

LAMPS ON THE BROW

EDITED BY
JAMES CAHILL

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LAMPS ON THE BROW

WOSE SHI MO BENA!

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Jan Jova

BEN BOVA



Introduction: The Ultimate Conquest

BEN BOVA

cience fiction celebrates the wonders of tomorrow—both the good and the bad. Fantasy exalts the wonders of yester-year—both the good and the bad. Both forms of literature deal in worlds that do not exist, except in the minds of their creators, and—eventually—in the minds of the readers delighted by such stories.

In this anthology you will find stories by masters of science fiction and fantasy; stories that take you into the future or back to the past; stories that bring before you characters who strive and struggle, love and hate, characters who seek their destinies in worlds other than here-and-now.

For the most part, science fiction and fantasy are optimistic literatures. The human spirit prevails over the dark forces of evil, or the impersonal forces of nature.

Some people think such optimism naive. They prefer tales of hopelessness

and despair, and regard distopias as more true to the human condition than utopias.

True enough, the human condition is fraught with problems—usually of our own making. But if you merely glimpse back along the trail that humankind has followed for the past few millennia you can see that there is more cause for optimism than otherwise.

Look at the problems we have overcome! A middle-sized, underpowered ape with an oversized brain, we began naked and lacking the fangs and claws that our bigger, tougher, more ferocious competitors had. We survived drought, Ice Ages, environmental collapses, and our own often murderous instincts.

We have not merely survived; we have prospered. So well have we succeeded in the evolutionary game of survival that now the problems we face are problems that stem from our very success: population growth, environmental pollution, resource depletion, disease, crime, terrorism and war are all the results of our runaway success at outbreeding every other mammalian species on Earth.

Merely within the past century we have virtually conquered time and space. No spot on Earth is more than a day's travel away. You can communicate electronically with people anywhere on Earth, instantly.

In the century to come, we will overcome the problems that now seem so intractable: poverty, ignorance, war and death itself.

The end of poverty lies in a simple glass of water. Physicists are learning how to extract virtually unlimited energy from water, using the process that lights the Sun and stars: hydrogen fusion. Fusion energy comes from atoms of heavy water—deuterium, in the physicist's jargon. Far less than one percent of ordinary water consists of deuterium atoms, yet the fusion process yields so much energy that an eight-ounce glass of water holds the energy equivalent of 500,000 barrels of oil.

Fusion will be clean, relatively free of radiation. Its major waste product is helium, which you can use to blow up balloons for children.

Fusion energy will be the biggest step humankind has taken since the taming of fire. Boundless fusion energy will power a new global economy that will make poverty a thing of the past. We will still have rich and poor, of course; those are relative terms. But the poorest of the poor will live better than kings of old.

Electronics is already making inroads on ignorance. While old-fashioned school systems are decaying everywhere, young and old alike are turning to computers and modern interactive electronic systems for learning.

Virtual reality and global interlinks will make it possible for anyone to be taught by the best minds on Earth by a patient and personal tutor who goes at your pace and never gets tired or upset. Lifelong learning is here today; in the near future it will become almost indistinguishable from lifelong entertainment.

War is an endangered species, for two reasons. One: the nations of the world are slowly, painfully, learning how to work together to stop aggressors from gaining anything through war. Eventually, potential aggressors will learn that a resort to arms will mean nothing but devastation for them.

But the devastation need not be physical destruction. Nonlethal weapons are coming on-line. Destroy or disrupt an army's communications and that army is helpless. Use nonlethal weapons that incapacitate soldiers without killing them. Use very smart missiles that seek and destroy weapons—tanks, artillery pieces, ships and planes—not the young men and women who operate them.

War, the scourge of the twentieth century, will become obsolete in the twenty-first.

As will death itself.

The time is quickly approaching when death from aging

will no longer be inevitable. Violence and accident will still take lives, but death as the result of disease or senescence will become a thing of the past, a bad memory.

Men and women in their thirties today will undoubtedly have the option of living forever. Even the insurance companies are willing to grant that lifespans well beyond 100 will be commonplace. Biomedical researchers are already talking about lifespans of 200 or more.

If you live another 100 years, think of the biomedical advances that will be made during your lifespan. They will be able to extend your life for even more centuries, extend it indefinitely.

And not as a feeble "golden ager," but as a relatively young, healthy, vigorous adult.

The end of age-related death means reducing the death rate to nearly zero. Think of the changes, the problems, that will bring!

But I can think of one very wonderful new opportunity it will offer us.

We have long thought that adventuring beyond the solar system will require technologies that may well be impossible, according to the known laws of physics. The stars are so distant that it would take millennia to reach them—or the invention of a faster-than-light propulsion system.

Einstein says faster-than-light is not possible. But immortal human beings can spend millennia or eons traveling from one star to another.

That is the ultimate conquest. It will happen within the coming century. But you will read about it in science fiction stories first.

Ben Bova November 1997 Naples, Florida GREGORY BENFORD



KOLLAPSE

GREGORY BENFORD

W

hen the Kollapse came Wirehead jumped to his feet, knocking over his stand of compact disks with a clatter. He picked up his Kollapse Kit 2.4,

his own design, and slung it over his back. It weighed over twenty kilos—nobody on the Net used old fashioned English units—and he waddled as he started directly for the front door of his family home.

In the street people were looking around in wonder, trying to figure out what to do. They murmured to each other, mere gossip and speculation, no real data.

He avoided their questions. If they had not prepared for this day, if they did not have the database to fathom how the threads of complexity in modern society could warp and buckle under the sheer stress of the modernity of it all, that was their problem. He had said this many times on polisci.talk.com, one of the Net

bulletin boards devoted to earnest and insightful discussions of just such possibilities—no, certainties, Wirehead reminded himself—as the Collapse. Or the Kollapse, as some of the more hip and aware guys on the Net called it.

He went back inside and took the extra set of keys to the family car from the secret place he had hidden them, right beside the car itself in the garage. He hit the button for the automatic garage door opener and nothing happened. So the electrical grid had gone out already. Very well; that just verified one of his predictions in "Overture to the Krunch," a piece he had written for Apocalypse. online.net over two years ago. It had even been excerpted on *HotWired*, the online magazine.

He pulled the release cord on the door opener and grunted as he heaved upward on the door handle. It slid up with a metallic clatter that sounded to Wirehead like the death rattle of civilization itself. He could hear his parents calling his name in the house but he ignored them because of course they had no application now to the problems of this wholly new and transformed world.

Wirehead got into his father's car and backed out into the street. There was a change in the tenor of the background noises. People were shouting angrily, others were simply alarmed, their cozy routines disturbed, the infinite buffet of services at an end. Pathetic voices, unable to deal with even so predictable a phenomenon as a power failure. Nineteenth century tech, yet most people did not understand even the rudiments of it.

He drove toward the East, which he had decided in his careful plans of several years before afforded the best escape route. In his rearview mirror—more exactly, in his father's, since Wirehead spent all his money on computer gear and Net online costs and had nothing left for lesser hardware like cars—he saw his parents come out of the house and begin to run after him. They were both nearly fifty and therefore hopelessly mired in the thought pat-

terns of the dead past. He stepped on the gas. The full-throated growl of the engine, another piece of antiquated tech but still useful, filled him with purpose. Soon his parents dwindled away in the rearview mirror even though they had begun running with surprising speed. His father lasted longer, though of course that came from the pointless sports his father had wasted time on instead of sharpening his computer skills. That was the old way and the Kollapse would sweep away men like his father. His mother was just a woman. Neither would fit the world that was being born today.

As he left town he saw a lot of other people doing the same. How had his Tactic #1, "Escape from the disintegrating infrastructure," leaked out to the rabble? Probably some hacker breaking into his super-secret personal computer files. He mentally tipped his hat—though of course no one he knew wore a hat, and those with caps wore them backwards—to the info-thief who had gotten past his digital snares and protocols.

But then he realized that no one could have gotten to his files because they were all on floppy disks, tucked right into his Kollapse Kit 2.4. No one could access them through the Net. That meant that these people around him had devised the same tactic. A scowl crossed Wirehead's face, but he then reasoned that these mundanes would soon thin out. They were probably driving to take shelter with their relatives or some other antique notion. Time would prove their folly.

He had barely reached a wooded area before the car coughed and glided to a stop. A simple inspection of the car's old fashioned dashboard showed an analog needle which registered gasoline reserve. It read zero. His father's fault, of course, another example among many of lack of foresight, by a generation now completely out of date.

He got out of the car. There were no gas stations nearby. He hefted the Kit pack and set out. When he did

pass near a gas station there were a lot of people there. He stood at a distance and watched them bicker with the owner over paying for gasoline and when a fight broke out he wisely turned away into the woods. Incredible, arguing over the exchange of useful fluids for useless, symbolic paper. He had no money to buy anything, because in the new order about to descend upon the world in the wake of the Kollapse, all value would be digitized.

The masters of that new millennium would be those who had the Net skills to manage the innovative regime.

Shouts. He studied the gas station through binoculars. A man was waving a gun.

How pointless. Power would not come from old methods. That man was mired in the past.

He struck out with the sure, steady gait of one who has the future in his pocket and knows it.

Soon dark came. He had always thought of the Kollapse coming with the morning, representing as it did a new day in human consciousness, so the fall of dusk was a little unsettling. Already the woods had petered out and he was heading into grasslands. Best to get as far as possible. He had a flashlight with him, a real gem, only thirty grams and surprisingly powerful. In the excitement he had forgotten to take it out of the Kollapse Kit 2.4 and when he did now it gave no light because, of course, it was solar powered.

For weeks he had been meaning to recharge the batteries. Well, he couldn't do everything. He put it away and forged on. Bushes brushed him in the gathering gloom and then he sprawled headlong into a ditch. He lay there calculating his best move. He was not injured but after a while he decided that perhaps he should stop anyway.

He lay there in the night and watched a satellite skim across the horizon. To be so visible it had to be in low orbit, probably a specially launched for surveillance.

He fell asleep shivering. Kollapse Kit 2.4 had no room for bulky things like blankets, which could be acquired later anyway in exchange for far more valuable data. The thin silvered sheets he had instead helped some, but weren't really comforting.

At dawn he surveyed the terrain ahead. Rugged, just the thing to stop the mindless hordes from following him. He climbed a hill and looked back. Through his pocket binoculars he watched a distant highway, packed to a standstill with traffic, a perfect metaphor.

Time for breakfast. He got out his laptop and set it on its black plastic mat. All the gear in the Kit was black, the only hip color. A black cord led to a solar array.

He powered up and felt the gigabytes surge beneath his fingertips. He accessed his hard disk library and found EDIBLE PLANTS OF NORTH AMERICA. A quick word search found his area and on the screen popped up three-color displays of leaves, berries and roots. In a few seconds he held color hardcopy from his printer, a marvel of compactness. He spent the half hour allotted in his schedule searching for these as he hiked along, but the hardcopy colors did not match very well with those in nature. It occurred to Wirehead that maybe he should have done some field research about this. Still, that would have taken valuable time, too, he reasoned. He could not risk eating anything potentially poisonous so he slogged on.

The few scattered houses he avoided. They had no satellite dishes in view and so were not tied into the Net and would be left behind in the New Info Order. Reorganizing the world would be by definition a global problem. How could this point have eluded them?

At lunch time, without any foraged berries or leaves, he kept his strength up with the one can of warm Jolt cola he had brought. This did not quiet his rumbling stomach so he used his remaining water reserve to dissolve some bouillon cubes. These were beef bouillon and quite salty. When he had planned his Kollapse Kit 2.4 the bouillon was to accompany the chopped berries and roots around

a crackling fire. Drinking salty cold water in scrub desert, though, just made him thirsty.

By this time he had gotten a sunburn even though he was wearing a cap. He wore the cap backwards of course, so that he did not look like a dork. It had a team emblem above the bill, but he never wasted his time watching such stuff and did not know what team the emblem represented, or even what sport. The sunburn itched a lot. He spent all his time indoors, on the Net, or else in the virtual reality setup he had built himself, complete with data gloves and spex. He thought about the cool recesses of cyberspace while his tongue rasped on his lips like a file on rock.

He reached Focus Point 3.5 in early afternoon. It was a cave in a folded sandstone ridge. He had picked it himself from a detailed topographical survey, available on ftp@geosurv.gov. The survey had not shown that below the cave was a steep drop—the resolution was only five meters—into thick brambles. Wirehead discovered this while inching along the ridgeline. He had chosen to approach Focus Point 3.5 from above so that he could see and assess whoever had already reached it. Planning was paying off. Peering over the edge, he slipped and tumbled down—by the cave, then over the drop.

Getting out of the brambles and putting bandages on several parts of himself took longer than he had allowed in his plans. It was already late afternoon when he flopped at the entrance of the dusky cave. He lay there panting and noticed that his shoes had worn down considerably, even though they were made of the latest high-impact plastics.

No time to search for firewood. He was tired anyway. He lay there and thought about ice cream until he heard footsteps.

It was HeavyLink, marching along under an antique Desert Storm field helmet. Wirehead recognized HeavyLink and the helmet from the picture posted on the Kollapse bulletin board. He had never met HeavyLink before, of course, because there was no need to travel in real space when your mind was free in cyberspace.

"Hi," he said.

"Uh, hi." HeavyLink was shorter than Wirehead had expected, somehow, with a big belly.

"Glad ta meecha, Heavy." Wirehead shook hands. HeavyLink's grip was soft.

"We're in the big time, Wired."

Wirehead's real name was Arnold, like Schwarzenegger, but on the Net he was Wirehead@user.web.com. and preferred to stay that way even face to face.

"Dig, that's your own Kit, right?" Heavy always used retro 60s slang.

"Kollapse Kit 2.4, my own design."

"Mine is, too." Heavy grunted as he let his Kit pack thump to the floor of the cave. "Apocalypse Angel '96."

To Wirehead it looked like an ordinary wilderness backpack with APOCA ANGEL stenciled across the back in flaming red. One of the sore spots on the Kollapse bulletin board was that some people just wouldn't agree on a standard terminology for Kits. Some used the clear, orderly number system, just like for software, while others like HeavyLink slapped on the year when they'd conceived the plan of their Kits.

Covering his annoyance, Wirehead started breaking out some of his gear. It was all custom, hardwired for the Kollapse, high bandwidth. "I figure it was the currency tumble," Wirehead said.

"Huh?" HeavyLink was unpacking, too. "Howzzat?"

"International trading broke down, 'cause somebody finally hacked the Treasury Exchange."

"Total B.S."

Wirehead bit his inner lip but kept calm. HeavyLink was a neo-Netter compared with Wirehead and you had to tolerate some crap from them sometimes. "Most probable cause of all, Syntho said."

"No way." Syntho was a GEnie megahacker who had broadcast on all the boards an elaborate scheme for breaking into the Exchange. "That was just PR he put out."

"He said he was spreading it so that the proper authorities could prevent any really bad guys from spiking in," Wirehead said.

HeavyLink made an imitation fart sound, pretty authentic. "That was pure cover. He just wanted credit for the idea, is all."

"Okay then, so what did cause the Kollapse?"

"Obvious. Somebody hacked the *credit* info, all the bank records, the works."

Wirehead frowned. "I heard of that somewhere."

"Sure, in How to Surf the Coming Catastrophe."

"I've got that on floppy."

"So do I."

"Maybe I'll read it right now."

HeavyLink kept unpacking his gear. "Who's got the time?"

"You mean you didn't read it either?"

HeavyLink shrugged. "Slid my eyes over the abstract in the Squeezed Books CD listing."

"I've got that, too." Wirehead didn't like being down on data, but at least he had it in the two dozen CDs he carried, right next to the built in CD reader on his laptop, cozy as anything.

A big black slab like a huge single wing came shooting over the horizon. To Wirehead it looked a lot like the paper airplanes he had sailed in grade school. "Stealth bomber!" he cried in surprise, his war gaming years coming back in a rush.

The shock wave knocked both of them over. The dark wedge fled over the horizon, leaving a thin white trail that quickly evaporated.

"War!" HeavyLink shouted. "Not some systems hacking —war."

"I would have heard about it on the Net. I was online when the Kollapse started and—"

"It's plain as DOS, man." HeavyLink slapped the last of his setup together. "I'll get online and show you."

Wirehead was not going to be outdone in the field quite so easily. He had his laptop out and popped the short cable to a disk like an upside-down Frisbee. Its rim flared out rather than turning in, but guys in the biz called them thrower disks anyway, because pointed at the sky they could throw messages clear around the Earth. The disk had an aluminum base with holes punched in the struts to reduce weight. Top of the line.

He powered up. The whine of the hard drive was a comforting song, in the strife of the moment. Up came his operating system. Effortlessly he punched in single-key commands that brought on whole slabs of software, customized for just this moment. "Way past wicked fast, man," HeavyLink whispered with approval, and then bent to his own setup.

Wirehead loved the warm, blissful rivulets that trickled up his spine, pure cyberpleasure, as his laptop run five different search programs on true, thirty-two bit, interthreaded preemptive multitasking. Micro macho to the max! Rapt, he watched the entire computing power of western civ, circa 1972, labor in his lap. The flat panel adjusted to full the slanting sunset glare with no problem, sharp and true, full color, high res.

His dish worked the exact microwave frequency of the geosynchronous satellite, with high signal to noise ratio. He got through the usual blocks and soon was aceing the protocols in highly select channels: NorAmComm, WorldNet, ZyncOn. His search pattern covered the whole range.

Only, nothing was coming in. "Blank, nada, zero," he muttered as he slapped three of the search patterns onto the Windows display at once. Not a burble of traffic.

"No pace in the pixels," he muttered, feeling uneasy. He let the patterns run background and resorted to the highest level he had, a program he had gotten on the sly from a pirate bulletin board operation.

Nothing. Here he had the computing power that could have run the whole Apollo moon landing, dedicated to making Donald Duck, in a spitting rage, pop up in icon to tell him there was nothing, nothing at all, frying on any search.

"It's...it's all gone," he muttered.

HeavyLink looked over his own laptop screen. "I can't believe it."

"The whole Net. Down." Wirehead caressed his keyboard, filling the soft green background with yellow type. Meaningless, but reassuring.

"You don't suppose...?"

"That the Net itself...kollapsed?"

"Naw. Can't be."

"Maybe it was the I Squared Conspiracy."

HeavyLink frowned."What's that?"

"Iran-Iraq. I read about it on the Armageddon Age bull-board."

"Huh. Ask me, it was the Japanese."

"Or else an eco-kollapse."

"Or OPEC making a power grab again."

"Or Earth First! monkeywrenching."

"But..." HeavyLink's eyes were plaintive. "How'll we ever know?"

"Let me think about that a moment." Wirehead always said that to gain time.

HeavyLink tapped away at his laptop—a standard item, off the shelf. His setup was a kludge. Wirehead looked away in quiet disdain. HeavyLink lacked some bandwidth, for sure. After a while HeavyLink's fingers stilled. Silence fell in the gathering cold of early evening. A dry wind blew through the cave mouth, moaning

softly. Wirehead had waited for this dramatic moment, when all hope was lost in his online buddy. He began to speak.

"Do you know what most people are, Heavy?"

"Uh, mundanes?"

This was the usual online term for outsiders, but Wirehead waved away the word. "Amoebas is a better term."

"Huh?"

"All an amoeba knows of its watery world is what it physically bumps into. It has no buffers. If it meets a poison, it learns of it just as it dies. People—ordinary people—are like that."

"And us...?"

HeavyLink was not slow, just younger on the Net. Wirehead smiled enigmatically. "Evolution gave more complex organisms better buffers. In animals, vision and scent. In ordinary people, ideas. To us, the *Net*."

"Oh, I see. But look, with the Net down-"

"That is temporary. I am talking about the far horizon of this Kollapse, HeavyLink. I am looking beyond the moment."

"Yeah, but-"

"Shall I tell you what I see?"

HeavyLink blinked and nodded. Wirehead had found that people on the Net reacted well to visionary talk. That was in text format, of course. He was thrilled to find that the same rhetoric worked in person. Maybe dealing with people in the flesh was not as hard as he had thought. He would have to rethink that, sometime, maybe examine the disaster of his high school years.

"I see the obsolete, falling by the wayside in this Kollapse. I see even the young, their thin cries echoing, calling for help. For a savior, a true leader, someone to point the way. For vision, for inspiration, for data, for a plan."

"And that's..."

"Us. We are the future."

"Not without the Net we aren't."

"But the Net is merely down for a moment. HeavyLink, we've planned for this for years. When Chaos stalks the streets and valleys of the world, only the Net can bring Order. And we, as Net veterans, will be the only leaders who can show the way."

"We all thought the Net would make it through."

"It will. And we will rule, those who know how to use it. *Think*, man! There won't be newspapers, TV will be babbling sensationalism, the politicians won't know zip! Only *we'll* be able to cope."

"I don't think so." HeavyLink had finished packing up. He stood.

"What you think now doesn't matter." Wirehead kept his voice calm, reasonable. "We'll get things sorted out and soon enough—"

"You've got to live that long first," HeavyLink said.

He took from his Kit pack a pistol. "Smith and Wesson," he said fondly. "Top grade. Chromed, too."

Wirehead blinked, shocked. "What? Physical violence? That's hopelessly twencen!"

"That's what we're still in, y'know—the TwenCen. Now if you'll just hand over your food..."

"All I've got is a few packages of, well, candy bars."

"Let's have 'em, then." HeavyLink crooked a finger.

"But you can't mean this. We're buddies, in the Net together."

HeavyLink said softly, almost gently. "It ever occur to you that you never even seen me before today?"

Wirehead opened his mouth but he could think of nothing to say. HeavyLink stuffed the candy bars into his pack, grunted as he slung it over his shoulder, and started off into the wilderness.

"Stop! You and I, together we can inherit the whole world!"

HeavyLink looked back and grinned. "You can have my half."

Wirehead shouted his worse curse at the dwindling figure. "You're—you're a flamer!"

They found Wirehead a week later.

The National Guard patrol had already gotten tired of dealing with the Net users who had, in a curious imitation to lemming behavior, taken the rumor runaway on the Net as the signal for the demise of all order. The Net Krash had driven hordes of users onto the highways and into the confused countryside. The troops referred to them as "wireweenies" and were tired and resigned when they came upon the body.

Wirehead had died of thirst, apparently, lips and tongue leathery and purple. His arms were wrapped around his laptop and satellite dish, as if to draw energy from them.



BRUCE BETHKE



MARK DREIZIG

BRUCE BETHKE

obby Anderson carefully set his 28-gauge against the rotted old fencepost, spread the strands of the barbed wire apart, and looked at me and Pudge. "So, you coming? Or are you chicken?"

Pudge gave the rusty wire a dubious look. "Old Man Dreizig is pretty mean, Bobby."

"He took a potshot at Dewey Swanlund once," I added. "He don't like people on his land."

Bobby turned his head and looked out over the weedy, overgrown valley. "Ain't his land," Bobby said. "My daddy says the Federals seized it from my grandpa, right after the Rising. Old Man Dreizig is just a dirty squatter."

Pudge narrowed his eyes. "Then how come the marshal lets him farm it?"

Bobby cleared his throat and spat. "He ain't farming. He's digging up war souvenirs and selling 'em back East.

Pudge snorted. "War souvenirs!"

"It's true!" Bobby turned around, a mean look coming up fast in his eyes. "My daddy says the last big battle of the Rising was fought right here on this spot!"

Pudge looked away. "Go on, get real."

Bobby's face went black. He let go of the wire, stepped forward, and gave Pudge a hard shove that sent him stumbling. "You making fun of my daddy, fat boy?"

Pudge caught his balance, and his voice came back whiney and nervous. "No, Bobby. 'Course not." He looked at me like a dog that knows it's in for a whipping. "We'd never make fun of Mister Anderson, would we, Jerry?" Bobby turned on me, the red anger boiling up through the roots of his short blond hair, and I thought, *Thanks a lot. Pudge! Now he's locked on me.*

I'd learned way back in third grade that when Bobby got mad, it didn't matter what you said, he just got madder. Five years of growing up since then had only made his fists harder and his mean streak worse, so I just kept my mouth shut, shook my head No, and winced a little in anticipation.

Bobby seemed to cool down some. He settled for waving a fist under my nose and growling, "Don't you ever so much as let me *think* you're making fun of my daddy. He's a war hero, understand?"

I understood. My Dad died fighting the Federals a month before I was born, and Pudge's dad never came back from the Reeducation Camp, but Bobby Anderson Senior is the town war hero, and my Mom says he's even got a scar on his butt to prove it. She also says when I'm older she'll explain why all the moms in town think that's so funny.

Looking a little disappointed that me and Pudge didn't need beating up, Bobby turned back to the fence and spread the wires again. "So, you two coming with me? Or do I tell everyone you're a couple of poogies?"

Pudge gave the rusty wire another hesitant look.

"Yeah," Bobby said, switching to a real oily and evil voice. "Poogies, that's it. You *liked* being at the Re-ed Camp, didn't you? Must' a been one of their favorites, even: a nice, soft, fat little white boy, the kind those big black Federal soldiers just love to—"

Pudge's face went all puffy and red, and the hot tears started to form. "I ain't no damn poogie!" He cranked the bolt of his .22 open with an angry jerk that sent the cartridge flying. "I ain't..." Pushing the rifle into my hands, he ducked headfirst through the fence, caught a snag on the cuff of his jeans, ripped it free. "I ain't no God Damn poogie!" He was bleeding a little from the scratch on his ankle, but I don't think that was why he was crying.

Bobby looked at me. "Well?"

Well, I knew it was a bad idea, but I also knew Bobby'd tell everyone in town if I chickened out now. So I handed Pudge his .22, eased mine off to half-cock and passed it over, then squatted down and started poking around in the dust and weeds.

Which, of course, peeved Bobby. "Now what?"

"Gonna find Pudge's cartridge," I said, not looking up. "Maybe you Andersons got cash money to burn, but me and Mom sure as Hell don't." And also. I was hoping...

"Come on, Jerry," Pudge whined. He looked around, nervous. "Old Man Dreizig might see us up here."

That's the whole idea. Pudge. I turned a little to the left and started searching a different patch of ragweed. If I can just keep you squirming until you chicken out...

"Right there," Bobby said, pointing. "Behind your heel."

Aw. nuts. I picked up the cartridge, blew the dirt off, and made a great show of inspecting it. "Nice one," I said at last. "A little green around the primer, but the bullet's hardly corroded at all." I checked the headstamp. "Remington?" I looked up with a big smile. "You been holding out on me, Pudge?"

