. They usually turn out to be the most monotonous kind of monotony. Bendo will be a rest."

"It will that," said the Director, leaning over his cards again. "Saul Diemus is the president of the Board. If you don't have a car, the only way to get to Bendo is by bus—it runs once a week."

I stepped out into the August sunshine after the interview and sagged a little under its savage pressure, almost hearing a hiss as the refrigerated coolness of the Placement Bureau evaporated from my skin.

I walked over to the Quad and sat down on one of the stone benches I'd never had time to use, those years ago when I was a student here. I looked up at my old dorm window and, for a moment, felt a wild homesickness—not only for years that were gone and hopes that died and dreams that had grim awakenings, but for a special magic I had found in that room. It was a magic—a true magic—that opened such vistas to me that for a while anything seemed possible, anything feasible—if not for me right now, then for Others, Someday. Even now, after the dilution of time, I couldn't quite believe that magic, and even now, as then, I wanted fiercely to believe it. If only it could be so! If only it could be so!

I sighed and stood up. I suppose everyone has a magic moment somewhere in his life, and, like me, can't believe that anyone else could have the same—but mine *was* different! No one else *could* have had the same experience! I laughed at myself. Enough of the past and of dreaming. Bendo waited. I had things to do.

I watched the rolling clouds of red-yellow dust billow away from the jolting bus and cupped my hands over my face to get a breath of clean air. The grit between my teeth and the smothering sift of dust across my clothes was familiar enough to me, but I hoped by the time we reached Bendo we would have left this dust-plain behind and come into a little

more vegetation. I shifted wearily on the angular seat, wondering if it had ever been designed for anyone's comfort, and caught myself as a sudden braking of the bus flung me forward.

We sat and waited for the dust of our going to catch up with us, while the last-but-me passenger, a withered old Indian, slowly gathered up his gunny-sack bundles and his battered saddle and edged his levi'd, velveteen-bloused self up the aisle and out to the bleak roadside.

We roared away, leaving him a desolate figure in a wide desolation. I wondered where he was headed. How many weary miles to his hogan in what hidden wash or miniature greenness in all this winderness.

Then we headed straight as a die for the towering redness of the bare mountains that lined the horizon. Peering ahead, I could see the road, ruler-straight, disappearing into the distance. I sighed and shifted again and let the roar of the motor and the weariness of my bones lull me into a stupor on the border between sleep and waking.

A change in the motor roar brought me back to the jouncing bus. We jerked to a stop again. I looked out the window through the settling clouds of dust and wondered who we could be picking up out here in the middle of nowhere. Then a clot of dust dissolved and I saw

BENDO POST OFFICE
GENERAL STORE
Garage & Service Station
DRY GOODS & HARDWARE
MAGAZINES

in descending size on the front of the leaning, weather-beaten building propped between two crumbling, smoke-blackened stone ruins. After so much flatness, it was almost a shock to see the bare, tumbled boulders crowding down to the roadside and humping their lichen-stained shoulders against the sky.

"Bendo," said the bus driver, unfolding his lanky legs and

hunching out of the bus. "End of the line—end of civilization —end of everything!" He grinned and the dusty mask of his face broke into engaging smile patterns.

"Small, isn't it?" I grinned back.

"Usta be bigger," he said. "Not that it helps now. Roaring mining town years ago." As he spoke, I could pick out disintegrating buildings dotting the rocky hillsides and tumbling into the steep washes. "My dad can remember it when he was a kid. That was long enough ago that there was still a river for the town to be in the bend o'."

"Is *that* where it got its name?"

"Some say yes, some say no. Might have been a feller named Bendo." The driver grunted as he unlashed my luggage from the bus roof and swung it to the ground.

"Oh, hi!" said the driver.

I swung around to see who was there. The man was tall, well built, good-looking—and old. Older than his face—older than years could have made him because he was really young, not much older than I. His face was a stern, unhappy stillness, his hands stiff on the brim of his stetson as he held it waist high.

In that brief pause before his "Miss Amerson?" I felt the same feeling coming from him that you can feel around some highly religious person who knows God only as a stern, implacable, vengeful deity, impatient of worthless man, waiting only for an unguarded moment to strike him down in his sin. I wondered who or what his God was that prisoned him so cruelly. Then I was answering. "Yes. How do you do?" And he touched my hand briefly with a "Saul Diemus" and turned to the problem of my two large suitcases and my phonograph.

I followed Mr. Diemus' shuffling feet silently, since he seemed to have slight inclination for talk. I hadn't expected a reception committee, but kids must have changed a lot since I was one, otherwise curiosity about Teacher would have lured out at least a couple of them for a preview look. But the silent two of us walked on for a half block or so from the highway and the postoffice and rounded the rocky corner of

a hill. I looked across the dry creek bed and up the one winding street that was residential Bendo. I paused on the splintery old bridge and took a good look. I'd never see Bendo like this again. Familiarity would blur some outlines and sharpen others, and I'd never again see it, free from the knowledge of who lived behind which blank front door.

The houses were scattered haphazardly over the hillsides and erratic flights of rough stone steps led down from each to the road that paralleled the bone-dry creek bed. The houses were not shacks, but they were unpainted and weathered until they blended into the background almost perfectly. Each front yard had things growing in it, but such subdued blossomings and unobtrusive plantings that they could easily have been only accidental massings of natural vegetation.

Such a passion for anonymity . . .

"The school—" I had missed the swift thrust of his hand.

"Where?" Nothing I could see spoke school to me.

"Around the bend." This time I followed his indication and suddenly, out of the featurelessness of the place, I saw a bell tower barely topping the hill beyond the town, with the fine pencil stroke of a flagpole to one side. Mr. Diemus pulled himself together to make the effort.

"The school's in the prettiest place around here. There's a spring and trees, and . . ." He ran out of words and looked at me as though trying to conjure up something else I'd like to hear. "I'm board president," he said abruptly. "You'll have ten children from first grade to second-year high school. You're the boss in your school. Whatever you do is your business. Any discipline you find desirable—use. We don't pamper our children. Teach them what you have to. Don't bother the parents with reasons and explanations. The school is yours."

"And you'd just as soon do away with it and me too." I smiled at him.

He looked startled. "The law says school them." He started across the bridge. "So school them."

I followed meekly, wondering wryly what would happen if I asked Mr. Diemus why he hated himself and the world

he was in and even—oh, breathe it softly—the children I was to "school."

"You'll stay at my place," he said. "We have an extra room."

I was uneasily conscious of the wide gap of silence that followed his pronouncement, but couldn't think of a thing to fill it. I shifted my small case from one hand to the other and kept my eyes on the rocky path that protested with shifting stones and vocal gravel every step we took. It seemed to me that Mr. Diemus was trying to make all the noise he could with his shuffling feet. But, in spite of the amplified echo from the hills around us, no door opened, no face pressed to a window. It was a distinct relief to hear suddenly the happy, unthinking rusty singing of hens as they scratched in the coarse dust.

I hunched up in the darkness of my narrow bed trying to comfort my uneasy stomach. It wasn't that the food had been bad—it had been quite adequate—but such a dingy meal! Gloom seemed to festoon itself from the ceiling and unhappiness sat almost visibly at the table.

I tried to tell myself that it was my own travel weariness that slanted my thoughts, but I looked around the table and saw the hopeless endurance furrowed into the adult faces and beginning faintly but unmistakably on those of the children. There were two children there. A girl, Sarah (fourth grade, at a guess), and an adolescent boy Matt (seventh?)—too silent, too well mannered, too controlled, avoiding much too pointedly looking at the empty chair between them.

My food went down in lumps and quarreled fiercely with the coffee that arrived in square-feeling gulps. Even yet—long difficult hours after the meal—the food still wouldn't lie down to be digested.

Tomorrow, I could slip into the pattern of school, familiar no matter where school was, since teaching kids is teaching kids no matter where. Maybe then I could convince my stomach that all was well, and then maybe even start to thaw those frozen, unnatural children. Of course they well might be little demons away from home—which is very often the case. Any-

way, I felt, thankfully, the familiar September thrill of new beginnings.

I shifted in bed again, then, stiffening my neck, lifted my ears clear off my pillow.

It was a whisper, the intermittent hissing I had been hearing. Someone was whispering in the next room to mine. I sat up and listened unashamedly. I knew Sarah's room was next to mine, but who was talking with her? At first I could get only half words and then either my ears sharpened or the voices became louder.

" . . . and did you hear her laugh? Right out loud at the table!" The quick whisper became a low voice. "Her eyes crinkled in the corners and she laughed."

"Our other teachers laughed, too." The uncertainly deep voice must be Matt.

"Yes," whispered Sarah. "But not for long. Oh, Matt! What's wrong with us? People in our books have fun. They laugh and run and jump and do all kinds of fun stuff and nobody—" Sarah faltered. "No one calls it evil."

"Those are only stories," said Matt. "Not real life."

"I don't believe it!" cried Sarah. "When I get big, I'm going away from Bendo. I'm going to see—"

"Away from Bendo!" Matt's voice broke in roughly. "Away from the Group?"

I lost Sarah's reply. I felt as though I had missed an expected step. As I wrestled with my breath, the sights and sounds and smells of my old dorm room crowded back upon me. Then I caught myself. It was probably only a turn of phrase. This futile, desolate unhappiness couldn't possibly be related in any way to *that* magic. . . .

"Where *is* Dorcas?" Sarah asked, as though she knew the answer already.

"Punished." Matt's voice was hard and unchildlike. "She jumped."

"Jumped!" Sarah was shocked.

"Over the edge of the porch. Clear down to the path. Father saw her. I think she let him see her on purpose." His voice was defiant. "Someday when I get older, I'm going to jump,

too—all I want to—even over the house. Right in front of Father."

"Oh, Matt!" The cry was horrified and admiring. "You wouldn't! You couldn't. Not so far, not right in front of Father!"

"I would so," retorted Matt. "I could so, because I—" His words cut off sharply. "Sarah," he went on, "can you figure any way, *any* way that jumping could be evil? It doesn't hurt anyone. It isn't ugly. There isn't any law—"

"Where is Dorcas?" Sarah's voice was almost inaudible. "In the hidey hole again?" Almost she was answering Matt's question instead of asking one of her own.

"Yes," said Matt. "In the dark with only bread to eat. So she can learn what a hunted animal feels like. An animal that is different, that other animals hate and hunt." His bitter voice put quotes around the words.

"You see," whispered Sarah. "You see?"

In the silence following, I heard the quiet closing of a door and the slight vibration of the floor as Matt passed my room. I eased back onto my pillow. I lay back, staring toward the ceiling. What dark thing was here in this house? In this community? Frightened children whispering in the dark. Rebellious children in hidey holes learning how hunted animals feel. And a Group . . .? No, it couldn't be. It was just the recent reminder of being on campus again that made me even consider that this darkness might in some way be the reverse of the golden coin Karen had shown me.

Almost my heart failed me when I saw the school. It was one of those brick monstrosities that went up around the turn of the century. This one had been built for a boom town, but now all the upper windows were boarded up and obviously long out of use. The lower floor was blank too, except for two rooms—though with the handful of children quietly standing around the door, it was apparent that only one room was needed. And not only was the building deserted: the yard was swept clean from side to side, innocent of grass or trees—or playground equipment. There *was* a deep grove just be-

yond the school, though, and the glint of water down canyon.

"No swings?" I asked the three children who were escorting me. "No slides? No seesaws?"

"No!" Sarah's voice was unhappily surprised. Matt scowled at her warningly.

"No," he said. "We don't swing or slide—nor see a saw!" He grinned up at me faintly.

"What a shame!" I said. "Did they all wear out? Can't the school afford new ones?"

"We don't swing or slide or seesaw." The grin was dead. "We don't believe in it."

There's nothing quite so flat and incontestable as that last statement. I've heard it as an excuse for practically every type of omission but, so help me! never applied to playground equipment. I couldn't think of a reply any more intelligent than *oh* so I didn't say anything.

All week long I felt as if I were wading through knee-deep jello or trying to lift a king-sized feather bed up over my head. I used up every device I ever thought of to rouse the class to enthusiasm—about anything, *anything!* They were polite and submissive and did what was asked of them, but joylessly, apathetically, enduringly.

Finally, just before dismissal time on Friday, I leaned in desperation across my desk.

"Don't you like *anything?*" I pleaded. "Isn't *anything* fun?"

Dorcas Diemus' mouth opened into tense silence. I saw Matt kick quickly, warningly against the leg of the desk. Her mouth closed.

"I think school is fun," I said. "I think we can enjoy all kinds of things. I want to enjoy teaching, but I can't unless you enjoy learning."

"We learn," said Dorcas quickly. "We aren't stupid."

"You learn," I acknowledged. "You aren't stupid. But don't any of you *like* school?"

"I like school," piped up Martha, my first grade. "I think it's fun!"

"Thank you, Martha," I said. "And the rest of you—" I

glared at them in mock anger. "You're going to have fun if I have to beat it into you!"

To my dismay, they shrank down apprehensively in their seats and exchanged troubled glances. But before I could hastily explain myself, Matt laughed and Dorcas joined him. And I beamed fatuously to hear the hesitant rusty laughter spread across the room, but I saw Esther's hands shake as she wiped tears from her ten-year-old eyes. Tears—of laughter?

That night I twisted in the darkness of my room, almost too tired to sleep, worrying and wondering. What had blighted these people? They had health, they had beauty—the curve of Martha's cheek against the window was a song, the lift of Dorcas' eyebrows was breathless grace. They were fed . . . adequately, clothed . . . adequately, housed . . . adequately, but nothing like they could have been. I'd seen more joy and delight and enthusiasm from little camp-ground kids who slept in cardboard shacks and washed—if they ever did—in canals and ate whatever edible came their way, but grinned, even when impetigo or cold sores bled across their grins.

But these lifeless kids! My prayers were troubled and I slept restlessly.

A month or so later, things had improved a little bit—but not much. At least there was more relaxation in the classroom. And I found that they had no deep-rooted convictions against plants, so we had things growing on the deep window sills—stuff we transplanted from the spring and from among the trees. And we had jars of minnows from the creek and one drowsy horny-toad who roused in his box of dirt only to flick up the ants brought for his dinner. And we sang—loudly and enthusiastically—but, miracle of miracles, without even one monotone in the whole room. But we *didn't* sing "Up, up in the Sky" nor "How Do You Like to Go Up in a Swing?" My solos of such songs were received with embarrassed blushes and lowered eyes!

There had been one dust-up between us though—this matter of shuffling everywhere they walked.

"Pick up your feet, for goodness' sake," I said irritably one morning when the *shoosh, shoosh, shoosh* of their coming and going finally got my skin off. "Surely they're not so heavy you can't lift them."

Timmy, who happened to be the trigger this time, nibbled unhappily at one finger. "I can't," he whispered. "Not supposed to."

"Not supposed to?" I forgot momentarily how warily I'd been going with these frightened mice of children. "Why not? Surely there's no reason in the world why you can't walk quietly."

Matt looked unhappily over at Miriam, the sophomore who was our entire high school. She looked aside, biting her lower lip, troubled. Then she turned back and said, "It is customary in Bendo."

"To shuffle along?" I was forgetting any manners I had. "Whatever for?"

"That's the we do in Bendo." There was no anger in her defense, only resignation.

"Perhaps that's the way you do at home," I said. "But here at school let's pick our feet up. It makes too much disturbance otherwise."

"But it's bad—" began Esther.

Matt's hand shushed her in a hurry.

"Mr. Diemus said what we did at school was my business," I told them. "He said not to bother your parents with our problems. One of our problems is too much noise when others are trying to work. At least in our schoolroom, let's lift our feet and walk quietly."

The children considered the suggestion solemnly and turned to Matt and Miriam for guidance. They both nodded and we went back to work. For the next few minutes, from the corner of my eyes, I saw with amazement all the unnecessary trips back and forth across the room, with high lifted feet, with grins and side glances that marked such trips as high adventure—as a delightfully daring thing to do! The

whole deal had me bewildered. Thinking back, I realized that not only the children of Bendo shuffled, but all the adults did too—as though they were afraid to lose contact with the earth, as though . . . I shook my head and went on with the lesson.

Before noon, though, the endless *shoosh, shoosh, shoosh,* of feet began again. Habit was too much for the children. So I silently filed the sound under *Uncurable, Endurable,* and let the matter drop.

I sighed as I watched the children leave at lunch time. It seemed to me that, with the unprecendented luxury of a whole hour for lunch, they'd all go home. The bell tower was visible from nearly every house in town. But instead, they all brought tight little paper sacks with dull crumbly sandwiches and unimaginative apples in them. And silently, with their dull shuffly steps, they disappeared into the thicket of trees around the spring.

Everything is dulled around here, I thought. Even the sunlight is blunted as it floods the hills and canyons. There is no mirth, no laughter. No high jinks or cutting up. No preadolescent silliness. No adolescent foolishness. Just quiet children, enduring.

I don't usually snoop, but I began wondering if perhaps the kids were different when they were away from me—and from their parents. So when I got back at twelve thirty from an adequate but uninspired lunch at Diemus' house, I kept on walking past the schoolhouse and quietly down into the grove, moving cautiously through the scanty undergrowth until I could lean over a lichened boulder and look down on the children.

Some were lying around on the short still grass, hands under their heads, blinking up at the brightness of the sky between the leaves. Esther and little Martha were hunting out fillagree seed pods and counting the tines of the pitchforks and rakes and harrows they resembled. I smiled, remembering how I used to do the same thing.

"I dreamed last night." Dorcas thrust the statement defiantly into the drowsy silence. "I dreamed about The Home."

My sudden astonished movement was covered by Martha's horrified "Oh, Dorcas!"

"What's wrong with The Home?" cried Dorcas, her cheeks scarlet. "There *was* a Home! There was! There was! Why shouldn't we talk about it?"

I listened avidly. This couldn't be just coincidence—a Group and now The Home. There must be some connection. . . . I pressed closer against the rough rock.

"But it's bad!" cried Esther. "You'll be punished! We can't talk about The Home!"

"Why not?" asked Joel as though it had just occurred to him, as things do just occur to you when you're thirteen. He sat up slowly. "Why can't we?"

There was a short tense silence.

"I've dreamed too," said Matt. "I've dreamed of The Home —and it's *good*, it's good!"

"Who hasn't dreamed?" asked Miriam. "We all have, haven't we? Even our parents. I can tell by Mother's eyes when she has."

"Did you ever ask how come we aren't supposed to talk about it?" asked Joel. "I mean and ever get any answer except that it's bad."

"I think it has something to do with a long time ago," said Matt. "Something about when the Group first came—"

"I don't think it's just dreams," declared Miriam, "because I don't have to be asleep. I think it's Remembering."

"Remembering?" asked Dorcas. "How can we remember something we never knew?"

"I don't know," admitted Miriam, "but I'll bet it is."

"I remember," volunteered Talitha—who never volunteered anything.

"Hush!" whispered Alice, the second-grade-next-to-youngest who always whispered.

"I remember," Talitha went on stubbornly. "I remember a dress that was too little so the mother just stretched the skirt till it was long enough and it stayed stretched. 'Nen she pulled the waist out big enough and the little girl put it on and flew away."

"Hoh!" Timmy scoffed. "I remember better than that." His face stilled and his eyes widened. "The ship was so tall it was like a mountain and the people went in the high, high door and they didn't have a ladder. 'Nen there were stars, big burning ones—not squinchy little ones like ours."

"It went too fast!" That was Abiel Talking eagerly! "When the air came it made the ship hot and the little baby died before all the little boats left the ship." He scoonched down suddenly, leaning against Talitha and whimpering.

"You see!" Miriam lifted her chin triumphantly. "We've all dreamed—I mean remembered!"

"I guess so," said Matt. "I remember. It's *lifting*, Talitha, not flying. You go and go as high as you like, as far as you want to and don't *ever* have to touch the ground—at all! At all!" He pounded his fist into the gravelly red soil beside him.

"And you can dance in the air, too," sighed Miriam. "Freer than a bird, lighter than—"

Esther scrambled to her feet, white-faced and panic-stricken. "Stop! Stop! It's evil! It's bad! I'll tell Father! We can't dream—or lift—or dance! It's bad, it's bad! You'll die for it! You'll die for it!"

Joel jumped to his feet and grabbed Esther's arm.

"Can we die any deader?" he cried, shaking her brutally. "You call *this* being alive?" He hunched down apprehensively and shambled a few shuffling steps across the clearing.

I fled blindly back to school, trying to wink away my tears without admitting I was crying, crying for these poor kids who were groping so hopelessly for something they knew they should have. Why was it so rigorously denied them? Surely, if they were what I thought them . . . And they could be! They could be!

I grabbed the bell rope and pulled hard. Reluctantly the bell moved and rolled.

"*One o'clock,*" it clanged. "*One o'clock!*"

I watched the children returning with slow, uneager, shuffling steps.

That night I started a letter:

Dear Karen,

Yep, 'sme after all these years. And, oh, Karen! I've found some more! Some more of The People! Remember how much you wished you knew if any other Groups besides yours had survived the Crossing? How you worried about them and wanted to find them if they had? Well, *I've* found a whole Group! But it's a sick, unhappy group. Your heart would break to see them. If you could come and start them on the right path again . . .

I put my pen down. I looked at the lines I had written and then crumpled the paper slowly. This was *my* Group. I had found them. Sure, I'd tell Karen—but later. Later, after—well, after *I* had tried to start them on the right path—at least the children.

After all, I knew a little of their potentialities. Hadn't Karen briefed me in those unguarded magical hours in the old dorm, drawn to me as I was to her by some mutual sympathy that seemed stronger than the usual roommate attachment, telling me things no outsider had a right to hear? And if, when I finally told her and turned the Group over to her, if it could be a joyous gift—then I could feel that I had repaid her a little for the wonder world she had opened to me.

Yeah, I thought ruefully—and there's nothing like a large portion of ignorance to give one a large portion of confidence. But I did want to try—desperately. Maybe if I could break prison for someone else, then perhaps my own bars . . . I dropped the paper in the wastebasket.

But it was several weeks before I could bring myself to do anything to let the children know I knew about them. It was such an impossible situation, even if it were true—and if it weren't, what kind of lunacy would they suspect me of?

When I finally set my teeth and swore a swear to myself that I'd do something definite, my hands shook and my breath was a flutter in my dry throat.

"Today," I said with an effort. "Today is Friday." Which gem of wisdom the children received with charitable silence.

"We've been working hard all week so let's have fun today." This stirred the children—half with pleasure, half with apprehension. They, poor kids, found my "fun" much harder than any kind of work I could give them. But some of them were acquiring a taste for it. Martha had even learned to skip!

"First, monitors pass the composition paper." Esther and Abie shuffled hurriedly around with the paper, and the pencil sharpener got a thorough workout. At least these kids didn't differ from others in their pleasure with grinding their pencils away at the slightest excuse.

"No," I gulped. "We're going to write." Which obvious asininity was passed over with forbearance, though Miriam looked at me wonderingly before she bent her head and let her hair shadow her face. "Today I want you all to write about the same thing. Here is our subject."

Gratefully I turned my back on the children's waiting eyes and printed slowly:

I REMEMBER THE HOME

I heard the sudden intake of breath that worked itself downward from Miriam to Talitha and then the rapid whisper that informed Abie and Martha. I heard Esther's muffled cry and I turned slowly around and leaned against the desk.

"There are so many beautiful things to remember about The Home," I said into the strained silence. "So many wonderful things. And even the sad memories are better than forgetting, because The Home was *good.* Tell me what you remember about The Home."

"We can't!" Joel and Matt were on their feet simultaneously.

"Why can't we?" cried Dorcas. "Why can't we?"

"It's bad!" cried Esther. "It's evil!"

"It ain't either!" shrilled Abie, astonishingly. "It ain't either!"

"We shouldn't." Miriam's trembling hands brushed her heavy hair upward. "It's forbidden."

"Sit down," I said gently. "The day I arrived at Bendo,

Mr. Diemus told me to teach you what I had to teach you. I have to teach you that Remembering The Home is good."

"Then why don't the grownups think so?" Matt asked slowly. "They tell us not to talk about it. We shouldn't disobey our parents."

"I know," I admitted. "And I would never ask you children to go against your parents' wishes—unless I felt that it is very important. If you'd rather they didn't know about it at first, keep it as our secret. Mr. Diemus told me not to bother them with explanations or reasons. I'll make it right with your parents when the time comes." I paused to swallow and to blink away a vision of me, leaving town in a cloud of dust barely ahead of a posse of irate parents. "Now, everyone busy," I said briskly. "I Remember The Home."

There was a moment heavy with decision and I held my breath, wondering which way the balance would dip. And then—surely it must have been because they wanted so to speak and to affirm the wonder of what had been that they capitulated so easily. Heads bent and pencils scurried. And Martha sat, her head bowed on her desk with sorrow.

"I don't know enough words," she mourned. "How do you write *toolas?*"

And Abie laboriously erased a hole through his paper and licked his pencil again.

"Why don't you and Abie make some pictures?" I suggested. "Make a little story with pictures and we can staple them together like a real book."

I looked over the silent, busy group and let myself relax, feeling weakness flood into my knees. I scrubbed the dampness from my palms with Kleenex and sat back in my chair. Slowly I became conscious of a new atmosphere in my classroom. An intolerable strain was gone, an unconscious holding back of the children, a wariness, a watchfulness, a guilty feeling of desiring what was forbidden.

A prayer of thanksgiving began to well up inside me. It changed hastily to a plea for mercy as I began to visualize what might happen to me when the parents found out what I was doing. How long must this containment and denial have

gone on? This concealment and this carefully nourished fear? From what Karen had told me, it must be well over fifty years—long enough to mark indelibly three generations.

And here I was with my fine little hatchet trying to set a little world afire! On which very mixed metaphor, I stiffened my weak knees and got up from my chair. I walked unnoticed up and down the aisles, stepping aside as Joel went blindly to the shelf for more paper, leaning over Miriam to marvel that she had taken out her Crayolas and part of her writing was with colors, part with pencil—and the colors spoke to something in me that the pencil couldn't reach though I'd never seen the forms the colors took.

The children had gone home, happy and excited, chattering and laughing, until they reached the edge of the school grounds. There smiles died and laughter stopped and faces and feet grew heavy again. All but Esther's. Hers had never been light. I sighed and turned to the papers. Here was Abie's little book. I thumbed through it and drew a deep breath and went back through it slowly again.

A second-grader drawing this? Six pages—six finished, adult-looking pages. Crayolas achieving effects I'd never seen before—pictures that told a story loudly and clearly.

Stars blazing in a black sky, with the slender needle of a ship, like a mote in the darkness.

The vasty green cloud-shrouded arc of earth against the blackness. A pink tinge of beginning friction along the ship's belly. I put my finger to the glow. Almost I could feel the heat.

Inside the ship, suffering and pain, heroic striving, crumpled bodies and seared faces. A baby dead in its mother's arms. Then a swarm of tinier needles erupting from the womb of the ship. And the last shriek of incandescence as the ship volatilized against the thickening drag of the air.

I leaned my head on my hands and closed my eyes. All this, all *this* in the memory of an eight-year-old? All *this* in the feelings of an eight-year-old? Because Abie, knew—he *knew* how this felt. He knew the heat and strivings and the dying

and fleeing. No wonder Abie whispered and leaned. Racial memory was truly a two-sided coin.

I felt a pang of misgivings. Maybe I was wrong to let him remember so vividly. Maybe I shouldn't have let him . . .

I turned to Martha's papers. They were delicate, almost spidery drawings of some fuzzy little animal (*toolas?*) that apparently built a hanging, hammocky nest and gathered fruit in a huge leaf-basket and had a bird for a friend. A truly out-of-this-world bird. Much of her story escaped me because first-graders—if anyone at all—produce symbolic art, and, since her frame of reference and mine were so different, there was much that I couldn't interpret. But her whole booklet was joyous and light.

And now, the stories—

I lifted my head and blinked into the twilight. I had finished all the papers except Esther's. It was her cramped writing, swimming in darkness, that made me realize that the day was gone and that I was shivering in a shadowy room with the fire in the old-fashioned heater gone out.

Slowly I shuffled the papers into my desk drawer, hesitated, and took out Esther's. I would finish at home. I shrugged into my coat and wandered home, my thoughts intent on the papers I had read. And suddenly I wanted to cry—to cry for the wonders that had been and were no more. For the heritage of attainment and achievement these children had, but couldn't use. For the dream-come-true of what they were capable of doing, but weren't permitted to do. For the homesick yearning that filled every line they had written—these unhappy exiles, three generations removed from any physical knowledge of The Home.

I stopped on the bridge and leaned against the railing in the half-dark. Suddenly I felt a welling homesickness. *That* was what the world should be like—what it *could* be like if only—if only . . .

But my tears for The Home were as hidden as the emotions of Mrs. Diemus when she looked up uncuriously as I came through the kitchen door.

"Good evening," she said. "I've kept your supper warm."
"Thank you." I shivered convulsively. "It *is* getting cold."

I sat on the edge of my bed that night, letting the memory of the kids' papers wash over me, trying to fill in around the bits and snippets that they had told of The Home. And then I began to wonder. All of them who wrote about the actual Home had been so happy with their memories. From Timmy and his *Shinny ship as high as a montin and faster than two jets,* and Dorcas' wandering tenses as though yesterday and today were one, *The flowers were like lights. At night it isn't dark becas they shine so bright and when the moon came up the breeos sing and the music was so you can see it like rain falling around only happyer,* up to Miriam's wistful *On Gathering Day there was a big party. Everybody came dressed in beautiful clothes with* Flahmen *in the girl's hair.* Flahmen *are flowers but they're good to eat. And if a girl felt her heart sing for a boy, they ate a* Flahmen *together and started two-ing.*

Then, if all these memories were so happy, why the rigid suppression of them by grownups? Why the pall of unhappiness over everyone? You can't mourn forever for a wrecked ship. Why a hidey hole for disobedient children? Why the misery and frustration when, if they could do half of what I didn't fully understand from Joel's and Matt's highly technical papers, they could make Bendo an Eden—

I reached for Esther's paper. I had put it on the bottom on purpose. I dreaded reading it. She had sat with her head buried on her arms on her desk most of the time the others were writing busily. At widely separated intervals she scribbled a line or two as though she were doing something shameful. She of all the children, had seemed to find no relief in her remembering.

I smoothed the paper on my lap.

I remember, she had written. *We were thursty. There was water in the creek we were hiding in the grass. We could not drink. They would shoot us. Three days the sun was hot. She*

screamed for water and ran to the creek. They shot. The water got red.

Blistered spots marked the tears on the paper.

They found a baby under a bush. The man hit it with the wood part of his gun. He hit it and hit it and hit it. I hit scorpins like that.

They caught us and put us in a pen. They built a fire all around us. Fly "they said" fly and save yourselfs. We flew because it hurt. They shot us.

Monster "they yelled" evil monsters. People can't fly. People can't move things. People are the same. You aren't people. Die die die.

Then blackly, traced and retraced until the paper split:

If anyone finds out we are not of earth we will die.

Keep your feet on the ground.

Bleakly I laid the paper aside. So there was the answer, putting Karen's bits and snippets together with these. The shipwrecked ones finding savages on the desert island. A remnant surviving by learning caution, suppression and denial. Another generation that pinned the *evil* label on The Home to insure continued immunity for their children, and now, a generation that questioned and wondered—and rebelled.

I turned off the light and slowly got into bed. I lay there staring into the darkness, holding the picture Esther had evoked. Finally I relaxed. "God help her," I sighed. "God help us all."

Another week was nearly over. We cleaned the room up quickly, for once anticipating the fun time instead of dreading it. I smiled to hear the happy racket all around me, and felt my own spirits surge upward in response to the lightheartedness of the children. The difference that one afternoon had made in them! Now they were beginning to feel like children to me. They were beginning to accept me. I swallowed with an effort. How soon would they ask *how come?* How come I knew? There they sat, all nine of them—nine, because Esther was my first absence in the year—bright-eyed and expectant.

"Can we write again?" asked Sarah. "I can remember lots more."

"No," I said. "Not today." Smiles died and there was a protesting wiggle through the room. "Today, we are going to *do*. Joel." I looked at him and tightened my jaws. "Joel, give me the dictionary." He began to get up. "*. . . without leaving your seat!*"

"But I—!" Joel broke the shocked silence. "I can't!"

"Yes, you can," I prayed. "Yes, you can. Give me the dictionary. Here, on my desk."

Joel turned and stared at the big old dictionary that spilled pages 1965 to 1998 out of its cracked old binding. Then he said, "Miriam?" in a high, tight voice. But she shook her head and shrank back in her seat, her eyes big and dark in her white face.

"You can." Miriam's voice was hardly more than a breath. "It's just bigger—"

Joel clutched the edge of his desk and sweat started out on his forehead. There was a stir of movement on the bookshelf. Then, as though shot from a gun, pages 1965 to 1998 whisked to my desk and fell fluttering. Our laughter cut through the blank amazement and we laughed till tears came.

"That's a-doing it, Joel!" shouted Matt. "That's showing them your muscles!"

"Well, it's a beginning," grinned Joel weakly. "You do it, brother, if you think it's so easy."

So Matt sweated and strained and Joel joined with him, but they only managed to scrape the book to the edge of the shelf where it teetered dangerously.

Then Abie waved his hand timidly. "I can, Teacher," he said.

I beamed that my silent one had spoken and at the same time frowned at the loving laughter of the big kids.

"Okay, Abie," I encouraged. "You show them how to do it."

And the dictionary swung off the shelf and glided unhastily to my desk, where it came silently to rest.

Everyone stared at Abie and he squirmed. "The little ships,"

he defended. "That's the way they moved them out of the big ship. Just like that."

