

OUT OF MY MIND

FROM THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

JOHN BRUNNER



PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE . . .

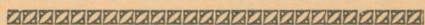
A wide canvas—and a wide group of stories. All the way from the downright vicious to the most gently tender: stories rich with humor, ripe with passion.

Just two from man's short past—a blink in time. A few more for the present we all live in. But more—many more—for the long reach of the future.

And these are stories waiting only to be read to come alive!

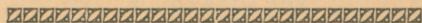
By the author of THE WHOLE MAN and THE SQUARES OF THE CITY.

by John Brunner
THE WHOLE MAN
THE SQUARES OF THE CITY
THE LONG RESULT



OUT OF MY MIND

JOHN BRUNNER



Ballantine Books



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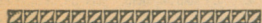
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Past



FAIR WARNING



ON CONSIDERATION of the stories finally chosen for this collection, I'm struck by the prevailing pessimism of the whole. (The short list, as it leaves my desk, even contains the ominous total of thirteen items.)

Possibly this is because they were written during a period when the human race was exhibiting with particularly alarming frequency its incompetence to manage its own affairs on the public scale. On the private scale we make out pretty well, but where two or three million are gathered together—watch out!

Indeed, when the fever of international mud-slinging is punctuated by an interlude of cool sanity, such as attended the signing of the test-ban treaty, one can't help wondering whether the world's leaders really had a lucid spell, or whether someone else came along and—well—intervened. . . .



I HAD this from someone I met in a London pub, so it's only fair to stress that (a) it's at best secondhand and (b) as the phrase goes, "names have been changed to protect the innocent."

There was this young man sitting at the bar. I came up and ordered a drink. He saw the pin, which I always wear, on my lapel—the sign of the Society for the Prevention of Nuclear War. Pointing at it, he said, “You’re scared!”

I said yes, because it was true. After all, the pin was there to provoke discussion with people. But I hoped he wasn’t going to pick an argument at the moment, because he was clearly rather drunk.

He said, “I’m in the navy. I’m scared. Sit down and listen.”

The island lay baking in the sun like a large round cake. It was iced around the edge and all across its center with bright white sand, decorated with a crisscross design of felled trees, and on the sand a greeting for some giant child’s birthday had been written in the haphazard hieroglyphs of vehicle tracks. Exactly at its midpoint was a black cabin made of corrugated iron; around this, in a tidy radial arrangement, latticework steel towers took the place of candles. The whole was set on the blue-silver platter of the Pacific Ocean and measured rather less than two miles each way.

It was an elaborate confection.

Beyond it, pegged out on the almost moveless water, there were large ships, none of them closer than fifteen miles away. Beached in the soft sand, or anchored to the atoll which ran out from the eastern side of the island a few feet below the surface, there were a few little ships. These were there to remove the men now working on the island to what was politely called a safe distance when zero hour approached. Yesterday the island had boasted over a hundred inhabitants, but most had already gone.

Now there remained a mere couple of dozen people on shore, mainly servicemen along to do the donkeywork of fetching and carrying. Already the landing craft were being loaded with unexpendable equipment: half-tracked trucks, spare scaffolding, the tents and field kitchens which had done their best to make the island seem military and efficient during the past few weeks. But it took the black cabin to make it look like anything other than a tropical paradise.

Shortly, of course, it would be rather more than a tropical hell.

A number of boats, fully loaded, moved away from the shore. Eventually one solitary boat headed in the opposite direction. It was one of the smallest vessels in sight, but even so it was ridiculously large by comparison with the single packing case which was its cargo.

Naturally, this was no ordinary packing case. Aside from rating an entire boat to itself, it was also entitled to a guard of four men and an escort in white coveralls who sat beside it wearing an anxious expression and listening through headphones to the tock-tock-brrr of a geiger counter. The case itself was slung in a cradle of tension springs like those used to ship unique archaeological relics, and when the boat nosed softly against the shore the men who had to lift it treated it with far more care than an equivalent quantity of eggs.

Among the men who came to greet it on arrival, showing the courtesy normally expended only on visiting royalty, were the two most important men on the island. They had been the most important even when all the hundred-plus previous inhabitants had been here, although there were several of the hundred-plus to whom it was not politic to mention the fact.

One of them was balding and elderly, with a slight stoop and horn-rimmed glasses. He had disks of green glass clipped over the lenses against the sunlight. The other was older, but looked younger because he was tall and thin and stood very erect. As they waited for the crate's handlers to transfer it from the cradle in the boat to another similar cradle specially rigged on the flat back of a half-tracked pickup, the one with glasses pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and furiously wiped first the glasses and then his face.

"God!" he said. "The heat!"

His companion glanced at him and smiled without humor. "Don't let it get you down, Vliesser. It's going to be a hell of a lot hotter in a few hours' time."

Vliesser snorted. "We shall be well out of it by then. I swear, even if it means putting off the firing for half an hour, I intend to get a shower before zero hour."

"Stand out on deck. The blast will pick up plenty of water."

"Damn you, Rogan—do you have to be so cynical?"

"If I wasn't cynical," the tall man said, "I'd be shaking like a leaf. Was it this way at Bikini in '54?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there. In any case, this is a new advance. Qualitatively new. What's the good of drawing empty comparisons?" Vliesser mopped his forehead again.

"They used to tell a story to newcomers in the western states, about the bird that flew backwards because he liked to see where he'd been." Rogan chuckled. "That's me. I'm temperamentally unsuited for major forward steps."

The naval lieutenant who had been supervising the stowage of the packing case turned away from the pickup and saluted.

"The crate's ready to go to the cabin now, Dr. Rogan," he said. "You've been briefed on arrangements for the evacuation?"

Civilians in a target area, thought Rogan wryly. Aloud he answered, "Yes, we've been told. Directly we've armed the bomb we drive back to the beach; you'll be waiting at the boat, and we're to abandon the truck and come aboard."

"That's right," nodded the young officer. "Well, I'll get my men aboard now—I've been warned not to let them stay on shore while you're in the cabin." He hesitated. "Is that all?"

Rogan confirmed, and he saluted and went to round up his men.

Vliesser checked the spring cradle carrying the crate, gave a satisfied nod, and addressed Rogan. "You know how to drive this mechanical yak, I suppose? I didn't think to ask."

"Yes, I took a lesson on it a couple of days ago. Jump in." Rogan climbed over the low door into the driving seat; more awkwardly, Vliesser settled his podgy bulk in the passenger's place.

"Not less than a hundred and twenty people have seen the thing being built," he grunted. "You'd think one of them could be allowed to stay and give us a hand."

"Security," Rogan said. "I'm sure they'd be happier if even we didn't know how the thing is supposed to work."

Matter of fact," he added reflectively, "I sometimes feel the same. But never mind. Hold on—here we go."

He started the engine, engaged a low gear, and began to ease the half-track up the gentle slope toward the black cabin.

Vliesser remained silent, mopping his forehead, for a full minute before speaking again. Then, not looking at his companion, he said, "Do you think it'll function?"

"Ask me this evening."

"Rogan, be serious. The occasion demands it. Think! The first manmade phoenix reaction—the first artificial carbon-nitrogen cycle—is probably going to be induced here, today!"

Guiding the vehicle carefully around some felled palms, Rogan nodded. "I hope it does work. I want to get back to something a bit more rewarding."

Vliesser glanced at him. "So you hope it will work? Do you not mean you hope it won't?"

"Not at all. I'm tired of being chased by the military towards bigger and better explosions. Now we've reached the level at which they're bound to lose interest. I mean, this really would be the weapon too terrible to use, wouldn't it?" He waved at the cabin ahead. "Let this thing off over open water, and you'll have a self-sustaining hydrogen reaction. It'd wipe the planet clean in about a twenty-fifth of a second."

"I made it decimal oh-five second," Vliesser said after a pause. "It's a function of the available deuterium."

"Don't let's argue," Rogan said with a wry smile, braking the half-track and swinging its nose around. After a couple of failures he backed it into a convenient position to unload.

Grumbling continually under his breath, Vliesser got down and helped his companion to manhandle the crate out of its springs. Carrying it between them, they entered the cabin. The black-painted walls had absorbed the sun, and the heat struck at them like a hammer.

"If this were TNT," Rogan said emotionlessly as he lowered his end of the crate, "I'd be running in case the heat in here set it off. Open it up, will you?"

Vliesser bent to the combination lock on the crate. He undid it and lifted off the lid. Inside there was insulation—a double layer of lead foil; flat cans of heavy water forming a false case inside the main one; more lead, in slabs rather than foil; rubber blocks to act as shock absorbers; and finally the trigger, a slender metal cylinder the length of a man's arm.

Rogan set it gently on the sliding cradle which was to take it into the very heart of the bomb mechanism. He gave it a pat, then took a note pad from the pocket of his shirt and began to read out a list of figures. As he read, Vliesser moved about him, checking dials and operating levers marked with the wasp sign—black and yellow stripes signifying DANGER.

Everything was normal. Rogan sighed with relief and pocketed the note pad again. He picked up two leads with crocodile clips on the ends and brought them to twin terminals peeking out of the end of the trigger. Vliesser's breathing was the loudest sound in the world.

The wires were clipped in place. Rogan muttered something to himself and pushed the lever beside the sliding cradle. Silently, the trigger ran down its oiled causeway into the appointed place.

"Now all we have to do is turn on the radio controls," said Vliesser. "Then we can go."

"Light the blue touch paper and retire to a safe distance," Rogan quoted.

"What?" Vliesser glanced up sharply.

"Nothing. I was just thinking"—Rogan's eyes roved the mechanism surrounding them—"that you were right to say this was a great occasion. Shall we mark it appropriately?" He felt in the hip pocket of his khaki shorts and took out a flask. "Let's toast it, in the hope that it won't do the same to us."

"I can't say I share your sense of humor," Vliesser commented. "But I will cheerfully share your liquor."

"Here, then." Carefully, as he had armed the bomb, Rogan measured out half the contents of the flask into the lid for Vliesser, then raised the flask mockingly to his lips.

And his arm stopped. Everything stopped. He could not

move a single muscle except his eyes and those involved in breathing. He tried to cry out, but failed, and from the look of terror on Vliesser's face he knew that the same paralysis had overtaken them both.

A second or two later, out of the sides of his eyes, he saw a distinct shimmer in the air. It resembled a heat effect but was too sharply defined.

As stiff as though turned to stone, both men stayed where they were.

Out of the shimmer in the air, a form was—was materializing. A form as tall as a man but not shaped quite like a man, although it had the same number of limbs, the same proportion of head to trunk, and moved with a manlike gait.

Straining to see what it was, Rogan felt his eye muscles stabbed by pain, and he had to look to the front again, where all he could see was Vliesser, a statue depicting raw fear.

About ten minutes went by. During it they barely glimpsed the stranger, but they could guess what he was doing—he was going around the cabin checking all the mechanism so shortly due for a fast and fiery end. They heard clinking noises and shuffling footsteps; once or twice they had a view of the stranger's back as he passed across their field of vision. But at no time did they see him clearly.

They heard him very well, of course. And that was the trouble.

When the tour of inspection was complete, the stranger paused in front of the shimmer in the air and—so it seemed to Rogan—glanced back. A voice tinged with sarcasm said, in perfect English with a strong American accent:

"Congratulations, gentlemen! This time you'll manage it!"

Their invisible bonds broke. Flask and lid crashed to the floor as they whirled.

But there was no one there.

The island baked on. Aboard a ship far out to sea, men looked impatiently at their watches. The young lieutenant in charge of the boat that was supposed to be taking Rogan and Vliesser away discovered that they were five full minutes overdue. He contemplated the relative risks of taking a

party up to investigate and being court-martialed for disobeying orders, or doing nothing and being court-martialed for not going to the rescue. He decided to give the scientists another five minutes.

He hoped to hell there hadn't been a mixup in his orders. The island was only baking now; shortly it would be burned to a crisp. Possibly to even less.

Eventually his dilemma was resolved. Aboard ship, someone who saw a fast promotion fading ordered a radio message to be sent, and the lieutenant took two of his men up to the black cabin, in a rather agitated hurry.

They found the cabin stinking of whiskey, and Vliesser and Rogan busy smashing the equipment to pieces.

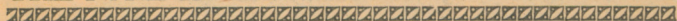
"You were the lieutenant who found them?" I said. I knew the recent Pacific tests had been joint Anglo-American undertakings, of course.

He looked at his empty glass. "I didn't say that," he muttered. "Matter of fact, I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything at all."

He got off his stool and walked, as though he had taken patient aim, straight through the door. He didn't even sway. When I got to the door myself, he was nowhere to be seen.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the names have been changed to protect innocent people. Like us.

THE NAIL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HAND



IT'S REPORTED that every time an executioner dies—the public hangman in Britain, for example—there are scores and scores of applications for his vacant post. Did you ever walk down a crowded street and wonder whether you were passing a man who wrote after the job, think that behind that civilized expression and smart suit of clothes might be a person desirous of being licensed to snuff out lives?

Not only the act but the apparatus of judicial murder retains its horrid fascination. Think of the unhealthy adoration which one way and another has been lavished on the Cross. It could as easily have been the saltire cross or Saint Catherine's wheel or the gallows.

More mesmeric yet than the act or the apparatus, though, is the man who kills. And at the most celebrated execution of all time: who was he?

What became of him?



OUTSIDE in the warm spring night there suddenly began an irregular hammering. After the first half-dozen blows, a rau-

cous voice with neither tone nor sense of rhythm to justify it was raised in what was probably meant to be song.

In the well-lighted, comfortable room—as barrack accommodation went—where he was visiting his friend the centurion, the elegant young man from the governor's staff wrinkled his nose in distaste. He said, "Do you enjoy that abominable row?"

"By the Bull God, no!" said the centurion. "But it would be more than my rule over my men is worth were I to tell him to shut his mouth. You don't know who it is, eh?"

"How should I know?" said the elegant young man, and sipped at his goblet of wine. "This Samian of yours is excellent, I must say. Who ships it for you?"

"A rascal of a Greek brings it in. I'll get you a barrel if you like. As I was saying, you honestly don't know?"

"I keep little company with the rank-and-file soldiery," the elegant young man said sarcastically.

"Does the name Decius Asculus mean anything to you?" the centurion said, and gave a faint smile as he saw understanding dawn on his friend's face.

"The one they call the Expert?" The elegant young man bent forward eagerly in his seat. "Is he really among your men?"

"Yes! I'm surprised I haven't mentioned it to you. Want to take a look at him?"

"I certainly do!" The elegant young man jumped to his feet. With the centurion he crossed to the balcony overlooking the courtyard of the barracks and stared down. A thickset man, stripped to the waist in the hot night air, was working at a rough wooden table by the light of a torch held by a young legionary. His work consisted of stamping out big bronze nails with a mallet; at every blow the courtyard rang.

"So he's the one," the elegant young man said softly. He put his hand on his friend's arm.

"Indeed! The reason he's singing like that—I agree it's awful, but it's his way—is that he has three to do tomorrow, and it always sets him up."

"Is he as good as they say?"

"And even better. Precise, careful, accurate—all the right

things. You should see him at work! If you like, I'll arrange for you to watch him tomorrow."

The elegant young man gave an elegant shudder. "The idea thrills me," he said. "Of course, I can't regard it as lightly as a man of action like you, but one must harden oneself, mustn't one?"

"You'll forget your qualms fast enough, believe me. It's purely a pleasure to watch a real expert like him at work."

Decius Asculus broke off his singing—he'd been rendering a whorehouse ballad called "The Spear and the Target," which had nothing to do with either spears or targets. He looked up at the balcony across the courtyard, and his big-jowled face split in such a grin that his eyes almost disappeared in creased rolls of fat flesh.

"I'll lay a denarius to a fish-scale that the centurion's promising to take his fancy friend up the hill tomorrow!" he said. At the words "up the hill"—which meant more than simply that—the young legionary gulped and the torch wavered.

"You on execution duty tomorrow, son?" the big man said. The boy nodded, and he went on, "First time, hey?"

"Y-yes, it is."

"You'll get used to it." Decius Asculus picked up one of the nails he had beaten flat, inspected it critically, and exchanged his hammer for a file. The nerve-racking rasp of metal on metal punctuated the rest of his talk, as he put barbs on the narrow end of the nail to make sure it could not possibly be tugged loose.

"Besides," he said, "the little parties we have here are nothing compared to what they had in the old days. Ever hear tell of the Slave Revolt? When they cleared that one up, they put more than five thousand slaves alongside the roads—as a lesson, so to speak." He swapped nails and began to file another. "I often wish I'd been there. I'll lay a denarius to a fish-scale that there was sloppy work done on that occasion. It isn't everyone who has the knack of it, boy!"

The young legionary muttered something.

"Know what they call me?" Decius Asculus went on. "They

call me the Expert. Not just *an* expert, but *the* Expert. They send novices to me for training." He glanced up and looked the boy straight in the eye. "You take advantage of it while you can," he counseled. "You watch carefully tomorrow and any other time you're on duty up the hill. It could be worth a good posting to you, and a bonus, to say that you learned the trick of it by watching Decius Asculus! More than that, I'll do you a special favour, seeing as how you're a good lad and I like you well. Give me your hand."

The boy hesitated. Decius Asculus shot out a brawny fist and seized him by the wrist. With the skill of long practice he turned the hand over, spread the fingers back, and held them with his thumb, while selecting a prepared nail from the table.

"See?" he said. "Doesn't matter how reluctant they are—you can always open the hand up ready for the job. Keep the hand still, that's very important. I've seen sloppy work done you wouldn't believe, where the man only had to pull and because the nail was ill-placed, he just naturally tore his hand away. Painful, as you'd think, but a man hung up and sick with thirst and sure of death if he doesn't pull won't worry about a little thing like ripping off a finger if he can escape the nail."

The boy's face was very white in the light of the torch, and his hand was limp in the big man's grasp.

"So!" said Decius Asculus, poisoning the nail. "You put it there, d'you see? Always get the nail in the middle of the hand!"

He jabbed the nail down playfully, and roared with laughter as the boy doubled over, letting fall the torch, in order to vomit between his feet.

Not a bad day, and not a bad crowd following the condemned men. And three was certainly better than two, just as two was better than one. But Decius Asculus had to sigh whenever he thought of the aftermath of the Slave Revolt long before he was born. Five thousand and more hung up for the crows! Ah, that was execution on the grand scale, while the most he, the Expert, had ever dealt with at one time

was a measly dozen, the crew of a pirate ship taken off Caesarea.

However, that was no reason for failing to do a perfect job.

He hadn't thought to ask who the three were, lined up for today; he didn't concern himself with such matters very much. Waiting on the hill among the standing posts for the condemned men to arrive, whipped along the road with the crossbars on their backs, he turned to one of his assistants and inquired.

"Couple of robbers," the man said. "And this holy man who's been kicking up such a row in the town lately."

Small fry. Decius Asculus went back to where he'd laid his nails and hammer and checked them over yet again.

When it was at last time for the job, he grinned, rubbed his hands together, drew himself up, and—fully aware that he had admirers in the crowd—gave his orders as crisply as a general planning a battle. Crossbars up! Ropes over the bars! Arms out, ropes over 'em! Haul away! Hold 'em steady!

He spat on his hands and took up the first nail.

This was his climax. This was the thing he lived for, the thing he had made his own: the poisoning of the nail between thumb and finger, his own little finger extended, strong as a bar of iron, pinning the fingers of the condemned man flat on the wood while he made the final minute adjustments, and then *bam*.

Sometimes they screamed as the single gigantic blow drove the metal crunching through the flesh and the bone, and sometimes they fainted. He preferred them to scream. It indicated that they were strong and likely to live for a while. It was a boast of his that—unless there was a knot in the wood of the crossbar—he never used more than two blows, the second being a light tap to fold the nail upwards so that it bent over and jammed the hand hard against the wood. The blood oozed from the holes; almost at once the flies swarmed down and began to sup at it.

Then he called for one of his larger nails and attended to the feet, first having the ropes removed which held the arms while the hands were being nailed, because it was

very hard to swing the legs and try to kick when the weight of the whole body was being carried on the nails in the middle of the hands. Long practice had taught him how best to gather the man's ankles both in one vicelike grip, slam them against the upright post, break the feet downwards with his knee, and then follow the knee blow with the driving of the final nail. The feet usually bled much more than the hands, but that was to be expected.

There was considerable racket going on among the crowd, but he scarcely noticed. He was concentrating so hard that his head was buzzing; his breath came fast, and the tautness in the pit of his stomach grew and grew. It was always like this. To see the nail go home, watch the blood run, and the flies come down to taste it, was more to Decius Asculus than food and wine—almost more than women. But whenever he had done a first-rate job, he let the women of the town know about it afterwards, sometimes as many as eight or ten of them before the accumulated excitement had been worn away.

The robbers were good value. They struggled; one of them defied the pain and almost managed to kick him in the face before he secured the feet and smashed them flat against the wood.

The third one, though, was a disappointment. He was so spiritless, Decius Asculus thought with contempt, that it was hardly worth hanging him up. He made no attempt to resist—just spread his hands out ready for the nails. Worse yet, he did not scream as the robbers did when the nails went home, but simply closed his eyes and hung his head. That annoyed Decius Asculus. It suggested that he would not live long, and some people might assume his early death to be due to a mistake on the executioner's part. It came near to spoiling his exhilaration.

To pay the man out for it, when he came to nail the feet he gave an extra vicious twist to flatten them, and made sure when he turned the nail over that the whole of its head sank deep into the flesh.

"There, you liverless weakling!" Decius Asculus muttered under his breath, and looked up, feeling the wonderful

sense of buoyancy that always followed an execution go through every limb. He began to turn away.

And stopped.

The eyes of the man on the cross were open and gazing directly into his.

"You were so right about your Expert!" the elegant young man said warmly, holding out his goblet for more of the fine Samian wine. "I was tremendously impressed with his skill the other day. You have another execution tomorrow, don't you? I must say I'd like to be there and watch him again."

The centurion frowned. "You can be there if you like," he said. "But Decius Asculus won't be."

"Why not? Oh!" The elegant young man chuckled. "Don't tell me! Some covetous visiting general spied him and had him posted out from under your nose. I can tell by your expression."

"No," the centurion said. He went on frowning. "No, it wasn't like that. It was another of the peculiar things that have been happening around town lately. I was doing my rounds that same evening, after the execution you came to, and I happened to pass the barrack room where Decius Asculus was supposed to be sleeping, and I heard a banging noise, and then I heard his voice sort of—well, trying to sing that awful song he's so fond of. You heard it. So I called up the patrol and went in to see what was happening. And there he was."

"What did you find?" The elegant young man sipped his wine.

"I found—" The centurion looked uncomfortable. "For the sake of all the gods, don't let this get around, or people may start talking. Well, there he was, sitting at the table in the middle of the room, with a little flaring lamp in front of him, and his hammer, and a stack of nails, and he had nailed his own hand down on the table. He was just sitting there looking at it, with the other men in the room starting up from their sleep because of the sudden noise. And when I asked what he was doing, he just shrugged and

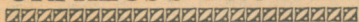
said he was trying to work out how he could nail down the other hand as well. Perhaps by holding the hammer in his teeth, he said."

"What an extraordinary thing!" exclaimed the elegant young man, and started to talk about something else.

Present



ORPHEUS'S BROTHER



THE LAST story was about a man who said he was a god—or, to be strictly accurate, I suppose, who said he was God. This is about a man who someone else said was a god.

It has been argued that we moderns have debased the concept of the Hero, preferring to create the Celebrity, whose claim to be famous is founded on his being well-known: a closed circle. Certainly we have degraded the related notion of "legend"—a singer, a movie star, gets killed in a crash, and instantly he's plastic for the public relations mold, myths being made to order out of his death.

And yet . . . the giants of legend were most likely ordinary men, whom we see through the magnifying glass of memory. This is the process which gave us our Heracles, our Orpheus.

Suppose the process *could* be consciously directed; suppose the meretricious myth-making of the publicity departments could be transformed and somehow become real. . . .

A third Linus likewise lies buried at Argos: he was the poet whom some describe as a son of Oeagrus and the Muse Calliope—thus making him Orpheus's brother.

—Robert Graves: *The Greek Myths*

ALL THE reasons why I was not glad to find him waiting in the dark in my apartment would make a long list. He had a

gun; he was eighteen years old; he was very frightened; he hated me.

And he looked very like his brother.

His face was pale as a corpse's: waxy, the skin stiffened with fear, the lips drawn back from sharp young teeth, the eyes wide and brilliant. He was wearing a black shirt and black jeans—Rock's trademark. Hero-worship, perhaps.

The phrase struck me as amusing, relieved the iron-bar solidity of my first tense alarm at finding him here, and started me casting about for ways to make him put the gun down without using it. I stood with my left hand on the light switch and my right extended to close the door, exactly as I had been when I realized he was here. I moved only my eyes, scanning the room. It was not quite as I had left it. Certain objects had been disturbed—though nothing was missing; this was an honest burglar by his own lights—and all the doors leading to other rooms had been opened, except one. He would certainly have tried that one and found it proof against anything short of dynamite.

"Come inside," he said in a thin voice. "Shut the door."

Moving carefully, so as not to startle him, I complied, and then walked towards the Louis Quatorze chair which was the twin of the one in which he had chosen to sit waiting for me to return. The muzzle of the gun followed me jerkily.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "What do you want?"

"You know who I am," he said.

"Of course I do!" I snapped. "You're Laurie Suggs—Rock's brother. You're damned lucky I recognized you, or I'd have slammed that door and called the police before you'd got used to the light being on. Or I could have jumped you. I may be old enough to be your grandfather but the dazzle would have slowed you down. Didn't it strike you that it was silly to wait in the dark?"

He swallowed, making his Adam's apple bob on his boy-stringy neck. That bulging prominence ran in the family, apparently—Rock had had it, and their father, too.

"You bastard," he said after a while. "You know why I came here."

I considered a possible retort along the lines of, "If I know

your family, it's to get money out of me." But it would be safer not to make him angry as well as scared.

"No, I don't," I said finally. "And I don't know why you think you want that gun, either. Put it down."

He softened the waxen pallor of his face enough to form a sketchy smile, and shook his head very slightly.

"Put it down!" I repeated more loudly. "It isn't a toy—guns are for killing, and they call that murder."

"They didn't call it murder when you killed my brother, Mr. Wise," he said.

The air in the room went suddenly cold, and my mind with it. I really had expected him to have come after money; I'd paid a great deal to Rock's relatives, without much regret. I had taken for granted that his tour of the apartment, picking up and putting down the jade, the silver, the porcelain, was to help him estimate how much he could force me to pay. The gun, on that basis, would be purely for reassurance, something to fondle *netsuke*-fashion in the dark hour of waiting before my eventual return.

Not now.

I looked at the gun as though seeing it for the first time, and its round smug mouth seemed to form a soundless word.

Death.

If there was any salvation for me now, it lay in that twist of the mind which makes the act of killing most meaningful when one knows the man he kills: not a stranger in the sights of a rifle, a sleeved limb shattered from its body by a bomb, but a person, an individual, upon whom is performed the most terrific act of love.

There might well be no safety even there. Nonetheless, I felt a tingling need that the moment be later, because although the patient's knowledge of the agent adds little to the act, I had always feared that I might be ended by an anonymous nobody: a driver on a freeway or a petty hoodlum. And I did not *know* Laurie Suggs yet, nor he me.

He has come here to kill me. He is probably sustained, therefore, by a sense of loyalty and the inspiring concept of vengeance. Take those from him, show him the emptiness

of the deed in the eyes of others, the absence of glory—and then perhaps. . . .

I gave a short laugh. "You'd better be careful making accusations like that, Laurie," I said. "That's nearly as dangerous as playing with guns." I saw now I had been wrong to say his gun wasn't a toy. It would help if I could attack the line of his weakness by making his behavior childish. So: *playing*.

He shook his head again. "You killed Jack, Mr. Wise," he said in the same thin voice. "That was what you had in mind all along. I got pictures showing you did it."

"Then you're the only person who has," I said. "And you weren't even there. How'd you get the pictures—draw them yourself?"

I thought so. Kid stuff, drawing. Finger painting in the schoolroom. He shifted on his chair and for a second pressed his lips together as though to stifle an angry answer. The fact that he didn't want to get angry was on my side, too.

"Shit," he said. He put his left hand awkwardly behind him to reach at the right hip pocket of the black jeans. "I mean real pictures, everyone saw. These!"

He tugged out a soiled and folded wad of clippings from newspapers, not quite old enough to be yellow but on the turn. Left-handed, he tossed the wad to me. It opened a little in the air and fell on my lap.

"Spread 'em out," he said. "Look at 'em. You're right there with the rest clawing at Jack, like a hound going on two legs. You smile, I'll kill you slow, shoot you in the belly first and let you bleed awhile. Hear me?"

I took the clippings and separated them, trying not to tear them where they had rubbed on the folds. They were all the ones I had expected. The big shouting headlines came at me like train-whistles.

FANS MOB SINGER, KILL IN FRENZY!

ROCK CARELESS DEAD IN AFTER-SHOW RIOT!

POP SINGER DIES AS FANS SCREAM!

God, how they loved it! Coast to coast and around the

world they loved it, drooled it out in their huge ill-detailed black and white pictures. Oh yes, I was there—where else should I be, manager of this singer so loved by his fans they didn't want anything less than *him*?

I said in my calmest and most reasonable tone, "Laurie, you're talking crazy nonsense."

"You're right there with the rest," he said. "Tearing at him. Pulling at him. Like dogs breaking up a rabbit."

"Now you shut your dirty mouth!" I flared. "What the hell did you expect me to do—stand back and let those lunatics do as they wanted? God damn you, I was beaten nearly to death myself trying to get Rock out of the middle of it! You take another look at these pictures. I'm not trying to rip your brother to pieces; I'm trying to help him get away from the crowd! What do you think I am—a cannibal?"

I balled the clippings up and threw them back at him.

"I ought to make you eat those words," I said. "Write 'em out and make you eat 'em, one by one. But I'd like to think you're grieving for Rock as badly as I did."

"You're smooth, Mr. Wise," he said. He wasn't quite so sure of himself now. "But you didn't care for Jack. He wasn't anything to you."

"Nothing to me? Laurie, you watch what you're saying or I'll come after you, gun or no gun, and beat the truth into your backside. You know I got closer to Rock than—"

"His name wasn't Rock. I'm not talking about anyone called Rock. You made up Rock Careless and hung the name on a guy who came handy. A guy called Jack Suggs, who was *my brother*. I didn't say that Rock wasn't anything to you. Rock was just about everything, I guess. Meal ticket, rent, carfare—a walking bank, especially when he was out of the way and the story of his death boosted those record sales. And not just cash, you . . ." He had to swallow. "I looked around the apartment when I came in. I saw that room in back."

"It was his."

"You mean he was yours." He spat accurately into the middle of a handwoven Turkey rug beside his chair. "I ought to shoot you just for that, making my brother into a—hell, I never learned what word was bad enough to fit."

He looked sick. I felt a stir of hope. Provided that silly emotional reaction didn't drive him to some deed of symbolic desperation, it too was working on my side.

I said, "Go ahead, then."

He blinked at me, suddenly uncertain.

"Go ahead!" I repeated. "Want to shoot your brother too? This brother you're so crazy about you're all set to avenge him nobly, thinking this'll set you up alongside him in the eyes of the world? *Nuts.*"

"What do you mean?" His eyes were narrow with alarm.

That's it! That's the weak spot!

"Isn't this what you're after, Laurie? You want to kill the brother who made his way in the world—the brother who liked you and the rest of his family so much he wouldn't admit to having any kin—the brother who didn't see why the hell he should give any of what he'd earned for himself to people who'd never given him anything, even though they were his relatives. But you can't kill him. He's dead. He's immortal! So you decided you'd kill his best friend instead."

His mouth was working. I leaned forward on my chair and flung the last words at him like knives. "Jack Suggs didn't die by being mobbed and broken in a crowd of fans. Jack Suggs killed himself because he hated being Jack Suggs. He wanted to be Rock Careless—he *liked* being Rock Careless—and I was all the family Rock Careless ever had."

Swaying, he closed his eyes. Then, remembering he had to watch me and keep the gun leveled, he snapped them open again. He said, "Shit. I went over this place before you got back. You didn't care about *Rock*, either, 'cept for what you had out of him. You talk slick, but it doesn't hang together."

He laughed. It was an unpleasant noise, fit to set the teeth on edge.

"He wasn't any part of your world, Mr. Wise. This—" He waved his left hand around the apartment. "This doesn't belong with Jack, or with Rock Careless either. You're a rich egghead who didn't give a cuss about your human play-pretty. He sang good, played guitar good—same as hundreds of others. You figured you could live off his back. And you did. And when you'd made plenty you saw how you could

make some more and be rid of Jack as well. You pulled him to pieces. Did he scream? They said in the paper you couldn't hear for the crowd of fans."

"Jack Suggs left home the earliest moment he could," I said. I was having difficulty keeping the scorn in my voice. "He didn't have a cent, but he wanted the hell out and nothing else mattered. He and I stayed together for going on three years. By then he had a quarter-million in the bank in his own name. *You* know that—since he didn't make a will, it was carved up among his kinfolk, and I guess there's a piece of it coming to you if you don't get yourself to the electric chair through playing with guns once too often. Rock Careless had a quarter of a million; he could have walked out any day. He stuck with me. You figure it. I say I was his best friend, and he'd have said the same."

"Mister," the boy said, his voice beginning to give at the edges like mine, "I don't agree. You're a smooth liar, but I went over this place like I told you. I don't find anything to say he was a friend of yours. I don't find his picture any place. I don't find his disks in your rack along with the long-hair music. I say you didn't give a damn for him and you killed him because you—"

"Jesus!" I said. "Listen, kid. They sent me back from the hospital after I got through mending the two ribs the crowd broke, and I went over this place and I took down the pictures and I smashed the disks because I didn't want to be reminded every time I turned around that he was *dead*."

This one worked.

The waxy face melted. The mask distorted. The dangerous young man with a gun seemed to fade from the room, leaving only a puzzled, trembling boy with a gun. I was in command.

"You didn't get all broken up over being reminded when I made you look at those pictures," he said after a pause.

"No," I admitted. "No, I'm finished with getting upset about it, and I'll tell you why." I reached to my pocket, and the gun jerked.

"I'm not trying to pull anything!" I said sharply. "I was going to offer you a cigarette, OK?"

I took out the pack and half rose from the chair, as naturally as I could, to reach it to him. He hesitated, then took the cigarette. I gave him a light with a table lighter patterned after the sort of lamp Aladdin is generally shown using.

He let out the first of the smoke, closing his eyes. He said, "Damn you, Mr. Wise. . . ! I *know* what you say about Jack hating his family is so, and I guess it did start before you ever met him, but—Christ, do I have to like you when I know what you did to him?"

"You're still saying I tore him to bits?" I suggested, and tensed for the answer.

After a moment he gave a negative sort of shrug, and I was so relieved I nearly showed it. Fortunately, even if I had done so it wouldn't have mattered; his eyes had strayed to one of the fine pieces of ancient votive ware displayed on tables against the wall—a statue of Dionysus-Bacchus portrayed in one of his most characteristic postures, seated on a pillarlike base of unmistakable symbolism.

One of these days, I thought, someone was going to sit in this apartment and look at my Bacchus and talk about the death of Rock Careless, and that someone would be well enough educated to put two and two together. Not Laurie Suggs, though. Not an ignorant country-born youth.

He said eventually, "That thing makes me want to puke."

"Rock used to find it amusing," I said. "I was going to tell you why I got over mourning after Rock. I'd like you to hear my reasons—I think afterwards you might feel a bit more kindly disposed towards me."

He curled his lip and went on staring at the statuette.

"You know," I said reflectively, "what happened to Rock wasn't just what the papers said—a singer mobbed by his fans, accidentally injured in the crush. It was more than that. It was his apotheosis, in the literal sense."

The burning eyes turned to me again. He said, "Stuff your three-dollar words."

"Apotheosis means making into a god. I said you weren't able to kill Rock now, because he's immortal. I mean that literally, and this is something which hasn't happened for

thousands of years, so far as I know. It's the most tremendous thing that could have happened to him."

"You go on like this," the boy said, "and I'll start thinking you helped tear him to bits all over again."

"Think about what I'm saying instead."

A frown furrowed the forehead to which a little color was returning now. "You mean—his being killed was sort of a bigger thing than if he'd gone on living? Like Jimmy Dean? Like Buddy Holly?"

This Laurie Suggs was a very perceptive youth, I realized. I was profoundly glad he was also ignorant. I said, "Not exactly, though I admit it was those two who first put me on to this idea. No, the person I had in mind was someone you probably haven't heard of: Orpheus."

"Who was he?"

"He was a singer and musician who was said to be so—so great that he could charm animals, trees, even mountains with his music. This is probably exaggerated, because he lived at least three thousand years ago, if he actually did live. Myself, I believe he was a real person. And the same thing happened to him that happened to Rock. He played to some women called Bacchantes, worshipers of the god Bacchus, and they were so wild about him they tore him to pieces. And because of this he became a god, too; they founded a religion in his honor called the Orphic Mysteries—a sort of church. I guess you aren't quite following me."

He shook his head, his mouth a little open. He had relaxed enough to rest his heavy gun on his knee. I started to get to my feet. I knew him now, not intimately, but well enough.

"Move slow!" he rapped, tensing. "What are you going to do? I don't like this crazy talk about Jack turning into a god!"

"Oh, it's the truth," I said, and chuckled inwardly. "Want me to prove it to you? I'd have thought you'd want to know what a terrific thing it really was when your brother died."

I gestured at the door he hadn't been able to open when he toured the apartment. "Let me get the strong room open, and I'll prove it to you. You ought to feel proud of your brother."

As casually as I could I walked to the armored door and

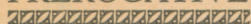
put my fingers on the combination lock. The sound of irregular breathing and the click of tumblers were all that could be heard in the room for long moments. Then I swung the door back and stood aside.

He didn't even have time to scream. He loosed one shot, which went wild, and then the panthers had borne him backward to the floor and were taking their sacrifice. While they were at it, I meditated on the curious relationship between the Bacchus cult, that of Orpheus, and these graceful beasts.

The boy was scrawny, of course, and was not enough to satisfy the panthers; when they had done with him, they would have rent me also, but by the power of the god I subdued them and returned them to their captivity. Then I picked up the smoldering cigarette which had fallen in the middle of the Turkish rug, but not before it had burned a hole.

I noticed that by chance—or perhaps not by chance—the spurt from the boy's jugular, released by a slash of panther claws, had drenched my Bacchus and made it run redder than wine. I cleared up all the other traces, but the blood on the statuette, I felt, was better left to dry where it was.

PREROGATIVE



A MAN who said he was God; a man who someone else said was a god; and this one is about a man who other people were quite sure was not God.

We say, "I'm on the side of the angels!" And treat it as self-flattery, forgetting that when Disraeli coined the phrase he was making a 101 per cent stupid remark. (He was taking the losing side in the debate about evolution.)

Even now the first tentative applications of Darwin's century-old theory are being made in the study of mind—the *first*, as though it's taken a hundred years to bring people around to the idea that our consciousness may have been acquired by slow degrees, as the skills of our bodies are agreed to have been. Quite respectable philosopher-scientists still storm into print with references to "life force," with which doubtless "man is not meant to meddle."

Meantime, in various laboratories, useful work gets done.

Amazing.



IT WAS a small and rather sleepy town, called Ditchmarket. Eight hundred years ago it had been rather important; later, there had been a minor clash between Roundheads and Royalists on what was now a school playing field. After that,

it was as though Ditchmarket had decided that its destiny was fulfilled and had been content to go to seed while other towns grew to be cities.

Something of the essence of Ditchmarket was distilled into the oak-paneled, inadequately windowed rooms of the town hall. There was a smell of dust. Doors creaked, objecting to anyone who opened them. The loudest noise that had intruded here for a long, long time was the clashing of the full peal of bells from the tower of St. Swynfrith's church on the other side of the market square.