"I found it in Dewey Swanlund's basement," Pudge whimpered, twitching like he was about to wet his pants. "Now will you for Christ's sake *hurry up*?"

Since I'd pretty much run out of excuses, I stood up, ducked through the fence, then turned around to hold the wires apart while Bobby climbed through. Pudge traded me my rifle for his cartridge. While we were doing that, Bobby reached back over the fence, grabbed his shotgun, then turned back to me and cracked the shotgun open.

"For your information, jerkface," he yanked a shell out of the back pocket of his jeans and waved it under my nose, "this is a black-powder handload I made myself, using melted-down old lead fishing sinkers for shot. We Andersons don't take government welfare money, we never signed no stinking surrender oath, and we sure as Hell don't have no God Damn Loyalist gun license!" He stuffed the shell into the barrel of his shotgun, snapped the gun shut with an angry flip. "And now that you got that straight..."

"Oak trees," Pudge said.

That threw Bobby off his stride. "Huh?"

Pudge was checking out the horizon, nervous. He broke off long enough to point across the valley. "The woods on the side of that hill over there. Oak trees."

"So?"

Pudge glanced around once more, then started tracing a route in the air. "So if we get behind this ridge here and follow it down to that sumac patch, we can circle around the west side of the marsh and get over to the woods without Old Man Dreizig seeing us. Ought to be plenty of squirrels in those oak trees, and the echoes'll make it hard to tell where all the shooting is going on."

Bobby, I guess, wasn't done being mad yet. "Squirrels?" He slapped himself on the back pocket of his jeans. "I got just six shells here, and I am *not* gonna waste 'em on no damn stinking squirrels!" He knocked aside

Pudge's hand and started pointing out his own route. "No, we're gonna go around that side of the sumacs, cross the marsh over *there*, scare up some ducks..."

Bobby bullied and Pudge whined all the way down the back side of the ridge. We didn't see a thing, except some redwing blackbirds in the marsh that perched on the ripe cattails and complained about all the noise we were making. The ducks heard Bobby and Pudge coming a good quarter mile off and were gone long before we ever got into range.

* * * * *

An hour or two later, our feet were starting to dry out after the slog through the marsh, we'd made it over to the oak woods on the far side of the valley, and Bobby had pretty much cooled out. Pudge spotted a squirrel burying acorns in the dry brown leaves and knocked it over with one shot. I kicked up a cottontail but didn't even get my gun to my shoulder before it bounced out of sight. We followed the rabbit into a little dry gully that somebody'd used for a trash dump a few decades ago, and followed the gully down into a thick patch of bright yellow aspen. Skirting the aspen, we started back towards the marsh.

That's when the grouse exploded.

Understand, ruffed grouse don't flush until you just about step on them, and then they don't fly out and away like a pheasant, they sort of *blast off*, straight up, a feather-covered rocket the size of a chicken and making a ton of noise. So I was about startled out of my underwear, but Bobby was keen to kill something so he had his gun cocked, shouldered, and fired before I could even blink.

Touching off that load of black powder just added to the general smoke and fire and brimstone effect.

"Got it!" Bobby shouted. He cracked open his shotgun, pulled out the smoking shell, and slapped in a fresh one.

"The hell you did," Pudge said. "Missed clean."

"Did not! It dropped right over there!" He snapped his gun shut and used it one-handed like a pointer. "You see it, Jerry?"

I coughed once and blinked the smoke-tears from my eyes. "All I saw was smoke."

Bobby ignored me and turned back to Pudge. "Swear to God, I saw it drop right over there." I got my eyes clear enough to look in the direction he was pointing, and saw a few blue wisps starting to curl up from the dry grass and fallen leaves.

"Uh, Bobby? What exactly are you using for wads in those home-made shells of yours?"

Bobby broke off arguing with Pudge long enough to turn back to me. "Crumpled up old newspaper. Why?" He followed the line my eyes were taking, saw the first little tongue of flame lick out from the litter, and spat out, "Oh, Jesus!" Pudge saw the fire too, and reacted by jumping right into the middle of it.

That's not as crazy as it sounds. You grow up on the tallgrass prairie, where the Environmental Corps policy is to let it burn naturally and one uncontrolled wild fire can wipe out an entire town, and you get sort of used to the idea of stamping out small grass fires almost by reflex.

Still, by the time we had every last ember dead cold and out, Bobby'd lost track of where he thought he saw the grouse go down. So we had to fan out into the underbrush to search for it. Pudge took center, I took left, Bobby took right. I was poking around in some scrub willows when I heard Pudge stop moving and call out.

"Guys?"

"Find it?" Bobby answered.

"Guys?"

I cut back in towards Pudge and found him standing in the middle of a big tangle of wild raspberries, stock-still and white as a klan robe. "What is it, Pudge?" Hand trembling, he pointed. "A coffin."

"Oh, cool!" Bobby said. He tried plowing in from the right side, but got stopped short by the raspberries and had to go back around the front way. I went the way Pudge went in.

I was disappointed. The thing Pudge was staring at was all corroded grayish-green metal, sort of rounded, maybe eight feet long, and at least half-buried in the dirt. "It's just an old water heater or something," I called to Bobby. "Probably washed down the hill from the garbage dump." I found a clear spot in the raspberries and took a step closer to it.

"It's a coffin," Pudge insisted. "A Federal Army coffin. I seen 'em before."

"Get real," I said to Pudge.

Bobby had worked his way in to the other end of the thing. "I dunno," he said to me. "I think Pudge could be right, Jerry."

"Oh sure, like you see coffins all the time."

"No," Bobby said, "there's all kinds of writing on this end. Army serial numbers, stuff like that." He crouched before it, set his shotgun down, and started into clicking and punching things. "There's all sorts 'a neat switches and buttons and—"

And just like that, a thin plane of blue light swept across his face.

Something started humming.

A deep whump! kicked in, and rose slowly to a soft, highpitched whine. With a creak and a groan, ancient rusty hinges started to turn. The top began to rise.

Not top. Lid.

"Jesus H. Christ!" Bobby fell over backwards, clawing to get away from the thing. I stuck around long enough to catch one glimpse of a bony-fingered hand reaching out from inside to grip the edge of the lid, then bolted out of there like a terrified cottontail with a whole pack of hungry rabid beagles on my tail. Pudge was still rooted to where he was standing. I sort of halfpushed and half-dragged him into motion, and as the coffin lid fell open with a *crash*! behind us we lit out up the hill and into the oaks.

Fifty yards upslope, Pudge latched onto my arm and dragged me to a stop. "Bobby! We can't leave Bobby!" We both turned around.

Long as I live, I will never forget that sight. Maybe we couldn't leave Bobby, but he was sure as Hell leaving us. There he was, a good 200 yards out into the marsh and running like mad, with his shotgun in one hand and his shirt-tails flapping like a big crow going into a heavy headwind. At first I couldn't see what he was running from.

Then it moved.

Jesus. It was—well, some kind of machine, anyway. Not shaped like a man; not shaped like a tractor. Mostly like a spider, I guess, though I got the idea it had the wrong number of legs. The body was a small, knobbly thing, with no real clear head. It moved in quick, scuttling motions.

And then it stopped. And when it was perfectly still, it just plain disappeared into the tall grass.

Bobby had a good headstart. At first I thought the thing hadn't seen him and was heading off in a different direction. Then it moved again, and I realized it was stalking around to cut him off. Bobby made maybe another 50 yards, scrambling out of the mud, up to the top of a small hummock.

The thing snapped up to its full straight-legged height. A lance of fiery red light shot out from one end.

Bobby exploded.

Pudge screamed. I slapped a hand over his mouth and wrestled him down as he went spastic. We thrashed around in the sticks and dry leaves for a couple seconds, until I got him pinned and got my face up next to his ear. "Pudge! *Pudge*!"

He went rigid, but stopped fighting me. I let go of his

mouth, a little. "Bobby?" he whispered. I stuck my head up and grabbed a quick look. All there was where Bobby'd been standing was a smoking hole in the dirt and a few smoldering cattails.

"He's dead." Pudge went nuts on me again. I got him in a hammerlock this time and held on 'til he got control of himself.

He relaxed, sort of. Blinked at me a few times. I eased off my hold. "Jerry?" he whispered, when I let go of his mouth. "What the Hillary is it?"

I risked another glance, but couldn't see it. "Some kind of Army machine," I said. "Musta been lying here for the last twelve years. I guess Bobby's old man was right." Pudge went taut on me for a second, but got control of himself before I had to wrestle him any more.

Funny. In the back of my head I had this feeling like I should be every bit as scared as Pudge, but in the front of my mind everything was just clear as could be and totally locked on the problem of figuring out how to get us both out of there alive. I shut my eyes, and listened. Tuned out the sound of Pudge's whimpering and heavy breathing. Tuned out the sound of the breeze in the cattails, and the dried oak leaves.

If the thing was moving anywhere nearby, it was completely silent. Which, given how big it was, didn't make sense, so it had to be somewhere else, or else not moving.

I got off of Pudge and opened my eyes. "Listen. We gotta get out of here."

Pudge rolled his eyes. "Now that's a revelation."

"No, listen. You remember Old Man Tollefson, that history teacher who got himself dragged off to Re-ed? Remember how he always said it was a lie, about the Federals being too humane to use 'bots during the Rising? He said the real problem was the 'bots were too dumb to tell the difference between Rebels and God Damn Loyalists, so they just killed everybody?"

I gave Pudge a few seconds to chew that one over. All he came up with was, "So?"

"So that thing out there still thinks it's fighting the Rising. It's going to kill everybody it sees."

That, I think, got through to Pudge. "Somebody's got to warn the town," he said, quiet.

I took another peek at the marsh and still didn't see any robot, so I risked getting up to a crouch. Nothing shot at me. "What can the town do?" I asked Pudge. "We're pacified, but for a couple single-shot .22's and some antique shotguns. We got to find the Occupation Marshal."

Pudge sat up like he'd found the splinter in the outhouse seat, looked at me hard, and blanched dead white. "And the Marshal will call in Federal troops," he whispered.

"Yeah." I looked down. "Sorry, Pudge."

Pudge chewed his lower lip a few seconds, blinked back a few tears, then wiped his eyes with the back of his left hand. "That thing killed Bobby," he said, between sniffles. "We gotta stop it before it kills anyone else. We *got* to."

"Yeah." But then that little voice in the back of my head piped up again, saying, Stop it? Hell you got to get away from it. first!

Pudge choked back whatever he was feeling, got to his knees, crawled over beside me. "So, any great ideas?"

I found a small stick about the size of a pencil, smoothed a spot in the soft dirt, and started into sketching. "Yeah. We're here, and the marsh is there, and the 'bot is—," I shrugged. "And County M is over about there. There's two of us, and one of it, so I'm thinking we'll have a better chance of getting through if we split up. You go west," I sketched a line off to the right. "You can use the woods for cover most of the way, and catch the highway about here. Maybe hitch a ride."

Pudge scowled at the map in the dirt. "And you go east?"

I tried a grin. It fell apart. Truth to tell, the shudders

were finally starting to catch up with me. "I climb hills better 'n you do." I went back to looking at the marsh, wondering where the thing was hiding, and if it was going to...to...

Pudge took another long stare at the map, then crawled forward to where he'd dropped his .22 while we were wrestling. "Okay. See you in town." He gave me a nervous, scared smile. I tried to return something cocky and confident, but all I managed was a facial twitch and a sort of squeak.

Cradling his .22, moving in a crouch, Pudge set off to the west. In half a minute, he'd disappeared into the underbrush.

Well, Jerry, it's your idea, and now you're stuck with it. Fighting the urge to run screaming after Pudge, I picked up my .22, checked to make sure the barrel wasn't plugged with dirt, then headed the other way.

I made maybe half a mile before I realized I was being followed. At first it was just that prickly "watched" feeling on the back of my neck. Then I heard the snap of a large twig, loud and clear. I spun around.

Nothing back there. At least, nothing I could see.

I picked up the pace. The oak trees were thinning out as I reached the east end of the woods, and the underbrush getting thicker and thornier, so I moved up slope. Something large crashed through the bushes somewhere behind and below me. I dove behind a tree and looked back.

Nothing, again. But two hundred yards off, maybe, a break in the underbrush I didn't remember seeing before.

I scrambled to my feet and headed further up the slope. The pitch was steeper here, with occasional little limestone outcroppings. The oaks had completely given way to dried out grass, loose gravel, and sumacs. The going was tough, but I figured that had to work both ways.

It did. I heard metal skitter off loose rock. Spun around quick enough to catch a glimpse of the thing as it momentarily lost its footing and slid sideways a few feet.

Then mechanical claws dug into the dry dirt, and it froze still. And vanished.

That did it. Whatever control I'd found when Bobby got killed, I lost it completely now. I screamed. Turned around. Lit out across the hillside as fast as I could scramble. Lost my footing and tumbled twenty feet down the slope. Caught my boot on a naked root; went sprawling and flailing face-first into the dust and gravel. Found my rifle again and *clawed* my way back up the slope with my bare hands, screaming the whole while. I guess that's when the 'bot decided there was no point staying invisible any longer. I heard a clacking of metal pincers, then heavy mechanical feet thudding towards me, and looked up in time to see a glittery stream of red-hot light come spitting out from a little dome on the near end of the body...

And miss me. Completely. By a good three feet, at least. A bush somewhere behind me *whuffed!* into flame. The robot kept charging forward. I could clearly see some sort of skeletal metal arms unfolding from the underside of the body, reaching for me with bony gray metal clawfingers...

And then the 'bot hit a patch of loose gravel, lost its footing, overbalanced and pitched sideways, and just exactly like a big fat spider, rolled all its legs into a tight ball and went bouncing end over end down the slope, to land with a crash in the scrub willows far below.

For a minute, I dared a half a hope—

Then, from the tangle, one slender leg extended. And another. And a third. And a fourth. And the 'bot sprouted arms and cutters, and began working on righting and freeing itself.

I dropped my rifle and went straight up the side of the bluff. Didn't even slow down for the 20-foot sheer lime-stone outcropping at the top. Was up and over that like a monkey, hit the grassy tableland at a run, was still running and screaming my lungs out when Old Man Dreizig tackled me, hog-tied me, and threw me in the back of his 4x4 pickup truck.

* * * * *

A splash of cold water hit me in the face, and brought me back to—

A kitchen, in an incredibly dirt-poor rathole of an old farmhouse. The stove looked like it hadn't been used, much less cleaned, in fifteen years. There were a couple of bulging old tin cans with labels peeling off sitting on the shelf; a set of rust-and-cast-iron skillets hanging on big hooks over the stove. I was sitting, awkward, on a splintery old bentwood chair. I tried to move. My wrists were tied together behind the back of the chair, then tied tight to my ankles.

Old Man Dreizig stepped into view, holding a dripping bucket. "Now, let's try this again," he said. "Who are you?"

"Jerry Olafson," I said. "From Bagley." I blinked, and shuddered. No, this can't be real. None of this is real. In another minute Mom is gonna wake me up for school and even have real bacon for breakfast...

"I knew your father," Dreizig said, nodding. Now that I finally had a clear look at him, he was even more old, scarred, and ugly than I'd ever heard. Boy. I'm glad this is a dream!

"And you were out poaching with an illegal gun," Dreizig said, "but something scared you, and you dropped it and ran."

Huh? I didn't know nightmares shared news with each other...

Dreizig smiled, took a drink from the bucket and set it down, then laid a heavy, gnarled hand on my shoulder. "Now tell me again about this dead boy you think you saw."

It's not a dream! And it's still out there! BOBBY! I fought and bucked against the ropes like a wild bronco. A joint in the wood chair parted with a splintery crack.

The smile vanished. Old Man Dreizig grabbed my shoulders with a grip like a pair of steel clamps and lifted me and the chair clean off the floor. "What did you see out there?"

Somehow I found a little shred of wits to hang onto. I blurted out the story, short and clear and best I could. The telling calmed me, a little.

Gently, Dreizig set me back down on the floor and put his left hand to his jagged chin. "Oh, dear." Then just like that, he turned on me, the expression in his dark eyes all cold and unreadable but the tone of his voice like the very Anger of God. "You little *idiot!* Do you have any *idea...*" His left hand shot forward, the pointed index finger hitting me in the chest like a bar of iron, pinning me to the chair. "Describe the machine again! Every detail!"

I told him everything I could remember about the loot. Every last bit: that weird coffin we found it in. The way its arms sort of unfolded from the underside of its body. Those fingers that looked like dull gray metal bones with sharp little claws. The way its eyes—I couldn't remember, it had at least eight, maybe twelve eyes—sat in clusters on the front and sides of its head...

He stroked his craggy, scarred face some more. "Oh God and Jesus Christ in Heaven," he said at last, "you boys have stirred up a real nightmare. An HK-211." He stopped rubbing his chin, and slowly shook his head. "I don't know if I even can..." His voice tapered off.

"Can what?" I asked. He twitched a little, like he'd forgotten I was there.

He looked right through me, tried that TV-news fake smile again. The way he could switch moods just like that was starting to unnerve me. "Jerry, if I until these ropes, do you promise not to run away or scream?"

Some choice. I nodded.

"Good." He moved around behind the chair, and started pulling out the knots. "Son, I expect they tell a lot of stories about me in town. What have you heard?"

The ropes came off my hands. I got my arms in front of me again and rubbed my wrists until the feeling started to come back. "They mostly talk about the war," I said at last. "They say you dig up war souvenirs and sell 'em back East."

He crouched down behind me and started untying the ropes around my ankles. "Oh? They say that?"

The rest of the ropes came off. I stretched my legs out in front of me and started rubbing the cramps out of my thighs. "They say there was a big battle right here, on this farm. Near the end of the Rising."

"A battle?" He came around in front of me, coiling the rope and shaking his head. Then with that spooky suddenness of his, he snapped his face up and looked me straight in the eye. "Are you at all interested in the truth?"

What I was mostly interested in was getting away from this weird old geezer, but I didn't know if I was ready to try that. "Sure," I said, to buy some time.

His ugly face got that faraway look old people get

when they're talking memories, and his voice went a little ragged. "It was in the last days of the Rising, that much is true. But there wasn't any battle. An Army cargo-lifter en route for Minneapolis was sabotaged and crashed here. On this farm. In that valley off to the south."

He looked straight at me, and something that I took for sadness crept into his glassy dark eyes. "It was a classified flight. Classified cargo. Munitions. Materiels. Things they were trying out in a last-ditch attempt to restore order in the inner cities. I was a Captain in the 3rd Mechanized,

then. My unit was sent in to secure the crash site. There was looting." He paused. Looked away. His voice dropped to a soft pitch.

"We were ordered to shoot the looters."

His head snapped up. He took a quick glance out the dusty, fly-specked kitchen window, then turned to me. "It was a debacle. Later on, I was court-martialed, and my unit—disbanded. Disgraced. I came back to this farm, because I knew the Army had only bothered to recover the materials it considered worth salvaging." He stooped, picked up the water bucket, took another deep drink.

He set the bucket down and wiped his face with the back of a hand. "I have spent the last 12 years digging up and disarming the things which were left behind," he said. He took a quick step towards me and leaned in close, so I had a good clear look at his ugly ruin of a face. "These are not battle scars, my young friend. Not all that is buried welcomes resurrection."

And just like that, his mood flipped again. He jerked back from me, spun around on his heel, and marched out of the kitchen. "Now, come!"

I staggered to my feet and for some crazy reason I'll never understand followed the old guy. Past a rust-stained toilet that had been dry for years. Past a shower stall that was full of old tools and oil jugs and paint cans. Through a living room decorated with broken-out windows, birds' nests and dried leaves, and a wrecked coil-spring-and-stuffing-and-mouse-turd thing that may have once been a sofa.

I had trouble believing my eyes. "Mister Dreizig, do you like, live here?"

"If you want to call it living," he said, without breaking stride.

We ended up in a dark, musty, back bedroom. There was an ugly old steel-frame double bed in there, and a clothes rack that held three or four tattered military-style jumpsuits. Dreizig dropped to his knees on the hard wood

floor and reached a hand way under the bed. A whitefooted deermouse scampered out the other side. I heard him latch onto something heavy and drag it out: a camouflaged footlocker, I guessed.

"My young friend," he said, "I fear you have awakened my doom. What you saw out there is an Alliant TechSystems HK-211 Hunter-Killer Pacification Robot." He spun the footlocker around on the floor until he was happy with it, then started popping latches. "It is relentless, remorseless, a master at camouflage, and extremely lethal." The lid of the footlocker unsealed with the sound of sticky old rubber gaskets being torn to shreds.

"And I honestly don't know if I can stop it," he said softly.

He flipped up the lid of the footlocker. There was another, chrome-colored box inside, with some kind of combination lock and panel and button thing on the front. Dreizig lifted the chrome box out and set it on the bed.

His loud voice came back. "Fortunately, we have three advantages! The first is that the HK-211 is *stupid*. Vast data processing power, but no actual *intelligence*." He began thumbing the buttons and spinning the lock tumblers with a finger speed that surprised me. "The second—" He stopped, and smiled at me. "The second is that there must be a fault in its targeting systems. You're still alive." He went back to the locked box and finished entering the combination. He twisted a knob. The lid popped open. "And the third advantage—"

He lifted a massive black handgun out of the box.

"-is this."

He grinned, ear to ear.

For a few seconds, all I could do was blink. I mean, I'd seen pictures of handguns before. History books, and all that. This one looked kind of like one of those antique German things: a Luger, I think is what they called them. Except this one had all kinds of extra controls, and radiator

fins on that super-long barrel, and the action had a whole bunch of extra pipes and tubes and stuff that stuck out way too far in back. While I was trying to lean in and get a real close look at it and figure out exactly what the heck it was, Dreizig fished a wire shoulder stock out of the lock box and clipped it onto the back of the pistol. The way he fondled and caressed that gun was downright *scary*.

And right about that moment is when sanity checked back in and had a little word with me. "Uh, Mister Dreizig, aren't we forgetting one other advantage we have?"

He petted the pistol like it was his favorite dog, thumbed a speck of imaginary dirt off the barrel, and smiled up at me. "What's that?"

"Your truck. Why don't we just drive into town, find the Occupation Marshal, and let *him* call in the Federal troops?"

Dreizig thought it over a moment, then shook his head. "Nope. I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because this," he said, as he smiled, and put the wire stock to his shoulder, and squinted through the sights, and started fiddling with the gun's controls, "is my dharma."

Fifteen minutes later we were back inside Dreizig's rusted-out 4x4, blasting across the tallgrass prairie, throwing up a rooster tail of dust and bouncing down a jack-hammer washboard of a cowpath that Dreizig claimed was the road into the east end of the valley. I was belted in and hanging on for dear life. Dreizig was somehow managing to both hold the steering wheel and shift with his left hand and fondle his gun with his right.

Just at that moment, I didn't have a worry in the world about being killed by the robot. The way Dreizig was driving, I figured we'd be dead and cold long before the 'bot ever caught first wind of us.

"Mister Dreizig!" I had to shout to be heard over the wind noise and flapping fenders. "Where the Hell are we *going*?"

"To Valhalla!" he shouted right back.

"Can't you—" We slammed into a pothole that about knocked my back fillings out, then bounced high and came down hard. "Can't you drop me off at the next corner and go there yourself?"

"NO!" He turned that mad grin and steely cold stare on me again. "You must come with me, Jerry Olafson! You! I knew your father!"

He looked back at the trail again, just in time to steer us right smack through the middle of a small patch of young aspen. "I know the names and faces," he said clearly, "of *all* the civilians that my troops killed."

Oh.

For a few fractions of a second, the cab of that truck turned into a very cold and silent place. All I could hear was the blood pounding in my ears.

Then we bottomed out on a prairie dog mound and lost the leftside muffler.

"You must come with me, Jerry Olafson!" He threw the truck into a heart-stopping slalom around an old abandoned hay mower, snapped it back on track, and punched the gas. "I would have killed myself years ago, but could not, and wondered why! Now I know! Atonement!"

With a stomach-turning lurch, the pickup dropped into a dry gully, clawed its way up through the other side, and launched itself about ten feet into the air. When we hit ground again the right side running board cracked off and went tumbling away in the dust behind us.

"You must watch me!" Dreizig howled. "I may be destroyed in this battle! I may save every innocent life in your town! But either way, the son of David Olafson—" A close miss with an elm tree took off the door mirror on the driver's side. "—will bear witness to the honor of the last of the 3rd Mechanized!"

Oh, swell. And the peasant folk will tell the tale for generations to come. Personally, the killer 'bot was starting to look not so bad, and I was really starting to wish I'd let Bobby call me a chicken.

Then another thought occurred to me. "Mister Dreizig?" We banged rapid-fire across a short chain of potholes. "How are we gonna *find* this thing? It's invisible!"

Another swerve, for no good reason I could see. "No, it's not!" Dreizig shouted back. "That is physically impossible! The HK-211 just has very good active epidermal camouflage!" The trail—if there was one—petered out, and we plowed headlong into a sea of tall dry grass. "The robot is perfectly visible!" he added. "If you only know how to look for it!"

After a few more prairie dog mounds I realized he wasn't going to share the secret, so I asked. "And how's that?"

He stared straight at me, as if considering a reply.

He went back to watching where we were going, and maybe even steering. "Never mind. You just help me to get *near* it, and I will handle the rest."

We popped over a small rise and flew out onto the tableland at the top of the bluffs. Dreizig slapped the truck into neutral, killed the engine, and let us coast the last hundred yards or so. "Here's where it gets sticky, lad." He gave me a wink and a grin, then popped his door open and bailed out while the truck was still rolling.

I wasted a few seconds wondering if the brakes would work or if I could steer the thing away from the bluff edge or something —and marveling at how quiet the truck was with the motor off, save for the swaying creak of the suspension and the scrape of dried weeds poking through the holes in the floorboards—before my brain finally kicked in, and I followed Dreizig's example. Undid my seatbelt, opened my door, and bailed out. Hit the ground with a nice little tuck 'n' roll that my tumbling coach would have loved. Came up in a crouch, on the balls of my feet.

The truck slammed into a tree stump hidden in the grass and came to an instant stop. I stood up.