Joel and Matt turned their eyes to some inner concentration and then exchanged exasperated looks.

"Why, sure," said Matt. "Why sure." And the dictionary swung back to the shelf.

"Hey!" protested Timmy. "It's my turn!"

"That poor dictionary," I said. "It's too old for all this bouncing around. Just put the loose pages back on the shelf."

And he did.

Everyone sighed and looked at me expectantly.

"Miriam?" She clasped her hands convulsively. "*You* come to me," I said, feeling a chill creep across my stiff shoulders. "*Lift* to me, Miriam."

Without taking her eyes from me, she slipped out of her seat and stood in the aisle. Her skirts swayed a little as her feet lifted from the floor. Slowly at first and then more quickly she came to me, soundlessly, through the air, until in a little flurried rush her arms went around me and she gasped into my shoulder. I put her aside, trembling. I groped for my handkerchief. I said shakily, "Miriam, help the rest. I'll be back in a minute."

And I stumbled into the room next door. Huddled down in the dust and debris of the catch-all storeroom it had become, I screamed soundlessly into my muffling hands. And screamed and screamed! Because after all—*after all!*

And then suddenly, with a surge of pure panic, I heard a sound—the sound of footsteps, many footsteps, approaching the schoolhouse. I jumped for the door and wrenched it open just in time to see the outside door open. There was Mr. Diemus and Esther and Esther's father, Mr. Jonso.

In one of those flashes of clarity that engrave your mind in a split second. I saw my whole classroom.

Joel and Matt were chinning themselves on non-existent bars, their heads brushing the high ceiling as they grunted upwards. Abie was swinging in a swing that wasn't there, arcing across the corner of the room, just missing the stovepipe from the old stove, as he chanted, "Up in a swing, up in a

swing!" This wasn't the first time *they* had tried their wings! Miriam was kneeling in a circle with the other girls and they were all coaxing their books up to hover unsupported above the floor, while Timmy *v-roomm-vroomed* two paper jet planes through intricate maneuvers in and out the rows of desks.

My soul curdled in me as I met Mr. Diemus' eyes. Esther gave a choked cry as she saw what the children were doing, and the girls' stricken faces turned to the intruders. Matt and Joel crumpled to the floor and scrambled to their feet. But Abie, absorbed by his wonderful new accomplishment, swung on, all unconscious of what was happening until Talitha frantically screamed, "Abie!"

Startled, he jerked around and saw the forbidding group at the door. With a disappointed cry, as though a loved toy had been snatched from him, he stopped there in mid-air, his fists clenched. And then, realizing, he screamed, a terrified, panic-stricken cry, and slanted sharply upward, trying to escape, and ran full tilt into the corner of the high old map case, sideswiping it with his head, and, reeling backwards fell!

I tried to catch him. I did! I did! But I only caught one small hand as he plunged down onto the old wood-burning heater beneath him. And the crack of his skull against the ornate edge of the cast-iron lid was loud in the silence.

I straightened the crumpled little body carefully, not daring to touch the quiet little head. Mr. Diemus and I looked at one another as we knelt on opposite sides of the child. His lips opened, but I plunged before he could get started.

"If he dies," I bit my words off viciously, "you killed him!"

His mouth opened again, mainly from astonishment. "I—" he began.

"Barging in on my classroom!" I raged. "Interrupting class work! Frightening my children! It's all your fault, your fault!" I couldn't bear the burden of guilt alone. I just had to have someone share it with me. But the fire died and I smoothed Abie's hand, trembling. "Please call a doctor. He might be dying."

"Nearest one is in Tortura Pass," said Mr. Diemus. "Sixty miles by road."

"Cross country?" I asked.

"Two mountain ranges and an alkali plateau."

"Then—then—" Abie's hand was so still in mine.

"There's a doctor at the Tumbel A ranch," said Joel faintly "He's taking a vacation."

"Go get him." I held Joel with my eyes. "*Go as fast as you know how!*"

Joel gulped miserably. "Okay."

"They'll probably have horses to come back on," I said. "Don't be too obvious."

"Okay," and he ran out the door. We heard the thud of his running feet until he was halfway across the school yard, then silence. Faintly, seconds later, creek gravel crunched below the hill. I could only guess at what he was doing—that he couldn't lift all the way and was going in jumps whose length was beyond all reasonable measuring.

The children had gone home, quietly, anxiously. And, after the doctor arrived, we had improvised a stretcher and carried Abie to the Peters home. I walked along close beside him, watching his pinched little face, my hand touching his chest occasionally just to be sure he was still breathing.

And now—the waiting . . .

I looked at my watch again. A minute past the last time I looked. Sixty seconds by the hands, but hours and hours by anxiety.

"He'll be all right," I whispered, mostly to comfort myself. "The doctor will know what to do."

Mr. Diemus turned his dark empty eyes to me. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "We almost had it stamped out. We were almost free."

"Free of what?" I took a deep breath. "Why did *you* do it? Why did you deny your children their inheritance?"

"It isn't your concern—"

"Anything that hampers my children is my concern. Anything that turns children into creeping, frightened mice is wrong. Maybe I went at the whole deal the wrong way, but you told me to teach them what I had to—and I did."

"Disobedience, rebellion, flouting authority—"

"They obeyed *me*," I retorted. "They accepted *my* authority!" Then I softened. "I can't blame them," I confessed. "They were troubled. They told me it was wrong—that they had been *taught* it was wrong. I argued them into it. But oh, Mr. Diemus! It took so little argument, such a tiny breach in the dam to loose the flood. They never even questioned my knowledge—any more than you have, Mr. Diemus! All this—this wonder was beating against their minds, fighting to be set free. The rebellion was there long before I came. I didn't incite them to something new. I'll bet there's not a one, except maybe Esther, who hasn't practiced and practiced, furtively and ashamedly, the things I permitted—demanded that they do for me.

"It wasn't fair—not fair at all—to hold them back."

"You don't understand." Mr. Diemus' face was stony. "You haven't all the facts—"

"I have enough," I replied. "So you have a frightened memory of an unfortunate period in your history. But what people *doesn't* have such a memory in larger or lesser degree? That you and your children have it more vividly should have helped, not hindered. You should have been able to figure out ways of adjusting. But leave that for the moment. Take the other side of the picture. What possible thing could all this suppression and denial yield you more precious than what you gave up?"

"It's the only way," said Mr. Diemus. "We are unacceptable to earth, but we have to stay. We have to conform—"

"Of course you had to conform," I cried. "Anyone has to when they change societies. At least enough to get them by until others can adjust to them. But to crawl in a hole and pull it in after you! Why, the other Group—"

"Other Group!" Mr. Diemus whitened, his eyes widening. "Other Group? There are others? There are others?" He leaned tensely forward in his chair. "Where? Where?" And his voice broke shrilly on the last word. He closed his eyes and his mouth trembled as he fought for control. The bedroom door opened. Dr. Curtis came out, his shoulders weary.

He looked from Mr. Diemus to me and back. "He should be in a hospital. There's a depressed fracture and I don't know what all else. Probably extensive brain involvement. We need X-rays and—and—" He rubbed his hand slowly over his weary young face. "Frankly, I'm not experienced to handle cases like this. We need specialists. If you can scare up some kind of transportation that won't jostle . . ." He shook his head, seeing the kind of country that lay between us and anyplace, and went back into the bedroom.

"He's dying," said Mr. Diemus. "Whether you're right or we're right, he's dying."

"Wait! Wait!" I said, catching at the tag end of a sudden idea. "Let me think." Urgently I willed myself back through the years to the old dorm room. Intently I listened and listened and remembered.

"Have you a—a—*Sorter* in this Group?" I asked, fumbling for unfamiliar terms.

"No," said Mr. Diemus. "One who could have been, but isn't."

"Or *any* communicator?" I asked. "Anyone who can send or receive?"

"No," said Mr. Diemus, sweat starting on his forehead. "One who could have been, but—"

"See?" I accused. "See what you've traded for . . . for what? Who are the coulds but can'ts? Who are they?"

"I am," said Mr. Diemus, the words a bitterness in his mouth. "And my wife."

I stared at him, wondering confusedly. How far did training decide? What could we do with what we had?

"Look," I said quickly. "There *is* another Group. And they —they have all the Signs and Persuasions. Karen's been trying to find you—to find any of The People. She told me—oh, lord, it's been years ago, I hope it's still so—every evening they send out calls for The People. If we can catch it—if *you* can catch the call and answer it, they can help. I know they can. Faster than cars, faster than planes, more surely than specialists—"

"But if the doctor finds out—" wavered Mr. Diemus fearfully.

I stood up abruptly. "Good night, Mr. Diemus," I said, turning to the door. "Let me know when Abie dies."

His cold hand shook on my arm.

"Can't you see!" he cried. "I've been taught too, longer and stronger than the children! We never even dared *think* of rebellion! Help me, help me!"

"Get your wife," I said. "Get her and Abie's mother and father. Bring them down to the grove. We can't do anything here in the house. It's too heavy with denial."

I hurried on ahead and sank down on my knees in the evening shadows among the trees.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I cried into the bend of my arm. "I have an idea, but I don't know! Help us! Guide us!"

I opened my eyes to the arrival of the four.

"We told him we were going out to pray," said Mr. Diemus.

And we all did.

Then Mr. Diemus began the call I worded for him, silently, but with such intensity that sweat started again on his face. *Karen, Karen, Come to The People, Come to The People.* And the other three sat around him, bolstering his effort, supporting his cry. I watched their tense faces, my own twisting in sympathy, and time was lost as we labored.

Then slowly his breathing calmed and his face relaxed and I felt a stirring as though something brushed past my mind. Mrs. Diemus whispered, "He remembers now. He's found the way."

And as the last spark of sun caught mica highlights on the hilltop above us, Mr. Diemus stretched his hands out slowly and said with infinite relief, "There they are."

I looked around startled, half expecting to see Karen coming through the trees. But Mr. Diemus spoke again.

"Karen, we need help. One of our Group is dying. We have a doctor, an Outsider, but he hasn't the equipment or the know-how to help. What shall we do?"

In the pause that followed, I was slowly conscious of a new feeling. I couldn't tell you exactly what it was—a kind of un-

folding . . . an opening . . . a relaxation. The ugly tight defensiveness that was so characteristic of the grownups of Bendo was slipping away.

"Yes, Valancy," said Mr. Diemus. "He's in a bad way. We can't help because—" His voice faltered and his words died. I felt a resurgence of fear and unhappiness as his communication went beyond words, and then ebbed back to speech again.

"We'll expect you then. You know the way."

I could see the pale blur of his face in the dusk under the trees as he turned back to us.

"They're coming," he said, wonderingly. "Karen and Valancy. They're so pleased to find us—" His voice broke. "We're *not* alone—"

And I turned away as the two couples merged in the darkness. I had pushed them somewhere way beyond me.

It was a lonely, lonely walk back to the house for me . . . alone.

They dropped down through the half-darkness—four of them. For a fleeting second I wondered at myself that I could stand there matter-of-factly watching four adults slant calmly down out of the sky. Not a hair ruffled, not a stain of travel on them, knowing that only a short time before they have been hundreds of miles away—not even aware that Bendo existed.

But all strangeness was swept away as Karen hugged me delightedly.

"It *is* you!" she cried. "He said it was, but I wasn't sure! Oh, it's so *good* to see you again! Who owes who a letter?"

She laughed and turned to the smiling three. "Valancy, the Old One of our Group." Valancy's radiant face proved the Old One didn't mean age. "Bethie, our Sensitive." The slender, fair-haired young girl ducked her head shyly. "And my brother Jemmy. Valancy's his wife."

"This is Mr. and Mrs. Diemus," I said, "And Mr. and Mrs. Peters, Abie's parents. It's Abie, you know. My second grade." I was suddenly overwhelmed by how long ago and far

away school felt. How far I'd gone from my accustomed pattern!

"What shall we do about the doctor?" I asked. "Will he have to know?"

"Yes," said Valancy. "We can help him, but we can't do the actual work. Can we trust him?"

I hesitated, remembering the few scanty glimpses I'd had of him. "I—" I began.

"Pardon me," said Karen. "I wanted to save time. I went in to you. We know now what you know of him. We'll trust Dr. Curtis."

I felt an eerie creeping up my spine. To have my thoughts taken so casually! Even to the doctor's name!

Bethie stirred restlessly and looked at Valancy. "He'll be in convulsions soon. We'd better hurry."

"You're sure you have the knowledge?" asked Valancy.

"Yes," murmured Bethie. "If I can make the doctor see—if he's willing to follow."

"Follow what?"

The heavy tones of the doctor's voice startled us all as he stepped out on the porch.

I stood aghast at the impossibility of the task ahead of us and looked at Karen and Valancy to see how they would make the doctor understand. They said nothing. They just looked at him. There was a breathless pause. The doctor's startled face caught the glint of light from the open door as he turned to Valancy. He rubbed his hand across his face in bewilderment and, after a moment, turned to me.

"Do *you* hear her?"

"No," I admitted. "She isn't talking to me."

"Do you *know* these people?"

"Oh yes!" I cried, wishing passionately it was true. "Oh, yes!"

"And believe them?"

"Implicitly," I said.

"But she says that Bethie—who's Bethie?" He glanced around.

"She is," said Karen, nodding at Bethie.

"*She* is?" Dr. Curtis looked intently at the shy, lovely face. He shook his head wonderingly and turned back to me.

"Anyway, this one, Valancy, says Bethie can sense every condition in the child's body and that she will be able to tell all the injuries, their location and extent without X-rays! Without equipment!"

"Yes," I said. "If they say so."

"You would be willing to risk a child's life—"

"Yes," I said. "They know. They really do." And swallowed hard to keep down the fist of doubt that clenched in my chest.

"You believe they can *see* through flesh and bone?"

"Maybe not see," I said, wondering at my own words. "But *know* with a knowledge that is sure and complete." I glanced, startled, at Karen. Her nod was very small but it told me where my words came from.

"Are *you* willing to trust these people?" The doctor turned to Abie's parents.

"They're *our* People," said Mr. Peters with quiet pride. "I'd operate on him myself with a pickax if they said so."

"Of all the screwball deals . . . !" The doctor's hand rubbed across his face again. "I know I needed this vacation, but this is ridiculous!"

We all listened to the silence of the night and—at least I—to the drumming of anxious pulses until Dr. Curtis sighed heavily.

"Okay, Valancy. I don't believe a word of it. At least I wouldn't if I were in my right mind, but you've got the terminology down pat as if you knew *something*. . . . Well, I'll do it. It's either that or let him die. And God have mercy on our souls!"

I couldn't bear the thought of shutting myself in with my own dark fears, so I walked back toward the school, hugging myself in my inadequate coat against the sudden sharp chill of the night. I wandered down to the grove, praying wordlessly, and on up to the school. But I couldn't go in. I shuddered away from the blank glint of the windows and turned back to the grove. There wasn't any more time or direction or

light or anything familiar—only a confused cloud of anxiety and a final icy weariness that drove me back to Abie's house.

I stumbled into the kitchen, my stiff hands fumbling at the doorknob. I huddled in a chair, gratefully leaning over the hot wood stove that flicked the semi-darkness of the big homey room with warm red light, trying to coax some feeling back into my fingers.

I drowsed as the warmth began to penetrate and then the door was flung open and slammed shut. The doctor leaned back against it, his hand still clutching the knob.

"Do you know what they did?" he cried, not so much to me as to himself. "What they made *me* do? Oh, lord!" He staggered over to the stove, stumbling over my feet. He collapsed by my chair, rocking his head between his hands. "They made me operate on his brain! *Repair* it. Trace circuits and rebuild them. *You can't do that!* It can't be done! Brain cells damaged can't be repaired. No one can restore circuits that are destroyed! It can't be done. But I did it! *I did it!*"

I knelt beside him and tried to comfort him in the circle of my arms.

"There, there, there," I soothed.

He clung like a terrified child. "No anesthetics!" he cried. "*She* kept him asleep. And no bleeding when I went through the scalp! *They* stopped it. And the impossible things I did with the few instruments I have with me! And the brain starting to mend right before my eyes! Nothing was right!"

"But nothing was wrong," I murmured. "Abie will be all right, won't he?"

"How do I know?" he shouted suddenly, pushing away from me. "I don't know anything about a thing like this. I put his brain back together and he's still breathing, but how do I know!"

"There, there," I soothed. "It's over now."

"It'll never be over!" With an effort he calmed himself and we helped one another up from the floor. "You can't forget a thing like this in a lifetime."

"We can give you forgetting," said Valancy softly from the door. "If you *want* to forget. We can send you back to the

Tumble A with no memory of tonight except a pleasant visit to Bendo."

"You can?" He turned speculative eyes toward her. "You can." He amended his words to a statement.

"Do you want to forget?" asked Valancy.

"Of course not," he snapped. Then, "I'm sorry. It's just that I don't often work miracles in the wilderness. But if I did it once, maybe—"

"Then you understand what you did?" asked Valancy, smiling.

"Well, no, but if I could—if you would . . . There must be some way—"

"Yes," said Valancy, "but you'd have to have a Sensitive working with you and Bethie is It as far as Sensitives go right now."

"You mean it's true what I saw—what you told me about the—The Home? You're extraterrestrials?"

"Yes," sighed Valancy. "At least our grandparents were." Then she smiled. "But we're learning where we can fit into this world. Someday—someday we'll be able—" She changed the subject abruptly.

"You realize, of course, Dr. Curtis, that we'd rather you wouldn't discuss Bendo or us with anyone else. We would rather be just people to Outsiders."

He laughed shortly, "Would I be believed if I did?"

"Maybe no, maybe so," said Valancy. "Maybe only enough to start people nosing around. And that would be too much. We have a bad situation here and it will take a long time to erase—"

And her voice slipped into silence and I knew she had dropped into thoughts to brief him on the local problem. How long is a thought? How fast can you think of Hell—and Heaven? It was that long before the doctor blinked and drew a shaky breath.

"Yes," he said. "A long time."

"If you like," said Valancy, "I can block your ability to talk of us."

"Nothing doing!" snapped the doctor. "I can manage my own censorship, thanks."

Valancy flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be condescending."

"You weren't," said the doctor. "I'm just on the prod tonight. It has been *A Day*, and that's for sure!"

"Hasn't it though?" I smiled, and then, astonished, rubbed my cheeks because tears had begun to spill down my face. I laughed, embarrassed, and couldn't stop. My laughter turned suddenly to sobs and I was bitterly ashamed to hear myself wailing like a child. I clung to Valancy's strong hands until I suddenly slid into a warm welcome darkness that had no thinking or fearing or need for believing in anything outrageous, but only in sleep.

It was a magic year and it fled on impossibly fast wings, the holidays flicking past like telephone poles by a railroad. Christmas was especially magic because my angels actually flew and the Glory actually shone round about because their robes had hems woven of sunlight—I watched the girls weave them. And Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, complete with cardboard antlers that wouldn't stay straight, really took off and circled the room. And, as our Mary and Joseph leaned raptly over the Manger, their faces solemn and intent on the Miracle, I felt suddenly that they were really seeing, really kneeling beside the Manger in Bethlehem.

Anyway, the months fled, and the blossoming of Bendo was beautiful to see. There was laughter and frolicking and even the houses grew subtly into color. Green things crept out where only rocks had been before and a tiny tentative stream of water had begun to flow down the creek again. They explained to me that they had to take it slow because people might wonder if the creek filled overnight! Even the rough steps up to the houses were being overgrown because they were so seldom used, and I was becoming accustomed to seeing my pupils coming to school like a bevy of bright birds, playing tag in the treetops. I was surprised at myself for adjusting so easily to all the incredible things done

around me by The People, and I was pleased that they accepted me so completely. But I always felt a pang when the children escorted me home—with me, they had to walk.

But all things have to end, and I sat one May afternoon, staring into my top desk drawer, the last to be cleaned out, wondering what to do with the accumulation of useless things in it. But I wasn't really seeing the contents of the drawer, I was concentrating on the great weary emptiness that pressed my shoulders down and weighted my mind. "It's not fair," I muttered aloud and illogically, "to show me Heaven and then snatch it away."

"That's about what happened to Moses, too, you know."

My surprised start spilled an assortment of paper clips and thumb tacks from the battered box I had just picked up.

"Well forevermore!" I said, righting the box. "Dr. Curtis! What are you doing here?"

"Returning to the scene of my crime," he smiled, coming through the open door. "Can't keep my mind off Abie. Can't believe he recovered from all that . . . shall we call it repair work? I have to check him every time I'm anywhere near this part of the country—and I still can't believe it."

"But he has."

"He has for sure! I had to fish him down from a treetop to look him over—" The doctor shuddered dramatically and laughed. "To see him hurtling down from the top of that tree curdled my blood! But there's hardly even a visible scar left."

"I know," I said, jabbing my finger as I started to gather up the tacks. "I looked last night. I'm leaving tomorrow, you know." I kept my eyes resolutely down to the job at hand. "I have this last straightening up to do."

"It's hard, isn't it?" he said and we both knew he wasn't talking about straightening up.

"Yes," I said soberly. "Awfully hard. Earth gets heavier every day."

"I find it so lately, too," he said. "But at least you have the satisfaction of knowing that you—"

I moved uncomfortably and laughed.

"Well, they do say: Those as can, do; those as can't, teach."

"Umm," said the doctor noncommittally, but I could feel his eyes on my averted face and I swiveled away from him, groping for a better box to put the clips in.

"Going to summer school?" His voice came from near the windows.

"No," I sniffed cautiously. "No, I swore when I got my Master's that I was through with education—at least the kind that's come-every-day-and-learn-something."

"Hmm!" There was amusement in the doctor's voice. "Too bad," he said. "I'm going to school this summer. Thought you might like to go there, too."

"Where?" I asked bewildered, finally looking at him.

"Cougar Canyon Summer School," he smiled. "Most exclusive."

"Cougar Canyon! Why, that's where Karen—"

"Exactly," he said. "That's where the other Group is established. I just came from there. Karen and Valancy want us both to come. Do you object to being an experiment?"

"Why, no—" I cried—and then, cautiously, "What kind of an experiment?" Visions of brains being carved up swam through my mind.

The doctor laughed. "Nothing as gruesome as you're imagining, probably." Then he sobered and sat on the edge of my desk. "I've been to Cougar Canyon a couple of times, trying to figure out some way to get Bethie to help me when I come up against a case that's a puzzler. Valancy and Karen want to try a period of training with Outsiders"—he grimaced wryly—"that's us—to see how much of what *they* are can be transmitted by training. You know Bethie is half Outsider. Only her mother was of The People."

He was watching me intently.

"Yes," I said absently, my mind whirling, "Karen told me."

"Well, do you want to try it? Do you want to go?"

"Do I want to go!" I cried, scrambling the clips into a rubber-band box. "How soon do we leave? Half an hour? Ten minutes? Did you leave the motor running?"

"Woops, woops!" The doctor took me by both arms and looked soberly into my eyes.

"We can't set our hopes too high," he said quietly. "It may be that for such knowledge we aren't teachable—"

I looked soberly back at him, my heart crying in fear that it might be so.

"Look," I said slowly. "If you had a hunger, a great big gnawing-inside hunger and no money and you saw a bakery-shop window—which would you do? Turn your back on it? Or would you press your nose as close as you could against the glass and let at least your eyes feast? I know what *I'd* do." I reached for my sweater.

"And, you know, you never can tell. The shop door might open a crack, maybe—someday. . . ."

"If ever," Ray Bradbury wrote in a recent letter, "I could safely predict a large, a very large future for anyone, it is for Charles Beaumont." That I'm in full agreement is evidenced by the fact that F&SF has printed six Beaumont stories in something over a year, plus a regular column of Beaumont film reviews; it's obviously an editor's duty to publish as much Beaumont as possible before, like Bradbury, he is Discovered by the major slicks and begins selling each story for more than the entire budget of any s.f. magazine. I don't think you'll find many stories combining such a disturbing start and such a joyous ending as this touching fable of

THE VANISHING AMERICAN

He got the notion shortly after five o'clock; at least, a part of him did, a small part hidden down beneath all the conscious cells—*he* didn't get the notion until some time later. At exactly 5 P.M. the bell rang. At two minutes after, the chairs began to empty. There was the vast slamming of drawers, the straightening of rulers, the sound of bones snapping and mouths yawning and feet shuffling tiredly.

Mr. Minchell relaxed. He rubbed his hands together and relaxed and thought how nice it would be to get up and go home, like the others. But of course there was the tape, only three-quarters finished. He would have to stay.

He stretched and said good night to the people who filed past him. As usual, no one answered. When they had gone, he set his fingers pecking again over the keyboard. The click-clicking grew loud in the suddenly still office, but Mr. Minchell did not notice. He was lost in the work. Soon, he knew, it would be time for the totaling, and his pulse quickened at the thought of this.

He lit a cigarette. Heart tapping, he drew in smoke and released it.

He extended his right hand and rested his index and middle fingers on the metal bar marked TOTAL bar.

There was a smooth low metallic grinding, followed by absolute silence.

Mr. Minchell opened one eye, dragged it from the ceiling on down to the adding machine.

He groaned, slightly.

The total read: 18037447.

"God." He stared at the figure and thought of the fifty-three pages of manifest, the three thousand separate rows of figures that would have to be checked again. "God."

The day was lost, now. Irretrievably. It was too late to do anything. Madge would have supper waiting, and F.G. didn't approve of overtime; also—

He looked at the total again. At the last two digits.

He sighed. Forty-seven. And thought, startled: Today, for the Lord's sake, is my birthday! Today I am forty—what? forty-seven. And that explains the mistake, I suppose. Subconscious kind of thing . . .

Slowly he got up and looked around the deserted office.

Then he went to the dressing room and got his hat and his coat and put them on, carefully.

"Pushing fifty now . . ."

The outside hall was dark. Mr. Minchell walked softly to the elevator and punched the *down* button. "Forty-seven," he said, aloud; then, almost immediately, the light turned red and the thick door slid back noisily. The elevator operator, a bird-thin, tan-fleshed girl, swiveled her head, looking up and down the hall. "Going down," she said.

"Yes," Mr. Minchell said, stepping forward.

"Going down." The girl clicked her tongue and muttered, "Damn kids." She gave the lattice gate a tired push and moved the smooth wooden-handled lever in its slot.

Odd, Mr. Minchell decided, was the word for this particular girl. He wished now that he had taken the stairs. Being alone with only one other person in an elevator had always made

him nervous: now it made him very nervous. He felt the tension growing. When it became unbearable, he cleared his throat and said, "Long day."

The girl said nothing. She had a surly look, and she seemed to be humming something deep in her throat.

Mr. Minchell closed his eyes. In less than a minute—during which time he dreamed of the cable snarling, of the car being caught between floors, of himself trying to make small talk with the odd girl for six straight hours—he opened his eyes again and walked into the lobby, briskly.

The gate slammed.

He turned and started for the doorway. Then he paused, feeling a sharp increase in his heartbeat. A large, red-faced, magnificently groomed man of middle years stood directly beyond the glass, talking with another man.

Mr. Minchell pushed through the door, with effort. He's seen me now, he thought. If he asks any questions, though, or anything, I'll just say I didn't put it on the time card; that ought to make it all right. . . .

He nodded and smiled at the large man. "Good night, Mr. Diemel."

The man looked up briefly, blinked, and returned to his conversation.

Mr. Minchell felt a burning come into his face. He hurried on down the street. Now the notion—though it was not even that yet, strictly: it was more a vague feeling—swam up from the bottom of his brain. He remembered that he had not spoken directly to F. J. Diemel for over ten years, beyond a good morning. . . .

Ice-cold shadows fell off the tall buildings, staining the streets, now. Crowds of shoppers moved along the pavement like juggernauts, exhaustedly, but with great determination. Mr. Minchell looked at them. They all had furtive appearances, it seemed to him, suddenly, even the children, as if each was fleeing from some hideous crime. They hurried along, staring.

But not, Mr. Minchell noticed, at him. Through him, yes.

Past him. As the elevator operator had done, and now F.J. And had anyone said good night?

He pulled up his coat collar and walked toward the drugstore, thinking. He was forty-seven years old. At the current life-expectancy rate, he might have another seventeen or eighteen years left. And then death.

If you're not dead already.

He paused and for some reason remembered a story he'd once read in a magazine. Something about a man who dies and whose ghost takes up his duties, or something; anyway, the man didn't know he was dead—that was it. And at the end of the story, he runs into his own corpse.

Which is pretty absurd: he glanced down at his body. Ghosts don't wear $36 suits, nor do they have trouble pushing doors open, nor do their corns ache like blazes, and what the devil is wrong with me today?

He shook his head.

It was the tape, of course, and the fact that it was his birthday. That was why his mind was behaving so foolishly.

He went into the drugstore. It was an immense place, packed with people. He walked to the cigar counter, trying not to feel intimidated, and reached into his pocket. A small man elbowed in front of him and called loudly: "Gimme couple nickels, will you, Jack?" The clerk scowled and scooped the change out of his cash register. The small man scurried off. Others took his place. Mr. Minchell thrust his arm forward. "A pack of Luckies, please," he said. The clerk whipped his fingers around a pile of cellophaned packages and, looking elsewhere, droned: "Twenty-six." Mr. Minchell put his twenty-six cents exactly on the glass shelf. The clerk shoved the cigarettes toward the edge and picked up the money, deftly. Not once did he lift his eyes.

Mr. Minchell pocketed the Luckies and went back out of the store. He was perspiring now, slightly, despite the chill wind. The word "ridiculous" lodged in his mind and stayed there. Ridiculous, yes, for heaven's sake. Still, he thought—now just answer the question—isn't it true? Can you honestly say that that clerk saw you?

Or that anyone saw you today?

Swallowing dryly, he walked another two blocks, always in the direction of the subway, and went into a bar called the Chez When. One drink would not hurt, one small, stiff, steadying shot.

The bar was a gloomy place, and not very warm, but there was a good crowd. Mr. Minchell sat down on a stool and folded his hands. The bartender was talking animatedly with an old woman, laughing with boisterous good humor from time to time. Mr. Minchell waited. Minutes passed. The bartender looked up several times, but never made a move to indicate that he had been a customer.

Mr. Minchell looked at his old gray overcoat, the humbly floraled tie, the cheap sharkskin suit-cloth, and became aware of the extent to which he detested this ensemble. He sat there and detested his clothes for a long time. Then he glanced around. The bartender was wiping a glass, slowly.

All right, the hell with you. I'll go somewhere else.

He slid off the stool. Just as he was about to turn he saw the mirrored wall, pink-tinted and curved. He stopped, peering. Then he almost ran out of the bar.

Cold wind went into his head.

Ridiculous. The mirror was curved, you jackass. How do you expect to see yourself in curved mirrors?

He walked past high buildings, and now past the library and the stone lion he had once, long ago, named King Richard; and he did not look at the lion, because he'd always wanted to ride the lion, ever since he was a child, and he'd promised himself he would do that, but he never did.

He hurried on to the subway, took the stairs by twos, and clattered across the platform in time to board the express.

It roared and thundered. Mr. Minchell held onto the strap and kept himself from staring. No one watched him. No one even glanced at him when he pushed his way to the door and went out onto the empty platform.

He waited. Then the train was gone, and he was alone.

He walked up the stairs. It was fully night now, a soft, unshadowed darkness. He thought about the day and the

strange things that were gouging into his mind and thought about all this as he turned down a familiar street which led to his familiar apartment.

The door opened.

His wife was in the kitchen, he could see. Her apron flashed across the arch, and back, and across. He called: "Madge, I'm home."

Madge did not answer. Her movements were regular. Jimmy was sitting at the table, drooling over a glass of pop, whispering to himself.

"I said—" Mr. Minchell began.

"Jimmy, get up and go to the bathroom, you hear? I've got your water drawn."

Jimmy promptly broke into tears. He jumped off the chair and ran past Mr. Minchell into the bedroom. The door slammed viciously.

"Madge."

Madge Minchell came into the room, tired and lined and heavy. Her eyes did not waver. She went into the bedroom, and there was a silence; then a sharp slapping noise, and a yelling.

Mr. Minchell walked to the bathroom, fighting down the small terror. He closed the door and locked it and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Ridiculous, he thought, and ridiculous and ridiculous. I am making something utterly foolish out of nothing. All I have to do is look in the mirror, and—

He held the handkerchief to his lips. It was difficult to breathe.

Then he knew that he was afraid, more so than ever before in a lifetime of being afraid.

Look at it this way, Minchell: why shouldn't *you vanish?*

"Young man, just you wait until your father gets here!"

He pushed the handkerchief against his mouth and leaned on the door and gasped.

"What do you mean, vanish?"

Go on, take a look. You'll see what I mean.

He tried to swallow, couldn't. Tried to wet his lips, they stayed dry.

"Lord—"

He slitted his eyes and walked to the shaving mirror and looked in.

His mouth fell open.

The mirror reflected nothing. It held nothing. It was dull and gray and empty.

Mr. Minchell stared at the glass, put out his hand, drew it back hastily.

He squinted. Inches away. There was a form now: vague, indistinct, featureless: but a form.

"Lord," he said. He understood why the elevator girl hadn't seen him, and why F.J. hadn't answered him, and why the clerk at the drugstore and the bartender and Madge . . .

"I'm not dead."

Of course you're not dead—not that way.

"—tan your hide, Jimmy Minchell, when he gets home."

Mr. Minchell suddenly wheeled and clicked the lock. He rushed out of the steam-filled bathroom, across the room, down the stairs, into the street, into the cool night.

A block from home he slowed to a walk.

Invisible! He said the word over and over, in a half-voice. He said it and tried to control the panic that pulled at his legs, and at his brain, and filled him.

Why?

A fat woman and a little girl passed by. Neither of them looked up. He started to call out and checked himself. No. That wouldn't do any good. There was no question about it now. He was invisible.