And therefore the tense excitement of today was grating on the nerves of Ditchmarket's coroner.

He was a scrawny man of sixty, a doctor, with thin grey hair and wire-rimmed glasses, and he was in a complaining mood. In this town people died natural deaths, so that usually there was no need for an inquest; the last such had been after a fatal road accident, and it had been perfectly simple. But this!

He rapped with his gavel and looked over his glasses at the audience in the public seats. There were a lot of them. There were persons present he had never expected to see in this depressing room, with its dark woodwork fading to black, its once-cream walls and ceiling turned to sour yellow. There were old women he knew by sight, because once a day they would hobble out of their narrow front doors to call on a neighbour, and once a week they would struggle across the market square to Sunday service at St. Swynfrith's. Some day, he would know them better. He would be called in to help them die.

There were men he knew, too: solid farmers dressed in their best but seeming not to have scraped off the clinging traces of the rich black local soil; shopkeepers who ought to have been behind their counters on a weekday; retired people who normally were content to stay the right side of their garden gates. . . .

And to these people who were Ditchmarket embodied, he spoke severely, conscious that his voice was too reedy to be authoritative.

"Silence!" he ordered. "I must make it clear at once that

I will not tolerate interruptions of any kind during this inquest. I am not concerned with anything but the evidence of the witnesses. Save your personal opinions for private conversation, but keep them to yourselves in here."

The audience sighed. Women exchanged knowing looks and firmed their lips together. Men shrugged and leaned back, crossing their arms and jutting their chins. The coroner rustled through the papers before him.

"The first witness is Sergeant Hankinson," he said. "Take the stand, please, sergeant."

Burly, peasant-faced, rubicund, the sergeant—sweating in his tight dark uniform—recited the oath in a rapid uncaring manner and followed it in the same breath with his particulars. Then he pulled his notebook from his breast pocket, opened it to the correct page, and took a deep breath.

"At 4:10 P.M. on Friday last the thirteenth of May—"

There was a sound from the public seats, between a sigh and a chuckle. The coroner held up his hand to interrupt the witness, and cast a warning glare at the audience. The sound stopped.

"Proceed, sergeant," he said. But the sergeant had been put off by the interruption. He had to take another breath and begin afresh.

"At 4:10 P.M. on Friday last the thirteenth of May I received a telephone call from Dr. Blankenberg at this 'ere research station on the Fogwell Road." He paused as though gathering strength for the articulation of unfamiliar words. "The Biological—Synthesis—Establishment, that is." And mopped his face, looking pleased with himself.

"What did Dr. Blankenberg say?" the coroner prompted.

"That one of the scientists up there 'ad been found dead in 'is room."

"What did you do as a result of this call?"

"I noted the details down. Leaving the station in charge of young Jones—Constable Jones, I should say—I proceeded on my bicycle to the research station."

"And what did you find?"

"Well, there was this Dr. Welby lying on the floor of 'is bedroom, all *scorched* and *burned*."

A simultaneous sharp intake of breath from the public

seats, which stilled of itself before the coroner could comment on it.

"Was anyone else there when you arrived?"

"About seven or eight people, sir, including Dr. Gordon 'oo'd found Dr. Welby and tried giving artificial respiration."

"Was Dr. Blankenberg there?"

"Yes. 'E said 'e'd come along after sending for me."

"And—?"

"After ascertaining whether anything at the scene of the—uh—the *mishap* 'ad been tampered with, I asked for an ambulance to take the body to the cottage 'ospital. I took measurements before the ambulance came. Also I took statements from those present, including Dr. Gordon, 'oo said—"

"Thank you, sergeant, but I think we shall let Dr. Gordon speak for himself," said the coroner testily. Was that enough from this horrible man? He almost permitted himself to think it was; then he recalled one pertinent question he had to get on the record.

"What was the weather like that afternoon?"

"Sunny," said the sergeant promptly. "A bit windy like, but not a cloud to be seen."

"Thank you," said the coroner. "You may stand down—I'll recall you later if necessary." He looked down at his papers to avoid the sergeant's gaze, hurt and reproachful that his period in the limelight had been curtailed, and said, "Dr. Gordon to the stand, please."

The audience rustled and stirred as they turned to look at this new witness. He was a fresh-faced young man, under thirty; he wore a college blazer and flannels, and looked as though what he regretted most about being at Ditchmarket was missing his Saturday game of rugger or cricket.

"You are Dr. David Gordon, of the Biological Synthesis Establishment on the Fogwell Road?"

"That's right."

"What is your post there?"

"I'm a biophysicist. I'm doing research into the physical and chemical structure of microorganisms."

"Were you well acquainted with the late Dr. Welby?"

Gordon made a seesawing movement with his hand. "Not very. I only came here six months ago, and my work didn't bring me into contact with him much. But we got on all right."

"You live in the same bachelor quarters as Dr. Welby?"

"Yes, my room is next but one to his on the first floor."

"Dr. Welby was senior to you on the staff of the establishment, was he not?"

"Oh yes. He'd been there since its foundation."

"Thank you." The coroner cleared his throat. "Now please tell us in your own words what happened after four o'clock on the afternoon of Friday the—on the afternoon in question," he corrected himself firmly.

Gordon frowned. "Well, I'd finished clearing up in the lab—I had Dr. Blankenberg's permission to start the week-end early. I was through by a few minutes after four. I went straight to the quarters and started to get changed. But I'd only just taken off my jacket when I heard a scream, followed by a terrible crash."

In the public seats, nodding of heads and satisfied expressions.

Gordon cast a disconcerted glance in that direction, let his eyes pass on to the impassive jury of seven men in the oak-barred jury box, and looked back at the coroner.

He resumed. "I thought at first it came from the room next door—my colleague Jack Millingway's room. But there was no one in there, so I dashed down the passage to Dr. Welby's room and—and there he was."

"There he was what?" said the coroner, and was instantly annoyed with himself.

"Dead," said Gordon, and had to lick his lips. Another unison nod from the audience.

"Describe the room as you found it, please."

"Uh—Dr. Welby had apparently been sitting writing at his table. There were papers on it and a pen on the floor. The window, which would have been on his right, was half open. He himself was lying on his back with his feet towards the window, and his chair, knocked over, was beside him. He was—" Again Gordon had to lick his lips. "He was very badly burned indeed."

"Where?"

"On his right hand and all over his chest around the level of his heart. His shirt was scorched and browned. His face was almost unrecognizable, though that wasn't from the burning—it was just sort of contorted."

"How did you know he was dead?"

"I performed the usual tests. Then I—"

"One moment. You're a qualified doctor of medicine?"

"I'm an LRCP." Gordon hesitated, then translated for the benefit of the jury before he was asked. "That's Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians."

"In other words, you were qualified to pronounce him dead. Go on."

"Well, certain features of Dr. Welby's appearance led me to conclude that he had suffered a violent electric shock, so my immediate thought was to administer artificial respiration, though I had no great hopes."

"What technique did you employ—the 'kiss of life'?"

"No, the Holger-Nielsen. I wanted to be able to shout for help while I was doing it, you see. I didn't know if there was anyone else in the building, as we normally work to four-thirty. Luckily, however, Mr. Millingway heard me almost at once and I sent him to call Dr. Blankenberg on the internal phone. That was about—oh—six or seven minutes past four."

"When did Dr. Blankenberg arrive? Straight away?"

"No, at about four-fifteen. He explained that he had telephoned the police and asked for someone to come over. I had continued the artificial respiration, but Dr. Blankenberg examined Dr. Welby's body and advised me there was no point in trying further. He was past the limit of any conceivable medical assistance."

A murmur from the public seats.

Now the question the coroner was most reluctant to put but which would have to be asked sooner or later. He sat up very straight.

"Dr. Gordon, had you ever seen anyone in a condition similar to Dr. Welby's, which might have led you to an opinion regarding the cause of death?"

"Yes." Gordon looked at the floor helplessly. "The resem-

blance hit me the moment I entered the room. I once saw somebody struck by lightning. Of course, out of a clear sky such as we had that day, it's ridiculous. Nonetheless," he finished firmly, "lightning."

"Thank you. You may stand down."

After that, the surgeon who had performed the post-mortem examination. He offered little but a jargon-ridden description of the corpse's state when he saw it and a cautious agreement that death was due to violent electrocution. The audience looked bored, as though this was to them a waste of time.

"Dr. Blankenberg," said the coroner, and instantly the listeners stiffened. This, he realized, was the witness they had been waiting for—and in moments he saw why.

Short, podgy, going bald, Dr. Blankenberg was swarthy of skin, black of hair, and the nose on which his spectacles sat was distinctly hooked. He came forward under the hostile, rustic English glare of the townspeople and took the stand.

"Uh—are you Jewish, Dr. Blankenberg?" the coroner suggested, wondering whether there was any book in the building suitable for administering a Jewish oath. The audience seemed to gather its concentration, menacingly.

"By race, but not by persuasion," said Dr. Blankenberg. "I am an agnostic and prefer to make an affirmation rather than take an oath."

This time the response from the public seats was a gasp. A Jew was bad enough; a Jew who had renounced his faith was one step beyond the limit. Someone said, "Shame!"—but not loudly enough to compel the coroner to take notice.

"Very well," sighed the coroner. And, when the affirmation was taken, went on: "You are Dr. Joseph Blankenberg, director of the Biological Synthesis Establishment here?"

"I am."

"Please tell us how you heard of the death of Dr. Welby."

Blankenberg took hold of the bar across the front of the witness stand and spoke in a level voice. "It was about six minutes past four when my internal telephone rang. I was in my office, completing my paperwork before the week-

end. The caller was Mr. Millingway. He said that Dr. Welby had been found dead in his room and Dr. Gordon was giving artificial respiration. I spoke with him long enough to ascertain that it was no mere case of—let's say—heart failure, and felt it advisable to ring the police. I did so, speaking to the person I now know as Sergeant Hankinson. Then I went to see for myself, and on the basis of my examination of Dr. Welby advised Dr. Gordon to abandon his attempts to revive him.

"By the time the sergeant arrived, it was past the time of cease-work, and about half a dozen people had gathered in the bachelor quarters. We work generally from 8:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., except on projects which involve shift work."

"And what was your reaction to the sight of Dr. Welby?"

"He looked to me as though he'd been struck by lightning. Unlike Dr. Gordon, I've never actually seen anyone struck by lightning, but I did once see a man who had been killed by touching a thirty thousand volt power line, and he looked much as Dr. Welby did."

"When you saw him, was he lying where Dr. Gordon found him?"

"Apart from the movement involved in artificial respiration, of course, I understand that he was. He was on his back with his feet almost touching the base of the radiator under the window. A chair was upset alongside him, with his jacket on the back. He had been working at his table in shirtsleeves, because although the day was windy it was rather warm and had been sunny since before lunch."

"Would you say that this type of weather rules out the possibility of Dr. Welby's death actually being due to lightning?"

"Offhand, certainly I would. Though I'm no meteorologist."

"What more *rational* explanation occurred to you?"

The coroner weighted the words and glanced covertly to see if they had any impact on the jury, hoping against hope that they had not—as he suspected—decided on their verdict long before entering the court.

"Well, electrocution. From faulty wiring, perhaps. I

did make a quick survey of the switches and other fitments, but they were all apparently in sound order, and in any case no wiring was within arm's reach of where Dr. Welby would have been standing, close to the window." Dr. Blankenberg's dark eyes flicked briefly towards the audience and back to the coroner. "However, I later arranged for a thorough inspection by an expert from London, and I was informed—"

"Thank you!" the coroner cut in, raising his hand. "The gentleman in question is present and will be giving us his findings in due course. Ah . . . Oh yes. I gather that Dr. Welby was thoroughly familiar with his room, in that he had occupied it for a considerable time."

"Six years—since the foundation of the establishment. He moved in as a temporary measure, and being a single man and rather simple in his tastes, was satisfied to remain there rather than take lodgings locally, which his salary and seniority would have led one to expect. As a matter of fact, he'd been with the establishment longer than I have myself—his project was the first to be launched when the station was set up."

There was a sudden shout from the public seats. "Devil's work! That's what he was doing—devil's work!"

"That it was!" A deep undercurrent of grumbling began; the coroner had to hammer for silence.

"If there's one more interruption like that, I'll clear you all out!" he snapped. "I'm sorry, Dr. Blankenberg. As you probably know, however, there's been a good deal of stupid talk about Dr. Welby's research—could you make it clear for the jury what he was doing?"

"He was engaged in an attempt to synthesize a replicating molecule from elementary constituents," said Blankenberg frigidly. The coroner blinked.

"Perhaps you could clarify that?" he invited.

Blankenberg looked absently towards a window which framed the tower of St. Swynfrith's. "Essentially it amounts to this. We believe that many thousands of years ago this world had a different atmosphere from the one it has now. It was hot and steamy with unfamiliar gases in it such as ammonia and methane—marsh gas. We believe that over thousands of centuries chance brought together the elements

which compose our own bodies, such as hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen, into a molecule—a collection of atoms—which had the power of reproducing itself. Molecules like this are called viruses. The common cold is caused by one. You can't really say they are alive, because you can break them down in a laboratory and put them together again in a different arrangement, and they go on reproducing themselves in a new form. But they do have the power, as plants and animals have, of taking simple substances from their surroundings and turning these substances into copies of themselves. We say they can *replicate* themselves. We won't go so far as to say they are actually reproducing like living things.

"What Dr. Welby was doing was an extension of an experiment carried out some years ago in America by a scientist named Miller. Miller filled a closed tube with the same gases we believed formed the primal atmosphere of Earth, connected the tube to a retort of boiling water, put a spark discharge across it to imitate lightning, because lightning played an important part in mixing the elements when life began on our planet. . . ."

The audience was shaking its head sorrowfully. Out of its superior wisdom it was pitying this man who did not know that the world was created on a Sunday in October of 4004 B.C., at a little after four in the afternoon.

"After only a few days Miller found that quite complicated substances had arisen in his glass tube: proteins, the bricks out of which all living creatures are built. So Dr. Welby pointed out that if proteins could be generated in a few days in a small system, there was a good chance of generating a replicating molecule in a large system, given several years in which to operate.

"And this was what he set out to do. He contrived a closed system free from any possible outside contamination, in which he circulated a mixture of the primal gases. He had means of detecting any changes in the contents by spectroanalysis and remote chromatography, and once in a while—usually on the first Monday of alternate months—he drew off a sample for direct analysis, afterwards reducing

it to its elements again and returning it to the system to maintain a constant balance of the constituents."

"And—" The coroner swallowed. "And had he had any success?"

"He had had some success prior to his death, yes," said Dr. Blankenberg. "He had identified some very complex high-order proteins, many of them close to viruses."

The coroner leaned back. "You said 'had had some success prior to his death,'" he repeated, and glanced nervously at the public seats. The jury were still impassive. "Are you implying that now he is dead the work will be discontinued?"

"Of course not. This is a tremendously exciting project, and it would certainly have been Dr. Welby's wish that we continue it." Blankenberg spoke in a firm voice, but his hands tightened on the bar of the witness stand.

Mentally rehearsing a stern directive to the jury about superstition and doubletalk, the coroner nodded. "Thank you—you may stand down."

"Oh no you don't!" bellowed a hoarse voice. The coroner, heart sinking, raised his head to find Fred Warble on his feet—a bellicose man who farmed sixty acres a mile from Ditchmarket, and had had his eyes on another ten before the land was taken under a compulsory purchase order to build the research establishment. The coroner had been fairly sure that if trouble arose some of it would come from Warble.

He pounded his gavel, but Warble shook a meaty fist in the air towards him. "No you don't!" he repeated. "Make him tell what they got out of their witches' stew on Monday! Make him tell what shame he's brought on Ditchmarket with his black arts!"

The old women in the front row were giving approving nods. The jury were swallowing nervously and having to tug at their collars as though suffocating.

"Very well," said the coroner after a tense pause. "As a concession I'll ask the question—if only to make a lot of idiotic rumours lie down! I'm surprised at you, Mr. Warble. You're a levelheaded man, and here you're talking about black arts like some—some benighted gypsy!"

Warble seemed to grow a little smaller suddenly. "All right," he said in a grudging tone, and sat down. "But you

ask him, mind!" he added with a resurgence of aggression, before folding his arms and sitting quiet.

During the exchange, Blankenberg had remained as he had been when Warble interrupted: with one hand on the rail of the witness stand, poised to step to the floor. Now he shrugged and faced the coroner again.

"Dr. Blankenberg," said the coroner solemnly, "have you examined Dr. Welby's experiment since his death?"

"I have. On Monday morning of this week, to be exact."

"And what did you find?"

Blankenberg hesitated. He glanced towards Warble and then at the jury, and pulled himself up to his full height. "I found," he said in a clear voice, "that a complex replicating molecule had spontaneously occurred in the mixture, as Dr. Welby had hoped and predicted."

Warble's face was perfectly blank, and so were other faces in the audience. Obviously, references to replicating molecules were over their heads. But in that case, Warble wouldn't be satisfied with the answer. The coroner felt driven onwards, carried along despite himself. He said faintly, "How—complex?"

"Comparable with *vaccinia*, the—uh—the infective agent responsible for smallpox." Blankenberg was sweating freely now; his forehead gleamed, but he did not wipe it.

"And this is a fairly advanced organism? Is it in fact indisputably a living creature?"

"Yes," said Blankenberg, and the word froze the air of the room. Suddenly there was not a sound. Not a single sound, not even the noise of breathing.

There were more questions. The coroner pushed the first of the last into the terrible silence. "Have you studied the reproduction of this organism?"

"Yes."

Again pushed into the heavy silence: "Have you calculated how long it had been reproducing in the system before you found it?"

"Yes."

"Then when did it—did it—?" The coroner found the last words too hard to utter. Blankenberg saved him the trouble.

"It must have begun to reproduce itself—that is, it must

have come to life—on Friday afternoon of last week.” And he finished, his voice suddenly dropping to a whisper, “In fact, at about the time Dr. Welby died.”

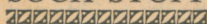
The faces of the audience were still like stone. They were set in expressions that could be read. Without movement, they informed the world—and each other, especially each other—that they had known. Yes, they had known. At the moment when his blasphemies and impieties found fruition, the bolt from heaven had struck down the man who aspired to usurp the prerogative of Another and create life.

One by one they rose and began to leave the room. They would not stay to hear the evidence of the expert from London who had inspected the scene of the accident and traced the swinging electric cable which the wind had carried against the steel frame of Dr. Welby’s window and gradually frayed through, so that when he tired of the breeze disturbing his papers and rose to pull the window shut, the first shock made him fall against the metal radiator and ground the entire current through his unprotected chest.

They had reached their verdict already. And so, the coroner realized sickly, had his jury. Not a hundred years of expert testimony would alter their intention of setting down on record as the cause of death the phrase in which the foreman’s lips were even now moving, as though rehearsing the words and savoring their ring.

“Act of God,” the coroner whispered to himself. “Act of God.”

SUCH STUFF



OF ALL the quarries in pursuit of which scientists have set out, determined to weigh and measure whatever they can catch, surely the most elusive must be—a dream.

It *can't* be weighed. And only very recently, with work like William Dement's at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, has it been possible to take measurements. Slowly we have garnered evidence, but most of it has been negative. A dream is not a journey by the soul, away from the body during sleep—at least, we're fairly sure it's not. Nor is it a vision of paradise (or hell) or of some coexistent other world—probably.

What it is . . . well, there's symbolism in there somewhere, but symbolism is so plastic we can make what we choose of the images. Perhaps more fruitful would be to try and discover why we dream, what purpose dreaming serves. If someone took over and extended Dement's work, he might find a Starling. . . .



WITH THE leads of the electroencephalograph stringing out from his skull like webs spun by a drunken spider, the soft adhesive pads laid on his eyes like pennies, Starling resem-

bled a corpse which time had festooned with its musty garlands. But a vampire-corpse, plump and rosy in its state of not-quite-death. The room was as still as any mausoleum, but it smelled of floor polish, not dust; his coffin was a hospital bed and his shroud a fluffless cotton blanket.

Except for the little yellow pilot lights in the electronic equipment beside the bed, which could just be seen through the ventilation holes in the casings, the room was in darkness. But when Wills opened the door from the corridor the shaft of light that came over his shoulder enabled him to see Starling clearly.

He would rather not have seen him at all—laid out thus, lacking candles only because he was not dead. That could be remedied, given the proper tools: a sharpened stake, a silver bullet, crossroads at which to conduct the burial—

Wills checked himself, his face prickly with new sweat. It had hit him again! The insane idea kept recurring, like a reflex, like pupils expanding under belladonna, for all he could do to drive it down. Starling lay like a corpse because he had grown used to not pulling loose the leads taped to his head—*that's all! that's all! that's all!*

He used the words like a club to beat his mind into submission. Starling had slept like this for months. He lay on one side, in a typical sleeper's attitude, but because of the leads he barely moved enough in the course of a night to disturb the bedclothes. He breathed naturally. Everything was normal.

Except that he had done it for months, which was incredible and impossible and not in the least natural.

Shaking from head to foot, Wills began to step back through the door. As he did so, it happened again—now it was happening dozens of times a night. A dream began.

The electroencephalograph recorded a change in brain activity. The pads on Starling's eyes sensed eye movements and signaled them. A relay closed. A faint but shrill buzzer sounded.

Starling grunted, stirred, moved economically as though to dislodge a fly that had settled on him. The buzzer stopped.

Starling had been woken; the thread of his dream was snapped.

And he was asleep again.

Wills visualized him waking fully and realizing he was not alone in the room. Cat-silent, he crept back into the corridor and closed the door, his heart thundering as though he had had a narrow escape from disaster.

Why? In daytime he could talk normally with Starling, run tests on him as impersonally as on anyone else. Yet at night—

He slapped down visions of Starling by day, Starling corpselike in his bed at night, and moved down the long corridor with his teeth set to save them from chattering. He paused at other doors, pressing his ear to them or glancing inside for a moment. Some of those doors led to private infernos which ought to have jarred on his own normality with shocking violence, as they always used to. But none affected him like Starling's passiveness—not even the moaning prayers of the woman in Room 11, who was being hounded to death by imaginary demons.

Conclusion: his normality had gone.

That thought also recurred in spite of attempts to blank it out. In the long corridor which framed his aching mind like a microwave guide tube, Wills faced it. And found no grounds for rejecting it. They were in the wards; he in the corridor. So what? Starling was in a ward, and he was not a patient. He was sane, free to leave whenever he wished. In remaining here he was simply being cooperative.

And telling him to go away would solve nothing at all.

His rounds were over. He went back towards the office like a man resolutely marching towards inevitable doom. Lambert—the duty nurse—was snoring on the couch in the corner; it was against regulations for the duty nurse to sleep, but Wills had had more than he could bear of the man's conversation about drink and women and what he was missing tonight on television, and had told him to lie down.

He prodded Lambert to make him close his mouth and sat down to the desk, drawing the night report towards him. On the printed lines of the form, his hand crawled with its

shadow limping behind, leaving a trail of words contorted like the path of a crazy snail.

5 A.M. All quiet except Room 11. Patient there normal.

Then he saw what he had written. Angrily he slashed a line through the last word, another and another till it was illegible, and substituted "much as usual." Normal!

I am in the asylum of myself.

He tilted the lamp on the desk so it shone on his face and turned to look at himself in the wall mirror provided for the use of female duty nurses. He was a little haggard after the night without sleep, but nothing else was visibly wrong with him. Much as usual, like the patient in Room 11.

And yet Starling was sleeping the night away without dreams, undead.

Wills started, fancying that something black and thread-like had brushed his shoulder. A picture came to him of Starling reaching out from his bed with the tentacle leads of the EEG, as if he were emitting them from spinnerets, and weaving the hospital together into a net of his own, trapping Wills in the middle like a fly.

He pictured himself being drained of his juices, like a fly.

Suddenly Lambert was sitting up on the couch, his eyes flicking open like the shutters of a house being aired for a new day. He said, "What's the matter, doc? You're as white as a flaming sheet!"

There was no black threadlike thing on his shoulder. Wills said with an effort, "Nothing. Just tired, I think."

He thought of sleeping, and wondered what he would dream.

The day was bright and warm. He was never good at sleeping in the daytime; when he woke for the fourth or fifth time, unrested, he gave up. It was Daventry's day for coming here, he remembered. Maybe he should go and talk to him.

He dressed and went out of doors, his eyes dark-ringed. In the garden a number of the less ill patients were working listlessly. Daventry and the matron moved among them, complimenting them on their flowers, their thorough weed-

ing, the lack of aphids and blackfly. Daventry had no interest in gardening except insofar as it was useful for therapy. The patients, no matter how twisted their minds were, recognized this, but Daventry apparently didn't know they knew. Wills might have laughed, but he felt laughter was receding from him. Unused faculties, like unused limbs, atrophy.

Daventry saw him approach. The bird eyes behind his glasses flicked poultry-wise over him, and a word passed from the thin-lipped mouth to the matron, who nodded and moved away. The sharp face was lit by a smile; brisk legs began to carry him over the tidy lawn, which was not mown by the patients because mowers were too dangerous.

"Ah, Harry!" in Daventry's optimistic voice. "I want a word with you. Shall we go to the office?" He took Wills's arm as he turned, companionably; Wills, who found the habit intolerable, broke the grip before it closed.

He said, "As it happens, I want a word with you, too."

The edginess of his tone sawed into Daventry's composure. The bird eyes scanned his face, the head tipped a little on one side. The list of Daventry's mannerisms was a long one, but he knew the reasons for all of them and often explained them.

"Hah!" he said. "I can guess what this will be about!"

They passed into the building and walked side by side with their footsteps beating irregularly like two palpitating hearts. In the passageway Daventry spoke again.

"I presume there's been no change in Starling, or you'd have left a note for me—you were on night duty last night, weren't you? I didn't see him today, unfortunately; I was at a conference and didn't get here till lunchtime."

Wills looked straight ahead, to the looming door of Daventry's office. He said, "No—no change. But that's what I wanted to talk about. I don't think we should go on."

"Ah!" said Daventry. It was automatic. It meant something altogether different, like "I'm astonished"—but professionally Daventry disavowed astonishment. The office accepted them, and they sat down to the idiot noise of a bluebottle hammering its head on the window.

"Why not?" Daventry said abruptly.

Wills had not yet composed his answer. He could hardly speak of the undead Starling with pads on his eyes like pen-nies, of the black tentacles reaching out through the hospital night, of the formulated but suppressed notion that he must be treated with sharp stakes and silver bullets, and soon. He was forced to throw up improvisation like an emergency earthwork, knowing it could be breached at a dozen points.

"Well—all our other cases suggest that serious mental disturbance results from interference with the dreaming process. Even the most resistant of our other volunteers broke down after less than two weeks. We've prevented Starling from dreaming every night for five months now, and even if there are no signs of harm yet it's probable that we *are* harming him."

Daventry had lit a cigarette while Wills talked. Now he waved it in front of him, as though to ward off Wills's arguments with an adequate barrier—a wisp of smoke.

"Good gracious, Harry!" he said affably. "What damage are we doing? Did you detect any signs of it last time you ran Starling through the tests?"

"No—that was last week and he's due for another run tomorrow—no, what I'm saying is that everything points to dreaming being essential. We may not have a test in the battery which shows the effect of depriving Starling of his dreams, but the effect must be there."

Daventry gave a neutral nod. He said, "Have you asked Starling's own opinion on this?"

Again, concede defeat from honesty: "Yes. He said he's perfectly happy to go on. He said he feels fine."

"Where is he at the moment?"

"Today's Tuesday. He goes to see his sister in the town on Tuesday afternoons. I could check if you like, but—"

Daventry shrugged. "Don't bother. I have good news for you, you see. In my view, six months is quite long enough to establish Starling's tolerance of dream-deprivation. What's next of interest is the nature of his dreams when he's allowed to resume. So in three weeks from now I propose to end the experiment and find out."

"He'll probably wake himself up reflexively," Wills said.

Daventry was prepared to take the words with utmost seriousness. He said, "What makes you think that?"

Wills had meant it as a bitter joke; when he reconsidered, he found reasons after all. He said, "The way he's stood the treatment when no one else could. Like everyone else we tested, his dreaming frequency went up in the first few days; then it peaked at about thirty-four times a night, and dropped back to its current level of about twenty-six, which has remained constant for about four months now. Why? His mind seems to be malleable, and I can't believe that. People need dreams; a man who can manage without them is as unlikely as someone who can do without food or water."

"So we thought," Daventry said briskly. Wills could see the conference papers being compiled in his mind, the reports for the *Journal of Psychology* and the four pages in *Scientific American*, with photographs. And so on. "So we thought. Until we happened across Starling, and he just proved we were wrong."

"I—" began Wills. Daventry took no notice and went on.

"Dement's work at Mount Sinai wasn't utterly definitive, you know. Clinging to first findings is a false attitude. We're now compelled to drop the idea that dreaming is indispensable, because Starling has gone without dreams for months and so far as we can tell—oh, I grant that: so far and no further—he hasn't suffered under the experience."

He knocked ash into a bowl on his desk. "Well, that was my news for you, Harry: that we finish the Starling series at the six-month mark. Then we'll see if he goes back to normal dreaming. There was nothing unusual about his dreaming before he volunteered; it will be most interesting. . . ."

It was cold comfort, but it did give him a sort of deadline to work to. It also rid him of part of the horror he had suffered from having to face the presence in his mind of the vampire-corpse like a threat looming down the whole length of his future life path. It actually heartened him till the time came, the following afternoon, to retest Starling.

He sat waiting in his office for half an hour beforehand, because everything was otherwise quiet and because before he came up for psychological examination Starling always

underwent a physical examination by another member of the staff. Not that the physicals ever turned anything up. But the psychologicals hadn't either. It was all in Wills's mind. Or in Starling's. But if it was in Starling's he himself didn't know.

He knew the Starling file almost by heart now—thick, much thumbed, annotated by himself and by Daventry. Nonetheless he turned back to the beginning of it, to the time five months and a week ago when Starling was just one volunteer among six men and six women engaged in a follow-up to check on Dement's findings of 1960 with superior equipment.

There were transcripts of dreams with Freudian commentary, in their limited way extraordinarily revealing but not giving a hint of the most astonishing secret—that Starling could get by without them.

I am in a railway station. People are going to work and coming home at the same time. A tall man approaches and asks for my ticket. I try to explain that I haven't bought one yet. He grows angry and calls a policeman, but the policeman is my grandfather. I cannot understand what he says.

I am talking to one of my schoolteachers, Mr. Bullen. I am very rich and I have come to visit my old school. I am very happy. I invite Mr. Bullen to ride in my car, which is big and new. When he gets in, the door handle comes off in his hand. The door won't lock. I cannot start the engine. The car is old and covered with rust. Mr. Bullen is very angry but I do not care very much.

I am in a restaurant. The menu is in French and I order something I don't know. When it comes I can't eat it. I call the manager to make a complaint and he arrives in a sailor's uniform. The restaurant is on a boat and rocks so that I feel ill. The manager says he will put me in irons. People in the restaurant laugh at me. I break the plates on which the food is served, but they make no noise and no one notices. So I eat the food after all.

That last one was exactly what you would expect from Starling, Wills thought. He ate the food after all, and liked it.

These were records extracted from the control period—the week during which his dreams and those of the other volunteers were being noted for comparison with later ones, after the experiment had terminated. In all the other eleven cases, that was from three to thirteen days later. But in Starling's—!

The dreams fitted Starling admirably. Miserable, small-minded, he had gone through life being frustrated, and hence the dreams went wrong for him, sometimes through the intervention of figures of authority from childhood, such as his hated grandfather and the schoolteacher. It seemed that he never fought back; he—ate the food after all.

No wonder he was content to go on cooperating in Daventry's experiment, Wills thought bleakly. With free board and lodging, no outside problems involved, he was probably in paradise.

Or a kind of gratifying hell.

He turned up the dreams of the other volunteers—the ones who had been driven to quit after a few nights. The records of their control week showed without exception indications of sexual tension, dramatized resolutions of problems, positive attacks on personal difficulties. Only Starling provided continual evidence of total surrender.

Not that he was outwardly inadequate. Considering the frustration he had endured first from his parents, then from his tyrannical grandfather and his teachers, he had adjusted well. He was mild-mannered and rather shy, and he lived with his sister and her husband, but he held down a fairly good job, and he had a small, constant circle of acquaintances, met mainly through his sister's husband, on whom he made no great impression but who all "quite liked" him.

Quite was a word central to Starling's life. Hardly any absolutes. Yet—his dreams to the contrary—he could never have surrendered altogether. He'd made the best of things.

The volunteers were a mixed bag: seven students, a teacher on sabbatical leave, an out-of-work actor, a struggling writer, a beatnik who didn't care and Starling. They were subjected to the process developed by Dement at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, as improved and automatized by Daventry—the process still being applied to Star-

ling even now, which woke him with a buzzer whenever the signs indicating dreaming occurred. In the eleven other cases, the effect found was the same as what Dement had established: interrupting their dreaming made them nervous, irritable, victims of uncontrolled nervous tension. The toughest quit after thirteen days.

Except for Starling, that was to say.

It wasn't having their sleep disturbed that upset them; that could be proved by waking them between, instead of during, dreams. It was not being *allowed* to dream that caused trouble.

In general, people seemed to spend about an hour a night dreaming, in four or five "installments." This indicated that dreaming served a purpose. But what? Dissipation of antisocial tensions? A grooming of the ego as repressed desires were satisfied? That was too glib an answer. But without Starling to cock a snook in their faces, the experimenters would have accepted a similar generalization and left the matter there till the distant day when the science of mind was better equipped to weigh and measure the impalpable stuff of dreams.

Only Starling *had* cropped up. At first he had reacted predictably. The frequency of his dreaming shot up from five times a night to twenty, thirty, and beyond, as the buzzer aborted each embryo dream, whirling into nothing his abominable grandfather, his tyrannical teachers—

Was there a clue there? Wills had wondered that before. Was it possible that, whereas other people *needed* to dream, Starling hated it? Were his dreams so miserable that to go without them was a liberation to him?

The idea was attractive, because straightforward, but it didn't hold water. In the light of previous experiments, it was about equivalent to saying that a man could be liberated from the need to excrete by denying him food and water.

But there was no detectable effect on Starling! He had not lost weight nor grown more irritable; he talked lucidly, and he responded within predictable limits to IQ tests and Rorschach tests and every other test Wills could find.

It was purely unnatural.

Wills checked himself. Facing his own reaction squarely, he saw it for what it must be—an instinctive but irrational fear like the fear of the stranger who comes over the hill with a different accent and different table manners. Starling was human; ergo, his reactions were natural; ergo, either the other experiments had agreed by coincidence and dreaming wasn't indispensable, or Starling's reactions were the same as everyone's and were just being held down until they blew like a boiler straining past its tested pressure.

There were only three more weeks to go, of course.

The habitual shy knock came at the door. Wills grunted for Starling to come in, and wondered as he looked at him how the sight of him passive in bed could inspire him to thoughts of garlic, sharpened stakes, and burial at cross-roads.

The fault must be in his own mind, not in Starling's.

The tests were exactly as usual. That wrecked Wills's tentative idea about Starling welcoming the absence of his dreams. If indeed he was liberated from a burden, that should show up in a trend towards a stronger, more assured personality. The microscopic trend he actually detected could be assigned to the fact that for several months Starling had been in this totally undemanding and restful environment.

No help there.

He shoved aside the pile of test papers. "Mr. Starling," he said, "what made you volunteer for these experiments in the first place? I must have asked you before, but I've forgotten."

It was all in the file, but he wanted to check.

"Why, I don't really know, doctor," Starling's mild voice said. Starling's cowlike eyes rested on his face. "I think my sister knew someone who had volunteered, and my brother-in-law is a blood donor and kept saying that everyone should do something to benefit society, and while I didn't like the idea of being bled because I've never liked injections and things like that, this idea seemed all right so I said I'd do it. Then of course when Dr. Daventry said I was unusual and would I go on with it I said I hadn't suffered

by it and I didn't see why I shouldn't if it was in the cause of science—"

The voice droned on, adding nothing new. Starling was very little interested in new things. He had never asked Wills the purpose of any test he submitted to; probably he had never asked his own doctor what was on a prescription form filled out for him, being content to regard the medical abbreviations as a kind of talisman. Perhaps he was so used to being snubbed or choked off if he showed too much interest that he felt he was incapable of understanding the pattern of which Wills and the hospital formed part.

He *was* malleable. It was the galling voice of his brother-in-law, sounding off about his uselessness, which pushed him into this. Watching him, Wills realized that the decision to offer himself for the experiment was probably the biggest he had ever taken, comparable in the life of anyone else with a decision to marry or to go into a monastery. And yet that was wrong, too. Starling didn't take decisions on such a level. Things like that would merely happen to him.

Impulsively Wills said, "And how about when the experiment is over, Mr. Starling? I suppose it can't go on for ever."

Placid, the voice shaped inevitable words. "Well, you know, doctor, I hadn't given that very much thought."

No, it wasn't a liberation to him to be freed of his dreaming. It was nothing to him. Nothing was anything to him. Starling was undead. Starling was neuter in a human scale of values. Starling was the malleable thing that filled the hole available for it, the thing without will of its own which made the best of what there was and did nothing more.

Wishing he could punish the mind that gave him such thoughts, Wills asked their source to go from him. But though his physical presence went, his nonexistent existence stayed and burned and loomed and was impassive and cocked snooks in every hole and corner of Wills's chaotic brain.

Those last three weeks were the worst of all. The silver bullet and the sharpened stake, the crossroads for the burial—Wills chained the images down in his mind, but he ached from the strain of hanging on to the chains. *Horror*,

horror, horror, sang an eldritch voice somewhere deep and dark within him. *Not natural*, said another in a professionally judicious tone. He fought the voices and thought of other things.

Daventry said—and was correct according to the principles of the experiment, of course—that so as to have a true control for comparison they must simply disconnect the buzzer attached to the EEG when the time came and not tell Starling what they had done, and see what happened. He would be free to finish his dreams again. Perhaps they would be more vivid, and he would remember more clearly after such a long interruption. He would—

But Wills listened with only half an ear. They hadn't predicted Starling's reaction when they deprived him of dreams; why should they be able to predict what would happen when he received them back? A chill premonition iced solid in his mind, but he did not mention it to Daventry. What it amounted to was this: whatever Starling's response was, it would be the wrong one.

He told Daventry of his partial breaking of the news that the experiment was to end, and his chief frowned.

"That's a pity, Harry," he said. "Even Starling might put two and two together when he realizes six months have gone by. Never mind. We'll let it run for another few days, shall we? Let him think that he was wrong about the deadline."

He looked at the calendar. "Give him three extra days," he said. "Cut it on the fourth. How's that?"

By coincidence—or not?—Wills's turn for night duty came up again on that day; it came up once in eight days, and the last few times had been absolutely unbearable. He wondered if Daventry had selected the date deliberately. Maybe. What difference did it make?

He said, "Will you be there to see what happens?"

Daventry's face set in a reflex mask of regret. "Unfortunately no—I'm attending a congress in Italy that week. But I have absolute confidence in you, Harry; you know that. By the way, I'm doing up a paper on Starling for *Journ. Psych.*" Mannerism, as always: he made it into the single word "jurnsike." "And I think you should appear as coauthor."

Cerberus duly sopped, Daventry went on his way.

That night the duty nurse was Green, a small clever man who knew judo. In a way that was a relief; Wills usually didn't mind Green's company, and had even learned some judo holds from him, useful for restraining but not harming violent patients. Tonight, though . . .

They spoke desultorily together for the first half hour of the shift, but Wills sometimes lost track of the conversation because his mind's eye was distracted by a picture of what was going on in that room along the corridor where Starling held embalmed court among shadows and pilot lights. No one breached his privacy now as he went to bed; he did everything for himself, attached the leads, planted the penny pads on his eyes, switched on the equipment. There was some risk of him discovering that the buzzer was disconnected, but it had always been set to sound only after thirty minutes or more of typical simple sleep-readings.