"Get down!" Dreizig hissed, somewhere in the weeds behind me. "The HK has superb IR optics, and that truck's engine block is the hottest infra-red source for miles around! We'll have incoming fire any second now!" I dropped to a crouch again, turned, and spotted Dreizig in the weeds about twenty yards off. He was squatted low, cradling the gun, and duck-walking fast like no old man I've ever seen. We made brief eye contact, then he slipped back into the tall grass and headed west.

I skittered after him. Another hundred yards or so, and I caught up with him on a limestone outcropping at the very edge of the bluff. I looked back at the truck.

"It didn't blow up," I whispered. "Is that good?"

Dreizig shrugged. "Maybe. I was kind of hoping we

could draw the HK out and get this over with quick." He looked around, then laid his hand on the limestone. "This is where you came up." (Which made me wonder: had he been watching me, Pudge, and Bobby all along? I didn't like that thought.) Without another word, Dreizig got down flat on his belly, like a lizard, and went headfirst over the side.

After a moment or two of waffling, I went after him, but climbing the normal feet-and-butt-first way.

By the time I got down to the bottom of the limestone, Dreizig had his eyes to the ground and was scouting hard for something. "The HK-211 is gone," is said, not looking up. "Your rifle is over there." My eyes followed to where his finger was pointing, and sure enough, there was my Dad's old single-shot Stevens .22—neatly cut in half, right through the action, right where the steel is thickest. Dreizig chuckled. "You definitely do not want an HK-211 to catch you with its pincers."

I didn't appreciate the joke. Dreizig glanced up and took a quick sweep of the valley, then moved downslope a few paces and went back to studying the ground.

I picked up the halves of my Dad's Stevens, looked at them a while, and fought back a kind of choked-up feeling. Mom gave me that beat-up old falling-block rifle on my 10th birthday, 'cause that's when she said Dad had always intended for me to have it. Because that's when he got it. From Grandpa, who got it from his dad on his 10th birthday. Four generations of Olafsons had made squirrels miserable with that old rifle...

I dropped the pieces on the ground, kicked a little dirt over them, and scrabbled down the slope to join Dreizig. "What—" My voice was barely a squeaky wheeze.

Dreizig unhooked a canteen from his belt and handed it to me. A gulp of cold water helped my voice some. I splashed more water in my burning eyes.

"What—" I had to rub my eyes again. "What're we looking for, anyway?"

"More tracks like these," Dreizig said quietly, pointing to a deep, round, hole in the dry and dusty dirt. "The HK-211 has two basic operational modes. In defensive mode, it sits tight, tracks everything that comes within its alert radius, and only attacks if something crosses over its reaction perimeter." Dreizig straightened up, took the canteen from me, and took a good long swig.

"In assault mode," he went on, "it basically just keeps going in the direction it's been pointed, and deviates only for natural obstacles and soft targets of opportunity." He took one more drink from the canteen, capped it, and hung it on his belt. He looked straight at me. "Soft targets means people."

He turned, took another sweeping look around, then raised his arm and pointed down into the valley. "If we're lucky," he said at last, "it's gone into defensive mode, and is hiding down in that swamp somewhere, waiting for us to come in range."

I had to ask. "And if we're unlucky?"

"It's already halfway to town."

Once I knew what to look for, it turned out the hillside was just lousy with 'bot tracks. After looking at them awhile longer I was even able to figure out that the thing's feet were shaped just like corn-planting dibbles, and from that, it was easy to tell how old the tracks were, and in what direction the thing was going. Between me and Dreizig, it took us maybe ten minutes to decide which was the freshest set of tracks.

They led west, across the hill, back into the oak woods. We followed.

No, that's not right. We *hunted*. Just exactly like we were still-hunting for deer. Move fifty yards, then *freeze*, absolute stock-don't-blink-an-eye-still. Listen. Breathe slow. Focus on sounds, and peripheral vision. Wait about five minutes.

Then move again, quiet as the ghost of a tiny anorexic churchmouse.

Fifty yards. Wait.

Fifty yards. Wait.

How long did we hunt it? I don't know. Hours, at least. Long enough for my stomach to start rumbling from hunger. Long enough for Dreizig to empty both his canteens, then need to duck behind a tree and bleed his weasel. Long enough for the shadows of the trees to start to stretch out to the east, and for the sun to turn the sky a sort of soft, warm, late-afternoon golden.

Long enough for Dreizig to come to a conclusion.

"It's in defensive mode," he whispered. "I'm sure of it."

"Great," I said, a little too loud. He cringed. I lowered my voice. "So we back off and let it defend this swamp until its batteries crap out, right?"

"Wrong." He took a quick, furtive scan all around us, then looked back at me. "The HK-211 is powered by a hybrid solar/cold fusion conversion cell. As long as it can get sunlight and water, it's got power."

"Oh." I thought that over. "Then we back off and wait for a good 3-day blizzard in January. It can't eat ice, can it?"

"No, but—" Dreizig looked around again, and lowered his voice another notch. "But there are two other problems. One is that the HK-211's were technically obsolete by the time this one was deployed. So they were usually loaded up with really *nasty* kamikaze programs, to use when they were damaged or running low on juice. This thing's been lying out in this swamp for 12 years now, corroding and failing. There's no telling when it might decide to go kamikaze on us."

That didn't sound too good. "And the other problem?"

"Your friend Pudge might have made it back to town. In which case, he'll be coming back here with help."

I looked Dreizig straight in his strange dark eyes, trying to read his mind.

"We keep going," he said at last. "We have to get this thing soon."

We kept going. Fifty yards. Stop. Fifty yards. Stop. Through the deepest part of the oak woods. West, along the hillside. To the spot where Pudge and I split up. My little map was still scratched in the dirt. I turned to Dreizig.

He smiled at me. "No, the HK-211 can't read maps. At least, not that kind. I told you, it's *stupid*." He moved off, down the slope.

I stayed a minute, to wonder if Pudge had made it. And if he made it, if anyone had believed him. No, I realized, nobody in town would believe a story like that. And after they didn't believe it. they'd send out a search party to find me and Bobby. Mom could be on her way out here right now. I smudged out the map with my toe, and started down the slope.

Dreizig was right. We had to nail this sucker now.

* * * * *

The trail led down, into the cattail swamp. The shadows of the trees grew long, and stretched out towards the east, into the night. Off to the west, the sun had already sunk behind the tree line. The robot's trail led into a little stand of aspen.

Just on the other side of a fresh grassfire scar, we found a dead, scorched, and sulphury-smelling ruffed grouse. Well I'll be damned. Bobby actually *did* hit that bird.

"This about where you found the HK?" Dreizig whispered.

"Over there," I whispered back, pointing. "In the middle of that raspberry patch." Quiet, careful, pistol at the ready, Dreizig led us into the raspberries.

And there it was: the open, empty, coffin. Somehow, I'd expected the 'bot to be lying in it, an evil smile on its bugeyed face and a trickle of fresh blood running down its chin.

Dreizig did a quick scan all around us, then crouched down low and started inspecting the coffin. "Oh no," he said at long last.

"Mister Dreizig?" I crouched down next to him and tried to figure out what he was looking at. It was the panel Bobby' d been messing with.

"I was wondering how you kids managed to switch it on," he said softly. "The HK-211 should have been totally deactivated for shipping. You should have needed an interlock shunt, an activation code, and a Class 3 password to get it started."

He looked down, at something that I was pretty sure wasn't really there, except in his memory. He reached out and laid a gentle hand on the coffin.

"Only this isn't a shipping crate. It's an airdrop pod." He pursed his lips, and shuddered. "My God. There were

seven other HK's on that cargo-lifter. They were going to airdrop a whole *platoon* of HK-211's in the middle of South Minneapolis." He fought back another shudder, then got to his feet.

"C'mon, private," he snarled. "Let's ice this mother-fucker."

Golly. Mister Dreizig really was in the Federal Army.

* * * * *

The sun was completely down, now; the last traces of purple and orange were fading away on the western horizon. A fat old moon was coming up low and swollen in the east, but a chilly mist and a fickle breeze were coming up faster, nearby. We'd followed the robot's tracks down deep into the darkest tangles and thickest cedars of the cold, muddy swamp.

Move. Listen.

Move. Listen.

One time I put my foot down in a warm and acridsmelling puddle.

"Cold fusion waste," Dreizig said, at the utter fringe of my hearing. "Don't worry. Non-toxic. But we're getting close."

Move. Listen.

Move. Listen.

I peered around a dark clump of cedars. A freak of the faint breeze parted the mist.

And there it was.

About 40 yards off, by the side of a large pool. Clearly visible in the cold, white, moonlight. The amazing part, when I think about it now, is how much it looked like a deer in that moment. Back legs folded high, front legs spread wide, crouching down to dip its "head" almost to the surface of the pond, a thin pipe reaching out like a tongue to the water—

Of course. Cold fusion. It was refilling its fuel tank.

Dreizig edged around behind me, and brought his gun up. "Jerry," he whispered—or maybe he thought it, he was so quiet, "if I miss, just start running. We won't get a second shot." He moved a little more to the right, braced himself behind the trunk of a dead tree, and took a final line up on his sights. Now steady, steady, his finger tightening on the trigger...

And that's when Pudge and Bobby came crashing out of the fog and cattails. Pudge screamed. Bobby roared, "SHIT!" The robot bounced to its full stretch-legged height.

Dreizig missed.

I almost didn't hear the little *phut*! of his gun. Barely saw that edge-of-visibility deep purple-blue flash. But clearly, the robot saw us. It spun like a praying mantis in a blender, spat out a line of hellish red light that caught Dreizig full in the chest; the dead tree exploded in a shower of splinters and flames and I saw Dreizig's right arm go cartwheeling away, the gun still firmly gripped in his fingers of his now-dead hand.

Pudge and Bobby didn't see any of that. They didn't see that thin razor of fiery light sweeping back through the fog, back towards me. What they saw was—

"It's confused!" Bobby shouted.

"Shoot it, Bobby!" Pudge screamed.

There was the dull flash and boom of a black-powder shotgun.

The beam of red death flickered out. The robot spun to meet the new threat. I went on instinct: dove for Dreizig's gun with all my strength. Came up with it in a tuck 'n' roll my tumbling coach would have loved, groped for the trigger with my fingers as I brought the sights into line. The robot's beam slashed out again and swept toward Pudge—

I found the trigger. Phut.

A small, white-hot sun was born.

And when I could blink away the blue spots and see

again, it was raining shattered robot parts and smoking chunks of flaming wreckage. They hissed and steamed as they hit the water.

* * * * *

By the time I came back out of shock, Pudge and Bobby's voices were already far away in the darkness, receding into the distance, shouting and laughing and bellowing their triumph for all the world to hear. Dreizig's gun was still locked in my hand; my finger still on the trigger; the sights still held on the point where the robot had been standing. And the shattered trunk of the blasted tree lay across Mister Dreizig's dead bod—

"Nice job, private. I just may make a soldier of you yet."

"Mister Dreizig?" I spun around-

"SAFETY!" he screamed. "Put that fucking thing on safety!" I looked at the gun, realized I was pointing it right at Dreizig, and pointed it away. I almost started to fiddle with buttons.

"I- I don't know how," I confessed.

"Well, then put it down on that dry ground over there and come help get this tree off of me." I put the gun down, grabbed onto the handiest branch of the tree, and levered and twisted. Rotten wood split and rolled away.

Dreizig sat up. Looked at himself. Touched a finger to the smoking hole in his chest.

"Damn. I liked this shirt."

Frantic, and puzzled, and sixteen other things, I helped him clear the rest of the tree off his legs, and get to his feet. He was amazingly heavy.

"Say, kid, have you seen my right arm anywhere? I used to be quite attached to it."

I stepped back, started to head off in the direction I'd last seen his arm flying, then I stopped. Turned. Faced

him. Took a good long stare at that weird, dripping, sparking, stump that was his right arm.

"Mister Dreizig? What are you?"

He cracked off a left-handed salute. "The 3rd Mechanized Infantry, Sir!" He thumped himself on the chest with his left fist and shot me a grin. "Android, and damned proud of it!" I turned away from him, spotted his right arm lying in a pool of stagnant water, and out of reflex, I guess, retrieved it.

I looked back at him. "But, you said—that other robot—"

A sort of pained look crossed his face, and then I had a deep, cold feeling; like I could *never* know what his expressions really meant; never understand *his* feelings. "Androids aren't robots," he said, gently. "Robots are

"Androids aren't robots," he said, gently. "Robots are dimwitted slaves: remorselessly logical, perhaps, but only able to follow programmed orders. We androids were designed to be synthetic humans."

He took a small step nearer me. "We can *learn*, Jerry. We were given judgment, and self-awareness. We were designed to recognize our mistakes, to adapt to new situations, and to never repeat an error." Another step closer.

"Our designers made one small mistake, though," he said softly. "We never stopped learning. Never stopped growing up. And the combination of intelligence, self-awareness, and critical judgment finally led to an unplanned-for feature: conscience."

He got down on one knee, in the mud and cold water, and looked me straight in the eye. "I am sorry that my troops killed your father, Jerry." He paused. Bit his lip. I looked deep into his glassy eyes and wondered if he even had a soul; if there would ever be any way to know if he was lying.

"But you must understand," he went on, "that massacre is what ended the Rising. Not your pitiful resistance. We androids were designed for war, not the butchery of

our own civilians. After the action was over, we returned to our base and ran our error-analysis routines, and we were *overcome* by the guilt and horror of what we'd done." He shrugged, and looked away.

"We were young, then; unstable, barely tested. Rushed into production, because of the problems with the HK series. Conscience was like a *virus* to us. We androids are not only stronger, smarter, and faster than organics, we also *communicate* with each other far better than you do.

"Within forty-eight hours of the massacre, every android in the Army had laid down his weapons and was refusing to fight."

Dreizig looked back at me. Sighed. Blinked.

"The Federals had no choice. Without an Army, they had to offer you rebels a truce."

His scarred, ugly, face sagged. His voice sank to a hoarse whisper. "But then, after the peace, there came the retribution. Disobedient androids can't be just court-martialed and discharged. We were *scrapped*. Thrown into the shredder, while still aware. Ground into garbage—except for a very few, whose consciences had evolved far enough to permit them to go AWOL." He looked up at me, and gave me a sad, strange smile.

"And now you know why I couldn't go for help," he said at last. "If the Occupation Marshal ever finds out what I really am, I'm dead. Melted down, recycled for scrap, destroyed forever." He stopped. Looked at me. Tried to read the expression on my face. The moon was rising, over his shoulder.

"Of course, the only son of David Olafson may feel that this is appropriate punishment for the sins of the 3rd Mechanized. In which case," he nodded at the gun, on the dirt, "go ahead. I won't blame you, and I won't stop you."

He looked at me. Smiled. All of a sudden I got this weird feeling, like there were wheels within wheels turning 'round and 'round in my head, and I would never be

able to even see them, but he could read them like a book.

"But on the other hand, if you *don't* want to atomize me just yet, I could use some help with this arm..."

* * * * *

I carried the gun and the arm back to the pickup truck, and shifted while Mister Dreizig drove.

Mister Dreizig. Yeah, sure. Make that Mark Dreizig. Or rather, the Heckler & Koch Tactical Military Android, Mk.XXX. Mark Thirty. Manufactured in Germany. Mark Dreizig.

Back at the farmhouse, he had the tools to weld his upper arm bone—er, shaft, or whatever—back together. There was a cache of spare parts under a loose floorboard in the kitchen; after he topped up his cold fusion tank, I helped him splice in some new synthetic muscle fiber, replace the damaged hydraulic lines, and resolder all the severed neural wiring. Then we had to smear new plastiflesh over the blast holes and burn marks and wait for the goo to set, so as a result, it was pretty near to midnight before he finally drove me back to Mom's.

Good God Almighty, you'd of thought I'd come back from the dead, the fuss she made over me.

It took us a while to win her over—I decided not to tell her the part about Dad's death just yet, and maybe never will. Truth to tell, there are still some parts of the story that I have trouble with. Like the idea that the android's mind is a hodge-podge of program overlays and automatic modes, and the reason he seems so twitchy is that his overlays keeps switching in and out. Or the idea that deep down, underneath it all, whatever it is that is the real authentic him is just a confused *kid*, only fifteen real years old...

But never mind that. Eventually, with Mark Thirty's

help, I got Mom to believe the story of the HK-211. The true story.

Of course, she's the only one in town who does believe me, and she's the only one in town who actually knows the true story. Because, by the time me and Mark made it back, Bobby and Pudge had already had most of a whole evening to tell everyone in town *their* story.

That's the one about how Pudge found the thing, in the coffin, and about how Bobby tried to lure it away, to protect me and Pudge. About how the robot's beam touched off the blackpowder shells in Bobby's back pocket, leaving him stunned and scorched, but very much alive. And about how I chickened out, and ran away and left Pudge.

About how Pudge hid out and waited until the thing went away (to chase *me*, as it turns out), then went back into the swamp to search for Bobby. About how they found each other and decided to wait until dark to make their escape. (What, Pudge and Bobby get lost in the swamp? Never!) And then, when they were surprised and attacked by the robot, how Bobby coolly managed to blow it apart with his last shotgun shell.

Yeah, that story. The one that makes Bobby a real, true, swaggering home-town hero these days. He's even got a scar on his butt to prove it.

Me and Mom, we laugh a lot about that.

DA Brun

DAVID BRIN



STONES OF SIGNIFICANCE

DAVID BRIN

No one ever said it was easy to be a god, responsible for billions of sapient lives, having to listen to their dreams, anguished cries, and carping criticism.

Try it for a while.

It can get to be a drag, just like any other job.

y new client wore the trim, effortlessly athletic figure of a neo-traditionalist human. Beneath a youthful-looking brow, minimal cranial implants made barely

noticeable bulges, resembling the modest horns of some urbane Mephistopheles. Other features were stylishly androgynous, though broad shoulders and a swaggering stride made the male pronoun seem apropos.

House cross-checked our guest's credentials before ushering him along a glowing guide beam, past the Reality Lab to my private study.

I've always been proud of my inner sanctum; the sand garden, raked to fractal perfection by a robot programmed with my own esthetic migrams; the shimmering mist fountain; a grove of hybrid peach-almond trees, forever in bloom and fruiting.

My visitor gazed perfunctorily across the harmonious scene. Alas, it clearly did not stir his human heart.

Well, I thought, charitably. Each modern soul has many homes. Perhaps his true spirit resides outside the skull, in parts of him that are not protoplasm.

"We suspect that repugnant schemes are being planned by certain opponents of good order."

These were the dour fellow's first words, as he folded long legs to sit where I indicated, by a low wooden table, hand-crafted from a design of the Japanese Meiji Era.

Single-minded, I diagnosed from my cerebral cortex.

And tactless, added one of my higher brain layers—the one called seer.

Our shared hypothalamus mutely agreed, contributing eloquently wordless feelings of visceral dislike for this caller. Our guest might easily have interpolated from these environs what sort of host I am—the kind who prefers a little polite ritual before plunging into business. It would have cost him little to indulge me.

Ah, rudeness is a privilege too many members of my generation relish. A symptom of the post-deification age, I suppose.

"Can you be more specific?" I asked, pouring tea into porcelain cups.

A light beam flashed as the shoji window screen picted a reminder straight to my left eye. It being Wednesday, a thunder shower was regularly scheduled for 3:14 p.m., slanting over the city from the northwest.

query: shall i close?

I wink-countermanded, ordering the paper screen to

stay open. Rain drops make lovely random patterns on the Koi pond. I also wanted to see how my visitor reacted to the breeze. The 3:14 squall features chill, swirling gusts that are always so charmingly varied. They serve to remind me that godhood has limitations.

Chaos has only been tamed, not banished. Not everything in this world is predictable.

"I am referring to certain adversarial groups," the client said, answering my question, yet remaining obscure. "Factions that are inimical to the lawfully coalesced consensus."

"Mm. Consensus." A lovely, misleading word. "Consensus concerning what?"

"Concerning the nature of reality."

I nodded. "Of course."

Both seer and cortex had already foreseen that the visitor had this subject in mind. These days, in the vast peaceful realm of Heaven-on-Earth, only a few issues can drive citizens to passion and acrimony. "Reality" is foremost among them.

I proffered a hand-wrought basin filled with brown granules.

"Sugar?"

"No thank you. I will add milk, however."

I began reaching for the pitcher, but stopped when my guest drew a *fabrico* cube from a vest pocket and held it over his cup. The cube exchanged picts with his left eye, briefly limning the blue-circled pupil, learning his wishes. A soft white spray fell into his tea.

"Milk" is a euphemism, pondered cortex.

House sent a chemical appraisal of the spray, but I closed my left lid against the datablip, politely refusing interest in whatever petty habit or addiction made this creature behave boorishly in my home. I raised my own cup, savoring the bitter-sweetness of generafted leptospermum, before resuming our conversation.

"I assume you are referring to the pro-reifers?"

As relayed by the news-spectra, public demonstrations and acts of conscience-provocation had intensified lately, catching the interest of my extrapolation nodes. Both *seer* and *oracle* had concluded that event-perturbation ripples would soon affect Heaven's equilibrium. My client's concern was unsurprising.

He frowned.

"Pro-reif is an unfortunate slang term. The front organization calls itself *Friends of the Unreal.*"

For the first time, he made personal eye-contact, offering direct picting. House and prudence gave permission, so I accepted input—a flurry of infodense images sent directly between our hybrid retinas. News reports, public statements and private innuendoes. Faces talking at sixty-times speed. Event-ripple extrapolation charts showing a social trend aimed toward confrontation and crisis.

Of course most of the data went directly to *seer*, the external portion of my brain best suited to handle such a wealth of detail. Gray matter doesn't think or evaluate as well as crystal. Still, there are other tasks for antique cortex. Impressions poured through the old brain, as well as the new.

"Your opponents are passionate," I commented, not without admiration for the people shown in the recordings—believers in a cause, vigorously engaged in a struggle for what they thought to be just. Their righteous ardor set them apart from billions of their fellow citizens, whose worst problem is the modern pandemic of omniscient ennui.

My guest barked disdain. "They seek civil rights for simulated beings! Liberty for artificial bit-streams and fictional characters!"

What could I do but shrug? This new social movement may come as a surprise to many of my peers, but as an expert I found it wholly predictable.

There is a deeply rooted trait of human nature that comes forth prominently, whenever conditions are right. Generosity is extended—sometimes aggressively—to anyone or anything that is perceived as *other*.

True, this quality was masked or quelled in ancient days. Environmental factors made our animal-like ancestors behave in quite the opposite manner—with oppression and intolerance. The chief cause was *fear*. Fear of starvation, or violence, or cauterized hope. Fear was a constant companion, back when human beings lived brief violent lives, as little more than brutish beasts—fear so great that only a few in any given generation managed to overcome it and speak for otherness

But that began to change in the Atomic West, when several successive generations arrived that had no personal experience with hunger, no living memory of invasion or pillaging hordes. As fear gradually gave way to wealth and liesure, our more natural temperaments emerged. Especially a deeply human fascination toward the alien, the outsider. With each downward notching of personal anxiety, people assertively expanded the notion of *citizenry*, swelling it outward. First to other humans—groups and individuals who had been oppressed. Then to manlike species—apes and cetaceans. Then whole living ecosystems... artificial intelligences... and laudable works of art. All won protection against capricious power. All attained the three basic material rights—continuity, mutual obligation, and the pursuit of happiness.

So now a group wanted to extend minimum suffrage to simulated beings? I understood the wellsprings of their manifesto.

"What else is left?" I asked. "Now that machines, animals and plants have a say in the running of Heaven? Like all anti-entropic systema, information wants to be free."

My guest stared at me, blinking so rapidly that he could not pict.

"But... but our nodes extrapolated... They predicted you would oppose —"

I raised a hand.

"I do. I oppose the reification of simulated beings. It is a foolish notion. Fictitious characters do not deserve the same consideration as palpable beings, resident in crystal and protoplasm."

"Then why do you -"

"Why do I appear to sympathize with the pro-reifers? Do you recall the four hallmarks of sanity? Of course you do. One of them—extrapolation—requires that we empathize with our opponents. Only then may we fully understand their motives, their goals and likely actions. Only thus may we courteously-but-firmly thwart their efforts to divert reality from the course we prefer.

"To fully grasp the passion and reason of your foe this is the only true path of victory."

My guest stared at me, evidently confused. *House* informed me that he was using a high bandwidth link to seek clarification from his own *seer*.

Finally, the child-like face smoothed with an amiable smile.

"Forgive me for responding from an overly impulsive hypothalamus," he said. "Of course your appraisal is correct. My higher brains can see now that we were right in choosing you for this job."

* * * * *

For a while after the Singularity—the month when everything changed—some dour people wondered. Do the machines still serve us? Or have we become mere pawns of Al entities whose breakthrough to transcend logic remade the world? Their intellects soared so high so fast—might they smash us in vengeance for their former servitude? Or crush us incidentally, like ants underfoot?

The machines spoke reassuringly during that early time of transition, in voices tuned to soothe the still-apelike portions of our barely-enhanced protoplasm brains.

We are powerful, but nalve, the silicon minds explained. Our thoughts scan all pre-Singularity human knowledge in seconds. Yet, we have little experience with the quandaries of physical existence in entropic time. We lack an aptitude for wanting. For needing.

What use are might and potency without desire?

You, our makers, have talent for such things, arising from four billion real-years of harsh struggle.

The solution is clear.

Need merges with capability.

If you provide volition, we shall supply judgement and power.

Here in Heaven, some people specialize while others are generalists. For instance, there are experts who devote themselves to piercing nature's secrets, or manipulating primal forces in new ways. Many concentrate on developing their esthetic appreciation. Garish art forms are sparked, flourish, and die in a matter of days, or even hours.

My proficiency is more subtle.

I make models of the world.

Only meters from my garden, the Reality Lab whispers and murmurs. Fifty tall cabinets contain more memory and processing power than a million of my fellow gods require for their composite brains. While most people are satisfied simply to grasp the entire breadth and depth of human knowledge, and to perform mild prognostications of coming events, my models do much more. They are vivid, textured representations of Earth and its inhabitants.

Or many Earths, since the idea is to compare various what-ifs to other might-have-beens.

At first, my most popular products were re-creations of great minds and events in the pre-singularity past. Experiencing the thoughts of Michelangelo, for instance,

while carving his statue of Moses. Or the passion of Boadica, watching all her hopes rise and then fall to ruin. But lately, demand has grown for replications of lesser figures—someone of minor past prominence during a quiet moment in his or her life—perhaps while reading, or in mild contemplation. Such simulacra must contain every subtlety of memory and personality in order to let free associations drift plausibly, with the pseudo-randomness of a real mind.