He walked on. As he did, forgotten things returned; they came and they left, too fast. He couldn't hold onto them. He could only watch, and remember. Himself as a youngster, reading: the Oz books, and Tarzan, and Mr. Wells. Himself, going to the University, wanting to teach, and meeting Madge; then not planning any more, and Madge changing, and all the dreams put away. For later. For the right time. And then Jimmy—little strange Jimmy, who ate filth and picked his nose

and watched television, who never read books, never; Jimmy, his son, whom he would never understand . . .

He walked by the edge of the park now. Then on past the park, through a maze of familiar and unfamiliar neighborhoods. Walking, remembering, looking at the people and feeling pain because he knew that they could not see him, not now or ever again, because he had vanished. He walked and remembered and felt pain.

All the stagnant dreams came back. Fully. The trip to Italy he'd planned. The open sports car, bad weather be damned. The first-hand knowledge that would tell him whether he did or did not approve of bullfighting. The book . . .

Then something occurred to him. It occurred to Mr. Minchell that he had not just suddenly vanished, like that, after all. No; he had been vanishing gradually for a long while. Every time he said good morning to that bastard Diemel he got a little harder to see. Every time he put on this horrible suit he faded. The process of disappearing was set into action every time he brought his pay check home and turned it over to Madge, every time he kissed her, or listened to her vicious unending complaints, or decided against buying that novel, or punched the adding machine he hated so, or . . .

Certainly.

He had vanished for Diemel and the others in the office years ago. And for strangers right afterwards. Now even Madge and Jimmy couldn't see him. And he could barely see himself, even in a mirror.

It made terrible sense to him. *Why* shouldn't you *disappear*? Well, why, indeed? There wasn't any very good reason, actually. None. And this, in a nightmarish sort of a way, made it as brutally logical as a perfect tape.

Then he thought about going back to work tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. He'd have to, of course. He couldn't let Madge and Jimmy starve; and, besides, what else would he do? It wasn't as if anything important had changed. He'd go on punching the clock and saying good morning to people who didn't see him, and he'd run the tapes

and come home beat, nothing altered, and someday he'd die and that would be that.

All at once he felt tired.

He sat down on a cement step and sighed. Distantly he realized that he had come to the library. He sat there, watching the people, feeling the tiredness seep through him, thickly.

Then he looked up.

Above him, black and regal against the sky, stood the huge stone lion. Its mouth was open, and the great head was raised proudly.

Mr. Minchell smiled. King Richard. Memories scattered in his mind: old King Richard, well, my God, here we are.

He got to his feet. Fifty thousand times, at least, he had passed this spot, and every time he had experienced that instant of wild craving. Less so of late, but still, had it ever completely gone? He was amazed to find that now the childish desire was welling up again, stronger than ever before. Urgently.

He rubbed his cheek and stood there for several minutes. It's the most ridiculous thing in the world, he thought, and I must be going out of my mind, and that must explain everything. But, he inquired of himself, even so, why not?

After all, I'm invisible. No one can see me. Of course, it didn't have to be this way, not really. I don't know, he went on, I mean, I believed that I was doing the right thing. Would it have been right to go back to the University and the hell with Madge? I couldn't change that, could I? Could I have done anything about that, even if I'd known?

He nodded sadly.

All right, but don't make it any worse. Don't for God's sake *dwell* on it!

To his surprise, Mr. Minchell found that he was climbing up the concrete base of the statue. It ripped the breath from his lungs—and he saw that he could much more easily have gone up a few extra steps and simply stepped on—but there didn't seem anything else to do but just this, what he was doing. Once upright, he passed his hand over the statue's

flank. The surface was incredibly sleek and cold, hard as a lion's muscles ought to be, and tawny.

He took a step backwards. Lord! Had there ever been such power? Such marvelous downright power and . . . majesty, as was here? From stone—no, indeed. It fooled a good many people, but it did not fool Mr. Minchell. He knew. This lion was no mere library decoration. It was an animal, of deadly cunning and fantastic strength and unbelievable ferocity. And it didn't move for the simple reason that it did not care to move. It was waiting. Someday it would see what it was waiting for, its enemy, coming down the street. Then look out, people!

He remembered the whole yarn now. Of everyone on Earth, only he, Henry Minchell, knew the secret of the lion. And only he was allowed to sit astride this mighty back.

He stepped onto the tail, experimentally. He hesitated, gulped, and swung forward, swiftly, on up to the curved rump.

Trembling, he slid forward, until finally he was over the shoulders of the lion, just behind the raised head.

His breath came very fast.

He closed his eyes.

It was not long before he was breathing regularly again. Only now it was the hot, fetid air of the jungle that went into his nostrils. He felt the great muscles ripple beneath him and he listened to the fast crackle of crushed foliage, and he whispered:

"Easy, fellow."

The flying spears did not frighten him. He sat straight, smiling, with his fingers buried in the rich, tawny mane of King Richard, while the wind tore at his hair. . . .

Then, abruptly, he opened his eyes.

The city stretched before him, and the people, and the lights. He tried quite hard not to cry, because he knew that forty-seven-year-old men never cried, not even when they had vanished, but he couldn't help it. So he sat on the stone lion and lowered his head and cried.

He didn't hear the laughter at first.

When he did hear it, he thought that he was dreaming. But it was true: somebody was laughing.

He grasped one of the statue's ears for balance and leaned forward. He blinked. Below, some fifteen feet, there were people. Young people. Some of them with books. They were looking up and smiling and laughing.

Mr. Minchell wiped his eyes.

A slight horror came over him, and fell away. He leaned farther out.

One of the boys waved and shouted: "Ride him, Pop!"

Mr. Minchell almost toppled. Then, without understanding, without even trying to understand—merely knowing—he grinned, widely, showing his teeth, which were his own and very white.

"You . . . see me?" he called.

The young people roared.

"You do!" Mr. Minchell's face seemed to melt upwards. He let out a yell and gave King Richard's shaggy stone mane an enormous hug.

Below, other people stopped in their walking and a small crowd began to form. Dozens of eyes peered sharply, quizzically.

A woman in gray furs giggled.

A thin man in a blue suit grunted something about these damned exhibitionists.

"You pipe down," another man said. "Guy wants to ride the god-damn lion it's his own business."

There were murmurings. The man who had said pipe down was small and he wore black-rimmed glasses. "I used to do it all the time." He turned to Mr. Minchell and cried: "How is it?"

Mr. Minchell grinned. Somehow, he realized, in some mysterious way, he had been given a second chance. And this time he knew what he would do with it. "Fine!" he shouted, and stood up on King Richard's back and sent his derby spinning out over the heads of the people. "Come on up!"

"Can't do it," the man said. "Got a date." There was a look of profound admiration in his eyes as he strode off. Away

from the crowd he stopped and cupped his hands and cried: "I'll be seeing you!"

"That's right," Mr. Minchell said, feeling the cold new wind on his face. "You'll be seeing me."

Later, when he was good and ready, he got down off the lion.

ALICE ELEANOR JONES

Here is a new addition to the Henderson-Merril-Seabright roster of sensitive depictors of the future from a woman's viewpoint. A scholar-turned-housewife, Alice Jones began writing only recently; and though her sole previous published work was a forgotten Ph.D. thesis, she started selling at once, not only to science fiction magazines but also to major slicks. I think you'll remember for a long time this sympathetic and moving picture of a domestic tragedy which God grant may never befall us.

CREATED HE THEM

ANN CROTHERS looked at the clock and frowned and turned the fire lower under the bacon. She had already poured his coffee; he liked it cooled to a certain degree; but if he did not get up soon it would be too cool and the bacon too crisp and he would be angry and sulk the rest of the day. She had better call him.

She walked to the foot of the stairs, a blond woman nearing thirty, big but not fat, and rather plain, with a tired sad face. She called, "Henry! Are you up?" She had calculated to a decibel how loud her voice must be. If it were too soft he did not hear and maintained that she had not called him, and was angry later; if it were too loud he was angry immediately and stayed in bed longer, to punish her, and then he grew angrier because breakfast was spoiled.

"All *right!* Pipe down, can't you?"

She listened a minute. She thought it was a normal response, but perhaps her voice had been a shade too loud. No, he was getting up. She heard the thump of his feet on the floor. She went back to the kitchen and took his orange juice and his prunes out of the icebox, and got out his bread but did not begin to toast it yet, and opened a glass of jelly.

She frowned. Grape. He did not like grape, but the co-op

had been out of apple, and she had been lucky to get anything. He would not be pleased.

She sat down briefly at the table to wait for him and glanced at the clock. Ten-five. Wearily, she leaned forward and rested her forehead on the back of her hand. She was not feeling well this morning and had eaten no breakfast. She was almost sure she was pregnant again.

She thought of the children. There were only two at home, and they had been bathed and fed long ago and put down in the basement playpen so that the noise they made would not disturb their father. She would have time for a quick look at them before Henry came down. And the house was chilly; she would have to look at the heater.

They were playing quietly with the rag doll she had made, and the battered rubber ball. Lennie, who was two and a half, was far too big for a playpen, but he was a good child, considerate, and allowed himself to be put there for short periods and did not climb out. He seemed to feel a responsibility for his brother. Robbie was fourteen months old and a small terror, but he loved Lennie, and even, Ann thought, tried to mind him.

As Ann poked her head over the bannister, both children turned and gave her radiant smiles. Lennie said, "Hi, Mommy," and Robbie said experimentally, "Ma?"

She went down quickly and gave each of them a hug and said, "You're good boys. You can come upstairs and play soon." She felt their hands. The basement was damp, but the small mended sweaters were warm enough.

She looked at the feeble fire and rattled the grate hopefully and put on more coal. There was plenty of coal in the bin, but it was inferior grade, filled with slate, and did not burn well. It was not an efficient heater, either. It was old, secondhand, but they had been lucky to get it. The useless oil heater stood in the corner.

The children chuckled at the fire, and Robbie reached out his hands toward it. Lennie said gravely, "No, no, bad."

Ann heard Henry coming downstairs, and she raced up the cellar steps and beat him to the kitchen by two seconds. When

he came in she was draining the bacon. She put a slice of bread on the long fork and began to toast it over the gas flame. The gas, at least, was fairly dependable, and the water. The electricity was not working again. It seemed such a long time since the electricity had always worked. Well, it was a long time. Ten years.

Henry sat down at the table and looked peevishly at his orange juice. He was not a tall man, not quite so tall as his wife, and he walked and sat tall, making the most of every inch. He was inclined to be chubby, and he had a roll of fat under his chin and at the back of his neck, and a little bulge at the waist. His face might have been handsome, but the expression spoiled it—discontented, bad-tempered. He said, "You didn't strain the orange juice."

"Yes, I strained it." She was intent on the toast.

He drank the orange juice without enjoyment and said, "I have a touch of liver this morning. Can't think what it could be." His face brightened. "I told you that sauce was too greasy. That was it."

She did not answer. She brought over his plate with the bacon on it and the toast, nicely browned, and put margarine on the toast for him.

He was eating the prunes. He stopped and looked at the bacon. "No eggs?"

"They were all out?"

His face flushed a little. "Then why'd you cook bacon? You know I can't eat bacon without eggs." He was working himself up into a passion. "If I weren't such an easygoing man—! And the prunes are hard—you didn't cook them long enough—and the coffee's cold, and the toast's burnt, and where's the apple jelly?"

"They didn't have any."

He laughed scornfully. "I bet they didn't. I bet you fooled around the house and didn't even get there till everything was gone." He flung down his fork. "This garbage!—why should you care, you don't have to eat it!"

She looked at him. "Shall I make you something else?"

He laughed again. "You'd ruin it. Never mind." He

slammed out of the kitchen and went upstairs to sulk in the bathroom for an hour.

Ann sat down at the table. All that bacon, and it was hard to get. Well, the children would like it. She ought to clear the table and wash the dishes, but she sat still and took out a cigarette. She ought to save it, her ration was only three a day, but she lit it.

The children were getting a little noisier. Perhaps she could take them out for a while, till Henry went to work. It was cold but clear; she could bundle them up.

The cigarette was making her lightheaded, and she stubbed it out and put the butt in the box she kept over the sink. She said softly, "I hate him. I wish he would die."

She dressed the children—their snowsuits were faded and patched from much use, but they were clean and warm—and put them in the battered carriage, looping her old string shopping bag over the handle, and took them out. They were delighted with themselves and with her. They loved the outdoors. Robbie bounced and drooled and made noises, and Lennie sat quiet, his little face smiling and content.

Ann wheeled them slowly down the walk, detouring around the broken places. It was a fine day, crisp, much too cold for September, but the seasons were not entirely reliable any more. There were no other baby carriages out; there were no children at all; the street was very quiet. There were no cars. Only the highest officials had cars, and no high officials lived in this neighborhood.

The children were enchanted by the street. Shabby as it was, with the broken houses as neatly mended as they could be, and the broken paving that the patches never caught up with, it was beautiful to them. Lennie said, "Hi, Mommy," and Robbie bounced.

The women were beginning to come, as they always came, timidly out of the drab houses, to look at the children, and Ann walked straighter and tried not to smile. It was not kind to smile, but sometimes she could not help it. Suddenly she was not tired any more, and her clothes were not shabby, and her face was not plain.

The first woman said, "Please stop a minute," and Ann stopped, and the women gathered around the carriage silently and looked. Their faces were hungry and seeking, and a few had tears in their eyes.

The first woman asked, "Do they stay well?"

Ann said, "Pretty well. They both had colds last week," and murmurs of commiseration went around the circle.

Another woman said, "I noticed you didn't come out, and I wondered. I almost knocked at your door to inquire, but then—" She stopped and blushed violently, and the others considerately looked away from her, ignoring her blunder. One did not call on one's neighbors; one lived to oneself.

The first woman said wistfully, "If I could hold them—either of them—I have dates; my cousin sent them all the way from California."

Ann blushed, too. She disliked this part of it very much, but things were so hard to get now, and Henry was difficult about what he liked to eat, though he denied that. He would say "I'd eat anything, if you could only learn to cook it right, but you can't." Henry liked dates. Ann said, "Well..."

Another woman said eagerly, "I have eggs. I could spare you three." One for each of the boys and one for Henry.

"Oranges—for the children."

"And I have butter—imagine, butter!"

"Sugar—all children like sugar. Best grade—no sand in it."

"And I have tea." Henry does not like tea. But you shall hold the children anyway.

Somebody said, "Cigarettes," and somebody else whispered, "I even have *sleeping pills!*"

The children were passed around and fondled and caressed. Robbie enjoyed it and flirted with everybody, under his long eyelashes, but Lennie regarded the entire transaction with distaste.

When the children began to grow restless Ann put them back into the carriage and walked on. Her shopping bag was full.

The women went slowly back into their houses, all but one,

a stranger. She must have moved into the neighborhood recently, perhaps from one of the spreading waste places. They were coming in, the people, as if they had been called, moving in closer, a little closer every year.

The woman was tall and older than Ann, with a worn plain face. She kept pace with the carriage and looked at the children and said, "Forgive me, I know it is bad form, but are they—do you have more?"

Ann said proudly, "I have had seven."

The woman looked at her and whispered, "Seven! And were they all—surely they were not *all*—"

Ann said more proudly still, "All. Every one."

The woman looked as if she might cry and said, "But seven! And the rest, are they—"

Ann's face clouded. "Yes, at the Center. One of my boys and all my girls. When Lennie goes, Robbie will miss him. Lennie missed Kate so, until he forgot her."

The woman said in a broken voice, "I had three, and none of them was—*none!*" She thrust something into Ann's shopping bag and said, "For the children," and walked quickly away.

Ann looked, and it was a Hershey bar. The co-op had not had chocolate for over two years. Neither of the boys had ever tasted it.

She brought the children home after a while and gave them their lunch—Henry's bacon crumbled into two scrambled eggs, and bread and butter and milk. She had been lucky at the co-op yesterday; they had had milk. She made herself a cup of coffee, feeling extravagant, and ate a piece of toast, and smoked the butt of this morning's cigarette.

For dessert she gave them each an orange; the rest she saved for Henry. She got out the Hershey bar and gave them all of it; Henry should not have their chocolate! The Hershey bar was hard and pale, as stale chocolate gets, and she had to make sawing motions with the knife to divide it evenly. The boys were enchanted. Robbie chewed his half and swallowed it quickly, but Lennie sucked blissfully and made it last, and then took pity on his brother and let Robbie suck,

too. Ann did not interfere. Germs, little hearts, are the least of what I fear for you.

While the children took their naps she straightened the house a little and tinkered with the heater and cleaned all the kerosene lamps. She had time to take a bath, and enjoyed it, though the laundry soap she had to use was harsh against her skin. She even washed her hair, pretty hair, long and fine, and put on one of the few dresses that was not mended.

The children slept longer than usual. The fresh air had done them good. Just at dusk the electric lights came on for the first time in three days, and she woke them up to see them—they loved the electric lights. She gave them each a piece of bread and butter and took them with her to the basement and put them in the playpen. She was able to run a full load of clothes through the old washing machine before the current went off again. The children loved the washing machine and watched it, fascinated by the whirling clothes in the little window.

Afterward she took them upstairs again and tried to use the vacuum cleaner, but the machine was old and balky and by the time she had coaxed it to work the current was gone.

She gave the children their supper and played with them awhile and put them to bed. Henry was still at the laboratory. He left late in the morning, but sometimes he had to stay late at night. The children were asleep before he came home, and Ann was glad. Sometimes they got on his nerves and he swore at them.

She turned the oven low to keep dinner hot and went into the living room. She sat beside the lamp and mended Robbie's shirt and Lennie's overalls. She turned on the battery radio to the one station that was broadcasting these days, the one at the Center. The news report was the usual thing. The Director was in good health and bearing the burden of his duties with fortitude. Conditions throughout the country were normal. Crops had not been quite so good as hoped, but there was no cause for alarm. Quotas in light and heavy industry were good—Ann smiled wryly—but could be improved if every worker did his duty. Road repairs were picking up—

Ann wondered when they would get around to the street again—and electrical service was normal, except for a few scattered areas where there might be small temporary difficulties. The lamp had begun to smoke again, and Ann turned it lower. The stock market had closed irregular, with rails down an average of two points and stocks off three.

And now—the newcaster's voice grew solemn—there was news of grave import. The Director had asked him to talk seriously to all citizens about the dangers of rumormongering. Did they not realize what harm could be done by it? For example, the rumor that the Western Reservoir was contaminated. That was entirely false, of course, and the malicious and irresponsible persons who had started it would be severely dealt with.

The wastelands were not spreading, either. Some other malicious and irresponsible persons had started that rumor, and would be dealt with. The wastelands were under control. They were *not* spreading, repeat, *not*. Certain areas were being evacuated, it was true, but the measure was only temporary.

Calling them in, are you, calling them in!

The weather was normal. The seasons were definitely not changing, and here were the statistics to prove it. In 1961 . . . and in '62 . . . and that was *before*, so you see . . .

The newcaster's voice changed, growing less grave And now for news of the children. Ann put down her mending and listened, not breathing. They always closed with news of the children, and it was always reassuring. If any child were ever unhappy, or were taken ill, or died, nobody knew it. One was never told anything, and of course one never saw the children again. It would upset them, one quite understood that.

The children, the newscaster said, were all well and happy. They had good beds and warm clothes and the best food and plenty of it. They even had cod-liver oil twice a week whether they needed it or not. They had toys and games, carefully supervised according to their age groups, and they were being educated by the best teachers. The children were

all well and happy, repeat, *well and happy.* Ann hoped it was true.

They played the national anthem and went off the air, and just then Henry came in. He looked pale and tired—he did work hard—and his greeting was, "I suppose dinner's spoiled."

She looked up. "No, I don't think so."

She served it and they ate silently except for Henry's complaints about the food and his liver. He looked at the dates and said, "They're small. You let them stick you with anything," but she thought he enjoyed them because he ate them all.

Afterward he grew almost mellow. He lit a cigarette and told her about his day, while she washed the dishes. Henry's job at the laboratory was a responsible one, and Ann was sure he did it well. Henry was not stupid. But Henry could not get along with anybody. He said that he himself was very easy to get along with, but they were all against him. Today he had a dispute with one of his superiors and reported that he had told the old—where to go.

He said with gloomy relish, "They'll probably fire me, and we'll all be out in the street. Then you'll find out what it's like to live on Subsistence. You won't be able to throw my money around the way you do now."

Ann rinsed out the dish towel and hung it over the rack to dry. She said, "They won't fire you. They never do."

He laughed. "I'm good and they know it. I do twice as much work as anybody else."

Ann thought that was probably true. She turned away from the sink and said, "Henry, I think I'm pregnant."

He looked at her and frowned. "Are you sure?"

"I said I *think.* But I'm practically sure."

He said, "Oh, God, now you'll be sick all the time, and there's no living with you when you're sick."

Ann sat down at the table and lit a cigarette. "Maybe I won't be sick."

He said darkly, "You always are. Sweet prospect!"

Ann said, "We'll get another bonus, Henry."

He brightened a little. "Say, we will, at that. I'll buy some more stock."

Ann said, "Henry, we need so many things—"

He was immediately angry. "I said I'll buy stock! Somebody in this house has to think of the future. We can't all hide our heads in the sand and hope for the best."

She stood up, trembling. It was not a new argument. "What future? Our children—children like ours are taken away from us when they're three years old and given to the state to rear. When we're old the state will take care of us. Nobody lives well any more, except—but nobody starves. And that stock—it all goes down. Don't talk to me about the future, Henry Crothers! I want my future now."

He laughed unpleasantly. "What do you want? A car?"

She said, "I want a new washing machine and a vacuum cleaner, when the quotas come—the electricity isn't so bad. I want a new chair for the living room. I want to fix up the boys' room, paint and—"

He said brutally, "They're too little to notice. By the time they get old enough—"

She sat down again, sobbing a little. Her cigarette burned forgotten in the ashtray, and Henry thriftily stubbed it out. She said, "I know, the Center takes them. The Center takes children like ours."

"And the Center's good to them. They give them more than we could. Don't you go talking against the Center." Though a malcontent in his personal life, Henry was a staunch government man.

Ann said, "I'm not, Henry, I'm—"

He said disgustedly, "Being a woman again. Tears! Oh, God, why do women always turn them on?"

She made herself stop crying. Anger was beginning to rise in her, and that helped a good deal. "I didn't mean to start an argument. I was just telling you what we need. We do need things, Henry. Clothes—"

He looked at her. "You mean for you? Clothes would do you a lot of good, wouldn't they?"

She was stung. "I don't mean maternity clothes. I won't be needing them for—"

He laughed. "I don't mean maternity clothes either. Have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately? God, you're a big horse! I always liked little women."

She said tightly, "And I always liked tall men."

He half rose, and she thought he was going to hit her. She sat still, trembling with a fierce exhilaration, her eyes bright, color in her cheeks, a little smile on her mouth. She said softly, "I'll hit you back, I'm bigger than you are. I'll kill you!"

Suddenly Henry sat down and began to laugh. When he laughed he was quite handsome. He said in a deep chuckling voice, "You're almost pretty when you get mad enough. Your hair's pretty tonight, you must have washed it." His eyes were beginning to shine, and he reached across the table and put his hand on hers. "Ann . . . old girl . . ."

She drew her hand away. "I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

He said good-humoredly, "Sure. I'll be right up."

She looked at him. "I said I'm tired."

"And I said I'd be right up."

If I had something in my hands I'd kill you. "I don't want to."

He scowled, and his mouth grew petulant again, and he was no longer handsome. "But *I* want to."

She stood up. All at once she felt as tired as she had told Henry she was, as tired as she had been for ten years.

I cannot kill you, Henry, or myself. I cannot even wish us dead. In this desolate, dying, bombed-out world, with its creeping wastelands and its freakish seasons, with its limping economy and its arrogant Center in the country that takes our children—children like ours; the others it destroys—we have to live, and we have to live together.

Because by some twist of providence, or radiation, or genes, we are among the tiny percentage of the people in this world who can have normal children. We hate each other, but we breed true.

She said, "Come up, Henry." I can take a sleeping pill afterward.

Come up, Henry, we have to live. Till we are all called in, or our children, or our children's children. Till there is nowhere else to go.

FOUR VIGNETTES

This business of vignettes is all Fredric Brown's fault. Science-fantasy stories have always tended to be longer than they need to be (partly because most s.f. magazines pay by the word); and authors usually think they've achieved a miracle of compression if they pull a story down to 2500 *words. But Mr. Brown has been cheerfully demonstrating—in F&SF, in Galaxy, in Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, and in his delightful collection* ANGELS AND SPACESHIPS *(Dutton,* 1954*)—that one can tell a pointed, witty, complete story in under* 500 *words, or exactly one page of our magazine format. Readers have been captivated by this discovery, and authors challenged; for "vinnies" (as Brown always calls them) are intensely tricky technically, yet deeply rewarding to the craftsman when they come off. So other F&SF authors have been trying them (and of course I could not resist the temptation to move in on the act myself), with unexpected results: you'll find James Blish, normally a most sober and complex writer, indulging in broad parody of the current Psionic Pschool, and Isaac Asimov proving himself quite as at home in a miniature as in the galactic saga of the Foundation (which runs to* 245,000 *words).*

TOO FAR

R. Asutin Wilkinson was a bon vivant, man about Manhattan, and chaser of women. He was also an incorrigible punster on every possible occasion. In speaking of his favorite activity, for example, he would remark that he was a wolf, as it were, but that didn't make him a werewolf.

Excruciating as this statement may have been to some of his friends, it was almost true. Wilkinson was not a werewolf; he was a werebuck.

A night or two nights every week he would stroll into Central Park, turn himself into a buck and take great delight in running and playing.

True, there was always danger of his being seen but (since he punned even in his thoughts) he was willing to gambol on that.

Oddly, it had never occurred to him to combine the pleasures of being a wolf, as it were, with the pleasures of being a buck.

Until one night. Why, he asked himself that night, couldn't a lucky buck make a little doe? Once thought of, the idea was irresistible. He galloped to the wall of the Central Park Zoo and trotted along it until his sensitive buck nose told him he'd found the right place to climb the fence. He changed into a man for the task of climbing and then, alone in a pen with a beautiful doe, he changed himself back into a buck.

She was sleeping. He nudged her gently and whispered a suggestion. Her eyes opened wide and startled. "No, no, a dozen times no!"

"Only a doezen times?" he asked, and then leered. "*My deer,*" he whispered, "*think of the fawn you'll have!*"

Which went too far. He might have got away with it had his deer really been only a doe, but she was a weremaid—a doe who could change into a girl—and she was a witch as

well. She quickly changed into a girl and ran for the fence. When he changed into a man and started after her she threw a spell over her shoulder, a spell that turned him back to a buck and froze him that way.

Do you ever visit the Central Park Zoo? Look for the buck with the sad eyes; he's Wilkinson.

He is sad despite the fact that the doe-weremaid, who is now the toast of New York ballet (she is graceful as a deer, the critics say), visits him occasionally by night and resumes her proper form.

But when he begs for release from the spell she only smiles sweetly and tells him no, that she is of a very saving disposition and wants to keep the first buck she ever made.

A MATTER OF ENERGY

As soon as I saw Joe Jones, I knew that he was the man I needed to send back to the Augustan Age. I knew it because I could not read his expression.

To the ordinary man who can't even read his own expression this wouldn't be a significant datum, but with me it is different. As a consulting industrial psionic psichologist I am accustomed to reading the faces of anything, even checks. I always understand everybody instantly.

But I didn't understand Joe Jones. He was Everyman's nobody. He had no emotions. If he had had them, I could have read them—if not by the patterns formed by the hairs in his moustache, then by the psionic techniques which I have developed by correspondence with psichotic people all over the country. So it had to be true that Joe had no emotions.

He was the perfect man to go back in time and take over the Augustan Age for me.

"Joe," I asseverated, "I've given you the invincible weapon to take over the Romans: twisted semantics. It can't fail, but if it does, try twisted dianetics. Do you understand what you're to do?"

"Yes, Cliff," he lipped thinly.

"But there's one danger I haven't warned you of until now," I admonished sternly. "You must not use Arabic numerals while you're in Rome. The Romans didn't know them. If you use them you will be driven to hide like a witch. Understand?"

"Yes, Cliff," he acknowledged flatly.

"Now, I haven't given you any training in how to calculate in Roman numerals," I outpointed. "I could have given it to you by my own revolutionary educational system, or implanted it on your cerebral cortex with my psionic powers, but there's one great drawback: calculating with Roman numerals just takes too long. You wouldn't have time to take over the

Empire if you had to do all your figuring that way. Is that clear?"

"That's clear, Cliff," he admitted immediately.

"So," I perorated triumphantly. "I've provided you with the answer, inside this little black box. This is a computer, called the THROBAC. That's short for *TH*rifty *RO*man-numeral *BA*ckwards-looking *C*alculator. It will add, subtract, multiply or divide in Roman numerals, and give you the answer in Roman numerals. Coupling and that crowd at Bell think that they invented it, but I can see through *them* like a glass of antigravity elixir. Use this machine—secretly, of course—whenever you need to do any figuring. Do you dig me?"

"I dig you, Cliff," he penultimated.

"Then go," I concluded commandingly. He stepped into the time machine, which I had named ELSIE, and vanished at once. With the help of my psionic correspondents I could have sent him back without a machine, but this whole operation had to be kept secret from the politicians, industrialists, and other pressure groups who might bring twisted semantics to bear on me.

He was back in no time, of course. He had instructions to return to this moment, no matter how long he stayed in ancient Rome. But there was something wrong.

I could read his expression!

"What have you done?" I hissed grindingly.

"I did just like you said, Cliff," he replied defensively. "Soon as I had to do some figuring, I holed up in my room and plugged THROBAC into the nearest socket. But—"

"Get to the point!" I ordered commandingly.

"But, Cliff," he wailed protestingly, "you overlooked something. THROBAC operates only on AC current! And the first AC generator wasn't built until after the 1830s—A.D.!"

I was crushed. That small oversight—no, it was an undersight, typical of me, underestimating the extent of my own massive knowledge—must have blown every fuse and circuit-breaker in Augustan Rome. I rushed to the nearest history book.

What had I undone?

ANTHONY BOUCHER

NELLTHU

AILSA had been easily the homeliest and the least talented girl in the University, if also the most logical and levelheaded. Now, almost twenty-five years later, she was the most attractive woman Martin had ever seen and, to judge from their surroundings, by some lengths the richest.

". . . so lucky running into you again after all these years," she was saying, in that indescribably aphrodisiac voice. "You know about publishers, and you can advise me on this novel. I was getting so tired of the piano . . ."

Martin had hear her piano recordings and knew they were superb—as the vocal recordings had been before them and the non-representational paintings before *them* and the fashion designs and that astonishing paper on prime numbers. He also knew that the income from all these together could hardly have furnished the Silver Room in which they dined or the Gold Room in which he later read the novel (which was of course superb) or the room whose color he never noticed because he did not sleep alone (and the word *superb* is inadequate).

There was only one answer, and Martin was gratified to observe that the coffee-bringing servant cast no shadow in the morning sun. While Ailsa still slept (superbly), Martin said, "So you're a demon."

"Naturally, sir," the unshadowed servant said, his eyes adoringly upon the sleeper. "Nellthu, at your service."

"But such service! I can imagine Ailsa-that-was working out a good spell and even wishing logically. But I thought you fellows were limited in what you could grant."

"We are, sir. Three wishes."

"But she has wealth, beauty, youth, fame, a remarkable variety of talents—all on three wishes?"

"On one, sir. Oh, I foxed her prettily on the first two."

Nellthu smiled reminiscently. " *'Beauty'*—but she didn't specify, and I made her the most beautiful centenarian in the world. *'Wealth beyond the dreams of avarice'*—and of course nothing is beyond such dreams, and nothing she got. Ah, I was in form that day, sir! But the third wish . . ."

"Don't tell me she tried the old *'For my third wish I want three more wishes'!* I thought that was illegal."

"It is, sir. The paradoxes involved go beyond even our powers. No, sir," said Nellthu, with a sort of rueful admiration, "her third wish was stronger than that. She said: *'I wish that you fall permanently and unselfishly in love with me.'* "

"She was always logical," Martin admitted. "So for your own sake you had to make her beautiful and . . . adept, and since then you have been compelled to gratify her every—" He broke off and looked from the bed to the demon. "How lucky for me that she included *unselfishly!*"

"Yes, sir," said Nellthu.

ISAAC ASIMOV

DREAMWORLD

AT THIRTEEN, Edward Keller had been a science fiction devotee for four years. He bubbled with galactic enthusiasm.

His Aunt Clara, who had brought him up by rule and rod in pious memory of her deceased sister, wavered between toleration and exasperation. It appalled her to watch him grow so immersed in fantasy.

"Face reality, Eddie," she would say, angrily.

He would nod, but go on, "And I dreamed Martians were chasing me, see? I had a special death ray, but the atomic power unit was pretty low and—"

Every other breakfast consisted of eggs, toast, milk, and some such dream.

Aunt Clara said, severely, "Now, Eddie, one of these nights you won't be able to wake up out of your dream. You'll be trapped! Then what?"

She lowered her angular face close to his and glared.

Eddie was strangely impressed by his aunt's warning. He lay in bed, staring into the darkness. He wouldn't like to be trapped in a dream. It was always nice to wake up before it was too late. Like the time the dinosaurs were after him—

Suddenly he was out of bed, out of the house, out on the lawn, and he knew it was another dream.

The thought was broken by a vague thunder and a shadow that blotted the sun. He looked upward in astonishment and he could make out the human face that touched the clouds.

It was his Aunt Clara! Monstrously tall, she bent toward him in admonition, mastlike forefinger upraised, voice too guttural to be made out.