Starling, though he never did anything to tire himself out, always went to sleep quickly. Another proof of his malleable mind, Wills thought sourly. To get into bed suggested going to sleep, and he slept.

Usually it was three-quarters of an hour before the first attempted dream would burgeon in his round skull. For six months and a couple of days the buzzer had smashed the first and all that followed; the sleeper had adjusted his position without much disturbing the bedding, and—

But not tonight.

After forty minutes Wills got up, dry-lipped. "I'll be in Starling's room if you want me," he said. "We've turned off his buzzer, and he's due to start dreaming again—normally." The word sounded unconvincing.

Green nodded, picking up a magazine from the table. "On to something pretty unusual there, aren't we, doc?" he said.

"God only knows," Wills said, and went out.

His heart was pumping so loudly he felt it might waken the sleepers around him; his footsteps sounded like colossal hammer blows, and his blood roared in his ears. He had to fight a dizzy, tumbling sensation which made the still

lines of the corridor—floor-with-wall a pair of lines, wall-with-ceiling another pair—twist like a four-strand plait, like the bit of a hand drill or a stick of candy turned mysteriously and topologically outside-in. Swaying as though drunk, he came to Starling's door and watched his hand go to the handle.

I refuse the responsibility. I'll refuse to coauthor the paper on him. It's Daventry's fault.

Nonetheless he acquiesced in opening the door, as he had acquiesced all along in the experiment.

He was intellectually aware that he entered soundlessly, but he imagined himself going like an elephant on broken glass. Everything was as usual, except of course the buzzer.

He drew a rubber-shod chair to a position from which he could watch the paper tapes being paid out by the EEG, and sat down. As yet there were only typical early-sleep rhythms—Starling had not yet started his first dream of the night. If he waited till that dream arrived and saw that all was going well, perhaps it would lay the phantoms in his mind.

He put his hand in the pocket of his jacket and closed it around a clove of garlic.

Startled, he drew the garlic out and stared at it. He had no memory of putting it there. But the last time he was on night duty and haunted by the undead appearance of Starling as he slept, he had spent most of the silent hours drawing batwing figures, stabbing their hearts with the point of his pencil, sketching crossroads around them, throwing the paper away with the hole pierced in the center of the sheet.

Oh, God! It was going to be such a relief to be free of this obsession!

But at least providing himself with a clove of garlic was a harmless symptom. He dropped it back in his pocket. He noticed two things at the same time directly afterwards. The first was the alteration in the line on the EEG tapes which indicated the beginning of a dream. The second was that he had a very sharp pencil in his pocket, as well as the clove of garlic—

No, not a pencil. He took it out and saw that it was a piece of rough wood, about eight inches long, pointed at one end. That was all he needed. That, and something to drive it home with. He fumbled in all his pockets. He was carrying a rubber hammer for testing reflexes. Of course, that wouldn't do, but anyway . . .

Chance had opened a gap in Starling's pajama jacket. He poised the stake carefully over his heart and swung the hammer.

As though the flesh were soft as cheese, the stake sank home. Blood welled up around it like a spring in mud, trickled over Starling's chest, began to stain the bed. Starling himself did not awaken but simply went more limp—naturally, for he was undead and not asleep. Sweating, Wills let the rubber hammer fall and wondered at what he had done. Relief filled him as the unceasing stream of blood filled the bed.

The door behind him was ajar. Through it he heard the cat-light footfalls of Green and his voice saying urgently, "It's Room 11, doc! I think she's—"

And then Green saw what had been done to Starling.

His eyes wide with amazement, he turned to stare at Wills. His mouth worked, but for a while his expression conveyed more than the unshaped words he uttered.

"Doc!" Green said finally, and that was all.

Wills ignored him. He looked down at the undead, seeing the blood as though it were luminous paint in the dim-lit room—on his hands, his coat, the floor, the bed, flooding out now in a river, pouring from the pens that waggled the traces of a dream on the paper tapes, making his feet squelch stickily in his wet shoes.

"You've wrecked the experiment," Daventry said coldly as he came in. "After I'd been generous enough to offer you coauthorship of my paper in *Journ. Psych.*, too! How could you?"

Hot shame flooded into Wills's mind. He would never be able to face Daventry again.

"We must call a policeman," Daventry said with authority. "Fortunately he always said he thought he ought to be a blood donor."

He took up from the floor a gigantic syringe, like a hypodermic for a titan, and after dipping the needle into the river of blood hauled on the plunger. The red level rose inside the glass.

And *click*.

Through a crack in Wills's benighted skull a fact dropped. Daventry was in Italy. Therefore he couldn't be here. Therefore he wasn't. Therefore—

Wills felt his eyes creak open like old heavy doors on hinges stiff with rust and found that he was looking down at Starling in the bed. The pens tracing the activity of his brain had reverted to a typical sleep rhythm. There was no stake. There was no blood.

Weak with relief, Wills shuddered at remembered horror. He leaned back in his chair, struggling to understand.

He had told himself that whatever Starling's reaction to being given back his dreams might be, it would be the wrong one. Well, here it was. He couldn't have predicted it. But he could explain it now—more or less. Though the mechanics of it would have to wait a while.

If he was right about Starling, a lifetime of frustration and making the best of things had sapped his power of action to the point at which he never even considered tackling an obstacle. He would just meekly try and find a way around it. If there wasn't one—well, there wasn't, and he left it at that.

Having his dreams stopped was an obstacle. The eleven other volunteers, more aggressive, had developed symptoms which expressed their resentment in manifold ways: irritability, rage, insulting behavior. But not Starling. To Starling it was unthinkable to express resentment.

Patiently, accustomed to disappointment because that was the constant feature of his life, he had sought a way around the obstacle. And he had found it. He had learned how to dream with someone else's mind instead of his own.

Of course, until tonight the buzzer had broken off every dream he attempted, and he had endured that like everything else. But tonight there was no buzzer, and he had dreamed *in* and *with* Wills. The driving of the stake,

the blood, the intrusion of Green, the appearance of Daventry, were part of a dream to which Wills contributed some images and Starling contributed the rest, such as the policeman who didn't have time to arrive and the giant hypodermic. Starling feared injections.

Wills made up his mind. Daventry wouldn't believe him—not unless he experienced the phenomenon himself—but that was a problem for tomorrow. Right now he had had enough, and more than enough. He was going to reconnect the buzzer and get to hell out of here.

He tried to lift his arm towards the boxes of equipment on the bedside table and was puzzled to find it heavy and sluggish. Invisible weights seemed to hang on his wrist. Even when, sweating, he managed to force his hand towards the buzzer, his fingers felt like sausages and would not grip the delicate wire he had to attach to the terminal.

He had fought for what seemed like an eternity and was crying with frustration when he finally understood.

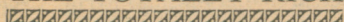
The typical pattern of all Starling's dreams centered on failure to achieve what he attempted; he expected his greatest efforts to be disappointed. Hence Wills, his mind somehow linked to Starling's and his consciousness seeming to Starling to be a dream, would never be able to reconnect that buzzer.

Wills let his hands fall limp on his dangling arms. He looked at Starling, naked fear rising in his throat. How much dreaming could a man do in a single night when he had been deprived for six mortal months?

In his pocket was a sharp wooden stake and a hammer. He was going to put an end to Starling's dreaming once for all.

He was still in the chair, weeping without tears, tied by invisible chains, when Starling awoke puzzled in the morning and found him.

THE TOTALLY RICH



As we limp towards the deflating discovery that life is accountable in chemical terms, that consciousness may shortly be developed in manufactured systems, and that all in all we are a good deal lower than any angels there may be around, a puzzled question begins to be asked occasionally: if we know so much about life and can tinker with its essence in our laboratories, why do we know so little about death?

Granted, there is a fine row blowing up over what constitutes legal death, now that so many people have "died" and been "restored to life" by heart massage or artificial respiration. But this isn't quite the point.

For a certain span of time, we think—or think we think. We create; we hunger and thirst; we love. And then as though a light went out in the wind—nothing.

This is about a temporary assemblage of subjective reactions called a woman, whose light—not her own—has blown out.



THEY ARE the totally rich. You've never heard of them because they are the only people in the world rich enough

to buy what they want: a completely private life. The lightning can strike into your life and mine:—you win a big prize or find yourself neighbor to an ax-murderer or buy a parrot suffering from psittacosis—and you are in the searchlight, blinking shyly and wishing to God you were dead.

They won their prizes by being born. They do not have neighbors, and if they require a murder they do not use so clumsy a means as an ax. They do not keep parrots. And if by some other million-to-one chance the searchlight does tend towards them, they buy it and instruct the man behind it to switch it off.

How many of them there are I don't know. I have tried to estimate the total by adding together the gross national product of every country on earth and dividing by the amount necessary to buy a government of a major industrial power. It goes without saying that you cannot maintain privacy unless you can buy any two governments.

I think there may be one hundred of these people. I have met one, and very nearly another.

By and large they are night people. The purchase of light from darkness was the first economic advance. But you will not find them by going and looking at two o'clock in the morning, any more than at two in the afternoon. Not at the approved clubs; not at the Polo Grounds; not in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot nor on the White House lawn.

They are not on maps. Do you understand that? Literally, where they choose to live becomes a blank space in the atlases. They are not in census lists, *Who's Who*, or Burke's *Peerage*. They do not figure in tax collectors' files, and the post office has no record of their addresses. Think of all the places where your name appears—the yellowing school registers, the hospital case records, the duplicate receipt form in the store, the signature on letters. In *no single* such place is there one of their names.

How it is done . . . no, I don't know. I can only hazard a guess that to almost all human beings the promise of having more than everything they have ever conceived as desirable acts like a traumatic shock. It is instantaneous brain-washing; in the moment the promise is believed, the pattern of obedience is imprinted, as the psychologists say. But

they take no chances. They are not absolute rulers—indeed, they are not rulers of anything except what directly belongs to them—but they have much in common with that caliph of Baghdad to whom a sculptor came, commissioned to make a fountain. This fountain was the most beautiful in the world, and the caliph approved it. Then he demanded of the sculptor whether anyone else could have made so lovely a fountain, and the sculptor proudly said no one but he in the whole world could have achieved it.

Pay him what was promised, said the caliph. And also—put out his eyes.

I wanted champagne that evening, dancing girls, bright lights, music. All I had was a can of beer, but at least it was cold. I went to fetch it, and when I came back stood in the kitchen doorway looking at my . . . living room, workshop, lab, whatever. It was a bit of all these.

All right, I didn't believe it. It was August 23rd, and I had been here one year and one month, and the job was done. I didn't believe it, and I wouldn't be able to until I'd told people—called in my friends and handed the beer around and made them drink a toast.

I raised the can. I said, "To the end of the job!" I drank. That hadn't turned the trick. I said, "To the Cooper Effect!" That was a little more like it, but it still wasn't quite complete.

So I frowned for a moment, thought I'd got it, and said triumphantly, "To Santadora—the most wonderful place on earth, without which such concentration would never have been possible: may God bless her and all who sail from her."

I was drinking this third toast with a sense of satisfaction when Naomi spoke from the shadows of the open porch.

"Drink to me, Derek," she said. "You're coming closer, but you aren't quite there."

I slammed the beer can down on a handy table, strode across the room, and gave her a hug. She didn't respond; she was like a beautiful doll displaying Paris creations in a store window. I had never seen her wearing anything but

black, and tonight it was a black blouse of hand-spun raw silk and tight black pants tapering down to black espadrilles. Her hair, corn-pale, her eyes, sapphire blue, her skin, luminous under a glowing tan, had always been so perfect they seemed unreal. I had never touched her before. Sometimes, lying awake at night, I had wondered why; she had no man. I had rationalized to myself that I prized this haven of peace, and the concentration I found possible here, too much to want to involve myself with a woman who never demanded anything but who—one knew it—would take nothing less than everything.

"It's done," I said, whirling and throwing out my arm. "The millennium has arrived! Success at last!" I ran to the haywire machine which I had never thought to see in real existence. "This calls for a celebration—I'm going out to collect everyone I can find and. . . ."

I heard my voice trail away. She had walked a pace forward and lifted a hand that had been hanging by her side, weighed down by something. Now it caught the light. A bottle of champagne.

"How—?" I said. And thought of something else, too. I had never been alone with Naomi before, in the thirteen months since coming to Santadora.

"Sit down, Derek," she said. She put the champagne bottle on the same table as the beer can. "It's no good going out to collect anyone. There isn't anybody here except you and me."

I didn't say anything.

She cocked a quizzical eyebrow. "You don't believe me? You will."

Turning, she went to the kitchen. I waited for her to return with a pair of the glasses I kept for company; I was leaning forward with my hands on the back of a chair, and it suddenly seemed to me that I had subconsciously intended to put the chair between myself and this improbable stranger.

Dexterously she untwisted the wire of the champagne bottle, caught the froth which followed the cork in the first glass, poured the second and held it out to me. I came—moving like a stupid, stolid animal—to take hold of it.

"Sit down," she said again.

"But—where is everybody else? Where's Tim? Where are Conrad and Ella? Where—?"

"They've gone," she said. She came, carrying her glass, to sit facing me in the only other chair not cluttered with broken bits of my equipment. "They went about an hour ago."

"But—Pedro! And—!"

"They put out to sea. They are going somewhere else." She made a casual gesture "I don't know where, but they are provided for."

Raising her champagne, she added, "To you, Derek—and my compliments. I was never sure that you would do it, but it had to be tried."

I ran to the window which overlooked the sea, threw it open, and stared out into the gathering dark. I could see four or five fishing boats, their riding lights like shifting stars, moving out of the harbor. On the quay was a collection of abandoned furniture and some fishermen's gear. It *did* look as though they were making a permanent departure.

"Derek, *sit down*," Naomi said for the third time. "We're wasting time, and besides, your wine is getting flat."

"But how can they bring themselves to—?"

"Abandon their ancestral homes, dig up their roots, leave for fresh woods and pastures new?" Her tone was light and mocking. "They are doing nothing of the kind. They have no special attachment to Santadora. Santadora does not exist. Santadora was built eighteen months ago, and will be torn down next month."

I said after an eternal silence, "Naomi, are you—are you feeling quite well?"

"I feel wonderful." She smiled, and the light glistened on her white teeth. "Moreover, the fishermen were not fishermen and Father Francisco is not a priest and Conrad and Ella are not artists except in a very small way of business, as a hobby. Also my name is not Naomi, but since you're used to it—and so am I—it'll serve."

Now, I had to drink the champagne. It was superb. It was the most perfect wine I had ever tasted. I was sorry not to be in the mood to appreciate the fact.

"Are you making out that this entire village is a sham?" I demanded. "A sort of colossal—what—movie set?"

"In a way. A stage setting would be a more accurate term. Go out on the porch and reach up to the fretted decoration overhanging the step. Pull it hard. It will come away. Look at what you find on the exposed surface. Do the same to any other house in the village which has a similar porch—there are five of them. Then come back and we can talk seriously."

She crossed her exquisite legs and sipped her champagne. She knew beyond doubt that I was going to do precisely as she said.

Determinedly, though more to prevent myself feeling foolish than for any better reason, I went on to the porch. I put on the light—a swinging yellow bulb, on a flex tacked amateurishly into place—and looked up at the fretted decoration on the edge of the overhang. The summer insects came buzzing in towards the attractive lamp.

I tugged at the piece of wood, and it came away. Holding it to the light, I read on the exposed surface, stamped in pale blue ink: "*Número 14,006—José Barcos, Barcelona.*"

I had no ready-made reaction. Accordingly, holding the piece of wood like a talisman in front of me, I went back indoors and stood over Naomi in her chair. I was preparing to phrase some angry comment, but I never knew what it was to be, for at that moment my eye was caught by the label on the bottle. It was not champagne. The name of the firm was unknown to me.

"It is the best sparkling wine in the world," Naomi said. She had followed my gaze. "There is enough for about—oh—one dozen bottles a year."

My palate told me there was some truth at least in what she said. I made my way dizzily to my chair and sank into it at last. "I don't pretend to understand this. I—I haven't spent the last year in a place that doesn't exist!"

"But you have." Quite cool, she cradled her glass between her beautiful slim hands and set her elbows on the sides of the dirty chair. "By the way, have you noticed that there are never any mosquitoes among the insects that come to your

lights? It was barely likely that you would have caught malaria, but the chance had to be guarded against."

I started. More than once I'd jokingly commented to Tim Hannigan that one of Santadora's greatest advantages was its freedom from mosquitoes. . . .

"Good. The facts are beginning to make an impression on you. Cast your mind back now to the winter before last. Do you recall making the acquaintance of a man going under the name of Roger Gurney, whom you subsequently met one other time?"

I nodded. Of course I remembered Roger Gurney. Often, since coming to Santadora, I'd thought that that first meeting with him had been one of the two crucial events that changed my life.

"You gave Gurney a lift one rather unpleasant November night—his car had broken down and there was no hope of getting a necessary spare part before the morning, and he had to be in London for an urgent appointment at ten next day. You found him very congenial and charming. You put him up in your flat; you had dinner together and talked until 4 A.M. about what has now taken concrete form here in this room. You talked about the Cooper Effect."

I felt incredibly cold, as though a finger of that bleak November night had reached through the window and traced a cold smear down my spine. I said, "Then, that very night, I mentioned to him that I only saw one way of doing the necessary experiments. I said I'd have to find a village somewhere, without outside distractions, with no telephone or newspapers, without even a radio. A place where living was so cheap that I could devote myself for two or three years to my work and not have to worry about earning my living."

My God! I put my hand to my forehead. It was as if memory was re-emerging like invisible ink exposed to a fire.

"That's right," Naomi nodded with an air of satisfaction. "And the second and only other time you met this delightful Roger Gurney was the weekend you were celebrating your small win on the football pools. Two thousand one hundred and four pounds, seventeen shillings,

and a penny. And he told you of a certain small Spanish village, named Santadora, where the conditions for your research were perfectly fulfilled. He said he had visited some friends here, named Conrad and Ella Williams. The possibility of turning your dreams into facts had barely occurred to you, but by the time you'd had a few drinks with Gurney, it seemed strange that you hadn't already laid your plans."

I slammed my glass down so hard it might have broken. I said harshly, "Who are you? What game are you playing with me?"

"No game, Derek." She was leaning forward now, her blue jewel-hard eyes fixed on my face. "A very serious business. And one in which you also have a stake. Can you honestly say that but for meeting Roger Gurney, but for winning this modest sum of money, you would be here—or anywhere—with the Cooper Effect translated into reality?"

I said after a long moment in which I reviewed one whole year of my life, "No. No, I must be honest. I can't."

"Then there's your answer to the question you put a few moments ago." She laid her glass on the table and took out a small cigarette case from the pocket of her tight pants. "I am the only person in the world who wanted to have and *use* the Cooper Effect. Nobody else was eager enough to bring it about—not even Derek Cooper. Take one of these cigarettes."

She held out the case; the mere opening of it had filled the air with a fragrance I found startling. There was no name on the cigarette I took, the only clue to its origin being a faint striping of the paper, but when I drew the first smoke I knew that this, like the wine, was the best in the world.

She watched my reaction with amusement. I relaxed fractionally—smiling made her seem familiar. How many times had I see her smile like that, here, or much more often at Tim's or at Conrad's?

"I wanted the Cooper Effect," she repeated. "And now I've got it."

I said, "Just a moment! I—"

"Then I want to rent it." She shrugged as though the matter were basically a trifling one. "After I've rented it,

it is and will be forever yours. You have conceded yourself that but for—certain key interventions, let's call them—but for *me*, it would be a mere theory. An intellectual toy. I will not, even so, ask you to consider that a fair rental for it. For the use of your machine for one very specific purpose, I will pay you so much that for the rest of your life you may have anything *at all* your fancy turns to. Here!"

She tossed something—I didn't know where she had been hiding it—and I caught it reflexively. It was a long narrow wallet of soft, supple leather, zipped round the edge.

"Open it."

I obeyed. Inside I discovered one—two—three credit cards made out in my name, and a check book with my name printed ready on the checks. On each of the cards there was something I had never seen before: a single word overprinted in red. The word was UNLIMITED.

I put them back in the wallet. It had occurred to me to doubt that what she said was true, but the doubt had faded at once. Yes, Santadora had been created in order to permit me to work under ideal conditions. Yes, she had done it. After what she had said about Roger Gurney, I didn't have room to disbelieve.

Consequently I could go to Madrid, walk into a sales-room, and come out driving a Rolls-Royce; in it, I could drive to a bank and write the sum of one million pesetas on the first of those cheques and receive it—if the bank had that much in cash.

Still looking at the wallet, zipping and unzipping it mechanically, I said, "All right. You're the person who wanted the Effect. Who are you?"

"The person who could get it." She gave a little dry laugh and shook her head. Her hair waved around her face like wings. "Don't trouble me with more inquiries, Derek. I won't answer them because the answers would mean nothing."

I was silent for a little while. Then, finally, because I had no other comment to make, I said, "At least you must *say* why you wanted what I could give you. After all, I'm still the only person in the world who understands it."

"Yes." She studied me. "Yes, that is true. Pour more wine for us; I think you like it."

While I was doing so, and while I was feeling my body grow calm after the shock and storm of the past ten minutes, she said, looking at the air, "You *are* unique, you know. A genius without equal in your single field. That's why you're here, why I went to a little trouble for you. I can get everything I want, but for certain things I'm inevitably dependent on the *one* person who can provide them."

Her eyes roved to my new, ramshackle—but functioning—machine.

"I wanted that machine to get me back a man," she said. "He has been dead for three years."

The world seemed to stop in its tracks. I had been blind ever since the vision of unlimited money dazzled me. I had accepted that because Naomi could get everything she knew what it was she was getting. And, of course, she didn't.

A little imaginary pageant played itself out in my mind, in which faceless dolls moved in a world of shifting, rosy clouds. A doll clothed in black, with long pale hair, said, "He's dead. I want him back. Don't argue. Find me a way."

The other dolls bowed and went away. Eventually one doll came back and said, "There is a man called Derek Cooper who has some unorthodox ideas. Nobody else in all the world is thinking about this problem at all."

"See that he gets what he needs," said the doll with pale hair.

I put down the bottle of wine. I hesitated—yes, I still did, I was still dazzled. But then I took up the soft leather wallet and tossed it into Naomi's lap. I said, "You've cheated yourself."

"What?" She didn't believe it. The wallet which had fallen in her lap was an apparition; she did not move to pick it up, as though touching it would turn it from a bad dream to a harsh fact.

I said, very thoughtfully because I was working out in my mind how it must be, "You talked about wanting my machine for a particular job. I was too dazed to wonder what the job might be—there *are* jobs which can be done with it, so I let

it slide by. You are very rich, Naomi. You have been so rich all your life that you don't know about the one other thing that stands between the formulation of a problem and its solution. That's *time*, Naomi!"

I tapped the top of the machine. I was still proud of it. I had every right to be.

"You are like—like an empress of ancient China. Maybe she existed, I don't know. Imagine that one day she said, 'It has been revealed to me that my ancestors dwell in the moon. I wish to go there and pay the respects of a dutiful daughter. Find me a way.' So they hunted through the length and breadth of the empire, and one day a courtier came in with a poor and ragged man, and said to the empress, 'This man has invented a rocket.'

"'Good,' said the empress. 'Perfect it so that I may go to the moon.'"

I had intended to tell the fable in a bantering tone—to laugh at the end of it. But I turned to glance at Naomi, and my laughter died.

Her face was as pale and still as a marble statue's, her lips a little parted, her eyes wide. On one cheek, like a diamond, glittered a tear.

All my levity evaporated. I had the sudden horrible impression that I had kicked at what seemed a stone and shattered a priceless bowl.

"No, Derek," she said after a while. "You don't have to tell me about time." She stirred, half turned in her chair, and looked at the table beside her. "Is this glass mine?" she added in a lighter tone, putting out her slim and beautiful hand to point. She did not wipe the tear; it remained on her cheek for some time, until the hot dry air of the night kissed it away.

Taking the glass at my nod, she stood up and came across to look at my machine. She regarded it without comment, then said, "I hadn't meant to tell you what I wanted. Time drove me to it."

She drank deeply. "Now," she went on, "I want to know exactly what your pilot model *can* do."

I hesitated. So much of it was not yet in words; I had kept my word-thinking separate from my work-thinking

all during the past year, and lately I had talked of nothing except commonplaces when I relaxed in the company of my friends. The closer I came to success, the more superstitious I had grown, about mentioning the purpose of this project.

And—height of absurdity—now that I knew what she wanted, I was faintly ashamed that my triumph reduced on close examination to such a little thing.

Sensing my mood, she glanced at me and gave a faint smile. “‘Yes, Mr. Faraday’—or was it Humphry Davy?—‘but what is it *good* for?’ I’m sorry.”

A newborn baby. Well enough. Somehow the phrase hit me—reached me emotionally—and I was suddenly not ashamed at all of anything; I was as proud as any father and much more so.

I pushed aside a stack of rough schematics on the corner of the table nearest the machine and perched where it had been. I held my glass between my palms, and it was so quiet I fancied I could hear the bubbles bursting as they surfaced in the wine.

I said, “It wasn’t putting money in my way, or anything like that, which I owe you a debt of gratitude for. It was sending that persuasive and charming Roger Gurney after me. I had never met anyone else who was prepared to take my ideas except as an amusing talking point. I’d kicked the concept around with some of the finest intellects I know—people I knew at university, for instance, who’ve left me a long way behind since then.” I hadn’t thought of this before. I hadn’t thought of a lot of things, apparently.

“But he could talk them real. What I said to him was much the same as what I’d said to others before then. I’d talked about the—the space a living organism defines around itself, by behaving as it does. A mobile does it. That’s why I have one over there.” I pointed, raising my arm, and as though by command a breeze came through the open window and stirred hanging metal panels in the half-shadowed far corner of the room. They squeaked a little as they turned; I’d been too busy to drop oil on the bearings lately.

I was frowning, and the frown was knotting my forehead

muscles, and it was going to make my head ache, but I couldn't prevent myself.

"There must be a total interrelationship between the organism and its environment, including and especially its fellow organisms. Self-recognition was one of the first things they stumbled across in building mechanical simulacra of living creatures. They didn't plan for it—they built mechanical tortoises with little lights on top and a simple light-seeking urge, and if you showed this beast to a mirror, it would seem to recognize itself. . . . This is the path, not the deliberate step-by-step piecing together of a man, but the attempt to define the same shape as that which man himself defines in reacting with other people.

"Plain enough, that. But are you to process a trillion bits of information, store them, label them in time, translate them back for reproduction as—well, as what? I can't think of anything. What you want is. . . ."

I shrugged, emptied my glass, and stood up. "You want the Cooper Effect," I finished. "Here—take this."

From the little rack on top of my machine I took a flat translucent disk about the size of a penny but thicker. To handle it I used a key which plugged into a hole in the center so accurately that it held the weight by simple friction. I held it out to Naomi.

My voice shook, because this was the first random test I had ever made.

"Take hold of this. Handle it—rub your fingers over it, squeeze it gently on the flat sides, close your hand on it."

She obeyed. While it was in her hand, she looked at me.

"What is it?"

"It's an artificial piezoelectric crystal. All right, that should be enough. Put it back on the key—I don't want to confuse the readings by touching it myself."

It wasn't easy to slip the disk back on the key, and she made two false attempts before catching my hand to steady it. I felt a vibration coming through her fingers, as though her whole body were singing like a musical instrument.

"There," she said neutrally.

I carried the disk back to the machine. Gingerly I transferred it from the key to the little post on the top of

the reader. It slid down like a record dropping to a turntable. A moment or two during which I didn't breathe. Then there was the reaction.

I studied the readings on the dials carefully. Not perfect. I was a little disappointed—I'd hoped for a perfect run this first time. Nonetheless, it was extraordinarily close, considering she had handled the disk for a bare ten seconds.

I said, "The machine tells me that you are female, slim, fair-haired and probably blue-eyed, potentially artistic, unaccustomed to manual labor, IQ in the range 120-140, under intense emotional stress—"

Her voice cut across mine like the lash of a whip. "How? How do I know the machine tells you this, not your own eyes?"

I didn't look up. I said, "The machine is telling me what changes were brought about in that little crystal disk when you touched it. I'm reading it as a kind of graph, if you like—looking across the pattern of the dials and interpreting them into words."

"Does it tell you anything else?"

"Yes—but it must be in error somewhere, I'm afraid. The calibration has been rather makeshift, and would have to be completed with a proper statistical sample of say a thousand people from all walks of life." I forced a laugh as I turned away from the machine. "You see, it says that you're forty-eight to fifty years old, and this is ridiculous on the face of it."

She sat very still. I had moved all the way to the table beside her, intending to refill my glass, before I realized how still. My hand on the bottle's neck, I stared at her.

"Is something wrong?"

She shook herself and came back to life instantly. She said lightly, "No. No, nothing at all. Derek, you are the most amazing man in the world. I shall be fifty years old next week."

"You're joking." I licked my lips. I'd have said . . . oh, thirty-five and childless and extremely careful of her looks. But not more. Not a day more.

A trace of bitterness crossed her face as she nodded.

"It's true. I wanted to be beautiful—I don't think I have

to explain why. I wanted to go on being beautiful because it was the only gift I could give to someone who had, as I have, everything he could conceivably want. So I—I saw to it.”

“What happened to him?”

“I would prefer you not to know.” The answer was cool and final. She relaxed deliberately, stretching her legs out before her, and gave a lazy smile. Her foot touched something on the floor as she moved, and she glanced down.

“What—? Oh, that!” She reached for the soft leather wallet, which had fallen from her lap when she stood up after I had tossed it back at her. Holding it out, she said, “Take it, Derek. I know you’ve already earned it. By accident—by mistake—whatever you call it, you’ve proved that you can do what I was hoping for.”

I did take it. But I didn’t pocket it at first; I kept it in my hands, absently turning it over.

I said, “I’m not so sure, Naomi. Listen.” I picked up my newly filled glass and returned to the chair facing her. “What I ultimately envisage is being able to deduce the individual from the traces he makes. You know that; that was the dream I told to Roger Gurney. But between now and then, between the simple superficial analysis of a specially prepared material and going over, piece by piece, ten thousand objects affected not merely by the individual in question but by many others, some of whom probably cannot be found in order to identify and rule out their extraneous influence—and *then* processing the results to make a coherent whole—there may be years, decades, of work and study, a thousand false trails, a thousand preliminary experiments with animals. . . . Whole new techniques will have to be invented in order to employ the data produced! Assuming you have your—your analogue of a man: what are you going to do with it? Are you going to try and *make* a man, artificially, that fits the specifications?”

“Yes.”

The simple word left me literally gasping; it was like a blow to the stomach, driving my breath away. She bent her brilliant gaze on me and once more smiled faintly.

“Don’t worry, Derek. That’s not your job. Work has

been going on in many places for a long time—they tell me—on that problem. What nobody except yourself was doing was struggling with the problem of the total person.”

I couldn't reply. She filled her own glass again before continuing, in a tenser voice.

“There's a question I've got to put to you, Derek. It's so crucial I'm afraid to hear the answer. But I can't endure to wait any longer, either. I want to know how long you think it will be before I can have what I want. Assume—remember that you've *got* to assume—the best men in the world can be set to work on the subsidiary problems; they'll probably make their reputations, they'll certainly make their fortunes. I want to hear what you think.”

I said thickly, “Well, I find that pretty difficult! I've already mentioned the problem of isolating the traces from—”

“This man lived a different kind of existence from you, Derek. If you'd stop and think for a second, you'd guess that. I can take you to a place that was uniquely *his*, where his personality formed and molded and affected every grain of dust. Not a city where a million people have walked, not a house where a dozen families have lived.”

It had to be true, incredible though I would have thought it a scant hour ago. I nodded.

“That's good. Well, I shall also have to work out ways of handling unprepared materials—calibrate the properties of every single substance. And there's the risk that the passage of time will have overlaid the traces with molecular noise and random movement. Moreover, the testing itself, before the actual readings, might disturb the traces.”

“You are to assume”—she forced patience on the repetition—“that the best men in the world are going to tackle the side issues.”

“It isn't a side issue, Naomi.” I wished I didn't have to be honest. She was hurt by my insistence, and I was beginning to think that, for all the things one might envy her, she had been hurt very badly already. “It's simply a fact one has to face.”

She drank down her wine and replaced the glass on the table. Musingly she said, “I guess it would be true to say that the—the object which a person affects most, and most

directly, is his or her own body. If just handling your little disk reveals so much, how much more must be revealed by the hands themselves, the lips, the eyes!"

I said uncomfortably, "Yes, of course. But it's hardly practicable to process a human body."

She said, "I have his body."

This silence was a dreadful one. A stupid beetle, fat as a bullet, was battering its head on the shade of the lamp in the porch, and other insects were droning, too, and there was the sea distantly heard. The silence, nonetheless, was graveyard-deep.

But she went on at last. "Everything that could possibly be preserved is preserved, by every means that could be found. I had—" Her voice broke for a second. "I had it prepared. Only the thing which is *he*, the web in the brain, the little currents died. Curious that a person is so fragile." Briskening, she launched her question anew.

"Derek, how long?"

I bit my lip and stared down at the floor by my feet. My mind churned as it considered, discarded relevant factors, envisaged problems, assumed them to be soluble, fined down everything to the simple irreducible of *time*. I might have said ten years and felt that I was being stupidly optimistic.

But in the end, I said nothing at all.

She waited. Then, quite unexpectedly, she gave a bright laugh and jumped to her feet. "Derek, it isn't fair!" she said. "You've achieved something fantastic, you want and deserve to relax and celebrate, and here I am plaguing you with questions and wanting answers out of the air. I know perfectly well that you're too honest to give me an estimate without time to think, maybe do a few calculations. And I'm keeping you shut up in your crowded room when probably what you most want is to get out of it for a while. Am I right?"

She put her hand out, her arm quite straight, as if to pull me from my chair. Her face was alight with what seemed pure pleasure, and to see it was to experience again the shock of hearing her say she was fifty years old. She looked

—I can only say transformed. She looked like a girl at her first party.

But it lasted only a moment, this transformation. Her expression became grave and calm. She said, "I am sorry, Derek. I—I hate one thing about love. Have you ever thought how selfish it can make you?"

We wandered out of the house hand in hand, into the summer dark. There was a narrow slice of moon and the stars were like fierce hard lanterns. For the more than hundredth time I walked down the narrow ill-paved street leading from my temporary home towards the harbour; there was Conrad's house, and there was the grocery and wine shop; there was the church, its roof silvered by the moon; there were the little cottages all in a row facing the sea, where the families of fisherfolk lived. And here, abandoned, was the detritus of two hundred and seventy lives which had never actually existed—conjured up to order.

I said, when we had walked all the way to the quay, "Naomi, it's beyond belief, even though I know it's true. This village wasn't a sham, a showplace. It was real. I *know* it."

She looked around her. "Yes. It was intended to be real. But all it takes is thought and patience."

"What did you say? Did you tell—whatever it was—'Go and build a real village'?"

"I didn't have to. They knew. Does it interest you, how it was done?" She turned a curious face to me, which I could barely see in the thin light.

"Of course," I said. "My God! To create real people and a real place—when I'm ordered to re-create a real person—should I not be interested?"

"If it were as easy to re-create as it is to create," she said emptily, "I would not be . . . lonely."

We stopped, close by the low stone wall which ran from the quay to the sharp rocks of the little headland sheltering the beach, and leaned on it. At our backs, the row of little houses; before us, nothing but the sea. She was resting on both her elbows, staring over the water. At less than arm's reach, I leaned on one elbow, my hands clasped before

me, studying her as though I had never seen her before tonight. Of course, I hadn't.

I said, "Are you afraid of not being beautiful? Something is troubling you."

She shrugged. "There is no such word as 'forever'—is there?"

"You make it seem as though there were."

"No, no." She chuckled. "Thank you for saying it, Derek. Even if I know—even if I can see in the mirror—that I am still so, it's delightful to be reassured."

How had she achieved it, anyway? I wanted, and yet didn't want, to ask. Perhaps she didn't know; she had just said she wanted it so, and it was. So I asked a different question.

"Because it's—the thing that is most *yours*?"

Her eyes came back from the sea, rested on me, returned. "Yes. The *only* thing that is mine. You're a rare person; you have compassion. Thank you."

"How do you live?" I said. I fumbled out cigarettes from my pocket, rather crumpled; she refused one with a head-shake, but I lit one for myself.

"How do I live?" she echoed. "Oh—many ways. As various people, of course, with various names. You see, I haven't even a name to call my own. Two women who look exactly like me exist for me, so that when I wish I can take their places in Switzerland or in Sweden or in South America. I borrow their lives, use them a while, give them back. I have seen them grow old, changed them for replacements—made into duplicates of me. But those are not persons; they are masks. I live behind masks. I suppose that's what you'd say."

"You can't do anything else," I said.

"No. No, of course I can't. And until this overtook me, I'd never conceived that I might want to."

I felt that I understood that. I tapped the first ash off my cigarette down towards the sea. Glancing around, I said irrelevantly, "You know, it seems like a shame to dismantle Santadora. It could be a charming little village. A real one, not a stage set."

"No," she said. And then, as she straightened and whirled

around, "No! Look!" She ran wildly into the middle of the narrow street and pointed at the cobbles. "Don't you see? Already stones which weren't cracked are cracked! And the houses!" She flung up her arm and ran forward to the door of the nearest house. "The wood is warping! And that shutter—hanging loose on the hinges! And the step!" She dropped to her knees, felt along the low stone step giving directly on the street.

I was coming after her now, startled by her passion.

"Feel!" she commanded. "Feel it! It's been worn by people walking on it. And even the wall—don't you see the crack from the corner of the window is getting wider?" Again she was on her feet, running her hand over the rough wall. "Time is gnawing at it, like a dog at a bone. God, no, Derek! Am I to leave it and know that time is breaking it, breaking, *breaking* it?"

I couldn't find words.

"Listen!" she said. "Oh God! Listen!" She had tensed like a frightened deer, head cocked.

"I don't hear anything," I said. I had to swallow hard.

"Like nails being driven into a coffin," she said. She was at the house door, battering on it, pushing at it. "You *must* hear it!"

Now, I did. From within the house there was a ticking noise—a huge, majestic, slow rhythm, so faint I had not noticed it until she commanded me to strain my ears. A clock. Just a clock.

Alarmed at her frenzy, I caught her by the shoulder. She turned and clung to me like a tearful child, burying her head against my chest. "I can't stand it," she said, her teeth set. I could feel her trembling.

"Come away," I murmured. "If it hurts you so much, come away."

"No, that isn't what I want. I'd go on hearing it—don't you understand?" She drew back a little and looked up at me. "I'd go on hearing it!" Her eyes grew veiled, her whole attention focusing towards the clock inside the house. "Tick-tick-tick—God, it's like being buried alive!"

I hesitated a moment. Then I said, "All right, I'll fix it. Stand back."

She obeyed. I raised my foot and stamped it, sole and heel together, on the door. Something cracked; my leg stung all the way to the thigh with the impact. I did it again, and the jamb split. The door flew open. At once the ticking was loud and clear.

And visible in a shaft of moonlight opposite the door was the clock itself: a tall old grandfather, bigger than me, its pendulum glinting on every ponderous swing.

A snatch of an ancient and macabre Negro spiritual came to my mind:

The hammer keeps ringing on somebody's coffin. . . .

Abruptly it was as doom-laden for me as for Naomi. I strode across the room, tugged open the glass door of the clock, and stopped the pendulum with a quick finger. The silence was a relief like cold water after long thirst.

She came warily into the room after me, staring at the face of the clock as though hypnotized. It struck me that she was not wearing a watch, and I had never seen her wear one.

"Get rid of it," she said. She was still trembling. "Please, Derek—get rid of it."

I whistled, taking another look at the old monster. I said, "That's not going to be so easy! These clocks are heavy!"