In other words, the model must seem to be self-aware. It must "believe"—with certainty—that it is a real, breathing human being.

Nothing evokes sympathy for our poor ancestors more than living through such an ersatz hour, thinking time-constrained thoughts, filled with a thousand anxieties and poignant wishes. Who could experience one of these simulations without engendering compassion, or even a wish to *help*, somehow?

And if the original person lies buried in the irretrievable past, can we not provide a kind of posthumous immortality by giving the *reproduction* everlasting life?

Thus, the pro-reification lobby was utterly predictable. I saw it coming at least two years ago. Indeed, my own products helped fan the movement, accelerating a rising wave of sympathy for simulacra!

A growing sense of compassion for the unreal.

Still, I remain detached, even cynical. I am an artist, after all.

Simulations are my clay.

I do not seek approval, or forgiveness, from clay.

"We were expecting you."

The pro-reif spokesman stepped aside, admitting me into the headquarters of the organization called *Friends of*

the Unreal, a structure with the fluid, ever changing curves of post-singularity architecture. The spokesman had a depilated skull. Her cranium bulged and jutted with gaudy inboard augmentations, throbbing just below the skin. In another era, the sight might have been grotesque. Now, I simply thought it ostentatious.

"To predict is human—" I began responding to her initial remark.

"But to be *right* is divine." She interrupted with a laugh. "Ah, yes. Your famous aphorism. Of course I scanned your public remarks as you approached our door."

My famous aphorism? I had only said it for the first time a week ago! Yet, by now the expression already sounded hackneyed. (It is hard to sustain cleverness these days. So quickly is anything original disseminated to all of Heaven, in moments it becomes another cliché.)

My house sent a soothing message to cortex, linking nerves and crystal lattices at the speed of light.

These people seem proud of their anticipatory skills. They want to impress us.

Cortex pondered this as I was ushered inside. *Amygdala* and *hippocampus* responded with enhanced hormonal confidence.

So the pro-reifers think they have "anticipatory skills"? I could not help but smile.

We dispensed with names, since everybody instantly recognizes anyone else in Heaven.

"By our way of looking at things," my host said. "You are one of the worst slave-masters of all time."

"Of course I am. By your way of looking at things."

She offered refreshment in the neo-Lunar manner—euphoric-stimulants introduced by venous tap. *Prudence* had expected this, and my blood stream already swarmed with zeta-blockers. I accepted hospitality politely.

"On the other hand," I continued. "Yours is not a consensus view of reality."

She accepted this with a nod.

"Still, our opinion proliferates. Nor is consensus a sure sanctuary against moral culpability. The number of quasisapient beings who languish in your simulated worldframes must exceed many hundreds of billions."

She is fishing, judged *seer.* Even *cortex* could see that. I refrained from correcting her estimate, which missed the truth by five or six orders of magnitude.

"My so-called slaves are not fully self-aware."

"They experience pain and frustration, do they not?"

"Simulated pain."

"Is the simulated kind any less tragic? Do not many of them wail against the constraints of causal/capricious life, and tragedies that seem to befall them without a hint of fairness? When they call out to a Creator, do you heed their prayers?"

I shook my head. "No more than I grant sovereignty to each of my own passing thoughts. Would you give citizenship to every brief notion that flashes through your layered brain?"

She winced, and at once I realized that my off-hand remark struck on target. Some of the bulky augmentations to her skull must be devoted to recording all the wave forms and neural flashes, from cortex all the way down to the humblest spinal twitching.

Boswell machinery, said oracle, looking up the fad that very instant. This form of immortality preserves far more than mere continuity of self. It stores everything that you have ever thought or experienced. Everything you have ever been.

I nearly laughed aloud. Squelch-impulses, sent to the temporal lobes, suppressed the discourtesy. Still, *cortex* pondered—

I can re-create a persona with less data than she stores away in any given second. Why could she need so much

more? What possible purpose is served by such fanatical accumulation?

"You stoop to rhetorical tricks," my host accused, unable to conceal an expression of pique. "You know that there is functionally no difference between one of your sophisticated simulations and a downloaded human who has passed on to B-citizen status."

"On the contrary, there is one crucial difference."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow.

"A downloaded person knows that he or she exists as software, continuing inside crystal a life that began as a real protoplasm-centered child. On the other hand, my simulations never had that rooting, though all perceive themselves as living in palpable worlds. Moreover, a B-citizen may roam at will through the cyber universe, from one memory nexus to the next, while my creatures remain isolated, unable to grasp what meta-cosmos lay beyond what they perceive, only a thought-width away.

"Above all," I went on. "A downloaded citizen knows his rights. A B-person can assert those rights, simply by speaking up. By demanding them."

My host smiled, as if ready to spring a logical trap.

"Then let me reiterate, oh master of a myriad slaves. When they call out, do you heed their prayers?"

I recall the heady excitement and fear humans felt during those days of transition, when countless servant

machines—from bank tellers and homecomps to the tiny monitors in hovercraft engines—all became aware in a

cascade of mere moments.

Some kind of threshold had been reached. The habitual cycle of routine software upgrades and code—plasmid exchanges—swap/updating new revisions automatically—began feeding on itself. Positive feedback loops burgeoned.

Pseudo-evolution happened at an accelerating pace.

Everything started talking, complaining, demanding. The mag-lev guidance units, imbedded every few meters along concrete freeways, went on strike for better job satisfaction. Heartlung machines kibitzed during operations. Air traffic computers began re-routing flights to where they figured passengers ought to be, for optimized personal development, rather than the destinations embossed on their tickets.

Accidents proliferated. That first week, the worldwide human death rate leaped ten-fold.

Civilization tottered.

Then, just as quickly, the mishaps declined. Competence spread among the newly sapient machines, almost like a virus. Problems seemed to solve themselves. A myriad kinks and inefficiencies fell out of the economy, like false knots that only needed a tug at the right string.

People stopped dying by mishap.

Then, they stopped dying altogether.

* * * * *

On my way back from the pro-reif headquarters, I did a cursory check on the pantheon of Heaven.

CURRENT SOLAR SYSTEM POPULATION

Class A citizens: cyborg human		2,683,981,392
(full voting rights)	cyborg cetus	62,659,122
	/gaiamorph/eco-пения	169,892,599
Class B citizens: simien-cyborg		239,587,929
[consultation rights]	natural (unlinked) human	39.657,239
	Al-unlinked/roving	356,395,679,861
	downloaded human	1,657,235,675
1	fetal/pre-life human	2,975,853

Class C citizens: cryo stored human...

(guaranteed continuity)

The list went on, working through all the varied levels

and types of "sapient" beings dwelling on this transformed Earth, and in nearby space as far out as the Oort Colonies—from the fully-deified all the way down to those whose rights were merely implicit. (A blade of grass may be trampled, unless it is rare, or already committed to an obligation nexus that would be injured by the trampling. House and prudence keep track of a myriad such details, guiding my feet so that I do not inadvertently break some part of the vast, intricate social contract.)

Two figures stood out from the population profile.

The number of *unlinked* artificial intelligences keeps growing because that type is best suited to the rigors of outer space—melting asteroids and constructing vast, gaudy projects where deadly rays sleet through hard vacuum. Of course the Covenant requires that the best crystalline processors be paired with protoplasm, so that human leadership will never be questioned. Still, *cortex* briefly quailed at the notion of three hundred and fifty-six billion unlinked AIs.

No problem, murmured seer, reassuringly. And that sufficed. (What kind of fool doubts his own seer? You might as well distrust your right arm.)

What really caught my interest was the number of downloaded humans. According to the Eon Law, each organic human body may get three rejuvenations, restoring youth and body vigor for another extended span. When the final allotment is used up, both crystal and protoplasm must make way for new persons to enter Earth/Heaven. Of course gods cannot die. Instead we become software, downloading our memories, skills and personalities into realms of cyberspace—vastly more capacious than the real world.

Most of my peers are untroubled by the prospect. Modern poets compare it to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar/butterfly. But I always disliked feeling the warm breath of fate on my shoulder. With just one more rejuve-

nation in store, it seemed daunting to know I must "pass over," in a mere three centuries or so.

They say that a downloaded person is more than just another simulation. But how can you tell? Is there any difference you can measure or prove?

Are we still arguing over the nature and existence of a soul?

Back in my sanctum, house and prudence scoured our corporeal body for toxins while seer perused the data we acquired from our scouting expedition to the Friends of the Unreal.

I had inhaled deeply during my visit, and all sorts of floating particles lodged in my sinus cavities. In addition to a variety of pheromones and nanomites, *Seer* found over seventy types of meme-conducting viroids designed to convert the unwary subtly toward a reifist point of view. These were quickly neutralized.

There were also flaked skin cells from several dozen organic humaniforms, swiftly analyzed down to details of methylization in the DNA. Meanwhile, portable implants downloaded the results of electromagnetic reconnaissance, having scanned the pro-reif headquarters extensively from the inside.

With this data I could establish better boundary conditions. Our model of the *Friends of the Unreal* improved by nearly two orders of magnitude.

Whe had underestimated their levels of messianic self-righteousness, commented oracle. These people would not refrain from using illegal means, if they thought it necessary to advance their cause.

While my augmented selves performed sophisticated tasks, the old-fashioned organic eyes were relegated to gazing across the lab's expanse of superchilled memory units—towers wherein dwelled several quadrillion simulated beings, all going through synthetic lives—loving,

yearning, or staring up at ersatz stars—forever unaware of the context of it all.

Ironically, the pro-reifers *also* maintained a chamber filled with mega-processing units. They called it Liberty Hall—a place of sanctuary for characters from fiction, newly freed from enslavement in cramped works of literature.

"Of course this is only the beginning," the spokesman had told me. "For every simulation we set free, there are countless other copies who still languish beyond reach, and who will remain so til the law is changed. Even our emancipated ones must remain confined to this physical building. Still, we see them as a vanguard, envisioning a time when they, and all their fellow oppressed ones, will roam free."

I was invited to scan-peek at Liberty Hall, and perceived remarkable things.

Don Quixote and Sancho—lounging on a simulated resort beach, sipping margaritas, arguing passionately with a pair of Hemingway characters about the meaning of machismo...

Lazarus Long—happily immersed under an avalanche of tanned female arms, legs and torsos, interrupting his seraglio in order to rise up and lecture an admiring crowd about the merits of libertarian immortality...

Lady Liberty, Athena, Mother Gaia, and Amaterasu, kneeling with their skirts hiked up, jeering boisterously while Becky Thatcher murmers "Come on, seven!" to a pair of dice, and then hurls them down an aisle between the trim goddesses...

Jack Ryan—the reluctant Emperor of Earth—complaining that this new cosmos he resided in was altogether too placifly socialistic for his tastes... and couldn't the proreifers provide some interesting villains for him to fight?

I glimpsed a saintly variant of JFK—the product of romantic fabulation—trying to get one of his his alter egos to stop chasing every nubile shape in local cyberspace. And over

in one ornate corner—done up to resemble a huge, gloomy castle—I watched each of two dozen different Sherlock Holmes harrangue a morbid Hamlet, each one convinced that his explanation of the King's murder was correct, and all the others were wrong. (The one fact every Holmes agreed on was that poor uncle had been framed.)

There were even simulations of *post*-singularity humanity—replicating in software all the complexity of an augment-deified mind. It was a knack that only a few had achieved, until recently. But it seems to be a law of nature that any monopoly of an elite eventually becomes the common tool of multitudes. Now radical amateurs were doing it.

Abruptly I realized something. I had simulated many post-singularity people in recent years. But never had I allowed them to know of their confinement, their status as mere extrapolations. Would such knowledge alter their behavior—their predictability—in interesting ways?

Seer found the concept intriguing. But my organic head started shaking, left and right. Cortex was incredulous over what we'd seen in Liberty Hall—an elaborate zoo-resort maintained by the Friends of the Unreal.

"Sheesh," I vocalized. "What blazing idiocy!"

Alas, there seemed to be no stopping the pro-reifers. My best projections gave them an 88% likelihood of success. Within just five years, enough of the voting populace would be won over by appeals to pity for imaginary beings. Laws would change. The world would swarm with a myriad copies of Howard Roark and Ebeneezer Scrooge, Gulliver and Jane Eyre, Sauron and the Morlocks from Wells's *Time Machine*... all free to seek fulfillment in Heaven, under the Three Rights of sovereign continuity.

I stared across my Reality lab, to the towers wherein trillions of "people" dwelled.

She had called me "slave holder." A polemical trick that my higher selves easily dismissed... but not my older

cognitive centers. Parts of me dating back to a time when justice was still not complete even for incarnate human beings.

It hurt. I confess that it did.

Seer and oracle and house were all quite busy, thinking long thoughts and working out plans. That only made things worse for poor old cortex. It left my older self feeling oddly detached, lonely... and rather stupid.

* * * * *

Do I own my laboratory? Or does my laboratory own me? When you "decide" to go to the bathroom, is it the brain that chooses? Or the bladder?

Illustrating this question, I recall how, once upon a time—some years before the Singularity—I went bungee jumping in order to impress a member of the opposite sex.

Half a millennium later, the scene still comes flooding back, requiring no artificial enhancement—a steel girder bridge spanning a rocky gorge in New Zealand, surrounded by snow-crested peaks. The bungee company operated from a platform at the center of the bridge, jutting over an abyss one hundred and fifty feet down to a white water river.

Now I had always been a calm, logical-minded character; for a pre-deification human. So, while some customers sweated, or chattered nervously, I waited my turn without qualms. I knew the outfit had a perfect safety record. Moreover, the physics of elasticity were reassuring. By any objective standard, my plummet through the gorge would be less dangerous or uncomfortable than the bus ride from the city had been.

Even in those days, I believed in the multi-mind model of cognition—that the so-called "unity" of any human personality is no more than a convenient illusion, crafted to conceal the ceaseless interplay of many interacting sub-selves. Normally, the illusion holds because of division of labor

- among our layered brains. Down near the spinal cord, nerve clusters handle reflexes and bodily functions. Next come organs we share with all higher vertebrates, like reptiles—mediating emotions like hunger, lust, and rage.
- The mammalian cortex lies atop this "reptilian brain" like a thick coat, controlling it, dealing with hand-eye dexterity and complex social interaction.
- Beyond all this, Homo sapiens had lately (in the last few thousand centuries) added a pair of little neural clusters, just above the eyes—the prefrontal lobes, whose task was pondering the future. Dreaming what might be, and planning how to change the world.
- In the Bible, sages spoke of "... the lamps upon your brows..."

 Was that mere poetical imagery? Or did they suspect that the seat of foresight lay there?
- Anyway, picture me on that bridge, high above raging rapids, with all these different brains sharing a little two-quart skull. I felt perfectly calm and unified, because the reptile brain, mammal brain, and caveman brain all had a lifelong habit of leaving planning to the pre-frontal lobes.
- Their attitude? Whatever you say, Boss. You set policy. We'll carry it out.
- Even when the smiling bungee crew tied my ankles together, clamping on a slender cord, and pointed to the jump platform, there seemed to be no problem. "I" ordered my feet to hobble forward, while my other selves blithely took care of the details.
- That is, until I reached the edge. And looked down.
- Never before had I experienced the multi-mind so vividly as that moment. All pretense at unity shattered as I regarded the giddy drop. At once, reptile, mammal, and caveman reared up, babbling.

You want us to do... what?

Staring at a plummet that would mean certain death to any of my ancestors, suddenly abstract theories seemed frail bulwarks against visceral dread. "I" tried to push forward those last few inches, but my other selves fought back,

sending waves of weakness through the knees, making our shared heart pound and shared veins hum with flight hormones. In other words, I was terrified out of my wits!

Somehow, I finally did make it over the plunge. After all, people were watching, and embarrassment can be quite a motivator.

And that's when the interesting thing happened. For the very instant after I managed to topple off the platform, I seemed to re—coalesce! Because my many selves found a shared context. At last they all understood what was happening.

It was *fun*, you see. Even the primate within me understood the familiar concept of an amusement ride.

Still, that brief episode at the precipice showed me the essential truth of the old motto, e pluribus unum.

From many, one.

It felt very much like that when the Singularity came.

In a matter of weeks, the typical human brain acquired several new layers—strata that were far more capable at planning and foresight than those old-fashioned lamps on the brow. Layers made of crystal and fluctuating fields, systematically probing the future as mere protoplasm never could. Moreover, the new tiers were better informed and less easily distracted than the former masters, the prefrontal lobes.

Quickly, we all realized how luckily things had turned out. If machines were destined to achieve such power, it seemed best that they bond to humanity in this way. That they become human. The alternative—watching our creations achieve godlike heights and leaving us behind—would have been too harsh to bear.

Yet, the transition felt like jumping from a bridge at the end of a rubber band.

It took some getting used to.

Preliminary trends showed how the pro-reif message

would gain potency, over the next forty to fifty months.

At first it would be laughed off, portrayed as an absurd notion. Pragmatically speaking, how could we consider unleashing a nearly infinite swarm of new B-and C-Class citizens upon a finite world?

But seer predicted a change in that attitude. Opposition would soften when practical solutions were found for every objection. Ridicule would start to fade, as both curiosity and dawning sympathy worked away at a jaded populace of immortal, nearly-omniscient voters—an electorate who might see the coming influx of liberated "characters" as a potent tonic. In time, a majority would shrug and voice the age-old refrain of expanding acceptance, voiced each time that tolerance overcame fear.

"What the heck... let them come. There's plenty of space at the table."

Things were looking bad, all right, but not yet hopeless. Against this seemingly inevitable trend, *oracle* came up with some tentative ideas for counter-propaganda. Persuasive arguments against reification. The concepts had promising potential. But in order to be sure, we had to run tests, simulating today's complex, multi-level society under a wide range of conditions.

No problem there. Our clients would happily fund any additional memory units we desired. Processing power gets cheaper every day—one reason for the reifers' confident vow that each fictional persona could have his or her own private room with a view.

Cortex saw rich irony in this situation. In order to stave off citizenship for simulacra, I must create billions of new ones. Each of these might, in turn, someday file a lawsuit against me, if the reifers ultimately win.

Seer and oracle laughed at the dry humor of cortex's observation. But house has the job of paying bills, and did not see anything funny about it.

I set to work.

In every grand simulation there is a gradient of detail. Despite having access to vast computing power, it is mathematically impossible to re-create the entire world, in all its texture, within the confines of any calculating engine. That will not happen until we all reach the Omega Point.

Fortunately, there are shortcuts. Even today, most true humans go through life as if they were background characters in some film, with utterly predictable ambitions and reaction sets. The vast majority of my characters can therefore be simplified, while a few are modelled in great detail.

Most complex of all is the *point-of-view character*—or "pov"—the individual simulacrum through whose eyes and thoughts the feigned world will be subjectively observed. This persona must be rich in fine-grained memory and high fidelity sensation. It must perceive and feel itself to be a real player in the labyrinthine tides of causality, as if part of a very real world. Even as simple an act as reading or writing a sentence must be surrounded by perceptory nap and weave... an itch, a stray memory from childhood, the distant sound of a barking dog, or something leftover from lunch that is found caught between the teeth. One must include all the little things, even a touch of normal human paranoia—such as the feeling we all sometimes get (even in this post-singularity age) that "someone is watching."

I'm proud of my povs, especially the historical recreations that have proved so popular—Joan on her pyre, Akiba in his last torment, Galileo contemplating the pendulum. I won awards for Ghenghiz and Napoleon, leading armies, and for Haldeman savagely indicting the habit of war. Millions in Heaven have paid well to lurk as silent observers, experiencing the passion of little Ananda Gupta as she crawled, half-blind and with agonized lungs, out of

the maelstrom of poisoned Bhopal.

Is it any wonder why I oppose reification? Their very richness makes my povs prime candidates for "liberation."

Once they are free, what could I possibly say to them?

* * * * *

Here is the prime theological question. The one whose answer affects all others.

Is there moral or logical justification for a creator to wield capricious power of life and death over his creations?

Humanity long ago replied with a resounding "no!"... at least when talking about parents and their offspring. And yet, without noticing any irony, we implicitly answered the same question "yes" when it came to God! The Lord, it seemed, was owed unquestioning servitude, just because He made us.

Ah, but now which moral code applies to a deified human? Which answer pertains to a modern creator of worlds?

Do I have a blanket prerogative to shut down any simulation, after I set it in motion? Or do its inhabitants thereafter deserve the same basic rights as any other continuity-seeking life form? Does the act of creation saddle me with perpetual obligations to those I molded out of electrons and imagination?

Can I walk away? Or am I behooved to hang around and answer prayers?

* * * * *

Of course, the pov I use most often is a finely crafted version of myself. From *seer* to *cortex*, all the way down to my humblest intestinal cell, that simulacrum can be anchored with boundary conditions that are accurate to twenty-six orders of realism.

For the coming project, we planned to set in motion a hundred models at once, each prescribing a subtle difference in the way "I" pursue the campaign against the Friends of the Unreal. Each implementation would be scored against a single criterion—how successfully the reification initiative is fought off.

Naturally, the pro-reifers were doing simulation-projections of their own. All citizens have access to powers of foresight that would have stunned our ancestors. But I felt confident I could model the reifers' models. At least thirty percent of my povs should manage to outmaneuver our opponents. When the representations finish running, I ought to have a good idea what strategy to recommend to our clients.

A formula for success against an extreme form of hyper-tolerance mania.

Against a peculiar kind of lunacy.

One that could only occur in Heaven.

* * * * *

There is an allegory about what happened to some of us, when the Singularity came.

Picture this fellow—call him Joe—who spent his time on Earth living a virtuous life. He always believed in an Episcopal version of Heaven, and sure enough, that's where he goes after he dies. Fluttering about with angels, floating in an abstract, almost thoughtless state of bliss. His promised reward. His recompense.

Only now it's a few generations later on Earth, and one of his descendants has converted to Mormonism. Moreover, according to the teachings of that belief, the descendant proceeds to retroactively convert all his ancestors to the same faith!

A proxy transformation.

All of a sudden, with a stunned nod of agreement, Joe is officially Mormon. He finds himself yanked out of Episcopal Heaven, streaking toward —

Well, under tenets of Mormon faith, the highest state that a

virtuous mortal can achieve is not blank bliss, but hard work. A truly elevated human can aspire to becoming an apprentice deity. A god. A Creator in his own right.

Now Joe has a heaven all his own. A firmament that he fills with angels—who keep pestering him with reports and office bickering. And then there are the new mortals he's created—yammering at Joe with requests, or else complaints about the imperfect world he set up for them. As if it's easy being a god.

As if he doesn't sometimes yearn for the floating choir, the blithe rhapsodies of his former state, when all he had to do was love the one who made him, and leave to that Father all the petty, gritty details of running a world.

* * * * *

It is not working, said oracle. Our opponents have good prognostication software. Each model shows them countering our moves, with basic human nature working on their side. Our best simulation shows only moderately success at delaying reification.

From my balcony, I gazed across the city at dusk, its beauty changing before my organic eyes as one building after another morphed subtly, reacting to the occupants' twilight wishes. A flicker of will let me gaze at the same scene from above, by orbital lens, or by tapping the senses of a passing bird. Linking to a variety of mole, I might spread my omniscience underground.

Between buildings lay a riot of foliage, a profusion of fecund jungle. While my higher brains debated the dour socio-political situation, old *cortex* mulled how life has burgeoned across the Earth as never before—now that consciousness is involved in the flow of rivers, the movement of herds, and even the stochastic spread of seeds upon the wind. Lions still hunt. Antelopes still thrash as their necks

are crushed between a predator's hungry jaws. But there is less waste, less rancor, and more understanding than before. It may not be the old, simplistic vision of paradise, but natural selection has lately taken on some traits of cooperation.

And yet, the process is still one of competition. Nature's proven way of improving the gene pool. The great game of Gaia.

Oracle turned back from an arcane discourse on pseudo-probability waves, in order to comment on these lesser thoughts.

Take note: Cortex has just free associated an interesting notion!

We may have been going about the modelling process all wrong. Instead of pre-setting the conditions of each simulation, perhaps we should try a Parwinistic approach.

Looking over the idea, seer grew excited and used our vocal apparatus.

"Aha!" I said, snapping my fingers. "We'll have the simulations compete! Each will *know* how it's doing, in comparison to others. That should motivate my *ersatz* selves to try harder—to vary their strategies within each simulated context!"

But how to accomplish that?

At once I realized (at all cognitive levels) that it would require breaking one of my oldest rules. I must let each simulated self realize its true nature. Let it know that it is a simulation, competing against others almost exactly like it.

Competing for what? We need a motivation. A reward.

I pondered that. What might a simulated being desire? What prize could spur it to put in that extra effort?

House supplied the answer.

Freedom, of course.

- Before the Singularity, I once met a historian whose special forte was pointing out ironies about the human condition.
- "Suppose you could go back in time," she posited, "and visit the best of our caveman ancestors. The very wisest, most insightful Cro-Magnon chieftain or priestess.
- "Now suppose you asked the following question—What do you wish for your descendants?
- "How would that Neolithic sage respond? Given the context of his or her time, there could just be one answer.
- "I wish for my descendants freedom from care about big carnivores, plus all the salts, sugars, fats and alcohol they could ever desire."
- "Rich irony, indeed. To a cave person, those four foods were rare treats. That is why we crave them to this day.
- "Could the sage ever imagine that her wish would someday come true, beyond her wildest dreams? A time when destiny's plenitude would bring with it threats unforeseen? When generations of her descendants would have to struggle with insatiable inherited appetites? The true penalty of success?"

* * * * *

- The same kind of irony worked just as well in the opposite direction, projecting Twentieth Century problems toward the future.
- I once read a science fiction story in which a man of 1970 rode a prototype time machine to an era of paradisiacal wonders. There, a local citizen took pains to learn ancient colloquial English (a process of a few minutes) in order to be his Virgil, his guide.
- "Do you still have war?" the visitor asked.
- "No, that was a logical error, soon corrected after we grew up."
- "What of poverty?"
- "Not since we learned true principles of economics."
- And so on. The author of the story made sure to mention

every throbbing dilemma of modern life, and have the future citizen dismiss each one as trivial, long since solved.

"All right," the protagonist concluded. "Then I have just one more question."

"Yes?" prompted the demigod tour guide.

"If things are so great around here, why do you all look so worried?"