Eddie turned and ran in panic. Another Aunt Clara monster loomed up before him, voice rumbling.

He turned again, stumbling, panting, heading outward, outward.

He reached the top of the hill and stopped in horror. Off in the distance a hundred towering Aunt Claras were marching by. As the column passed, each line of Aunt Claras turned their heads sharply toward him and the thunderous bass rumbling coalesced into words:

"Face reality, Eddie. Face reality, Eddie."

Eddie threw himself sobbing to the ground. Please wake up, he begged himself. Don't be caught in this dream.

For unless he woke up, the worst science-fictional doom of all would have overtaken him. He would be trapped, *trapped,* in a world of giant aunts.

SHIRLEY JACKSON

I don't know a better writer of unexpected and unclassifiable fiction than Shirley Jackson, who offers us this time a story as delightfully unconventional as its title.

ONE ORDINARY DAY, WITH PEANUTS

MR. JOHN PHILIP JOHNSON shut his front door behind him and came down his front steps into the bright morning with a feeling that all was well with the world on this best of all days, and wasn't the sun warm and good, and didn't his shoes feel comfortable after the resoling, and he knew that he had undoubtedly chosen the precise very tie which belonged with the day and the sun and his comfortable feet, and, after all, wasn't the world just a wonderful place? In spite of the fact that he was a small man, and the tie was perhaps a shade vivid, Mr. Johnson irradiated this feeling of well-being as he came down the steps and onto the dirty sidewalk, and he smiled at people who passed him, and some of them even smiled back. He stopped at the newsstand on the corner and bought his paper, saying "*Good* morning" with real conviction to the man who sold him the paper and the two or three other people who were lucky enough to be buying papers when Mr. Johnson skipped up. He remembered to fill his pockets with candy and peanuts, and then he set out to get himself uptown. He stopped in a flower shop and bought a carnation for his buttonhole, and stopped almost immediately afterward to give the carnation to a small child in a carriage, who looked at him dumbly, and then smiled, and Mr. Johnson smiled, and the child's mother looked at Mr. Johnson for a minute and then smiled too.

When he had gone several blocks uptown, Mr. Johnson cut across the avenue and went along a side street, chosen at random; he did not follow the same route every morning, but preferred to pursue his eventful way in wide detours, more

like a puppy than a man intent upon business. It happened this morning that halfway down the block a moving van was parked, and the furniture from an upstairs apartment stood half on the sidewalk, half on the steps, while an amused group of people loitered, examining the scratches on the tables and the worn spots on the chairs, and a harassed woman, trying to watch a young child and the movers and the furniture all at the same time, gave the clear impression of endeavoring to shelter her private life from the people staring at her belongings. Mr. Johnson stopped, and for a moment joined the crowd, and then he came forward and, touching his hat civilly, said, "Perhaps I can keep an eye on your little boy for you?"

The woman turned and glared at him distrustfully, and Mr. Johnson added hastily, "We'll sit right here on the steps." He beckoned to the little boy, who hesitated and then responded agreeably to Mr. Johnson's genial smile. Mr. Johnson brought out a handful of peanuts from his pocket and sat on the steps with the boy, who at first refused the peanuts on the grounds that his mother did not allow him to accept food from strangers; Mr. Johnson said that probably his mother had not intended peanuts to be included, since elephants at the circus ate them, and the boy considered, and then agreed solemnly. They sat on the steps cracking peanuts in a comradely fashion, and Mr. Johnson said, "So you're moving?"

"Yep," said the boy.

"Where you going?"

"Vermont."

"Nice place. Plenty of snow there. Maple sugar, too; you like maple sugar?"

"Sure."

"Plenty of maple sugar in Vermont. You going to live on a farm?"

"Going to live with Grandpa."

"Grandpa like peanuts?"

"Sure."

"Ought to take him some," said Mr. Johnson, reaching into his pocket. "Just you and Mommy going?"

"Yep."

"Tell you what," Mr. Johnson. "You take some peanuts to eat on the train."

The boy's mother, after glancing at them frequently, had seemingly decided that Mr. Johnson was trustworthy, because she had devoted herself wholeheartedly to seeing that the movers did not—what movers rarely do, but every housewife believes they will—crack a leg from her good table, or set a kitchen chair down on a lamp. Most of the furniture was loaded by now, and she was deep in that nervous stage when she knew there was something she had forgotten to pack—hidden away in the back of a closet somewhere, or left at a neighbor's and forgotten, or on the clothesline—and was trying to remember under stress what it was.

"This all, lady?" the chief mover said, completing her dismay.

Uncertainly she nodded.

"Want to go on the truck with the furniture, sonny?" the mover asked the boy, and laughed. The boy laughed too and said to Mr. Johnson, "I guess I'll have a good time at Vermont."

"Fine time," said Mr. Johnson, and stood up. "Have one more peanut before you go," he said to the boy.

The boy's mother said to Mr. Johnson, "Thank you so much; it was a great help to me."

"Nothing at all," said Mr. Johnson gallantly. "Where in Vermont are you going?"

The mother looked at the little boy accusingly, as though he had given away a secret of some importance, and said unwillingly, "Greenwich."

"Lovely town," said Mr. Johnson. He took out a card, and wrote a name on the back. "Very good friend of mine lives in Greenwich," he said. "Call on him for anything you need. His wife makes the best doughnuts in town," he added soberly to the little boy.

"Swell," said the little boy.

"Goodbye," said Mr. Johnson.

He went on, stepping happily with his new-shod feet, feeling the warm sun on his back and on the top of his head. Halfway down the block he met a stray dog and fed him a peanut.

At the corner, where another wide avenue faced him, Mr. Johnson decided to go on uptown again. Moving with comparative laziness, he was passed on either side by people hurrying and frowning, and people brushed past him going the other way, clattering along to get somewhere quickly. Mr. Johnson stopped on every corner and waited patiently for the light to change, and he stepped out of the way of anyone who seemed to be in any particular hurry, but one young lady came too fast for him, and crashed wildly into him when he stooped to pat a kitten which had run out onto the sidewalk from an apartment house and was now unable to get back through the rushing feet.

"Excuse me," said the young lady, trying frantically to pick up Mr. Johnson and hurry on at the same time, "terribly sorry."

The kitten, regardless now of danger, raced back to its home. "Perfectly all right," said Mr. Johnson, adjusting himself carefully. "You seem to be in a hurry."

"Of course I'm in a hurry," said the young lady. "I'm late."

She was extremely cross and the frown between her eyes seemed well on its way to becoming permanent. She had obviously awakened late, because she had not spent any extra time in making herself look pretty, and her dress was plain and unadorned with collar or brooch, and her lipstick was noticeably crooked. She tried to brush past Mr. Johnson, but risking her suspicious displeasure, he took her arm and said, "Please wait."

"Look," she said ominously, "I ran into you and your lawyer can see my lawyer and I will gladly pay all damages and all inconveniences suffered therefrom but please this minute let me go because *I am late.*"

"Late for what?" said Mr. Johnson; he tried his winning

smile on her but it did no more than keep her, he suspected, from knocking him down again.

"Late for work," she said between her teeth. "Late for my employment. I have a job and if I am late I lose exactly so much an hour and I cannot really afford what your pleasant conversation is costing me, be it *ever* so pleasant."

"I'll pay for it," said Mr. Johnson. Now these were magic words, not necessarily because they were true, or because she seriously expected Mr. Johnson to pay for anything, but because Mr. Johnson's flat statement, obviously innocent of irony, could not be, coming from Mr. Johnson, anything but the statement of a responsible and truthful and respectable man.

"What *do* you mean?" she asked.

"I said that since I am obviously responsible for your being late I shall certainly pay for it."

"Don't be silly," she said, and for the first time the frown disappeared. "*I* wouldn't expect you to pay for anything—a few minutes ago I was offering to pay *you*. Anyway," she added, almost smiling, "it *was* my fault."

"What happens if you don't go to work?"

She stared. "I don't get paid."

"Precisely," said Mr. Johnson.

"What do you mean, precisely? If I don't show up at the office exactly twenty minutes ago I lose a dollar and twenty cents an hour, or two cents a minute or . . ." She thought. " . . . Almost a dime for the time I've spent talking to you."

Mr. Johnson laughed, and finally she laughed, too. "You're late already," he pointed out. "Will you give me another four cents worth?"

"I don't understand why."

"You'll see," Mr. Johnson promised. He led her over to the side of the walk, next to the buildings, and said, "Stand here," and went out into the rush of people going both ways. Selecting and considering, as one who must make a choice involving perhaps whole years of lives, he estimated the people going by. Once he almost moved, and then at the last

minute thought better of it and drew back. Finally, from half a block away, he saw what he wanted, and moved out into the center of the traffic to intercept a young man, who was hurrying, and dressed as though he had awakened late, and frowning.

"Oof," said the young man, because Mr. Johnson had thought of no better way to intercept anyone than the one the young woman had unwittingly used upon him. "Where do you think you're going?" the young man demanded from the sidewalk.

"I want to speak to you," said Mr. Johnson ominously.

The young man got up nervously, dusting himself and eying Mr. Johnson. "What for?" he said. "What'd *I* do?"

"That's what bothers me most about people nowadays," Mr. Johnson complained broadly to the people passing. "No matter whether they've done anything or not, they always figure someone's after them. About what you're going to do," he told the young man.

"Listen," said the young man, trying to brush past him. "I'm late, and I don't have any time to listen. Here's a dime, now get going."

"Thank you," said Mr. Johnson, pocketing the dime. "Look," he said, "what happens if you stop running?"

"I'm late," said the young man, still trying to get past Mr. Johnson, who was unexpectedly clinging.

"How much you make an hour?" Mr. Johnson demanded.

"A communist, are you?" said the young man. "Now will you please let me—"

"No," said Mr. Johnson insistently, "*how* much?"

"Dollar fifty," said the young man. "And *now* will you—"

"You like adventure?"

The young man stared, and, staring, found himself caught and held by Mr. Johnson's genial smile; he almost smiled back and then repressed it and made an effort to tear away. "I got to *hurry*," he said.

"Mystery? Like surprises? Unusual and exciting events?"

"You selling something?"

"Sure," said Mr. Johnson. "You want to take a chance?"

The young man hesitated, looked longingly up the avenue toward what might have been his destination and then, when Mr. Johnson said, "I'll pay for it," with his own peculiar convincing emphasis, turned and said, "Well, okay. But I got to *see* it first, what I'm buying."

Mr. Johnson, breathing hard, led the young man over to the side where the girl was standing; she had been watching with interest Mr. Johnson's capture of the young man and now, smiling timidly, she looked at Mr. Johnson as though prepared to be surprised at nothing.

Mr. Johnson reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. "Here," he said, and handed a bill to the girl. "This about equals your day's pay."

"But no," she said, surprised in spite of herself. "I mean, I *couldn't*."

"Please do not interrupt," Mr. Johnson told her. "And *here*," he said to the young man, "this will take care of *you*." The young man accepted the bill dazedly, but said, "Probably counterfeit," to the young woman out of the side of his mouth. "Now," Mr. Johnson went on, disregarding the young man, "what is your name, miss?"

"Kent," she said helplessly. "Mildred Kent."

"Fine," said Mr. Johnson. "And you, sir?"

"Arthur Adams," said the young man stiffly.

"Splendid," said Mr. Johnson. "Now, Miss Kent, I would like you to meet Mr. Adams. Mr. Adams, Miss Kent."

Miss Kent stared, wet her lips nervously, made a gesture as though she might run, and said, "How do you do?"

Mr. Adams straightened his shoulders, scowled at Mr. Johnson, made a gesture as through he might run, and said, "How do you do?"

"Now *this*," said Mr. Johnson, taking several bills from his wallet, "should be enough for the day for both of you. I would suggest, perhaps, Coney Island—although I personally am not fond of the place—or perhaps a nice lunch somewhere, and dancing, or a matinee, or even a movie, although take care to choose a really *good* one; there are *so* many bad movies these days. You might," he said, struck with an in-

spiration, "visit the Bronx Zoo, or the Planetarium. Anywhere, as a matter of fact," he concluded, "that you would like to go. Have a nice time."

As he started to move away Arthur Adams, breaking from his dumfounded stare, said, "But see here, mister, you *can't* do this. Why—how do you know—I mean, *we* don't even know—I mean, how do you know we won't just take the money and not do what you said?"

"You've taken the money," Mr. Johnson said. "You don't have to follow any of my suggestions. You may know something you prefer to do—perhaps a museum, or something."

"But suppose I just run away with it and leave her here?"

"I know you won't," said Mr. Johnson gently, "because you remembered to ask *me* that. Goodbye," he added, and went on.

As he stepped up the street, conscious of the sun on his head and his good shoes, he heard from somewhere behind him the young man saying, "Look, you know you don't *have* to if you don't want to," and the girl saying, "But unless *you* don't want to . . ." Mr. Johnson smiled to himself and then thought that he had better hurry along; when he wanted to he could move very quickly, and before the young woman had gotten around to saying, "Well, *I* will if *you* will," Mr. Johnson was several blocks away and had already stopped twice, once to help a lady lift several large packages into a taxi and once to hand a peanut to a seagull. By this time he was in an area of large stores and many more people and he was buffeted constantly from either side by people hurrying and cross and late and sullen. Once he offered a peanut to a man who asked him for a dime, and once he offered a peanut to a bus driver who had stopped his bus at an intersection and had opened the window next to his seat and put out his head as though longing for fresh air and the comparative quiet of the traffic. The man wanting a dime took the peanut because Mr. Johnson had wrapped a dollar bill around it, but the bus driver took the peanut and asked ironically. "You want a transfer, Jack?"

On a busy corner Mr. Johnson encountered two young peo-

ple—for one minute he thought they might be Mildred Kent and Arthur Adams—who were eagerly scanning a newspaper, their backs pressed against a storefront to avoid the people passing, their heads bent together. Mr. Johnson, whose curiosity was insatiable, leaned onto the storefront next to them and peeked over the man's shoulder; they were scanning the "Apartments Vacant" columns.

Mr. Johnson remembered the street where the woman and her little boy were going to Vermont and he tapped the man on the shoulder and said amiably, "Try down on West Seventeen. About the middle of the block, people moved out this morning."

"Say, what do you—" said the man, and then, seeing Mr. Johnson clearly, "Well, thanks. Where did you say?"

"West Seventeen," said Mr. Johnson. "About the middle of the block." He smiled again and said, "Good luck."

"Thanks," said the man.

"Thanks," said the girl, as they moved off.

"Goodbye," said Mr. Johnson.

He lunched alone in a pleasant restaurant, where the food was rich, and only Mr. Johnson's excellent digestion could encompass two of their whipped-cream-and-chocolate-and-rum-cake pastries for dessert. He had three cups of coffee, tipped the waiter largely, and went out into the street again into the wonderful sunlight, his shoes still comfortable and fresh on his feet. Outside he found a beggar staring into the windows of the restaurant he had left and, carefully looking through the money in his pocket, Mr. Johnson approached the beggar and pressed some coins and a couple of bills into his hand. "It's the price of the veal cutlet lunch plus tip," said Mr. Johnson. "Goodbye."

After his lunch he rested; he walked into the nearest park and fed peanuts to the pigeons. It was late afternoon by the time he was ready to start back downtown, and he had refereed two checker games and watched a small boy and girl whose mother had fallen asleep and awakened with surprise and fear which turned to amusement when she saw Mr. Johnson. He had given away almost all of his candy, and had

fed all the rest of his peanuts to the pigeons, and it was time to go home. Although the late afternoon sun was pleasant, and his shoes were still entirely comfortable, he decided to take a taxi downtown.

He had a difficult time catching a taxi, because he gave up the first three or four empty ones to people who seemed to need them more; finally, however, he stood alone on the corner and—almost like netting a frisky fish—he hailed desperately until he succeeded in catching a cab which had been proceeding with haste uptown and seemed to draw in towards Mr. Johnson against its own will.

"Mister," the cab driver said as Mr. Johnson climbed in, "I figured you was an omen, like. I wasn't going to pick you up at all."

"Kind of you," said Mr. Johnson ambiguously.

"If I'd of let you go it would of cost me ten bucks," said the driver.

"Really?" said Mr. Johnson.

"Yeah," said the driver. "Guy just got out of the cab, he turned around and give me ten bucks, said take this and bet it in a hurry on a horse named Vulcan, right away."

"Vulcan?" said Mr. Johnson, horrified. "A fire sign on a Wednesday?"

"What?" said the driver. "Anyway, I said to myself if I got no fare between here and there I'd bet the ten, but if anyone looked like they needed the cab I'd take it as an omen and I'd take the ten home to the wife."

"You were very right," said Mr. Johnson heartily. "This is Wednesday, you would have lost your money. Monday, yes, or even Saturday. But never never never a fire sign on a Wednesday. Sunday would have been good, now."

"Vulcan don't run on Sunday," said the driver.

"You wait till another day," said Mr. Johnson. "Down this street, please, driver. I'll get off on the next corner."

"He *told* me Vulcan, though," said the driver.

"I'll tell you," said Mr. Johnson, hesitating with the door of the cab half open. "You take that ten dollars and I'll give you another ten dollars to go with it, and you go right ahead

and bet that money on any Thursday on any horse that has a name indicating . . . let me see, Thursday . . . well, grain. Or any growing food."

"Grain?" said the driver. "You mean a horse named, like, Wheat or something?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Johnson. "Or, as a matter of fact, to make it even easier, any horse whose name includes the letters C, R, L. Perfectly simple."

"Tall corn?" said the driver, a light in his eye. "You mean a horse named, like, Tall Corn?"

"Absolutely," said Mr. Johnson. "Here's your money."

"Tall Corn," said the driver. "Thank *you*, mister."

"Goodbye," said Mr. Johnson.

He was on his own corner and went straight up to his apartment. He let himself in and called "Hello?" and Mrs. Johnson answered from the kitchen, "Hello, dear, aren't you early?"

"Took a taxi home," Mr. Johnson said. "I remembered the cheesecake, too. What's for dinner?"

Mrs. Johnson came out of the kitchen and kissed him; she was a comfortable woman, and smiling as Mr. Johnson smiled. "Hard day?" she asked.

"Not very," said Mr. Johnson, hanging his coat in the closet. "How about you?"

"So-so," she said. She stood in the kitchen doorway while he settled into his easy chair and took off his good shoes and took out the paper he had bought that morning. "Here and there," she said.

"I didn't do so badly," Mr. Johnson said. "Couple young people."

"Fine," she said. "I had a little nap this afternoon, took it easy most of the day. Went into a department store this morning and accused the woman next to me of shoplifting, and had the store detective pick her up. Sent three dogs to the pound —*you* know, the usual thing. Oh, and listen," she added, remembering.

"What?" asked Mr. Johnson.

"Well," she said, "I got onto a bus and asked the driver

for a transfer, and when he helped someone else first I said that he was impertinent, and quarrelled with him. And then I said why wasn't he in the army, and I said it loud enough for everyone to hear, and I took his number and I turned in a complaint. Probably got him fired."

"Fine," said Mr. Johnson. "But you do look tired. Want to change over tomorrow?"

"I *would* like to," she said. "I could do with a change."

"Right," said Mr. Johnson. "What's for dinner?"

"Veal cutlet."

"Had it for lunch," said Mr. Johnson.

Time, in the history of science fiction, is (like the time of the Short Ones in this story) curiously speeded up and condensed. Such young and relatively new writers as Poul Anderson, Richard Matheson, Chad Oliver and Robert Sheckley seem by now like well-established Old Hands; and already there is an even younger and newer generation of creators. (Personally, I feel that I entered the field rather late—as recently as 1941; but I suppose I must appear a very graybeard. . . .) Of this latest generation, one of the most promising, to my mind, is Raymond E. Banks, a part-time politico of Manhattan Beach, California, who here studies the politics of the future—politics in Washington, and the religio-politics of a strange microcosm which can shape—or annihilate —the vast world above it.

THE SHORT ONES

VALSEK came out of his hut and looked at the sky. As usual it was milk-white, but grayed down now to predawn somberness.

"Telfus!"

The sleepy face of his hired man peered over a rock, behind which he had slept.

"We must plow today," said Valsek. "There'll be no rain."

"Did a god tell you this?" asked Telfus, a groan in his voice. Another exposed god-wire! Important things were stirring and he had to drive this farm-hand clod to his labor.

"If you are to sleep in my field and eat at my table, you must work," said Valsek angrily. He bent to examine the god-wire. The shock to his hands told him there was a feeble current running in it which made his magnetic backbone tingle. Vexing, oh vexing, to know that current ran through the wire

and through you, but not to know whether it was the current of the old god Melton, or the new god, Hiller!

"Bury this god-wire at once," he told Telfus. "It isn't neat to have the god-wires exposed. How can I make contact with Hiller when he can see my fields unplowed and my god-wires exposed? He will not choose me Spokesman."

"Did this Hiller come to you in the night?" asked Telfus politely.

"In a way, in a way," said the prophet testily. It was hard to know. It was time for a new god, but you could miss it by weeks.

Valsek's wife came over the hill, carrying a pail of milk warm from the goat.

"Was there a sign last night?" she asked, pausing before the hut.

Valsek gave his wife a cold stare. "Naturally there was a sign," he said. "I do not sleep on the cold stone of the barn floor because it pleases my bones. I have had several portents from Hiller."

His wife looked resigned. "Such as?"

Short Ones! Valsek felt contempt inside of him. All of the Short Ones were fools. It was the time for a new god, and they went around milking goats and asking about signs. Short Ones! (And what god had first revealed to them that name? And why, when they were the tallest living beings in all the world?)

"The wind blew last night," he said.

"The wind blows every night," she said.

He presented his hard conviction to the cutting blade of her scorn.

"About midnight it rained," he persisted. "I had just got through suggesting rain to the new god, Hiller."

"Now was that considerate?" asked Telfus, still leaning on his rock. "Your only hired hand asleep in the fields outside and you ask for rain."

"There is no Hiller," said Valsek's wife, tightening her lips. "It rains every midnight this time of year. And there will be

no corn if you keep sleeping in the barn, making those stupid clay images and avoiding work."

"Woman," said Valsek, "god-business is important. If Hiller choses me for Spokesman to all the Short Ones we shall be rich."

But his wife was tired, perhaps because she had had to pull the plow yesterday for Telfus. "Ask Hiller to send us a bushel of corn," she said coldly. "Then I will come into the barn and burn a manure stick to him."

She went into the hut, letting the door slam.

"If it is permitted to sleep in the barn," said Telfus, "I will help you fashion your clay idols. Once in King Giron's courtyard I watched an artist fashion a clay idol for Melton, and I think I might have a hand for it, if it is permitted to sleep in the barn."

Blasphemers! Worldly blasphemers! "It is not permitted to sleep in the barn," said Valsek. "I have spent many years in the barn, reaching out for each new god as he or she came, and though I have not yet made contact, it is a dedicated plaee. You have no touch for prophecy."

"I have seen men go mad, each trying to be picked Spokesman to the gods for the Short Ones," said Telfus. "The chances are much against it. And consider the fate of the Spokesman once the year of his god is over."

Valsek's eyes flashed angrily. "Consider the fate of the Spokesman in his prime. Power, rich power in the time of your god, you fool, if you are Spokesman. And afterwards many Spokesmen become members of the Prophets' Association—with a pension. Does life hold more?"

Telfus decided not to remind his employer that usually the new Spokesman felt it necessary to execute the old Spokesman of the used-up god.

"Perhaps it is only that my knees are too tender for god-business," he said, sighing against the rock.

"Quiet now," said Valsek. "It is time for dawn. I have asked Hiller for a portent, to show his choice of me as Spokesman. A dawn portent."

They turned to watch the dawn. Even Valsek's wife came

out to watch, for Valsek was always asking for a dawn portent. It was his favorite suggestion to the gods.

Dawn came. There was a flicker of flashing, magic lights, much, much faster than the slow flame of a tallow taper that the Short Ones used for light. One-two-three-four-five, repeated, one-two-three-four-five. And then the day was upon them. In an instant the gray turned to milk-white and the day's heat fell.

"Ah!" cried Valsek. "The dawn light flashed six times. Hiller is the new god. I am his Spokesman! I must hurry to the market place in town with my new idol!"

Telfus and the wife exchanged looks. Telfus was about to point out that there had been only the usual five lights of dawn, but the wife shook her head. She pointed a scornful finger to the horizon where a black ball of smoke lingered in the sky.

"Yesterday there were riots," she said. "Fighting and the burning of things. If you take your new idol to the market place, you will insult either the followers of King Giron or the followers of Melton. One or the other, they will carve your heart out, old man!"

But it was no use. Valsek had rushed back into the barn to burn a manure stick to Hiller and start his journey, on the strength of the lights of dawn.

Valsek's wife stared down at her work-stained hands and sighed. "Now I suppose I should prepare a death sheet for him," she said.

"No," said Telfus, wearily picking up the harness from the ground. "They will only laugh at him and he will live forever while you and I die from doing the world's work. Come, Mrs. Valsek, assume the harness, so that I may walk behind and plow a careful furrow in his fields."

Time: One month earlier . . . or half an hour.

Place; the Pentagon, Washington, D.C.

The Life Hall.

In the vast, gloomy auditorium the scurryings and scuttlings of the Short Ones rose to a climax beneath the opaque, milky

glass that covered the colony. Several spectators rose in their seats. At the control panel, Charles Melton also rose.

"The dials!" cried his adviser.

But Melton was past tending the dials. He jerked the control helmet off his head a second too late. A blue flash from the helmet flickered in the dark room. Short circuit!

Melton leaned over the glass, trying to steady himself, and vomited blood. Then a medical attendant came and escorted him away, as his adviser assumed the dials and his helmet.

A sigh from the spectators. They bent and peered at Melton from the seats above his level, like medical students in an operating theatre. The political career of Charles Melton was over: he had failed the Life Hall Test.

A technician tapped some buttons and the lighted sign, visible to all, changed:

TEST 39167674
HILLER, RALPH, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, USA
TEST TIME: 6 HOURS
OBJECTIVE: BLUE CERTIFICATE TO PROVE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES
ADVISER: DR. CYNTHIA WOLLRATH

Cynthia Wollrath!

Ralph Hiller turned from the door of the Ready Room and paced. What rotten luck he was having! To begin with, his test started right after some inadequate Judge-applicant had failed badly and gotten the Short Ones all upset. On top of that, they had assigned his own former wife to be adviser. How unethical can you get?

He was sure now that his enemies in the Administration had given him a bad test position and picked a prejudiced adviser to insure his failure—that was typical of the Armstrong crowd. He felt the hot anger on his face. They weren't going to get away with this. . . .

Cynthia came into the Ready Room then, dressed in the white uniform of the Life Hall Staff, and greeted him with a cool, competent nod.

"I'm rather surprised that I've been given a prejudiced adviser," he said.

"I'm sorry. The Board considered me competent to sit in on this test."

"Did you tell them that we were once married?"

She sighed. "No. You did that in at least three memorandums, I believe. Shall we proceed with the briefing?"

"The Board knows you dislike me," he said. "They know I could lose my sanity in there. You could foul me up and no one would be the wiser. I won't stand for it."

Her eyes were carefully impartial. "I don't dislike you. And I rather think that the Board chose me because they felt that it would help you out. They feel I know your personality, and in something as dangerous as the Life Hall Tests they try to give all the applicants a break."

"My father died in that chair," he said. "My uncle—"

"You aren't your father. Nor your uncle. Shall we start? We're late. This i. a Short One—"

She held up a figure, two inches high, a perfectly formed little man, a dead replica of the life below. In her other hand she held a metal sliver that looked like a three-quarter-inch needle. "The Short Ones are artificial creatures of living protoplasm, except for this metallic backbone imbedded in each. It is magnetic material—"

"I want a postponement."

"Bruce Gerard of the *Times* is covering this test," she said patiently. "His newspaper is not favorable to the Administration. He would like to report a postponement in a Life Hall Test by an important Administration figure. Now, Ralph, we really must get on with this. There are many other testees to follow you to the chair."

He subsided. He held his temper in. That temper that had killed his father, almost destroyed his uncle. That temper that would be put to the most severe test known to men for the next few hours. He found it difficult to concentrate on her words.

"—wires buried in the ground of the Colony, activate the Short Ones—a quarter of a million Short Ones down there—

one of our minutes is a day to them—your six hours of testing cover a year of their lives—"

He knew all that. A Blue Certificate Life Hall Test was rather like an execution and you studied up on it long before. Learned how science had perfected this tiny breed. How there had been opposition to them until the beginnings of the Life Hall. In today's world the Short Ones protected the people from inefficient and weak leaders. To hold an important position, such as his Cabinet job, you had to have a Life Hall Certificate. You had to prove out your leadership wisdom over the roiling, boiling generations of Short Ones before you could lead mankind. The test was rightfully dangerous; the people could expect their leaders to have true ability if they passed the test, and the false leaders and weaklings either never applied, or were quickly broken down by the Short Ones.

"Let's go," said Cynthia.

There was a stir from the audience as they entered the auditorium. They recognized him. Many who had been resting with their spectator helmets off reassumed them. A wave of tense expectancy seemed to come from them. The people knew about the failure of his father and his uncle. This looked like a blood test and it was fascinating to see a blood test.

Ralph took his position in the chair with an inward sigh. It was too late not to change anything. He dare not embarrass the Administration before a hostile reporter. He let Cynthia show him the inside of the Director's helmet with its maze of wires.

"Since their time runs so fast, you can't possibly read out each and every mind of the Short Ones down there," she said. "You can handle perhaps half a dozen. Step-down transformers will allow you to follow their lives. They are your leaders and representatives down in the world of the Short Ones.

"These knob hand dials are your mechanical controls down there. There are hydraulic linkages which give you power

to change the very seas, cause mountains to rise and valleys to form. Their weather is in your control, for when you think of weather, by an electronic signal through the helmet, you cause rain or sun, wind or stillness. The left hand dial is destructive, the right hand dial is constructive. As the current flows throughout the system, your thoughts and wishes are impressed upon the world of the Short Ones, through your leaders. You can back up your edicts by smashing the very ground under their feet. Should you desire to kill, a flick of the dial saturates the magnetized backbone of the unfortunate Short One, and at full magnetization all life ceases for them.

"Unfortunately, you are directing a dangerous amount of power in this system which courses within a fraction of an inch of your head in the control helmet. At each death down there a tiny amount less current is needed to control the Short Ones. At many deaths this wild current, no longer being drawn by the dead creatures, races through the circuits. Should too many die, you will receive a backlash of wild current before I can—"

Ralph nodded, put on the helmet and let the scurryings and scuttlings of the Short Ones burst in on his mind.

He sat straight, looking out over a sheet of milky glass fifty feet across that covered the world below. He was sinking mentally into their world. With him, but fully protected, the spectators put on their helmets to sink into the Colony and witness the events below as he directed them.

The eerie light from the glass shone on the face of the medical attendant standing ready.

Ralph reached out his hands to start his test and gave himself a final admonition about his temper. At all costs he must curb it.

There is a temper that destroys and also one that demands things done by other men. Ralph had used his sternness well for most of the years of his life, but there had been times, bad times, when that fiery temperament had worked against him.

Like his marriage to Cynthia, ten years before. She had

had a cool, scientific detachment about life which had attracted him. She had been a top student of psychology on the campus. At first her cool detachment had steadied him and enabled him to get started in his political career. But then it began to haunt him—her reasonableness against his storms; he had a growing compulsion to smash through her calmness and subjugate her to his will.

He had hurt her badly once.

He still felt the flame of embarrassment when he remembered her face in the bedroom, staring down at the nakedness of the other woman, staring at his own nakedness, as the adulterers lay on her bed, and the shivery calmness of his own nervous system at the expected interruption. And his words across the years:

"Why not? You seem to be sterile."

Foolish, hot ego of youth. He had meant to stir and shock a very proper Cynthia, and he had done so. Her moan of rage and hurt had made him for that triumphant moment the flame-thrower he was destined to be.

He hadn't counted on a divorce, but then it was impossible for him to give up his victory. He was Ralph Hiller, a man who asked no favors—

Ah, that was ten years ago when he was barely twenty-five! Many times since the divorce he'd wished for her quiet calmness. She had stayed in the arms of science, never marrying again, preferring the well-lighted lab to the dark halls of passion. But such an act could rankle and burn over the years

. . . .

The affairs of the Short Ones pressed impatiently on him, and he turned to his job with unsteady nerves.

When Valsek appeared, towing his clay idol of Hiller on a handcart, the soldiers were too drunk to be cruel to him. They merely pricked his buttocks with their swords and laughed at him. And the priests of Melton, likewise sated with violence, simply threw stones at him and encouraged the loiterers to upend the cart and smash the grinning nonentity of clay. Hiller indeed! Would a new god creep into

their lives on a handcart pulled by a crazy old man? Go away, old man, go away.

Back at the farm Valsek found Telfus finishing up a new idol.

"You knew?" he asked sadly.

"It was somehow written in my mind that you would need a new idol," said Telfus. "I am quite enthusiastic about this new god, and if I may be permitted to sleep in the barn, I am sure that I would get the feel of him and help you do good works in his name."

"It is not permitted to sleep in the barn," grunted Valsek, easing his tender backside on a haypile. "Also I take notice that the plowing has stopped."

"Your wife fainted in the fields," said Telfus. "I could not bring myself to kick her back to consciousness as you ordered because I have a bad leg from sleeping on the ground. I have slept on the ground many, many years and it is not good for the leg."

The fire of fanaticism burned in Valsek's eyes. "Bother your leg," he said. "Place my new idol on the handcart; there are other towns and other ears to listen, and Hiller will not fail me."