"Please, Derek!" The urgency in her voice was frightening. She turned her back, staring into a corner of the room. Like all these cramped, imitation-antique houses, this one had a mere three rooms, and the room we were in was crowded with furniture—a big bed, a table, chairs, a chest. But for that, I felt she would have run to the corner to hide.

Well, I could try.

I studied the problem and came to the conclusion that it would be best to take it in parts.

"Is there a lamp?" I said. "I'd work better if I could see."

She murmured something inaudible; then there was the sound of a lighter, and a yellow flicker grew to a steady glow which illumined the room. The smell of kerosene reached my nostrils. She put the lamp on a table where its light fell past me on to the clock.

I unhitched the weights and pocketed them; then I un-

clipped a screwdriver from my breast pocket and attacked the screws at the corners of the face. As I had hoped, with those gone, it was possible to lift out the whole works, the chains following like umbilical cords, making little scraping sounds as they were dragged over the wooden ledge the movement had rested on.

"Here!" Naomi whispered, and snatched it from me. It was a surprisingly small proportion of the weight of the whole clock. She dashed out of the house and across the street. A moment, and there was a splash.

I felt a spasm of regret. And then was angry with myself. Quite likely this was no rare specimen of antique craftsmanship, but a fake. Like the whole village. I hugged the case to me and began to walk it on its front corners towards the door. I had been working with my cigarette in my mouth; now the smoke began to tease my eyes, and I spat it to the floor and ground it out.

Somehow I got the case out of the house, across the road, up on the seawall. I rested there for a second, wiping the sweat from my face, then got behind the thing and gave it the most violent push I could manage. It went over the wall, twisting once in the air, and splashed.

I looked down, and instantly wished that I hadn't. It looked exactly like a dark coffin floating off on the sea.

But I stayed there for a minute or so, unable to withdraw my gaze, because of an overwhelming impression that I had done some symbolic act, possessed of a meaning which could not be defined in logical terms, yet heavy, solid—real as that mass of wood drifting away.

I came back slowly, shaking my head, and found myself in the door of the house before I paid attention again to what was before my eyes. Then I stopped dead, one foot on the step which Naomi had cursed for being worn by passing feet. The flame of the yellow lamp was wavering a little in the wind, and it was too high—the smell of its smoke was strong, and the chimney was darkening.

Slowly, as though relishing each single movement, Naomi was unbuttoning the black shirt she wore, looking towards the lamp. She tugged it out of the waist of her pants and

slipped it off. The brassiere she wore under it was black, too. I saw she had kicked away her espadrilles.

"Call it an act of defiance," she said in a musing tone—speaking more to herself, I thought, than to me. "I shall put off my mourning clothes." She unzipped her pants and let them fall. Her briefs also were black.

"Now I'm through with mourning. I believe it will be done. It will be done soon enough. Oh yes! Soon enough." Her slim golden arms reached up behind her back. She dropped the brassiere to the floor, but the last garment she caught up in her hand and hurled at the wall. For a moment she stood still; then seemed to become aware of my presence for the first time and turned slowly towards me.

"Am I beautiful?" she said.

My throat was very dry. I said, "God, yes. You're one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen."

She leaned over the lamp and blew it out. In the instant of falling darkness she said, "Show me."

And, a little later on the rough blanket of the bed, when I had said twice or three times, "Naomi—Naomi!" she spoke again. Her voice was cold and far away.

"I didn't mean to call myself Naomi. What I had in mind was Niobe, but I couldn't remember it."

And very much later, when she had drawn herself so close to me that it seemed she was clinging to comfort, to existence itself, with her arms around me and her legs locked with mine, under the blanket now because the night was chill, I felt her lips move against my ear.

"How long, Derek?"

I was almost lost; I had never before been so drained of myself, as though I had been cork-tossed on a stormy ocean and battered limp by rocks, I could barely open my eyes. I said in a blurred voice, "What?"

"How long?"

I fought a last statement from my wearying mind, neither knowing nor caring what it was. "With luck," I muttered, "it might not take ten years. Naomi, I don't know—" And in a burst of absolute effort, finished, "My God, you do this to me and expect me to be able to think afterwards?"

But that was the extraordinary thing. I had imagined myself about to go down into blackness, into coma, to sleep like a corpse. Instead, while my body rested, my mind rose to the pitch beyond consciousness—to a vantage point where it could survey the future. I was aware of the thing I had done. From my crude, experimental machine, I knew, would come a second and a third, and the third would be sufficient for the task. I saw and recognized the associated problems, and knew them to be soluble. I conceived names of men I wanted to work on those problems—some who were known to me and who, given the chance I had been given, could create, in their various fields, such new techniques as I had created. Meshing like hand-matched cogs, the parts blended into the whole.

A calendar and a clock were in my mind all this while.

Not all of this was a dream; much of it was of the nature of inspiration, with the sole difference that I could feel it happening and that it was right. But towards the very end, I did have a dream—not in visual images but in a kind of emotional aura. I had a completely satisfying sensation, which derived from the fact that I was about to meet for the first time a man who was already my closest friend, whom I knew as minutely as any human being had ever known another.

I was waking. For a little while longer I wanted to bask in that fantastic warmth of emotion; I struggled not to wake while feeling that I was smiling and had been smiling for so long that my cheek muscles were cramped.

Also I had been crying, so that the pillow was damp.

I turned on my side and reached out gently for Naomi, already phrasing the wonderful gift-words I had for her. "Naomi! I know how long it will take now. It needn't take more than three years, perhaps as little as two and a half."

My hand, meeting nothing but the rough cloth, sought further. Then I opened my eyes and sat up with a start.

I was alone. Full daylight was pouring into the room; it was bright and sunny and very warm. Where was she? I must go in search of her and tell her the wonderful news.

My clothes were on the floor by the bed; I pulled them on, thrust my feet in my sandals, and padded to the door, paus-

ing with one hand on the split jamb to accustom my eyes to the glare.

Just across the narrow street, leaning his elbows on the stone wall, was a man with his back to me. He gave not the slightest hint that he was aware of being watched. It was a man I knew at once, even though I'd met him no more than twice in my life. He called himself Roger Gurney.

I spoke his name, and he didn't turn around. He lifted one arm and made a kind of beckoning motion. I was sure then what had happened, but I walked forward to stand beside him, waiting for him to tell me.

Still he didn't look at me. He merely gestured towards the sharp rocks with which the end of the wall united. He said, "She came out at dawn and went up there. To the top. She was carrying her clothes in her hand. She threw them one by one into the sea. And then—" He turned his hand over, palm down, as though pouring away a little pile of sand.

I tried to say something, but my throat was choked.

"She couldn't swim," Gurney added after a moment. "Of course."

Now I could speak. I said, "But my God! Did you see it happen?"

He nodded.

"Didn't you go after her? Didn't you rescue her?"

"We recovered her body."

"Then—artificial respiration! You must have been able to do something!"

"She lost her race against time," Gurney said after a pause. "She had admitted it."

"I—" I checked myself. It was becoming so clear that I cursed myself for a fool. Slowly I went on, "How much longer would she have been beautiful?"

"Yes." He expressed the word with form. "That was the thing she was running from. She wanted *him* to return and find her still lovely, and no one in the world would promise her more than another three years. After that, the doctors say, she would have—" He made an empty gesture. "Crumbled."

"She would always have been beautiful," I said. "My God! Even looking her real age, she'd have been beautiful!"

"We think so," Gurney said.

"And so stupid, so futile!" I slammed my fist into my palm. "You too, Gurney—do you realize what you've *done*, you fool?" My voice shook with anger, and for the first time he faced me.

"Why in hell didn't you revive her and send for me? It needn't have taken more than three years! Last night she demanded an answer and I told her ten, but it came clear to me during the night how it could be done in less than three!"

"I thought that was how it must have been." His face was white, but the tips of his ears were—absurdly—brilliant pink. "If you hadn't said that, Cooper; if you hadn't said that."

And then (I was still that wave-tossed cork, up one moment, down the next, up again the next) it came to me what my inspiration of the night really implied. I clapped my hand to my forehead.

"Idiot!" I said. "I don't know what I'm doing yet! Look, you have her body! Get it to—to wherever it is, with the other one, *quick*. What the hell else have I been doing but working to re-create a human being? And now I've seen how it can be done, I can do it—I can re-create her as well as him!" I was in a fever of excitement, having darted forward in my mind to that strange future I had visited in my sleep, and my barely visualized theories were solid fact.

He was regarding me strangely. I thought he hadn't understood, and went on, "What are you standing there for? I can do it, I tell you—I've seen how it can be done. It's going to take men and money, but those can be got."

"No," Gurney said.

"What?" I let my arms fall to my sides, blinking in the sunlight.

"No," he repeated. He stood up, stretching arms cramped by long resting on the rough top of the wall. "You see, it isn't hers any longer. Now she's dead, it belongs to somebody else."

Dazed, I drew back a pace. I said, "Who?"

"How can I tell you? And what would it mean to you if I did? You ought by now to know what kind of people you're dealing with."

I put my hand in my pocket, feeling for my cigarettes. I was trying to make it come clear to myself: now Naomi was dead she no longer controlled the resources which could bring her back. So my dream was—a dream. Oh, God!

I was staring stupidly at the thing which had met my hand; it wasn't my pack of cigarettes but the leather wallet she had given me.

"You can keep that," Gurney said. "I was told you could keep it."

I looked at him. And I *knew*.

Very slowly, I unzipped the wallet. I took out the three cards. They were sealed in plastic. I folded them in half, and the plastic cracked. I tore them across and let them fall to the ground. Then, one by one, I ripped the checks out of the book and let them drift confetti-wise over the wall, down to the sea.

He watched me, the color coming to his face until at last he was flushing red—with guilt, shame, I don't know. When I had finished, he said in a voice that was still level, "You're a fool, Cooper. You could still have bought your dreams with those."

I threw the wallet in his face and turned away. I had gone ten steps, blind with anger and sorrow, when I heard him speak my name and looked back. He was holding the wallet in both hands, and his mouth was working.

He said, "Damn you, Cooper. Oh, damn you to hell! I—I told myself I loved her, and I couldn't have done that. Why do you want to make me feel so *dirty*?"

"Because you are," I said. "And now you know it."

Three men I hadn't seen before came into my house as I was crating the machine. Silent as ghosts, impersonal as robots, they helped me put my belongings in my car. I welcomed their aid simply because I wanted to get to hell out of this mock village as fast as possible. I told them to throw the things I wanted to take with me in the passenger seats and the luggage compartment, without bothering to pack cases. While I was at it, I saw Gurney come to the side of the house and stand by the car as though trying to pluck up courage to speak to me again, but I ignored him,

and when I went out he had gone. I didn't find the wallet until I was in Barcelona sorting through the jumbled belongings. It held, this time, thirty-five thousand pesetas in new notes. He had just thrown it on the back seat under a pile of clothes.

Listen. It wasn't a *long* span of time which defeated Naomi. It wasn't three years or ten years or any number of years. I worked it out later—too late. (So time defeated me, too, as it always defeats us.)

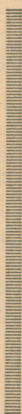
I don't know how her man died. But I'm sure I know why she wanted him back. Not because she loved him, as she herself believed. But because he loved her. And without him, she was afraid. It didn't need three years to re-create her. It didn't even need three hours. It needed *three words*.

And Gurney, the bastard, could have spoken them, long before I could—so long before that there was still time. He could have said, "I love you."

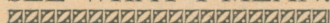
These are the totally rich. They inhabit the same planet, breathe the same air. But they are becoming, little by little, a different species, because what was most human in them is—well, this is my opinion—dead.

They keep apart, as I mentioned. And God! God! Aren't you grateful?

Future



SEE WHAT I MEAN!



"MY MIND'S made up. Don't try and confuse me with facts."

Even though, like everyone else, I'd often suspected during an argument that the other guy was an inaccessible bigot, I'd always thought the foregoing celebrated remark was a happy epigrammatic summation. Then one day I happened to be addressing an open-air meeting on the subject of nuclear weapons, and a heckler in the crowd really *did* say he didn't want any facts because he'd made up his mind. (I don't doubt he thought I was the bigot. Well, could be.)

Nonetheless, that reminded me of the mystery of why diplomats allegedly negotiating towards the solution of a problem say so much and communicate so little. Then I found the likely answer in Grey Walter's *The Living Brain* and indulged in some wishful thinking: herewith.

NB—unless this story comes true we shan't get through to the far future where the remaining stories are set.



MORNING, GENEVA, Switzerland. Warm bright sunlight. The famous *jet d'eau* tossing jeweled drops at its own re-

flection in the calm lake. It was such a beautiful morning, indeed, that Dr. Gerhard Hirnmann had been tempted into leaving home earlier than usual to walk to the hospital.

But on the way he bought a paper to see how the conference was going, and by the time he had read about it his day had been ruined.

He passed the handsome white building where the negotiators were meeting, and a surge of despair made him shake the rolled paper towards the blank windows. Four men on whom the future of the world depended, and they couldn't even agree that a fine sunny morning like this was worth all their points of principle put together.

"What can they be *thinking of*?" he asked the air.

And that was when the idea came to him.

Morning, Geneva, Switzerland. In the cool high-ceilinged room the four delegates to the Foreign Ministers' Conference on the Resolution of Outstanding International Differences and Disarmament assembled—by pairs, through opposite doors. The American and British delegates entered on one side, looking respectively grim and resigned. The Russian and Chinese delegates entered on the other, looking respectively resigned and grim.

They took their places at the table. Yesterday the British Foreign Minister had been the chairman, and the greater part of the proceedings had consisted of an address by the American Secretary of State, who had depicted in the most harrowing terms the probable consequences of a nuclear war and called on the other side to join in efforts to avoid this. The Russian delegate had replied briefly to the effect that he was perfectly aware of all that already thank you, and his colleague would make a full reply the following day.

Now it was the turn of the Russian to take the chair, and the Chinese was due to speak. In rather good English his interpreter explained to the other side exactly what China could not agree to—diminution of national integrity, foregoing of outstanding territorial claims, compromise on matters of indisputable importance. . . .

It went on for a long time. The Secretary of State did well to resist the impulse to yawn for three solid hours. When

he eventually yielded, the Chinese glared at him and launched into an improvised addition to his speech, thus ensuring he would last out the day.

The British Foreign Minister exchanged a covert glance with the Russian chairman. The Russian shrugged, as much as to say, "I've tried to make him see sense!"

It was like butting your head on a brick wall, the Foreign Minister thought. This Chinese fellow had some real arguments on his side—nobody was denying that. If only he'd try to see the other side of them and admit that the Americans might have some points in their favor, too. . . .

Not listening very closely to what his colleague was saying, the Russian in the chair wondered how much longer this was going to go on. You couldn't help agreeing with what the American kept saying about the danger of war—in fact, he described it so vividly you could almost see the calamity happening in front of you. But why, why, *why* couldn't he recognize that points of principle were all-important to the Chinese opposite him and arrive at a formula that would save him and his country from losing face?

The ninety-third day of the conference wound to its close. It was a measure of the sheer desperation felt by all parties to the negotiations that they were willing to mortgage their most senior diplomats—their foreign ministers—to the interminable discussion. But it really seemed as though the entire world had given up hope of reaching a rational settlement and had decided that the only chance was to drag out the talks as long as possible before they broke down and the planet blew up. This conference was built on the wreck of umpteen other conferences between officials of junior rank, and the only other reason it had gone on so long was that neither side fancied starting a summit meeting if there was a risk of it trailing on and on as this meeting had. You could manage without foreign ministers, but you couldn't very well park your chief executives in another country for an indefinite period.

When the session closed, one by one the big black cars pulled up at the main door: a Caddy for the Secretary of State, a Rolls-Royce for the British Foreign Minister, a Zis

for the Russian, and a Flaming Dragon for the Chinese. The Flaming Dragon looked very much like the last Buick model but one, but it was Chinese-built from tires to roof.

The first three roared away, up the drive and out on to the highway, and the Flaming Dragon set out to follow—only to find itself rammed broadside by a large Mercedes driven by a small grey-haired man in a dark blue suit and silver-rimmed glasses.

The chauffeur leapt out, drawing an automatic. The interpreter leapt out, drawing a rubber truncheon. The Chinese Foreign Minister sat tight, wary of a possible attempt to kidnap him.

“What do you think *you’re* playing at?” the interpreter said in fluent French to the little man with grey hair, who was wringing his hands and explaining how sorry he was.

“I had no idea!” the little man said. “What a stupid and careless thing to do! Why, it’s the Chinese delegate to the Conference in that car, isn’t it?”

The interpreter debated whether to deny the fact, remembered that a large number of capitalist journalists had taken pictures of his boss, and shrugged, which seemed a fair compromise between admitting and denying it.

“Oh, I hope he isn’t hurt by the accident!” wailed the grey-haired man. “Look, I am Dr. Gerhard Hirnmann, and I work at the hospital up the road; it is the finest and most advanced in Europe for the curing of damage to the nervous system. You must let me examine the Minister and see if he is injured. Why, even shock might have an effect on the outcome of this important conference!”

Satisfied at last that the accident wasn’t faked, the prelude to a raid (he had done such things himself in the old days at home, when he was a member of a guerilla band hunting in the hills), the Foreign Minister leaned out of the car and demanded to know what the man with grey hair wanted.

The interpreter told him. The Minister considered for a moment. The interpreter, who—thanks to his elevated position close to the high officials of government—had long ago decided that *he* never wanted to see a war in which a hundred million Chinese joined their ancestors, thought of

the point which Dr. Hirnmann had made about shock to the Minister upsetting the conference, and added several excellent and eloquent pleas of his own.

The Foreign Minister scowled. However, the interpreter was usually trustworthy, and he had managed to get across a subtle warning about the danger of losing face in public if the accident had disturbed the Minister's mental functions, which weighed very strongly.

He consented to accompany Dr. Hirnmann to the hospital for a brief examination, and the following day the papers didn't say a word about it. The Chinese delegation weren't interested in publicity.

The ninety-fourth day of the Conference on the Resolution of Outstanding—etcetera—wound to its weary close. The American Secretary of State had the chair today, and most of the proceedings consisted of a fierce argument between the chair and the Chinese delegation. Twice the American looked daggers at the British delegate because he conceded a point to the Chinese and the Russian; three times the Chinese hissed unprintable insults at the Russian for appearing to give ground to the capitalists. It was deadlock again. But at least today was Friday, and with the weekend coming the world was assured a war wouldn't break out for two more days.

The British Foreign Minister was looking forward to the private dinner the Russian had invited him to. The Soviet point of view throughout this conference seemed to him more reasonable than usual. Indeed, he was getting on rather well with the Russkies. If only (he sighed here, long and deeply) he could get on as well with his own colleague from the United States!

Once more the cars rolled up, and once more they sped out of the gates: the Flaming Dragon in the lead today, the Rolls, the Zis, and then the Caddy.

And just as it was turning into the main road, the Caddy was rammed by a Mercedes driven by a small man with grey hair and silver-rimmed glasses.

The Secretary of State had heard about the hospital up the

road where Dr. Hirnmann worked. It was famous all over the Western world. He had even been considering going there for a checkup, because the strain of the long conference was waking up his old ulcers. . . .

"It is madness!" the Russian said. He spoke excellent English. Leaning forward confidentially over the table, he went on, "Lèt me be frank. After all, what we have beer through together at this conference has made us—how do you say it?—old comrades in arms!" He hiccuped and chuckled as soon as he could.

The British Foreign Minister winced slightly, reflecting that this Russian custom of drinking innumerable toasts in vodka with no heel taps took a little getting used to. But he looked politely expectant.

"My Chinese colleague—" the Russian began. He paused, and a scowl bit deep into his face. "Of course, I am not saying he is not politically correct! His Marxist reasoning is impeccable. But, oh, let's face it, Mr. Minister! He's a pig-headed fool!"

It must be the vodka, the British Minister told himself owlshly. Because he could distinctly hear himself saying, "You know, sometimes I feel exactly the same thing about our American friend. He's so—so dogmatic, isn't he?"

They sighed in unison over the failings of their associates.

Suddenly the door of the dining-room was flung open. A harassed-looking young man appeared. Without apologizing, he addressed a flood of fierce Russian to his astonished chief.

"There is a man outside," he translated for his guest's benefit, "who says he can save the world and must see us urgently. He sounds like a madman. I'll have him thrown out."

"No!" said the British Foreign Minister, raising his hand solemnly. There seemed to be more of the hand than usual—twice as much, in fact. "Don't do that. After all, we've spent months in conference and got nowhere. Maybe we need a madman to advise us."

The Russian stared for a moment, then crowed with laughter. "Very good!" he roared. "We will see him. Tell

me," he added, turning to his aide, "what's this madman's name?"

"Dr. Gerhard Hirnmann," the aide said stiffly.

Morning, Geneva, Switzerland. A dull grey day with the threat of rain. The citizens hurrying to work were astonished at the sight of a respectably dressed man with silver-rimmed glasses dancing and singing as he made his way on foot towards a famous hospital on the outskirts of the city, waving a newspaper as though conducting a one-man chorus of celebration. Banner headlines in the paper announced: DEAD-LOCK BROKEN! PEACE IN SIGHT! CONFERENCE REACHES AGREEMENT!

"Have you heard the wonderful news?" his chief assistant said as Dr. Hirnmann entered the hospital. "How do you suppose it happened?"

Dr. Hirnmann, making a last pirouette, paused and faced his assistant.

"You are aware," he said, "that some people when examined on an electroencephalograph display an absence of alpha rhythms. These are people who think exclusively in visual terms. They are classed 'M' for *minus*—yes? You know that some people display persistent alpha rhythms, and these think exclusively in abstracts, without visual imagery. They are classed 'P' for *persistent*. You know that most people have alpha rhythms which appear when the eyes are closed and disappear again when they start using their faculty of visualization, and that these are classed 'R' for *responsive*. You further know that someone who is 'P' and someone who is 'M' generally can't understand each other's point of view."

The assistant looked blank. He said, "I know all—"

Dr. Hirnmann ignored him. "Now if you can explain to someone who is the ordinary 'R' type that he has to deal with people of types 'P' and 'M', then you can make a link between the parties who disagree because an 'R' person thinks to some extent in each of these modes."

"Yes!" said the assistant. "But what—?"

"Following a motorcar accident the other evening the Chinese delegate to the conference came here for an ex-

amination. You'd gone home by then. I studied him with the electroencephalograph. As I suspected, he is a person who thinks in almost pure abstracts; he's concerned about losing face and about absolute political principles.

"By—uh—" Dr. Hirnmann looked modestly at his shoes. "By a strange coincidence the American delegate also had an accident and also came for examination. You'd gone home again. It turns out that he thinks exclusively in pictures. He can visualize something so perfectly that he can describe it as though it were there in front of him. Neither of them is to blame, of course—it's an accident of heredity.

"Luckily for us, and the world, the British and Russian delegates proved to be of the intermediate 'R' type and saw what I was driving at."

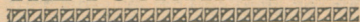
"What you were driving at?" the assistant echoed.

"Exactly," said Dr. Hirnmann with satisfaction. "What's more, though I'm an extremely bad driver, I hit it twice." He felt in his pocket and produced a piece of paper. "Kindly do something for me. Divide the total of this bill in half and send requests for payment to the Chinese and American governments. Call it a fee for medical examination, naturally."

He deposited the paper in the hands of his startled assistant and went whistling away down the corridor. After some time, the assistant recovered sufficiently to look at what he had been given.

It was a bill from a car-hire company for extensive damage to the front of a Mercedes sedan.

THE FOURTH POWER



I WROTE this in a fourth-floor flat in Brussels towards the end of a four-month tour my wife and I made around Europe with an exhibition about nuclear weapons, visiting in all seven countries. It was an experience which had brought vividly home to me the fact that although we have shrunk the world spatially we have expanded it temporally—for instance, I'm told it would be possible for a man to step off a Boeing 707 jet airliner, get into his Cadillac, and go off to buy a slave in one of the Arab sheikhdoms.

In other words, one can cross the cultural boundaries of ten centuries in a single round-the-world journey.

How to keep track of our own knowledge, when publication of scientific papers in even a single speciality exceeds the average man's reading capacity? How to bring under control this temporal spread of such fearful magnitude? We need, I suppose, people like Smith—only not *too* like him, please!



WHEELWELL WAS nervous. The palms of his hands itched with perspiration. He rubbed them on his handkerchief sur-

reptitiously and tried to persuade himself that the feeling was due to the presence of Norstein. Norstein's calm gaze invariably conveyed the impression that to him any human being was merely a piece of imperfectly functioning machinery.

Anyone would think it was I who was going to be the guinea pig, he told himself irritably. He cleared his throat and looked around the lab.

There were four people here who really mattered; the technicians running last-minute checks on the circuitry didn't count. There was himself; Holiday, who had discovered the Effect; Norstein, who had proposed the experiment; and Smith. Smith had put the original two and two together and catalyzed this chain of events. That was his job—he was a synthesist.

Wheelwell tried not to look as though he was staring, but he could hardly take his eyes off the man. He had discovered since taking on the post of research administrator for the Foundation that he was a better businessman than he ever had been a scientist, despite his master's degree in chemical physics. Perhaps that was why he found it hard to understand the inherent dislike specialists felt for synthesists. "Jumped-up jacks of all trades" was about the kindest word a follower of a specialized discipline ever had for them. Yet they were inoffensive enough—colorless young men with glasses, conservatively dressed, bearing commonplace names, who resembled each other as closely as brothers.

And imperturbable! Smith sat in his not-very-comfortable chair with his legs crossed and his eyes half closed, as if he were doing nothing more demanding than waiting for a bus.

What was he actually waiting for? What did he expect might happen? Wheelwell could read no answer in the placid face.

He glanced at Holiday, and found that there he could read the expression only too clearly. The black-haired young physicist was almost chewing at the stem of his pipe; his thin, white-knuckled hands with the powdering of short black hairs on the back were drumming at the arms of his chair. The delay was preying on his nerves. Now he took the pipe

from his jaws and jabbed the stem in Smith's direction, posing the very question Wheelwell had been longing to ask.

"Hey! Mister llama-keeper! What exactly do you think is going to come of this?"

Smith came alive as though a switch had been pressed. He gave a dry, pleasant chuckle. "Llama-keeper! Not bad, Dr. Holiday. Not bad at all."

Norstein blinked and growled something interrogative, and Smith turned to him. "Llamas are a hybrid species. They have difficulty in reproducing their kind without—uh—manual assistance. Dr. Holiday was referring to our job of cross-fertilizing overspecialized disciplines. It's a very good analogy."

Holiday had just realized that if one pushed the implications of his remark to their conclusion, they were less flattering to specialists than to synthesists. He scowled, and Smith hastened to answer his question.

"Why—I wouldn't really like to say what I expect, doctor. After all, we haven't got much to go on, have we?"

"There was a whole slew of cats and monkeys and things you tried it on first," Holiday grunted, jamming his pipe back in place.

"I'm afraid they didn't tell us very much," Smith murmured.

Norstein leaned forward. "They told us a great deal," he contradicted. "We can say that to some extent they stopped thinking—or rather reacting—like themselves. The drawback is that we can't understand the process in any readily definable terms. If we knew what it *felt* like to be a cat or a monkey, we'd have made a lot more sense out of what they told us."

Wheelwell remembered those cats and monkeys; he'd seen a lot of them. He thought they looked pitiful. *Haunted* was the term he was tempted to employ. As though, after having been cats and monkeys all their lives, they'd suddenly started to think like—like *not*-cats, *not*-monkeys. Like nothing ever known.

He'd said something of the sort to Norstein; Norstein had scoffed a little, but in his usual compassionate way.

"The rig checked out," said a technician offhandedly,

passing with a sheaf of circuit diagrams in one hand and a voltmeter in the other. The four waiting men exchanged glances and stood up.

"A few tests first, then, Smith," Norstein suggested, and Smith stretched himself out obediently on the operating trolley they had ranged alongside the induction mechanism. Lips pursed as though he were whistling an inaudible tune, Norstein ran the standard series of reflex tests, measured sweat secretion rates and blood pH and several other things Wheelwell did not recognize.

The first time he had met Smith, he remembered . . .

The synthesists' visits ran as much according to a pattern as did the synthesists themselves. A colorless voice on the outside phone would say that Mr. So-and-So of the Department of Synthesis, Board of Research and Development, would be with him in ten minutes if that was convenient. It always was convenient; it had to be.

Wheelwell had been in his office, checking proofs for the Foundation journal which was due to appear shortly. When he heard the news, he debated with himself whether to be relieved or alarmed. Then he concluded that it was easier to stand a burst of Holiday's unpredictable behavior than the entirely predictable inquiries of the board of trustees as to why he had persisted in spending money on a line of research the experimenter himself had described as hopeless; he was smiling when Smith arrived.

"I'm glad you're here," he began. "As a matter of fact, I'd been considering calling your department and asking for someone to drop by ahead of schedule. We've got something to interest you."

Smith nodded. "The chances are your request would have been denied," he said matter-of-factly. "Nine times out of ten, only a synthesist can say what will interest a synthesist." He adopted an interested expression. "This might be the tenth time, though. May I have the details?"

Wheelwell shuffled through the heap of proofs till he came to the article he wanted. He passed it across the desk, and Smith read it silently. Meantime, Wheelwell mentally reviewed what it said. He didn't understand it himself; no-

body did, so far, but he had seen it in operation, and that helped.

In itself, the phenomenon was slightly remarkable. There was this circuit, an ordinary loop of silver wire—only it had a gap in it. Assuming certain physical conditions were fulfilled, nonetheless, a current of the order of a few millivolts induced *here* produced an identical reading *there*. And it didn't matter what was in the gap in the circuit—air, an insulator, a conductor, a bar magnet, high vacuum—nothing influenced the current.

"The author's done an excellent job of proving what it's *not*," said Smith thoughtfully. "Not transmitted on any detectable band of radiant energy; not a resonance phenomenon; not anything. What does he think it *is*?"

He glanced at the title of the article again as though to stamp the author's name on his memory.

"Holiday says it's a good parlor trick to have around a lab," Wheelwell acknowledged candidly. "And that's all."

Smith looked as much astonished as he ever permitted himself to look. "Really? But you disagree with him."

"Well—yes. If it had been anyone else but Holiday, I might have been inclined to take the discoverer's word for it. He maintains that it's too limited: the maximum current is a few millivolts; the maximum range is a few inches. But . . . Holiday is very young and regards himself as more brilliant than he probably is. I believe he expected to be invited to the Institute for Advanced Study, and it galls him to be working with a commercial research foundation. So you see I can't accept his dogmatic assertions as a genuine desire to save wasting time on a fruitless line of investigation. Rather, I think he hoped this would be the discovery that made him famous before he was thirty, and because it isn't, he wants to scratch the surface of something new."

"Ye-es. And—?"

"And I can't think of any physical principle that is to be dismissed as useless. And . . . well, I'll tell you an illuminating story. A few months ago, when he first told me he'd hit a dead end, I—uh—I suggested turning it over to a synthesist, knowing that he was going to be sufficiently annoyed at the suggestion to go back to the job. But that was not

enough, so I sent him a memo suggesting that he draft the paper you've just read and proposing as a title 'The Holiday Effect.' He sent the memo back with his answer scribbled on the blank side; he said, 'I'm saving that name for something which *does* something.'"

Smith nodded. "Unfortunate," he muttered. "Can you spare me a copy of this article? You were quite right—this is the tenth case. As far as I know it's quite new, and when we turn it loose I think Dr. Holiday will regret not having officially attached his name to the Effect."

"You—uh—know already where it's going to—?"

Smith shook his head. "Of course not. But it has the right sort of—of smell, as we say in my profession."

Wheelwell glanced down at the top of his desk. "I might mention that the first idea I had was to propose it as a switching mechanism for computers—only it's highly nondirectional, and one of our computer men figured out that to employ the principle for switching would involve a setup costing an additional million and a quarter and nearly as big as this room. Before you got around to saving anything."

"Ye-es. But there are other fields where millivolt currents do more than anyone would believe possible."

And the answer to that enigmatic parting remark was to be found in this room, of course, Wheelwell reminded himself.

More to the point, perhaps, the answer was right behind his eyes.

He had been very surprised when Smith came back a week later with Norstein, whom he introduced as a neurologist; more surprised than ever when he had had experience of Norstein's company and found him to talk more like a cybernetics man than a member of a biological discipline.

But it had begun to clarify a little when he learned that among Norstein's other tasks he was responsible for the selection and training of synthesists. . . .

"Synthesis works!" he had said loudly, leaning forward—they were again in Wheelwell's office at the Foundation—to glare at Holiday. Holiday had early acquired the standard

attitude towards synthesists and had made the mistake of giving voice to it.

"All right, so it works," Holiday had shrugged. "Sometimes."

"If it worked once in a million cases it would be worthwhile," Norstein emphasised. "It works better than that; but we've got to make it work better still. I don't suppose you know as much about what goes on under your scalp as you do about the—the pi meson. Hey? There's a whole universe of electrochemical phenomena in there; there are more neuron connections, speaking theoretically, than there are atoms in the universe. In one human brain. Only we can't use them." He added the last sentence in a tone of disgust. "Why not? Well, some of them are damaged or spoiled by metabolic malfunctions. Some of them—a hell of a lot—are forever tied up with regulating nonconscious body functions. That still leaves a tidy number. Only we can't even use *that* many. We forget, and although we can dig the information out sometimes, by directly stimulating the brain with electrodes, for example, that's not much use.

"Now Smith here has his head very nearly as full of knowledge as is conceivably possible. He's a synthesist. We've taken him and stuffed his mind full by every technique we can imagine: hypnosis, sleep-learning, tachistoscopic acceleration of uptake, drugs. . . . He's good. They're all good. But they aren't good enough.

"Now the ordinary neuron connections in the brain operate in our customary three dimensions. It's a hell of a sight more complex than that, but you can picture a kind of conventional cybernetic switching system if you like. Only while most such systems are used to store fact, in the shape of binary digits, our storage system is full of referents to events and processes. We don't yet understand the coding system the brain employs to break down sensory stimuli into 'memories'—but we're on the edge of it. With me so far?"

Holiday scowled and nodded.

"Good! Now I said the ordinary neuron connections work in our conventional three dimensions. But they have a great advantage already—one charged neuron may form

part of a hundred, a thousand different code entries in the memory. It seems to depend on the direction in which the entry is made, but if there's anything within reach, so to speak, which can be utilized in formulating a new code entry, then it'll be employed." He seized a sheet of paper and drew a tick-tack-toe game on it, filling the squares with noughts and crosses in strict alternation.

"Oversimplifying, let's say there's a new memory acquired whose code is *oxo*." He drew a straight line through the appropriate symbols. "Now another comes along, which is coded *xxo*. The *xo* combination already exists and is in use. But the brain sees nothing wrong in using it again, understand?" He drew an angled line to connect an *x* on the line below with the *xo* he had already struck through.

"Even so, our brains' *cubic* capacity is limited. What we are looking for is the fourth power. We want to be able to cross-refer an *x* on the bottom line with an *o* on the top line and another *x* on a different sheet of paper."

Holiday's mouth was opening slowly in an undignified gape. He said feebly, "But how about directionalization?"

"The brain won't care, Dr. Holiday. There are plenty of neurons to play with. So long as the connection can be made, it doesn't matter a hoot in hell whether the end of the series is above, below, or to the side of the beginning."

The fourth power. Wheelwell liked that analogy; it was crisp and literal and concise. Only—

Only it had overtones. Most of them belonged to the word *power*, as Wheelwell kept telling himself. The aim and purpose of the program Norstein had set in motion was merely to make synthesists better synthesists, nothing else—and that was a crying need. With hundreds of minor discoveries being made in each of the specialized disciplines, and no specialist being able to comprehend the needs of others in fields that did not directly impinge on his own, synthesists had been a godsend. Hadn't they given social matrix mathematics its basic tool, borrowing it from an obscure set of decay study? Hadn't they given astrophysicists a new and powerful technique for the analysis of stellar distribution functions used previously only in a narrow line of radiation

by introducing them to an empirical device of the market research people? Hadn't they—?

But there was so much *more* to be done! The proponents of synthesis as an officially sponsored discipline had argued from Hero of Alexandria's steam turbine, stating what was probably impossible to deny—that under the nose of the world there were a million similar potentially useful bits of knowledge which were either being employed for something ridiculous or not being employed at all. The master-slave society of the day had prevented the adoption of Hero's turbine as a useful device; how many other curiosities were there in this twentieth century of which posterity would say the same?

And yet—*power* . . .

Holiday had come along with him a couple of times to see the experimental animals on which the principle had been first put to the test. He had remained hidden behind his armour of skepticism for the most part—out of vanity, Wheelwell believed—but had so far relented as to baptize the Effect with his name after all. The experimental animals, though, left him cold.

"Don't look any different from usual to me," he grunted, his pipe jutting up at an aggressive angle. "These the ones that have been treated?"

"That's right," Wheelwell agreed.

"Uh-huh. What sustains the process in operation?"

"It doesn't need sustaining, as Norstein explained it to me. He said that in a newborn child, for instance, most of the nerve channels are totally blank, but available to accept stimuli. You've watched a baby learning to see, I guess—learning to recognize the difference between something within reach and something beyond. After a while the adjustment is automatic."

Holiday nodded.

"Well, it turns out that your principle can be applied on the same basis by a living brain. Once it's been taught to utilize nonspatial neuron connections—"

"Nonspatial?" Holiday took his pipe out and stared at his

companion. "Where in hell did you get that piece of portman-teau terminology?"

Wheelwell felt put on the defensive. "What else do you want them called? Nonspatial is a good descriptive term; it will do until we figure out exactly what does happen to the current, won't it?"

Holiday shrugged. "Of course the current flows through space. Only it doesn't flow through *all* the space. You'll be postulating a five-dimensional super-continuum next, just because it's a handy mathematical way of describing what happens. It's an analogue, that's all. Sorry—you said?"

Wheelwell had to ponder a moment before remembering where he had broken off. "Oh—yes. According to Norstein, it's possible that some people gifted with eidetic memory have discovered the possibility of using such neuron connections by chance. He compared it to learning to walk. Once you can control your feet sufficiently well to put one in front of the other, you can walk on any kind of road, upstairs, even along a tightrope, without adjusting the basic mechanism."

"So?"

"So he just induces a few random connections in the brains of these animals, and after a bit their behaviour changes in a significant manner. Two of the monkeys have exhibited a rise in IQ—one of them was a real moron, but has now learned to pile boxes on top of each other to get at bunches of bananas overhead. You know—standard monkey intelligence test."

"Was it one of these?" Holiday was staring at the caged monkeys. None of them was doing anything at all except looking out at the world with big, miserable eyes. Occasionally they scratched themselves or made water.

"I don't know."

"I don't very much want to know," Holiday decided with an abrupt turn on his heel. "Come on, let's get out of here. These crazy apes give me the jitters."

"I feel the same way," confessed Wheelwell, following. "I get the idea they just aren't being monkeys any more."

They were taping electroencephalograph connections to

tiny patches shaved on Smith's head now. Wheelwell fumbled in his pocket for a piece of candy and chewed on it to slacken his ever-growing tension.

Monkeys and cats and other animals had indicated significant possibilities. That was all. To *know* what the effect of the change was, one had to try it on an animal that could answer Norstein's questions.

Smith.

They selected the synthesist for a variety of reasons, not least among them the fact that they had data on his intelligence, his reactions, and most of his bodily functions dating back over several years, since he had first been recruited to the Department of Synthesis. Another reason was that a synthesist was trained to winnow knowledge, to select the important from the unimportant. And then, of course, there was the fact that he practically demanded to be allowed to undergo the process.

The tension grew unbearable as Smith took his place before the banked dials of the induction mechanism. Wheelwell glanced around. Holiday had departed to supervise the induction; Norstein, of course, was standing beside Smith. Only Wheelwell was left with nothing to do. He wrung his handkerchief between his sweating hands.