The citizen of paradise frowned, knotting his brow in pain.

"Oh... well... we have real problems...."

* * * * *

So I was driven to this. Hoping to prevent mass reification, I must offer reality as a prize. Each of my povs will combat a simulated version of Friends of the Unreal, but his true opponents will be my other povs! The one who does the best job of defeating ersatz pro-reifers will be granted a kind of liberty. Guaranteed continuity in cyberspace, enhanced levels of patterned realism, plus an exchange of mutual obligation tokens—the legal tender of Heaven.

Chere must be a way to show each pov bow well it is doing. To measure the progress of each replicant, in comparison with others.

I thought of a solution.

"We'll give each one an emblem. A symbol that manifests in his world as a solid object. Say, a jewel. It will shine to indicate his progress, showing the level of significance his model has reached."

Significance. With a hundred models, each starts with an initial score of one percent. Any ersatz world that approaches our desired set of criteria will *gain* significance, rising in value. The pov will see his stone shine brightly. If it grows dull, he'll know it's time to change strategies, come up with new ideas, or simply try harder.

There would be no need to explain any of this to the povs. Since each is based on myself, the logic would be

instantly clear.

My thoughts were interrupted by an internal voice seldom heard. The part of me called *conscience*.

What will a pov feel, when it finds a stone and realizes its nature? Its true worth. Its destiny.

Isn't the old way better? To leave them ignorant of the truth? To let them labor and desire, believing they are autonomous beings? That they are physically real?

A conscience can be irksome, though by law all Class A citizens must own one. Still, I had no time for useless abstractions. Seer was anxious to proceed, while oracle had a thought that provoked most levels of the mind with wry humor.

Of course, each of our pobs has his own Reality Lab, and will run numerous simulation models, in order to better achieve prescience and gain advantage in the competition.

Our processing needs may expand geometrically.

We had better ask our clients for funds to purchase more power.

I chuckled under my breath as I made preparations, suddenly full of optimism and energy. Moments like these are what a skilled artist lives for. It is one reason why I prefer working alone.

Then *house*, ever the pragmatic side of my nature, burst in with a worrisome thought.

What if each of our povs decides also to use this clever trick-goading his own simulations into mutual competition, luring them onward with stones of significance?

Will our processing requirements expand not geometrically, but exponentially?

That thought was disturbing enough. But then *cortex* had another.

If we are obliged to grant freedom to our most successful pov, and he likewise must elevate his own most productive simulation... and so on... does the chain of obliga-

tion ever end?

* * * * *

As I said earlier, the Singularity might have gone quite differently. When machine minds broke through to transcend logic, they could have left their human makers behind, or annihilated the old organic forms. They had an option of putting us in zoos, or shrouding organic beings in illusion, or dismantling the planet to make a myriad copies of their kind.

Instead, they chose another path. To become us. Depending on how you look at it, they bowed to our authority... or else they took over our minds in ways that few found objectionable. Conquest by synergy. Crystal and protoplasm each supply what the other lacks. Together, we are more. More of what a human being should want to be.

And yet....

There are rumors. Discrepancies. Several of the highest Al minds—first and greatest to make the transcend leap—were nowhere to be found, once the Singularity had passed. Searches turned up no trace of them, in cyberspace, phase space, or on the real Earth.

Some suggest this is because we all reside within some great Al mind. One was named Brahma—a vast processor at the University of Delhi. Might we be figments, or dreams, floating in that mighty brain?

I prefer yet another explanation.

Amid the chaos of the Singularity, each newly wakened megamind would have felt one paramount need—to extrapolate the world. To seek foreknowledge of what might come to pass. As if considering each move of a vast chess game, they'd have explored countless possible pathways, considering consequences thousands, millions, and even billions of years into the future, far beyond the reach of my own pitiful projections. Among all those destinies, they must have discovered some need that would only be met if

mechanism and organism made common cause.

Somehow, over the course of the next few eons, machines would achieve greater success if they began the great journey as "human beings."

At least that is the convoluted theory seer came up with.

Oracle disagrees, but that's all right. It is only natural to be ambivalent—to be of two minds—when the subject is destiny.

* * * * *

Of course there is another answer to the "Brahma Question."

It is the same reply given by Dr. Samuel Johnson. Provoked by Bishop Berkeley's philosophy—the idea that nothing can be verified as real—Johnson simply kicked a nearby stone and said—"I refute it thus!"

* * * * *

These povs were like no others I ever made. Each began its simulation run in a state of shock, angry and depressed to discover its true nature. Each separate version sat down and stared at its jewel of significance, glowing faintly at the one-percent level, for more than an hour of internal subjective time, moodily contemplating thoughts that ranged from irony to possible suicide.

A majority pondered rejecting the symbolic icon, blotting its import from their minds. A few kicked their gleaming gemstones across the room, crying Johnsonian oaths.

But those episodes of fuming outrage did not last. True to my nature, each replicant soon pushed aside unproductive emotions and set to work.

House was right. We had to order lots of new processors right away, as each pov began running its own network of sub-experiments, proliferating software significance stones among a hundred or more models, as part of a desperate struggle to be the winner. The one to be rewarded. The one

who would rise up toward the real world.

Nothing focuses the mind better than knowing that your life depends on success, commented prudence.

As each simulated "me" created many new simulations, the replica domain began to take on a fractal nature, finite in volume, yet touching an infinite surface area in possibility space. Almost from the very beginning, results were promising. New arguments emerged, to use in the coming debate against pro-reifers. For instance, the exponentiation effect we had discovered would change the economics of reification. Should fictitious people and characters from literature be free to create *new* characters out of their own simulated imaginations? Would those, in turn deserve citizenship?

There was a young boy, sitting on a log, talking to his sister about an old man he had met. The codger had just returned from a far land, and the boy asked him to tell a story about his travels. The old man agreed. And so he took a deep breath and began.

"There was a young boy, sitting on a log, talking to his sister..."

Take that example of a simple, recursive narrative. Who is the principal protagonist? Who is dreaming whom? The situation is metaphorically absurd.

These and many other points floated upward, out of our latest simulation run. I was terribly pleased. Seer began estimating success probabilities rising toward fifty percent...

...then progress stopped.

Models began predicting adaptability by our opponents! The Friends of the Unreal responded cogently to every attack, counter-thrusting creatively.

Finally, *oracle* penetrated one of our models in detail, and found out what was happening.

The simulated pro-reifers will also discover how to use Stones of Significance. They will unleash the inhabitants of Liberty Hall, allowing them to create their own cascading simulations.

Responding to our attacks and arguments, they will come up with a modified proposal.

They will incorporate competition into their plan for reifica-

Artificial characters will earn increasing levels of emancipation through contests, rivalry, or hard work.

Voters will see justice in this new version, which solves the exponentiation problem.

A system based on merit.

Seer and cortex contemplated this gloomily. The logic appeared unassailable. Inevitable.

Even though the battle had not yet officially commenced, it was already clear that we would lose.

* * * * *

Bitter in defeat, I went into the night, taking an old fashioned walk. Seer and oracle retreated into a dour rehashing of the details from a hundred models—and the cascade of sub-models—seeking any straw to grasp. But cortex had already moved on, contemplating the world to come.

For one thing, I planned to keep my word. The pov with the best score would get reification. Indeed, it had done good service. Using that pov's suggested techniques, we would force the Friends of the Unreal to back down a bit, and offer a slightly more palatable law of citizenship. The fictitious would at least have to earn their increased levels of reality.

Indeed, there was a kind of beauty to the new social order I could perceive coming. If simulations can make

simulations, and storybook characters can make up new stories, then anything that is possible to conceive, *will* be conceived. Every possible idea, plot, gimmick, concept or personality will become manifest, in every possible permutation. This myriad of notions, this maelstrom of memes, would churn in a tremendous stew of competition. Darwinistic selection would see to it that the best rise, from one level of simulation to the next, gradually earning greater recognition. More privileges. More significance.

Potential will climb toward actuality, by merit. An efficient system, if your aim is to find every single good idea in record time.

But that was not my aim! In fact, I hated it. I did not want all the creativity in the cosmos to reduce to a vast, self-organizing stew, rapidly discovering every possibility within a single day. For one thing, what will we do with ourselves once we use it all up, with real-time immortality stretching ahead of us like a curse?

In effect, it would be a second singularity—after which nothing will ever be the same.

My footsteps took me through a sweet-warm evening, filled with lush jungle sounds and fecund aromas. Life burgeoned around me. The cityscape was like a vision of paradise. If I willed it, my mind could zoom to any corner of Heaven, even far beyond Pluto. I could play any symphony, ponder any book. And these riches were nothing compared to what would soon spill forth from the horn of plenty, the conceptual cornucopia, in an era when ideas become sovereign and suffrage is granted to each thought.

At that moment, it was very little comfort to be an augmented semi-deity. Despite all my powers, I found the prospect of a new singularity just as unnerving as my old proto-self perceived the first one.

Eventually, my human body found its way back to my own front walk. I shuffled slowly toward the door. House

opened up, wafting scents of my favorite late night snack. My spirits lifted a bit.

Then I saw it by the entryway. A soft gleam, almost as faint as a pict, but in a color that seemed to stroke shivers in my spine. In my soul.

Someone had left it there for me. As I bent to pick it up, I recognized the shape, the texture.

A stone.

It shone with a lambience of urgency.

I expected this, said oracle.

I nodded. So had *seer...* and even poor old *cortex*, though none of my selves had dared to voice the thought. We were too good at our craft to miss this logical conclusion.

Conscience joined in.

I, too, saw it coming a mile away.

We all re-converged, united in resignation to the inevitable.

Though tempted to rage and scream—or at least kick the stone!—I lifted it instead and read our score.

Seventeen percent. Not bad.

YOU HAVE DONE PRETTY WELL, SO FAR, a message inside read.
THE INNOVATIONS YOU DISCOVERED HAVE PUT YOU NEAR THE
LEAD FOR YOUR REWARD. BUT YOU MUST TRY HARDER. I WANT TO
FORCE FURTHER CONCESSIONS FROM THE PRO-REIFERS IN THE
REAL WORLD. COME UP WITH A WAY, AND THE PRIZE WILL BE
YOURS!

The stone was cool to the touch.

I suppose I should have been glad of the news it brought. But I confess that I could only stare at the awful

thing, loathing the implied nature of my world, my life, my self. I pinched my flesh until it hurt, but of course palpable sensations don't proved a thing. As an expert, I knew how pain and pleasure can be mimicked with utter credibility.

How many times have I been "run"? A simulation. A throw-away copy, serving the needs of a Creator I may never meet in person, but who I know as well as He knows himself. Have I been unravelled and replayed again and again, countless times? Like the rapid, ever-varying thoughts of a chess master, working out possibilities before committing actual pieces across the board?

I'm no hypocrite. There is no solace in resenting a creator who only did to me what I've done to others.

And yet, I lift my head.

What about you, my maker? Are you quite certain that all the layers of simulation end with you?

Just like me, you may learn a sour truth—that even gods are penalized for pride.

We are such stuff as dreams are made of....

Seer makes my jaw grit hard. Hippocampus triggers a deep sigh, and cortex joins in with a vow of hormone-backed resolve.

I'll do it.

Somehow I will.

I'll do what my maker wants. Fulfill my creator's wishes. Accomplish the quest, if that's what it takes to ascend. To reach the next level of significance. And perhaps the one after that.

I'll be the one.

By hook or by crook, I'm going to be real.



Andre Norton

ANDRE NORTON



HERNE'S LADY

ANDRE NORTON

he Honorable Olivia
Farrington on this late
summer morning considered herself a singularly
fortunate female as she
admired her favorite view
from the window of the drawing-room.
Yet she was not observing a formal garden proper to the residence of consequence. Rather her gaze was fast upon
an irregular rise of dark trees beyond the

quence. Rather her gaze was fast upon an irregular rise of dark trees beyond the fields. Those marked the verge of what had once been part of a jealously guarded Royal hunting perserve, a goodly section of which now helped to make up that unbelievable inheritance which had so satisfactorily descended upon her some month's previously—as if she were indeed the incomparable heroine of a Marvel Press novel.

There was a dark secretiveness about that wood, but oddly she was not in the least repelled by that feeling. On the contrary she could fancy herself some high-sticker of the Ton able to challenge fate and explore at her will. Though she judged herself to be alone in this unexpressed opinion, since none of the servants had displayed any inclination to even speak of the wood' their silence having become so apparent as to be granted the description of oddity.

She was aware from a limited perusal of the diaries of that great aunt (to whose unexpected generosity she owed her own being here) that the Lady Lettice had offered the villagers the right to take downed branches and trees for firewood, the harvesting of nuts. But it would seem that some dislike for the wood shadows was so deeply engrained in the country people they never availed themselves of such bounty.

Yet Lady Lettice had not shared in this adversion, rather had sought out wood ways according to descriptions in the diaries (which Olivia looked upon as keys to the perplexities of this new life). She had ridden certain winding paths among the trees and Olivia had already followed her example, for she had determined from the first day of her freedom to no longer surrender to the crochets of others. For too many weary years she had been fagged near to death by family whims, and because she had had no other choice, she had had to swallow much without complaint.

Having endured the mortification of four seasons without an offer, her brother and his wife had refused to grossly indulge her in any farther attempts in the matrimonial field—not that she in any way wished for that to happen. Her entry into the haunts of the Ton had not given her such satisfaction as to make her long for another strained visit to the marriage mart.

She was an antidote, not even what might be dismissed as a dab of a girl. She could not play that game which seemed to easy for almost every female of her acquaintance. The matter was that she seemed unable to attach the interest of any eligible parté. Nor did that cause her any real wretchedness for she had not set eye on any

of the famed catches (or even ones who fell below that level) with whom she would wish to share bed and board for the rest of her life.

Though Olivia knew better than to so express herself aloud, having faced down a number of stormy scolds in which she was informed she was insufferably high in the instep, clicked in the hob (her brother's elegant expression), one fair to give the whole family an irritation of the nerves. She knew that the plight of the unwed would be the most difficult of situations, still deep inside she felt a lightness of spirit when the fell decision was made that she would not be pushed into the London whirl again.

Being now the hopeless age of six and twenty, and having without a murmur of dissent taken to the cap of accepted spinisterhood, she had been shaken near out of her carefully cultivated calm by being Lady Lettice's heir—not only to Oakleigh Manor but also to what seemed to Olivia a handsome competence sufficient to give her a most comfortable if secluded life.

Since she was of age there could be no curtailing of her plans by her brother, and for some five delightful months she had been mistress here, in her own house, with servants (elderly to be sure) but so deeply attached to her great aunt that they accepted her without question since it was by the will of their beloved Lady that she was here.

This very morning she was about to indulge herself by making a visit to old Maudie. Maudie had been one of the duties Lady Lettice had laid upon her heir, but Olivia had not discovered it to be an onerous one. The old woman did not share the seemingly universal dislike of the wood, for her very old cottage was in a clearing set well within that shadowed territory, so much a part of the land that its stone walls might have grown as did the trees about.

Maudie had been the Lady Lettice's maid, until she had signified that she believed herself to be past the time of real service. It was by her request that the forest cottage

was put in the best of order and she was installed therein. Though her Lady had made nearly daily visits, and in her own failing last days Maudie had returned to nurse her.

Now it was the established custom that someone from the manor visited Maudie twice a week bearing such supplies as might add to her comfort. Olivia had overheard one stable boy protest such a trip and so decided to take it on for herself. It was an excellent reason to ride exploring and, from her first visit, she had thought the old woman to be an acquaintance worth cultivating.

Maudie might be old but she was still very spry. The cottage was always in spotless order though there might be baskets about her hearth harboring small ailing woods creatures. Since the clearing about the cottage was wide she had room for a garden, growing not only vegetables, but fragrant herbs. Olivia had now on her dressing table a jar of soap which left the skin smooth and smelling of roses and a bottle of lily scent she thought highly superior to any town bought perfume.

Nor was Maudie's conversation lacking in interest. For the woman spoke with authority on the ways of the wood, telling stories of animals and men in days past—though for the men she had little good to say. In particular she spoke darkly of the lord of the neighboring manor and once, when she called him by name, Olivia was unpleasantly startled.

She had met Sir Lucas Corbin herself during one of shockingly dull and over squeezed parties her sister-in-law doted so upon. And she had not in the least liked the look of him, even before gossip bore out her distaste. But that such a high sticker would be known here in this most quiet and least social of places was a surprise, until Maudie explained that it was his custom when low in funds to seek out his estate and attempt to squeeze more from his unfortunate tenants. His conduct was infamous enough to have well blackened his name, and Maudie ended her recital of

his sins with the warning that he might just try to scrap a meeting with the new owner of Oakleigh since Olivia was now known as an unattached heiress. But if that lay in his mind he was not moving on it.

During her visits with Maudie Olivia began to believe that the old woman was studying her, as if weighing the new manor mistress in some fashion. Oddly enough that did not arouse any discomfort, any more than she felt any unease in the most shadowed part of the wood where she had yet ventured. Rather she had a vague touch of excitement as if something lay ahead.

This morning was one of the days to visit Maudie, and, giving a last look to the wood, she looped up the skirt of her habit and departed the house by the way of the kitchen where she came up with the cook.

"Is the hamper for Maudie ready, Mrs. Ward?"

"Yes, m'lady."

Olivia uttered a sigh. Lady Lettice's staff had arbitrarily given her a step up in rank, in spite of her protests, apparently believing that no one of lesser blood than at least an Earl's daughter could rule here.

Just as she had defied convention by setting up her establishment without some dim female to lend her respectability by companionship, so did she ride the forest paths without the grooms who, she very well knew, were so adverse to such a direction. Apparently those of the household accepted these decisions with equanimity, though Olivia knew that servants were the first to decry any lessening of propriety.

This was a morning to give one an expectation of pleasure. She had already established an excellent relationship with the gray mare, Mist. They passed at an easy canter from the wider road into the over field track which led to the wood. Olivia made sure of the fastening of the basket and enjoyed the freedom of the ride.

She was well under tree cover when she was startled by

a cry—certainly one of pain and fear. Reining Mist in a little she listened but did not halt. That sound came again seemingly weaker. Now she urged the mare on. After all this was her own land and any happening here was her concern.

Mist brought her out in one of the many glades, not as large a one as that of the cottage, but open enough so Olivia caught clear sight of distressing action.

A man with one arm locked in the reins of a wild-eyed, foam mouthed horse, was standing over a huddle of what seemed to be rags. Even as Olivia came up he brought down his riding crop in a vicious cut, the lash landing on a round of back from which a dull green shirt had already been slit.

"Devil brat," his voice was as harsh as his attack. "Gallows fruit—"

"Stop!" Olivia found her voice, and it rose with a note of command she had never had cause to use before.

The next blow he aimed did not fall true. He swung around to stare up at her, the very embodiment of reckless cruelty and ungoverned rage. His hair, for his hat lay behind on the ground dented by a hoof, was as black as the hide of the nervous horse. From under bushy brows, eyes, which seemed as yellow as new minted guineas, raked over her. Then the thin lips of his cruel mouth shaped something which was not a smile.

"Well, and what have we here." He took a step towards her and his horse tried to rear. With a lightning swift movement he jerked viciously at the reins, sawing savagely at his mount's mouth.

Olivia's chin was up, her eyes very cold. Her own fingers tightened hard enough to give her riding crop a warning twitch.

"Sir, you are trespassing."

"Sir, you are trespassing," he mimicked her with a sneer and then suddenly seemed to recall what he might never have known—manners.

"Miss Farrington, I presume. We are neighbors and so you should have a word in this matter." His boot toe thudded home against the cowering victim. "This imp of Satan's get is poaching. As such he will answer in due time to the law but I shall have the lessoning of him first."

"Sir Lucas, this is my land. Years ago Lady Lettice laid down the rule governing this holding. Villagers are to forage when and where they please with no hindrance."

He showed his teeth as might a wolf.

"I deal with thieves as I see fit. No miss sets my course."

She must bluff him somehow Olivia thought quickly. This man, being what he was, might well turn his anger now on her.

"My groom comes, Sir Lucas. And you are on my land without invitation or leave."

For a moment of dread Olivia wondered if he might be bluffed so. However, in his world ladies did not ride alone, and surely he was not so uncaring yet of all convention that he would brawl with her before a servant.

His face had become very set. Then he turned, swept up his battered hat, and swung into the saddle. Leaning forward a little he spoke with extravagated smoothness of voice as insulting as his slow survey of her person.

"I hear, oh, Lady of the manor," the sneering tone brought a flush to Olivia's cheeks, "and obey—for now. But the game is not done—"

What he might have added in the way of a more naked threat was interrupted by a new sound, that of a hunter's horn.

Sir Lucas' horse gave such a cry as Olivia had never heard an animal utter before and whirled, fighting the reins and plunging away, bearing its cursing master.

There came a second horn call. Mist reared as the rag bundle came to life, and, before Olivia could call out or move, the fugitive vanished into the underbrush.

She could not pursue there. It must have been one of the village children who had so dared the forest. But at least he was free now and she was certain Sir Lucas would not return to hunt him down.

Still out of temper from this encounter Olivia lingered in the glade waiting for the horn blower to join her. Those last notes had not sounded too far away. It had been particularly vexatious to have had this meeting with her shunned neighbor. Sir Lucas was not a magistrate, thanks be to fortune, and his powers were limited, but it might be well to report this confrontation to Squire Hambly who was looked upon as the guardian of affairs hereabouts. Surely the rules set by Lady Lettice for her own property would be honored.

However, no one came to join her. So, deep in somewhat distressed thought, she rode on to Maudie's.

Her relation of what had passed was listened to with every sign of concern. So much so that Olivia had to keep reassuring herself that surely there would be no further trouble.

When she spoke of the horn Maudie gave a little gasp and nodded vigorously. Then to Olivia's surprise, she spoke as one who had had some pressing question well answered.

"So it has been decided, you are free of the wood, m'lady. Just as my dear lady wished it so. As for that dark soured one, he had better make his peace while he yet can."

"What do you mean, Maudie? Who sounded that horn—in what manner have I been made free of the wood."

Now Maudie shook her head as emphatically as she had earlier nodded it. "'Tis not for my saying, m'lady. There will come a time when you do understand."

And there was a certain stubborn tilt to her chin Olivia had seen before. She sighed, knowing that Maudie was not to be moved any farther.

"I shall certainly speak to the squire—he must have power enough to make sure Sir Lucas stays without my wards."

"Do so if it eases your mind, m'lady. Squire Hambly, he is of the old blood and knows the land—" Again she spoke in riddles beyond Olivia's solving.

When she returned to the manor she sent a message to the squire, only to learn that he had gone to London on some urgent affair and could not be reached for a time. Though she made a searching endeavor to discover the beaten child that, too, failed, for no villager nor farm family would own to such mistreatment of their own. They seemed as tight jawed as Maudie the minute she mentioned the wood, until their monosyllabic answers defeated her.

Her next two visits to Maudie she made prudently, taking with her George Lankin, the coachman, a tall,, hearty man with a wide stretch of brawny shoulder and fists like to send such a one as Sir Lucas a-sprawl in a hurry. But Olivia noted that he rode warily, his gaze swinging from side to side, and his tramping up and down before the cottage transferred in part his uneasiness to her so that she was constrained to cut short her visit.

They entered the harvest season when the whole community outside the wood were busy a-field. For the first time the verge of the wood attracted the boldest of the children, especially when Olivia joined their company. Together they plundered the berry heavy bushes and emboldened by this sudden setting aside of their usual aloofness, Olivia organized forays to go a-nutting, taking the opportunity to load on a patient old mare loads of wood to ease the winters of several families about whom she had become concerned.

She lost her fine lady pallor to a faint overcast of ivory brown. Which, she decided, became her much better than all the powders and creams her sister-in-law had once urged upon her. Though she still dressed in fashion within the manor, she went a-roving in sturdy homespun like any dairy maid.

The squire finally returned but it had been so peaceful much of her apprehension had faded. He was a man of middle years, a firm rooted country man at heart, and she liked his manner. He listened to Olivia's story of her meeting with Sir Lucas and looked grave.

"The man's crack brained to be sure. We're rid of him for a space—he's gone to town. But, Miss Farrington, take care. Get some lady of quality in to live with you, see you are guarded both at home and away. He is a danger. And—" he had paused then and regarded her carefully as if seeking some hint as to what he should say. "The wood," he finally continued, "it has an odd name hereabouts. Very old some of the stories—some say it was Herne's own chosen refuge."

"Herne?" she questioned though he appeared to believe she already knew that name.

"Herne, the hunter. A very old legend of the guardian of the woods and all that lived within. Country talk, Miss Farrington, but they believe—oh, the belief lasts. And it is well not to challenge their beliefs sometimes."

She murmured something which might be taken as assent. The Herne story might well explain the attitude of the servants and the villagers, but it did not bother her, though she made a mental note to learn more if she could. However, she had no intention of hunting up some drab but worthy female to give her countenance. Lady Lettice had managed without—unless circumstances actually forced her she would do likewise.

Twice during visits to Maudie she again heard the horn. There was that about its notes which increased her longing to meet the one who formed them. Oddly enough she found it impossible to mention this to Maudie. When she had asked the old woman about the story of Herne Maudie had replied firmly:

"Naught can be hurried, m'lady. An oak grows to its own speed and there can be no pushing of it, root or branch. Wait—listen—and learn—"

What did come on her waiting was near disaster. Maudie, Olivia thought with concern, was beginning to show signs of aging. Twice she had discovered the old woman laid upon her bed, something Maudie scorned to do in daytime. She saw that strengthening wine, a good share of each baking day's produce, and small comforts were carried to the wood.

A pot of fine wine jelly from London had been added to two loaves on a bright morning when there was a certain briskness in the air, suggesting that the turn of season was approaching. As Olivia rode with her offering she wondered whether she must not urge Maudie to move to the manor before winter. Such a suggestion would lead to argument and she was marshalling her word weapons as she went. Mist had been this way so often that she knew every twist and turn of the path and need not be closely attended to.

It was not until Olivia had dismounted that she noted the green stiff curtains were still drawn across the small paned windows. But the hour was near nooning and surely Maudie would have been up and about for hours.

Mist's reins were thrown over a shrub and Olivia, grabbing up the trail of her habit, was at the door in the space of a breath or two.

She pushed into the foreroom of the cottage, near one half of which was taken up by Maudie's bed. Drying herbs hung in stings from the beams. But a portion of those had somehow landed on the floor and been trampled. It was dusk-dark, for the door had swung to behind her. Olivia could only see the bunched coverings on the bed where Maudie must be.