In a short time Valsek had used up several of the idols to Hiller in various towns and was required to rest from the injuries given him by the scornful priests, the people and the soldiers.

"When I beg," said Telful, "I place myself before the door of a rich man, not a poor one. Would it not be wisdom to preach before King Giron himself rather than the lesser figures? Since Melton is his enemy, the King might welcome a new god."

"You are mad," said Valsek. "Also, I do not like your latest idols. You are shirking on the straw which holds the clay together. I suspect you of eating my straw."

Telfus looked pained. "I would not dream of eating Hiller's straw," he said, "any more than I would dream of sleeping in

the barn without permission. It is true, however, that your wife and goat occasionally get hungry."

Valsek waved a hand. "Prepare a knapsack. It has occurred to me that I should go to the very courtyard of the King himself and tell him of Hiller. After all, does a beggar beg at the door of a poor man?"

Telfus nodded. "An excellent idea, one I should've thought of."

"Prepare the knapsack," ordered Valsek. "We will go together."

At the gate of the palace itself, Telfus stopped. "Many Short Ones have died," he said, "because in the midst of a hazardous task they left no avenue of escape open. Therefore I shall entertain the guards at the gate with my juggling while you go on in. Should it be necessary for you to fly, I will keep the way open."

Valsek frowned. "I had planned for you to pull the idol-cart for me, Telfus, so that I might make a better impression."

"An excellent idea!" said Telfus. "But, after all, you have the company of Hiller, which is worth a couple of regiments. And I have a bad leg, and Hiller deserves a better appearance than to be pulled before a King by a limping beggar. Therefore I will remain at the gates and keep the way open for you."

Valsek took the cart rope from Telfus, gave him a look of contempt and swept into the courtyard of King Giron.

King Giron, who had held power for more than a year now, stared out of his lofty bedroom window and listened to the words of Valsek carried on the wind from the courtyard below, as he preached to the loiterers. He turned white; in just such a fashion had he preached Melton the previous year.

True, he no longer believed in Melton, but, since he was writing a bible for the worship of King Giron, a new god didn't fit into his plans. He ordered the guards to bring the man before him.

"Make a sign, old man," he directed. "If you represent

a new god, have him make a sign if as you say, Melton is dead and Hiller is the new god."

Valsek threw himself down and groveled to Hiller and asked for a sign. He crooned over Telfus' latest creation, asking for a sign. There was none. Ralph was being careful.

"But Hiller lives!" cried Valsek as the guards dragged him upright and King Giron smiled cynically. "Melton is dead! You can't get a sign from Melton either! Show me a sign from Melton!"

The two men stared at each other. True, Melton was gone. The King misdoubted that Melton had ever existed, except in the furious fantasies of his own mind which had been strong enough to convince other people. Here now was a test. If he could destroy the old man, that would prove him right—that the gods were all illusion and that the Short Ones could run their own affairs.

The King made a cutting sign across his own throat. The guards threw Valsek to his knees and one of them lifted a sharp, shining blade.

"Now cut his throat quickly," ordered the King, "because I find him a very unlikely citizen."

"Hiller," moaned Valsek, "Hiller, I've believed in you and still do. Now you must save me, for it is the last moment of my miserable life. Believe in me, Hiller!"

Sweat stood out on Ralph's brow. He had held his temper when the old man had been rejected by the others. He had hoped for a better Spokesman than this fanatic, but the other Short Ones were confused by King Giron's defiance of all gods and Valsek was his only active disciple. He would have to choose the man after all, and, in a way, the fanatical old man did have spirit. . . . Then he grinned to himself. Funny how these creatures sneaked into your ego. And deadly, no doubt!

The sword of the guard began to descend. Ralph, trying hard to divine the far-reaching consequences of each act he would perform, made his stomach muscles grip to hold himself back. He didn't mean to pass any miracles, because once you

started it became an endless chain. And this was obviously the trap of the test.

Then King Giron clapped his hands in glee and a particle of Ralph's anger shot through the tight muscles. His hand on the dial twitched.

The sword descended part way and then hung motionless in the air. The guards cried out in astonishment, as did Ralph up above. King Giron stopped laughing and turned very white.

"Thrust this man out of the gate," he ordered hoarsely. "Get him out of my sight."

At the gate Telfus, who had been watching the miracle as openmouthed as the soldiers, eagerly grasped the rope of the handcart and started off.

"What has become of your sore leg?" asked Valsek, relaxed after his triumph.

"It is well rested," said Telfus shortly.

"You cannot maintain that pace," said Valsek. "As you said this morning, it is a long, weary road back home."

"We must hurry," said Telfus. "We will ignore the road." His muscles tensed as he jerked the cart over the bumpy field. "Hiller would want us to hurry and make more idols. Also we must recruit. We must raise funds, invent insignia, symbols. We have much to do, Valsek. Hurry!"

Ralph relaxed a little and looked at Cynthia beside him. Her fair skin glowed in the subdued light of the Hall. There was a tiny, permanent frown on her forehead, but the mouth was expressionless. Did she expect he would lash out at the first opposition to his control? He would show her and Gerard and the rest of them. . . .

They called Valsek the Man the King Couldn't Kill. They followed him wherever he went and listened to him preach. They brought him gifts of clothes and food which Telfus indicated would not be unpleasing to such a great man, and his wife and servant no longer had to work in the fields. He dictated a book, *Hiller Says So,* to Telfus, and the book grew

into an organization which rapidly became political and then began to attract the military. They made his barn a shrine and built him a mud palace where the old hut had stood. Telfus kept count with manure sticks of the numbers who came, but presently there weren't enough manure sticks to count the thousands.

Throughout the land the cleavage grew, people deciding and dividing, deciding and dividing. If you didn't care for King Giron, you fell under the sway of Hillerism. But if you were tired of the strange ways of the gods, you clung to Gironism in safety, for this new god spoke seldom and punished no one for blasphemy.

King Giron contented himself with killing a few Hillerites. He was fairly certain that the gods were an illusion. Was there anything more wonderful than the mountains and trees and grass that grew on the plains? As for the god-wires, they were no more nor less wonderful, but to imagine they meant any more than a tree was to engage in superstition. He had once believed that Melton existed but the so-called signs no longer came, and by denying the gods—it was very simple—the miracles seemed to have ceased. True, there was the event when the guard had been unable to cut Valsek's throat, but then the man had a history of a rheumatic father, and the coincidence of his frozen arm at the proper moment was merely a result of the man's natural weakness and the excitement of the occasion.

"We shall let the Hillerites grow big enough," King Giron told his advisers. "Then we shall march on them and execute them and when that is done, the people will understand that there is no god except King Giron, and we shall be free of godism forever."

For his part, Valsek couldn't forget that his palace was made of mud, while Giron's was made of real baked brick.

"Giron insults you!" cried Valsek from his barn-temple to Hiller. "His men have the finest temples in the city, the best jobs, the most of worldly goods. Why is this?"

"Giron represents order," Ralph directed through his elec-

tronic circuits. "It is not time to upset the smoothness of things."

Valsek made an impudent gesture. "At least give us miracles. I have waited all my life to be Spokesman, and I can have no miracles! The priests who deserted Melton for you are disgusted with the lack of miracles. Many turn to the new religion, Gironism."

"I don't believe in miracles."

"Fool!" cried Valsek.

In anger Ralph twisted the dial. Valsek felt himself lifted by a surge of current and dashed to the floor.

"Thanks," he said sadly.

Ralph shot a look at Cynthia. A smile, almost dreamy, of remembrance was on her lips. Here comes the old Ralph, she was thinking. Ralph felt himself tense so hard his calf muscles ached. "No more temper now, none," he demanded of himself.

Giron discovered that his *King's Book of Worship* was getting costly. More and more hand-scribes were needed to spread the worship of Gironism, and to feed them he had to lay heavier taxes on the people. He did so. The people responded by joining the Hillerites in great numbers, because even those who agreed with Giron about the illusory existence of the gods preferred Hiller's lower tax structure. This angered the King. A riot began in a minor city, and goaded by a determined King Giron, it flowered into an armed revolt and flung seeds of civil war to all corners of the land.

Telfus, who had been busy with organizational matters, hurried back to the mud palace.

"I suspect Hiller does not care for war," he said bitterly. "Giron has the swords, the supplies, the trained men. We have nothing. Therefore would it not be wise for us to march more and pray less—since Hiller expects us to take care of ourselves?"

Valsek paced the barn. "Go hide behind a rock, beggar. Valsek fears no man, no arms."

"But Giron's troops are organizing—"

"The children of Hiller need no troops," Valsek intoned.

Telfus went out and stole, begged or borrowed all of the cold steel he could get. He began marching the men in the fields.

"What—troops!" frowned Valsek. "I ordered against it."

"We are merely practicing for a pageant," growled Telfus. "It is to please the women and children. We shall re-enact your life as a symbol of marching men. Is this permitted?"

"You may do that," nodded Valsek, appeased.

The troops of Giron came like a storm. Ralph held out as he watched the Gironists destroy the homes of the Hillers, deflower the Hiller women, kill the children of Hillers. And he waited. . . .

Dismayed, the Hillerites fell back on Valsek's bishopric, the mud palace, and drew around the leader.

Valsek nervously paced in the barn. "Perhaps it would be better to kill a few of the Gironists," he suggested to Ralph, "rather than wait until we are dead, for there may be no battles in heaven."

There was silence from above.

The Gironist troops drew up before the palace, momentarily stopped by the Pageant Guards of Telfus. You had to drive a god, thought Valsek. With a sigh, he made his way out of the besieged fortress and presented himself to the enemy. He had nothing to offer but himself. He had brought Hillerism to the land and he alone must defend it if Hiller would not.

King Giron smiled his pleasure at the foolish old man who was anxious to become a martyr. Was there ever greater proof of the falseness of the gods? Meekly Valsek bowed before the swords of King Giron's guardsmen.

"I am faithful to Hiller," said Valsek, "And if I cannot live with it, then I will die for it."

"That's a sweet way to go," said King Giron, "since you would be killed anyway. Guards, let the swords fall."

Ralph stared down at the body of Valsek. He felt a thin pulse of hate beating at his temples. The old man lay in the dust murdered by a dozen sword wounds, and the soldiers were cutting the flesh from the bones in joy at destroying

the fountainhead of Hillerism. Then the banners lifted, the swords and lances were raised, the cry went down the ranks and the murderous horde swept upon the fortress of the fallen Valsek. A groan of dismay came from the Pageant troops when the Hillerites saw the severed head of Valsek borne before the attackers.

Ralph could hardly breathe. He looked up, up at the audience as they stirred, alive to the trouble he was in. He stared at Cynthia. She wet her lips, looking down, leaning forward. "Watch the power load," she whispered; "there will soon be many dead." Her white fingers rested on a dial.

Now, he thought bitterly, I will blast the murderers of Valsek and uphold my ego down there by destroying the Gironists. I will release the blast of energy held in the hand of an angry god—

And I shall pass the critical point and there will be a backlash and the poor ego-destroyed human up here will come screaming out of his Director's chair with a crack in his skull.

Not me!

Ralph's hands felt sweaty on the dials as he heard the far-off cries of the murders being wrought among the Hillerites. But he held his peace while the work was done, stepping down the system energy as the Short Ones died by the hundreds. The Hillerites fell. They were slaughtered without mercy by King Giron. Then the idols to Hiller were destroyed. Only one man, severely wounded, survived the massacre.

Telfus . . .

That worthy remembered the rock under which he had once slept when he plowed Valsek's fields. He crept under the rock now, trying to ignore his nearly severed leg. Secure, he peered out on the field of human misery.

"A very even-tempered god indeed," he told himself, and then fainted.

There was an almost audible cry of disappointment from the human audience in the Life Hall above Ralph's head. He looked up and Cynthia looked up too. Obviously human sentiment demanded revenge on the ghastly murderers of

King Giron's guard. What sort of Secretary of Defense would this be who would let his "side" be so destroyed?

He noted that Bruce Gerard frowned as he scribbled notes. The Life Hall critic for the *Times*, spokesman for the intellectuals. Ralph would be ticked off proper in tomorrow's paper:

"Blunt-jawed, domineering Ralph Hiller, Assistant Secretary of Defense, turned in a less than jolly Life Hall performance yesterday for the edification of the thoughtful. His pallid handling of the proteins in the Pentagon leads one to believe that his idea of the best defense is signified by the word *refrainment*, a refinement on containment. Hiller held the seat long enough to impress his warmth upon it, the only good impression he made. By doing nothing at all and letting his followers among the Short Ones be slaughtered like helpless ants, he was able to sit out the required time and gain the valuable certificate that all politicos need. What this means for the defense of America, however, is another thing. One pictures our land in ashes, our people badly smashed and the porticoed jaw of Mr. Hiller opening to say, as he sits with folded hands, 'I am aware of all that is going on. You should respect my awareness.' "

Ralph turned to Cynthia.

"I have undercontrolled, haven't I?"

She shook her head. "I am forbidden to suggest. I am here to try to save you from the Short Ones and the Short Ones from you in case of emergency. I can now state that you have about used up your quota of violent deaths and another holocaust will cause the board to fail you for mismanagement."

Ralph sighed. He had feared overcontrol and fallen into the error of undercontrol. God, it was frustrating. . . .

Ralph was allowed a half-hour lunch break while Cynthia took over the board. He tried to devise a safe way of toppling King Giron but could think of none. The victory was Giron's. If Giron was content, Ralph could do nothing. But if Giron tried any more violence— Ralph felt the blood sing in his ears. If he was destined to fail, he would make a magnificent failure of it!

Then he was back at the board beside Cynthia and

under the helmet and the world of the short Ones closed in on him. The scenes of the slaughter remained with him vividly, and he sought Telfus, the sole survivor, now a man with one eye and a twisted leg who nevertheless continued to preach Hillerism and tell about the god who was big enough to let Short Ones run their own affairs. He was often laughed at, more often stoned, but always he gathered a few adherents.

Telfus even made friends with a Captain of Giron's guard.

"Why do you persist in Hillerism?" asked the Captain. "It is obvious that Hiller doesn't care for his own priests enough to protect them."

"Not so," said Telfus. "He cares so much that he will trust them to fall on their knees or not, as they will, whereas the old gods were usually striking somebody dead in the market place because of some fancied insult. I cannot resist this miracle-less god. Our land has been sick with miracles."

"Still you'll need one when Giron catches up with you."

"Perhaps tomorrow. But if you give me a piece of silver for Hiller, I will sleep in an inn tonight and dream your name to him."

Ralph sought out King Giron.

That individual seemed sleek and fat now, very self-confident. "Take all of the statues of Hiller and Melton and any other leftover gods and smash them," ordered the King. "The days of the gods are over. I intend to speed up the building of statues to myself, now that I control the world."

The idols to the King went up in the market places. The people concealed doubt and prayed to him because his military was strong. But this pretense bothered Giron.

"The people cannot believe I'm divine," said King Giron. "We need a mighty celebration. A ritual to prove it. I've heard from a Guard Captain of Telfus, this one-eyed beggar who still clings to Hiller. I want him brought to my palace for a celebration. I want the last survivor of the Hiller massacre dressed in a black robe and sacrificed at my celebration. Then the people will understand that Gironism defies all gods and is eternal."

Ralph felt a dryness on the inside of his mouth. He watched the guards round up the few adherents of Hillerism and bring them to the palace. He watched the beginnings of the celebration to King Giron.

There was irony, he thought. Just as violence breeds violence, so non-violence breeds violence. Now the whole thing had to be done over again, only now the insolence of the Gironists dug into Ralph like a scalpel on a raw nerve.

Rank upon rank of richly clad soldiers, proud merchants, laughing Gironists crowded together in the center of the courtyard where the one-eyed man and a dozen of his tattered followers faced death.

"Now, Guards," said King Giron, "move out and kill them. Place the sword firmly at the neck and cleave them down the middle. Then there will be twice as many Hillers!"

Cheers! Laughter! Oh, droll, divine King Giron!

Ralph felt the power surging in the dial under his hand, ready but not yet unleashed. He felt the dizzying pull of it, the knowledge that he could rip the flesh apart and strip the bones of thousands of Gironists. The absolute power to blast the conceited ruler from his earth. To smash bodies, stone, sand, vegetation, all—absolute, absolute power ready to use.

And King Giron laughed as the swordsman cleft the first of the beggarly Hillers.

Ralph was a seething furnace of rage. "Go! Go! Go!" his mind told his hands.

Then Cynthia did a surprising thing. "Take your hands off the dials," she said. "You're in a nasty spot. I'm taking over."

His temples throbbed but with an effort he removed his hands from the dials. Whether she was helping him or hurting him, he didn't know, but she had correctly judged that he had reached his limit.

One by one the followers of Hillerism died. He saw the vein along her throat throb, and he saw her fingers tremble on the dials she tried to hold steady. A flush crept up her neck. Participation in the world below was working on her too. She could see no way out and he understood it.

The cruel, fat dictator and his unctuous followers, the poor, set-upon martyrs—even the symbol of Telfus, his last follower, being a crippled and helpless man. A situation like this could trigger a man into unleashing a blasting fury that would overload the circuits and earn him revenge only at the cost of a crack in his skull. In real life, a situation of white-hot seething public emotion would make a government official turn to his H-bombs with implacable fury and strike out with searing flames that would wash the world clean, taking the innocent along with the guilty, unblocking great segments of civilization, radioactivating continents and sending the sea into an eternal boil.

And yet—*GOD DAMN IT, YOU HAD TO STOP THE GIRONS!*

Cynthia broke. She was too emotionally involved to restrain herself. She bit her lips and withdrew her hands from the dials with a moan.

But the brief interruption had helped Ralph as he leaned forward and took the dials in her place. His anger had subsided suddenly into a clear-minded determination.

He thought-waved Telfus. "I fear that you must go," he said. "I thank you for keeping the faith."

"You've been a most peculiar god," said Telfus, warily watching the last of his friends die. His face was white; he knew he was being saved for the last.

"Total violence solves nothing."

"Still it would be nice to kick one of these fellows in the shins," said Telfus, the sweat pouring from his face. "In the natural order of things an occasional miracle cannot hurt."

"What would you have me do?"

Telfus passed a hand over his face. "Hardly a moment for thoughtful discussion," he groaned. He cried out in passionate anguish as his closest friend died. Ralph let the strong emotions of Telfus enter his mind, and then gradually Telfus caught hold of himself.

"Well," he said, "if I could only see King Giron die . . ."

"Never mind the rest?" asked Ralph.

"Never mind the rest," said Telfus. "Men shouldn't play gods."

"How right you are!" cried Ralph.

"Telfus!" cried King Giron. "You see now how powerful I am! You see now that there are no more gods!"

"I see a fool," said Telfus as the guard's sword fell. The guard struck low to prolong the death for the King's enjoyment and Telfus rolled on the ground trying to hold the blood in his body. The nobles cheered and King Giron laughed and clapped his hands in glee. The guards stood back to watch the death throes of Telfus.

But Telfus struggled to a sitting position and cried out in a voice that was strangely powerful as if amplified by the voice of a god.

"I've been permitted one small miracle," he said. "Under Hiller these favors are hard to come by."

There was an electric silence. Telfus pointed his empty hand at King Giron with the forefinger extended, like a gun. He dropped his thumb.

"Bang," he said.

At that moment Ralph gave vent to his pent-up steam of emotions in one lightning-quick flip of the dial of destruction, sent out with a prayer. A microsecond jab. At that the earth rocked and there was a roaring as the nearby seas changed the shoreline.

But King Giron's head split open and his insides rushed out like a fat, ripe pea that had been opened and shucked by a celestial thumb. For a second the empty skin and bones stood upright in semblance of a man and then gently folded to the ground.

"Not bad," said Telfus. "Thanks." He died.

It was interesting to watch the Gironists. Death—death in battle or natural death—was a daylight-common thing. Dignified destruction is a human trade. But the unearthly death of the King brought about by the lazy fingering of the beggar—what person in his time would forget the flying guts and the empty, upright skin of the man who lived by cruelty and finally had his life shucked out?

Down below in the courtyard the Gironists began to get rid of their insignia. One man dropped Giron's book into a fire. Another softly drew a curtain over the idol of Giron. Men slunk away to ponder the non-violent god who would always be a shadow at their shoulder—who spoke seldom but when he spoke was heard for all time. Gironism was dead forever.

Up above a bell rang and Ralph jerked up from his contemplation with surprise to hear the rainlike sound, the applause and the approval of the audience in the Life Hall. Even Gerard was leaning over the press-box rail and grinning and nodding his head in approval, like a fish.

Ralph still had some time in the chair, but there would be no more trouble with the Short Ones. Already off somewhere a clerk was filling out the certificate.

He turned to Cynthia. "You saved me by that interruption."

"You earned your way," she said.

"I've learned much," he said. "If a god calls upon men for faith, then a god must return it with trust, and it was Telfus, not I, whom I trusted to solve the problem. After all, it was his life, his death."

"You've grown," she said.

"We have grown," he said, taking her hand under the table and not immediately letting go.

Earlier in this volume I mentioned the marked diversity of Mildred Clingerman's stories— a fact which you can confirm by reading the sharply different tales hitherto anthologized by me, by Groff Conklin and by August Derleth. Or you can find sufficient evidence simply in the contrast between the frivolous and rather naughty Birds Can't Count *and this narrative of a wealthy bore whose only distinction was that he knew the forgotten cause of—but Mrs. Clingerman lets her story develop and reveal itself so easily that a blurb has no business even stating the theme.*

THE LAST PROPHET

IT was said of Reggie Pfister that he had an uncanny knack for appearing at the best and noisiest parties, wherever in the world they might be. To those scribes who reported the cavortings of international society, Reggie was as much a fixture as the fat ex-king, though not nearly so colorful. Reggie, too, was fat and rich; but nobody hung on his words, nobody scrambled to join his retinue. Reggie didn't have any retinue. Hostesses welcomed him for the reason that unattached, eligible males are always welcomed; but because of his well-known hobby and his penchant for droning on about it in a soft, flat monotone, people tended to avoid him whenever possible.

At very large parties, however, there were always a few who were unaware of his reputation as an amiable bore. Across the room from him, somebody would be struck by his likeness to a jolly (but spiritual) monk; somebody else (usually female) would recall acres of oil wells all labeled *Pfister*; or occasionally somebody's attention would be caught by the significant way Reggie glanced at his watch, then

wrote in a worn little notebook. These were the people who threaded their way to his table.

Reggie's face always glowed with delight when this happened. Hopping up excitedly, Reggie pushed chairs about, signaled waiters, shook hands, and bounced on his toes till his guests, dizzied by his swooping, flightlike gestures, collapsed in their chairs gratefully. For the first few minutes Reggie was content to let the others talk—not because Reggie had finally learned to approach potential listeners warily (he hadn't), but because he liked the feeling that at any moment now he'd have the opportunity to present these smart, sophisticated people with some *real news!*

When he decided the time had come, almost any casual remark was enough to set Reggie going. Somebody might say, "It's a dull party," or "Weren't you in Rome last week?"

Then Reggie would say: "That's a very interesting question. I'm glad you brought that up. . . ." And always he'd gallop on his hobbyhorse while his guests stared at him and nudged each other under the table. ". . . I'm sure you've noticed it," the flat voice would be hurrying now. "Everybody has noticed it at one time or another, but nobody does anything about it—like the weather, hmmm? But I have. Done something about it, I mean. For fifteen years I've kept records on it . . . right here in this little old notebook. I've gone to the noisiest parties—trying to play fair, you know. Must be scientific about these things, or a project's worthless. Worthless. As of this moment, I've recorded 12,938 occasions it has happened, all personally witnessed. No doubtfuls included, you understand. If there's so much as a giggle, say, from the terrace, I'm utterly ruthless with myself. I don't record it, though I am often tempted . . . yes, yes, very tempted. My record is four in one twenty-four hour period. I should so much like to make it five. . . ."

There was always one at the table who had failed to follow Reggie's tricky transition. In fact, in his eagerness to plunge into his subject, Reggie often forgot to lead into it at all. Asked what the hell he was talking about, Reggie would laugh and slap his thighs, and then take out his handkerchief

and blow his nose. This seemed to have a sobering effect on everybody. Reggie, leaning carefully over his untouched drink, would tap the table with a pudgy forefinger, stare one by one into the glum faces around him, and ask a question.

"Haven't you ever noticed those dead-silent lulls that fall on groups of people? At a party like this one, for instance. Sooner or later this very night there'll come those few seconds when nobody is saying anything. When it happens, glance at your watch. You know what time it will be? *Twenty minutes after the hour.*" The pudgy finger lifted as if to halt protests. Nobody offered any. "Now mind you, some people will tell you that it also occurs at twenty minutes *to* the hour. I'll be honest with you. Sometimes it does. But out of 12,938 recorded instances, that has only happened, in my experience, 119 measly times. That clearly indicates to me just one thing: human fallibility. You discount human fraility, ordinary wear and tear, and the natural blurring after so long a time of the built-in blueprint for the human brain, and I'll guarantee that, *from the beginning,* we were supposed to be quiet at twenty minutes after every hour."

At this point, Reggie's listeners would be drooping listlessly over empty glasses and staring out at the gaiety around them with the sour faces of castaways watching a ship disappear over the horizon. But the waiters were heaving into view with drinks. Reggie saw to that. Almost anybody with a fresh drink before him will pause long enough to take a sip or two. Reggie counted on their doing so. Because now he was approaching the great heart of the matter. It was imperative that *this* time Reggie be allowed to finish what he had to say. But first he must fill them in, he thought, on some of the background.

"I've tracked this thing all over the world." (Reggie never varied his background-opener.) "I spent years hunting out the wisest men in every corner of the globe. To every one of them I put the same question: Why? *Why?* Most of them just laughed at me. . . Now, I'm not blaming them. I can see how, just at first, my question might sound pretty unimportant to a

busy man—the world being in the shape it is, and all. Their mistake was, they didn't ponder it long enough. If they'd bothered to think about it awhile, they'd have seen as clearly as I do that, given the answer to *what makes people fall silent at twenty minutes past the hour,* we'd have a lot of other answers to some pretty deep questions. Like, *Who are we?* for instance, and *Is there a God?* Well. To make a long story short, I finally ran across a couple of old magi, real wise men of the East, like in the Bible. They study the stars and charts and ancient old tablets and books, you know. So I asked them, and they didn't laugh. 'Come back,' they said, 'in seven years and we'll try to answer your question.' So back I went, seven years later—that was a couple of years ago—and I find just this one feeble old man still alive, but he had the answer for me!

"Now I don't insist that you believe it. The answer, I mean. You people can look on it as a theory, if you like. But I'll frankly admit that I regard it as prophecy. That poor little old man . . .! After his partner died, he'd worked on alone. He had a lot of dignity. The day before he died he took my hand and told me how lucky I was—said I was chosen to publish the good news and alert mankind. That made me feel good. But you have no idea how difficult it is! People don't seem to be interested. Oh, they'll listen politely enough for a while, but they never wait to find out the answer. . . ."

It was on the Riviera that Reggie's voice halted just at this point—one of those evenings when he was most hopeful of reaching his hearers. For a moment the whole room was quiet. Except for the wind that could be heard in the oleanders outside, the hush was complete. But only for a few seconds. Even while Reggie was consulting his watch, noise flowed back, with a woman's laughter bobbing atop the wave.

"You see!" Reggie crowed. "Twenty minutes after twelve!" But his guests were gone.

That kind of thing was always happening to Reggie. In Cairo or New York, in Madrid or Washington, D.C.—especially in Washington, D.C. It was there that Reggie had

the devastating experience of barely opening his mouth when several people said, "I'm glad you brought that up," and what with all of them talking politics very fast and loud, completely drowned out Reggie's soft drone.

In Hollywood Reggie got only as far as the two magi, when a pert starlet insisted there should be three magi, and where was Reggie from?

"Why, I'm from East Fairview, Pennsylvania," he admitted shyly.

Whereupon the starlet dragged him off to a bedroom and draped him in a bedspread, proclaiming him for the rest of the evening as the third wise man from the East. The other two, she said, were a helluva lot brighter. They'd already given up and gone home.

In San Francisco Reggie poured out his story to a fascinated audience, up to the moment when he was about to divulge the prophecy. But in San Francisco everybody insisted on the right to think (and prophesy) for himself, and it all ended in the hurling of some high-class vocabulary and fisticuffs.

Reggie boarded a fast plane home to East Fairview, having wired his housekeeper to uncover the furniture in the drawing room and prepare for a big party. He invited all his relatives and in-laws, his old school chums, and the girls he'd left behind him. It was a very nice party. For the first time in his life, Reggie was able to record five dead-silent lulls; but even this triumph was questionable, since he later discovered that none of his relatives ever spoke to each other anyway. And as for relating the prophecy, Reggie hadn't a chance. He had forgotten that a prophet is without honor under his own rooftree.

Back again in New York, Reggie faced the fact that time was running out. There's something about an unshared hotel room, he thought, that presents any fact in the dreariest possible light.

Silently, he addressed his image in the bureau mirror: Here am I, a lonely man, with a story to tell. I have *news*, and nobody listens. I'm fat and funny-looking and my voice is all wrong. Until fifteen years ago I led a perfectly useless ex-

istence. I'm not very smart; somebody else had to give me all the answers. I've shared food with people, and drinks, and roomspace, but I've never shared a great experience. I'd like to share this. I'm the only man alive who knows . . .

Suddenly Reggie Pfister remembered that he was a rich man. He remembered it in a spirit of humility. If nobody would listen freely, then perhaps he could pay to be heard.

The psychiatrist's office was cool and quiet, except for the murmuring of the two nurses in the receptionist's cubicle. Reggie was very early for his appointment; he had been anxious to escape the hotel room and the bureau mirror. There was another patient waiting too, a young woman with the blank, unwritten-on face of a child. Reggie tried not to stare at her. He had the feeling that it might be bad form to show undue interest in patients waiting in the outer rooms of psychiatrists. But the young woman troubled him. She was very pale, and she was trembling. She turned the pages of the magazine she held with the excessive quietness and caution of a child who has been scolded too often and too harshly. Reggie, stealing little peeps at her over his own magazine, saw that she was crying. He had never before seen anybody weep in just that way. Two little unbroken streams of tears poured smoothly down her face and dripped onto her soft collar. She was scarcely making a sound.

Impulsively Reggie went to sit beside her. He glanced at the receptionist's cubicle. He and the girl were out of the line of sight of the nurses. They would have had to lean out their little window to watch the two patients; besides, they were now discussing hats. No interference there, Reggie thought, and he took the girl in his arms.

She fitted against him without resistance, pressing her head against his shoulder. After a while, when her trembling had subsided, Reggie wiped her eyes and her nose and smoothed back the fine, straight hair. He was rewarded with a small, tentative smile.

"I'm so frightened," the girl whispered, leaning very close to Reggie's ear, as if she were telling an important secret.

"Tell me why," Reggie whispered back.

"All the paths are dark," the girl said, "and I am afraid to turn corners."

"Yes," Reggie said. "And what else?"

"When I cry out in the night, nobody answers . . . and . . . and there are beasts in the forest who devour children, even very good children. Not a bit like in stories . . . Will you tell me a story?"

Reggie's eyes closed almost involuntarily, as if he wanted to contain for the moment his fierce joy. He shifted his arm then and drew her closer to him.

"Listen. . . ." he said. "Once upon a time—a *very* long time ago, when the world was young, a father gathered his children around him and said, 'I must go away for a time. I have work to do far away—so far that, though I shall travel faster than your good thoughts, yet will I not have reached the realm when your children's children are old. I do not like to leave my children fatherless, but I am needed elsewhere. I leave you with my boundless love, and lest you grow weary with longing for counsel, I bid you be silent and listen at such times every day—' "

Reggie paused and smiled down at the girl's rapt face. "And then," he continued, "the father set a kind of little clock humming in every child's head, with the times for listening clearly marked, so none could forget. Then he said, 'When I have finished my work, I will come home.' He kissed every child goodby and asked them all to be good, and then he went away."

"Did the old witch get them?" the girl asked in alarm.

"The old witch?" Reggie asked.

"You know. It's part of the game. . . . The father says, 'I'm going downtown to smoke my pipe, and I won't be back till the broad daylight. Don't let the old witch get you.' Then the children are supposed to say *'Tick-a-lock'* so they'll be safe behind the locked door. But mostly they forget that part," the girl mused.

Reggie nodded. "Yes, I expect these children forgot it, too. By and by, they, or their descendants, forgot a number of

things. They forgot the trick of listening in a certain, special way; so that, as the father traveled farther and farther, and his voice grew smaller and smaller, finally they couldn't hear him at all. But the little clocks still kept humming—every child ever after was born with one built-in—and every day people still fell silent at the right times though they no longer knew why."

The girl stirred in his arms. "And then what happened?"

Reggie sighed. "The next part hasn't happened yet. In the meantime the world grows darker and darker without counsel, and you and I are afraid of the beasts in the forest. . . . But almost any day now," Reggie's face brightened, "something very nice will happen. You really mustn't be afraid because—" Reggie struggled for the right words to phrase the prophecy, but found none. The girl waited quietly. In their cubicle, the two nurses were silent, too. Reggie stared at the clock on the wall. *Twenty minutes after three.*

Suddenly, out of the silence, there was a great deal of noise, as of the ripping of an enormous cloth, big enough to shroud the world. Then came a mighty rolling-back sound, as if the sky had parted and curled back on itself like two halves of a scroll. Light poured down into the waiting room, and the weight of it bowed the heads of all within. There was a sound like bells, and a sound like thunder. There was an immutable sound like power, and a joyous sound like glory. Reggie heard and noted the chill undertones of justice, but was most aware of the tender tones of love. Both the light and the sound grew and grew till they merged and became the Voice:

MY DEAR, OBEDIENT CHILDREN, I AM COMING HOME. . . .