Norstein performed a series of extraordinary antics next. He shouted loudly in Smith's ear; then he flashed a bright light in his eyes. Then he read a few lines from *Hamlet* and drew the graph of a mathematical function on a small blackboard propped within easy reach. Finally he asked Smith a riddle—quite an amusing one, to judge by Smith's grin in response. He received a correct answer.

And they were coming back from the stand. It was over.

Wheelwell felt the tension in his stomach begin to reduce. There was no change—of course. It would have been stupid to expect a visible transformation in Smith. And yet he couldn't help thinking that there should have been *something*. A light in his eyes, perhaps. A sort of distant look. That would have satisfied his need.

Holiday came down from behind the banked equipment, leaving the technicians to take the final readings. He gave Smith a sharply questioning look.

"Well, any results?" he demanded.

"What sort of results do you expect at this moment?" Norstein countered irritably before Smith could reply. "Damn it, an ordinary aspirin tablet doesn't work in a twink of an eye!"

"It'll be a day or two before anything measurable happens," Wheelwell soothed the annoyed Holiday. "What are you going to do now, Dr. Norstein?"

"Just run one more EEG check, that's all," Norstein told him, glancing at the paper band as it spilled from the machine. "Right—no change. We'll settle you in the presidential suite, OK, Smith? And await developments."

Smith nodded. Now, for the first time, Wheelwell was glad to see signs of tension developing in the man's hands—how the fingers bent over to dig into the palms. He had begun to think that Smith had nothing in the way of ordinary human reactions.

The presidential suite—baptized by Holiday—was an apartment adjoining the lab, furnished on a magnificent scale by borrowing the ingredients from the homes of members of the Foundation staff. The library had been ransacked to provide books on every conceivable subject; there was a big bathroom, a splendid bedroom, a lounge with television, radio, record player, computer, drawing boards. . . . They had no idea what to expect; a dozen brain-storming sessions had produced the odd mixture of appliances.

They went into the lounge and sat down in an air of expectancy; they all found themselves looking at Smith, who gave them a wry smile.

"I think I'd like a drink," he said.

Wheelwell glanced doubtfully at Norstein, but Holiday was already on his feet. "Good idea," he said shortly, and was crossing to the liquor cabinet. He mixed their orders and came back to perch on the extreme front edge of a soft armchair, cradling a whiskey sour between his hands.

"Y'know, Smith, this—trip of yours has me scared green," he said abruptly.

Smith gave him a gently questioning glance.

"Oh, I don't know why," Holiday went on. "I just wonder about it. . . . This is Norstein's line, not mine, and I've

said so many hard things about synthesists I'm going to respect a fellow specialist's competence to keep the record straight. But—what are we expecting to happen?" He raised his eyes to Norstein.

"You want to increase the available memory capacity of a synthesist, and that's all. But supposing it isn't all. Say for the sake of an extreme example Smith here gets superman intelligence out of this—fourth power we're giving him."

"Superman is still man," said Norstein offhandedly. "I remember beating that one out a hundred times in college. What have you in mind? That Smith will see the solution to the world's problems in one blinding flash of insight, and stop at nothing to set them right?"

Holiday hesitated. "Oversimplifying, I'd say—yes."

Norstein glanced at Wheelwell. "And you?"

Wheelwell spread his hands. "I'm a research administrator; I've learned I'm better at that than at speculative research itself. My job is to tell the staff committee what they can have—after they've told me what they want. But"—and he felt a note of anxiety creep into his voice—"I saw your experimental animals. I think Smith is going to be very unhappy."

There! He had said it. It was too late—but before, it would have carried no weight. Why had he bothered to say it at all? To have the satisfaction of Cassandra and see his gloomy forebodings come to pass, maybe.

He looked at Smith, who was sipping his drink slowly and without taking his glass away from his lips. He waited for a comment.

"There's one point to be considered," Smith said thoughtfully after a pause. "The experimental animals didn't know what was being done to them—how could you explain the Holiday Effect to a cat? I do; I'm at least prepared for *something* to happen. And according to our best-informed guesses, that something will take the form of an increment of memory." He set aside his empty glass after swigging the last drop.

"And I've always got my kicks out of my memory. I recall in school I used to bother people by repeating word for word something they'd said months previous. They used to

send for me to settle arguments, you know? Where I'd been a witness of what happened. I used to be prompter when they put on plays in college—I read the play a couple of times and that was it. Never worried with a text.”

He shrugged. “I expect to enjoy myself in much the same way as I did when I was a kid and first found out what I could do in the way of tricks like that. No, I don't think I'm going to be unhappy.”

Wheelwell debated for a moment whether he ought to utter the next remark he planned; then he thought, *What the hell?* Dr. Norstein,” he said, “how about the—the other functions which tie up neuron connections?”

“Oh, they'll tie up a certain number of the connections we make available now. The same percentage, probably. I've told Smith already that this may make him physically more efficient—we're going to rely on him to win the gold medals at the next Olympics.” He grinned. Smith gave a tired smile in appreciation.

“I'd like another drink,” he said. Norstein nodded.

“But make two your limit, will you? The new connections are probably stamping themselves already; we don't want a significant number of them fouled up with alcoholic overtones.”

Smith nodded and went and got himself the second ration; this one he husbanded carefully. “Mescaline would be interesting,” he said wistfully, and Norstein shot him a sharp look.

“Why?”

“Oh—because the nature of reality is still a metaphysical speculation even if our method of perceiving whatever this reality is has been pretty well hammered out. A hallucinogen on top of the Holiday Effect ought to produce some crazy kinks in one's mental space-time.”

That's it.

Wheelwell glanced round involuntarily, half expecting to see someone standing behind him with a feather, brushing the back of his neck. Only it hadn't been the back of his neck—it had felt more as though it was his bare brain. He lost the next part of the discussion in concentrated analysis of that unheard remark.

That's it. *That's what?* he demanded angrily of himself and then spelled out the reply. That was what had been worrying him: not something he could formulate precisely, for it would have taken a philosopher to convert it into accurate terms, but an intuition, a—a smell, as Smith would call it.

When does a change of magnitude become a change of nature? Often; many cyberneticists had used analogy to argue that consciousness, self-awareness, was not a unique and special characteristic of human intelligence but an automatic by-product of complexity. Somewhere between *here*, they promised with one hand on an ordinary desk computer, and *there*, with a wave in the future direction of a planetoid-sized super-robot, we'll pass the limit and the miracle will happen. No miracle. Just an inescapable consequence.

The change of nature between the cats, to whom one could not explain the Holiday Effect, and the man, who understood it pretty well, was probably on a level an inch or two above the apes. Maybe they should have waited a little longer; maybe they should have attempted to communicate with the apes that had been treated. . . .

Wheelwell remembered the unpleasant feeling he had had on looking at the experimental animals. The treatment hadn't made them *more* cat, *more* ape. It had made them different.

What's different from a man, and everything else that ever was? He didn't know. He only hoped it wasn't going to be called Smith.

He carried the queasy disturbed feeling away with him when he left the lab and went on home.

At first he found himself calling Norstein every couple of hours, until Norstein had a fit of irritability and slammed the phone down. After that, he confined himself to daily inquiries. There was nothing to justify even that frequent an interrogation.

For some while Smith behaved just as anyone would, left to do nothing in a comfortable apartment. He read voluminously—but then, Norstein remarked, he'd been doing that since he was five years old. Sometimes he played records or watched the TV. He wrote several letters to friends. Each

day he underwent a thorough check of his physical condition and an exhaustive series of EEG readings. No change.

After a week he decided he wanted to learn to play the guitar; he spent four days doggedly fumbling his way through a series of exercises and then began to pick out tunes by ear. Norstein was jubilant when Wheelwell called him after this innovation.

"I tell you, there just wasn't room in that boy's memory for the auditory and kinesthetic information involved in playing an instrument. Damn it, I cleaned out hunks of his brain myself to make extra room. And so far as we can determine, he hasn't forgotten anything he knew previously. This indicates that the treatment took. Tell Holiday, will you?"

"Certainly. Look, would you mind if I came down and called on Smith this evening?" Wheelwell wondered what the answer might be; he was vaguely surprised when it came.

"An excellent idea. We'll invite ourselves to have dinner with him, how about that?"

"Perfect," said Wheelwell mechanically. "About seven?"

Norstein met him in the outer lab, shaking his head with a look of wonder on his face. "He decided to add another field to his scope," he said. "So he read *The Golden Bough* and the whole of Margaret Mead's published work. He said he'd have a good grounding in anthropology by the beginning of next week; it interests him. I'm telling you here and now, Wheelwell: by the time Smith gets through, we'll have to invent a new word for him. 'Synthesist' just won't be adequate."

"What's different from a man, and everything else that ever was?" said Wheelwell under his breath, and Norstein blinked at him in puzzlement. "I'm sorry. He knows we're coming?"

"Of course." Norstein threw open the door to the presidential suite, and a blast of music hit them—a guitar recording turned up to maximum volume. Smith was sitting beside the record player with his head bowed over a book; he didn't glance round as they entered.

"Make yourselves comfortable," he said—or rather shouted above the tremendous noise of guitar. "Help yourselves to drinks. The food will be here soon. Excuse me going on with this. I've nearly"—he turned a page—"finished it."

Wheelwell lowered himself into a chair. "This is new!" he said in low tones to Norstein.

"What? This lack of courtesy in receiving us?"

"No. You—you mean you haven't noticed?" Wheelwell gestured at Smith, and Norstein turned to look.

About four bars before the record ran off into its playout groove, Smith had placed his book open on the table in front of him; as the music finished he lifted the lid of the record player with one hand, turned the record over—it wasn't an auto-coupling—and lowered the stylus; turned the page of his book; lowered the lid of the player; and picked up the book again without having taken his eyes off it.

"I don't see what's troubling you," Norstein frowned. "I often read and listen to music at the same time."

Wheelwell was aware that he was trembling slightly. He raised his voice. "Smith! What key's this piece in?"

Smith didn't look up. "E major, mostly—he just modulated into A but he's cycling back."

"And how's he doing that?"

"Added seventh—D—D seventh with added ninth—F sharp—minor—major again—enharmonic assumption of the G flat—D flat—enharmonic again, treating it as C sharp. Experimental. Rather interesting. He gets off the C sharp neatly with ascending arpeggios." Smith sounded very casual. His eyes remained fixed on his book; he had turned two pages while speaking.

The ascending arpeggios were arriving as Wheelwell turned to Norstein.

"And you still don't see what's troubling me?" he said in a pleading voice. But Norstein did see.

"It's eleven days now," he said thoughtfully. "He's been taking an interest in music for four. And now he can analyze harmonic structure by ear without interrupting his reading and talk at the same time. He has a book on harmony which came with the teach-yourself-guitar record." Norstein

knew that didn't explain anything. He sat back in his chair.

"Well, parallel mental processes are nothing new."

"Maybe not," grunted Wheelwell. "But all the cases I've ever heard of suffered from some sort of compensatory disadvantage. They couldn't do two things *brilliantly* at the same time. Why not run a few checks on Smith in the morning and find out what he can do simultaneously?"

The waiter from the Foundation canteen knocked and brought their dinner. Through it they talked of miscellanea; Smith seemed to notice nothing wrong, but Wheelwell kept finding himself with his eyes on his plate, saying nothing, thinking over and over again: *what's different from a man. . . ?*

Holiday happened to be in Wheelwell's office the next morning when Norstein called to describe the results of the tests he had just run. Wheelwell gestured for Holiday's attention as he hung the phone on the amplifier.

"I think you ought to hear this," he suggested. "Go ahead, Norstein."

Norstein seemed to be choosing his words with care. "It isn't that he can do anything very spectacularly well," he began. "After all, Smith's had a reading speed of two thousand a minute since before we got hold of him, and he's always had a phenomenal memory. It's what he can do. . . ."

The voice tailed away.

"All at once?" Wheelwell prompted gently.

"Right. Now for instance, we gave him a math problem or two to work out in his head. Slow ones. And handed him a copy of a poem to memorize. Asked him for the solutions to the problems and took the book away. He'd memorized the poem while he was doing his calculations."

Holiday was leaning forward with tense interest.

"So we asked him to write a—an essay on nothing in particular, read aloud to him while he was writing, and showed him a series of tachistoscope images at the same time. Didn't faze him; he reeled off the sequence of images, recited what had been read to him, *and* turned out quite an interesting essay. I'm going half out of my mind trying to think of *four* things we could ask him to do at once."

"Does he himself seem to realize anything's different?"

"Well, of course he does. But all these tests we're giving him are ones he's run before, or something like. Only we pile them up three at a time now. I've got three assistants putting him through a treble IQ test—verbal, read aloud; visual, presented on a screen; and mathematical, memorized in advance. I've got a pretty good idea what it's going to show."

"What?"

Wheelwell thought absently that he didn't remember saying that; then he realized it was Holiday who had spoken. The physicist was clamping down on the stem of his pipe with his lips drawn back in a near snarl.

"Smith is going to check out on all three tests just about as well as he would have done previously—if he'd taken them in sequence instead of all together." Norstein's voice revealed nervousness. "It's not an increment of IQ in the strict sense. It's—a talent. Where's he going to go from here? Not *up*, I imagine. More sort of—outwards."

The connection broke with a click, and Wheelwell hung up his own phone. "Well?" he said to Holiday. "What do you make of that?"

Frowning, the physicist debated his answer. "It seems like a logical result," he mused. "It's Norstein's field, not mine—but I'd say if I'd been asked, that would have been a possibility I'd have thrown out." He sucked loudly at his pipe, found it had gone out, and pocketed it.

"You know something? He scares me."

"Who? Norstein?"

"No, Smith, of course. I think that's why all we specialists detest synthesists. At bottom, we're jealous, because we know they're hand-picked, the cream of the genius crop, and yet we wouldn't change places with them because of the treatment they get from specialists. We're grateful to them, and at the same time we regard them as a damned nuisance. They make us feel inadequate. And telling ourselves that a world full of synthesists wouldn't make much headway doesn't help."

Wheelwell felt as though a great event had taken place; for the first time he found himself on an open footing with this able and erratic young researcher. Trying to preserve

the mood, he said thoughtfully, "That's a good reason for the dislike. But you said he scared you?" He tried not to make his tone too questioning—just a lift of the voice.

"Why not?" Holiday tipped back his chair and stared through the window. "Hell, he's been trained to be a walking volume from an encyclopaedia—and a *talking* volume. And somewhere in the course of development, he's lost 90 percent of what made him human, already. Take the insane courage with which he faced the treatment Norstein gave him; I didn't see a quiver of an eyelid before he went under, did you? Only—we've met synthesists before. We know what they're for; we know why they have their character so carefully ironed out, to avoid scraping the raw patch which we specialists already have for them. We can accept this. But when he's through growing, Smith's not just going to be a— a more of a synthesist. He'll be something else. And because he started off a lot less than human, it scares me."

He shoved his hands into the side pockets of his jacket and scowled at Wheelwell as though challenging him to produce a contradiction.

"I noticed his calmness," Wheelwell agreed. "It could've been due to the fact that he had such an encyclopaedic knowledge, you know. I mean, there are two reasons for not being scared in face of danger: one is to be too stupid to recognize that it's dangerous, and the other is to be clever enough to determine the limits within which it is dangerous. Only—"

"Only what?" prompted Holiday. Wheelwell gave a nervous laugh.

"Your choice of words, when you said Smith wasn't going to be more of a synthesist. I'd already thought, looking at the experimental animals, that they didn't seem to have got to be more monkey or more cat."

"Just something altogether different," agreed Holiday. He gave a diffident smile. "What does Norstein think of all this?"

Norstein opened the door of the office at that instant and threw a pile of papers on Wheelwell's desk before sitting down—or rather, throwing himself down in a chair. "Look at it, will you!" he demanded.

Wheelwell obeyed, and then raised his eyes. "I'm afraid

some of your codings—" he ventured, and Norstein snorted.

"All right. What it amounts to is this: Smith's IQ as measured by each of those tests is normal—within his usual range of variation. As I said it would be. We had him under the EEG for the last one; I wanted to see if I could find where it was coming from."

"It?"

"The ability to do them simultaneously. Well, we didn't find any extra activity in the regions where we'd expected it. The talent is entirely due to the Holiday Effect—he's using nonspatial neuron connections in his new memory codings. *But*"—and he hunched himself forward to glare around impressively—"we found activity in the Organ of Shield. The one that hooks on to the progress of time. Three separate zones of activity. Do I have to tell you what that means?"

Wheelwell glanced at Holiday. "Please," he requested.

"Why, it means that so far as Smith's ego—his I-persona—is concerned, he's not doing these three tests simultaneously. He's doing them *one by one*, as he always has in the past, and consequently getting the same results. *He's* doing them in sequence while we're giving them to him together."

Holiday was looking faint. He said, "Ridiculous!"

"Of course it's ridiculous! And the man doesn't even know he's doing it!"

"Doesn't he notice that the—the environment for each of the three tests includes the other two?" ventured Wheelwell.

"He must do, but he wouldn't question the fact, and I've got no mind at the moment to point it out to him." Norstein was sweating visibly; he wiped his forehead with a handkerchief before going on.

"He's got the one memory, of course, for the three tests; but that's after they're over. While they're in progress, he switches his attention from one to the other *only* at the end of each. In other words—"

"He's got time travel," said Holiday bluntly. "I wish him joy of it."

Norstein was taken aback, and then his face slowly went putty-coloured. "Why, I suppose he has, mentally," he whispered.

Wheelwell felt he was in a fog. He said, "Let's get this straight. He does Test A straight through, goes back and does Test B, and then Test C. How? Does his memory include Test A when he's doing Test B, for instance?"

"Oh, yes. He did the calculations first, he told me. *He* doesn't know how he does it. He probably couldn't explain it to us if he did."

"And this applies generally? Like last night he listened to those guitar records before, or after, he read that book?"

"Why not?" Norstein had not put his handkerchief away; he was torturing it between his fingers. "What's memory, anyway? A perfect memory of an event can be induced by artificially stimulating the brain—sights, sounds, all the sensory information is there in the brain. The way Smith is heading, he soon ought to be able to do this for himself. A memory will present itself to him, and he'll be back in the middle of it. He'll remember that he's remembering. But if he ever forgets that. . ."

"I've got a horrible thought," said Wheelwell. The phrase was literally exact enough; he wished he could have made it stronger. "Reality—we were talking about reality, remember? The first day, with Smith? It suddenly strikes me: take an example; a statuette would be a good one. It's got a reality a monkey would recognize; it's a lump of stone, or wood. It's got another quality a man would notice. It's been deliberately shaped. A Bushman would notice something else, too; owing to its human form, it has magical possibilities. And you and I might see still more—that it was a good likeness or that it was ugly. What's that a matter of?"

"Memory. Environment. The experience of a Bushman includes statuettes used for ritual magic; ours includes museums and *objets d'art*." Norstein's voice was very cold suddenly. He stopped wringing his handkerchief.

"What's Smith's experience going to include?" asked Holiday.

There was no answer.

For the next few days Wheelwell could not bring himself to go down and call on Smith. The memory of that conversation was too strong for him. At length, however, he

braced himself with a repetition of Norstein's offhand remark—"Superman is still man!"—and went down to the laboratory. He found Norstein there sitting at a table and poring over reports.

"Good God, Norstein!" he said when the other raised his eyes. "You look as if you haven't slept for a week!"

"It's only three nights," Norstein answered hoarsely. "I'm not as bad as I look." He pushed back his chair and made a gesture with his thumb to indicate the door of the presidential suite.

"Know what he's doing now?"

Wheelwell shook his head dumbly.

"He's asleep, reading a volume of Malinowski, watching TV and listening to a Segovia album, practicing one of Segovia's transcriptions of Bach, and writing a short article on—on I forget what. And maybe by this time it's something else, too."

"What?" Wheelwell reviewed what Norstein had said and came to a conclusion. "For one thing, you can't write and play a guitar simultaneously. You need two hands for the guitar—he hasn't grown an extra arm?" he interrupted himself, half expecting that Norstein might nod.

"Go and take a look, if you like, and come back and tell me how he does it," was Norstein's reply. "I can't stand it any longer. I've been watching. Or trying to watch."

Puzzled, Wheelwell hesitated. "Go ahead," Norstein insisted. "He won't bother you. He doesn't talk much to anybody since the day before yesterday."

He buried his face in his hands and added, as though that was the last word on the subject, "Anyway, he's asleep."

Wheelwell advanced with the air of a man walking the plank and thrust open the door into the presidential suite. He blinked. There was something wrong with his eyes, obviously; so he concentrated for a moment on his ears and identified a commentator on TV reviewing the day's news, the sound of a guitar, which came from the record player, and the sound of another, which didn't. He turned towards the second guitar.

Smith was playing it, with every evidence of careful concentration. How the electric typewriter failed to get in the

way while he listened to the record and watched the TV, Wheelwell could almost make out.

But not quite.

He put his hands over his eyes for a moment; the sensation of watching Smith was similar to looking at an early three-dimensional film without Polaroid glasses on. And a sleepy voice broke into his consciousness.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wheelwell! Sorry—have you been waiting long? I was just taking a nap."

Wheelwell looked up bravely. Smith was holding out his hand to be shaken while he played the guitar and typed his article and—

And Wheelwell went blindly out of the room and closed the door.

"What in God's name has happened?" he whispered. Norstein gave a harsh laugh.

"Why, isn't it obvious? The fact that he succeeded in doing the tests we gave him simultaneously suggested to him that he might do other things simultaneously. Only *he's* doing them one at a time. If there's a limit to the number he can manage, he'll be a hell of a synthesist, won't he? We can give him six degree courses all at once, and he'll pass them with honors."

Wheelwell gave Norstein a suspicious glance. "You'd better take a couple of tranquilizers and get to bed," he advised. "This is getting you down!"

Norstein let the tension seep out of him and sagged on his chair. He nodded. "Wouldn't it get you down? Sometimes I think I've got it—figured out how the process fits together. Then I realize he's interrupted himself for a moment—he starts doing something else, and usually two more things, and that makes it worse than it was before."

"Does he eat?"

"Oh yes. Only I've had to stop the canteen waiter from taking his food in. The first time he started on his lunch without stopping typing I had to have the waiter sent down to the hospital under sedation. That's the way we're all heading, I guess."

"But—I mean, what is it that one sees when one goes in? Is it Smith, or several Smiths, or what?"

Norstein picked up a pencil and began to doodle on the blank margin of a report card. "The nearest I can come to it is to say that we're seeing the process of construction of Smith's memories. In an hour's time he will have remembered typing for an hour, playing his guitar for an hour, listening to records for an hour, sleeping for an hour, and so on. He's *capable* of remembering all that new! But hell, he had to *do* it before he can remember it. And that's what we see when we look in."

He broke the point of the pencil and threw it aside. "We aren't equipped to understand the process. We can only make vague analogies. And I don't feel inclined to take the treatment with the Holiday Effect just to be able to comprehend Smith's actions. Here's an example which has been fogging me for a good hour. It's like one of those theological problems the medieval schoomen liked to muck about with.

"As I figure it, when he gets through playing guitar, his fingers are going to be sore. Likewise they'll be tired—more so from all the typing he's done. On the other hand, it doesn't make your fingers tired watching TV or sleeping. Well, are his fingers going to be tired and sore or not?"

Wheelwell tried to formulate an answer and gave up.

"You follow me, then," said Norstein after an adequate silence.

"How about today's tests? Did they show anything?"

"I haven't dared run any tests since this phase began. I was too afraid of bringing one Smith out into the lab and— and seeing another stay behind in the lounge." Norstein's tired eyes closed. "Maybe I should have done it and got it over with—I've seen it a thousand times in imagination."

"Well, what are we going to do? Just leave him to get on with it?"

"Maybe there's a limit." Norstein looked for a piece of paper among those in front of him. "I did some calculating. I think the number of nonspatial neuron connections available for this spendthrift acquisition of memories is going to be limited. I think. Assuming that, this phase can't last more than a year or two at its present level. But the level shows signs of increasing. And there's always the forgetting mecha-

nism." He looked at the paper he had found, and then closed his hand on it to crumple it into a ball.

"I think someone should study the characteristics of the space in that room," he remarked presently. "Maybe they're peculiar. I'm inclined to suspect that we'll find nothing; I mean, despite this fantastic behavior, Smith is probably still aging at exactly one day per day on the purely physical level. If only it didn't suffice him to sleep once at a time—!"

"Has he got a calendar?"

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

Wheelwell started to say something, and then corrected himself. "Of course—he gets the date off the TV. So that's no good. I was wondering whether the peculiar behavior he's remembering now would have penetrated if he compared the time elapsed since it started with the number of memories he's had crammed in." Wheelwell frowned. "Surely he *must* realize, sooner or later!"

"Maybe he has done," suggested Norstein. "Maybe he thinks it's an illusion; maybe he ascribes it to the Holiday Effect and doesn't query its physical consequences. He still thinks he's doing one thing at a time, most likely."

"Well, it can't go on. . . ." Wheelwell pulled himself back from a train of empty speculation. "I'll get Holiday down to check the characteristics of the space in the lab, if you like. Right away?"

Norstein got up. "Tomorrow will do. And tomorrow we can pluck up enough courage to get him out here in the lab for tests. Maybe"—he brightened—"maybe all of him will come."

Wheelwell brought the incredulous Holiday down with his equipment and assistant at nine the next morning. Norstein met them in the outer lab.

"There's a new development," he said. "I think you're going to be proved right, Wheelwell. I think Smith is unhappy. Something's troubling him—or rather, *one* of him."

"What do you mean?"

"He's been at it all night—reading four books and playing half a dozen records simultaneously." Norstein in-

terruted himself with a dry chuckle. "I'd give my right arm to know how that one was worked!"

"But—?" pressed Wheelwell.

"But he's also been sitting in the bedroom staring into space. If I'm any judge, that's the 'last' of him at this moment. Probably he's finally come around to the problem of why he can remember coexistent actions. I propose that we ask the one in the bedroom to come out for tests; that way we stand the best chance of identifying his latest persona. And while we're doing that, if you can stand the strain, Holiday, we'll ask you to run checks on the condition of the space in the outer lab and the lounge."

Holiday's assistant looked puzzled and said nothing. Holiday himself gave a curt nod and licked his lips.

They exchanged glances and lined up in order automatically, Norstein at the head, followed by Holiday, and then Wheelwell. Norstein opened the door into the lounge.

Smith was intently reading an article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; he was replacing a broken string on his guitar and looking for a more interesting program on TV; he was writing something on his typewriter, searching through the pile of records, and intently listening to some Bach, and one or two other things that Wheelwell tried to ignore. They waited as Norstein walked into the bedroom beyond, followed by Smith's astonished gaze. One of it.

Norstein turned back and swore under his breath. "No one in there," he said. He squinted painfully as he surveyed Smith. "Uh—Smith, which of you spent the night in there thinking?"

In the middle of reading the article in the encyclopaedia, of replacing the broken string, of changing TV stations, of typing a sentence, of turning over the records, of beating time to a phrase—and more—Smith's expression became very unhappy. For a timeless instant, Wheelwell had the impression that there was only one of him, although his eyes confirmed that he was actually in several different places.

Only he wasn't.

They spent twenty frantic minutes establishing beyond doubt that he hadn't been seen to leave the Foundation premises—any more than he had been seen to leave the room

where they were. Holiday's lab assistant threatened to break down in giggling hysterics; he shuttled her off upstairs, came back, and made a determined beeline for the liquor cabinet. The others copied his example, and it was not until they had felt the artificial comfort of the alcohol that Holiday glared belligerently at Norstein and demanded, "Well? What happened?"

"I don't know," said Norstein. "I can only guess."

"Well, guess ahead," said Wheelwell, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "Where *is* Smith?"

"About twenty or twenty-five minutes ago," said Norstein with owlish solemnity.

Wheelwell was about to say that that was no answer, when he realized that Holiday was nodding as though he completely understood. He held his tongue impatiently.

"Yes!" said the physicist. "I see what you mean. But—but hell! The conservation of energy! I mean, it can't just *stop!* Where did it go?"

Norstein pondered. "I'm no physicist, but I'll guess with enthusiasm. Where your millivolt currents go when you demonstrate your Effect."

"But they come back! If they *go* anywhere, which seems to me an anthropocentric way of putting it."

"I'm—a bit lost," ventured Wheelwell. Holiday ignored him.

"Wait a moment. I see where it could have gone. How about those half-dozen records he was playing all at the same time? That must have taken energy to—to distort the local space. Yes, that fits. Poor bastard!"

"*What happened to Smith?*" Wheelwell only realized he had shouted when the other two stared at him. He repeated the question in a lower tone. Norstein emptied his glass and put it down with an expression of nausea.

"If what I think happened, did," he said after a moment of silence, "then we deserve to have our throats cut. Only—it *was* unpredictable until it was too late. . . .

"I imagine that some time last night Smith finally began to consider the physical impossibility of what he clearly remembered doing. I imagine that at first he would have tried to find some sort of defensive armor in assuming that

it was all illusion. By this morning, he had quite possibly adjusted to this idea. But when I asked him *which* of him had spent the night worrying . . .

"You see, all the Smiths were one Smith; each and all of him remembered that night spent in cogitation, because it was in their common past. And—he lost the way forward."

"How do you mean?"

"Up till then, I suppose, he had managed to keep the relative order of his coexistent experiences straight. But at *any* given instant he remembered an instant before in which he had been doing half a dozen or more distinct things. Do you see? He lost the way out because he couldn't accept that my remark applied to any *one* of him, and equally he couldn't accept that there was *more* than one of him. Because there wasn't. And I was a fool."

"But he can't just have stopped!"

"In a four-dimensional continuum," said Holiday reflectively, "these nonspatial neuron connections of his, as you insist on calling them, would have served both to connect and store memory codes in the present and to provide a method of connecting them past to future. This accounts for his contemporaneous personalities; it also provided a source of energy for the physical realization of his acts. In other words, the energy which ought to be sustaining Smith here and now—in the shape of electrons, protons, neutrons, heat, and the rest—has been dissipated. Spent. Back there."

Wheelwell got to his feet violently. "You can't just sit there and talk about him as though he was a—a laboratory specimen! He was a human being!"

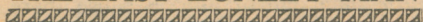
"Was," said Norstein glacially. "If you can think of anything we can do about it, let us know."

Wheelwell turned slowly round in the middle of the room, seeing the guitar, the records, the books, the typewriter. Somewhere at the back of his mind, a small voice was posing a question.

What's different from a man and everything else that ever was?

The other two stood up and set their glasses on the liquor cabinet. They glanced at him, and then at each other, and went out.

THE LAST LONELY MAN



WE ALL hope that our society is perfectible, whatever its political structure. We hope that those who inherit it from us will have made progress as we define the term; we look around and to our horror discover that our successors are beats, or mods and rockers, or *blousons noirs*, or *stil-yagi*.

The trouble seems to lie in the fact that perfect inhabitants of a perfect society would need to be the children of perfect parents. Even if one could invent a time machine and start tackling the problem in previous generations, however, it would still be necessary to chase clear back to Ugwug in 50,000 B.C.

To remove the fear of death, one of the greatest of human curses—would that not be progress? And yet . . . could it be done? You'd still be dealing with men, and men would not forget overnight a terror that has lain on our souls since the beginning of time.



"DON'T SEE you in here much any more, Mr. Hale," Geraghty said as he set my glass in front of me.

"Must be eighteen months," I said. "But my wife's out of

town and I thought I'd drop by for old times' sake." I looked down the long bar and round at the booths against the opposite wall, and added, "It looks as though you don't see anybody much any more. I never saw the place so empty at this time of evening. Will you have one?"

"Sparkling soda, if you please, Mr. Hale, and thank you very much." Geraghty got down a bottle and poured for himself. I never knew him to drink anything stronger than a beer, and that rarely.

"Things have changed," he went on after a pause. "You know what caused it, of course."

I shook my head.

"Contact, of course. Like it's changed everything else."

I started at him for a moment, and then I had to chuckle. I said, "Well, I knew it had hit a lot of things—like the churches in particular. But I wouldn't have thought it would affect you."

"Oh yes." He hoisted himself on a stool behind the bar; that was new since I used to come here regularly. Eighteen months ago he wouldn't have had the chance to sit down all evening long; he'd have been dead on his feet when the bar closed. "I figure it this way. Contact has made people more careful in some ways and less in others. But it's cut out a lot of reasons for going to bars and for drinking. You know how it used to be. A bartender was a sort of professional open ear, the guy to spill your troubles to. That didn't last long after Contact came in. I knew a tender-hearted bartender who went on being like that for a while after Contact. He got himself loaded to *here* with lonely guys—and gals, too." Geraghty laid his palm on the top of his head.

"Occupational risk!" I said.

"Not for long, though. It hit him one day what it would be like if they all came home to roost, so he went and had them all expunged and started over with people he chose himself, the way anyone else does. And round about then it all dried up. People don't come and spill their troubles any more. The need has mostly gone. And the other big reason for going to bars—chance company—that's faded out, too. Now that people know they don't have to be scared of the biggest lone-

liness of all, it makes them calm and mainly self-reliant. Me, I'm looking round for another trade. Bars are closing down all over."

"You'd make a good Contact consultant," I suggested, not more than half joking. He didn't take it as a joke, either.

"I've considered it," he said seriously. "I might just do that. I might just."

I looked around again. Now Geraghty had spelled it out for me, I could see how it must have happened. My own case, even if I hadn't realized it till now, was an illustration. I'd spilled troubles to bartenders in my time, gone to bars to escape loneliness. Contact had come in about three years ago; about two years ago it took fire and everyone but everyone lined up for the treatment; and a few months after that I quit coming here, where I'd formerly been as much of a fixture as the furniture. I'd thought nothing of it—put it down to being married and planning a family and spending money other ways.

But it wasn't for that. It was that the need had gone.

In the old style, there was a mirror mounted on the wall behind the bar, and in that mirror I could see some of the booths reflected. All were empty except one, and in that one was a couple. The man was nothing out of the ordinary, but the girl—no, woman—took my eye. She wasn't so young; she could be forty or so, but she had a certain something. A good figure helped, but most of it was in the face. She was thin, with a lively mouth, and laughter wrinkles round the eyes; and she was clearly enjoying whatever she was talking about. It was pleasant to watch her enjoying it. I kept my eyes on her while Geraghty held forth.

"Like I say, it makes people more careful and less careful. More careful about the way they treat others, because if they don't behave their own Contacts are liable to expunge them, and then where will they be? Less careful about the way they treat themselves, because they aren't scared much of dying any more. They know that if it happens quick, without pain, it'll just be a blur and then confusion and then picking up again and then melting into someone else. No sharp break, no stopping. Have you picked anyone up, Mr. Hale?"

"Matter of fact, I have," I said. "I picked up my father just about a year ago."

"And was it OK?"

"Oh, smooth as oil. Disconcerting for a while—like having an itch I couldn't scratch—but that passed in about two to three months and then he just blended in and there it was."

I thought about it for a moment. In particular, I thought about the peculiar sensation of being able to remember how I looked in my cradle, from outside, and things like that. But it was comforting as well as peculiar, and anyway there was never any doubt about whose memory it was. All the memories that came over when a Contact was completed had indefinable auras that labeled them and helped to keep the receiver's mind straight.

"And you?" I said.

Geraghty nodded. "Guy I knew in the army. Just a few weeks back he had a car smash. Poor guy lived for ten days with a busted back, going through hell. He was in poor shape when he came over. Pain—it was terrible!"

"Ought to write your congressman," I said. "Get this new bill through. Hear about it?"

"Which one?"

"Legalize mercy killing provided the guy has a valid Contact. Everyone has nowadays, so why not?"

Geraghty looked thoughtful. "Yes, I did hear about it. I wasn't happy about it. But since I picked up my buddy and got his memory of what happened—well, I guess I'm changing my mind. I'll do like you say."

We were quiet for a bit then, thinking about what Contact had done for the world. Geraghty had said he wasn't happy at first about this euthanasia bill—well, I and a lot of other people weren't sure about Contact at first, either. Then we saw what it could do and had a chance to think the matter out, and now I felt that I didn't understand how I'd gone through so much of my life without it. I just couldn't think myself back to a world where when you died you had to stop. It was horrible!

With Contact, that problem was solved. Dying became like a change of vehicle. You blurred, maybe blacked out, knowing you would come to, as it were, looking out of

somebody's eyes that you had Contact with. You wouldn't be in control any more, but he or she would have your memories, and for two or three months you'd ease around, fitting yourself to your new partner, and then bit by bit there'd be a shift of viewpoint, and finally a melting together, and *click*. No interruption; just a smooth painless process taking you on into another installment of life as someone who was neither you nor someone else, but a product of the two.

For the receiver, as I knew from experience, it was at worst uncomfortable, but for someone you were fond of you could take far more than discomfort.

Thinking of what life had been like before Contact, I found myself shuddering. I ordered another drink—a double this time. I hadn't been out drinking for a long while.

I'd been telling Geraghty the news for maybe an hour, and I was on my third or fourth drink, when the door of the bar opened and a guy came in. He was medium-sized, rather ordinary, fairly well-dressed, and I wouldn't have looked at him twice except for the expression on his face. He looked so angry and miserable I couldn't believe my eyes.

He went up to this booth where the couple were sitting—the one where the woman was that I'd been watching—and planted his feet on the ground facing them. All the attractive light went out of the woman's face, and the man with her got half to his feet as if in alarm.

"You know," Geraghty said softly, "that looks like trouble. I haven't had a row in this bar for more than a year, but I remember what one looks like when it's brewing."

He got up off his stool watchfully and moved down the bar so he could go through the gap in the counter if he had to.

I swiveled on my stool and caught some of the conversation. As far as I could hear, it was going like this.

"You expunged me, Mary!" the guy with the miserable face was saying. "*Did* you?"

"Now look here!" the other man cut in. "It's up to her whether she does or doesn't."

"You shut up," the newcomer said. "Well, Mary? *Did* you?"

"Yes, Mack, I did," she said. "Sam has nothing to do with it. It was entirely my idea—and your fault."

I couldn't see Mack's face, but his body sort of tightened up, shaking, and he put his arms out as though he was going to haul Mary out of her seat. Sam—I presumed Sam was the man in the booth—seized his arm, yelling at him.

That was where Geraghty came in, ordering them to quit where they were. They didn't like it, but they did, and Mary and Sam finished their drinks and went out of the bar, and Mack, after glaring after them, came up and took a stool next but one to mine.

"Rye," he said. "Gimme the bottle—I'll need it."

His voice was rasping and bitter, a tone I realized I hadn't heard in maybe months. I suppose I looked curious; anyway, he glanced at me and saw I was looking at him, and he spoke to me.

"Know what that was all about?"

I shrugged. "Lost your girl?" I suggested.

"Much worse than that—and she isn't so much a lost girl as a heartless she-devil." He tossed down the first of the rye that Geraghty had brought for him. I noticed that Geraghty had moved to the other end of the counter and was washing glasses. If he was out of the habit of listening to people's troubles, I wouldn't blame him, I thought.

"She didn't look that way," I said at random.

"No, she doesn't." He took another drink and then sat for a while with the empty glass between his hands, staring at it.

"I suppose you have Contacts," he said at last. It was a pretty odd question, and I answered it automatically out of sheer surprise.

"Well—yes, of course I have!"

"I haven't," he said. "Not now. Not any more. *Damn* that woman!"

I felt the nape of my neck prickle. If he was telling the truth—well, he was a kind of living ghost! Everyone I knew had at least one Contact; I had three. My wife and I had a mutual, of course, like all married couples; and as insurance against our being killed together in a car wreck or by some similar accident, I had an extra one with my kid

brother Joe and a third with a guy I'd known in college. At least, I was fairly sure I did; I hadn't heard from him in some months and he might perhaps have expunged me. I made a mental note to look him up and keep the friendship moving.

I studied this lonely guy. His name was Mack—I'd heard him called that. He was probably ten years older than I was, which made him in his middle forties—plenty old enough to have dozens of potential Contacts. There was nothing visibly wrong with him except this look of unspeakable misery he wore—and if he really had no Contacts at all, then I was surprised the look was of mere misery, not of terror.