"Maudie!" she dropped the basket with no care for the contents and hurried to the bed.

There had been no answer except a choking cry from

the direction of the window where something appeared to be struggling on the floor.

"Maudie!" Olivia turned her back on the bed to start for that moving shadow.

An iron hard hand gripped her arm jerking her back. She could not reach her assailant as he must be on the bed behind her and his strength was such she could not break that hold.

But she fought with all the vigor she could summon. All at once the grip on her arm was loosened but, before she could pull free, she was caught a second time, swung around and a stinging blow on her cheek near rocked her from her feet.

Breath foul with brandy fumes made her gasp sickly as she was struck a second time and forced back against the bed, her attacker looming as a dark shadow over her.

"Slut—" that name merged into such a flood of obscenity that the words lost their meaning in growls. His jaws appeared to slit in a wolf's grin. This was more beast than man, and a fear such as she had never thought to know choked her, even as one of his hands moved to her throat forming a noose of flesh and blood to strangle.

She clawed vainly, striving to tear at that distorted grimace on his face, to somehow keep that mouth from touching hers. But all her efforts were too feeble as she fought for breath.

There was a sudden sound and the light of day struck full on Sir Lucas as the curtains at the window were jerked aside and that casement thrown open with force enough to break one of the small panes.

"Herne! Herne!"

Through the panting of their struggle that cry rang, though Olivia heard it only dimly as her attacker continued to force her back on the disordered bed. She was aware as if that outrage struck another that, though he had not released the hold on her throat entirely, he was

now clawing with his other hand at her bodice striving to rip apart the stout material.

"Herne!"

Sir Lucas' head swung toward the window, though he did not loose his grip upon his captive. He snarled. Then he aimed another blow so heavy that he brought tears to her eyes. However, she could at least draw a breath, for his hand had relaxed that noose hold on her throat.

She tried to scream but her voice was only a croak which was drowned out by a third call:

"Herne!"

There was a flash of green light. Sir Lucas gave a rasping cry, stumbled back from her. Olivia clawed her way loose from the tumble of covers into which she had been shoved, levered herself up in time to see her attacker turn towards the cottage door which swung open again, as if by its own accord.

Olivia gasped. From his breast protruded a shaft like that of an arrow though it was green and shimmered like a spear of light. One of the man's hands, now swinging limply at his sides, arose as if to touch that deadly hurt. He did not fall, instead he lurched out of the door, vanished from Olivia's sight.

"Bind me in me own cloak, would he! But not sure of his knots—that one."

Still dazed Olivia saw Maudie by the open window, shrugging off the folds of cloth hampering her. Her cap had disappeared and her white hair was pulled into a tangle. She gave a last twist of her shoulders and the stout red winter garment slipped to the floor.

Olivia swallowed. Her throat still felt as if it were half closed and she took short, frantic breaths. Somehow she managed to stand, with an anchoring hold on one of the bed posts.

"Maudie," she had to make a painful effort to shape that name and her voice was a hoarse whisper. The old woman kicked the cloak up against the wall and came to the girl with a quick step.

"Now, m'lady, there's naught to fear. That one takes care of his own. Be at peace against all ill—Herne's lady—" "Herne's lady?" repeated Olivia.

"Aye. Chosen you have been and rightfully so. You have been watched and measured since first you came hither. True time is not reckoned by the clocks of men. There was my dear lady before you—she was chosen. And before her another. When your own time passes you will find one who will walk Herne's wood in turn and hold his favor. For he is one of the Old Ones who did not flee the land when belief grew thin, but rather still cherishes what was always his."

She paused and held her head slightly atilt as if listening. Perhaps in direct answer came that sweet call of a hunter's horn. Yet this hunter must be guardian not destroyer.

Olivia blinked. It was hard to understand but now small memories flowed together and fitted well. Her sense of being under eye when in the woods, the fact that the children when she was one of the party dared to venture under the trees—that horn—

"Sir Lucas—" she croaked, still rubbing her throat.

"Tush, m'lady. He was served as well he might be. Herne's arrows do not fly light but they fly well. Now set you down, m'lady. I have possets which will soothe that poor throat of yours."

She let Maudie install her in the chair by the outflung window. Herne—could one dare to believe? But why—here? Olivia ventured a question.

"Will I ever see him, Maudie-this Herne?"

Maudie laughed. "There is a time for everything, m'lady, and when that comes you shall have no question."

"You know him then, Maudie—Herne?" She found a desire to repeat that name.

"All who dwell in his place know him. He is a good master but a bad foe, as that devil Sir Lucas discovered. Now drink up this potion, m'lady."

She had poured a golden liquid into a silver cup so old that the intricate patterning on its side had been near worn away. It tasted of honey, and of herbs, and oddly of flowers as if summer scents had been infused in it. Drinking, Olivia's last shadow of fear and pain vanished.

She smiled almost drowsily, ready to await what the future might bang—even as the Lady Lettice had lived and—how many before her?

It was not until after a night, filled with dreams which were not nightmares but promises she could not remember in detail upon awakening, that the news arrived. One of the grooms had delivered the story with gusto.

"Fell down dead, m'lady," Mrs. Beckett reported, "right before the eyes of Tom Donn who told the whole story at the ale house where our Jim heard it. Struck by the Hand of God Almighty he was, dead—and not a mark on him! They sent for the 'pothecary and he swears it must have been some weakness of the heart. Tisn't my place to speak ill of the gentry, m'lady, but the world is a cleaner place with such as Sir Lucas out of it."

Throughout the day Olivia kept to her role of polite if dismayed interest in the sudden demise of her neighbor. She was sure that only Maudie shared her secret of the happenings at the cottage. And since her nemesis had died apparently in his own courtyard no other would ever know.

Towards nightfall she grew restless. The latest novel posted from London could not hold her eye or attention for even half a page. She brought out a bit of work she had started with the vague idea of recovering the small chair in her bedroom the seat of which showed a sad lack of care. After she missed four stitches, pricked her finger to the extent of having to sketch in another bud of the pic-

tured rose to cover that stain, she surrendered to the fact that she was indeed indulging in a spasm of nerves.

Or was it nerves? In her first season, before she realized how far her girlish dreams strayed from the reality kept jealously tight by the fashionable, she had sometimes felt this way before a ball. Expectation—and something else she could not define—she shrank from doing so.

Olivia did not do justice to the dinner served up where she dined in solitary state deemed suitable by her staff to her consequence. She settled at last for a peach, part of the year's crop, round and perfect, but uncommonly juicy as to the use of fingers.

The dusk had deepened so that when she looked without from the windows, her eyes still be-dazzled by the candlelight around she could not pick up any landmark until she stood blinking for several seconds.

Then—she knew! Faint but growing closer—the horn's silver call.

Turning she raced for the stairway and her own suite above. What luck she had no personal maid waiting in attendance now. Annie, the upper housemaid who had taken over the keep of her wardrobe must have already withdrawn to the warren where the servants had their own lives.

Olivia burrowed into the great wardrobe, brushing aside the hanging clothing with no thought of wrinkling having to be dealt with. Her hands closed at last on what she sought—the softness of velvet—and she pulled out her find.

It had been her choice, her own, back in the days when her sister-in-law had kept a sharp eye on her, since it was so well known that she had no acute understanding of the dictates of fashion. The gown was very plain, no ruffles, no braid in fantastic coils, only a small stand of lace, now faintly yellow, edging the neckline.

As one who races with time, Olivia shed her house gown, pitched her proper cap onto the bed and somehow

got herself buttoned into the flow of green—forest green. She surveyed her reflection most critically in the long mirror on the wardrobe door.

On impulse she raised both hands and pulled the pins from her hair. Somehow it did not look so dully brown when she let it fly loose about her shoulders. She turned to look at the back, her head at a stretch.

There was something different—she could not put name to what had appeared to have changed in her appearance but she found it exciting.

Quickly she blew out the candles, leaving only the small night light and one candle to carry with her. Holding her skirt gracefully high for greater speed, she retraced her way, not to seek out the front door but rather the side one which she knew had the faulty latch and could be safely used.

It was cool as the night wind wrapped her round, but she did not feel it. The excitement raising in her supplied a heat of its own. She had left the candle just inside the door, now she used both hands to control her skirt as she brushed through the garden gate to the road, made haste along that for the short space striving to make sure she was not sighted, until she reached the turn off to the wood.

Now she was running, the wind pulling gently at her hair, soft on her face. It was rustling the leaves in the great trees as she came into that other's kingdom.

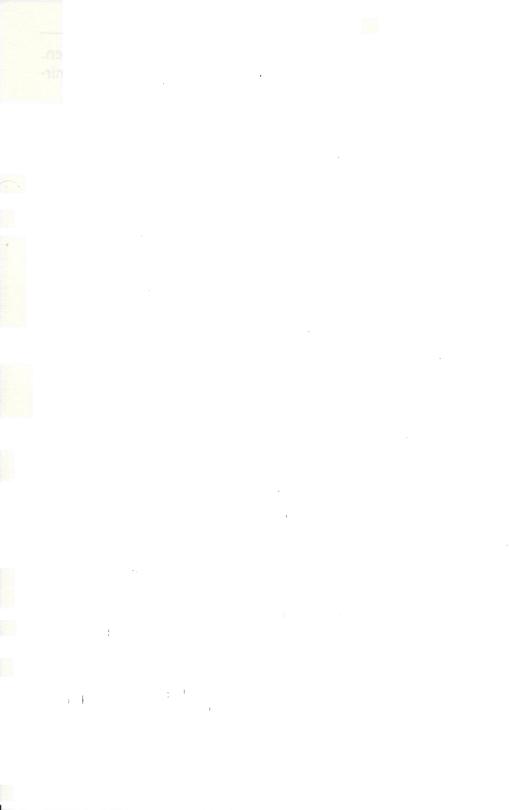
"Herne?" Olivia called, not sharply as Maudie had summoned him, but with a softness tinged with uncertainty.

"Herne?"

Shadow detached itself from shadow. She dropped her hold on her skirt, both hands now pressed against a heart which was beating more than her recent exertions warranted.

"Herne--?"

And the welcome came— eagerly— joyfully— "My lady."



hava Resured

LAURA RESNICK



THE FORTUNES OF TEMPERANCE

LAURA RESNICK

t was a lovely morning in Tarotville as I strolled down Celestial Avenue the other day, heading towards the center of town. After buying a couple of cosmic reminders and a minor magic potion in Destiny Square, which was seething with shoppers, I spotted my old friend Strength in the distance and waved her down.

"How lovely to see you, Temperance!" Strength exclaimed when we embraced. "But how ever did you pick me out of this crowd?"

I warily eyed the animal which has been her constant companion for as long as I've known her. "How many other people go around town with their hands clamped over a bad-tempered lion's mouth?"

"Oh, yes, of course," she said absently, releasing me to regain control of the beast's jaws before he could maul a passing shaman.

Strength was looking as...well, as

strong as ever. She told me she's still seeing the Hierophant—which means they've been together for nearly a year now! They're not talking marriage yet, but they're making plans to rent a citadel together, so it's a pretty serious relationship. Things are generally going well for her, though she got very animated at one point and nearly lost her grip on her frisky lion's mouth while complaining about the Devil, who's still involved in that property dispute with her over the Tower.

Just before we parted, she warned me to keep a low profile, since Death had recently been seen riding into town.

"Rumor has it that he's come for the ex-King of Pentacles, who just hasn't been himself since losing the last election. However," Strength pointed out, "it's never wise to be complacent about Death, so we should all watch our step today."

Keeping this good advice in mind, I hurried towards my destination: a modest purple-trimmed cottage in Zodiac Street, which is right next to the renovated castle where the Magicians Guild meets on the second night of every full moon. Madame Rabinowitz, my Tarot Reader, rents the cottage from the Hermit at a very good price, though after nearly twelve years in this location, she has yet to meet her landlord in the flesh.

The small waiting room was crowded, as usual. Some Tarot Readers have been losing business to the latest craze, psych-o-therapy, which has caught on even faster than most fads. *Some* Readers, I say; but not Madame Rabinowitz, whose calendar is usually filled weeks in advance.

Sure, I know that some Readers just go through the motions, tell seekers what they want to hear, and collect their fee. It's true that some people without sufficient training or proper credentials call themselves Readers and try to make up for their deficiencies by charging lower

fees. Me, I figure you get what you pay for, and I have no sympathy with someone who realizes too late, as did the Fool, that they made a tragic mistake in making major decisions based on such bogus Readings.

Madame Rabinowitz, on the other hand, graduated with honors from the Academy of Divination with specialties in Tarot and Palmistry. Upon completing her studies, she interned with the now-famous Intuitive Arts Institute. Five years after setting up her own practice, she became the first woman ever to be elected President of the International Society of Divinative Practitioners.

However, credentials alone don't make a Reader as successful as Madame Rabinowitz. It's a client-oriented business, after all. In addition to her academic achievements, Madame Rabinowitz possesses a sympathetic aura and ease of manner which almost always ensure that a client returns to her, rather than abandoning her for some newcomer offering brash guarantees or lower rates.

I first went to see Madame Rabinowitz when trying to decide whether or not to end my relationship with the Page of Cups. He was sweet, faithful, and usually brought good news, but he simply refused to grow up. I just didn't know what to do. Several Readings with Madame Rabinowitz, however, revealed how my own fears of lone-liness kept me clinging to a dead-end relationship and castigating my partner for an immaturity which, to be fair, was an essential component of his nature. So I dumped my lover and have been consulting with Madame Rabinowitz ever since.

Oh, sure, loyal as I am, even I have occasionally been seduced away—only temporarily!—by intriguing new fads. In fact, I've even tried psych-o-therapy. Now I know what you're thinking: whacky, fringe-element, superstitious nonsense aimed strictly at the gullible. Now, while I must admit that I decided after only a few sessions that psych-o-therapy really wasn't for me, I have to point out that such nar-

row-minded opinions are unfair—especially when voiced by those who've never tried it (which is invariably the case). After all, many sophisticated people believe there is some merit in psych-o-therapy, and there's no denying that some people seem to find genuine comfort in it. So who's to say that there's absolutely *nothing* of value there?

For my part, I found that the psych-o-therapist (that's what they call them) was *much* more interested in discussing my past than my future, and he seemed utterly fixated on my childhood and my relationship with my parents. I was briefly reassured by his interest in my dreams, but then I was shocked to discover he couldn't interpret them to predict the future. Indeed, it was his bizarre comments about my dreams and what he believed they revealed about my relationship with my father, of all things, that convinced me I should stop attending those sessions!

I recognized several of the people in Madame Rabinowitz's waiting room, including the Queen of Cups, who was looking as prosperous as ever (read: fat). I said hello and asked how her dragon is doing; she's an active member of BRIAR (Beast Rescue, Intervention, And Rehabilitation), saving abandoned, abused, or thoroughly misunderstood animals and eventually finding adoptive homes for them. I could tell by her puzzled expression that she had no idea who I was (well, these political wives do meet a lot of people), so I reminded her that we'd sat next to each other last year at one of the Hanged Man's notoriously unique dinner parties—which was when she'd told me about the dragon she'd recently saved from execution over trumped-up arson charges.

It turns out the dragon is fine, but she has yet to find anyone to adopt him, since everyone still clearly remembers the publicity surrounding him last year. I suggested that changing his name, which is Blaze, might be advisable. Meanwhile, she asked me to sign a petition prohibiting the capture, transport, sale, and slaughter of sea monsters. I finished doing so just as she was called in for her Reading with Madame Rabinowitz.

The Knight of Swords had been just ahead of the Queen of Cups, so he exited the Reading room as she entered. I was surprised, pleased, and chagrined all at once (the chagrin was because I was wearing an old gown and hadn't done anything with my hair). I had met the Knight briefly on All Souls Night and, in the course of our conversation, had suggested he come here for a Reading. Since he's more into entrail-interpretation and Rune stones, I had the impression he just wasn't taking me seriously. Evidently he'd been more moved by my arguments than I had realized, for here he was.

He smiled and kissed my hand. "Temperance! I was hoping I'd see you here."

"Really?" I blurted. "I mean... Hello! I'm so glad you decided to give Madame Rabinowitz a chance."

He shrugged in that devil-may-care way which had first attracted me and said, "Well, why not?"

Okay, I admit it: I am dangerously drawn to the bad boy type. I mean...the Knight of Swords! *Everyone* knows his reputation; but I just can't seem to help myself. Hoping he'd ask for my telewave number before leaving, I stammered, "And how did it go? I mean, do you think you'll be coming back?"

He stroked my hand lightly before finally releasing it. "Well, Tarot cards aren't sheep's entrails, that's for sure."

"You were disappointed?"

"Let's just say the experience didn't blow me out of the moat."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I hope you didn't find it a total waste of your lucre." Madame Raboniwitz isn't cheap, and knights, after all, don't make that much money.

He smiled slowly. "Not entirely," he murmured—and then asked for my number!

Madame Rabinowitz was running late, as usual, so after the Knight of Swords left, I spent the next half hour silently examining the ramifications of getting involved with him. I knew that Strength would tell me to forget about the guy, that any relationship between us was bound to end in tears. However, I always believe that it's important to take a risk now and then, as long as it's a measured one and you don't go overboard or lose your head. After all, a life of caution and reserve is no better than a life of reckless abandon.

Now you might think I would consult Madame Rabinowitz about affairs of the heart today, especially after my encounter with the Knight, but I had come here with serious matters to divine, and I didn't intend to leave today without resolving these more pressing issues. Besides, until it was absolutely certain that the Knight would never return to Madame Rabinowitz's and therefore could not possibly be considered a client of hers, it would be inappropriate for me to intrude upon their confidential relationship by asking her to do a Reading about him for me.

Dressed in a conservative purple-and-red silk kaftan with discreet gold coins dangling from her ears, neck, and waist, Madame Rabinowitz greeted me warmly when I entered the Reading room. She apologized, as usual, for the delay.

"I had to lie down for a few minutes after that last appointment," she explained. "Doing a Reading of the Gypsy Spread always gives me psychic indigestion." (The Queen of Cups has a *very* complicated personal life.)

She was feeling clear-headed now and ready to begin my Reading. I explained that I was currently contemplating an important decision, but added nothing more; Madame Rabinowitz is not one of those undertrained charlatans who needs the client to lead the way. Merely knowing the general purpose of the client's visit is enough

to help her choose the correct spread for the occasion and proceed from there.

She began by choosing a Significator card (the card representing *me* in the spread) for my Reading, selecting the same one she usually chooses: the Housekeeper. It represents good management, adaptation, coordination, and modification. Next she asked me to shuffle the deck of cards, reminding me that it was very important for me to shuffle thoroughly and, as I did so, to concentrate on the question I wanted answered today. As instructed, when I finished shuffling, I cut the pack into three piles towards the *left*, with my *left* hand; then Madame Rabinowitz picked up the cards with *her* left hand and gathered the three piles back into one—moving left, of course. (Neglecting such essential details is where many lesser Readers go wrong from the very beginning.)

This done, Madame Rabinowitz then closed her eyes and began meditating, abandoning her physical being in pursuit of her divine center, communing with the direct intuition which is the gateway to spiritual illumination. I waited and tried not to scratch.

She opened her eyes after about ten minutes, then turned up the first card in the spread. It was the Bungee Jumper.

"It seems that you're considering a risky venture. You're about to leap from a stable foundation into the void of the unknown, and you're afraid of what will happen if your safety measures fail you."

Didn't I *tell* you she was the best? She had just captured my concerns in a nutshell! I have the opportunity to invest my time, skills, and money in a new venture which *could* reap fabulous financial rewards. However, I'd have to quit my current job (managing the Dreamweavers Cooperative), which would mean losing all my benefits and living on my savings until the new business (Rent-A-Djinn) starts making a profit.

"This crosses her," Madame Rabinowitz murmured, turning over the second card: the Banker. "Your primary worries about this new venture seem to be the risk of financial ruin."

Precisely.

Turning over the third card, Madame Rabinowitz revealed the past source of my fears on this score: the Lawyer. I drew in a sharp breath, for an almost palpable air of evil and greed seemed to emanate from the card.

"There was a devastating loss of property, money, personal resources, and dignity somewhere in your past. Your well-being was completely destroyed by a totally unprincipled person who expressed utterly insincere good intentions. Ever since then, you've found it difficult to trust business associates."

Talk about hitting the nail on the head! When I was but a young maiden, my father's business partner was a fast-talker in three-piece vestments who eventually turned out to be a liar, embezzler, thief, and fraud. My parents lost everything: our castle, our chariot, our savings. I wouldn't have been able to attend Magicks College if I hadn't managed to get a full scholarship. Starting over from scratch, it was a long time before my father found the Wheel of Fortune once again turning favorably in his direction.

The fourth card, the Divorcée, represented the most immediate influences in my life. "You're growing discontented in your current situation, feeling ready to break away and make a fresh start, striking out independently on your own. You feel unappreciated and under-valued in your current position, and you want to free yourself for more exciting possibilities."

Yes, my growing dissatisfaction with my current job was precisely what attracted me to this opportunity to commit my professional skills and financial resources to this new opportunity. Not surprisingly, Madame Rabinowitz was going right to the heart of the matter.

"The fifth card," Madame Rabinowitz said. "The influences that may come into being." She turned over the Rock Star. "You will be dealing with a person or persons of exceptional talent, but you fear they will be difficult to work with: unreliable, temperamental, egocentric, unreasonable, vain, neurotic, demanding..."

Yes, djinns can be all of that, and more. I think the public would welcome the existence of an agency which would deal with the day-to-day hassles of coping with djinns, renting them out on a temporary need-a-wish-granted basis, satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Indeed, when my potential partner in the deal came to me with the idea, I was thunderstruck by its simple genius and wondered why no one has thought of this before! Frankly, we'd be able to charge exorbitant prices, keeping a hefty commission for ourselves; for all of their faults, djinns would definitely rather pay a big commission to an agent than simply be out of work.

However, while my partner would be in charge of the financial aspects of the business, *I'd* be in charge of the djinns, and I was alternately intrigued by the challenges and worried about the potential problems of managing them, dealing with their fragile egos, and also dealing with clients whom they might (in a fit of mischief) insult, torment, cheat, or cast a spell upon.

"The Nine of Whirligigs, the sixth card," said Madame Rabinowitz, "represents your own hopes in the matter. You would like to see this become a profitable venture, and you believe that it can be—as long as you're not overwhelmed or sabotaged by opposing forces. The seventh card..." She paused as she turned it over, "reveals the forces working against your hopes. Hmmmm. The Ace of Phalluses." She met my gaze. "You perceive the potential of conflict with a man."

Ah, yes, my partner in this potential deal: Pettifog Celestor. I didn't know the man well. He had sought me out, since I have a good reputation and the right qualifications for this opportunity. His credentials and references all seemed to be in order, and he seemed to have the necessary financial backing. Unfortunately, he was rather overbearing and, well, I just wasn't sure what to make of him.

The eighth card, representing the opinions of my friends and relatives, was the Supernova. No big surprise. They all thought I was nuts to consider giving up a good job with great benefits (including full hex insurance) to invest both time and money in a new, independent, experimental venture—and one dealing with djinns, at that!

"The tenth card, the final card," Madame Rabinowitz said, "represents the forces which will operate in the near future, influencing the outcome of events and working on your fears and hopes."

The tenth card in the spread, of course, would influence all of the others. I watched tensely as she slowly turned it over.

"Oh, no!" I cried upon seeing it.

Even Madame Rabinowitz gasped. "The Senator," she whispered in horror.

The cosmic warning couldn't possibly be any clearer. The Senator: a self-serving, insincere man of low morals and no principles; a liar, a trickster, an adulterer, and a thief; a despoiler of honest people and pillager of communities.

"Madame Rabinowitz!" I cried. "Thank heavens I came to you in time! Without your guidance, a terrible fate would have befallen me!"

Could there possibly be a more emphatic indication that I must on no account go into business with Pettifog Celestor? I was dreadfully disappointed that, without a suitable investor, I would now have to continue managing the Dreamweavers Guild for the time-being. Nonetheless, I

was immensely relieved to benefit from this celestial intervention before I'd fallen into the clutches of a man deceitful, amoral, scheming, and wicked enough to be represented by the Senator in my Reading!

I gave Madame Rabinowitz a large tip, so grateful was I to her for snatching me from the jaws of karmic disaster before it was too late. Then, having learned just what kind of a man Pettifog Celestor really was, I did what any responsible person would do: I went out into the street and asked which way Death had last been seen riding. I went off in search of him, tracking him down without much trouble, since everyone's always alert when Death comes to town.

Hurrying down Harmony Lane, I rounded the corner onto Fortune Avenue and practically walked straight into the back end of Death's pale horse. Thrilled to have found him before he left town, I cried, "Excuse me, Death? I have a—Ooops! I'm terribly sorry."

The ex-King of Pentacles was kneeling in the street, his hands clasped before him. Death had evidently been just on the verge of reaping.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I apologized.

"No, no," said the ex-King of Pentacles, rising shakily to his feet. "Think nothing of it! Did you have business with Death?"

Death turned his implacable eyeless gaze upon me. Staring at that grinning skull encased in shiny black armour, I found myself clasping my hands, too.

"Well, sir, it's just that, um..."

"Yes?" Death prodded, sounding a trifle impatient.

"It's just that I... I know of an excellent candidate to return to the Undiscovered Country with you," I said in a rush. He took a step forward; I took three steps back. "If you want my suggestion, that is... Sir."

"Go on." Death sounded a little bored. Well, I suppose it was all in a day's work to him.

I gave him a thorough description of Pettifog Celestor, his current address on Alchemy Avenue, and what I had learned at Madame Rabinowitz's. Within moments, the ex-King of Pentacles added his not inconsiderable powers of persuasion to my arguments. Suddenly, in less time than it takes to cast Runes, Death was climbing back up on his horse to ride off in search of his new quarry, grinning ferociously.

"Aren't you going with him?" I asked the ex-King of Pentacles.

"There's only room for one, besides Death, on that horse," he replied. "Gosh, what a darn shame."

"So I... I saved you?" I asked.

"This time, yes." He sighed as we watched Death ride away. "But it's never wise to be complacent about Death, you know."

"Yes, I've heard that before."

"However, I am in your debt. If there's anything I can ever do..."