There was a cessation of sound, and only the light remained. Then one of the nurses screamed, and the scream died away into a long, sobbing wail. This very human ululation brought Reggie's head up sharply. The old distress call of the pack found an instant response in his quickened heartbeat, and in the prickling down his backbone. It brought Reggie's head around to stare downward through the window behind him, however briefly. Still holding the girl,

Reggie's arms were now wooden and unaware. His mouth was dry and he swallowed spasmodically to rid it of the metallic taste of adrenalin.

Below him the pack squirmed and crawled like maggots seeking an opening into the dark, sweet body of the earth. Reggie saw enacted with terrible clarity all that was animal in humankind. Under a rising accompaniment of wordless babble the monstrous pantomime unrolled for him. Reggie was lost in it and part of it, tooth and claw, till suddenly he caught sight of a man with his back to a wall, his arms and head raised defiantly, not against the howling mob, but *against the sky.* The puny, clenched fists of the man were so sad and wonderful that Reggie smiled. . . . There was something in the gesture that returned all Reggie's humanity to him. The pack moved on, but Reggie turned and looked at the girl.

Bathed in the great light, her face showed no fear. When her serene eyes met his, Reggie was able for a moment to meet her gaze without faltering. Except that . . . His eyes closed in shame for the niggling little shred of vanity and disappointment he was wrestling with. *If only I could have had another minute* . . . he thought.

"You are troubled," she said.

"It's nothing really," Reggie said. "It's just that I wanted to tell you something, but time ran out."

P. M. Hubbard is the most skilled and graceful writer of light (and occasionally serious) verse whom Punch has discovered since A. P. Herbert. (Memo to American publishers: A collection of his delightful poetry is long overdue.) In this story, written especially for F&SF, he brings a poet's sense of concise beauty to a classic and ever tragic theme of science fiction.

BOTANY BAY

It was one of those evenings you get in England around midsummer, that seem to go on indefinitely. I could build up a nice bit of atmosphere about that evening, but it wouldn't be true. If there was an atmosphere, I didn't feel it; and on the facts, even as presented, I don't see why there should have been. And the petrol-station was a perfectly ordinary one, and the man on duty, to all appearances, a perfectly ordinary man.

The man filled her up, speaking with a pleasant richness in what I took to be the local voice. Then he went inside for change, and I got out and walked around a bit to stretch my legs. The road followed the valley here, with hills—I suppose chalk downs—rising sharply on the far side. It was really starting to get dark at last, and the narrow strip of tarmac reflected like water the tremendous sultry glow that lay across the tops of the hills. There were a few stars showing, and one in particular, a steady orange-gold, over the high skyline right opposite the pumps.

I fetched up beside the door of the garage, looking at the collection of spares and accessories they always put in the window at these places. The man must have thought I was still in the car. He came straight out of the door, leaving me behind him, and walked towards the pumps. He had the money in his hand. Then he stopped, just as I was going to speak to

him, and uttered a sound which I could hardly believe I'd heard, only my stomach was still sickened at it. When I pulled myself together, I decided he was ill, and went to him. He was still standing there, with the line of pumps between him and the car, gazing up at the sky, where the orange-yellow star, clearer now, gazed back.

I said, "Are you all right?" I didn't touch him or anything. He was perfectly steady on his feet, just standing there, and I still wasn't sure. Then I came abreast of him and saw his face. I haven't described his appearance before, because he wasn't the sort of man you find it necessary to describe—just an ordinary man in overalls, a bit on the small side and quiet-spoken, but very ordinary. Now he had a look on his face that needs describing, but isn't easy to describe—not adequately. It was a look of longing, a sort of shocking hunger, but so overlaid with hopelessness that the impression was one of complete passivity. He didn't move because there was nothing he could do. The sound he had uttered had been squeezed out of him; it was quite involuntary. He was looking at the star.

I said, "Are you all right?" again. It was an idiotic question to ask a man with that look on his face, but it was the sort of thing one does say. He heard me the second time. He turned and held out the money to me, but in a tentative sort of way, and not quite within my reach, as though he couldn't get me properly focused. I moved up and took it from him. That seemed to rouse him. He looked at me, rearranging his disintegrated features. "I thought you were in the car," he said. The voice, with its soft country burr, was quite unchanged.

It seemed to be dark now all at once. The orange star glowed in the sky, but he did not look at it. It didn't look right to me, but I don't notice that sort of thing much, and I think now it was probably quite normal. There again, there was no reason, even on the facts, why it should have been anything else.

I said, "That star—" but he cut me very short. "That's not a star, sir," he said. "More what you'd call a planet." He spoke exactly as a countryman speaks to a townsman, putting him

right, but no disrespect intended. He was in every way perfectly ordinary again.

"All right," I said, "a planet it is. But look, chum. I don't want to interfere, and I'm sorry if you didn't know I was there. But I heard you and saw your face just now, and there's something very wrong. If there's anything I can do—"

He turned his back while I was still speaking and started walking towards the garage. He said, "I wonder why the hell They let me remember."

He went inside and I followed him. In the last glimmer of daylight we groped our way into the little boarded box of an office and sat down on hard chairs. The air smelt of petrol and oiled metal. I could see the outline of a cash register and above it the stolid, frowning profile against the luminous window. "I didn't ought to remember, not by rights," he said. "They said—" He caught his breath, and I felt sick at the stomach again. "They said"—this time the word was harsh with a sort of incredulous defiance—"They said we'd remember nothing that was any good to us—just enough to keep us unhappy. They must have got the mixture wrong." He thought for a bit. "A couple of hundred of us there must have been, my time. Too many to handle properly, perhaps. Used to be forty or fifty in a batch, generally, but They had been having a lot of trouble. Don't all get there, of course. Even They don't know everything, and there's a lot of wastage. What happens to the ones that miss nobody knows, but They wouldn't care, so long as they get us off. Still, there must be a lot of us about, remembering enough to keep us unhappy. It's nicely done, really. You've got to hand it to them. They are clever all right."

He chuckled, a soft country chuckle, and then caught his breath again, so that I felt my heart thud twice in the sudden, hollow silence.

The window frame lit up silver with the lights of an oncoming car. I got up, clutching with both hands at the solid reality of a country garage. Somebody sounded a horn outside, and he said, "I'll have to ask you to move your car, sir. You're blocking the pumps."

"I will," I said. I got in and started her up. Then, seeing no reason to do anything else, I drove on.

It was nearly a year before I went there again. I had no need to stop this time, and did not mean to. Nevertheless, I found I had been hoping to see him outside by the pumps; and when I did not, I hesitated on the throttle, and then stopped the car and walked back.

I didn't know the man who came out. He was a lot older, probably the boss. I suddenly found myself in a difficulty. I said, "Oh—I was hoping to see the chap who was here."

He looked at me a bit sharp. "Newman, you mean?" he said.

"I don't know his name. About a year ago. A smallish chap, fair."

"That's right, Newman. What d'you want him for? Any sort of trouble?" He seemed eager.

"No," I said, "no trouble. Isn't he here?"

"He went," he said. "Walked out on me. Must be nearly a year ago now. Never heard a word from him, nor did anyone else. Left everything in order, I must say. But when you asked for him, I wondered."

I said, "It doesn't matter." I turned and walked back to the car, feeling his eyes on my back the whole way. Now, of course, I shall never know. Only I did not imagine it. I can see him and hear him much too clearly for that, railing in his soft country voice against some monstrous celestial tyranny I could not understand.

It's a strange and moving story that Walter Miller has chosen to tell on this his first (and very welcome!) appearance in these annuals. In the background is a bitter history of atomic devastation and of man's deliberate conscious creation of a new Dark Age. But this is no bitter story; for in the foreground stands little Brother Francis of Utah, gentle, humble, fallibly human—and this loving account of his trials glow with the light that must lie at the heart of the Darkest Age.

A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ

BROTHER FRANCIS GERARD of Utah would never have discovered the sacred document, had it not been for the pilgrim with girded loins who appeared during that young monk's Lenten fast in the desert. Never before had Brother Francis actually seen a pilgrim with girded loins, but that this one was the bona fide article he was convinced at a glance. The pilgrim was a spindly old fellow with a staff, a basket hat, and a brushy beard, stained yellow about the chin. He walked with a limp and carried a small waterskin over one shoulder. His loins truly were girded with a ragged piece of dirty burlap, his only clothing except for hat and sandals. He whistled tunelessly on his way.

The pilgrim came shuffling down the broken trail out of the north, and he seemed to be heading toward the Brothers of Leibowitz Abbey six miles to the south. The pilgrim and the monk noticed each other across an expanse of ancient rubble. The pilgrim stopped whistling and stared. The monk, because of certain implications of the rule of solitude for fast days, quickly averted his gaze and continued about his business of hauling large rocks with which to complete the wolf-proofing of his temporary shelter. Somewhat weakened by a ten-day diet of cactus fruit, Brother Francis found the work

made him exceedingly dizzy; the landscape had been shimmering before his eyes and dancing with black specks, and he was at first uncertain that the bearded apparition was not a mirage induced by hunger, but after a moment it called to him cheerfully, *"Ola allayl"*

It was a pleasant musical voice.

The rule of silence forbade the young monk to answer, except by smiling shyly at the ground.

"Is this here the road to the abbey?" the wanderer asked.

The novice nodded at the ground and reached down for a chalklike fragment of stone. The pilgrim picked his way toward him through the rubble. "What are you doing with all the rocks?" he wanted to know.

The monk knelt and hastily wrote the words "Solitude & Silence" on a large flat rock, so that the pilgrim—if he could read, which was statistically unlikely—would know that he was making himself an occasion of sin for the penitent and would perhaps have the grace to leave in peace.

"Oh, well," said the pilgrim. He stood there for a moment, looking around, then rapped a certain large rock with his staff. *"That* looks like a handy crag for you," he offered helpfully, then added: "Well, good luck. And may you find a Voice, as y' seek."

Now Brother Francis had no immediate intuition that the stranger meant "Voice" with a capital V, but merely assumed that the old fellow had mistaken him for a deaf mute. He glanced up once again as the pilgrim shuffled away whistling, sent a swift silent benediction after him for safe wayfaring, and went back to his rock-work, building a coffin-sized enclosure in which he might sleep at night without offering himself as wolf-bait.

A skyherd of cumulus clouds, on their way to bestow moist blessings on the mountains after having cruelly tempted the desert, offered welcome respite from the searing sunlight, and he worked rapidly to finish before they were gone again. He punctuated his labors with whispered prayers for the certainty of a true Vocation, for this was the purpose of his inward quest while fasting in the desert.

At last he hoisted the rock which the pilgrim had suggested.

The color of exertion drained quickly from his face. He backed away a step and dropped the stone as if he had uncovered a serpent.

A rusted metal box lay half crushed in the rubble . . . only a rusted metal box.

He moved toward it curiously, then paused. There were things, and then there were Things. He crossed himself hastily, and muttered brief Latin at the heavens. Thus fortified, he readdressed himself to the box.

"*Apage Satanas!*"

He threatened it with the heavy crucifix of his rosary.

"Depart, O Foul Seductor!"

He sneaked a tiny aspergillum from his robes and quickly spattered the box with holy water before it could realize what he was about.

"If thou be creature of the Devil, begone!"

The box showed no signs of withering, exploding, melting away. It exuded no blasphemous ichor. It only lay quietly in its place and allowed the desert wind to evaporate the sanctifying droplets.

"So be it," said the brother, and knelt to extract it from its lodging. He sat down on the rubble and spent nearly an hour battering it open with a stone. The thought crossed his mind that such an archeological relic—for such it obviously was—might be the Heaven-sent sign of his vocation but he suppressed the notion as quickly as it occurred to him. His abbott had warned him sternly against expecting any direct personal Revelation of a spectacular nature. Indeed, he had gone forth from the abbey to fast and do penance for forty days that he might be rewarded with the inspiration of a calling to Holy Orders, but to expect a vision or a voice crying "Francis, where art thou?" would be a vain presumption. Too many novices had returned from their desert vigils with tales of omens and signs and visions in the heavens, and the good abbot had adopted a firm policy regarding these. Only the Vatican was qualified to decide the authenticity of

such things. "An attack of sunstroke is no indication that you are fit to profess the solemn vows of the order," he had growled. And certainly it was true that only rarely did a call from Heaven come through any device other than the *inward ear,* as a gradual congealing of inner certainty.

Nevertheless, Brother Francis found himself handling the old metal box with as much reverence as was possible while battering at it.

It opened suddenly, spilling some of its contents. He stared for a long time before daring to touch, and a cool thrill gathered along his spine. Here was antiquity indeed! And as a student of archeology, he could scarcely believe his wavering vision. Brother Jeris would be frantic with envy, he thought, but quickly repented this unkindness and murmured his thanks to the sky for such a treasure.

He touched the articles gingerly—they were real enough—and began sorting through them. His studies had equipped him to recognize a screwdriver—an instrument once used for twisting threaded bits of metal into wood—and a pair of cutters with blades no longer than his thumbnail, but strong enough to cut soft bits of metal or bone. There was an odd tool with a rotted wooden handle and a heavy copper tip to which a few flakes of molten lead had adhered, but he could make nothing of it. There was a toroidal roll of gummy black stuff, too far deteriorated by the centuries for him to identify. There were strange bits of metal, broken glass, and an assortment of tiny tubular things with wire whiskers of the type prized by the hill pagans as charms and amulets, but thought by some archeologists to be remnants of the legendary *machina analytica,* supposedly dating back to the Deluge of Flame.

All these and more he examined carefully and spread on the wide flat stone. The documents he saved until last. The documents, as always, were the real prize, for so few papers had survived the angry bonfires of the Age of Simplification, when even the sacred writings had curled and blackened and withered into smoke while ignorant crowds howled vengeance.

Two large folded papers and three hand-scribbled notes con-

stituted his find. All were cracked and brittle with age, and he handled them tenderly, shielding them from the wind with his robe. They were scarcely legible and scrawled in the hasty characters of pre-Deluge English—a tongue now used, together with Latin, only by monastics and in the Holy Ritual. He spelled it out slowly, recognizing words but uncertain of meanings. One note said: *Pound pastrami, can kraut, six bagels, for Emma.* Another ordered: *Don't forget to pick up form* 1040 *for Uncle Revenue.* The third note was only a column of figures with a circled total from which another amount was subtracted and finally a percentage taken, followed by the word *damn!* From this he could deduce nothing, except to check the arithmetic, which proved correct.

Of the two larger papers, one was tightly rolled and began to fall to pieces when he tried to open it; he could make out the words RACING FORM, but nothing more. He laid it back in the box for later restorative work.

The second large paper was a single folded sheet, whose creases were so brittle that he could only inspect a little of it by parting the folds and peering between them as best he could.

A diagram . . . a web of white lines on dark paper!

Again the cool thrill gathered along his spine. It was a *blueprint*—that exceedingly rare class of ancient document most prized by students of antiquity, and usually most challenging to interpreters and searchers for meaning.

And, as if the find itself were not enough of a blessing, among the words written in a block at the lower corner of the document was the name of the founder of his order—of the Blessed Leibowitz *himself!*

His trembling hands threatened to tear the paper in their happy agitation. The parting words of the pilgrim tumbled back to him: "May you find a Voice, as y' seek." Voice indeed, with V capitalized and formed by the wings of a descending dove and illuminated in three colors against a background of gold leaf. V as in *Vere dignum* and *Vidi aquam,* at the head of a page of the Missal. V, he saw quite clearly, as in Vocation.

He stole another glance to make certain it was so, then breathed, *"Beate Leibowitz, ora pro me . . . Sancte Leibowitz, exaudi me,"* the second invocation being a rather daring one, since the founder of his order had not yet been declared a saint.

Forgetful of his abbot's warning, he climbed quickly to hs feet and stared across the shimmering terrain to the south in the direction taken by the old wanderer of the burlap loincloth. But the pilgrim had long since vanished. Surely an angel of God, if not the Blessed Leibowitz himself, for had he not revealed this miraculous treasure by pointing out the rock to be moved and murmuring that prophetic farewell?

Brother Francis stood basking in his awe until the sun lay red on the hills and evening threatened to engulf him in its shadows. At last he stirred, and reminded himself of the wolves. His gift included no guarantee of charismata for subduing the wild beast, and he hastened to finish his enclosure before darkness fell on the desert. When the stars came out, he rekindled his fire and gathered his daily repast of the small purple cactus fruit, his only nourishment except the handful of parched corn brought to him by the priest each Sabbath. Sometimes he found himself staring hungrily at the lizards which scurried over the rocks, and was troubled by gluttonous nightmares.

But tonight his hunger was less troublesome than an impatient urge to run back to the abbey and announce his wondrous encounter to his brethern. This, of course, was unthinkable. Vocation or no, he must remain here until the end of Lent, and continue as if nothing extraordinary had occurred.

A cathedral will be built upon this site, he thought dreamily as he sat by the fire. He could see it rising from the rubble of the ancient village, magnificent spires visible for miles across the desert. . . .

But cathedrals were for teeming masses of people. The desert was home for only scattered tribes of huntsmen and the monks of the abbey. He settled in his dreams for a shrine, attracting rivers of pilgrims with girded loins. . . . He drowsed.

When he awoke, the fire was reduced to glowing embers. Something seemed amiss. Was he quite alone? He blinked about at the darkness.

From beyond the bed of reddish coals, the dark wolf blinked back. The monk yelped and dived for cover.

The yelp, he decided as he lay trembling within his den of stones, had not been a serious breach of the rule of silence. He lay hugging the metal box and praying for the days of Lent to pass swiftly, while the sound of padded feet scratched about the enclosure.

Each night the wolves prowled about his camp, and the darkness was full of their howling. The days were glaring nightmares of hunger, heat, and scorching sun. He spent them at prayer and wood-gathering, trying to suppress his impatience for the coming of Holy Saturday's high noon, the end of Lent and of his vigil.

But when at last it came, Brother Francis found himself too famished for jubilation. Wearily he packed his pouch, pulled up his cowl against the sun, and tucked his precious box beneath one arm. Thirty pounds lighter and several degrees weaker than he had been on Ash Wednesday, he staggered the six-mile stretch to the abbey where he fell exhausted before its gates. The brothers who carried him in and bathed him and shaved him and anointed his desiccated tissues reported that he had babbled incessantly in his delirium about an apparition in a burlap loincloth, addressing it at times as an angel and again as a saint, frequently invoking the name of Leibowitz and thanking him for a revelation of sacred relics and a racing form.

Such reports filtered through the monastic congregation and soon reached the ears of the abbot, whose eyes immediately narrowed to slits and whose jaw went rigid with the rock of policy.

"Bring him," growled that worthy priest in a tone that sent a recorder scurrying.

The abbot paced and gathered his ire. It was not that he objected to miracles, as such, if duly investigated, certified,

and sealed; for miracles—even though always incompatible with administrative efficiency, and the abbot was administrator as well as priest—were the bedrock stuff on which his faith was founded. But last year there had been Brother Noyen with his miraculous hangman's noose, and the year before that, Brother Smirnov, who had been mysteriously cured of the gout upon handling a probable relic of the Blessed Leibowitz, and the year before that . . . *Faugh!* The incidents had been too frequent and outrageous to tolerate. Ever since Leibowitz' beatification, the young fools had been sniffing around after shreds of the miraculous like a pack of good-natured hounds scratching eagerly at the back gate of Heaven for scraps.

It was quite understandable, but also quite unbearable. Every monastic order is eager for the canonization of its founder, and delighted to produce any bit of evidence to serve the cause in advocacy. But the abbot's flock was getting out of hand, and their zeal for miracles was making the Albertian Order of Leibowitz a laughingstock at New Vatican. He had determined to make any new bearers of miracles suffer the consequences, either as a punishment for impetuous and impertinent credulity, or as payment in penance for a gift of grace in case of later verification.

By the time the young novice knocked at his door, the abbot had projected himself into the desired state of carnivorous expectancy beneath a bland exterior.

"Come in, my son," he breathed softly.

"You sent for . . ." The novice paused, smiling happily as he noticed the familiar metal box on the abbot's table. ". . . for me, Father Juan?" he finished.

"Yes . . ." The abbot hesitated. His voice smiled with a withering acid, adding: "Or perhaps you would prefer that I come to *you,* hereafter, since you've become such a famous personage."

"Oh, no, Father!" Brother Francis reddened and gulped.

"You are seventeen, and plainly an idiot."

"That is undoubtedly true, Father."

"What improbable excuse can you propose for your outrageous vanity in believing yourself fit for Holy Orders?"

"I can offer none, my ruler and teacher. My sinful pride is unpardonable."

"To imagine that it is so great as to be unpardonable is even a vaster vanity," the priest roared.

"Yes, Father. I am indeed a worm."

The abbot smiled icily and resumed his watchful calm. "And you are now ready to deny your feverish ravings about an angel appearing to reveal to you this . . ." He gestured contemptuously at the box. ". . . this assortment of junk?"

Brother Francis gulped and closed his eyes. "I—I fear I cannot deny it, my master."

"What?"

"I cannot deny what I have seen, Father."

"Do you know what is going to happen to you now?"

"Yes, Father."

"Then prepare to take it!"

With a sigh, the novice gathered up his robes about his waist and bent over the table. The good abbot produced his stout hickory ruler from the drawer and whacked him soundly ten times across the bare buttocks. After each whack, the novice dutifully responded with a *"Deo Gratias!"* for this lesson in the virtue of humility.

"Do you *now* retract it?" the abbot demanded as he rolled down his sleeve.

"Father, I cannot."

The priest turned his back and was silent for a moment. "Very well," he said tersely. "Go. But do not expect to profess your solemn vows this season with the others."

Brother Francis returned to his cell in tears. His fellow novices would join the ranks of the professed monks of the order, while he must wait another year—and spend another Lenten season among the wolves in the desert, seeking a vocation which he felt had already been granted to him quite emphatically. As the weeks passed, however, he found some satisfaction in noticing that Father Juan had not been entirely serious in referring to his find as "an assortment of junk." The

archeological relics aroused considerable interest among the brothers, and much time was spent at cleaning the tools, classifying them, restoring the documents to a pliable condition, and attempting to ascertain their meaning. It was even whispered among the novices that Brother Francis had discovered true relics of the Blessed Leibowitz—especially in the form of the blueprint bearing the legend OP COBBLESTONE, REQ LEIBOWITZ & HARDIN, which was stained with several brown splotches which might have been his blood—or equally likely, as the abbot pointed out, might be stains from a decayed apple core. But the print was dated in the Year of Grace 1956, which was—as nearly as could be determined—during that venerable man's lifetime, a lifetime now obscured by legend and myth, so that it was hard to determine any but a few facts about the man.

It was said that God, in order to test mankind, had commanded wise men of that age, among them the Blessed Leibowitz, to perfect diabolic weapons and give them into the hands of latter-day Pharaohs. And with such weapons Man had within the span of a few weeks, destroyed most of his civilization and wiped out a large part of the population. After the Deluge of Flame came the plagues, the madness, and the bloody inception of the Age of Simplification when the furious remnants of humanity had torn politicians, technicians, and men of learning limb from limb, and burned all records that might contain information that could once more lead into paths of destruction. Nothing had been so fiercely hated as the written word, the learned man. It was during this time that the word "simpleton" came to mean "honest, upright, virtuous citizen," a concept once denoted by the term "common man."

To escape the righteous wrath of the surviving simpletons, many scientists and learned men fled to the only sanctuary which would try to offer them protection. Holy Mother Church received them, vested them in monk's robes, tried to conceal them from the mobs. Sometimes the sanctuary was effective; more often it was not. Monasteries were invaded, records and sacred books were burned, refugees seized and

hanged. Leibowitz had fled to the Cistercians, professed their vows, became a priest, and after twelve years had won permission from the Holy See to found a new monastic order to be called "the Albertians," after St. Albert the Great, teacher of Aquinas and patron saint of scientists. The new order was to be dedicated to the preservation of knowledge, secular and sacred, and the duty of the brothers was to memorize such books and papers as could be smuggled to them from all parts of the world. Leibowitz was at last identified by simpletons as a former scientist, and was martyred by hanging; but the order continued, and when it became safe again to possess written documents, many books were transcribed from memory. Precedence, however, had been given to sacred writings, to history, the humanities, and social sciences—since the memories of the memorizers were limited, and few of the brothers were trained to understand the physical sciences. From the vast store of human knowledge, only a pitiful collection of handwritten books remained.

Now, after six centuries of darkness, the monks still preserved it, studied it, recopied it, and waited. It mattered not in the least to them that the knowledge they saved was useless—and some of it even incomprehensible. The knowledge was there, and it was their duty to save it, and it would still be with them if the darkness in the world lasted ten thousand years.

Brother Francis Gerard of Utah returned to the desert the following year and fasted again in solitude. Once more he returned, weak and emaciated, to be confronted by the abbot, who demanded to know if he claimed further conferences with members of the Heavenly Host, or was prepared to renounce his story of the previous year.

"I cannot help what I have seen, my teacher," the lad repeated.

Once more did the abbot chastise him in Christ, and once more did he postpone his profession. The document, however, had been forwarded to a seminary for study, after a copy had been made. Brother Francis remained a novice, and continued

to dream wistfully of the shrine which might someday be built upon the site of his find.

"Stubborn boy!" fumed the abbot. "Why didn't somebody else see his silly pilgrim, if the slovenly fellow was heading for the abbey as he said? One more escapade for the Devil's Advocate to cry hoax about. Burlap loincloth indeed!"

The burlap had been troubling the abbot, for tradition related that Leibowitz had been hanged with a burlap bag for a hood.

Brother Francis spent seven years in the novitiate, seven Lenten vigils in the desert, and became highly proficient in the imitation of wolf calls. For the amusement of his brethren, he would summon the pack to the vicinity of the abbey by howling from the walls after dark. By day, he served in the kitchen, scrubbed the stone floors, and continued his studies of the ancients.

Then one day a messenger from the seminary came riding to the abbey on an ass, bearing the tidings of great joy. "It is known," said the messenger, "that the documents found near here are authentic as to date of origin, and that the blueprint was somehow connected with your founder's work. It's being sent to New Vatican for further study."

"Possibly a true relic of Leibowitz, then?" the abbot asked calmly.

But the messenger could not commit himself to that extent, and only raised a shrug of one eyebrow. "It is said that Leibowitz was a widower at the time of his ordination. If the name of his deceased wife could be discovered . . ."

The abbot recalled the note in the box concerning certain articles of food for a woman, and he too shrugged an eyebrow.

Soon afterwards, he summoned Brother Francis into his presence. "My boy," said the priest, actually beaming. "I believe the time has come for you to profess your solemn vows. And may I commend you for your patience and persistence. We shall speak no more of your, ah . . . encounter with the

ah, desert wanderer. You are a good simpleton. You may kneel for my blessing, if you wish."

Brother Francis sighed and fell forward in a dead faint. The abbot blessed him and revived him, and he was permitted to profess the solemn vows of the Albertian Brothers of Leibowitz, swearing himself to perpetual poverty, chastity, obedience, and observance of the rule.

Soon afterwards, he was assigned to the copying room, apprentice under an aged monk named Horner, where he would undoubtedly spend the rest of his days illuminating the pages of algebra texts with patterns of olive leaves and cheerful cherubim.

"You have five hours a week," croaked his aged overseer, "which you may devote to an approved project of your own choosing, if you wish. If not, the time will be assigned to copying the *Summa Theologica* and such fragmentary copies of the Britannica as exist."

The young monk thought it over, then asked: "May I have the time for elaborating a beautiful copy of the Leibowitz blueprint?"

Brother Horner frowned doubtfully. "I don't know, son—our good abbot is rather sensitive on this subject. I'm afraid . . ."

Brother Francis begged him earnestly.

"Well, perhaps," the old man said reluctantly. "It seems like a rather brief project, so—I'll permit it."

The young monk selected the finest lambskin available and spent many weeks curing it and stretching it and stoning it to a perfect surface, bleached to a snowy whiteness. He spent more weeks at studying copies of his precious document in every detail, so that he knew each tiny line and marking in the complicated web of geometric markings and mystifying symbols. He pored over it until he could see the whole amazing complexity with his eyes closed. Additional weeks were spent searching painstakingly through the monastery's library for any information at all that might lead to some glimmer of understanding of the design.

Brother Jeris, a young monk who worked with him in the

copy room and who frequently teased him about miraculous encounters in the desert, came to squint at it over his shoulder and asked: "What pray, is the meaning of *Transistorized Control System for Unit Six-B*?"

"Clearly, it is the name of the thing which this diagram represents," said Francis, a trifle crossly since Jeris had merely read the title of the document aloud.

"Surely," said Jeris. "But what is the thing the diagram represents?"

"The transistorized control system for unit six-B, obviously."

Jeris laughed mockingly.

Brother Francis reddened. "I should imagine," said he, "that it represents an abstract concept, rather than a concrete *thing*. It's clearly not a recognizable picture of an object, unless the form is so stylized as to require special training to see it. In my opinion, *Transistorized Control System* is some highly abstraction of transcendental value."

"Pertaining to what field of learning?" asked Jeris, still smiling smugly.

"Why . . ." Brother Francis paused. "Since our Beatus Leibowitz was an electronicist prior to his profession and ordination, I suppose the concept applies to the lost art called *electronics*."

"So it is written. But what was the subject matter of that art, Brother?"

"That too is written. The subject matter of electronics was the Electron, which one fragmentary source defines as a Negative Twist of Nothingness."

"I am impressed by your astuteness," said Jeris. "Now perhaps you can tell me how to negate nothingness?"

Brother Francis reddened slightly and squirmed for a reply.

"A negation of nothingness should yield somethingness, I suppose," Jeris continued. "So the Electron must have been a twist of *something*. Unless the negation applies to the 'twist,' and then we would be 'Untwisting Nothing,' eh?" He chuckled. "How clever they must have been, these ancients. I suppose if you keep at it, Francis, you will learn how to untwist a nothing, and then we shall have the Electron in our

midst. Where would we put it? On the high altar, perhaps?"

"I couldn't say," Francis answered stiffly. "But I have a certain faith that the Electron must have existed at one time, even though I can't say how it was constructed or what it might have been used for."

The iconoclast laughed mockingly and returned to his work. The incident saddened Francis, but did not turn him from his devotion to his project.

As soon as he had exhausted the library's meager supply of information concerning the lost art of the Albertians' founder, he began preparing preliminary sketches of the designs he meant to use on the lambskin. The diagram itself, since its meaning was obscure, would be redrawn precisely as it was in the blueprint, and penned in coal-black lines. The lettering and numbering, however, he would translate into a more decorative and colorful script than the plain block letters used by the ancients. And the text contained in a square block marked SPECIFICATIONS would be distributed pleasingly around the borders of the document, upon scrolls and shields supported by doves and cherubims. He would make the black lines of the diagram less stark and austere by imagining the geometric tracery to be a trellis, and decorate it with green vines and golden fruit, birds and perhaps a wily serpent. At the very top would be a representation of the Triune God, and at the bottom the coat of arms of the Albertian Order. Thus was the Transistorized Control System of the Blessed Liebowitz to be glorified and rendered appealing to the eye as well as to the intellect.

When he had finished the preliminary sketch, he showed it shyly to Brother Horner for suggestions or approval. "I can see," said the old man a bit remorsefully, "that your project is not to be as brief as I had hoped. But . . . continue with it anyhow. The design is beautiful, beautiful indeed."

"Thank you, Brother."

The old man leaned close to wink confidentially. "I've heard the case for Blessed Leibowitz' canonization has been speeded up, so possibly our dear abbot is less troubled by you-know-what than he previously was."

The news of the speed-up was, of course, happily received by all monastics of the order. Leibowitz' beatification had long since been effected, but the final step in declaring him to be a saint might require many more years, even though the case was under way; and indeed there was the possibility that the Devil's Advocate might uncover evidence to prevent the canonization from occurring at all.

Many months after he had first conceived the project, Brother Francis began actual work on the lambskin. The intricacies of scrollwork, the excruciatingly delicate work of inlaying the gold leaf, the hair-fine detail, made it a labor of years; and when his eyes began to trouble him, there were long weeks when he dared not touch it at all for fear of spoiling it with one little mistake. But slowly, painfully, the ancient diagram was becoming a blaze of beauty. The brothers of the abbey gathered to watch and murmur over it, and some even said that the inspiration of it was proof enough of his alleged encounter with the pilgrim who might have been Blessed Leibowitz.

"I can't see why you don't spend your time on a *useful* project," was Brother Jeris' comment, however. The skeptical monk had been using his own free-project time to make and decorate sheepskin shades for the oil lamps in the chapel.

Brother Horner, the old master copyist, had fallen ill. Within weeks, it became apparent that the well-loved monk was on his deathbed. In the midst of the monastery's grief, the abbot quietly appointed Brother Jeris as master of the copy room.

A Mass of Burial was chanted early in Advent, and the remains of the holy old man were committed to the earth of their origin. On the following day, Brother Jeris informed Brother Francis that he considered it about time for him to put away the things of a child and start doing a man's work. Obediently, the monk wrapped his precious project in parchment, protected it with heavy board, shelved it, and began producing sheepskin lampshades. He made no murmur of protest, and contented himself with realizing that someday the soul of Brother Jeris would depart by the same road as

that of Brother Horner, to begin the life for which this copy room was but the staging ground; and afterwards, please God, he might be allowed to complete his beloved document.

Providence, however, took an earlier hand in the matter. During the following summer, a monsignor with several clerks and a donkey train came riding into the abbey and announced that he had come from New Vatican, as Leibowitz advocate in the canonization proceedings, to investigate such evidence as the abbey could produce that might have bearing on the case, including an alleged apparition of the beatified which had come to one Francis Gerard of Utah.