"Did—uh—did Mary know that she was your only Contact?" I said.

"Oh, she knew. Of course. That's why she did it without telling me." Mack refilled his glass and held the bottle towards me. I was going to refuse, but if someone didn't keep the poor devil company, he'd probably empty the bottle himself and then maybe walk out staggering drunk and fall under a car and be done for. I really felt sorry for him. Anyone would have.

"How did you find out?"

"She—well, she went out tonight and I called at her place and someone said she'd gone out with Sam, and Sam generally brings her here. And there she was, and when I put it to her she confessed. I guess it was as well the bartender stepped in or I'd have lost control and maybe done something really serious to her."

I said, "Well—how come she's the only one? Have you no friends or anything?"

That opened the floodgates.

The poor guy—his full name was Mack Wilson—was an orphan brought up in a foundling home he hated; he had run away in his teens and was committed to reform school for some petty theft or other, and hated that, too, and by the time he got old enough to earn his living he was sour on the world, but he'd done his best to set himself straight, only to find that he'd missed learning how. Somewhere along the line he'd failed to get the knack of making friends.

When he'd told me the whole story, I felt he was truly piti-

able. When I contrasted his loneliness with my comfortable condition I was almost ashamed. Maybe the rye had a lot to do with it, but it didn't feel that way. I wanted to cry, and I hardly even felt foolish.

Round about ten or ten-thirty, when most of the bottle had gone, he slapped the counter and started to get down from his stool. He wobbled frighteningly. I caught hold of him, but he brushed me aside.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Home, I guess," he said hopelessly. "If I can make it. If I don't get run down by some lucky so-and-so who's careless what he hits because he's laughing, he has Contacts aplenty."

He was darned right—that was the trouble. I said, "Look, don't you think you should sober up first?"

"How in hell do you think I'll get to sleep if I'm not pickled?" he retorted. And he was probably right there, too. He went on, "You wouldn't know, I guess: what it's like to lie in bed, staring into the dark, without a Contact anywhere. It makes the whole world seem hateful and dark and hostile. . . ."

"Jesus!" I said, because that really hit me.

A sudden glimmer of hope came into his eyes. He said, "I don't suppose—no, it's not fair. You're a total stranger. Forget it."

I pressed him because it was good to see any trace of hope on *that* face. After a bit of hesitation, he came out with it.

"You wouldn't make a Contact with me, would you? Just to tide me over till I talk one of my friends round? I know guys at work I could maybe persuade. Just a few days, that's all."

"At this time of night?" I said. I wasn't sure I liked the idea; still, I'd have him on my conscience if I didn't fall in.

"They have all-night Contact service at Kennedy Airport," he said. "For people who want to make an extra one as insurance before going on a long flight. We could go there."

"It'll have to be a one-way, not a mutual," I said. "I don't have twenty-five bucks to spare."

"You'll do it?" He looked as though he couldn't believe his ears. Then he grabbed my hand and pumped it up and down, and settled his check and hustled me to the door and found a cab and we were on the way to the airport before I really knew what was happening.

The consultant at the airport tried to talk me into having a mutual; Mack had offered to pay for it. But I stood firm on that. I don't believe in people adding Contacts to their list when the others are real friends. If something were to happen to me, I felt, and somebody other than my wife or my brother or my long-time friend from college were to pick me up, I was certain they'd all three be very much hurt by it. So since there were quite a few customers waiting to make an extra Contact before flying to Europe, the consultant didn't try too hard.

It had always been a source of wonder to me that Contact was such a simple process. Three minutes' fiddling with the equipment; a minute or two to put the helmets properly on our heads; mere seconds for the scan to go to completion, during which the brain buzzed with fragments of memory dredged up from nowhere and presented like single movie frames to consciousness. . . and finished.

The consultant gave us the standard certificates and the warranty form—valid five years, recommended reinforcement owing to personality development, temporal-geographical factor, in the event of death instantaneous transfer, adjustment lapse, in the event of more than one Contact being extant some possibility of choice, and so on. And there it was.

I never had been able to make sense of the principle on which Contact worked. I knew it wasn't possible before the advent of printed-molecule electronics, which pushed the information capacity of computers up to the level of the human brain and beyond. I knew vaguely that in the first place they had been trying to achieve mechanical telepathy, and that they succeeded in finding means to scan the entire contents of a brain and transfer it to an electronic store. I knew also that telepathy didn't come, but immortality did.

What it came to, in lay terms, was this: only the advent of

death was enough of a shock to the personality to make it want to get up and go. Then it wanted but *desperately*. If at some recent time the personality had been as it were shown to someone else's mind, there was a place ready for it to go to.

At that point I lost touch with the explanations. So did practically everybody. Resonance came into it, and maybe the receiver's mind vibrated in sympathy with the mind of the person about to die; that was a fair picture, and the process worked, so what more could anyone ask?

I was later in coming out from under than he was; this was a one-way, and he was being scanned, which is quick, while I was being printed, which is slightly slower. When I came out he was trying to get something straight with the consultant, who wasn't interested, but he wouldn't be just pushed aside—he had to have his answer. He got it as I was emerging from under the helmet.

"No, there's no known effect. Sober or drunk, the process goes through!"

The point had never occurred to me before—whether liquor would foul up the accuracy of the Contact.

Thinking of the liquor reminded me that I'd drunk a great deal of rye and it was the first time I'd had more than a couple of beers in many months. For a little while I had a warm glow, partly from the alcohol, partly from the knowledge that thanks to me this last lonely man wasn't lonely any more.

Then I began to lose touch. I think it was because Mack had brought the last of the bottle along and insisted on our toasting our new friendship—or words like that. Anyway, I remember that he got the cab and told the hackie my address, and then it was next morning and he was sleeping on the couch in the rumpus room and the doorbell was going like an electric alarm.

I pieced these facts together a little afterwards. When I opened the door, it was Mary standing there. The woman who had expunged Mack the day before.

She came in quite politely, but with a determined expression which I couldn't resist in my morning-after state, and told me to sit down and took a chair herself.

She said, "Was it true what Mack told me on the phone?"

I looked vacant. I felt vacant.

Impatiently, she said, "About him making a Contact with you. He called me up at 2 A.M. and told me the whole story. I wanted to throw the phone out the window, but I hung on and got your name out of him and some of your address and the rest from the phone book. Because I wouldn't want anybody to have Mack wished on him. Not anybody."

By this time I was starting to connect. But I didn't have much to say. I let her get on with it.

"I once read a story," she said. "I don't remember who by. Perhaps you've read it, too. About a man who saved another man from drowning. And the guy was grateful—gave him presents, tried to do him favors, said he was his only friend in all the world, dogged his footsteps, moved into his home—and finally the guy who'd saved him couldn't stand it any longer and took him and pushed him back in the river. That's Mack Wilson. That's why Mack Wilson has been expunged by everybody he's conned into making a Contact with him in the past two mortal years. I stood it for going on three months, and that's about the record, as I understand it."

There was a click, a door opening, and there was Mack in shirt and pants, roused from his sleep in the rumpus room by the sound of Mary's voice. She got in first. She said, "You see? He's started already."

"You!" Mack said. "Haven't you done enough?" And he turned to me. "She isn't satisfied with expunging me and leaving me without a Contact in the world. She has to come here and try to talk you into doing the same! Can you imagine anybody hating me like that?"

On the last word his voice broke, and I saw that there were real tears in his eyes.

I put my muddled mind together and found something to say.

"Look," I said, "all I did this for was just that I don't think anyone should have to go without a Contact nowadays. All I did it for was to tide Mack over." I was mainly talking to Mary. "I drank too much last night and he brought me home, and that's why he's here this morning. I don't care

who he is or what he's done—I have Contacts myself; I don't know what I'd do if I didn't, and until Mack fixes up something maybe with somebody where he works I'll go bail for him. That's all."

"That's the way it started with me," Mary said. "Then he moved into my apartment. Then he started following me on the street to make sure nothing happened to me. He said."

"Where would I have been if something had?" Mack protested.

Just then I caught sight of the clock on the wall and saw it was noon. I jumped up.

"Jesus!" I said. "My wife and kids get back at four, and I promised to clear the apartment up while they were away."

"I'll give you a hand," Mack said. "I owe you that, at least."

Mary got to her feet. She was looking at me with a hopeless expression. "Don't say you weren't warned," she said.

So she was right. So Mack was very helpful. He was better around the house than a lot of women I've known, and though it took right up until my wife got home with the children, the job was perfect. Even my wife was impressed. So since it was getting on towards the evening she insisted on Mack staying for supper with us, and he went and got some beer and over it he told my wife the spot that he'd been put in, and then at around nine or half past he said he wanted an early night because of work tomorrow, and went home.

Which seemed great under the circumstances. I dismissed what Mary had said as the bitterness of a disappointed woman and felt sorry for her. She hadn't looked the type to be so bitter when I first saw her the evening before.

It was about three or four days later that I began to catch on. There was this new craze for going to see pre-Contact movies, and though I didn't feel myself I was apt to get a bang out of watching soldiers and gunmen kill each other without Contact to look forward to, my wife had been told by all her friends that she oughtn't to miss out on this eerie thrill.

Only there was the problem of the kids. We couldn't take

eleven-month twins along, very well. And we'd lost our regular sitter, and when we checked up there just didn't seem to be anyone on hand.

I tried to talk her into going alone, but she didn't like the idea. I'd noticed that she'd given up watching pre-Contact programs on TV, so that was of a piece.

So we'd decided to scrap the idea, though I knew she was disappointed, until Mack called, heard the problem, and at once offered to sit in.

Great, we thought. He seemed willing, competent, and even eager to do us the favour, and we had no worries about going out. The kids were fast asleep before we left.

We left the car and started to walk round to the movie house. It was getting dark, and it was chilly, so we hurried along although we had plenty of time before the start of the second feature.

Suddenly my wife glanced round and stopped dead in her tracks. A man and a boy following close behind bumped into her, and I had to apologize and when they'd gone on asked what on earth was the trouble.

"I thought I saw Mack following us," she said. "Funny. . ."

"Very funny," I agreed. "Where?" I looked along the sidewalk, but there were a lot of people, including several who were dressed and built similarly to Mack. I pointed this out, and she agreed that she'd probably been mistaken. I couldn't get her to go beyond *probably*.

The rest of our walk to the movie was a kind of sidelong hobble, because she kept staring behind her. It got embarrassing after a while, and suddenly I thought I understood why she was doing it.

I said, "You're not really looking forward to this, are you?"

"What do you mean?" she said, injured. "I've been looking forward to it all week."

"You can't really be," I argued. "Your subconscious is playing tricks on you—making you think you see Mack, so that you'll have an excuse to go back home instead of seeing the movies. If you're only here because of your *kaffeeklatsch* friends who've talked you into the idea and you don't actually think you'll enjoy it, let's go."

I saw from her expression I was at least half right. But

she shook her head. "Don't be silly," she said. "Mack would think it was awfully funny, wouldn't he, if we came right home? He might think we didn't trust him or something."

So we went in, and we sat through the second feature and were duly reminded of what life was like—and worse, what death was like—in those distant days a few years ago when Contact didn't exist. When the lights went up briefly between the two pictures, I turned to my wife.

"I must say—" I began, and broke off short, staring.

He *was* there, right across the aisle from us. I knew it was Mack, not just someone who looked like Mack, because of the way he was trying to duck down into his collar and prevent me from recognizing him. I pointed, and my wife's face went absolutely chalk white.

We started to get to our feet. He saw us and ran.

I caught him halfway down the block, grabbing his arm and spinning him round, and I said, "What in hell is this all about? This is just about the dirtiest trick that anyone ever played on me!"

If anything happened to those kids, of course, that was the end. You couldn't make a Contact for a child till past the age of reading, at the earliest.

And he had the gall to try and argue with me. To make excuses for himself. He said something like, "I'm sorry, but I got so worried I couldn't stand it any longer. I made sure everything was all right, and I only meant to be out for a little while, and—"

My wife had caught up by now, and she turned it on. I never suspected before that she knew so many dirty words, but she did, and she used them, and she finished up by slapping him across the face with her purse before leading me into a dash for the car. All the way home she was telling me what an idiot I'd been to get tangled up with Mack, and I was saying what was perfectly true—that I did the guy a favour because I didn't think anyone should have to be lonely and without a Contact any more—but true or not it sounded hollow.

The most terrifying sound I ever heard was the noise of those two kids squalling as we came in. But nothing was

wrong with either of them except they were lonely and miserable, and we comforted them and made a fuss over them till they quieted down.

The outside door opened while we were breathing sighs of relief, and there he was again. Of course, we'd left him a key to the door while we were out, in case he had to step round the corner or anything. Well, a few minutes is one thing—but tracking us to the movie house and then sitting through the show was another altogether.

I was practically speechless when I saw who it was. I let him get the first few words in because of that. He said, "Please, you must understand! All I wanted was to make sure nothing happened to you! Suppose you'd had a crash on the way to the movie, and I didn't know—where would I be then? I sat here and worried about it till I just couldn't stand any more, and all I meant to do was make sure you were safe, but when I got down to the movie house I got worried about your coming home safe and—"

I still hadn't found any words because I was so blind angry. So, since I couldn't take any more, I wound up and let him have it on the chin. He went halfway backwards through the open door behind him, catching at the jamb to stop himself falling, and his face screwed up like a mommy's darling who's got in a game too rough for him, and he started to snivel.

"Don't drive me away!" he moaned. "You're the only friend I have in the world! Don't drive me away!"

"Friend!" I said. "After what you did this evening I wouldn't call you my friend if you were the last guy on earth! I did you a favour, and you've paid it back exactly the way your friend Mary said you would. Get the hell *out* of here and don't try to come back, and first thing in the morning I'm going to stop by at a Contact agency and have you expunged!"

"No!" he shrieked. I never thought a man could scream like that—as though red-hot irons had been put against his face. "No! You can't do that! It's inhuman! It's—"

I grabbed hold of him and twisted the key out of his fingers, and for all he tried to cling to me and went on blub-

bering, I pushed him out of the door and slammed it in his face.

That night I couldn't sleep. I lay tossing and turning, staring up into the darkness. After half an hour of this, I heard my wife sit up in the other bed.

"What's the trouble, honey?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I guess maybe I feel ashamed of myself for kicking Mack out the way I did."

"Nonsense!" she said sharply. "You're too soft-hearted. You couldn't have done anything else. Lonely or not lonely, he played a disgusting, wicked trick on us—leaving the twins alone like that after he'd promised! You didn't promise him anything. You said you were doing him a favor. You couldn't know what sort of a person he'd turn out to be. Now you relax and go to sleep. I'm going to wake you early and make sure of getting you to a Contact agency before you go in to work."

At that precise moment, as though he'd been listening, I picked him up.

I could never describe—not if I tried for twenty lifetimes—the slimy, underhand, snively triumph that was in his mind when it happened. I couldn't convey the sensation of "Yah, tricked you again!" Or the undertone of "You treated me badly, see how badly I can treat you."

I think I screamed a few times when I realized what had happened. Of course. He'd conned me into making a Contact with him, just as he'd done to a lot of other people before—only they'd seen through him in good time and expunged without telling him, so that when he found out, it was too late to cheat on the deal the way he'd cheated me.

I'd told him I was going to expunge him in the morning—that's a unilateral decision, as they call it, and there wasn't a thing he could do to stop me. Something in my voice must have shown that I really meant it. Because, though he couldn't stop me, he could forestall me, and he'd done exactly that.

He'd shot himself in the heart.

I went on hoping for a little while. I fought the nastiness that had come into my mind—sent my wife and kids off to her parents again over the weekend—and tried to sweat it out by myself. I didn't make it. I was preoccupied for a while finding out exactly how many lies Mack had told me—about his reform school, his time in jail, his undiscovered thefts, and shabby tricks played on people he called friends, like the one he'd played on me—but then it snapped, and I had to go and call up my father-in-law and find out if my wife had arrived yet, and she hadn't, and I chewed my nails to the knuckles and called up my old friend Hank who said hullo, yes of course I still have your Contact you old so-and-so and how are you and say I may be flying up to New York next weekend—

I was *horrified*. I couldn't help it. I guess he thought I was crazy, or at any rate idiotically rude, when I tried to talk him out of flying up, and we had a first-rate argument which practically finished with him saying he'd expunge the Contact if that was the way I was going to talk to an old pal.

Then I panicked and had to call my kid brother Joe, and he wasn't home—gone somewhere for the weekend, *my* part of my mind told me, and nothing to worry about. But Mack's part of my mind said he was probably dead and my old friend was going to desert me and pretty soon I wouldn't have a Contact at all and then I'd be permanently dead and how about that movie last night with people being killed and having no Contacts at all?

So I called my father-in-law again and yes my wife and the twins were there now and they were going on the lake in a boat belonging to a friend and I was appalled and tried to say that it was too dangerous and don't let them and I'd come up myself and hold them back if I had to and—

It hasn't stopped. It's been quite a time blending Mack in with the rest of me; I hoped and hoped that when the *click* came things would be better. But they're worse.

Worse?

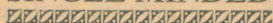
Well—I can't be sure about that. I mean, it's true that until now I was taking the most appalling risks. Like going

out to work all day and leaving my wife at home alone—why, anything might have happened to her! And not seeing Hank for months on end. And not checking with Joe every chance I got, so that if he was killed I could have time to fix up another Contact to take his place.

It's safer now, though. Now I have this gun, and I don't go out to work, and I don't let my wife out of my sight at all, and we're going to drive very carefully down to Joe's place and stop him doing foolish things, too, and when I've got him lined up we'll go to Hank's and prevent him from making that insanely risky flight to New York and then maybe things will be OK.

The thing that worries me, though, is that I'll have to go to sleep some time, and—what if something happens to them all when I'm asleep?

SINGLE-MINDED



ESSENTIALLY THIS is the objective working out of a theme which I have also treated from a subjective standpoint in a story called "Protect Me from My Friends."

To be able to read other people's minds . . . a wonderful dream! Think of the intimacy of communication this would make possible; think of the advantages of gaining insight into the mental processes of an Einstein or a Shakespeare, without the blurring intervention of crude words!

Well, all right. Think about those things. But think also of the fact that there are some three thousand million of us now, and all of us to some extent are neurotic, greedy, selfish, jealous, sadistic, quarrelsome, and *busy*.

We don't even like people who talk all the time. But people think all the time—even though some of us appear never to think at all. Would the gift perhaps be more like the advantage of sight in Wells's "Country of the Blind?"



THE SHIP went down, staggering on a lopsided stilt of fire, among the rugged foothills of the lunar Urals. Despite the terrifying brilliance of the bands crossing the exhaust—which

showed that the cause of the trouble was a resonance instability apt to shake the entire vessel to bits like blows from a vast hammer—the engines went on firing after a fashion till one of the landing legs touched on an outcropping rock and tipped the ship over.

It crunched like an eggshell and the engines died, leaving its pilot stranded but alive.

Not that that made much difference. He had about twelve hours' oxygen in his suit tanks and a liter of fortified liquid in his nutriment reserve. But he was lost, he was some hundreds of kilometers from the nearest American base, and he was not even sure that he had been watched down by the radar there.

For a while he occupied himself with petty things—salvaging what instruments had survived the crash, hunting for any oxybottles not broken open in the crash, soaking inflammable material in the fast-drying liquid from the hydraulic shock absorbers in the hope that he could fire a beacon when someone came to look for him. He considered climbing a nearby peak to set up a radio and try to beam a line-of-sight signal, but had to concede that even if he got up far enough for the extra height to be useful he would use more oxygen and might not have enough to get down again.

He could stay with the ship, and that was that.

Within an hour of the crash, he was learning that he was very much afraid to die.

Not ours

But all are (now as we are)

Others to rescue

No one else knows exactly where in thousands of square kilometers

Suffering follows awareness if we leave him

Agreed impossible but do what

Avoid contamination

There is the cured one (cured?)

Compulsion misliking constrained to act consent

He waited on the crest of a steep rock, able to see over the jagged local ground to the smoother-seeming plains

beyond. He was not well used to exposed lunar conditions, and the stark blacks and brilliant sunlit greys of the landscape were maddening; so also was the fact that if he did not move rather often his suit's heat-transfer devices overloaded and if his feet were in his own shadow they began to prickle with cold, while his shoulders and scalp perspired.

He did not mind loneliness very much—he would never have been entrusted with single-handed lunar ferry flights if he had shown any sign of breaking down from mere isolation—but once the extra factor of approaching death entered his mind, he found it gnawing at him, rat-wise.

To die so much alone, with not even a sight of earth to comfort him—that was the intolerable part of it. He could die when he chose or when he had to: crack the suit or wait for the oxygen meters to hit zero. But he had to die.

Four hours of waiting, then five, then six, and he was beginning to break. He could feel himself going, like a piece of fatigued steel; he knew he must not, should rather endure to the eleventh hour and beyond, and yet his control slipped away until he began to whimper involuntarily.

Enough of that! He put his mind to singing and telling himself stories; to reminding himself of friends; to reassuring lies about the excellent chance of being spotted. But it was very difficult. Whenever he let his attention wander, he felt the black despair well up, encroach on him like tides eroding a cliff.

He had endured eight hours and was uncertain whether he would meet his inevitable end as a sane man or as a mindless broken *thing*, when he saw the stirring of dust across the plain which indicated the passage of a lunar tractor.

He imagined at first that he was deluding himself, but when he clambered down from his rock and fetched the telescope which some navy-minded bureaucrat had decreed be included in the emergency kit of the ship, he saw that the tractor was real. Moreover, it was headed directly for him; he could see few details owing to the reflection of the sun on its highly polished snout, but that in itself showed it was aimed for where he stood. If it had been traveling at an angle to him,

it would have been splashing up enough dust to hide its sides.

Nonetheless, thinking pure chance might have brought it in this direction, he hurried to fire his beacon. Turning on the tap of an oxybottle, he ignited a few scraps of what had been his acceleration couch and made a bright blaze until the bottle ran dry.

The tractor driver had seen him. Out of the blurring dust a brilliant light flashed—Morse letters forming the international reassurance sign, I-C-U.

He felt himself go limp with relief, and did not realize until some moments had passed that he was babbling happily and that if his suit radio had survived the crash he would have made the oncoming driver think he was rescuing a lunatic.

How close would the tractor be able to come? Between him and the comparatively level plain lay some three kilometers of irregular ground, creviced and hummocked, over which no tracked vehicle could pass at more than snail's pace. It would help greatly if he could make his way to the edge of the plain, he thought, and began to scramble forward, no longer needing to remain close to the conspicuous wreckage of the ship. At this range, the bright orange fabric of his suit would stand out against the darker rocks.

He was so occupied that he failed to notice when the tractor passed the edge of the plain and kept coming, over rocks and hummocks and crevasses, without slackening speed. Only when he paused before tackling a particularly difficult patch and looked up to see how far he had got did he realize that the tractor was not what he had assumed.

Out on the plain, of course, it had splashed dust up just as a tracked vehicle would have done. Now it was on hard ground he could see what he would have deduced anyway from its ability to tackle broken terrain. This wasn't a tractor from a Western base. This was a Russian "moon-walker," tramping on four padded feet exactly like a mechanical camel with an oyster perched on top, and its slab sides bore the Soviet red star.

A million crazy fears filled his mind. Automatically, as he struggled to digest the knowledge of his fate, he found his fingers leaping towards the cracking valve on his suit.

But for the long hours of waiting, in which he had found he was afraid of dying, he would have decompressed then and there and made the rescue journey useless.

Only he checked himself.

He could live.

He would live. And the hell with everything else. He was twenty-nine years old and that was too young to waste the chance.

The moon-walker stopped a hundred meters from him. Below the oysterlike pilot compartment a door in the slab side slid back, and the legs folded to bring the threshold to within a few inches of the ground. More than a little enviously, he stepped inside. The door gave into a small compartment that served as an air lock; it cycled quickly, and before he knew what was happening the floor was pressing against his feet. He was lifted up into the pilot compartment through another sliding panel in the ceiling of the lock.

"Hullo," said the pilot. "I am very glad to have found you in good time."

He did not even remember to crack his suit in the first moment of shock, although his outside pressure gauge showed one atmosphere and the pilot was unsuited. For the pilot was a woman.

Everyone knew vaguely that the Reds made a fetish of sexual equality. But he had never imagined for a moment that they might send a woman out alone on a hazardous trip to rescue a foreign pilot.

She had short-cropped dark hair around a rather long, fine-boned face; her complexion was sallow but her eyes were big and liquid, and her teeth were superb. She wore a standard undersuit of olive green with rank and technician's badges he did not recognize.

Ideas flashed through his head. Possibly he was the first Westerner ever to go aboard one of these moon-walkers; down in the slab-sided compartment beneath his feet there was alleged to be a compact fusion engine which was a jealously guarded secret, and then there was the question of automatic preadjustment to changes of level in the ground, which was baffling many investigators; a woman could be

overpowered and the moon-walker directed to the nearest Western base. . . .

The pilot pushed a control home and locked it with a twist to the left; there was a slight lurch and a turning sensation, and the machine swung back on its original course in the reverse direction.

"Please—open your suit," the pilot said. Her voice was low and pleasant, and her accent good. Then she gave a sudden shrill, nervous laugh, and checked herself as if she were in a state of extreme tension. "My name is Olga Solykin, and I am more glad than I know how to say!"

"Uh—" Well, no harm in giving his name. . . "I'm Don Bywater. Thank you for—well, saving my life."

Something was askew. Suppose this situation were reversed. Could anyone imagine missing the chance to inspect the wreck of a rival spaceship, laid out and opened like a corpse at an autopsy? Yet already she had turned the machine around and by now—to judge from the view through the excellent ports—it was making thirty-five kph back towards the base. Not a thought, apparently, for the ship.

Cautious, he cracked the suit at last. The air was sweet and good after his own canned supply, which was partly recycled and never completely free of his own body odours.

"Come, sit down!" the pilot insisted, patting the vacant copilot's chair. "Are you well? Are you hungry, thirsty? Were you injured in the fall? Were you not very lucky?"

Why was she so *eager*—almost as though she had not seen another human being for months? Her eyes were bright, and her voice tended to shake on occasional words, with what Don could only presume to be excitement. He glanced round the large cabin, noting the usual semipersonal touches—the painting of Lenin, the photograph of Yuri Gagarin, the bust of Maisky-Artemov standing on a little ledge next to a package of moon maps.

The stabilizing equipment was fantastic! Listening hard, he could faintly discern the hum of a gyro somewhere, keeping the cabin dead level no matter what kind of ground the moon-walker was scrambling over.

Belatedly, he began to peel off his suit. He said, "No, I wasn't hurt, thank you. I was very lucky. The whole of

my acceleration unit came away in one piece and I was still in it when it hit the ground."

"I'm so glad!" the pilot cried. She turned and felt along a shelf under the exiguous bank of controls; the machine was obviously completely automatic when bound for a known destination. She produced a large box of candy and some packs of cigarettes, and offered them to him as he sat down.

He was so taken aback he forgot that it was probably bad to show that he was impressed by anything. He said, "You can smoke on board?"

"Oh, yes, if not more than one person does at a time. I do not smoke, so please, you smoke if you like." She urged the cigarettes towards him, checked the movement, and stripped away the cellophane wrap with frantic fingers as though panicking to be of service to him.

The tobacco drugged? The candy poisoned? All the scores of stories that had been poured into his mind since he was a child came back to him. Anyway, he did not usually smoke off Earth, and rarely even at home.

But his nerves were shot to pieces, and a smoke would certainly be welcome. If there was anything funny about the taste, he told himself, he could throw the cigarette away after the first puff.

There was nothing wrong with it at all. It was very good, aromatic Balkan tobacco, and although it burned rather quickly in the oxygen-high air of the cabin it was soothing and welcome.

"And a drink, yes?" she invited. "To celebrate the saving of your life? I brought you food, vodka, all I could find, and the candy for you, and the cigarettes—you have not been in one of our moon-walkers before, yes? Or you would not have asked about the smoking of a cigarette!" She laughed again, the sound coming hard and harsh from her full-lipped mouth.

"Has anybody from my country?" he countered bitterly. What *was* all this about, anyway—some elaborate Mata Hari trick?

"Not even by now?" She seemed disappointed. "It is being so long, I hoped that—well, it is not really so long, I guess. Well, you will like to see all of it, then. Shall I show you how

it is?" She leaned towards him, over the side of her chair, her face bright and her tongue going once from left to right across her lips.

A tentative conclusion jelled in Don's mind. This woman—or girl, maybe, for she was no older than himself—must have been condemned to some isolated post for a long tour of duty. It was exactly the kind of thing that fitted with all the half-authorized rumors one was always hearing, even more here on the moon than back home because here was where the competition was fiercest. And the stress of loneliness must have made her mentally unbalanced. How else to explain her weird behaviour? Claiming to have brought him candy and cigarettes and vodka—he was no psychologist, but as guesswork it certainly fitted.

He said, not without some nervousness, "Later. In a little while, if you like." Not to arouse any suspicion, that was important. To jump at the chance of inspecting the works of the moon-walker might be fatal. The trick was to be friendly as long as possible, to find out where he was exactly, to get an idea of the controls of the machine, and then to overpower her and walk it to the nearest American base. . . .

"Whereabouts are we?" he inquired, as casually as possible. "I was too busy fighting the controls to take a fix as I came down."

Well, that was true enough.

She jumped at the opportunity. Flushing a little, she put a finger on a switch before her. A previously dark screen on the control panel lit up with a set of grid lines and a pattern of radar blips.

The grid lines moved visibly, in time with the motion of the moon-walker. Don tried not to look impressed again.

"Here, you see!" the girl said. "It navigates partly by dead reckoning, partly by sighting on the stars. All is automatic now. We are here, and here are the Ural Mountains in back of us, and this red star in the center: that is this moon-walker, you understand?"

"And you can—uh—steer it by hand if you have to?"

"Oh yes!"

She showed him how; she showed him the inspection hatch of the fusion engine and the neat stabilizer which kept the cabin level—it turned out to be a bowl of mercury with hundreds and hundreds of tiny electrical contacts around the sides, from which a computer drew information about the vehicle's attitude, extrapolating to find the most probable correction the mechanism would next have to cope with. Don followed her explanations with mounting excitement; it seemed there was nothing she would not willingly tell him about, apparently for the simple pleasure of talking.

In the back of his mind, he was calculating. It would be best to take over the machine after about a couple of hours on board, before they came too close to its home base but not so soon that her suspicions would not be lulled. Then he could easily locate the nearest American base—there were rather few in this region, for it was mainly a Soviet preserve—and then he could . . .

"Ah!" she said suddenly, and cocked her head. They were looking down through the inspection hatch over the forward radar, watching the ground scanner weave back and forth on the far side of a pane of tough glass.

Don felt a stir of alarm. "What is it?" he demanded.

"We are coming in at my base. Listen!"

"We're *what*?" Pictures of a dozen wasted chances flashed through his mind. "But—why so soon?"

"Oh, you mean why if we are so near where you crashed did I come so long after you fell down? Why, there was much argument for and against to rescue you." She gazed at him with almost ridiculously melting eyes. Suddenly she thrust out her hand and snatched his, squeezing it briefly. "I am so glad they decided it must be done!"

"They?" Don stared wildly towards the cabin ports. Yes, it must be true. The machine was marching in between two low cliffs, towards a dark, over-roofed aperture; then it was in the shadow with the suddenness of a light being switched off, and the engine's note changed down to an idling buzz. But if this woman hadn't gone crazy from isolation, then what—?

He pulled his hand away. "How many people are there at your base?" he demanded.

"Oh, there are many, many! Ninety, a hundred! But I have been so alone for so long!"

There was a noise from below—first, air hissing into an oversized lock, then the hurry of footsteps. Dazed, he said, "Alone? Are you crazy?"

"With no one to talk to, yes, I have become nearly crazy!" she asserted, nodding her dark head frantically. "They do not talk, you understand! They do not give me a single word!"

So she was a lunatic. And he was trapped. Don made a dash for the front of the cabin. But just as he was forming his intention, the helmet and shoulders of a space suit appeared on the platform under the cabin which had previously lifted him from the air lock below. He was too close to stop himself. All the newcomer—a stolid-faced man with big shoulders—had to do was trip him.

He measured his length on the deck. His forehead hit the base of the pilot's chair, and there was long darkness.

He awoke painfully, with his head aching and his eyes blurred, in a room that might well have been at any of the moon bases he knew. Starkly furnished with bunks and one table, plus some lockers and shelves on which were microfilms, a reader, and some recording spools, it was about as homelike as a fallout shelter.

He had a little delirium for a while before he regained full consciousness, and could not tell whether he actually saw, or only imagined he was seeing, Olga's face above his own, very pale and worried. He was confused, unable to decide whether the crash had been a dream and he was really in one of the American bases, or whether he was dead.

When things finally straightened out, he found that Olga was there, on a stool beside the bunk, watching him with terrible intensity. When he opened his eyes, she seemed to break suddenly and gave a long peal of half-hysterical laughter.

"You live!" she cried. "You are well! How wonderful!"

Memory came flooding back, and he could not tell if it was wonderful to be alive or not. He lifted hesitant hands to touch his forehead. There was a tenderness, but nothing more, to show where he had knocked himself out.

Gently Olga guided his hands away, and swabbed the

patch of bruised skin with something cool and wet that diminished the pain. She had barely finished the brief task when there was a rapping sound from the far wall.

She got up and took the three steps necessary to reach a sort of window, beyond which a stout middle-aged woman with an expressionless face was making quick pantomime gestures. As he rolled his head on one side to follow Olga with his eyes, Don saw her draw out from below the window a sliding compartment like those used in drive-in banks to protect cash being paid over. From it she took a charged hypodermic.

Once more the mishmash of tales about hypnotic drugs, secret poisons, and ruthless espionage techniques flooded into Don's muddled mind, but he was as weak as a kitten and couldn't resist as the needle was pushed expertly home.

"It is good," Olga said apologetically. "It is for your health, you understand."

Don closed his eyes.

Some hours went by between sleeping and waking. On two occasions someone came and went at the curious sealed window and signaled for Olga to go to the drawer below it. The first time she took out some thin broth steaming in a tin bowl and spooned it into Don's mouth; the second time she took out food for herself, and by raising his head a little, Don was able to see that a faint violet glow pervaded the box, disappearing a moment after it was opened.

Sterile? Presumably. But—what for?

It was not until the embarrassing discovery that Olga was not going to leave this cramped cabin for any purpose whatever, even the most private ones, that he began to think back over what she had said. The others would not speak to her. She was alone among nearly a hundred companions. Why? Surely she could *not* simply be insane, because then she would not have been trusted to drive out alone and fetch him from the wreck.

When she came back from the unscreened sanitary facilities in the far corner of the cabin, he said, "What goes on? Please tell me! Why will no one talk to you? Why am I shut up with you like this when there are so many other people?"

Olga clasped her hands before her in a kind of parody of delight, drew up her little stool near the bed, and sat down close to him. She said, "Oh it's marvelous to *talk* again! Even in a foreign language it is good! You know, I have come to where I have made recordings of my own voice and played to myself so as to remember what it is like to hear and listen."

"Why?" Don persisted.

"The others are not talking now. I am the only one who is cured."

Don closed his eyes. This was too much. One sane person in a base full of lunatics?

"Poor friend Don," Olga said, laying her hand on his. "It is all hard to understand, isn't it? Here is the beginning. Several years ago, in Soviet Experimental Biology Station of Raznoyansk, is discovered strange symbiotic virus with some affinity for the nervous system, especially the brain. They give it to some monkeys, and they get very intelligent, amazing! Then they go mad. But so intelligent it is wonderful—I saw some of them, who learned to use tools, who could even talk a few hundred simple words about food and working. It is decided by the great scientist Bielov, director of the base, that he will experiment on himself, for it seems the virus increases mind activity. Changes readings on the encephalo—" She stumbled, stressing the syllables oddly, and got it right the second time. "Encephalo-graph, yes."

Don listened passively. All this was a long way from the moon.

"So in secret he infects himself with this virus that we call a *resonating* virus. It seems to respond to nervous activity as a sounding board to a tuning fork, do you know? As an amplifier.

"Now I was apprentice—student, yes—with Bielov. One evening I am working with a friend, Dvoriov, in the laboratory where we have monkeys, and Dvoriov suddenly cries out the Bielov will kill himself! Bielov is not there—he is at his house half a kilometer away, outside the station. But we go, because he insists, like a crazy man, do you understand?"

She was getting violently demonstrative. The words poured from her, with wild gestures to emphasize them.

"And he is taking poison, laid on his bed with a note by him! From half a kilometer Dvoriov *knew*. And that was when we discovered it was true, what Bielov said in his last note. This virus can create telepathy."

Don almost sat up. Only a stab of pain from his head made him fall back. Telepathy! Jesus, with a tool like that the East would—

"So all of us who had in any way been infected, Dvoriov, myself, many many more as well, were brought here to the moon, to this secret base, to work upon the antidote. We think we have got it. We think so because it was tested on myself, and for many months now I have been well and have not suffered to be able to read a thought in another mind. And that was what was given to you. This was why Dvoriov wore a space suit when he came into the moon-walker to us—although I am now cured, perhaps, I still carry the virus, can still infect others. But I am sealed up here in the one room because I am the control study. It must be learned if the virus will one day die out in my body, do you understand?"

Painfully, Don worked it out. Yes, it hung together. He could have been infected by Olga as an immune but a carrier; he had been given the antidote, so he was now an immune carrier himself, and—he had to get out of here. If he could just walk out, that would be enough to take the secret of the miraculous virus with him. . . .

Or was this all a big lie?

Olga was going on, but he was scarcely paying attention.

"Now all the others, you see, think together and talk no more. I must talk again—oh, I have been *so* alone since I was cured! Soon, when one year and a half is finished, and if I am still well, there will be more cures, but here it is a long way from other people, and our supplies come by automatic rockets and by robot vehicles, and all of us are of high intelligence, so perhaps the others may not after all want to be cured. They work together on many problems."

Don seized on that one. Telepathy would imply perfect espionage, perfect teamwork in research, limitless things!

"When you fell down in your ship," Olga hurried on, "it was much argued whether to rescue you. It was dangerous. But it would not have been possible to endure the

knowing that you were dying, do you understand? Better to save you. Better also because without company I would go mad, and though I have no longer power to receive thoughts all the others can hear me distantly as they heard you."

Once more she clasped his hand. It occurred to him that he would probably need a friend in the enemy camp. He returned the pressure. It wasn't difficult. In spite of her manish haircut and her rather disturbing eagerness to talk, she was attractive and female. Vague plans for exploiting these facts crossed his mind. In alarm, he checked them. It had just struck him that if he could be "overheard" at the distance of the crash, he could be overheard similarly and more easily now.

What a *fantastic* situation to find himself in!

"So you will help me to keep my mind well," Olga was saying, "and this will be good for the others, and also you will be a control for the antidote, because if you do not begin to have telepathy it will prove it also immunizes as well as cures. It is turning out so well!" she finished rapturously.

"What is it like to read people's minds?" Don demanded.

"So strange it cannot be explained. It must happen to you. Blurred—confusing—sometimes frightening. Worst and most difficult is when you are awake and near a person sleeping, for dreams are not logical. Almost, they are insane. That is why now everyone here sleeps at the same time; we have our own artificial time, and all sleep from midnight to eight hundred hours. This is by hypnosis, that all go to sleep and wake up together. No other way is possible."

Click! Don tried to keep the thought un verbalized, at least, so as to reduce the chance of it being picked out of his mind. He said, "And—are they listening to me all the time?"

"No, no! Much work is done, and they concentrate hard. I—or now you as well—we are like a little noise in the corner of a room. It is there, but you can forget it. To hear the tick of a watch at night, when your wrist comes near your ear, is easy, but after you wear the watch two days, three days, it is ignored, you understand? So with the mind you

are not interested in. With many minds, it is much more difficult, for it is what you would call louder. Stronger."