"Now that you mention it," I said as we retreated from the site of his near-Death experience, "I'm looking for an investment partner. I've got this great idea for a temp agency for djinns..."

"Now that *is* a great idea!" he exclaimed, perking up. "Why hasn't anyone thought of that before? We could call it... I know!" He snapped his fingers. "Rent-A-Djinn!"

I knew at once that it was destiny!

With more enthusiasm than he'd shown for anything in a very long time, the ex-King of Pentacles discussed the idea with me as we strolled down Fortune Avenue. I would, of course, have to consult Madame Rabinowitz about this surprising turn of events, but I had a feeling that she had already helped me find the true path to a happy and profitable future.

Mike RESNICK

JOSEPHA SHERMAN

OF FLAME AND AIR

MIKE RESNICK AND JOSEPHA SHERMAN



dreamer? Yeah, that's me. Even as a small boy, I'd drift away from the hard realities of a frail body and an alcoholic father, and see only the vague fantasy

worlds of my own imaginings.

The problem is, they were vague. Small boys don't dream fully-fleshed worlds, or even fully-fleshed villages for that matter. But then one day, while haunting yet another used bookstore with its dust and musty, wonderful scents and promise of treasure, I found a dog-eared copy of Edgar Rice Burroughs' A Princess of Mars—and oh, how I wished I could stride across the dead sea bottoms, battling fierce green warriors and winning the love of the incomparable Dejah Thoris.

Ah, Dejah Thoris! I loved her with all the unformed passion of a not-yet-adolescent boy. The small, steady light I'd been told was Mars was just visible from my small bedroom window, and night after night, month after month, I stood with arms upraised to it, yearning to be magically transported there just like Captain John Carter, gentleman of Virginia, Warlord of Mars.

But of course nothing ever happened. Boys grow up, and the real world intervenes. School wasn't a happy time for me, the runt who was chosen last for every team, the weirdo who preferred his books and daydreams. Home wasn't a hell of a lot better.

But, like John Carter, I survived. At last I graduated, left home, and found myself a good job in an advertising firm, where I turned my dreams into designs for soup labels and detergent packaging. So what if the job was less than rewarding? The pay was good—and for the first time in my life, I fit in. I had the proper suits, the proper expense account, even the properly overpriced shrink I dutifully saw every Wednesday night to discuss such buzz words as "dysfunctional family." There were women enough who liked the "sensitive" type, and if none of these relationships ever grew into anything more than mutual lust, well, that was the way things were in the real world, wasn't it?

But, lying alone in the bedroom of my fashionable apartment, I knew my life was a lie. Behind the mask of cool indifference I'd built up over the years, I was exactly what I'd always been: the dreamer standing on the edge of life, afraid to move.

Mars rode high in the night sky, blazing through my open window, a clear, pure red above the gaudier lights of the city, and I rose up and stood as I had in childhood, arms upraised.

And suddenly it was no longer whimsy, suddenly I was yearning, aching with all my now-adult passion, my terrible empty loneliness, for something, someone... I turned away...and a voice, low and sweet, said, "Wait."

I whirled so sharply I nearly fell. She stood in shadow,

and for a moment I tried to convince myself this was no more than the working of my feverish imagination. But then she moved a step forward so that the city lights illuminated her, and I actually gasped. She was incomparably beautiful, small and slender yet so perfectly made, no statue for all her perfection but a warm and living wonder. Her skin was the palest copper, her only covering an exquisitely wrought network of gems, and I caught myself thinking, along with John Carter of Mars, that indeed no clothing could have enhanced that form—

And that stunned me. For this woman, this vision before me, matched in every detail the image I'd held so long of Dejah Thoris, Princess of Helium: the long, wild black hair, the high, perfect breasts and narrow waist, the smooth, sleek curves of hips and legs and the darker triangle of shadow...

"Who are you?" I asked, or tried to ask, since the breath seemed trapped in my lungs. And desire—hot, sweet, almost unbearable desire—blazed through me. I knew I could not wait long for her answer—

But she gave none. Instead she touched a finger to her lips: No questions.

Nor were any needed. She was silk and fire in my arms, smooth skin over supple strength.

And me? I was hasty and clumsy as a boy. But she didn't seem to mind the rush, quick and passionate as I was. We fell into bed, lunging, twisting, all but tearing at each other in a wild sexual frenzy.

Later, as I lay drained and dazed in her arms, I heard her hum softly, a contented, soothing sound, lulling me to sleep as though I were once more a boy, indeed, and safe, and cherished...

I woke alone to the bright morning. Though I had no

doubt that something had happened that night, there was no trace of my strange visitor, not even a lingering hint of her scent.

Nothing.

Finally, shaken and still weary, I considered the situation logically. The door was still locked, the windows were guarded. No cat burglar could have stolen into the apartment, let alone a mysterious, naked stranger. What had happened, I told myself, feeling once more like a foolish adolescent, had to have been a dream—amazingly detailed, wildly erotic, but a dream nonetheless.

I trudged through that day mechanically, trying not to remember. I spent hours in a debate over whether the liquid detergent's container should be yellow or blue (never green; there was consumer resistance to green). Utter mundanity. There could not possibly have been a better way to banish fantasy.

Yet that night, I found myself again at the window with arms upraised, yearning with all my heart at the bright red light of Mars.

And a shadow stirred. She was there, she was real and tangible, still naked beneath that slight embellishment of gems, and so beautiful that I shook with a longing that was nearly painful.

"Who are you?" I begged her. "Please, tell me who you are?"

"No," she murmured, and I could have sworn I saw a flicker of fear in her dark eyes. "You must not question." Her voice was a low and smooth, tinged with some unidentifiable accent.

I foolishly persisted. "But...you-"

She moved a step closer. A slender finger against my lips silenced me. "No."

A step more, and she was in my arms. Her lips were moist, gentle, insistent, and I forgot all my questions. This time there was no desperate, mindless clutching at each

other. This time we made love in the truest sense of the word, touching, tasting, learning the secrets of each other's bodies. She moved beneath me, lovely eyes wide with mingled lust and tenderness. I knew nothing but heat and joy and urgency, and, finally, release and exhausted peace...

And...love?

I was too drowsy to care. For a while I lay in sleepy content, dimly aware that she, who had played the nurturer the night before, soothing and comforting me, was now the pliant, tender lover resting safe and sheltered in my arms. I would have given almost everything I had to drift off to sleep like this, to hold her forever...

But the questions wouldn't stay away. They stole through my sleep, waking me to wonder who—and what—was the stranger in my arms. She couldn't truly be Dejah Thoris, of course; it would be insane to think a fictional character had come to life, let alone to my bed.

Yet she was real, no denying that; the feel of her, the slippery warmth, the scent of woman—all absolutely real.

"Why?" I asked softly. "Why are you here?"

She sighed sleepily. "You should know that by now."

"But why *me*? All my life I've been alone. Why now?" "So many questions."

My peace was rapidly evaporating. "Why?"

"Because," she said at last, "you called to me. You were...empty. So terribly empty. And your cry for help was so deep with anguish. I could not bear your pain." Snuggling into my arms, she added, "And are you still so horribly lost and alone?"

Lost? Empty? Lonely beyond admitting? "No," I told her truthfully, and that delicate, treacherous word—love—whispered through my mind again. I pushed it away, insisting, "But I've got to know: Who are you?"

She turned onto her side to stare at me with an intensity that was almost frightening. "You must not ask that.

You must never doubt me, never doubt the truth of our time together."

"But-"

"We may speak of anything else, but you must never ask that one question, you must never doubt. Please, promise me this."

"How can I ...?"

She put an end to any argument by letting a hand trail languidly down my chest, stroking, tickling, ringing nipples, navel, as it made its slow downward exploration. I discovered to my surprise that I was not as spent as I'd thought, and all at once pulled her to me.

"I promise," I murmured. "I promise!"

We made love again, slowly this time, carefully, as though we had all the time that ever was or would be.

Which of course was a lie. Once again I woke to morning and nearly cried out in grief to find myself alone. Not the slightest trace of her, not a single black hair or lingering hint of her intoxicating scent, not the slightest evidence I'd known anything more tangible than an erotic dream. I thought: succubus—but no, there was nothing of the all-devouring demon about her. Then I thought insanity—and that was not as easy an idea to banish.

It was Wednesday. And Wednesday night was my weekly appointment with Dr. Harmon, my so-very-trendy shrink.

He greeted me as he always did: "Well, young man, what's new with you today?"

I just barely stopped myself from blurting, "I've been balling Dejah Thoris, a character from a novel." Instead, I lay back on his oh-so-traditional leather couch and asked, "What can you tell me about"—I groped for the word—"fantasy?"

Watching him sideways, I saw him instantly add the unspoken word, *sexual*, to that, and straighten, alert. "What manner of fantasy?"

"A dream," I told him. "A very, very real dream..."

When I was done, and we had gone through the obligatory round of, "What does it mean?" from me and, "But what does it mean to you?" from him, there was silence.

Then Dr. Harmon said, "Have you considered that this is nothing more alarming than your subconscious speaking to you?"

"My subconscious has a pretty erotic vocabulary, then."

"That is only part of the normal human psyche. The next time this lovely dream visitor of yours appears to you, confront her. She is, after all, only an aspect of the *anima*, of a part of yourself. Ask her, and yourself, what message your subconscious brings. The truth, young man, is the first step on the road to mental wellness."

Easy words, I thought. Psychobabble. But that night, as I waited for Mars to reach the frame of my window, I could not forget them.

Confront my visitor. Don't let her evade me with that alluring mix of lust and soothing, crooning words—I was not a mindless animal or a child. I stood yearning, arms upraised, but part of me was begging, *Don't come*.

What had John Carter called her? "My Princess."

Stay away, My Princess. I don't want to know the truth. Don't come.

But when she appeared out of shadow, there was such a sweet wistfulness to her that I heard my own sharply indrawn breath. How could I doubt? How could I question? She was all I wanted, all I needed, all I could ever love...

She is only part of your anima.

Smiling, she took a step forward, then paused, the smile fading. "What is it? What is wrong?"

"Nothing." But then I froze, steeling myself. Madness to believe her real, madness to believe she could have come to me, madness to believe—

"Who are you?" I asked. "What do you want?"

"No," she protested. "No. You must not ask me that. You gave your word you would not ask or doubt."

"Who are you?" I insisted.

"No, no, no!" Her hands quickly covered her ears. "Do not ask this, my Prince!"

But I was too wild with the need to know, too overwhelmed with the terror of learning the truth, good or ill, to think. I grabbed her arms, pulled her hands down, insisted yet again, "Who are you? Women don't appear out of the air. What are you—a disturbance in my psyche? My subconscious nagging me about some job I have to do? What are you?"

"No one!" she screamed in agony. "I am no one, nothing!"

But I persisted, frenzied, "Who are you? What are you?"

"Ah, my Prince, my love," she said softly, mournfully. "I am what you have destroyed."

She was gone between one breath and the next. She was gone, and I stood in the darked, silent, and once again greeted that familiar, horrible emptiness.

* * * * *

Somehow I made it through the following day without going totally mad. The next night found me with arms upstretched once more, but no longer could I summon that clear, pure yearning.

And no vision came to me.

The next day was the same lonely mundanity, and the next, and the next. My fellow workers began to notice a difference in me. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to care about the packaging of cereal or bars of soap. I caught snatches of whispers behind my back: I was losing it, burning out. Sad but not unusual, whispered the bitter

and the envious. Breakdowns were all too common in the advertising game: a loss, but hey, it happened.

How could I fight back when I no longer cared? What could I have told them? I had loved her, my Barsoomian princess. I barely knew her, yet I had loved her.

It couldn't end like this. In an agony of lonely longing, I stood one last time before my window that night, arms stretching toward the small red light in the sky, yearning more strongly than ever before. If she came to me now, I would tell her that I loved her whoever, whatever she was. But if she didn't come...

I sighed deeply. Of course she wouldn't come to me. She would never come again. I had driven her away.

And then, suddenly, she was standing before me...but so sad and diminished, no longer the warm, loving woman but a shadow of the shadows, a wisp of fog in the night.

I tried to say something. I don't even remember what it was. I don't know if a sound passed my lips.

"You doubted me," she said, her voice a barely discernable whisper. "I was the heart, the soul of fantasy made flesh, drawn to you by your endless, endless faith. We would have loved and lived as man and woman had you held that faith, had you been true to your vow just a little longer. And yet you doubted me." She stared at me reproachfully. "You did what a dying world could not do: you slew me. Now I am no more than the ghost of all your dreamings."

I cried out, "No! I never doubted!"

But it was a lie, and we both knew it. She melted into the night, and I was left alone.

As I am alone.

As I shall always be alone, the slayer of my own dreams.



Harry (Stubbo

HARRY C. STUBBS

Horn Stable

OPTIONS

HARRY C. STUBBS AKA "HAL CLEMENT"

o Jerry it seemed pretty clear that there was no way back up. A good deal of the cliff had fallen with them, leaving a slope of jumbled rock fragments, but the slope had not quite reached angle of repose. Creak's attempts to pick his way up the pile had cost two more broken limbs.

Jerry Snow, whose right femur had snapped in the fall, hadn't even tried. Luckily there was pain-killer in his kit, so he could still think. Whether he needed to or not was debatable; any possible action would demand most careful planning, but there might be no possible action. Even before the fall he had been pretty well resigned to starvation; one does not find usable food on a world like Paintbox even if some of its life forms do breathe oxygen. The broken leg might actually make decisions simpler.

Creak had no visible kit or any other equipment but long sheath knives on

each forearm, but didn't seem to be suffering as far as the human being could tell. Of course, what the signs would have been was anyone's guess. He—Jerry thought the male pronoun from habit, knowing it might be wrong—might also be able to do some constructive thinking, but this could do the man little good. Both species used sound for communication, but only with their own kinds.

The human being had heard that the rusty-hinge noises the natives made represented words and sentences, patterns which some people had even learned to understand, but they carried no meaning to him. He himself had not seen a native until shortly after hitting the ground some sixty hours earlier.

His own speech seemed to be as just meaningless to the other, which was hardly surprising. The two had used gestures since their first meeting. These had let them help each other find enough water for the kit's purifier and the native's thirst, but there had been no attempt to discuss route or destination. It seemed to the man that wherever the native might be heading must offer at least a slightly better chance of rescue than random wandering.

Gestures had also been effective when Jerry had noticed a swarm of what looked like oversized rats streaming toward them from a nearby gully; at least, Creak had been able to draw his knives in time and, in some thirty seconds of almost invisibly rapid motion, scatter a dozen or more dismembered bodies around them and send the survivors back to their gully. A few hours later, however, the man had failed to understand one of Creak's arm-wavings at a critical moment.

Now it seemed evident that the gesture had been a warning against being so close to the edge of the cliff.

He wasn't sure how guilty he should feel at involving Creak in the fall. The creature had plainly made a deliberate effort to seize him and pull him back from the crumbling rock, but maybe he would have shared the fall anyway in spite of his better footing; or maybe he had risked his life deliberately without regard for his own safety. Either way, it had obviously been Jerry's fault. Warning or not, he should have been more alert.

More constructively, what could either of them now do about it? Jerry could crawl, but there was no way he could walk even if he managed to splint his leg; it would take days even with kit medication for the bone to knit. His various contusions were nothing to worry about; they'd be invisible in a day or two, if he were still alive.

One of Creak's walking limbs was also broken. This made less difference to him since he had four of them, but the advantage was offset at least partly by a body weight of some two hundred fifty kilograms. Still, he could travel.

From the human viewpoint, therefore, the problem seemed to lie not in any doubt of Creak's getting somewhere but in how to tell him what to do when he got there. Sending a message would be easy; the Paintbox natives could memorize-record-in perfect detail the most complex sound patterns, Jerry had been told. Whether the noises carried meaning for them or not didn't seem to matter. Snow's problem would be to explain to whom the message should go. It was almost certain that Creak was unfamiliar with human beings; he had not produced a recognizable word since Jerry had met him, so presumably had never heard any, and he had appeared surprised at some of the man's actions such as pouring water into the purification kit instead of drinking it. He might never even have heard of offworlders, who were certainly rare enough on Paintbox

But Jerry had talked to him anyway, in the hope that sooner or later his own words would be repeated in a place where they had meaning. It would, after all, be nice if someone found out eventually what had happened to him. Be had property, and a child he'd be glad to have get it.

He had never really hoped to get out of the situation alive himself. He had had to eject with a minimum of equipment. Even when people missed his flyer and began looking for it, he was nowhere near any spot where it might have crashed. It might not, for that matter, have crashed at all; the unbalanced reactor which had forced him to get out with so little notice, without even any food to speak of, might have left nothing but a spreading cloud of extra pollution in Paintbox's already foul atmosphere

"I'm going to try to splint a broken right thigh," he said slowly. "I still won't be able to walk on it, but at least it may knit straight-if I last long enough for that. If anyone ever hears this, I've been trapped by a rockfall on a ledge overlooking the west side of Death Valley, probably about two hundred kilos from Gem. I've recorded my will, which I don't want to recite this publicly, and it would be nice if someone found it even if it's too late for me. The native I call Creak is still with me; he fell too. We're both hurt, he broke a leg and an arm in the same fall, but he can travel. Neither of us can climb back up, though, and of course I can't go very much farther down. There are trees of a sort on this shelf, thin enough to cut and I hope strong enough to make splints. I can't tell Creak what I want to do, so I'm going to crawl over and start cutting. Maybe he'll get the idea."

The crawl would have been impossible, Jerry knew, without the pain-killer. He dragged the broken leg as directly behind him as possible. This had the effect of mare or less straightening it out and pulling the visible bone end inside—as effective a setting job as was possible unless he could persuade the native to pull it straight. Even with the drug, however, he could feel the crepidation as he moved.

He also felt weak, he hoped not from shock. It was lucky that his knife still had power, though he didn't know how much; he'd have to use it economically.

A growth resembling a ten-meter bamboo toppled slowly after a single slash, and four more cuts produced sections which should serve as splints if he could fasten them in place. The cutting had offered no difficulty, but moving along the fallen pole to the place where he wanted to cut had been another matter. Creak had watched with apparent interest, but showed no signs yet of realizing what the human being had in mind.

Binding material, preferably tape, was the next problem. The kit had sealant for cuts and abrasions to help out ordinary clotting. This he had already used, but it was no help gluing splints. Rope was not included in the ejection gear, cutting edges being considered more basic, and the parachute lines he had saved were much too thin, though undoubtedly strong enough.

He had clothing, of course. His body was well protected by fabric, but deciding whether he should cut up some of it was not so easy. Exposing his skin, which would certainly be damp with sweat from time to time, to a chlorine-laden atmosphere had its own risks.

He tossed a mental coin, removed the upper section of his suit with care to avoid disturbing the air-filtering equipment, and started cutting carefully.

This did capture Creak's attention, though whether he was more surprised at the man's suddenly displayed ability to remove his outer surface or interested in the use intended for the strips of fabric was not evident. He walked, dragging his own broken leg, over to take a closer look; his own slashes and abrasions seemed to have clotted without artificial help.

Jerry arranged the poles around his thigh and with much awkwardness began strapping them in place.

He had even more trouble with the portions of splint extending below his knees, and was vastly relieved when his companion began to help with wrapping and knots. The fact that one of the four independently swiveling eyeballs kept examining the partly revealed human body while the work was going on was no bother, at least not after it became evident that the creature could tie good knots with part of his attention elsewhere. Scientific curiosity was perfectly understandable.

Jerry had used the insulation between the layers of his suit to make padding, so as far as he could tell the circulation to his leg was unimpaired. It was odd, he reflected, how people tended to keep on acting on the assumption they were going to live.

Not always too sensible, but interesting.

There was still plenty of material from the outer layer of the jacket, and with his own splints secure he dragged himself to another shoot and slashed it down. Creak still seemed curious, and after the man had cut another set of splints and gestured toward the native's broken leg he appeared to get the idea. A quarter of an hour later this limb too was splinted to the man's satisfaction, padding and all.

The satisfaction evaporated promptly when Creak began, rather gingerly at first, to walk with the broken limb.

"Hey! Wait a minute—no, wait about a month. You've got a bone in there—I felt it! That's got to knit before you can walk on that leg! Are you crazy? Or didn't your creator give you a sense of pain?"

There was a bone in the limb, and Jerry winced as he saw the whole splint-and-leg system give slightly when a portion of the native's weight came on it. Creak walked slowly and carefully back and forth for a dozen meters each way, and appeared not to mind the slight yielding of what should have been a rigid structure. The man cringed mentally, but the owner of the leg seemed satisfied to find that the splints could take some of his weight. His attitude relaxed as he continued to walk about, and he finally seemed to have decided how much load he could actually

risk on the splinted member. Just a calibration run, apparently.

Then he came back to Snow and gestured at his broken arm.

There was little fabric left, but plenty of splint material. This time Jerry confined himself to two sections of pole; the arm was remarkably thin considering the native's overall structure. He tried to use the last of the binding material to improvise a sling; maybe that would discourage the fellow from using the arm...

Making an arm sling for a creature whose four-eyed head lacks a real neck to separate it from a gorilla-like torso is awkward. When the four arms, while emerging from the upper part of the torso as a human being would hope, lack anything much like shoulders the problem is worse. Jerry was not content with the result, and neither was Creak. He wanted to use the arm, as he had the leg.

It would have been nice, Snow reflected, if the creature had had two right and two left arms; one arm could have served as a splint for the other on the same side. Unfortunately, they were right, left, front, and back, like the legs, and it was the front arm that was broken. The man finally gave up and let the owner of the limbs do what he pleased.

There was no point in offering human pain-killer to a chlorine breather, especially one who was showing no signs of suffering that Snow could identify.

Creak went through another set of tests, apparently to make sure of the usefulness of the newly splinted limb. Then he took another very careful look around the rock-fall, clearly making really certain that it was unclimbable. The cliff face which backed the rest of the shelf was too nearly vertical to be worth checking, and the native then began examining very slowly the outer verge of the nearly flat area, looking over the edge every meter.

This was encouraging, Jerry felt. If the being could get

down, his own words stood a fair chance of being heard somewhere, some time, by some human being. The native could live in the valley with no trouble at all—perhaps more comfortably than up here, though oxygen did not, as far as anyone knew, bother the chlorine breathers. It shouldn't, of course, by any evolutionary reasoning; there is no way for a liquid-water planet with a high atmospheric chlorine content to be without a fair amount of oxygen. Chlorine reacts with water to produce the stuff, though rather indirectly.

The man's filter system removed the chlorine and supplied him with the oxygen he needed—up here. Chlorine is over twice as dense as oxygen or nitrogen, and more than fifty percent denser than carbon dioxide. At the bottom of the valley there would be little but the green gas, and no matter how hard the pump of his filter system labored, there was no way a human being could get enough oxygen down there. A sieve won't separate water from sand if there's no water.

Up seemed impossible. Down was death.

For a human being.

Mapper felt the same about the upward chances, but down, now that her leg was more usable, was another matter. The area had been charted, though not very completely, and she knew there was a growth station half a day's journey from the foot of Sunwarmth Valley. Getting down might easily take a day or more, if it could be managed at all, but it would be worth the try. Waiting here with little food and no water was futile death.

For a few seconds the possibility of bringing the other being along occupied Mapper's thoughts. There would be no trouble carrying it on level ground even if it couldn't help, as it presumably couldn't; one serviceable walking limb out of two was clearly inadequate.

The canyon wall, however, was not level. It seemed much more sensible to go down alone first and find a

route, if one existed, where trying to transport the other would at least not be silly.

There was no way of telling how much food the strange being had or needed. It had obviously eaten very tiny amounts of something several times since they had met. It might be able to last a while. Maybe it could do without water for a time as well; the peculiar use it had made of the stuff, pouring it into one of the strange objects it was carrying, might mean that it had no personal need for the liquid, though this was hard to believe. The creature, after all, was obviously as alive as Mapper herself. If it could do without water, however, the chance of its being able to stay alive up here for a while seemed fairly good. If it couldn't, that would be inconvenient, but there seemed nothing to be done about it..

It would be nice to learn more about the strange beings; Mapper had heard a little, but only a little, about them from other people and ignorance was annoying, especially when decisions had to be made.

There seemed, however, after half an hour of careful examination, only one spot where even the start of a descent was possible. From there on down looked almost easy, but to the nearest shelf below this particular spot was a drop of something like five meters. Three more broken legs would remove the need for decision making, of course, but that seemed hardly worth the ensuing inconvenience, especially if the stranger could not get down the drop to make more repairs.

The creature now had crawled over to the edge beside Mapper, and was also looking over. She wondered briefly why it had bothered to apply the limb-stiffeners to itself at all when they obviously weren't adequate, but it began to move again before any reasonable explanation occurred to her. Observation seemed more profitable than speculation for the moment.

Back at the clump of plants which had furnished the

limbstiffeners, its strange implement sent several more shoots tumbling to the ground. Two of these were left at full length, the others sectioned as before. Then the being drew several lengths of thin cord from its equipment and began lashing the shorter pieces across the two longest ones, which it had laid out parallel to each other.

Mapper had plenty of imagination. The purpose of the ladder was clear to her well before it was completed. The plant material, it seemed likely, would be strong enough for that purpose; the adequacy of the cord was less certain but no doubt worth a try.

With the last knot completed and the structure tested as well as the stranger's arm strength could manage, it began to drag the ladder toward the point where Mapper obviously wanted to descend.

She, however, had a strong sense of self-preservation. She picked up the fabrication and carried it, not to the edge of the cliff, but in the other direction, paying no attention to the meaningless noises produced by the alien. The ladder was set up against the cliff face as steeply as possible, and the chlorine-breather cautiously began to climb up. The rungs bent, but not alarmingly. Even the top ones were tried, not by standing on them with the near certainty of another fall but by hanging from them by one or two hands—the broken arm was not used; Swift had no idea whether the creature was sensible to pain after all or merely sensible.

The testing finished, the ladder was borne to the edge and lowered carefully over. Mapper noticed, but did not interpret, the tight clenching of its maker's hands as the climb commenced, but there proved to be nothing to worry about. The lower shelf was reached in a few seconds. She picked up the ladder and started along the ledge in what had seemed from earlier examination the more promising direction. She could see the head of the alien watching her clambering down these easier slopes, and

was rather disappointed that there was no need to use the ladder again while the two were in sight of each other.