The gentleman was warmly greeted, quartered in the suite reserved for visiting prelates, lavishly served by six young monks responsive to his every whim, of which he had very few. The finest wines were opened, the huntsman snared the plumpest quail and chaparral cocks, and the advocate was entertained each evening by fiddlers and a troupe of clowns, although the visitor persisted in insisting that life go on as usual at the abbey.

On the third day of his visit, the abbot sent for Brother Francis. "Monsignor di Simone wishes to see you," he said. "If you let your imagination run away with you, boy, we'll use your gut to string a fiddle, feed your carcass to the wolves, and bury the bones in unhallowed ground. Now get along and see the good gentleman."

Brother Francis needed no such warning. Since he had awakened from his feverish babblings after his first Lenten fast in the desert, he had never mentioned the encounter with the pilgrim except when asked about it, nor had he allowed himself to speculate any further concerning the pilgrim's identity. That the pilgrim might be a matter for high ecclesiastical concern frightened him a little, and his knock was timid at the monsignor's door.

His fright proved unfounded. The monsignor was a suave and diplomatic elder who seemed keenly interested in the small monk's career.

"Now about your encounter with our blessed founder," he said after some minutes of preliminary amenities.

"Oh, but I never said he was our Blessed Leibo—"

"Of course you didn't, my son. Now I have here an account of it, as gathered from other sources, and I would like you to read it, and either confirm it or correct it." He paused to draw a scroll from his case and handed it to Francis. "The sources for this version, of course, had it on hearsay only," he added, "and only *you* can describe it first hand, so I want you to edit it *most* scrupulously."

"Of course. What happened was really very simple, Father."

But it was apparent from the fatness of the scroll that the hearsay account was not so simple. Brother Francis read with mounting apprehension which soon grew to the proportions of pure horror.

"You look white, my son. Is something wrong?" asked the distinguished priest.

"This . . . this . . . it wasn't like this *at all!*" gasped Francis. "He didn't say more than a few words to me. I only saw him once. He just asked me the way to the abbey and tapped the rock where I found the relics."

"No heavenly choir?"

"Oh, no!"

"And it's not true about the nimbus and the carpet of roses that grew up along the road where he walked?"

"As God is my judge, nothing like that happened at all!"

"Ah, well," sighed the advocate. "Travelers' stories are always exaggerated."

He seemed saddened, and Francis hastened to apologize, but the advocate dismissed it as of no great importance to the case. "There are other miracles, carefully documented," he explained, "and anyway—there is one bit of good news about the documents you discovered. We've unearthed the name of the wife who died before our founder came to the order."

"Yes?"

"Yes. It was Emily."

Despite his disappointment with Brother Francis' account of the pilgrim, Monsignor di Simone spent five days at the

site of the find. He was accompanied by an eager crew of novices from the abbey, all armed with picks and shovels. After extensive digging, the advocate returned with a small assortment of additional artifacts, and one bloated tin can that contained a desiccated mess which might once have been sauerkraut.

Before his departure, he visited the copy room and asked to see Brother Francis' copy of the famous blueprint. The monk protested that it was really nothing, and produced it with such eagerness his hands trembled.

"Zounds!" said the monsignor, or an oath to such effect. "Finish it, man, finish it!"

The monk looked smilingly at Brother Jeris. Brother Jeris swiftly turned away; the back of his neck gathered color. The following morning, Francis resumed his labors over the illuminated blueprint, with gold leaf, quills, brushes, and dyes.

And then came another donkey train from New Vatican, with a full complement of clerks and armed guards for defense against highwaymen, this time headed by a monsignor with small horns and pointed fangs (or so several novices would later have testified), who announced that he was the *Advocatus Diaboli,* opposing Leibowitz' canonization, and he was here to investigate—and perhaps fix responsibility, he hinted—for a number of incredible and hysterical rumors filtering out of the abbey and reaching even high officials at New Vatican. He made it clear that he would tolerate no romantic nonsense.

The abbot greeted him politely and offered him an iron cot in a cell with a south exposure, after apologizing for the fact that the guest suite had been recently exposed to smallpox. The monsignor was attended by his own staff, and ate mush and herbs with the monks in refectory.

"I understand you are susceptible to fainting spells," he told Brother Francis when the dread time came. "How many members of your family have suffered from epilepsy or madness?"

"None, Excellency."

"I'm not an 'Excellency,' " snapped the priest. "Now we're going to get the truth out of you." His tone implied that he considered it to be a simple straightforward surgical operation which should have been performed years ago.

"Are you aware that documents can be aged artificially?" he demanded.

Francis was not so aware.

"Did you know that Leibowitz' wife was named Emily, and that Emma is *not* a diminutive for Emily?"

Francis had not known it, but recalled from childhood that his own parents had been rather careless about what they called each other. "And if Blessed Leibowitz chose to call her Emma, then I'm sure . . ."

The monsignor exploded, and tore into Francis with semantic tooth and nail, and left the bewildered monk wondering whether he had ever really seen a pilgrim at all.

Before the advocate's departure, he too asked to see the illuminated copy of the print, and this time the monk's hands trembled with fear as he produced it, for he might again be forced to quit the project. The monsignor only stood gazing at it however, swallowed slightly, and forced himself to nod. "Your imagery is vivid," he admitted, "but then, of course, we all knew that, didn't we?"

The monsignor's horns immediately grew shorter by an inch, and he departed the same evening for New Vatican.

The years flowed smoothly by, seaming the faces of the once young and adding gray to the temples. The perpetual labors of the monastery continued, supplying a slow trickle of copied and recopied manuscripts to the outside world. Brother Jeris developed ambitions of building a printing press, but when the abbot demanded his reasons, he could only reply, "So we can mass-produce."

"Oh? And in a world that's smug in its illiteracy, what do you intend to do with the stuff? Sell it as kindling paper to the peasants?"

Brother Jeris shrugged unhappily, and the copy room continued with pot and quill.

Then one spring, shortly before Lent, a messenger arrived

with glad tidings for the order. The case for Leibowitz was complete. The College of Cardinals would soon convene, and the founder of the Albertian Order would be enrolled in the Calendar of Saints. During the time of rejoicing that followed the announcement, the abbot—now withered and in his dotage—summoned Brother Francis into his presence, and wheezed:

"His Holiness commands your presence during the canonization of Isaac Edward Leibowitz. Prepare to leave.

"Now don't faint on me again," he added querulously.

The trip to New Vatican would take at least three months, perhaps longer, the time depending on how far Brother Francis could get before the inevitable robber band relieved him of his ass, since he would be going unarmed and alone. He carried with him only a begging bowl and the illuminated copy of the Leibowitz print, praying that ignorant robbers would have no use for the latter. As a precaution, however, he wore a black patch over his right eye, for the peasants, being a superstitious lot, could often be put to flight by even a hint of the evil eye. Thus armed and equipped, he set out to obey the summons of his high priest.

Two months and some odd days later he met his robber on a mountain trail that was heavily wooded and far from any settlement. His robber was a short man, but heavy as a bull, with a glazed knob of a pate and a jaw like a block of granite. He stood in the trail with his legs spread wide and his massive arms folded across his chest, watching the approach of the little figure on the ass. The robber seemed alone, and armed only with a knife which he did not bother to remove from his belt thong. His appearance was a disappointment, since Francis had been secretly hoping for another encounter with the pilgrim of long ago.

"Get off," said the robber.

The ass stopped in the path. Brother Francis tossed back his cowl to reveal the eye patch, and raised a trembling finger to touch it. He began to lift the patch slowly as if to reveal something hideous that might be hidden beneath it. The

robber threw back his head and laughed a laugh that might have sprung from the throat of Satan himself. Francis muttered an exorcism, but the robber seemed untouched.

"You black-sacked jeebers wore that one out years ago," he said. "Get off."

Francis smiled, shrugged, and dismounted without protest.

"A good day to you sir," he said pleasantly. "You may take the ass. Walking will improve my health, I think." He smiled again and started away.

"Hold it," said the robber. "Strip to the buff. And let's see what's in that package."

Brother Francis touched his begging bowl and made a helpless gesture, but this brought only another scornful laugh from the robber.

"I've seen that alms-pot trick before, too," he said. "The last man with a begging bowl had half a heklo of gold in his boot. Now strip."

Brother Francis displayed his sandals, but began to strip. The robber searched his clothing, found nothing, and tossed it back to him.

"Now let's see inside the package."

"It is only a document, sir," the monk protested. "Of value to no one but its owner."

"Open it."

Silently Brother Francis obeyed. The gold leaf and the colorful design flashed brilliantly in the sunlight that filtered through the foliage. The robber's craggy jaw dropped an inch. He whistled softly.

"What a pretty! Now wouldn't me woman like it to hang on the shanty wall!"

He continued to stare while the monk went slowly sick inside. *If Thou has sent him to test me, O Lord,* he pleaded inwardly, *then help me to die like a man, for he'll get it over the dead body of Thy servant, if take it he must.*

"Wrap it up for me," the robber commanded, clamping his jaw in sudden decision.

The monk whimpered softly. "Please, sir, you would not

take the work of a man's lifetime. I spent fifteen years illuminating this manuscript, and . . ."

"Well! Did it yourself, did you?" The robber threw back his head and howled again.

Francis reddened. "I fail to see the humor, sir . . ."

The robber pointed at it between guffaws. "You! Fifteen years to make a paper bauble. So that's what you do. Tell me why. Give me one good reason. For fifteen years. Ha!"

Francis stared at him in stunned silence and could think of no reply that would appease his contempt.

Gingerly, the monk handed it over. The robber took it in both hands and made as if to rip it down the center.

"*Jesus, Mary, Joseph!*" the monk screamed, and went to his knees in the trail. "For the love of God, sir!"

Softening slightly, the robber tossed it on the ground with a snicker. "Wrestle you for it."

"Anything, sir, anything!"

They squared off. The monk crossed himself and recalled that wrestling had once been a divinely sanctioned sport—and with grim faith, he marched into battle.

Three seconds later, he lay groaning on the flat of his back under a short mountain of muscle. A sharp rock seemed to be severing his spine.

"Heh-heh," said the robber, and arose to claim his document.

Hands folded as if in prayer, Brother Francis scurried after him on his knees, begging at the top of his lungs.

The robber turned to snicker. "I believe you'd kiss a boot to get it back."

Francis caught up with him and fervently kissed his boot.

This proved too much for even such a firm fellow as the robber. He flung the manuscript down again with a curse and climbed aboard the monk's donkey. The monk snatched up the precious document and trotted along beside the robber, thanking him profusely and blessing him repeatedly while the robber rode away on the ass. Francis sent a glowing cross of benediction after the departing figure and praised God for the existence of such selfless robbers.

And yet when the man had vanished among the trees, he felt an aftermath of sadness. Fifteen years to make a paper bauble . . . The taunting voice still rang in his ears. Why? Tell one good reason for fifteen years.

He was unaccustomed to the blunt ways of the outside world, to its harsh habits and curt attitudes. He found his heart deeply troubled by the mocking words, and his head hung low in the cowl as he plodded along. At one time he considered tossing the document in the brush and leaving it for the rains—but Father Juan had approved his taking it as a gift, and he could not come with empty hands. Chastened, he traveled on.

The hour had come. The ceremony surged about him as a magnificent spectacle of sound and stately movement and vivid color in the majestic basilica. And when the perfectly infallible Spirit had finally been invoked, a monsignor—it was di Simone, Francis noted, the advocate for the saint—arose and called upon Peter to speak, through the person of Leo XXII, commanding the assemblage to hearken.

Whereupon, the Pope quietly proclaimed that Issac Edward Leibowitz was a saint, and it was finished. The ancient and obscure technician was of the heavenly hagiarchy, and Brother Francis breathed a dutiful prayer to his new patron as the choir burst into the *Te Deum.*

The Pontiff strode quickly into the audience room where the little monk was waiting, taking Brother Francis by surprise and rendering him briefly speechless. He knelt quickly to kiss the Fisherman's ring and receive his blessing. As he arose, he found himself clutching the beautiful document behind him as if ashamed of it. The Pope's eyes caught the motion, and he smiled.

"You have brought us a gift, our son?" he asked.

The monk gulped, nodded stupidly, and brought it out. Christ's Vicar stared at it for a long time without apparent expression. Brother Francis' heart went sinking deeper as the seconds drifted by.

"It is a nothing," he blurted, "a miserable gift. I am ashamed to have wasted so much time at . . ." He choked off.

The Pope seemed not to hear him. "Do you understand the meaning of Saint Isaac's symbology?" he asked, peering curiously at the abstract design of the circuit.

Dumbly the monk shook his head.

"Whatever it means . . ." the Pope began, but broke off. He smiled and spoke of other things. Francis had been so honored not because of any official judgment concerning his pilgrim. He had been honored for his role in bringing to light such important documents and relics of the saint, for such they had been judged, regardless of the manner in which they had been found.

Francis stammered his thanks. The Pontiff gazed again at the colorful blaze of his illuminated diagram. "Whatever it means," he breathed once more, "this bit of learning, though dead, will live again." He smiled up at the monk and winked. "And we shall guard it till that day."

For the first time, the little monk noticed that the Pope had a hole in his robe. His clothing, in fact, was threadbare. The carpet in the audience room was worn through in spots, and plaster was falling from the ceiling.

But there were books on the shelves along the walls. Books of painted beauty, speaking of incomprehensible things, copied by men whose business was not to understand but to serve. And the books were waiting.

"Goodby, beloved son."

And the small keeper of the flame of knowledge trudged back toward his abbey on foot. His heart was singing as he approached the robber's outpost. And if the robber happened to be taking the day off, the monk meant to sit down and wait for his return. This time he had an answer.

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

LAMENT BY A MAKER

If you want to know about me, I will tell you what I am:
I'm a science fiction genius—all the other kinds are sham.
For I started in the era of the other-world romance,
When a hero with a broadsword faced a horde of giant ants,
Or he saved a naked princess from a fiendish Martian priest
Who fed virgins in his temple to an octopoidal beast.
But although I skewered villains till my pages ran with gore,
Yet everybody said my stuff was such a frightful bore!
And I can't think why!

Then the age of super-gadetry. I modified my themes,
Using robots, proton-blasters, trips in time, and tractor-beams.
So my hero juggled worlds and spoke in clipped and cosmic slang,
Such as: "CQX, old reptile; how is every little fang?"
And when cornered in his space-ship by the Things from Procyon,
He destroyed them with his just-invented hyper-neurotron.
But although I switched dimensions till I stripped my spatial gears,
Yet the letter-writers said my stories bored them all to tears!
And I can't think why!

Comes the human-interest story of the psychiatric kind,
Where the hero is a maladjusted jerk of feeble mind.
Now he beats his wife and children till an altruistic Slan,
Using hypno-psionetics, makes him love his fellow-man.
So I write of twerps who weep for Mom, who slobber, twitch and glower,
And who pull the wings off Martians by their telekinetic power.
But although I make my character the cosmos' biggest fool,

Still the readers all insist they do not want to read this drool!
And I can't think why!

THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL DESIGN

If robots are delinquent in link effect and cause,
Blame it on Science—their defiance is pretense.
Now reread Monsieur Rousseau,
And how the AC-DC's flow,
Repairing faulty circuits of original design,
Think about their sleazy, spliced-up heads.

The missing links, mistreated, plead for modern monster laws;
Policemen trained politely, nice rules rightly could administer
With hints and thanks and frank incense.
Remember Doctor Frankenstein,
Repeating in a chorus, "There are no bad monsters!
These are only crazy,
mixed-up,
kids!"

WINONA MC CLINTIC

Do you want to know what type of man stands the best chance for surviving the holocaust of his world? You'll learn the answer in this brief and pointed item which is, like most Mathesons, not quite like any other story you've read.

PATTERN FOR SURVIVAL

And they stood beneath the crystal towers, beneath the polished heights which, like scintillant mirrors, caught rosy sunset on their faces until their city was one vivid, coruscated blush.

Ras slipped an arm about the waist of his beloved.

"Happy?" he inquired, in a tender voice.

"Oh, yes," she breathed. "Here in our beautiful city where there is peace and happiness for all, how could I be anything but happy?"

Sunset cast its roseate benediction upon their soft embrace.

THE END

THE clatter ceased. His hands curled in like blossoms and his eyes fell shut. The prose was wine. It trickled on the taste buds of his mind, a dizzying potion. I've done it again, he recognized, by George in heaven, I've done it again.

Satisfaction towed him out to sea. He went down for the third time beneath its happy drag. Surfacing then, reborn, he estimated wordage, addressed envelope, slid in manuscript, weighed total, affixed stamps and sealed. Another brief submergence in the waters of delight, then up withal and to the mailbox.

It was almost twelve as Richard Allen Shaggley hobbled down the quiet street in his shabby overcoat. He had to hurry or he'd miss the pick-up and he musn't do that. *Ras and the City of Crystal* was too superlative to wait another

day. He wanted it to reach the editor immediately. It was a certain sale.

Circuiting the giant, pipe-strewn hole (When, in the name of heaven, would they finish repairing that blasted sewer?), he limped on hurriedly, envelope clutched in rigid fingers, heart a turmoil of vibration.

Noon. He reached the mailbox and cast about anxious glances for the postman. No sign of him. A sigh of pleasure and relief escaped his chapped lips. Face aglow, Richard Allen Shaggley listened to the envelope thump gently on the bottom of the mailbox.

The happy author shuffled off, coughing.

Al's legs were bothering him again. He shambled up the quiet street, teeth gritted slightly, leather sack pulling down his weary shoulder. Getting old, he thought, haven't got the drive any more. Rheumatism in the legs. Bad; makes it hard to do the route.

At twelve-fifteen, he reached the dark green mailbox and drew the keys from his pocket. Stooping, with a groan, he opened up the box and drew out its contents.

A smiling eased his pain-tensed face; he nodded once. Another yarn by Shaggley. Probably be snatched up right away. The man could really write.

Rising with a grunt, Al slid the envelope into his sack, relocked the mailbox, then trudged off, still smiling to himself. Makes a man proud, he thought, carrying his stories; even if my legs do hurt.

Al was a Shaggley fan.

When Rick arrived from lunch a little after three that afternoon, there was a note from his secretary on the desk.

New ms. from Shaggley just arrived (it read). *Beautiful job. Don't forget R. A. wants to see it when you're through. S.*

Delight cast illumination across the editor's hatchet face. By George in heaven, this was manna from what had threatened

to be a fruitless afternoon. Lips drawn back in what, for him, was smiling, he dropped into his leather chair, restrained empathic finger twitchings for the blue pencil (No need of it for a Shaggley yarn!) and plucked the envelope from the cracked glass surface of his desk. By George, a Shaggley story; what luck! R. A. would beam.

He sank into the cushion, instantly absorbed in the opening nuance of the tale. A tremor of transport palsied outer sense. Breathless, he plunged on into the story depths. *What balance, what delineation!* How the man could write. Distractedly, he brushed plaster dust off his pin-stripe sleeve.

As he read, the wind picked up again, fluttering his straw-like hair, buffeting like tepid wings against his brow. Unconsciously, he raised his hand and traced a delicate finger along the scar, which trailed like livid thread across his cheek and lower temple.

The wind grew stronger. It moaned by pretzeled I-beams and scattered brown-edged papers on the soggy rug. Rick stirred restlessly and stabbed a glance at the gaping fissure in the wall (When, in the name of heaven, would they finish those repairs?), then returned, joy renewed, to Shaggley's manuscript.

Finishing at last, he fingered away a tear of bittersweetness and depressed an intercom key.

"Another check for Shaggley," he ordered, then tossed the snapped-off key across his shoulder.

At three-thirty, he brought the manuscript to R. A.'s office and left it there.

At four, the publisher laughed and cried over it, gnarled fingers rubbing at the scabrous bald patch on his head.

Old hunchbacked Dick Allen set type for Shaggley's story that very afternoon, vision blurred by happy tears beneath his eyeshade, liquid coughing unheard above the busy clatter of his machine.

The story hit the stand a little after six. The scar-faced dealer shifted on his tired legs as he read it over six times before, reluctantly, offering it for sale.

At half-past six, the little bald-patched man came hobbling down the street. A hard day's work, a well-earned rest, he thought, stopping at the corner newsstand for some reading matter.

He gasped. By George in heaven, a new Shaggley story! What luck!

The only copy, too. He left a quarter for the dealer who wasn't there at the moment.

He took the story home, shambling by skeletal ruins (Strange, those burned buildings hadn't been replaced yet), reading as he went.

He finished the story before arriving home. Over supper, he read it once again, shaking his lumpy head at the marvel of its impact, the unbreakable magic of its workmanship. It inspires me, he thought.

But not tonight. Now was the time for putting things away: the cover on the typewriter, the shabby overcoat, threadbare pin-stripe, eyeshade, mailman's cap and leather sack all in their proper places.

He was asleep by ten, dreaming about mushrooms. And, in the morning, wondering once again why those first observers had not described the cloud as more like a toadstool.

By 6 A.M. Shaggley, breakfasted, was at the typewriter.

This is the story, he wrote, *of how Ras met the beautiful priestess of Shahglee and she fell in love with him.*

Many of us have experimented with blends of science fiction and the detective story, but none more successfully than Isaac Asimov, especially in that almost perfect fusion, THE CAVES OF STEEL (*Doubleday,* 1954). *Now, in the first of a series of stories for F&SF, Mr. Asimov tries something new: an* inverted *detective story of the future, modeled upon those revolutionary detective expolits of Dr. Thorndyke's which R. Austin Freeman published as* THE SINGING BONE (*Hodder & Stoughton,* 1912). *Let Freeman himself describe the singular method of these stories: "The first part was a minute and detailed description of a crime. . . . The reader had seen the crime committed, knew all about the criminal, and was in possession of all the facts. It would have seemed that there was nothing left to tell. But . . . the second part, which described the investigation of the crime, had to most readers the effect of new matter. All the facts were known; but their evidential quality had not been recognized." Mr. Asimov's essay in reader-bafflement, is, in its way, even trickier than those of Mr. Freeman; for he makes his puzzle hinge on a clue which can occur only in the future, yet which can be interpreted by any reader on the basis of today's knowledge! I'm happy to introduce you to Dr. Wendell Urth, extraterrologist and detective, in his first recorded case. Good luck in matching wits with him!*

THE SINGING BELL

LOUIS PEYTON never discussed publicly the methods by which he had bested the police of Earth in a dozen duels of wits and bluff, with the psychoprobe always waiting and always foiled. He would have been foolish to do so, of course, but in his more complacent moments, he fondled the notion of leaving a

testament to be opened only after his death, one in which his unbroken success could be clearly seen to be due to ability and not to luck.

In such a testament, he would say, "No false pattern can be created to cover a crime without bearing upon it some trace of its creator. It is better, then, to seek in events some pattern that already exists and then adjust your actions to it."

It was with that principle in mind that Peyton planned the murder of Albert Cornwell.

Cornwell, that small-time retailer of stolen things, first approached Peyton at the latter's usual table-for-one at Grinnell's. Cornwell's blue suit seemed to have a special shine, his lined face a special grin and his faded mustache a special bristle.

"Mr. Peyton," he said, greeting his future murderer with no fourth-dimensional qualm, "it is so nice to see you. I'd almost given up, sir, almost given up."

Peyton, who disliked being approached over his newspaper and dessert at Grinnell's, said, "If you have business with me, Cornwell, you know where you can reach me." Peyton was past forty and his hair was past its earlier blackness, but his back was rigid, his bearing youthful, his eyes dark, and his voice could cut the more sharply for long practice.

"Not for this, Mr. Peyton," said Cornwell, "not for this. I know of a cache, sir, a cache of . . . you know, sir." The forefinger of his right hand moved gently, as though it were a clapper striking invisible substance, and his left hand momentarily cupped his ear.

Peyton turned a page of the paper, still somewhat damp from its tele-dispenser, folded it flat and said, "Singing Bells?"

"Oh, hush, Mr. Peyton," said Cornwell, in whispered agony.

Peyton said, "Come with me."

They walked through the park. It was another Peyton axiom that to be thoroughly secret there was nothing like a low-voiced discussion out of doors. Any room might be spy-rayed, but no one had yet spy-rayed the vault of heaven.

Cornwell whispered, "A cache of Singing Bells; an accumu-

lated cache of Singing Bells. Unpolished, but such beauties, Mr. Peyton."

"Have you seen them?"

"No, sir, but I have spoken with one who has. He had proofs enough to convince me. There is enough there to enable you and me to retire in affluence. In absolute affluence, sir."

"Who was this other man?"

A look of cunning lit Cornwell's face like a smoking torch, obscuring more than it showed and lending it a repulsive oiliness. "The man was a lunar grubstaker who had a method for locating the Bells in the crater sides. I don't know his method; he never told me that. But he has gathered dozens, hidden them on the moon, and come to Earth to arrange the disposing of them."

"He died, I suppose?"

"Yes. A most shocking accident, Mr. Peyton. A fall from a height. Very sad. Of course, his activities on the moon were quite illegal. The Dominion is very strict about unauthorized Bell-mining. So perhaps it was a judgment upon him after all. . . . In any case, I have his map."

Peyton said, a look of calm indifference on his face, "I don't want any of the details of your little transaction. What I want to know is why you've come to me."

Cornwell said, "Well now, there's enough for both of us, Mr. Peyton, and we can both do our bit. For my part, I know where the cache is located and I can get a spaceship. You—"

"Yes?"

"You can pilot a spaceship, and you have such excellent contacts for disposing of the Bells. It is a very fair division of labor, Mr. Peyton. Wouldn't you say so, now?"

Peyton considered the pattern of his life—the pattern that already existed—and matters seemed to fit.

He said, "We will leave for the moon on August 10."

Cornwell stopped walking and said, "Mr. Peyton! It's only April now."

Peyton maintained an even gait and Cornwell had to hurry to catch up. "Do you hear me, Mr. Peyton?"

Peyton said, "August 10. I will get in touch with you at the proper time, tell you where to bring your ship. Make no attempt to see me personally till then. Good-bye, Cornwell."

Cornwell said, "Fifty-fifty?"

"Quite," said Peyton. "Good-bye."

Peyton continued his walk alone and considered the pattern of his life again. At the age of twenty-seven, he had bought a tract of land in the Rockies on which some past owner had built a house designed as refuge against the threatened atomic wars of two centuries back, the ones that had never come to pass after all. The house remained, however, a monument to a frightened drive for self-sufficiency.

It was of steel and concrete in as isolated a spot as could well be found on Earth, set high above sea-level and protected on nearly all sides by mountain peaks that reached higher still. It had its self-contained power unit, its water supply fed by mountain streams, its freezers in which ten sides of beef could hang comfortably, its cellar outfitted like a fortress with an arsenal of weapons designed to stave off hungry, panicked hordes that never came. It had its air-conditioning unit that could scrub and scrub the air until anything *but* radioactivity (alas for human frailty) could be scrubbed out of it.

In that house of survival, Peyton passed the month of August every subsequent year of his perennially bachelor life. He took out the communicators, the television, the newspaper tele-dispenser. He built a force-field about his property and left a short-distance signal mechanism to the house from the point where the fence crossed the one trail winding through the mountains.

For one month each year, he could be thoroughly alone. No one saw him, no one could reach him. In absolute solitude, he could have the only vacation he valued after eleven months of contact with a humanity for which he could feel only a cold contempt.

Even the police (and Peyton smiled) knew of his rigid regard for August. He had once jumped bail and risked the psychoprobe rather than forgo his August.

Peyton considered another aphorism for possible inclusion in his testament: There is nothing so conducive to an appearance of innocence as the triumphant lack of an alibi.

On July 30, as on July 30 of every year, Louis Peyton took the 9:15 A.M. non-grav strato-jet at New York and arrived in Denver at 12:30 P.M. There he lunched and took the 1:45 P.M. semi-grav bus to Hump's point, from which Sam Leibman took him by ancient ground-car (full grav!) up the trail to the boundaries of his property. Sam Leibman gravely accepted the ten-dollar tip that he always received, touched his hat as he had done on July 30 for fifteen years.

On July 31, as on July 31 of every year, Louis Peyton returned to Hump's Point on his non-grav flitter, and placed an order through the Hump's Point general store for such supplies as he needed for the coming month. There was nothing unusual about the order. It was virtually the duplicate of previous such orders.

MacIntyre, manager of the store, checked gravely over the list, put it through to Central Warehouse (Mountain District) in Denver, and the whole of it came pushing over the mass-transference beam within the hour. Peyton loaded the supplies onto his aero-flitter with MacIntyre's help, left his usual ten-dollar tip and returned to his house.

On August 1, at 12:01 A.M., the force-field that surrounded his property was set to full power and Peyton was isolated.

And now the pattern changed. Deliberately, he had left himself eight days. In that time, he slowly and meticulously destroyed just enough of his supplies to account for all of August. He used the dusting chambers which served the house as a garbage-disposal unit. They were of an advanced model capable of reducing all matter up to and including metals and silicates to an impalpable and undetectable molecular dust. The excess energy formed in the process was carried away by the mountain stream that ran through his property. It ran five degrees warmer than normal for a week.

On August 9, his aero-flitter carried him to a spot in Wyoming where Albert Cornwell and a spaceship waited. The

spaceship, itself, was a weak point, of course, since there were men who had sold it, men who had transported it and helped prepare it for flight. All those men, however, led only as far as Cornwell, and Cornwell, Peyton thought (with the trace of a smile on his cold lips), would be a dead end. A very dead end.

On August 10, the spaceship, with Peyton at the controls and Cornwell (and his map) as passenger, left the surface of Earth. Its non-grav field was excellent. At full power, the ship's weight was reduced to less than an ounce. The micro-piles fed energy efficiently and noiselessly, and without flame or sound, the ship rose through the atmosphere, shrank to a point and was gone.

It was very unlikely that there would be witnesses to the flight. In point of fact, there were none.

Two days in space; now two weeks on the moon. Almost instinctively, Peyton had allowed for those two weeks from the first. He was under no illusions as to the value of home-made maps by non-cartographers. Useful they might be to the designer himself, who had the help of memory. To a stranger, they could be nothing more than a cryptogram.

Cornwell showed Peyton the map for the first time only after takeoff. He smiled obsequiously. "After all, sir, this was my only trump."

"Have you checked this against the lunar charts?"

"I would scarcely know how, Mr. Peyton. I depend upon you."

Peyton stared at him coldly as he returned the map. The one certain thing upon it was Tycho Crater, the site of the buried Luna City.

In one respect, at least, astronomy was on their side. Tycho was on the daylight side of the moon at the moment. It meant that patrol ships were less likely to be out; they themselves less likely to be observed.

Peyton brought the ship down in a riskily quick non-grav landing within the safe, cold darkness of the inner shadow of

a crater. The sun was past zenith and the shadow would grow no shorter.

Cornwell drew a long face. "Dear, dear, Mr. Peyton. We can scarcely go prospecting in the lunar day."

"The lunar day doesn't last forever," said Peyton shortly. "There are about a hundred hours of sun left. We can use that time for acclimating ourselves and for working out the map."

The answer came quickly, but it was plural. Peyton studied the lunar charts over and over, taking meticulous measurements, and trying to find the pattern of craters shown on the homemade scrawl that was the key to—what?

Finally, Peyton said, "The crater we want could be any one of three: GC-3, GC-5 or MT-10."

"What do we do, Mr. Peyton?" asked Cornwell, anxiously.

"We try them all," said Peyton, "beginning with the nearest."

The terminator passed and they were in the night shadow. After that, they spent increasing periods on the lunar surface, getting used to the eternal silence and blackness, the harsh points of the stars and the crack of light that was the Earth peeping over the rim of the crater above. They left hollow, featureless footprints in the dry dust that did not stir or change. Peyton noted them first when they climbed out of the crater into the full light of the gibbous Earth. That was on the eighth day after their arrival on the moon.

The lunar cold put a limit to how long they could remain outside their ship at any one time. Each day, however, they managed for longer. By the eleventh day after arrival they had eliminated GC-5 as the container of the Singing Bells.

By the fifteenth day, Peyton's cold spirit had grown warm with desperation. It would have to be GC-3. MT-10 was too far away. They would not have time to reach it and explore it and still allow for a return to Earth by August 31.

On that same fifteenth day, however, despair was laid to rest forever when the discovered the Bells.

Carefully, in double handfuls, they carried the Bells to the ship, bedded them in excelsior, and returned for more. Three

times they made the trip both ways over ground that would have worn them out on Earth, but which, under the moon's lilliputian gravity, was scarcely a barrier.

Cornwell passed the last of the Bells up to Peyton, who placed them carefully within the outer lock.

"Keep them clear, Mr. Peyton," he said, his radioed voice sounding harshly in the other's ear. "I'm coming up."

He crouched for the slow high leap against lunar gravity, looked up and froze in panic. His face, clearly visible through the hard curved lusilite of his helmet, froze in a last grimace of terror. "No, Mr. Peyton. Don't—"

Peyton's fist tightened on the grip of the blaster he held. It fired. There was an unbearably brilliant flash and Cornwell was a dead fragment of a man, sprawled amid remnants of a spacesuit and flecked with freezing blood.

Peyton paused to stare somberly at the dead man, but only for a second. Then he transferred the last of the Bells to their prepared containers, removed his suit, activated first the nongrav field, then the micropiles and, potentially a million or two richer than he had been two weeks earlier, set off on the return trip to Earth.

On the twenty-ninth of August, Peyton's ship descended silently, stern bottomward, to the spot in Wyoming from which it had taken off on August 10. The care with which Peyton had chosen the spot was not wasted. His aero-flitter was still there, drawn within the protection of an enclosing wrinkle of the rocky, tortuous countryside.