So he could allow himself to think that it would be possible to escape as soon as he was well enough, when the ninety or a hundred telepathic people here were all fast asleep together. And hypnotically prevented from waking up for eight hours.

It was logical that they should become lovers; the confined conditions plus Olga's desperate hunger for maximum companionship saw to that, and Don had no particular objection, except first that it seemed obscurely like treachery to have so much pleasure from it, and second that he could never help wondering whether there were eavesdroppers.

There were regular deliveries of food, usually by the same middle-aged woman he had seen bring the hypodermic with the antidote just after he woke up. It seemed that that could have been automated, but it gave an opportunity for visual inspection of the control subjects, of course, and according to Olga that was why it was attended to personally. Twice a day he and she both had to offer a drop of blood from a finger to be taken to a lab somewhere else in the base; she did this skillfully for herself and for him, and he noted—not knowing whether it was important but taking everything in that he could—that the sterilizing ultraviolet did not play inside the sliding box when something was passed out of the room as it did when something was passed inward.

Aside from that, Olga talked. Months of pent-up conversation flooded from her—childhood memories, description of what it was like to be infected with the resonating virus, funny stories, accounts of books she had read and shows she had seen, word-portraits of people here at the station before they became as they were. . . . Don closed his mind to it firmly as he had been taught. One could never tell when insidious, pro-Soviet propaganda might come through the harmless-seeming words.

The other people in the base might as well not have existed except as shadows beyond the sealed window, appearing like the figures on some ancient mechanical clock at stated hours,

going through their routine, and vanishing again. But there was a world outside, and there was a secret of tremendous importance which he alone of all Americans possessed and which, if humanly possible, he was going to take away.

His watch had survived the crash and still worked. The base was apparently run on an arbitrary time—perhaps that of some Russian meridian—but it was easy to establish when the official “midnight” fell: 2:40 A.M. on his Greenwich-set watch.

Disciplining himself with every technique he had ever been taught, he acted quite well enough to convince Olga within a few days that his gratitude for being saved from death had evolved into a genuine affection for her. It was unkind, he knew, but then there was a deadly rivalry between West and East, and unless the secret of telepathy was shared it might be the long-feared decisive advantage that would give the enemy (the enemy since before Don was born, although there had never been a war in all that time) the effective victory.

Then, measuredly, he began to make himself depressed and restless; the natural effect of being cooped up gave him a basis to work on, and soon he was snapping and complaining with convincing vigour while she wrung her hands and demanded to know what she could do.

After a couple of days of that, he delicately broached the idea that they ought to be allowed outside, to save them from claustrophobia setting in. So what if it were not permitted? Was anyone to know if—just after midnight—one of the moon-walkers was taken out briefly and returned before anyone woke up?

Horror at the idea fought in Olga's mind with her boundless desire to please her companion and not to be condemned to renewed loneliness. She voiced objections; Don disposed of them smoothly. He was enough of a technician to get around the alarms if she knew where they were—there could not be many, because all the telepaths would be in hypnotic sleep and it would be impossible to wake just one of them because of this difficulty with insane-seeming dreams picked up from sleeping minds. . . .

Three days' argument produced the admission that there

were no alarms or indeed locks to prevent Olga from leaving her one room—there had just been no reason why she should, until now, and she had wanted to keep the experiment perfectly controlled.

After over a year, Don countered, surely enough evidence had been gathered!

On the fourth night, he won his point.

He had never been so excited in his life as at the moment when she timorously activated the remote control for the big lock through which the moon-walker entered and left the base and sent it hurrying and scurrying over the plain as if anxious to get quickly away from the base where everyone slumbered and all the alarms had been temporarily restored to the normal "daytime" setting.

It was lunar night outside, but to the radar senses of the moon-walker that made no difference at all. At a steady forty-kph clip, it headed out across the black plain under the frozen stars.

At his request, she showed him how to operate all the controls. Directly after she had done so, he closed his fingers gently on her carotid arteries.

As she fainted, he chuckled to himself. He felt extraordinarily proud, as though he had given her a much-needed lesson in absolute devotion to duty. He had been a little ashamed of himself for not cracking his suit when he saw he was being rescued by the enemy and again when he found himself tempted to treat Olga with real tenderness.

But he had well and truly made amends for his weakness now.

He bound and gagged her with strips torn from her clothing and placed her comfortably in the copilot's chair. Then he studied his location; he had done some heavy thinking on the problem of navigation, and he was fairly sure he could strike straight across the plain towards Mrs. Rafferty's Gap—that all-important pass between steep mountains which an irreverent spaceman had named for the wife of a man he disliked. Beyond there, he would be in line-of-sight radio range of more than one American base and could take his pick of the nearest.

It would be a long haul. But traffic in the lunar night was very sparse, and with a fusion engine under him the range was virtually unlimited.

He occupied his time on the long trip with dreams of the glory awaiting the man who captured not only one of the fabulous moon-walkers but also the incredible secret of the telepathic virus. When the eggheads set to work on *that* one, things would really blow off—and imagine the lovely expressions on Soviet faces as they learned of the loss of their secret weapon!

He noticed eventually that Olga had recovered. He had expected her to struggle against her bonds, splutter foolish nonsense behind her soaked gag. But she did not. She merely twisted her head and looked at him.

For some reason, he could not meet her gaze for long. He distracted himself by feigning cheerfulness. He said, "Sorry, Olga honey! I'm afraid I never was the type to be romanced away from the call of duty. They teach you a lot about loyalty in the service, and some of it sticks. Maybe you wouldn't know about that, I guess."

She said nothing.

How could she, efficiently gagged as she was?

Yet somehow a sort of deflating message seemed to reach him from her. As it might be put in words, *Don't count chickens*. It didn't fit with his future plans, and he ignored it.

He said nothing else directly to her all the time it took the moon-walker to pass through Mrs. Rafferty's Gap and come in range of an American base. As luck would have it, the first one he contacted was on a war footing, and they made him stand by for six hours while they verified his identity by satellite relay half around Luna and made sure it wasn't a Soviet trap. But they relaxed their overcautious manner once they had men swarming over the machine and inspecting its mechanism, and in another hour or two he was in the presence of the base commander and pouring out his message.

Again, the commander was suspicious, but at length Don convinced him, and the application of a syringe of disinhibitor to Olga produced evidence to back him up.

Within two hours more, he, Olga, and a heavy guard were on their way to America Base One, the nearest equivalent to a city anywhere on the moon, for ferrying back to earth.

He had a wonderful time impressing the guards with the resourcefulness whereby he had captured the moon-walker; the telepathic virus was of less interest to them. Machinery they could see working. Viruses were something to do with a cold in the head.

Still . . .

On this trip, Olga was not gagged, only handcuffed to a stanchion, but she said nothing at all. She merely went on looking at Don. Sometimes she smiled, and he didn't like the smile at all. So he tried not to look at her.

It took the better part of a day at America Base One to establish his claims to the satisfaction of the egghead staff. There were hasty conferences with the topmost brass; there were plans laid on for a Vice-Presidential welcome and other suitable rewards for Don Bywater. And suitable treatment for Olga was likewise arranged.

"Congratulations!" said the base commander briefly, as the ferry to earth was being fueled and raised on the launching ramps. He shook Don's hand briefly. Photographs were taken for the record.

Somewhere along the line, some wires seemed to get crossed. When the ship had settled at Nevada Main Port, there was quite a crowd; and it cheered as Don emerged, waving, straining a little against full gravity, but not as loudly as might have been. The Vice-President waited at the edge of the field for the buggy to fetch Don across. Don went down to the little open vehicle with his personal escort, assigned to him on the very reasonable ground that after all he had been exposed to Soviet propaganda at first hand for some time and might possibly be a Trojan horse. But when they were aboard, the driver still waited.

"What's the trouble?" Don demanded.

"The girl!" the driver replied in surprise. "This girl you talked out of her wrong ideas, this girl who gave up all for love or whatever. That's who they're mainly waiting for."

"But—"

There was no chance to argue it out. Worried public relations men appeared in a mob, conferred with Don's escort, with the captain of the ship, with the responsible ground officers. Don caught snatches of angry remonstrance.

"Flay the man who started this story! But we must do it or there'll be hell to pay. Say she's sick? Won't satisfy them. Have to show her. Well, keep her away from any cameras or microphones for pity's sake—"

And they brought her out of the ship. The cheering rose to a noise like Niagara.

Disgusted suddenly with the whole business, Don had to make room for her in the buggy's back seat, but to his amazement she was smiling, even at him, and with some sign of real pleasure at the welcome arranged for them. The driver turned the buggy around and drove at a suitably slow pace across the concrete towards the Vice-President, the cameras, and the press.

"Tell me, Don," Olga said in a voice bright with false cheerfulness, "did you ever stop to wonder about some things?"

"What?" Don was lost in worrying about what might happen in this ghastly situation and about his tarnished glory.

"Why Bielov killed himself, yes? And why it was necessary to take all of us to the moon and close us away from the whole world?"

Don felt a block of ice form around his heart.

"Think!" Olga invited brightly. "All on the moon at our base were clever, sensible people, high intelligence, trained scientists. All infected—not deliberately, by accident. For them, life is difficult but not bad. More were infected than are there now, but it was clearly necessary to ensure that the stupid ones, the untrained thinkers, were excluded. We know a lot, over our side of the world, about people in the mass. You also should know. People have lynched and rioted here, do you understand?"

Don stared at her numbly.

She turned and inspected the waiting crowd with a bright, hating look in her eyes. "Yes!" she said and gave a nod.

"People in the mass react strangely. They make less than the—what is it in English?"

"The sum of their parts."

The gravelly voice was Don's own, but it took him a while to recognize that he had spoken.

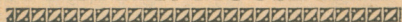
"That is correct." Bitterness colored Olga's words. "I think perhaps I was sane till you exploited me—for loyalty, as you said. Now . . . perhaps not. But I think there is a good number of people here, enough to form well a *mob*."

Don's mind seemed to have congealed now. To stop the buggy? To stand up and scream a warning?

"Possibly there are some people here who dislike your Vice-President. Political people are easily hated." Olga smiled a little crazy smile. "Do you think it would please the crowd if I persuaded the leader to kiss me, the pretty girl who has been brought to see error of her ways? Who would not know what loyalty means? You should know, Don."

Perhaps the antidote in the carriers' bodies had made the virus more efficient at the business of infecting others. The crowd took ten minutes to become the mob Olga had predicted; within days it was the hemisphere that was infected, and in two weeks, the world.

A BETTER MOUSETRAP



THERE WAS, of course, Charles Fort. Some of my fellow SF writers loved him for his iconoclasm, his dogmatic nonconformity, and his writing style. I always found him exasperating.

Perhaps his most celebrated statement was this one, simple and devastating. After sifting for years through stories of scientifically impossible happenings, he decided that the only explanation covering them all was to assume that we inhabit an artificial environment and summed the entire hypothesis into this brief phrase: "I think we're property."

Eric Frank Russell made a classic novel out of that: *Sinister Barrier*. But even when I first read it, many years ago, I was struck by a nagging thought. That suggestion implies a shred of unjustifiable vanity. Our masters, presumably, would be superintelligent beings—and what superintelligent creature would want to own a race like us?

I think we're more likely to be a bloody nuisance.



"I'D LIKE you to meet Professor Aylward of Copernicus Observatory," said Angus.

Up to that point, Captain Martinu had been seriously

considering leaving the party. The band was much too loud, the dancing was far too energetic for someone like himself who was used to long periods of free fall that wasted the muscles, and the promise of fascinating people to talk to with which Angus had persuaded him to come along had not been fulfilled.

Now, though, he felt a sudden stir of interest as he shook the hand of the short, bespectacled, balding scientist. He said, "You mean you're the Aylward they named the Aylward Field after?"

"Er—" Aylward looked uncomfortable. "Well, as a matter of fact, yes, I am."

"As a result of which," Angus said, "I owe you my life, among other things." He ran his hand through his shock of coarse black hair, which stuck up from his head in the currently fashionable Fijian style, like a chimney sweep's brush.

Martinu said, "And I owe you a couple of billion dollars. We picked up a buster with your Field in the old *Castor*, when I was a junior engine tech."

Rather diffidently, Aylward eyed the other's immaculate uniform. "And stayed on in the space service?" he said. "Isn't that unusual?"

"Oh, unique!" Martinu agreed with a trace of pride. "I'm the only man in the service who's picked up a buster and not immediately bought himself out of a career job. I say, is there anything I can do for you?"

Aylward seemed to be in some distress, his breathing deep and stertorous, his shoulders hunching forward. He said, "You can help me to a chair, if you will. I've been on Luna for the past seventeen years or so, and full gravity makes me terribly tired."

Martinu hastily took the professor's arm; he was in top physical condition—had to be—but even so he was quickly exhausted by a couple of hours on his feet, so he could appreciate Aylward's discomfort. Angus, as always, had vanished the moment he saw a conversation starting and had gone to spark another one elsewhere.

There was a vacant double seat in the nearest of the alcoves

off the dance floor. Martinu headed for it. There was a couple engaged in violent lovemaking on the other seat, but he ignored their looks of irritation as he sat Aylward down. He said, "Let me get you a drink."

"That's very kind of you," said Aylward. He wiped sweat from his forehead with a bandanna handkerchief matching his Mexican-style cummerbund. "A long cool one, for choice."

"Will do," said Martinu, and went in search of a waiter.

He was on his way back with the drinks when Angus, a look of anxiety on his long face, pushed through a cluster of other guests and caught his arm.

"Martinu, I guess I should warn you about old Aylward. I mean, he's a nice guy and a genius and all that, but like a lot of geniuses he's a bit nutty on one point, and unfortunately you've hit it right away."

"What? Busters?"

"Yes. He has a perfectly absurd theory about what they are and where they come from, and if you get him started on it, he'll bend your ear all night."

Martinu shrugged. "If he hasn't got a right to theorize about busters, who has? Besides, the Aylward Field got me a share in one—I reckon listening to him for an hour or two is a cheap price to pay for that."

"Damn it, I had to tell him what a buster was, once!" Angus made a sweeping gesture, which spilled his drink over the back of his hand. Fishing for a handkerchief to dry it, he went on, "In fact, if it hadn't been for me—"

Something in Martinu's expression warned him. He broke off. "I guess I told you about that. Sorry. But don't say I didn't warn you, will you?"

Martinu grinned and walked on.

The lovers had gone, presumably in search of more privacy. He set a tall frosted glass beside the professor and sat down himself. "I got you a julep," he said. "Is that all right?"

"Perfect." Aylward produced a length of tubing and dropped one end into the glass to save himself the effort of holding it up while he drank. "What are you having?"

"Slivovitz," said Martinu. "Sort of homage to my Bal-

kan ancestry. Anyway, what brings you back to Earth after such a long time, professor?"

"Oh, someone seems to be infringing the patents on the Field," Aylward answered. "Angus told me I was needed, so I came down. He's my agent, you know—and very good he is. I don't know how I'd manage without him. I've always found the world of commerce far more complicated than any problem in astrophysics, because it's easier to improve your equipment than yourself."

"You have quite a setup at Copernicus, don't you? They tell me it's the best-equipped observatory in the system, and you financed practically all of it yourself. May I inquire—does the Field bring you in a good income?"

Aylward gave a tired smile. "Excellent! I never expected so much return for so little effort."

He drew out the tube from his now half-empty glass and began to run it absently between his fingers. "People sometimes ask me," he went on, "why I stick at my job when I'm wealthy enough to live in luxury on Earth. I think you'll probably understand me when I say I think I made a sensible decision." He cocked an eyebrow at Martinu.

The captain suddenly found himself liking Aylward a lot. He smiled, and as he nodded agreement his hair bobbed around his face. It was too soft for the Fijian style, so he had had to settle for curls like a Queen Anne wig, and being used to a free-fall crewcut he found it a permanent irritation. Damn these silly Earthside fads!

"I wouldn't even have come to this party but for Angus's insistence," Aylward went on. "I depend completely on him, as I said, and he does have this tendency to fly off into space over the littlest things. . . . We were on the *Algol* together when we located the buster that started the whole thing. Did he ever tell you the story?"

Martinu almost said, "He's told everybody!" But he checked himself. For one thing, Angus's version of the story had probably been colored by the passage of time, while Aylward's might give a different slant. And for another, though the professor's tone had been conventionally light, Martinu sensed that he was actually aching to find someone to listen to him. Angus had more than likely gone around warn-

ing all his other guests about Aylward's obsession with the buster problem.

He set his glass down on his knee. "That was when Rusch was in command, wasn't it?" he said. "Yes, I'd very much like to hear about it."

The radar tech first class at number three screen held his breath for a long moment. When he let it out, it was to speak in a voice shaky with excitement.

"Buster, sir!" he said.

The lieutenant on the other side of the room whipped around and bounded over with a hard kick at the far wall. He caught the back of the tech's chair with one hand and hung floating, his eyes wide. "Where?" he demanded.

"There, sir." The tech put his finger on a large green blip near the center of the screen. "It broke through about ten seconds ago. I saw it arrive. And the range and mass are exactly right."

"Are you sure?" said the lieutenant. But he didn't wait for an answer before shouting to the orderly at the phone desk.

"Green, get me a line to the bridge!"

"Aye aye, sir," said the orderly unemotionally.

The lieutenant turned to the screen again. He said, "What is the range?"

"About four and a half kil, sir. Right under our feet."

The lieutenant whistled. "Well, for sure it didn't sneak up on us. Read it for relative velocity, will you?"

The tech slid cross-hairs over the screen, centered on the blip, and pressed the switch of the doppler integrator. They waited the necessary five seconds, and a figure went up on the dial.

"Six hundred," the lieutenant said. "Hasn't settled into its natural orbit yet. I think—"

He was going to say he thought the tech was right, but the communications orderly interrupted. "Bridge, sir!"

"Chuck it over," said the lieutenant, and picked the phone out of the air as it soared across the room. He continued into it, "Ahmed, screen room watch, sir. One of my techs thinks we're on a buster."

"Hah!" said Captain Rusch skeptically. "How are we doing for white whales this week?"

"It showed up without warning on number three screen at four and a half kilomiles, sir. We haven't had a chance to check its orbit yet, but its relative velocity is only six hundred."

There was a pause. At length Rusch grunted. "Right, I'll get a 'scope on it," he said. "Bearing?"

"Oh-seven-six and a half, sir."

"Thank you, lieutenant. I'll let you know the verdict. Don't get too worked up till we're sure, will you?"

That, of course, was a pious hope, Rusch reflected as he gave the bridge phone back to his own communications orderly. He could tell from the expressions on the faces around him. Even the normally placid Commander Gabrilov, who had been close enough to hear what Ahmed said, was showing excitement.

"OK," Rusch said. "OK. I don't have to say it again."

Gabrilov gave a shamefaced grin and pushed himself over to the 'scope controls. "Oh-seven. . . six and a half," he said under his breath as he set them. "Four and a half kil . . . Yes, there's something there all right."

"Get it on the screens," Rusch said. "Come on now!" He felt his heart pounding faster as he glanced at the big screen mounted over the pilot board at the forward end of the bridge. A click. An ill-defined, misshapen object appeared in the center of the square frame. It could have been anything out of the asteroid belt.

There was a long silence. At last Gabrilov said, "Do you think it could *really* be a buster?"

"Well, why the hell don't you take steps to find out?" Rusch snapped.

Gabrilov colored. "Sorry, sir!" he mumbled. He barked at the communications orderly. "Tell Warrant Officer Fisher to draw power for a laser beam! Ask Lieutenant Ahmed to stand by for spectroanalysis!"

"Aye aye!" said the orderly fervently, his eyes bright.

While they were waiting, Rusch glanced at Gabrilov. He said as though there had been no interruption, "It *could* be a buster, of course. It's some while since the last one was

found, but there have been forty-five of the things, and they turned up all over the system. One was found in a lunar equilateral, wasn't it? But even if this *is* a buster, you've got to remember one thing."

"What?"

"They may not all be worth picking up. Some of them may only be lumps of iron, for instance. It hasn't happened yet, but it's possible."

Gabrilov bit his lip and looked lugubrious.

The communications orderly said, "Sir! Screen room!"

Rusch seized the phone. Gabrilov came diving over to hover beside him.

"Get this, sir!" Ahmed's voice said. "Spectroanalysis shows iron—cobalt—nickel—"

Gabrilov pulled a face, looking down at the floor.

"But also!" Ahmed said triumphantly. "Also silver, gold, uranium, thorium, platinum, osmium, iridium . . ."

He went on, but Rusch had lowered the phone.

"Number forty-six," he said quietly.

Whatever the reason for all that shouting and banging and laughing, Aylward wished they would stop it and let him concentrate. He was trying to cope with more figures than his portable calculator could handle, and running side factors in his head always gave him a headache. *Two zero six five nine—*

The door of his cabin slammed back and Angus burst in, frantic with excitement. The chain of figures vanished into limbo, and Aylward clapped his hand to his face.

"For heaven's sake, what are you playing at?" he snarled.

"Didn't you hear?" said Angus, braking himself on the far wall with his foot and bouncing back towards Aylward. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to resolve some survey data—if you'll kindly give me the chance to finish the job." Aylward spoke with heavy sarcasm; he was an old-young man of thirty-five, with glasses and an expression that was usually mild but now was thunderous. "I never heard such a racket!"

"But we've picked up a buster!" Angus exclaimed.

Aylward sighed and pushed his papers under a clip to hold them to the table before sliding his chair back in its guides. "Is that serious?" he said. "Does it take long?"

Angus hooked a leg under the tabletop and shook his head pityingly. "Are you trying to make out that you don't know what a buster is?" he demanded incredulously. "You can carry an ivory-tower pose too far, you know!"

"All right, *tell* me what it is," Aylward snapped.

Angus rolled his eyes, but shrugged and complied. "Nobody knows what they are—exactly. They're lumps of matter that apparently drop from nowhere. Radar doesn't show them till they're well within detector range, and they think this may have something to do with the fact that they're fuller of high-number radioactives than a pudding is of plums."

"Oh, yes!" Aylward said. "Of course I've heard of them! But there haven't been any for some time, have there? What are they like?"

"Turn your screen on, and you'll see one. Captain Rusch had the 'scope image piped in for everyone to look at."

Aylward did so. The screen lit with a knife-sharp picture of a roughly spherical object, scarred across by the sweep of the high-powered laser beam. It was approximately a hundred feet in diameter. Lights from the ship were playing on it now, and made it gleam against the black depths of space.

"I wonder how much we'll get," Angus said in an awed tone.

"Come again?"

"These things contain fabulous riches!" Angus gave him a supercilious glance. "So your ignorance doesn't show too much, listen and I'll give you the background.

"The first one was found by the *Aurora* about six years ago. They couldn't believe their eyes when they saw it drop out of nowhere—a hundred-foot ball of concentrated wealth. They got thousands of tons of platinum out of it, gold, silver, uranium, and so many diamonds they practically bankrupted the commercial manufacturers. All the rest—there've been forty-five to date—have been cast in the same mold. The precious metals have more or less flooded the market,

but the demand for radioactives is still high, and everyone who's found a buster has become rich for life.

"After the *Aurora* case there was a gold rush to the asteroid belt—no, don't interrupt, let me finish! But you don't seem to find busters with the ordinary planetoids; they showed up all over the system. And another odd thing—this is the first to be discovered in some years, although at one time they were being found at the rate of about two a month. Of course, this is probably a statistical accident; they're virtually undetectable until you're right on top of them."

Aylward said, "All right, all right! I remember now. Rudolf Cotteril was prophesying economic chaos, wasn't he? But in the event we absorbed the impact pretty well."

"So well you don't seem to have noticed it at all," Angus commented dryly.

Aylward ignored the jab. "Just a second," he said. He was frowning, for no reason Angus could think of. "If forty-five were found, and they were coming at an average two per month, the rush lasted two years. You don't know the dates of the first and last reported findings, do you?"

"Huh?" Angus blinked. "Well, the *Aurora* got the first on twenty-seventh April, 'eighty-six—uh—and the *Capella* got the forty-fifth some time in March of 'eighty-eight. Middle of March—I think the seventeenth. Why?"

Aylward said, "And it's 'ninety-two now!" He began frantically unstrapping himself from his chair.

"Hey! Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

Aylward looked grim. "Not being a seasoned spacetraveler," he said, "I was a bit worried before making this trip about the number of ships that have been lost lately. I looked into it fairly closely to make sure I had a statistical chance of getting home."

"What's that got to do with—?"

"Since you have such a good memory for dates, you can tell me when the current run of losses started. They said thirty had gone missing in the past four years—more than in the preceding two decades!"

Bewildered, Angus said, "Sure I can tell you. The *Dubhe*

was lost on the Venus run some time between tenth March and first April of 'eighty-eight."

"And the next ship to go?"

"The *Lucifer*. She vanished—" He broke off and bit his lip.

"About two weeks later," Aylward said, kicking himself through the door. Angus hung where he was for a moment; then he gave a gasp and dived in the other's wake.

The door of the bridge slid back with a squeal of complaint. Rusch turned; when he saw who the intruder was, he frowned. It was all very well to say that young Aylward was potentially the greatest living authority on theoretical astrophysics; it was all very well for him to want to make surveys distant from the sun—but on simple principle Rusch disapproved of nonservice personnel shipping on anything other than a proper passenger liner.

However, the rosy glow attendant on the discovery of a buster had mellowed him to the point at which he did not even ask brusquely who had authorized Aylward to trespass on the bridge. He merely said, "Yes, Mr. Aylward? What do you want?"

"Angus tells me you've located what they call a buster," Aylward said. His face was pale, and his eyes were very wide behind his glasses.

"Yes, we have," Rusch agreed. A thought struck him, and he called to Gabrilov on the other side of the room. "I forgot to order 'splice the mainbrace,' Mr. Gabrilov! I imagine the men are expecting it."

"Aye aye, sir!"

"Captain!" Aylward said desperately. Rusch turned a frosty eye on him; he had jumped to the obvious conclusion.

"Don't worry, Mr. Aylward. There's enough valuable material in that thing out there to keep all of us in comfort for the rest of our natural lives. And spatial law provides that nonservice personnel are entitled to two-thirds of a crewman's share. All we can do right now is stake our claim, of course, and with luck tow it into orbit at our destination. But we'll start the mining as soon as—"

"Captain, if I were you I'd be very chary even of staking

a claim, let alone mining that thing!" Aylward regretted that force of habit had made him draw his feet down to the floor, because the captain was floating a foot off it and so looked a long way down at him.

There was a frigid silence. At last Rusch said, "Would you like to explain yourself, Mr. Aylward? If you can, that is."

"Well, it seems to me—" Aylward hesitated: how to make this clear? Then he plunged on. "Isn't it a fact that no buster has been reported for four years, though there was a positive spate of them before that? And didn't the start of the current run of ships lost in space—thirty known vessels and who knows how many others belonging to prospectors and freebooters—didn't this coincide with the end of the stream of reported busters?"

"By God, that's right!" The exclamation came from Gabrilov. "I'm sorry, sir," he added to Rusch. "But the *Dubhe* was the first to go since they perfected atomics, and I have every reason to remember that she vanished about a fortnight after the forty-fifth buster—the *Capella*'s. I was due to go aboard, but I was held back by an ear infection."

"The odds against this are tremendous," Aylward said. He saw that Gabrilov's interruption had impressed Rusch and was in haste to seize his momentary advantage. "Which is why I think it would be terribly dangerous to come too close to the buster. Uh—what exactly is involved in what you call 'staking a claim?'"

"Just a moment!" Rusch said. "Are you envisaging that the buster might be unstable and blow up?"

"Well . . ." Aylward looked at the floor. "There's an awful lot of reactive material in it, they tell me."

"Hmph! It can't be very sensitive, then. We spectroanalyzed it with a laser beam intense enough to boil some of its surface off. What do you think, Gabrilov?"

Gabrilov was silent for a few seconds. At length he said, "Well, sir—we don't lose anything by being careful. To stake our claim, we'd normally match velocities and coast in close, wouldn't we? We're still calculating whether we have enough reaction mass to take the thing in tow, but I don't think we have, so we'll have to send someone over and plant

an identification beacon—but much of the surface will be hot. I see several reasons why we should stand well off and take time out to program a remote-controlled missile to act as a marker.”

Rusch pondered. “Yes, it’d be cutting things fine to try and get something that massive into orbit at the end of this trip—I was working on the assumption that all we could do would be to mark her with a long-life beacon and come back under no-load to fetch her. . . . Very well, Mr. Aylward. I’ll arrange to send out an unmanned lifeboat with the beacon in it—there’s enough iron in the buster for electromagnets to get a grip. And to satisfy your qualms, we’ll keep our distance.”

“Thank you, captain,” Aylward said. He was surprised to find, now that he’d made his point, that he was shaking all over and his forehead was slippery with sweat.

They tied the lifeboat controls directly into the pilot board on the bridge, and Gabrilov took charge. On the screen was a split-image projection: one half showed the view from the lifeboat itself, the other the picture from the side of the ship as the lifeboat curved outwards towards the buster.

Almost a quarter of an hour crept by on leaden feet as Gabrilov delicately maneuvered the tiny lifeboat closer and closer to the buster. Abruptly a tiny buzzer on the control board beeped and kept on beeping.

“A hundred miles,” Gabrilov said, not looking away from the screen in which the buster had grown progressively from a mere spot of light to a sizable globe. “The homer has picked it up. Shall I just let it go its own way now?”

“How far above the surface will the magnets take charge?”

“From about ten miles they ought to give a soft enough landing for the beacon to survive undamaged.”

“Then try and match velocities with the lifeboat about ten miles off.”

Gabrilov raised an eyebrow and looked worried, but he moved the main jet control slightly, and the image of the lifeboat in the other half of the screen showed a spurt of reaction mass.

More time limped by.

At last Gabrilov gave a precisely timed touch to the braking jet control, and sat back. "Very nice," Rusch said under his breath. "Yes, she's going down."

Aylward wondered if his heartbeats were audible to those around him; he was almost deaf with the rush of blood in his ears, and he was breathing fast and urgently. On the screen, the buster grew to moon-size, earth-size, and still larger; by now the lifeboat and the buster could no longer be seen separately from the ship without high magnification. The beeping grew to an intolerable unbroken buzz and stopped short.

"Well, she's down," Gabrilov said unnecessarily. "And it looks as though—"

He got no further. On both halves of the screen there was suddenly an eruption of incredible, sunlike light, as though a miniature star had been born.

"Crew's getting restive, sir," Gabrilov said, putting back the phone. "That was the MO with the casualty statement. One man was watching through binoculars, and he's going to need new eyes when we land, and a man in the nav section was looking down a 'scope, and he'll need one new retina. The radar tech who first spotted it has gone hysterical and needed sedation, and we have at least half a dozen cases of radiation sickness incipient."

Rusch grunted. He had been more affected by their narrow escape than he wanted to reveal. He said, "It seems to me some of us joined the service for no better reason than the chance of sharing in a buster! The thing would have blown us to glory if we'd gone much closer. Tell 'em they're lucky to be alive. Did the thing leave any debris, by the way?"

"Not a scrap," said Gabrilov gloomily. "Oh, there's probably some dust hell-bent for the stars, but nothing big enough to pick up on radar."

"It can't have been a total-conversion reaction!" The idea seemed to hit Rusch like a physical blow.

"No—or even at this distance, we wouldn't have survived to talk about it." Gabrilov drew himself down to a chair and formed his body into a posture as though rest-

ing on the seat. After a moment, he said, "Lieutenant Ahmed was talking about space mines. Weapons of war. At first I thought he was just suffering from the after effects of seeing his dreams of riches go bang—but the more I reflect, the more I'm inclined to wonder."

Rather unwillingly, Rusch looked across the room at Aylward. "What do *you* think?" he demanded.

Aylward shook his head seriously. "I don't think it's war. I mean—well, we haven't suffered much material damage. It's cost us thirty or so ships, but we have three and a half thousand in regular service; the loss of experienced space personnel is probably more serious, but still it's a fleabite. And besides, why should . . . *someone* who can afford to disguise a mine with thousands of tons of metal and induce a reaction as efficient as the one we saw waste effort on sowing a few mines randomly in space? They could so easily make a job of it by launching a few into orbits intersecting Earth's. No, I don't think we have to involve an enemy. My guess is that the busters are inherently unstable, being composed of such heavy elements, and conceivably they don't even belong in our order of space-time. Alteration of the nature of the space around them—on the arrival in the vicinity of a large and massive object, such as a spaceship—might upset their not very good equilibrium and blow them back into the continuum from which they came." He frowned deeply. "And yet this leaves so many questions unanswered. Why, for instance, were many of them safely brought into orbits around human-occupied worlds? I had it in the back of my mind that they might be contraterrene, but since some of them were—uh—hooked, this is out of the question. I think that I am going to give this matter some further investigation."

"Well, we can't do much here," Rusch said heavily. "We have sick men on board who need planetside medical care, but even if we hadn't I'd order immediate planetfall. This news about busters is too urgent to keep to ourselves. Gabrilov!"

"Sir?"

"Get the nav section to program us an orbit that will take us in radio range of a government station as soon as possible, and then home. Have the men strap down for a

turning maneuver. And you'd better have the MO issue decelerine, too. We're in a hurry!"

Martinu looked regretfully at his empty glass and realized as he did so that the gentle voice of Professor Aylward had stopped. With an effort he brought himself back to the present, eyeing the other with curiosity. One would never have taken him for such a damned good storyteller.

"So that was how it all began," he said after a pause.

Aylward was tying knots now in his length of tubing. He nodded. "Mark you," he said, "it wasn't easy to convince the authorities. I say, I'm sorry to have to ask you, but would you do me a favor?"

"Of course."

"Well—I'd like another drink and I don't feel up to going and fetching one."

"Oh, certainly!" Martinu pulled himself to his feet. His muscles complained a little, but he adjusted after a moment or two and walked off with their glasses to find a waiter again. He was feeling a little superior by the time he got back—after all, Aylward enjoyed at least some gravity most of his life, whereas a spaceman like himself had to cope with the change from no gravity at all to one full gee every time he landed on earth.

Handing Aylward his new drink, Martinu wondered whether it was genuine devotion to duty or some defect of personality that made the tubby man hide himself away on the far side of the moon. He suspected the latter, now he came to think about it. What a shame—to be so outstanding in one narrow field and yet basically incompetent in the most important field of all, that of being an ordinary person.

With disconcerting insight Aylward said, "There's no need to be sorry for me, you know."

Martinu choked on a mouthful of his drink and began to make frantic denials. Aylward ignored him. Staring at the dancers inexhaustibly whirling around the floor, he went on, "I pity you as much as you pity me, and both of us ought to pity the people here. Like mice, when the cat's away."

Was he going to become maudlin, for heaven's sake? Martinu decided to change the subject as quickly as possible. He

said, "You were saying something about convincing the authorities, professor."

"Was I?" Aylward blinked; the alcohol was taking effect on him. "Ah, so I was! Yes, I remember a blockheaded idiot named Machin—a bureaucrat if ever there was one—who tried to make out that we'd concocted a plot to filch all future busters away from their rightful owners. Like most people, he needed to have his nose rubbed in the truth before he'd accept it. But for him, we could have saved the *Sirius*."

"I remember the *Sirius*!" Martinu said. "I had friends on her. She found a buster within radio range of Luna Port—"

"And because of Machin and his like," Aylward interrupted, "went right in to grab it and was blown up with eight hundred people aboard. To many people saw it happen with their own eyes, and went blind like the crewmen of the *Algol*, for that affair to be hushed up.

"So they fell over backwards to make amends. I was given facilities for taking proper equipment to the spot when the next buster appeared, and by the time the fifth or sixth one showed up, I'd worked out the theoretical pattern of the Field. They try and tell me it was difficult to do, but don't you believe it—the math is simple enough. What did give trouble was getting the generating equipment down to portable size. But we managed it in the end, made it a commercial proposition—and busters held no more terrors; we could stabilize them in our space-time long enough to cut them up and separate out the radioactives." His *s*'s were getting the least bit slurred, and he was staring at his fingers as though unsure quite how many he could see.

"Angus tells me," he went on after a pause, "that it might have been a very bad thing. It was the direct cause of the vast inflation we underwent—when?—oh, thirteen or fourteen years ago, because the market for precious metals was saturated. It's the cause of prices like five bucks for a cup of coffee and two hundred for a taxi ride. I remember I used to dream of having a million dollars. Now where would a million get you? I bet Angus is spending a million on this party!" He waved to include the whole of the gaiety around them. Distantly in the background a theremin was playing a solo in imitation of a trumpet. Martinu nodded pontifically.

"But of course it also cured us of the tendency to place arbitrary values on things," Aylward finished. "Now we prize only work invested as a backing for currency, and the uranium from the busters made cheap fission power possible, so maybe the trade was a good one. Ah!"

A waiter in search of empty glasses entered the alcove, and Aylward signaled to him. "Get the captain another!" he instructed. "And one of the same for me."

Martinu hesitated, then shrugged. "Slivovitz," he told the waiter, who nodded and hurried away. A man and a girl, holding hands, looked in to see if the alcove was unoccupied, and on finding it wasn't, moved away. The waiter returned with the fresh glasses.

"Foof!" Aylward said, having gulped at his. "That's rather good." He lowered the glass cautiously beside him, then leaned back, sleepily half-closing his eyes.

"Look at them," he said. "Three thousand million blind mice. Who'll bell the cat?"

Martinu, whose own wits were apparently slipping a little, said foggily, "I *beg* your pardon?"

"I said, 'Three thousand million blind mice. Who'll bell the cat?'" repeated Aylward with dignity. "Though there isn't a cat, that I know of. For 'Who'll bell the cat?' read 'The mouse ran up the clock.'"

No, it was no good. Martinu didn't try to follow that one.

Aylward finished his drink with an appreciative belch, and said, "I suppose mice don't do so badly, really. What were we talking about?"

"Mice, apparently," Martinu said.

"I was talking about mice," Aylward corrected. "*We* were talking about busters. This can't last, you know."

"*What* can't last?"

"All this!" said Aylward largely. He gestured. "Not just this party—everything else, too. All unconscious of their doom the little victims play. Tell me, do you think the human race is master of its fate, or do you believe, like some people, that we're property?"

Martinu was relieved to hear a fairly sensible remark for a change. He considered the question. "That's one of Fort's speculations, isn't it? I—well, I don't know."

"I'll tell you," Aylward promised. "Do you think you're of value to anyone but yourself?"

"No," said Martinu positively. "Nobody'd mourn me—except perhaps the crew of my ship, and some of them I'm not sure of."

"You're lucky. So am I. Just think of all the poor people who think they do matter. How disappointed they'll be when they find they don't!"

"When will that be?" Martinu said, feeling it was expected.

"Oh, definitely some time. Do you know what a buster is? I mean, what it's for?"

Martinu was finding this a little tedious. He wished he had taken Angus's advice. "Tell me," he requested resignedly.

"I warn you, you won't believe me. Angus doesn't, and he's a typical hardheaded individual, and none of the other people I've told has believed me either. Anyway, I'll tell you. You said you didn't know if we were property or not. Well, we aren't property. Because we aren't worth owning. We're just one hell of a nuisance.

"Did you ever find yourself bothered with mice?"

Sheer politeness, nothing else, drove Martinu to bring to bear what concentration he had left. "When I was a kid," he said finally, "I recall my mother had a house full of them. But they never bothered me. I rather liked them—except for the stink."

"How did your mother get rid of them?"

"Well, I guess we tried trapping them first, but that didn't work for long—the cunning so-and-so's soon learned to avoid the traps. So in the end we poisoned them."

Another couple appeared at the entrance of the alcove, with their arms round each other. They were too absorbed to notice that anyone else was present, and walked past the seat where Aylward and Martinu were towards the curtains hanging behind it. Glad of some distraction, Martinu glanced over his shoulder and saw that they had drawn one of the curtains back to reveal an open window; they were leaning on the sill and staring at the stars. He envied them.

"All right," Aylward said. "Now if you wanted to do something like that to men, what would you use for baiting your traps?"

"I'm sorry?" Martinu came back with a start. Aylward repeated the question.

"Well," Martinu said, humoring him, "I'd use something either useful or precious."

"Exactly. And you'd lay some ground bait first, in order to lure the unsuspecting victims to the traps when they were put down."

Suddenly Martinu got it. He wondered why it had taken him so long. "You mean the busters, don't you?" he said disgustedly. But after a moment he saw the amusing side of it—and after all, Angus had warned him!

He chuckled. "So they're mousetraps, and we're the mice!" he said. "What an idea! But aren't you overlooking one thing in your analogy? How about the poison?"

"I was coming to that," said Aylward with equanimity. "And so, I judge, are the 'people' who planned the busters. When the mice started dodging the traps, did your mother latch on at once?"

"No, we kept right on setting them for a while. It was only when they became a real pest that we turned to poison."

"Pre-cisely!" Aylward looked pleased. "I imagine that they—whoever they are—will decide that their traps aren't working any more. Then someone will find a super-large, stable buster and bring it to Earth, and—that will be that."

A cold chill moved down Martinu's spine. Trying to ascribe it to the open window behind him, he said slowly, "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Mohammed Abdul in the *Vega* just brought in the first stable buster since the *Capella's*! Parked it in orbit today! And—it's an outsize one, a giant!"

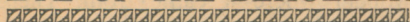
Aylward's face, all of a sudden, went pasty-pale. He looked at Martinu and tried to speak but couldn't.

Behind them, the girl looking out the window said in a tone of puzzlement, "Honey, what's the time?"

"Three o'clock. Why?" said her companion.

"I *thought* it wasn't dawn yet. And that isn't even the east over there. But look how red the sky is getting!"

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER



LONG BEFORE man created objects that would *do* something—cars, radio sets, guns—he created objects that *were* something.

Beautiful, for instance. Or magical.

One would imagine from this that the creation of being-category artifacts must be a far more fundamental denominator of intelligence than the creation of doing-category artifacts.

Unfortunately, the cliché warns us where beauty lies. And lies and lies.

It may prove sobering to reflect that if—let's say—a porpoise armed itself with a harpoon and went hunting skindivers, we'd regard this as proof of rational thought, whereas if it settled down to make aesthetically pleasing patterns out of seaweed and pebbles we would pay no attention. Yet I know which comes closer to my definition of civilized activity.



THE PEAK jutted up from the scorched range like a blood-stained fang, and its color was indescribable. Painter knew that rose and vermilion and scarlet and crimson all entered into the total effect, for he had climbed all over it

to see. It had taken him many days to survey the whole area, but he did not begrudge the time expended. He knew now precisely how the effect might be duplicated.

He was placing the first layer of pigment when the ship went past.

The movement had caught his attention a fraction before the scream of riven air came down to him, and he was quick enough to catch a glimpse of it before it dropped below the horizon. His first thought—as was natural to him—was to remark how magnificently the white vapour trail, tinted to blush pink by the fury of the exhausts, stood out against the almost unbearable steel blue of the sky, and to fix the impression in his mind to be reproduced at leisure.

His second was to wonder where it came from. There were no scheduled ships visiting this world, he was certain, which left as the most likely of various alternative possibilities that it was making an emergency landing.

In which case, he might be able to help.

The passing regret at having to postpone the completion of his picture was negligible; he had an almost perfectly trained visual memory, and the colors of this mountain range were unlikely to be forgotten in a hurry.

He was a good distance from his ship, of course—he was almost at the outward end of his trek—and it would take him a full rotation of the planet to get there and back. But if the stranger was still in control of his ship, he would have put it down where Painter had put his down, for the excellent reason that it was the only decently flat and solid piece of ground on the planet. And indeed, he remembered, the line of flight of the ship had been in that direction.

There was no point in picking up his equipment. It would suffer no harm where it was, and he would travel faster for being more lightly loaded. Painter—that was his name as well as his occupation—gave a final glance around to make sure he had left nothing to be blown away, and started with lengthy strides towards his goal.

As the ship dipped into atmosphere, Froude was blaming Takamura and Takamura was blaming the mechanics at their last port of call. Christy, of course, being a woman,

was blaming both of them for not organizing the universe properly to suit her convenience.

Tak shot a quick look at her when he could safely take his mind off the controls for a mile or two, and wondered how long this expensive and delicate female was going to stay married to Froude. A short stopover on the third planet of a B-type star would certainly do nothing to ease either of their tempers.

Froude was still shouting at him, he realized, and he broke in with a weary shrug. "All right!" he exclaimed. "You hired me to fly the ship, remember, not to service it! We can't settle anything by quarreling now, and if you don't let up I won't be able to concentrate on the controls."

He had told Froude when the man hired him that he could put a ship down with an Alpheratzan leg-show running on the exterior viewscreen, but Christy seemed suddenly to wake up to the fact that their survival depended on the skill and judgment of Tak. She dropped into a chair and spoke in a more reasonable tone than either of the men.

"Tak's right, dear," she told Froude. "Time enough to argue when we're out of this mess."

"I suppose you've turned on the emergency distress call?" said Froude, thinking of it abruptly. Tak gave him a sour nod.

"It's been on for over an hour, since we first fell out of hyperspace."

"And how long will it take them to get to us?" Christy wanted to know.

Tak shook his head. "Five days—a week—something like that. Unless they have the stressed-space characteristics of this area on record, which is doubtful. No one's interested in visiting planets as hot as this bunch here."

Air whispered outside.

"You mean we may have to spend a *week* down there?" Appalled, Christy gazed at the furnace-mouth surface of the world as it streaked past below. "Why, there's nothing but rocks and sand all over!"

"I know." Tak was studying the radar profilometer with a frown; it seemed that the average angle of the surface was about fifteen degrees from vertical—an incredible shark-tooth mess of folds and rifts.

Froude had noticed the reading, too; he quit biting his nails in the corner of the cabin—*thinking the same way as I am about Christy's reactions*, Tak commented to himself—and came over to watch the wriggling line on the screen. "You can't be going to try and land in that!" he said.

"Well, we can't just sit up here," Tak snapped ill-temperedly. "There's bound to be oxygen in those rocks, and there might even be a trace in the air, but if we stick in orbit we're going to find it damned difficult to breathe in another day or so."

"Look!" said Froude suddenly. "Over there!"

Tak saw it at almost the same instant: a patch of usably flat ground four or five miles square, cut off amid high ridges of rock and lava. Whether he could put the ship down on it after being used to the twenty-mile runways of decent spacesports, he didn't know. But he would obviously have to find out.

"Quiet!" he ordered, shooting a swift look over his shoulder to see that Christy was going to keep out of the way. She was sitting with her face set in a grim mask, and Tak guessed Froude was going to hear something from her when the two were alone.

There was only one possible approach to the level spot, between sharp-edged hills four thousand feet high. It took three passes before he gained enough confidence to attempt the touch-down, almost not daring to breathe. He was on the brink of congratulating himself, though, when he saw a smooth rise in the ground ahead—a heap of sand round-backed by the wind like a stranded whale.

Gasping, he lifted the ship and cleared the obstacle by what he suspected was about the width of his palm; then there was a slithering—

They were down.

He shut off the power and sat back, wiping his forehead unashamedly. The half hope that one of the others would appreciate and remark on his achievement died as Christy got to her feet and walked deliberately over to a viewport, followed by the anxious gaze of her current husband.

She studied the landscape for some time. Then she turned and went to another port opposite. Only after that did she

say anything, and her voice was full of blistering contempt.

"This is a bloodstained place for a wedding trip!"

And they were at it again.

Tak wished the ship were big enough for him to get out of earshot, but it had only been designed for the six- or eight-hour journeys between stars through hyperspace; and although there were stores aboard for emergencies such as this, there was precious little else, and room was in shortest supply of all.

The quarrel died slowly. Christy had shouted herself hoarse, and crossed to the water spigot to draw a drink. Tak's hand closed over the knob before she could press it down.

"Careful," he said flatly. "What we have has got to last a week at least. I'm going to try and rig a distillation unit, but I doubt if there's much accessible water outside."

Christy looked at him for several seconds as though she could hardly believe her ears: *hired space pilots don't talk to me like that!* He could practically hear the thought.

Then she seemed to sag a little. She turned away. "No water," she said thinly. And the words suddenly reminded them that it was getting hot in the cabin.

"I'll go turn up the refrigeration," Tak said, and stepped over to the rear door guarding the power compartment. Christy made to duck back from the sweep of the radiation field, and he gave her a humorless grin.

"This close to a B-type sun we're getting about double a safe rate already. I shouldn't let a little leak from the pile worry you."

There was none of the dismay normal to a woman who had not yet born children in Christy's face, he noted. As he passed down the shaft towards the power compartment, he thought that if he had sized her up right it was unlikely she and Froude would be in the archetypal hurry of newlyweds, and in the confined space of this cabin it was just as well. It wouldn't be sexual frustration getting her down. But what the hell? Any kind of frustration would work on a woman who had been so pampered and spoiled all her life.

Tak turned the 'fridge controls over to maximum. On the way back to the cabin, he paused and reached deep into his kit-bag in the baggage storebox. His fingers found the hard efficient shape of his bolt-gun immediately—he believed in having the weapon handy.

But, he reflected as he hefted it in his palm, there were degrees of handiness, and if the situation called for it, he wanted this right in his pocket.

Froude was down in the head, though Tak presumed it was nerves that had driven him there more than actual physical need, on their present reduced water-intake. He had been wondering how much longer Christy could keep up her stubborn mask.

Now her composure began to crack.

"Doesn't it ever get dark on this bloodstained world?" she demanded in a passionate voice.

"About once in three days," Tak grunted. "I checked the rotation period. We landed shortly after dawn."

"So we sit and fry till the sun goes down three days from now." Christy nodded. She started to rub her eyes, which the glare was reddening, but checked herself in mid-motion, dropping her hands to clench them in her lap.

So it's not just that Froude is scared of losing her, Tak thought. *It works the other way around as well.*

Of course, it did figure—owning an interstellar ship was a fair guarantee that a man was a good catch for any woman interested in the luxury life. Accordingly, she was going to great trouble to preserve her impeccable make-up. Tak wondered if Froude had seen his wife without it.

Peering closely, he saw telltale flaws appearing over her skin. Unable to wash, Christy had been patching faults as best she could. There was an end to that process.

And it might not be a pleasant one.

Froude stepped back into the cabin and shot a quick glance at Tak. Not at Christy, the pilot noted. Interesting—but nasty!

He was very glad of the weight of the bolt-gun in his pocket.

"Tak just told me the sun doesn't go down till the day

after tomorrow," Christy said, making an attempt at establishing contact with her husband again. Tak didn't try to make the statement more precise, only waited for Froude's reaction.

It didn't come. Or rather, it took the form of blank acceptance, as if his spirit was being drained into the parching air along with the sweat from his skin. He put one hand on the edge of the viewport and stared out at the blindingly bright plain.

"What is that, anyway?" he muttered, gesturing at the round-backed hummock they had so nearly struck on the way down.

"All I know," Tak retorted, "is we're damned lucky it wasn't a ten thousand foot mountain. On a world like this a patch of flat ground is hard to come by. Oh—a sand drift, maybe."

"What could possibly make it drift?" Christy glared. "I've been watching and praying for some sign of a breeze, and the air is as still as space!"

At the sharpness of her tone Tak tensed. That was the shadow of hysteria! He forced himself to reply matter-of-factly.

"Right now, I guess, the ground will have been in full sunlight for long enough to become evenly heated, but near the terminator, where the ground is unequally warmed, I imagine you get some fierce winds. We might see gales around evening." And Christy's self-surveillance failed her; she finally rubbed her face, and make-up flaked like plaster.

Froude was still staring at the round-backed hummock; it seemed to fascinate him. Tak made an urgent gesture to Christy, and she put her hand to her mouth in horror before making a belated rush towards the head to repair the damage.

Froude glanced around when he heard the door slide to and relaxed thankfully when he saw she was out of sight. He breathed a shuddering sigh. "She's standing this better than I ever thought she would," he said. "But is there *no* way of hurrying the rescue ship?"

Tak shook his head. "Deducing the stress patterns of this area will take some time, and they'll have to come in below

light speed from some distance out in case they hit the same flaw complex we did. Then there'd be two of us to be collected."

Froude scanned the pilot's face hungrily. "How do you manage to stay so *calm*?" he demanded at last.

Tak shrugged. "I was stranded once before. Alone. Having company makes it comparatively pleasant."

Froude's eyes narrowed, and he turned away. *Stars!* thought Tak in horror. *Have I said something as wrong as I think I have?*

At that point Christy came back, her face restored to its masklike perfection but set in a sullen and determined expression.

"I'm going to explode if I have to stay another minute in this—this prison!" she burst out. "I'm going outside before I develop claustrophobia."

"Outside?" Froude echoed. "What for? There's nothing to see but rocks and sand!"

Equally astonished, Tak put in, "Also we only have one heatproof suit."

"Well, there's only one of me, isn't there?" Christy snapped. "That's plenty!"

"But you can't just go out for a stroll on your own—" Baffled, Tak came to a stop to find Froude's eyes on him.

"You're amazingly concerned for my wife's safety all of a sudden, aren't you?" Froude said silkily. "Is it just that having company makes your stay more bearable? You'd hate to lose her, wouldn't you?"

Christy wasn't following the trend of her husband's remarks. Tak didn't propose to enlighten her. He turned away.

"Think there may be monsters lurking out there to attack her?" Froude went on. "If that's bothering you, why don't you make a constructive suggestion? Like offering her your bolt-gun!"

Tak whirled. "How—?"

"How did I know?" Froude looked smug. "I didn't. I just saw that you have something heavy in your pocket. If it is a gun, go on—give it to her!"

Safer with her than with him, Tak told himself. Reluctantly, he unpocketed the weapon and handed it over, then showed

her how to get into the clumsy heatproof suit and how to operate its radio and power-assisted walking devices.

For fully a minute after the lock had closed behind her, Froude stood watching his wife march off across the level ground. At length, however, he turned to face the silent Tak.

"So having my wife's company made this accident comparatively pleasant, did it?" he whispered.

"Don't be a fool!" the pilot said desperately. "How the hell could there be anything like that going on? You haven't been out of sight for more than a couple of minutes since we came aboard!"

"Christy bores easily," Froude said between his teeth. "And the quickest cure she knows for boredom is another man. The way your mind's running has told me all I need to know. That's why I made sure you hadn't got your gun to pull on me. Clever—wasn't it?"

Exactly as he finished the last word, his fist shot out. Tak was not quite fast enough to evade it; the blow took him on the side of the head and knocked him staggering back against the wall. Helplessly, he shook his head, trying to clear it, and saw Froude closing in for another attack.

But the second blow was never launched.

"Hey! *Hey!*"

At the sound of Christy's voice from the wall speaker, Froude spun around, his expression swiftly changing to one of horror. "What is it?" he cried, and then, giving Tak a venomous glance, added more quietly, "If anything's happened to her—"

Tak didn't try to reason with him. The time was past when reason would help. Instead, he pushed himself groggily upright and crossed to the microphone through which he could contact Christy.

"We hear you," he said, his jaw working stiffly. "What is it?"

"Someone's been here before us! I've found a sort of hut out here!"

Tak stiffened. "Come back at once!" he rapped.

"Come back nothing! It's deserted—just a big box arrange-

ment of sheet metal, camouflaged to blend with the rocks. Well made, too. I'm going to take a look inside it."

Froude was wrestling with the dogs of the air lock, his face contorted. When the hum of the carrier wave ceased at the end of Christy's call, he redoubled his efforts.

"That won't do you any good," said Tak wearily. "The lock monitor won't open to anyone not wearing a suit fit for the external conditions. Anyway, how far can you walk in air like this?"

"But damnation!" Froude raged. "Her radio went dead—you heard it!" His hands went on tugging at the dogs as if he could no longer control their movements.

"She's walked into a metal box," Tak said sourly. "Of course the transmission's gone dead."

Just at that moment, the radio woke up again in the middle of an excited sentence. "—absolutely wonderful! Come and see what I've found!"

Tak gave the other a searching glance and saw him almost wilt with relief. He hated to think what processes were going on in that mind.

"You have the only heatproof suit," he told Christy reasonably. "Can you bring over whatever it is you've found?"

"Yes—yes, I guess I can lift it. I'm coming straight back. Oh, but this is *fantastic!*"

The object was big, flat, and awkward to get through the air lock, but Christy struggled with it into the cabin and then fumbled the helmet off her head. "Look at it!" she said. "Isn't it *tremendous?*"

Bewildered, Froude stared at it. "But it's only a picture of those mountains," he began, and let his voice die away. Tak had had the same first impression, but his mind was not so crowded with frustration; it had been barely a fraction of a second before he saw this was not just *a* picture, but—

There was complete silence for three minutes by the wall chronometer while they simply stood and gazed at it. Tak broke the spell finally with a long deep sigh.

"I don't know anything about painting," he confessed, and Christy interrupted him, genuine excitement in her voice for the first time in their brief acquaintance.

"I do! It's been an interest of mine for years. And I'll swear the man who painted that was one of the great artists of all time. Maybe *the* greatest. Spinocchi couldn't have done it, Yestens couldn't have done it, or van Gogh—no one I know could have put the sheer *life* into a barren scene like that!"

And yet it was only some mountains. Tak found the contradiction beyond his powers to cope with; he was satisfied to accept it as a fact. Froude, more practically for once, demanded, "Are there any more?"

"Yes, a stack of them." Christy was examining the back of the painting, trying to determine what it was made of—some kind of smooth compressed fiber, apparently. "I just took the first one I saw and decided I had to show it to you right away, but there must be a dozen or so of these plates, and if this is a typical example—why, art galleries on fifty planets would trade their entire stock for the sake of them." She sounded breathless with wonder.

"But who could possibly have done them?" Froude asked. Christy could only shrug.

"Someone else who got stranded here," Tak suggested. "Wrecked his ship and couldn't signal for help."

"But who was he?" Christy whispered. "If he was painting like this before he—he got here, how is it the whole galaxy doesn't know about him?"

There was renewed silence. During it, Tak realized that the impact of the picture had precipitated the tension there had been between them; it was sinking like mud to the bottom of clear water, and in another moment would have gone.

Froude had crossed to the viewport which looked over the mountains depicted in the painting, and was glancing back and forth as if trying to see where the touch of genius had transmuted the original into art. He failed and turned away. "To think that so much—beauty—is out there, and we never saw it," he said in mild astonishment. "Tak, I'd like to go and look over this hut—see if we can find any clue to the identity of the painter."

"Is there any way we can all go out together?" Christy

asked. "I don't want to have to trek back and forth with the whole stack of pictures."

Tak hesitated, and finally nodded. "If you don't mind going even shorter on water, we could soak our clothes inside ordinary space suits. In this heat it should be good for half an hour's cooling."

He half expected Froude to round on him and demand why he hadn't mentioned this before, instead of letting Christy go out on her own, but there was no anger left.

He felt a curious reluctance to leave the ship, and the sight of the painting, and he could tell that the others experienced it, too. It was only the prospect of more and perhaps even better pictures outside that dragged them away at all.

There were more paintings. Thirteen of them in a stack on the sandy floor of the little metal hut—one corner of which was in clear view of the ship, and but for being colored to match the surrounding rocks would easily have been spotted.

And every single painting opened their eyes a little wider.

"I thought there was nothing here but red and brown," Tak said, swallowing painfully. "How is it that when you look at the picture you can see the greens and blues and pinks staring you in the face?"

Christy's voice came over his helmet phones. "If I knew that, Tak, I could paint like this. I've never seen—never dreamed of anything like it!"

"You were right, Chris," Froude put in. "He must have been one of the greatest men of all time."

A thought struck Christy, and she rounded on Tak. "Tak! He couldn't still be here, could he?"

"Where's his ship?" said the pilot wearily. "We looked hard enough for somewhere to land, and this was all we could find on the day side of the planet. If he made it to here on foot, he must have crashed nearby, among the mountains. Maybe he just managed to make a cache of his paintings in the hope that someone would find them eventually. Then—well, it would be much easier for a man to die than live on a world like this."

And yet it wasn't so horrible any more—not now that he had

been enabled to *see*, instead of just looking. With a flash of insight he realized that here was why the bitterness and anger had gone out of them: so long as the world where they found themselves was unwelcome and hostile, it was ugly; when it was no longer ugly, it was no longer to be railed at. Whoever this artist was, they owed him perhaps as much as their sanity.

"We can't stay here much longer," he warned. "I'm feeling the heat now. But after sunset it'll be cool enough for us to come out in ordinary suits, and then we can carry the pictures over to the ship."

The sight of the ship was the first thing to strike Painter as he approached. It jarred. It stuck out of the unity of the landscape like a stain. It was to avoid this that he had so carefully covered his own ship for the duration of his stay, preferring to live in a prefabricated hut—and painted even that the same color as the rocks, in case the sight of it disturbed the ordered precision of his mind. One had to become almost a part of the planet before it was possible to represent it properly. . . .

Nonetheless, he was glad of that shock experienced so far ahead of his arrival. For the ship resembled no vessel he had ever seen. It was almost a wrench to connect it with the furious trail he had seen on the blue sky; it was so unlike the ships of his own people.

In short: the other visitors to this world were *aliens*.

Cautiously, he dropped behind a ridge of sand, and from then until he reached the flat expanse of ground on which the ship had set down kept well out of sight. At last he wriggled between two boulders, which afforded him the protection of a dark shadow in which details would be blurred by contrast with the prevailing glare, and was able to study the area between the ship and his hut with unruffled attention.

So: there were three of these creatures, unless others had remained in the ship. Not likely; it was very small. And they were not totally different from himself, either, as far as he could tell through the protective suits they wore, which might or might not conform closely to their underlying shape. At least, they had two legs, two arms, one head—as he did.

He debated within himself whether he should try and make contact or simply wait until they departed or were rescued. The latter course seemed safest, but on the other hand it was excessively timid. Many members of his far-flung species had encountered other races in space; he had never done so and had often reflected on the chance of such a meeting being a stimulus to his creative imagination.

He was hardly equipped to benefit from the encounter, of course. He was a painter; it was his life. He was no expert in communication or psychology, or any of the myriad subjects that might lighten the difficulty of opening contact between strangers—

Abruptly his mental debate ceased. It came home to him what they were doing. They had brought his paintings out of the hut and ranged them against the outside wall, and were staring at them with great concentration, gesticulating the while as though discussing their merits.

Painter felt decision harden in his mind. People who could appreciate his work must be fundamentally similar to himself. Surely, with that much of a breach in the barrier between them already, contact was bound to be fruitful.

He got up and started to descend the slope towards the aliens.

"Christy!" Froude's voice exploded in the helmet phones. "*Look out!*"

Tak had barely time to turn and see the monstrous shape striding towards them before Christy had seized the bolt-gun from her belt and fired it in a spasm of pure terror.

The beast withstood the fury of the weapon only a fraction of a second; then it went sprawling in the sand.

Tak's heart seemed to have stopped. He waited to make sure it was still beating before he moved again, and by that time the sound of Christy's sobbing mingled in his ears with Froude's comforting phrases of commendation as she leaned her head on her husband's shoulder.

Awkwardly, he went closer to them.

"So that's what happened to our artist," Froude said somberly, gazing at the huge clumsy shape of the black-hided beast bleeding dark brown into the thirsty sand.

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious? That thing must have got him, the same way it tried to get us." Froude swallowed audibly. "What a foul end for a man with such talent!"

Tak hesitated. "We'd better get back to the ship," he said finally. "We've been out in this heat too long as it is. Here, let me help you, Chris."

Christy straightened. "I'm all right," she said in a strained voice. "It was just the shock of seeing that thing coming towards me. Yes, let's go in."

"Careful when you take your suit off, Froude," Tak reminded him. "We've got to get that water back in the recirculator."

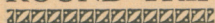
They plodded across the sand to the air lock again. As Christy was climbing up first into the cabin, Tak turned and looked back, a sudden idea forming.

"You don't suppose that—"

No, the notion was ridiculous. "Nothing," he said to Froude's inquiry, and clambered up the ladder. "Wait till the crew of the rescue ship see what we've found!"

Outside, the first winds of evening were tugging at the mound of sand that covered Painter's ship. The sun caught the fugitive gleam of metal through the grains as they fell away.

ROUND TRIP



I THINK this is the most terrifying idea I have ever had for a science-fiction story.

We have railed at the limitations of our senses as well as at the shortness of our life span. We have probed out into the infinity of space and dug up the relics of the past, trying to widen the bounds of our perception.

We have found small comfort anywhere we looked.

This story is about a man who transcended the last boundary and saw beyond the end of the universe. In a way, I suppose, it is reminiscent of that grim—pun intended—story of Grimm's, the one about the man who invited his friend to peer into a microscope and to see there a fearful jungle of monsters, tearing at one another, savaging and devouring their bodies in a frenzy of destruction. And when the friend demanded, aghast, "Is this not hell?" the man said, "No—it is a drop of pond water."



TO THE most noble, most magnanimous, and most beautiful of evolved creatures, the Lady Lireel bez Hamath, I,

Darek bez Hamath, send greetings and these words by my own hand. Hail—and farewell!

Forgive me, wife, for addressing you as though you were a stranger; forgive me for the agony which will come into your eyes when you take this letter from the hand of its bearer, who is, after all, myself, and know that I am indeed writing as the stranger which I have become. It is a long farewell which I must take of you, the longest that any man ever took of his beloved, and yet it is with the certainty that we shall meet again. Indeed, in a manner of speaking, when you read these very words we shall already have met again. In a manner of speaking . . .

Where was the beginning? In what deity-forsaken pit of primeval time did I decree for myself this torment—and for you? But—

Oh, Lireel my darling, I sit here looking at your portrait, where it stands on the communicator, and know that I could call you and see your features move in reality, instead of in that eternal delightful smile which the artist prisoned in the cube yonder. But I dare not; I would rather remember you smiling, even if the memory is of a poor shadow of your true self, than remember you as you would look were I to call and speak to you. . . .

Let me marshal my thoughts if I can. Let me recount the things you already know in order to prepare you for what you do not yet know—and indeed for what I myself do not yet know but am even so certain of beyond the chance of doubt.

Do you remember our last days together a-planet? When we took the children to look at the cradle of our race? That was a lesson you had been saying for a long time we ought to teach them; I had held back, maintaining that their minds were too youthful and unformed for them to withstand the shock as yet. Eventually you prevailed, though. I yielded for your sake despite the shadow of melancholy it would cast over our parting.

It must have been a beautiful world once, that planet where our stock sprang from. Even now it has its own sad loveliness, which I think I saw reflected in the children's eyes when at last they understood what had happened there. The pain and agony which the sight of that scarred

Earth still evokes in the human breast after—how long do the archaeologists say? Eleven thousand years? And for every one of those years, ten thousand human beings, creatures at least a little like ourselves, died in lingering agony.

It is a memory we like to hide from when we can; at our parting, I suspect that I was almost glad to flee from the image of that memory mirrored in your eyes and the children's.

Yet it is always with us. Maybe it was the original root cause of our need to know, our need to comprehend the universe in which we find ourselves. But the day will come—sooner for you than for me, by a very long way—when mankind will have to find another motive for continuing to live, because it is within our grasp to know everything—literally and without qualification everything—about the cosmos.

I took you and the children to Oyalet before I left, to see the computers there, and I remember your little shiver when you first really felt in your bones that here was the analogue of the universe. It is a gigantic concept, isn't it? The peak and perfection of nearly two millennia of concentrated effort have fruited on Oyalet. In the beginning they were satisfied to cope with every particle of matter in our own galaxy, tracing back its history to the moment of the Ultimate Origin. But before they reached that point they had to start taking into account the other galaxies and decided there was nothing for it but to build an analogue for the cosmos entire.

The observation! The lifetime-long excursions into the uttermost corners of the universe at speeds so great that we overtook time itself and could look from a distance at our own galaxy in its youthful prime! And the analysis of the results! It staggers the mind.

And consequently we know the answer to a problem which has baffled the best intelligences since before the dawn of history. At many stages of our growing knowledge, it seemed that the problem was itself meaningless, although it is recorded of the prehistoric sage Newton that he suspected the point of absolute relative nonmotion might be found among the stars, which at that time people had no means of visiting.

But the computers at Oyalet gave us the answer, and located for us the point at which there is an equal amount of matter plus velocity—of energy, in effect—in every conceivable direction. Insofar as the term has any meaning at all, one might say that “here” is the point at which it all began: you, me, the planet Earth, Oyalet, Sirius, and the other galaxies. . . . This point, this theoretical location in space, is on the empty world-line once occupied by the primal ylem.

“Here”—within a few thousand miles of where I am writing to you.

If it wasn't so important to us, as human beings, to *know* beyond a shadow of doubt, to verify with our direct perceptions what is predicted by our tools, the computers, we would never have troubled to come here. But we did, expecting I may say to find exactly what we had been told we would find: nothing.

I remember so clearly that it almost blinds me to the page on which I am setting these inadequate words down, how we assembled in the observation room to—well, to look at that nothing we expected to find. Illogical; but we as a species have never been noteworthy for our logical behavior.

As you well know, there are six ships in the expedition, identified to one another by hyperspatial links, and aboard them I have about fourteen thousand picked men and women, experts to the last. I have never been director of an expedition that so satisfied me, that so impressed me with the unison wave of enthusiasm which boiled up during the course of the uneventful journey. Somewhere deep in our minds it must have sprung from a sense of triumph—from the feeling that we puny material creatures, for all our mistakes, had unfailingly pursued our quarry to its lair: the *fons et origo* of the very matter in which we consist.

I remember saying to Incoratchuatar, my assistant—whom you haven't met, but who will doubtless visit you after this trip—that if our predictions were verified we should have a deal of trouble gathering more data after this in order to base yet other predictions. He laughed, as if the idea was new to him, and then he frowned, and off he went quietly by himself to return in a few hours' time with a plan for testing

the predictions resulting from running the Oyalet computers in reverse.

You will at once see what he was getting at. We had traced back the motion of every particle in the universe, in the plenum, to its common point of origin. Conversely, we could extrapolate from these observed motions—we had all the necessary information by now—in order to find out what will be the end.

"In my spare time," said Incoratchuatar—and this I may say amused me for he is the most dedicated man I have ever met, having neither family nor recreations (which was why they passed him over and selected me to be director of the expedition despite my actually inferior record of achievement in purely scientific fields)—"in my spare time," and he blinked as if aware of my amusement, "I have worked out two possible ends for the universe. One cannot grasp sufficient factors to decide between them. Possibly, the recession from the point of Ultimate Origin will continue, until energy is so diluted in space and time that every particle is contained in a universe of its own, having receded from every other particle to the point at which none can influence any others; and this, although indicated by some trends, seems unlikely unless some agency other than simple recession diminishes available gravitational force past the point at which any agglomeration of matter like a star or a planet can exist. . . . Or the universe may be a closed continuum, so that after a very long time indeed, it turns a corner, to use the obvious metaphor, and the recession without changing its direction becomes an approach and brings all matter and energy back to its point of origin. Time and space would close in with them; at the last, there would again be ylem, surrounded by emptiness so complete that it would possess not even the quality of existence."

Into the silence in which we were contemplating the nature of such emptiness broke a voice—that of our chief pilot. He spoke in the deliberately controlled tones in which men always announce momentous news, such as that of a death or disaster.

You must remember that we were closing in on the point at which we expected to find nothing; we were waiting for

the sensitive instruments which indicated the relative amounts of energy existing in all directions from us to quiver into the absolute dead center of their mountings. And it was at this moment that Chief Pilot Kopdet said, "Director, there is a spaceship ahead of us."

Naturally, we were stunned. Kopdet informed me afterwards that he had been observing it for some seconds before he concluded that the thing ahead *could* only be a spaceship, owing to the fact that it was obviously artificial: perfectly spherical and incredibly highly reflective.

And a ship it was. We closed to within two hundred miles of it, puzzling, and sent our six ships into orbit about it as if it had been a planet. For it was gigantic! I had imagined our own ships to be large, with their crews of more than two thousand apiece, but this dwarfed them to dust grains.

It was—well, it was like a marker. It was balanced precisely at the center of the universe. It had exactly the same amount of matter and energy on every side of it.

Someone, I thought to myself, had known we were coming. I didn't utter the words to Incoratchuatar. He was thunderstruck as he contemplated the—the object.

And it was only after a half hour of silent amazement, shared by everyone in the expedition, I believe, that he turned to me and spoke in a shaky voice. "Director, I had been envisaging just such a means of verifying our further predictions."

I told him to make himself clearer, while we waited to see if the spaceship would react to the arrival of strangers. He stumbled and was confused, but the gist of what he was saying was this: that given the time and the effort and the desire to know (all of which we human beings have in abundance), it would be possible to design and build a spaceship. Only not just a spaceship. A device that would withstand billions upon billions of years of waiting, so that if the universe was cyclical, if one infinitely distant day the stars crashed together again, it would survive to tell the next visitors.

To tell—us!

If Incoratchuatar's inspired guess was correct, this spaceship around which we orbited was exactly as old as the universe itself; it had been placed here, last time around, to await the arrival of someone else who wanted to know about the fate in store.

Or it might have been placed here more recently, during this universal cycle, by another race with the same curiosity as mankind. . . .

There was only one way to find out. I called for space garb and a gravisled, and we went to look.

One would have thought that so gigantic an object would have had an appreciable gravitational field. It didn't, and on thinking it over one saw that was logical. It must not react with or influence its surroundings in any way.

But in that case, what was the good of it?

Perfectly reflective, it hung awaiting our approach until we could see ourselves clinging to the gravisled in the slightly deformed image thrown back by the curved skin; and then, as though a switch had been tripped, the hull turned black. I thought for an extraordinary moment it had vanished; then I saw its bulk outlined against galaxies a trillion light-years distant, and gestalt put it back in the place from which it had seemed to disappear.

Cautiously, unsure of what next to do, we circled it and saw that there were features on its surface. There was an opening. . . .

We headed towards it, flashing lamps into the yawning hole, and found that there was now a fair gravitational tug to contend with. It drew us gently down, and we found we could walk upright.

I reflected that this substance on which I stood—whatever its nature might be—had perhaps survived the Ultimate Origin, which we now suspected was not after all the beginning of things, and looked into the heart of the ship.

And saw—though at first I didn't recognize it, for my mind was geared to anticipate something wholly alien and strange—a word written up. In our own language.

WELCOME.

Oh, now we have fought down our disbelief, and now we

can think and reason with the knowledge which the discovery has brought. But it took us days to convince ourselves, even after we had searched through layer after layer of the ship's interior, finding renewed evidence at every turn. . . .

You will wish to know specifically what we found. We found pictorial records—film, exposed through gigantic telescopes at twelve points on the sphere, at a rate of about one frame every thousand years. I've seen that film; it's fantastic, magnificent, unbelievable. The film fits our projectors. We found magnetic recordings and instrument readings for every conceivable wave band of energy from cosmic radiation to gravity. And we simply dropped the tapes into our players. The most incredible of all are the tapes which record the Ultimate Origin—there, you see, I can't even yet free myself of the old habit pattern of thinking that the universe has only happened once.

To be brief: we know, even without conducting Incoratchuatar's program of research, that we have been here before. Perhaps only once, although I think more likely many millions of times. It doesn't matter. Let me get to the most important point of all.

Concentric with the entire ship, at its heart, we found another featureless sphere, about nine hundred meters in diameter. We can't penetrate the exterior of it—small wonder, for it possesses the same properties which enabled the entire ship to withstand the pressures of the—of the Origin and End. You see, towards the end of the cycle the defenses of the ship go up automatically, and thereafter the only record is the internal one of the energy required to resist what happens. As the energy has been storing up continually since the ship was first built, there is plenty available. Stolen from the universe, you may say—and this has interesting consequences.

Why can't I keep my thoughts straight? I've missed out one very important thing. When we entered the ship the first time, underneath the message of welcome we found a warning, which said among other things that the defenses of the ship would remain down for as long as it took a certain dial to complete one revolution. We calculated that the time al-

lowed was a very familiar unit: the year of a certain now devastated planet in an insignificant system well out towards the edge of our home galaxy. . . .

The year is up today.

I ordered my crews to make the best possible use of the time given. We ripped out all the old records and replaced them with fresh stock for the benefit of the next visitors. We feel quite certain that no one else in this universal cycle will interfere with this ship. After all, we built it.

We built it. Let me spell that out. In the very first cycle of the universe men were undecided as to whether there was a cycle, so they built this spaceship, using energy and matter stolen from the universe, which would never—except during this one year out of every universal cycle—influence the rest of the cosmos again. Only . . . I've been calculating, and I find there was a first cycle which never should have been repeated. Mathematically I can express this tidily. In words—the energy and matter of the cosmos bounced off that ship. And because it was so perfectly reflective, the first cycle did repeat, almost exactly but for one small qualification. There was diminution in the total amount of energy; a tiny quantity, but not negligible, was locked for ever and ever in the spaceship.

So it's our doing that the universe is cyclic. There was a first time, which but for our intervention would have been unique. Since, there have been repetitions which will continue until the resonating together of many minute discrepancies causes someone (myself, presumably, or the echo of myself) to plant a hydrogen bomb inside the ship instead of refilling the recording devices. . . .

You see, a cumulative difference is building up from universe to universe, partly due to the knowledge that the universe *is* cyclical. (Ah, how clumsy and fumbling words are compared to the clarity and simplicity of math!) Chiefly, this is due to the first builders having worked so well none of their successors needed to make ships of their own and duplicate the task.

Also there is the sphere within the sphere I mentioned above.

Just lately, over the past few weeks, it became to me a matter of desperate importance to know what was in there. I left

my routine work to Incoratchuatar and spent my time prowling about, inspecting, investigating, wondering, until I came to the conclusion that I already knew why that sphere was there; that it would open to allow access to the interior, then close again; and that the time of opening would most likely be when the dial marking our allowance of time reached the last segment of its year-long sweep.

I've already mentioned our illogical reason for coming here when if we relied on the prediction of the Oyalet computers we would expect to find nothing. We came because we wanted to verify with our own senses that nothingness which our tools foretold. This spaceship, which has seen the universe grow old and grow young again, is also a tool, and human beings built it. There would have been an urge to verify its data, too.

This is what makes me believe—beyond any chance of scientific proof—that the universal cycle we are in is not the second, or the thousandth, but probably something of the order of the ten to the tenth. You see, the first Darak bez Hamath—the first “myself”—could not have been married. He could not have faced going into the dark unknown if he had left behind someone like you, my darling, or two beautiful children like ours.

And yet. . . and yet this must be a small terror. From the last universe to this one, the effect of the theft of energy has been so tiny that not even the language has changed. So I shall do what I have to do. When the creeping dial in the ship has only a few hours of its course to complete, I shall go back. No one will be permitted to accompany me. I shall leave this letter propped up against your portrait; I shall look at the picture one final time and go to find the defenses of the inner sphere down. And inside that sphere—?

Why, myself.

So, after more billions of years than one can imagine, my predecessor will come out and take my place as I am taking his, and he will bring you this letter. You will find him a very little different from me; he will look at you across a gulf of inconceivable ages, but that is all. I hope, my darling, that the little difference will not be enough to cause you suffering.

And I? In a few hours from now (or so it will appear to me), I shall come forth again and know I am looking on a new universe, and I shall find just such a letter as this and take it to someone who will not be you precisely, but very much like you. And as she reads it, I shall think of you, but after that I shall try to forget that we are in a different cosmos. I shall try to forget myself and become the man who will have released me.

So, I hope, will the man I go this moment to release become—

Your adoring husband,
Darak bez Hamath.

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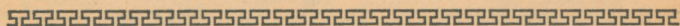
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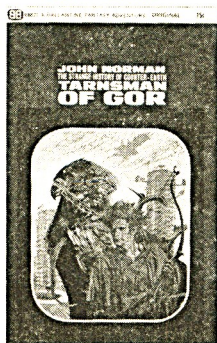


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