He moved the Singing Bells once again, in their containers, into the deepest recess of the wrinkle, covering them, loosely and sparsely, with earth. He returned to the ship once more to set the controls and make last adjustments. He climbed out again, and two minutes later the ship's automatics took over.

Silently hurrying, the ship bounded upward and up, veering to westward somewhat as the Earth rotated beneath it. Peyton watched, shading his narrowed eyes, and at the extreme edge of vision there was a tiny gleam of light and a dot of cloud against the blue sky.

Peyton's mouth twitched into a smile. He had judged well. With the cadmium safety-rods bent back into uselessness, the micropiles had plunged past the unit-sustaining safety level and the ship had vanished in the heat of the nuclear explosion that had followed.

Twenty minutes later, he was back on his property. He was tired and his muscles ached under Earth's unit gravity. He slept well.

Twelve hours later, in the earliest dawn, the police came.

II

The man who opened the door placed his crossed hands over his paunch and ducked his smiling head two or three times in greeting. The man who entered, H. Seton Davenport of the Terrestrial Bureau of Investigation, looked about uncomfortably.

The room he had entered was large and in semi-darkness except for the brilliant viewing lamp focused over a combination armchair-desk. Rows of book-films covered the walls. A suspension of Galactic charts occupied one corner of the room and a Galactic Lens gleamed softly on a stand in another corner.

"You are Dr. Wendell Urth?" asked Davenport, in a tone that suggested he found it hard to believe. Davenport was a stocky man with black hair, a thin and prominent nose and a star-shaped scar on one cheek which marked permanently the place where a neuronic whip had once struck him at too close a range.

"I am," said Dr. Urth, in a thin, tenor voice. "And you are Inspector Davenport."

The Inspector presented his credentials and said, "The University recommended you to me as an extraterrologist."

"So you said when you called me half an hour ago," said Urth, agreeably. His features were thick, his nose was a snubby button, and over his somewhat protuberant eyes there were thick glasses.

"I shall get to the point, Dr. Urth. I presume you have visited the moon—"

Dr. Urth, who had brought out a bottle of ruddy liquid and two glasses, just a little the worse for dust, from behind a straggling pile of book-films, said with sudden brusqueness, "I have never visited the moon, Inspector. I never intend to! Space travel is foolishness. I don't believe in it." Then, in softer tones, "Sit down, sir, sit down. Have a drink."

Inspector Davenport did as he was told and said, "But you're an—"

"Extraterrologist. Yes. I'm interested in other worlds, but it doesn't mean I have to go there. Good lord, I don't have to be a time-traveler to qualify as a historian, do I?" He sat down, and a broad smile impressed itself upon his round face once more as he said, "Now tell me what's on your mind."

"I have come," said the Inspector, frowning, "to consult you in a case of murder."

"Murder? What have I to do with murder?"

"This murder, Dr. Urth, was on the moon."

"Astonishing."

"It's more than astonishing. It's unprecedented, Dr. Urth. In the fifty years since the Lunar Dominion has been established, ships have blown up and spacesuits have sprung leaks. Men have boiled to death on sun-side, frozen on dark-side and suffocated on both sides. There have even been deaths by falls, which, considering lunar gravity, is quite a trick. But in all that time, not one man has been killed on the moon as the result of another man's deliberate act of violence . . . till now."

Dr. Urth said, "How was it done?"

"A blaster. The authorities were on the scene within the hour through a fortunate set of circumstances. A patrol ship observed a flash of light against the moon's surface. You know how far a flash can be seen against the night-side. He notified Luna City and landed. In the process of circling back, he swears that he just managed to see by Earthlight what looked like a ship taking off. Upon landing, he discovered a blasted corpse and footprints."

"The flash of light," said Dr. Urth, "you suppose to be the firing blaster."

"That's certain. The corpse was fresh. Interior portions of the body had not yet frozen. The footprints belonged to two people. Careful measurements showed that the depressions fell into two groups of somewhat different diameters, indicating differently sized spaceboots. In the main, they led to craters GC-3 and GC-5, a pair of—"

"I am acquainted with the official code for naming lunar craters," said Dr. Urth, pleasantly.

"Ummm. In any case, GC-3, contained footprints that led to a rift in the crater wall, within which scraps of hardened pumice were found. X-ray diffraction patterns showed—"

"Singing Bells," put in the extraterrologist in great excitement. "Don't tell me this murder of yours involves Singing Bells!"

"What if it does?" demanded Davenport, blankly.

"I have one. A University expedition uncovered it and presented it to me in return for— Come, Inspector, I must show it to you."

Dr. Urth jumped up and pattered across the room, beckoning the other to follow as he did. Davenport, annoyed, followed.

They entered the second room, larger than the first, dimmer, considerably more cluttered. Davenport stared with astonishment at the heterogeneous mass of material that was jumbled together in no pretense at order.

He made out a small lump of "blue glaze" from Mars, the sort of thing some romantics considered to be an artifact of long-extinct Martians, a small meteorite, a model of an early spaceship, a sealed bottle of liquid scrawlingly labeled "Venusian ocean."

Dr. Urth said, happily, "I've made a museum of my whole house. It's one of the advantages of being a bachelor. Of course, I haven't quite got things organized. Someday, when I have a spare week or so . . ."

For a moment he looked about, puzzled, then, remembering, he pushed aside a chart showing the evolutionary

scheme of development of the marine invertebrates that were the highest life forms on Arcturus V and said, "Here it is. It's flawed, I'm afraid."

The Bell hung suspended from a slender wire, soldered delicately onto it. That it was flawed was obvious. It had a constriction line running halfway about it that made it seem like two small globes, firmly but imperfectly squashed together. Despite that, it had been lovingly polished to a dull luster, softly gray, velvety smooth, and faintly pock-marked in a way that laboratories, in their futile efforts to prepare synthetic Bells, had found impossible to duplicate.

Dr. Urth said, "I experimented a good deal before I found a decent stroker. A flawed Bell is temperamental. But bone works. I have one here," and he held up something that looked like a short thick spoon made of a gray-white substance, "which I had made out of the femur of an ox. . . . Listen."

With surprising delicacy, his pudgy fingers maneuvered the Bell, feeling for one best spot. He adjusted it, steadying it daintily. Then, letting the Bell swing free, he brought down the thick end of the bone spoon and stroked the Bell softly.

It was as though a million harps had sounded a mile away. It swelled and faded and returned. It came from no particular direction. It sounded inside the head, incredibly sweet and pathetic and tremulous all at once.

It died away lingeringly and both men were silent for a full minute.

Dr. Urth said, "Not bad, eh?" and with a flick of his hand set the Bell to swinging on its wire.

Davenport stirred restlessly, "Careful! Don't break it." The fragility of a good Singing Bell was proverbial.

Dr. Urth said, "Geologists say the Bells are only pressure-hardened pumice, enclosing a vacuum in which small beads of rock rattle freely. That's what they *say*. But if that's all it is, why can't we reproduce one? Now a flawless Bell would make this one sound like a child's harmonica."

"Exactly," said Davenport, "and there aren't a dozen peo-

ple on Earth who own a flawless one, and there are a hundred people and institutions who would buy one at any price, no questions asked. A supply of Bells would be worth murder."

The extraterrologist turned to Davenport and pushed his spectacles back on his inconsequential nose with a stubby forefinger. "I haven't forgotten your murder case. Please go on."

"That can be done in a sentence. I know the identity of the murderer."

They had returned to the chairs in the library and Dr. Urth clasped his hands over his ample abdomen. "Indeed? Then surely you have no problem, Inspector."

"Knowing and proving are not the same, Dr. Urth. Unfortunately, he has no alibi."

"You mean, unfortunately, he *has*, don't you?"

"I mean what I say. If he had an alibi, I could crack it somehow, because it would be a false one. If there were witnesses who claimed they had seen him on Earth at the time of the murder, their stories could be broken down. If he had documentary proof, it could be exposed as a forgery or some sort of trickery. Unfortunately, he has none of it."

"What does he have?"

Carefully Inspector Davenport described the Peyton estate in Colorado. He concluded, "He has spent every August there in the strictest isolation. Even the T.B.I. would have to testify to that. Any jury would have to presume that he was on his estate this August as well unless we could present definite proof that he was on the moon."

"What makes you think he *was* on the moon? Perhaps he is innocent."

"No!" Davenport was almost violent. "For fifteen years I've been trying to collect sufficient evidence against him and I've never succeeded. But I can *smell* a Peyton crime now. I tell you that no one but Peyton, no one on Earth, would have the impudence, or, for that matter, the practical business contacts to attempt disposal of smuggled Singing Bells. He is known to be an expert space-pilot. He is known to have had

contact with the murdered man, though admittedly not for some months. Unfortunately, none of that is proof."

Dr. Urth said, "Wouldn't it be simple to use the psychoprobe, now that its use has been legalized?"

Davenport scowled, and the scar on his cheek turned livid. "Haven't you read the Konski-Hiakawa law, Dr. Urth?"

"No."

"I think no one has. The right to mental privacy, the government says, is fundamental. All right, but what follows? The man who is psychoprobed is entitled to as much compensation as he can persuade the courts to give him. In a recent case, a bank cashier was awarded $25,000 for having been psychoprobed on inaccurate suspicion of theft. It seems that the circumstantial evidence which seemed to point to theft actually pointed to a small spot of adultery. His claim that he lost his job, was threatened by the husband in question and put in bodily fear, and finally was held up to ridicule and contumely because a news-strip man had learned the results of the probe held in court."

"I can see the man's point."

"So can we all. That's the trouble. One more item to remember: any man who has been psychoprobed once for any reason can never be psychoprobed again for any reason. No one man, the law says, shall be placed in mental jeopardy twice in his lifetime."

"Inconvenient."

"Exactly. In the two years since the psychoprobe has been legitimized, I couldn't count the number of crooks and chiselers who've tried to get themselves psychoprobed for purse-snatching so that they can play the rackets safely afterward. So you see the Department will not allow Peyton to be psychoprobed until they have firm evidence of his guilt. Not legal evidence, maybe, but evidence that is strong enough to convince my boss. The worst of it, Dr. Urth, is that if we come into court without a psychoprobe record, we can't win. In a case as serious as murder, not to have used the psychoprobe is proof enough to the dumbest juror that the prosecution isn't sure of its ground."

"Now what do you want from me?"

"Proof that he was on the moon sometime in August. It's got to be done quickly. I can't hold him on suspicion much longer. And if news of the murder gets out, the world press will blow up like an asteroid striking Jupiter's atmosphere. A glamorous crime, you know; first murder committed on the moon."

"Exactly when was the murder committed?" asked Urth, in a sudden transition to brisk cross-examination.

"August 27."

"And the arrest was made when?"

"Yesterday, August 30."

"Then if Peyton were the murderer, he would have had time to return to Earth."

"Barely. Just barely." Davenport's lips thinned. "If I had been a day sooner—If I had found his place empty—"

"And how long do you suppose the two, the murdered man and the murderer, were on the moon altogether?"

"Judging the ground covered by the footprints, a number of days. A week at the minimum."

"Has the ship they used been located?"

"No, and it probably never will. About ten hours ago, the University of Denver reported a rise in background radioactivity beginning day before yesterday at 6 P.M. and persisting for a number of hours. It's an easy thing, Dr. Urth, to set a ship's controls so as to allow it to blast off without crew and blow up, fifty miles high, in a micropile short."

"If I had been Peyton," said Dr. Urth, thoughtfully, "I would have killed the man on board ship and blown up corpse and ship together."

"You don't know Peyton," said Davenport, grimly. "He enjoys his victories over the law. He values them. Leaving the corpse on the moon is his challenge to us."

"I see." Dr. Urth patted his stomach with a rotary motion and said, "Well, there is a chance."

"That you'll be able to prove he was on the moon?"

"That I'll be able to give you my opinion."

"Now?"

"The sooner the better. If, of course, I get a chance to interview Mr. Peyton."

"That can be arranged. I have a non-grav jet waiting. We can be in Washington in twenty minutes."

But a look of the deepest alarm passed over the plump extraterrologist's face. He rose to his feet and pattered away from the T.B.I. agent toward the duskiest corner of the cluttered room.

"*No!*"

"What's wrong, Dr. Urth?"

"I won't use a non-grav jet. I don't believe in them."

Davenport stared confusedly at Dr. Urth. He stammered, "Would you prefer a monorail?"

Dr. Urth snapped, "I mistrust all forms of transportation. I don't believe in them. Except walking. I don't mind walking." He was suddenly eager. "Couldn't you bring Mr. Peyton to this city, somewhere within walking distance? To City Hall, perhaps? I've often walked to City Hall."

Davenport looked helplessly about the room. He looked at the myriad volumes of lore about the light-years. He could see through the open door into the room beyond with its tokens of the worlds beyond the sky. And he looked at Dr. Urth, pale at the thought of a non-grav jet, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll bring Peyton right here. Right to this room. Will that satisfy you?"

Dr. Urth puffed out his breath in a deep sigh. "Quite."

"I hope you can deliver, Dr. Urth."

"I will do my best, Mr. Davenport."

Louis Peyton stared with distaste at his surroundings and with contempt at the fat man who bobbed his head in greeting. He glanced at the seat offered him and brushed it with his hand before sitting down. Davenport took a seat next to him, with his blaster-holder in clear view.

The fat man was smiling as he sat down and patted his round abdomen as though he had just finished a good meal and were intent on letting the world know about it.

He said, "Good evening, Mr. Peyton. I am Dr. Wendell Urth, extraterrologist."

Peyton looked at him again, "And what do you want with me?"

"I want to know if you were on the moon at any time in the month of August."

"I was not."

"Yet no man saw you on Earth between the days of August 1 and August 30."

"I lived my normal life in August. I am never seen during that month. Let him tell you." And he jerked his head in the direction of Davenport.

Dr. Urth chuckled. "How nice if we could test this matter. If there were only some physical manner in which we could differentiate moon from Earth. If, for instance, we could analyze the dust in your hair and say, 'Aha, moon rock.' Unfortunately, we can't. Moon rock is much the same as Earth rock. Even if it weren't, there wouldn't be any left in your hair unless you stepped on to the lunar surface without a spacesuit, which is unlikely."

Peyton remained impassive.

Dr. Urth went on, smiling benevolently, and lifting a hand to steady the glasses perched precariously on the bulb of his nose. "A man traveling in space or on the moon breathes Earth air, eats Earth food. He carries Earth environment next to his skin whether he's in his ship or in his spacesuit. We are looking for a man who spent two days in space going to the moon, at least a week on the moon, and two days coming back from the moon. In all that time he carried Earth next to his skin, which makes it difficult."

"I'd suggest," said Peyton, "that you can make it less difficult by releasing me and looking for the real murderer."

"It may come to that," said Dr. Urth. "Have you ever seen anything like this?" His hand pushed its pudgy way to the ground beside his chair and came up with a gray sphere that sent back subdued highlights.

Peyton smiled, "It looks like a Singing Bell to me."

"It *is* a Singing Bell. The murder was committed for the sake of Singing Bells. . . . What do you think of this one?"

"I think it is badly flawed."

"Ah, but inspect it," said Dr. Urth, and with a quick motion of his hand, he tossed it through six feet of air to Peyton.

Davenport cried out and half-rose from his chair. Peyton brought up his arms with an effort, but so quickly that they managed to catch the Bell.

Peyton said, "You damned fool. Don't throw it around that way."

"You respect Singing Bells do you?"

"Too much to break one. That's no crime, at least." Peyton stroked the Bell gently, then lifted it to his ear and shook it slowly, listening to the soft clicks of the Lunoliths, those small pumice particles, as they rattled in vacuum.

Then, holding the Bell up by the length of steel wire still attached to it, he ran a thumb nail over its surface with an expert, curving motion. It twanged! The note was very mellow, very flutelike, holding with a slight *vibrato* that faded lingeringly and conjured up pictures of a summer twilight.

For a short moment, all three men were lost in the sound.

And then Dr. Urth said, "Throw it back, Mr. Peyton. Toss it here!" and held out his hand in peremptory gesture.

Automatically Louis Peyton tossed the Bell. It traveled its short arc one third of the way to Dr. Urth's waiting hand, curved downward and shattered with a heartbroken, sighing discord on the floor.

Davenport and Peyton stared at the gray slivers with equal wordlessness and Dr. Urth's calm voice went almost unheard as he said, "When the criminal's cache of crude Bells is located, I'll ask that a flawless one, properly polished, be given to me as replacement and fee."

"A fee? For what?" demanded Davenport, irritably.

"Surely the matter is now obvious. Despite my little speech of a moment ago, there is one piece of Earth's environment that no space traveler carries with him . . . and that is *Earth's surface gravity*. The fact that Mr. Peyton could so egregiously misjudge the toss of an object valued so highly

could mean only that his muscles are not yet readjusted to the pull of Earthly gravity. It is my professional opinion, Mr. Davenport, that your prisoner has, in the last few days, been away from Earth. He has either been in space or on some planetary object considerably smaller in size than the Earth —as, for example, the moon."

Davenport rose triumphantly to his feet. "Let me have your opinion in writing," he said, hand on blaster, "and that will be good enough to get me permission to use a psychoprobe."

Louis Peyton, dazed and unresisting, had only the numb realization that any testament he could now leave would have to include the fact of ultimate failure.

CHAD OLIVER AND CHARLES BEAUMONT

As a special service to scholars of the future, two of the leading young authors of science fiction, have prepared this time capsule: a succinct presentation, in under 5,000 words, of every theme and situation characteristic of routine conventional s.f. This short story is guaranteed to contain material equivalent to three anthologies . . . and to be much more fun to read.

THE LAST WORD

CLAUDE ADAMS stood in the collapsed ruins of the city and sifted sand through his fingers, noting with approval that his hands were steady. He cocked his head and listened.

There was nothing.

A sluggish breeze pushed sand through the piles of junk that had once housed a mighty civilization.

Claude called out; he called not in desperation but with a scientific aloofness that he found singularly admirable, under the circumstances. "Hello! Can anyone hear me? Am I alone?"

There was only the wind, and the sand.

"I *am* alone," Claude concluded, not displeased. "Well."

He had known it for some little time now. He, Claude Adams, was the Last Man in the World. He thought of it in appropriate capitals, and the symbolism appealed to him.

He walked over to the machine he had built and regarded it with a critical eye. A bit sloppy about the edges, he would have to admit that. A trifle foggy about the dials, perhaps. Still, a not unworthy piece of construction.

He would have to use it; his inflexible logic told him that much.

It was not, of course, that he was fond of crowds, or anything of that sort. Actually, he had always tended toward a rather solitary type of existence. However, he was a believer

in moderation. It was good to be thrown on one's own resources and all that, but there were limits.

He frowned at his machine.

The problem was easily stated: he was the Last Man in the World, alone in a desert of sand, shrubs, and ruins. He was, so to speak, at the end of time's tether. To resolve this dilemma, he would have to step into his machine and travel backward through time until he found somebody.

Not just *anybody,* of course.

But somebody.

"He who hesitates," Claude observed, "is lost."

He squared his shoulders and climbed into his rectangular machine. His sensitive fingers set the dials. He seated himself and took out a pocket edition of Shoogly's *Advanced Theoretical Physics,* with which he hoped to amuse himself en route through time.

He waved farewell.

He pushed the red button.

The machine stopped.

Claude put down the book, stood up and yawned. He glanced at the temporal indicator, wondering when he was.

"Two million B.C.,", he read.

He did not panic. He sat down, filled his pipe and lit it. He smoked until he was quite calm.

"Shoddy postwar materials," Claude said. "Must have overshot the mark."

He activated the portal and stepped outside. A warm sun and soft, pleasant breezes greeted him. He stood in an immense green field, dotted with flowers. He took a deep breath and smiled.

"A lot of years," he mused. He tapped his pipe on his boot. "I am now, beyond a doubt, the First Man in the World."

He sat in the fragrant grass and stretched. How did one go about being the First Man in the World? He was not altogether sure. The symbolism of the moment did not escape him. Still, apart from skipping about in the sunbeams and feeling significant, what was there for him to *do*?

His reverie was disturbed by a rasping clank from the other side of his machine. Claude stood up with unaccustomed alacrity.

"Good heavens," he said.

A being confronted him. Piteously, it clasped its hands together in supplication, It moved again, its gears grinding horribly.

Claude examined the object with interest. It was humanoid in appearance.

"I am still the First Man in the World," he said.

The clanking humanoid was indubitably intended to be female. She was pitiably rusted and several of her plates were sprung. Her skin hung slackly on her metallic frame. Her eyes were dull and her hair a matted disaster.

"Robot?" he wondered. "Or android? Clearly, it has a mechanical basis, but it faintly resembles a woman."

The thing creaked to her feet. "Brrrkl?" she wheezed.

Claude did not permit himself to be trapped by emotionalism. He rapped the creature smartly on the forehead and analyzed the hollow *bong* which followed.

"Oil," he said, snapping his fingers.

He stepped into his time machine and produced a tube of oil from the supply closet. He had intended it for his own machine, but then oil was oil, he reasoned, and he could not abandon a lady in distress.

Besides, his curiosity was piqued.

Maintaining an air of clinical detachment, he located a small hole in the back of her neck, hidden by her stringy hair. While she whimpered gratefully, he squeezed a generous portion of oil into her interior.

The result was instantaneous.

The thing drew herself up with some grace and became a woman. She smiled and produced a comb, running it through her tangled hair. Her skin tautened on its frame and her eyes sparkled.

"Brrkl," she purred, trying to snuggle against him.

He pushed her away. "The transformation is not yet com-

plete," he said judiciously, eying her with some distaste. "Try to control yourself, my dear."

She seemed disappointed, but rallied quickly. She pointed to the west, jumped up and down eagerly on her newly oiled limbs, and gestured for him to accompany her.

"What next?" Claude asked of the sunshine and the silence.

He followed her gamboling form across the grasslands. He noticed that she was becoming better-looking as the oil worked itself into her vitals.

"The Dawn of Man," Claude mused.

Unexpectedly, he heard music. His trained ears positively recognized the soft strains of lutes, infinitely sad, infinitely melancholy.

They topped a slight rise and there they were. Musicians, no doubt of that. But what *kind* of musicians? Ahead, in a slight clearing by the side of a still lake, was the most singular assemblage of beings he had ever seen. They lay in various supine positions in the pleasant grass, models of relaxation. "What's this?" Claude whispered. "Who are these people?"

"Brrkl." The android's arm moved up (still with a trace of stiffness at the shoulder joint) and a finger whirred, pointing.

Claude looked and came quite close to losing his composure. There, leaning precariously, was a ship; its naked metal was acned with great splotches of rust and decay, its glass fogged, its once bright paint faded from the sun.

The elegiac music seemed to quaver slightly: the notes trembled loose from the heart-shaped lutes and hung briefly on the air.

Claude moved toward the lissome group of musicians. Aside from flesh-tones which suggested seaweed, these people were little different from humans. They had arms and legs, in the proper number. But never had Claude seen such palpable fragility; they were like porcelain figurines.

He watched his step.

A silent voice spoke to him: "Greetings!"

Claude nodded. Telepaths, eh?

The figures did not stir, apart from the movement of their graceful fingers over the silver strings.

The voice murmured in Claude's mind. "We are from the planet which you call Mars."

The music took on a more profound mournfulness. One of the green men smiled tragically. He plucked a small flower and burst into tears. Others followed his example.

"We were exploring the solar system when our craft fell to the Earth. It was . . . terrible. Now, we are here."

Claude brightened. "Mechanical difficulties?" he said.

"Yes. We would like to go on, somehow."

Claude rubbed his hands together. "Perhaps a little old-fashioned know-how would be in order."

"It is hopeless, but you are good."

"Let's have a look-see."

Sighing, two of the Martians rose from the grassy hillock. It seemed to Claude that they were nearly transparent. They proceeded to the spaceship.

"Just let me poke around a little," Claude said, and entered.

Within, it was a maze of coils, tubes, knobs, dials, and antennae. Claude shook his head. Then he noticed something on the lowest level.

Clearly, it was a furnace.

Beside it, stood a huge stack of wood.

"Ah," he said. It was the most devilishly clever device he had ever seen. The ship was operated on the absurdly simple —and therefore ingenious—principle of outer combustion, or spontaneous ignition!

The solution was at hand.

Claude left the ship, beaming. "I've got her fixed, I think," he said.

Sadly, the Martians went up the ladder. Claude took some ten-dollar credits from his wallet—useless now!—and broke up some kindling. He applied his pipe lighter to the bills. In moments there was a crackling blaze.

The ship quivered.

Claude left in a hurry and decided he had better close the airlock for them. "Impractical fools," he chuckled.

He found the increasingly female android waiting for him.

He turned back, but the ship was already off the ground.

The voice inside his brain was imperially calm. "Earthling, you have done us a service. Martians do not forget. The android is yours."

Then, in a shower of sparks and heat, the ship smoked into the sky.

The android's hand touched his.

He turned and touched her shoulders. They were surprisingly soft.

"I'll call you Eve," he said.

The symbolism did not escape him.

In the fullness of time, a child was born.

Torn between Cain and Abel, Claude Adams called the boy Son. The compromise preyed on his precision-hungry mind, but it was the best that he could do.

The first indication they had that Son was somehow different came when the boy was three months old. He killed a rabbit by staring weakly at it with his watery eyes. This caused Claude some discomfiture, but his insatiable curiosity got the upper hand. He began to watch the boy closely.

When Son began to nurse while Eve was yet a good hundred yards away, that was good enough for Claude. Son *was* different from other children he had known.

"Psi factors," Claude said, stamping on the grass. "The mysterious chemisms of blood. Post-atomic radiation. Exposure to the time stream. Alteration of the gene chromosomes. The boy's a mutant!"

And so he was.

Yet they had their Son, and in the main these were happy times. They had the sunlight and the green fields and the long summer days.

And the nights.

Eve was enough to drive a man mad, when properly oiled.

Still, Claude reflected, there was a price tag on Paradise. You had to pay to play in the Garden of Eden. The halcyon years went by, and no honeymoon lasts forever.

Little things began to come between them.

Eve grew cross and irritable, and took to sleeping late in the mornings and slouching about the fields in unkempt leaves. Claude felt a growing restlessness. He took to polishing up his time machine, and would retire to its cabin for long periods, smoking his pipe and idly twiddling with the dials.

Finally he called Son to his side.

"Running away, Pop?" Son said knowingly, lying at his ease in mid-air. "You ditching Mom?"

"In a nutshell," Claude admitted, "that's it. I'm going into the future. Son. Maybe I'll come back later. Would you like to go with me?"

Son gracefully rolled over in the air and touched his chin with his knees. "You go ahead, Pop, I'll catch up with you later."

"But you have no machine, Son."

Son smiled tolerantly. "I'll get there," he said.

"Stout lad."

Claude made his preparations with care. Exactly twelve years since he had first set foot on the grassy fields, he climbed back into his machine. His heart was somehow heavy within him.

He took the old, long-empty oil tube with him, and there was a suspicion of moisture about his eyes.

He set the dials.

He pressed the red button for the second time.

There was a sort of hiss, followed by grindings. The machine stopped.

Claude moved toward the portal. "Well." he said, "the twentieth century, if I'm not mistaken!" He glanced at the temporal indicator.

He was mistaken.

The long red arrow trembled slightly at 3042 A.D. Claude frowned. "Damned strange," he muttered.

The machine could not be set into operation again until it had properly cooled, of course.

Claude activated the door. It wheezed pneumatically in-

ward, colliding with a rather shapeless object in the corner, that Claude knew instantly, had not been there before.

"Eve!"

She rose stiffly from her cramped position.

"I stowed away," she said. "Was it very wrong of me, dear?"

Claude sighed. "What is wrong? What is right? Anyway, we're here."

They stepped out the cabin door.

The day was a riot of sunshine and crisp breezes. Claude sniffed and examined his surroundings.

He was in a city. Tall, lean buildings rose all around him. The buildings were girdled by insect swarms of tiny planes, and crowds of people stood on mobile sidewalks. Claude watched the people. They seemed strangely alike, as if there were only one person, reflected and reflected again, thousandly. They were, without exception, expressionless. They stared at tiny antennaed boxes, which depended from their necks.

"Do you love me?" Eve asked.

"Yes and no," Claude answered, evasively, and continued at a brisker gait.

Then he stopped. At his feet was a clump of dandelions. He plucked one of the healthier specimens.

Instantly, a plane dropped from the sky and landed at his side.

The door of the plane opened. There was no one inside.

"Name?"

"Claude Adams. And yours?"

"Address?"

"At the moment, I'm afraid that I am not permanently located."

"You are under arrest. We're booking you on a 703-A."

"A 703-A?"

"That's right. A 703-A. Curiosity."

Claude was suddenly unable to control his feet. They marched him into the cabin. He sat down. The door closed. The plane lifted.

"I'll get you out!" Eve called from far below. "Don't worry. I'll talk to someone!"

Her voice faded with distance.

Tamping down a quantity of strong shag tobacco—the last of his supply—Claude stretched out on the fibrous pallet and attempted to think.

Undoubtedly this was a jail, although it did not resemble a jail. There were no bars: only a shallow moat, easily leaped, and a decided ascetic touch in the furnishings suggested the concept of imprisonment.

There was a baffled sob.

Claude turned and saw that he was not alone. A youngish man in a far corner sat disconsolately, twirling the knobs of a blank TV set.

"What's the difficulty?" Claude asked democratically.

"The TV," the man groaned. "It doesn't work. You understand? It does not work!"

At this moment there came a hollow laugh.

From another corner an older man arose. He was bearded. "It'll never work, either," he gibbered.

The young man turned on the bearded gentleman angrily and Claude turned away, wondering. After the commotion died down he addressed himself to the bearded man.

"Tell me something about this civilization," he said. "I seem to have a touch of amnesia."

"What's to tell?" the bearded man shrugged. "When the Overmasters arrived fifty years ago, from Mars, they eliminated all war, suffering, crime, disease, and work. It seems that this was in payment for a favor an Earthman once did them. Since then we've lived off the fat of the land. The Big Machine runs the show—"

"The Big Machine?"

"A highly Complex Mechanism," the bearded man said, warming to his topic. "Cybernetics and all that. It has taped the neural indices of every human being on Earth—it can steam your brains out if you step out of line. Not only that, but it serves as the electronic matrix of every structure on the

planet. Without the Big Machine, friend, there wouldn't be a manufactured molecule around here big enough to spit on."

"Hmmm," said Claude.

He continued to think.

Eve came to him the following day. He spotted her moving slowly across the smooth green lawn.

"Eve!"

She stopped at the water and did not look up.

Claude rushed to the edge of the moat. "Eve," he cried. "What news?"

"I got through," Eve said. "I spoke to it. The Big Machine."

"Ah! It's here, in this very city?"

"Yes."

"Well, then. I am going to be released immediately?"

Eve toed at a daisy. She seemed to blush. "No," she murmured. "It has extended your sentence to ninety years."

Claude reeled. "You're angry," he groped. "I left you and this is your revenge—"

"No." Eve raised her head. Of her two prime expressions, she did not use joy. "You must try to understand, Claude. I went to The Big Machine. My intentions were excellent. Then . . . something happened. Chemical affinities, meshing circuits—oh, I don't know!"

"Meshing circuits?"

Eve smiled, remembering. "I am mechanical," she said slowly. "The Big Machine is mechanical. It was one of those things. He's been lonely, Claude."

"That's enough. Do not go on."

Claude leaped the moat. He grasped Eve's shoulders. "Where is he?" he rasped. "Come on, I know he's around here somewhere."

"There. The domed building on the corner. Oh, Claude—"

Claude moved fast. His blood was up now. The Big Machine, since it had the neural indices of every person on Earth, had no need of guards. Claude entered the Central Rotunda without difficulty.

The Big Machine, resembling an immense dynamo, hummed.

"Machine," Claude murmured, "say your prayers."

Claude inspected the machine. It was forged of heavy materials. It appeared to be impenetrable. It hummed and banks of lights flickered in its cavernous recesses.

Somewhere, it must have an Achilles' heel.

Claude applied his scientific know-how to the problem and got nowhere. He kicked The Big Machine with something akin to desperation.

Then he noticed something odd floating directly above his head.

It was Son.

"The plug, Dad," Son said.

"Beg pardon?"

"The plug. Pull the plug!"

"Of course!"

The Big Machine sent up Sonic Vibrations. It hummed and quivered as Claude approached the socket. It knew Fear.

"Damned clever," Claude said, and yanked the plug out.

"Umph!" cried Son. "Hang on, Pop!"

The world began to lose its bearings. Things effervesced. Claude swayed and was hit by attacks of nausea.

Buildings crumbled, their electronic matrix destroyed.

People dropped in their tracks, their neural indices triggered.

Claude felt himself falling. . . .

There was darkness.

He awoke to find himself in the collapsed ruins of the city. A sluggish breeze pushed sand through the piles of junk that had once housed a mighty civilization.

There was silence everywhere.

Son flew over astride a large boulder and ground to a stop at his father's side. "Mom is here," he said. "She wants you, Dad."

Side by side, they walked into a clearing, surrounded by

scorched foliage. Eve sat silently on a block of broken masonry. Her face was moist with tears.

Claude took her hand.

"Eve," he said. "You and I and Son are now civilization. Do you understand what this means?"

"Yes."

"And are you afraid?"

"A little. It isn't easy to be the mother of a whole new race."

"No," Claude conceded, "not easy. The job is too big for the two of us. We must have a wife for Son. We must have a female child."

Son smiled.

Claude squared his shoulders.

Together, he and Eve marched into the bushes.

SURVIVAL

After we've blown ourselves to dust
And all the dooms have come to pass,
The things from space will wonder at
The endless patience of the grass.

CARLYN COFFIN

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