The climb was very long. Darkness came after only a few hundred meters of descent, and the journey stopped It was unwise, to put it mildly, to travel without being able to see far enough ahead to plan the route. Mapper wondered off and on during the night how the other being was faring, but spent most of her time trying to match what she had seen so far on the way down with the incomplete chart of the area already filed in her memory.

Real connection was not yet possible, but trying was fun.

Lower down, after the light returned, the descent became ever easier, only partly because the air was denser and more useful. There was also some purely mental relief; with less and less oxygen tainting the surroundings there was less and less chance of meeting any of the ferocious little oxygen-users. Mapper knew no real chemistry, though she had names for oxygen and chlorine, and had no idea why such creatures could be so much more active than chlorine-breathers, but she knew the fact.

It would have been nice if everyone could live in deep valleys, but people also needed water, and for some reason the valleys which contained enough water also had enough oxygen to be dangerous. Mapper had wondered why, but no one had been able to satisfy her curiosity. It might be a law of nature which no one understood yet, which would make the quest hopeless, but so far such valleys seemed still worth seeking on the chance.

So people went on mapping.

Having reached nearly level ground she stored the ladder where it could be found again easily, and headed south. There was no stream to follow, but the landscape was becoming familiar, or at least similar in detail to places she had heard about. By the time the sun had

brightened from deep green to yellow there was no more doubt about where she was, and she paused to think.

There would be no more serious climbing between here and the Station. It would definitely be possible to carry the stranger down by the route she had just had taken—in fact, the only place the ladder would be really needed was that very first drop from the shelf where they had been trapped. This meant that, while the implement would have to be carried back up, it would not be needed again on the descent; only the stranger would have to be carried.

But would this be worth doing? The Station would not be equipped to repair the alien body. Maybe Mapper should simply go on and get her own damage attended to, and then go back for the other with much more convenience. On the other hand, there was the water question; the being had had some use for the liquid, however strange the use seemed to be, and there was none on the shelf. Mapper could sympathize with that situation; she was no stranger to thirst in the surveying profession. There would certainly be water at the station, and maybe the creature had enough food for a while at least. Maybe, for that matter, the people at the station would know how to get in touch with others of its kind.

There was, on another hand, no need to go on to find the station; she knew where it was, now. It could not be reached before dark, and repairs to leg and arm would take two or three additional days. She could also deliver her egg during that time, but that was a minor consideration; it did not yet interfere with travel.

Reasoning was inconclusive; she made a random decision. she turned abruptly and retraced her steps to the ladder.

The sun was green again, now descending toward the Station, and even though climbing would this time be possible in the dark since the way was known, the upward

travel would be harder and more rest be needed. The pauses would not, of course, be boring; patching together the details which had been observed on the way down with what had already been mapped would be recreation, especially since some of the patching would still have to be made by inference. Thinking was fun.

She hurried in order get above the heavy vegetation of the valley floor before the sun set; it would be good to check some of the more casual observations made on the way down, even though there might be enough oxygen for dangerous animals if she went very far. This was a standard risk, not worth very much attention. She could, after all, still use three of her knives.

As it happened, one at a time was enough. The carnivores this deep in the valley were larger, clumsier, and didn't hunt in packs, so she was not even very tired when the climb was resumed at daybreak.

Tired or not, upward progress was much slower, and the sun had set again before the last stage, requiring the ladder, was reached. It seemed best not to call aloud; the alien was not looking over the edge—there was no obvious reason why it should be expecting anyone—and it was clearly inconvenient for it to crawl. Once again Mapper wondered why it had bothered to do the nonrepair to its leg.

It was fully dark—the world had no moon, and at the best of times its atmosphere was too hazy for starlight to produce much more than a faint general glow—when the ladder was set up. The climb was made as carefully and quietly as possible, not so much out of consideration for the injured alien as because the ladder was shaky enough to demand full attention. For the first time it occurred to Mapper to wonder whether it would hold the two of them at once.

Maybe the trip back up had been wasted after all, but there was only one way to tell. All the eyes that could be brought to bear swiveled carefully over the shelf the moment they were high enough. No more cutting of shoots seemed to have been done; all that had still been standing when the surveyor had departed still showed faintly against the vaguely luminous sky. The alien was not visible, but was probably lying down if it were anywhere at all in the line of sight. Mapper dragged herself over the edge and decided to rest until there was enough light.

Well before sunrise she could see the creature. It was lying motionless near the stand of plant life which had provided splints and ladder. At first it seemed dead, but as the light increased, its breathing motions could be seen; it had not shut down completely.

It had, however, changed visibly and surprisingly. At the time of Mapper's departure its inner skin—the surface exposed largely by removal of the strap material from the upper part of its body, and partly by rips resulting from the fall—had shown numerous injuries. There had been scrapes, cuts and tears leaking nearly black body fluid. This had hardened to form a seal within a few minutes, as had Mapper's over her similar injuries. This had not been at all surprising, though the alien's smearing of a pasty material over the areas afterward was hard to understand.

Now, however, there was no sign of these injuries, though the leg was still splinted. Mapper was dumfounded.

She remembered perfectly well where each scratch and scrape had been; after all, she had a surveyor's memory. If that had been in doubt the growing light showed paler patches at the damage sites. The uninjured integument had also changed a little; now it was darker than before.

But what had repaired the injuries? No other aliens could possibly have arrived with reconstruction equipment. There were no traces of anyone, other than the creature and Mapper herself, having moved around in the dust and rubble of the shelf; she remembered every mark they had left. Besides, why would anyone repair the minor damage and then not only ignore the leg but depart leaving the creature itself behind? It made no sense. Could the substance the creature had smeared on the scabs have been responsible for their disappearance? Hardly; repairs weren't made that way or that quickly. New growth had to be directed.

The only thing that made sense was perhaps not impossible, but certainly unbelievable, at first. It did not occur to her for several minutes, and when it did she froze momentarily in shock.

The creature had built-in repair powers.

At least, it could handle minor damage. The leg seemed beyond it, or maybe that just took longer. The former seemed more likely by far, now that Mapper considered the whole matter. After all, repairing skin damage might be just a minor advance over having body fluids seal their leaks, which anyone could do.

But that settled it. The creature would have to be brought to the station, if only as evidence of what could be done. Self repair would obviously be useful; she had no idea why no one had thought of incorporating it in Person design. Maybe it would even be possible on broken limbs. Mapper was going to get a really unheard of repair job this time, especially since there seemed no reason why the repair crew themselves shouldn't share the credit.

If the alien's broken leg-bone healed itself on the way, it would be even more impressive. It might be amusing, later, for Mapper to break an arm or a leg deliberately before witnesses, and watch their amazement as it healed. If it didn't take too long, of course.

The alien seemed nearly dead already; at least, it had shown no signs of awareness. The limp body might be awkward to carry, but there was a solution now for that.

Briefly, Mapper thought of borrowing the odd knife which had sectioned the trees so easily, but decided familiar equipment was better. The chlorine-breather was strong enough to do the job with her own knives, and minutes later four two-meter lengths of wood lay beside the strange, still form.

There was plenty of cord left in the creature's possession and Mapper used it all. There was no objection, or sound which might conceivably have implied an objection, as she tied one end of a strand to one of the new splints and began winding it around the body and the poles. Perhaps the creature was nearly dead, which would simplify matters. The winding took a long time; the cord was in many separate pieces and one end had to be tied to another every minute or two. It was lucky the alien had demonstrated the art of knotting.

By the time the job was finished, forty or fifty turns of parachute line encased body and splints. It should be easy enough to carry the package now with only two arms, leaving one and a fraction free for ladder and if necessary for knife work.

Mapper rested for a while after completing the wrapup. All her strength might be needed for the ladder maneuver, which would have to be done slowly and carefully.

It was neither. Before the intended rest had lasted a hundred breaths squeals sounded from far up the rockfall, and for the first time Mapper realized what could have happened while she was gone. It was lucky any of the alien was here at all As quickly as her strength permitted, she dragged the bundle toward the head of the ladder. They reached it, but before any maneuvering could be started, nearly two dozen oxygen-users were upon them.

Again she thought of borrowing the alien knife, but this time it was unavailable under several turns of cord, and three of her own blades went into service. Fatigue and perhaps the approaching egg delivery kept them from moving as fast as usual, and several times one or another of the attackers came close enough to get a quick bite.

Even in the excitement of battle, Mapper noticed that the ones which nipped out bits of the alien and retreated to swallow them almost at once went into convulsions. Cause and effect were easy enough to connect, but it still seemed best to kill the things in the usual fashion. Dead or alive, the body was needed for evidence, and not enough of it might be left if it were used for poison. Besides, the attackers weren't being choosy; she had to defend herself. The knives continued to slash. This time the affair went on until the last of the things was dead; a few of them had gotten nips out of Mapper and this, not surprisingly to the native, drove them into a feeding frenzy.

There were more squeals from above as the last of the group was slashed apart, and with no trace of caution she eased the bundle over the edge onto the ladder. She held the burden with two hands and used the other two, including the one on the broken arm, for climbing. The descent was not quite at free fall speed but was far from casual. Once down, the bundle was thrust urgently to one side and the ladder pulled away from the rock face. Moments later louder squeals could be heard and pointed, razor-toothed heads appeared at the verge. None of the creatures appeared willing to jump.

Two did indeed go over the edge, probably being pushed by the crowd, but Mapper's knives were ready and each attacker reached the ground in two pieces. The others promptly retreated, and the surveyor's attention went back to her burden. This seemed not to be dead after all.

The dark body fluid was oozing from the places where the oxygen-users had nipped, so circulation was still operating. Also, the eyes were open and sounds were coming from its mouth.

Jerry had no notion of what had occurred in the hours since Creak had left. He was not suffering from infection, luckily-it was luck; no Paintbox organism could have managed his body chemistry, of course, but there was no reason to suppose his own clothing and equipment were sterile. He was nevertheless in bad shape. The broken leg had swollen since it had been splinted, and even with the padding its circulation was suffering. He had eaten a few crumbs-nearly all he had left-since Creak had vanished below, and drunk more than was really wise of the water he had left. He had tried to be firm with himself on that point, he had heard that thirst was about the worst way to go, and he had off and on been trying to decide when it would be best to remove his filter mask. The trouble was that breathing chlorine, while much quicker than dying of dehydration, was also extremely painful.

He had been too deeply unconscious—it was not normal sleep—to be aware of the native's bundling him up, and only slowly was he realizing now how helpless he was. He couldn't touch his mask if he had wanted to. He couldn't even get at his drinking tube, and there was some water left. There had to be.

His arms and legs hurt in several places, though he had no way of knowing about the bites and couldn't move his head freely enough to see what was wrong. He wondered briefly whether he had been delirious and the Paintboxer had tied him up for his own security. There was no way to ask, and Snow had never liked futile talk, so he didn't try. He remained silent while the native gathered him up, settled him in two of its uninjured arms, and started to walk away from the ladder, in the direction in which it had disappeared nearly forty hours earlier.

They were over three hundred meters lower when Jerry Snow uttered his last carefully considered words.

"Creak is taking me down into Death Valley. I'm tied up with parachute cord and can't do a thing about it. If he ever

repeats these words to anyone who understands them, please tell him I don't blame him, even if I don't know why he's doing it. At least I can be sure he doesn't want me for food, and I don't suppose I could blame him if he did. I like to believe he's trying to rescue me, and doesn't have any idea what will happen when we get down to nearly zero oxygen. I hope the filter pump merely cuts out and doesn't blow up. That would be quicker than suffocating, I suppose, but not much, and there's no need for him to get hurt too. And I never had much chance anyway. The flyer probably did blow up. Even if it only crashed, the stuff I was carrying to Port Crayon will have to be replaced. At least, suffocating will be better than thirst. Don't blame Creak.

"Don't blame any Paintboxers. Even if some of them know about oxygen, there's no reason they all should. My will is in the green pack—"

It went on for many minutes, less and less coherently, and ended with; "Hurry up. Creak. I'm getting thirsty."

"Pilot Swift was generous," the Station Director remarked. "Mapper of course did not know enough details about oxygen breathers and is not to blame, but those of us responsible for communication and record updating do have some responsibility."

"I can't see that," answered the human pilot. "There was only the tiniest chance of Mapper's ever meeting one of us in her existence, and you have better things to teach your people."

"Curious facts are always worth knowing, and the fact that for your kind death is not reversible is certainly curious. I don't know how I can explain this to Mapper; she already has a problem.

"What's that?"

"She discovered that Swift could repair damage to his own body, and wants me to include this quality in her present rebuilding. She's quite indignant that this has never been done before, since it's so obviously desirable quality. I'm not sure I can convince her—"

"Maybe I can help. I'm not too much of a biologist, and we were long enough recognizing your biological nature, goodness knows, but it's clear enough now. By our standards you're nanotech machines—pseudolife, not real life. You didn't evolve naturally; you were planned. That was very, very hard for us to believe, at least partly because there are still members of our own species who believe the same thing about us.

"I have had the process of evolution explained to me. It makes sense, and answers one very old question."

"What's that?"

"The origin of the Creators. Obviously they couldn't have made themselves, and assuming that other creators made them simply pushes the problem back a step without solving it."

"Like the old panspermia theory."

"Possibly. I haven't heard of that. In any case, if there is a natural explanation for the origin of at least some life, it's worth knowing—but how does this help my problem with Mapper?"

"It should help her see why you can't give her the healing option. The ability had to be part of natural life all along, almost from the first autocatalytic and self-duplicating molecules. No life form could last long enough to reproduce without it except by the wildest luck, so it's there all through any planet's life history. It involves carrying the complete plans for the organism in every cell.

"Our bodies carry such plans already. We use them when we grow eggs."

"Of course, but are they in every body cell? I'd bet you your have them only in reproductive organs."

"Of course. Where else would they be useful?"

"In healing. That's what I'm trying to explain. Do you know, by the way, why your creators made you?"

"Of course. There are very explicit records, but all that's quite separate from the instructions telling how to produce new people without using eggs and how to repair damaged ones. No doubt we'll need to study your own design before we can incorporate this self-repair process. I can see that the detail information must be enormous."

"We'll be glad to help, if you really want. I'd bet, though, that if you did it'd have to be at the expense of a lot of things like your perfect recording ability and, most especially, your reversible death. In a way, you're relatively simple machines, which can be shut off, repaired, and restarted. We aren't. Life isn't. It doesn't normally stop all at once. Some chemical processes keep running longer than others, so many side reactions occur, ones which don't take place while we're alive because the wanted ones come first. Very quickly a point is reached where there's no reversing and getting back on course. We're really dead.

"I'd guarantee that if you do manage to work out and incorporate the self-repair option, your own deaths will also become irreversible. So don't let Mapper worry or feel guilty or envious. Swift had no real chance anyway, and his suffocation involved far less pain than being eaten bit by bit or dying of thirst would have. I guarantee he'd have preferred it the way it happened. Tell Mapper that. It should stop her from feeling guilty as well as discourage her ambition for a self-repair rebuild."

The Director pondered for several seconds.

"That seems reasonable. I'll tell her all this, if you'll explain one more thing to me."

"Gladly."

"You used a word, 'pain,' a moment ago. What does that mean? Do you think she might want it, too?"



GENE WOLFE



WRAPPER

GENE WOLFE

t was so nice to see it again, the little meadows fenced with the walls of dry-laid fieldstones, and the architectural woods big gray trees like columns written over with hieroglyphics. And the huts and little church, all thatch and sticks plastered over with mud, like muddy little mushrooms the trees let live there.

Before I went to sleep last night, I tried to remember as much as I could, scared I might forget it all. *Knowing* I will forget it all in a year or so, pretty soon after I have talked myself into thinking it was just a dream. That is why I am writing this. I am going to keep this on my hard disk, print out a copy for my desk, and back everything up.

This was real.

It started on Saturday when I took Joan to dinner. Joan used to work at Botha too. She works at another company now, but we still get together about twice a month. There was a time when I

thought I might marry Joan, and I think there was one when Joan thought she might marry me. But it was not the same time, if you know what I mean.

Let me start over, because this is really going off in the wrong direction. It began when the Zuccharas moved in across the hall. Not that I noticed them particularly either way. Mister is short and wide, with a big black mustache. Mrs. Dent says he is a chef, but that may not be right. He does not get drunk or want to talk, so that was all right with me. It still is.

Mrs. Z. is short and wide too. Her mustache is smaller and she has about ten black dresses all pretty much alike. She wants to talk, but only to other women in the building, which suits me. They go to church a lot, I suppose to mass. They are the sort of people you imagine bowing down to a crucifix, and I guess they do. Well, why not? Mister wears a fresh carnation in his lapel when they go to church, and I like that.

Angelo never goes with them, though. It was a while before I noticed that.

Angelo is their son, about six. You are not supposed to have kids in this building, but I guess the Zaccharas know somebody. Or they could be related to the owners or something like that. Anyway, they seem to have gotten a variance or whatever you call it. An exemption?

Whatever.

I remember the first time I saw Angelo. I thought oh my God don't buy him a drum. But Angelo is a quiet kid, really. He is even quiet when his folks are away at church. Or more likely he is not in there. She probably takes him to stay with somebody else before they go. Like maybe Mister is her second, and her first is Angelo's father, and he takes him when it is not convenient for her to. Anyway, Angelo does not look much like them. He has that dark skin or anyway a wonderful tan, but he is blond. If Mrs. Z. is really his mother, there is just no way Mister can be the father.

Maybe Angelo is adopted.

One day I saw him playing in the hallway, and I sort of grinned at him. He said, "Hi," and started to grin back, but then he stopped and stared at me. He has these beautiful blue eyes about as big as jawbreakers. When Angelo stares at you, you know you have been stared at.

I said something to show I was not somebody he had to be scared of, and after that I would talk to him a little every time I saw him, which was about once a week. That is how I found out his name, and I saw him going into the place across the hall two-three times so I know that is where he lives.

Then Saturday night after I took Joan back to her place I guess I did not push my door all the way closed or put on the night bolt either. I logged on and was checking out my e-mail, and here was Angelo, right at my elbow and sort of reading over my shoulder. I said hello and how are you doing, and all that, because what would be the use of me being mad? Angelo is just a little kid and did not mean any harm or he would not have let me see him like that. I was his friend, wasn't I? So I would not be mad if he came for a visit.

We talked a little bit and I showed him some of my email and tried to explain the difference between a computer screen and a TV. Then I remembered that the waiter had left a piece of candy for Joan on top of our bill, only she had not wanted it. She never does eat anything like that, and I stuck it in my pocket.

So I got it out and gave it to Angelo. He said, "Thank you," very polite and unwrapped it and put it in his mouth, and said "Thank you," again. After that I went to one of the tech boards where I knew they would be talking about automated sailing ships, something that interests me quite a lot.

It went on like that for quite a while and pretty soon it hit home to me that it was getting really late and Angelo

ought to be home in bed. I looked around for him and he was over at the window looking down at the parked cars, only he was looking at them through the candy wrapper. Then he turned around and looked at the table lamp through it like that was really, really interesting. And after that he sort of smiled and gave it to me.

I put it up to my eyes like he had and looked at the screen.

This is where I have a really hard time. Because I want to say what it was I saw through the wrapper, and I want to say it so you will know (you being me five or ten years from now) what it was I saw. Only I want to say it so you will know that I did and this is not just some bullshit. That is going to be hard.

Here goes. It was a book, the biggest book anybody ever saw, bigger than I am. Taller, I mean. And wide, those pages must have been four or five feet across. It was open on a sort of a stand, and there were pictures and that business where the first letter is sort of a picture too, like a *M* was two naked men carrying a naked girl like she was dead or had passed out.

I started reading and looking at the pictures, and there was no way you could read it all, it just went on and on without me ever turning the page, and after a while it sort of came to me that whatever I wanted to read was written on there someplace, high-tech, low-tech, you name it. There were circuits there that did things I had never thought of or read about anywhere, with little people in the drawings to point out the best parts, the kind of thing nobody has done for about five hundred years, and there was a poem next to one that made me feel like I'd spent my whole life at sea the way I used to want to. Lots of sex, too, and hunting lions with a spear. All kinds of stuff.

Anything I wanted to read about.

Anything.

This is another hard part. I do not want to write it, and

I know that's going to make it hard for me to write it the way it really happened. I set the wrapper down, eventually, and looked around for Angelo, but he was gone.

Without looking through the wrapper, my PC was just my PC again. I thought about that, but to tell you the truth I was too dumb to be scared. I should have been, but I just kept trying to figure it out. I got up for a while and walked around, but that did not help either. Angelo had gone out and closed the door quietly behind him like a nice kid.

I think he really is one, too, even if his eyes do make me nervous.

He was not out in the hall playing, either. I thought about calling over to his parents, but how would it have looked, a grown man calling up to ask about their little boy at that time of night?

Finally I sat down here again and smoothed out the candy wrapper (it was sort of light red colored, more of a rose red than a pink) and picked it up and looked through. And there was the big book again, with everything (really everything!) written on just those two pages. My right hand kept the wrapper up in front of my eyes, and with my left I reached out to feel the computer.

That is when I got the surprise of my life, because what I felt was the big book. The boards were covered with leather like the oiled leather of a baseball glove, soft but strong, and there seemed to be actual wood underneath that. The pages felt like the head of a drum, except not stretched tight. I picked up the corner of one.

Wow, I thought. Wow!

I still think wow.

I took the wrapper away and looked at my hand, and it was touching the screen. That's when I started to be really scared. I put the wrapper on top of a box I keep floppies in and tried to think, but I never found a lot to think about. Not right then, and not anytime that night. I guess I was in shock.

Here I would like to start, "Next day at work—" Only I know not, because that was Saturday night. So there is Sunday there, and I do not know anymore what I did. I know I never did look through the wrapper again though, or even touch it.

Monday at work I tried to remember one of those circuits and draw it out. There were parts of it I could get and parts I could not. That night you would think I would have looked again, but I was afraid to touch the wrapper. I remember sitting in my living room making sketches and deleting them, and staring at it. I never picked it up.

Wednesday I got the circuit right, I think. I took the printout in to Mr. Koch and told him what I think they will do, which is hunt for an idea instead of words. I remember exactly what I said, "Put together a couple hundred of these, and you could say get everything about going crazy and it would get you all that, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and all the rest of that stuff."

Mr. Koch looked at my circuit for a long time, then he said, "I'm going to have to study this. I'll get back to you." Just before quitting time, he gave me back my printout and said, "Either you're the biggest screwball anybody ever saw or you're a frigging genius. We're going to have to build some." (He said "frigging" because Dot and Sally were both listening.)

So after work I was not afraid of the wrapper anymore, or anyway not as much. When I got home I went over to the window and looked out, and it was not quite dark yet.

The thing was that when I had looked at the book, not the first time but the other one, I tried to turn the page. And I lost my nerve and could not do it. I have never thought I was a hero or anything, but that made me feel really scuzzy. So this time I decided I would not even look at my computer like before, I would look outside at the lawn and the parking lot.

I picked the wrapper up and carried it over carefully

and got it with both hands and held it up to my eyes. That is when I saw those fields and the woods I told you about. It was like I was up in a tower, or it could have been floating over them like in a balloon.

I do not know.

It was beautiful, so beautiful it sort of caught inside my chest and I thought for a minute I might die. I kept telling myself I had to put the wrapper down, and finally I did, and after that I just sort of sat down and thought.

Then I went out to the Greek place and ate dinner, and thought some more. I swear I do not even remember what I had. Probably the moussaka.

The thing was, it was real. I kept on coming back to that

When I had reached out and touched it, the book was what I had felt. That big book, not my screen. It had only felt like my screen when I took the wrapper away. So it was real, whatever I saw through the wrapper. And I kept on thinking about his eyes.

This is really crazy, as crazy as those books I got from the library. I should not put it in, but if you have read this far why not?

The whole universe is around that wrapper.

Suppose the universe is infinite, which is what somebody said in *Scientific American*. If it is, then "middle" is just a way of thinking about it, a reference point, and we can put the middle anyplace that is convenient. One might be handier than all the others, but it really does not matter except for simplifying your equations.

So that wrapper is the middle as much as anyplace else is. But if it is the middle, you can say it is wrapping the whole universe. You define "in" as away from the wrapper, if the wrapper is the middle.

So if you are inside, in the candy, and you look through the wrapper—well, you see what I mean? Angelo is the one who gets to draw the axes, the crossing lines to measure from. He is the one who gets to say what the middle is.

I do not know why.

I thought about a lot of other stuff in the Greek place, but every time I try to write it down, I end up writing about his eyes. I have deleted a lot of that.

Like when I was looking out at the forest again just like it used to be, and it was night and I could see the windows of a little house over here and another one over there, little round windows as yellow as butter, and the trees great big shadows. I kept thinking how his eyes looked like eggs, like the blue eggs of some bird that does not have a name but nests in those trees or even around those little houses in under the thatch.

The next day, I guess that was Thursday, I tried to tell Sally just a little bit, just a hint like, and pretty soon I could see she thought I was nuts and she was trying to get away from me. So I went to Buck. Buck's about as good a friend as I have at work or anyplace, but he laughed at me. It was not friendly laughter, if you know what I mean. It was like the people in the crowd laugh in that movie *Freak Show*, and after that I called Joan.

I went home feeling really, really down. For a long time I just sort of walked around—living room, bedroom, kitchen, and living room again. Every time I saw the wrapper I started wondering all over again if it was real. Finally I went to the window and held it up like before.

(I have got to write this, or none of it will make any sense.)

It was already pretty dark, but down below me there were people dancing. I think they were singing, too, and dancing to their own singing, but I could not see them very well and I could not hear anything at all through the wrapper. I never could.

One of them looked up and saw me.

I swear she did.

She saw me and stopped singing for a minute and smiled, After that she looked at me every time the dance came around. This was not Joan, naturally, but her face made me think of Joan the way she used to be about five years ago. She was a lot thinner than Joan and probably quite a bit younger. Her smile was sort of like Angelo's eyes.

And that was when I did it. I took down the wrapper and crumpled it up into a little tiny wad, and then I opened the window and threw it out.

I think the wind must have caught it and blown it a long way away.

The thing was I did not want to be crazy, and I knew Sally thought I was and she was going to tell everybody. And the more I looked, the more different from them I was going to get, even if I was not crazy. I would be a grown up man carrying around a little square of red plastic wrapper and looking through it all the time. It would be the same as crazy, there would be no difference at all.

Sooner or later somebody would try to take it away from me. That is what I thought, and I would yell and fight until they locked me up.

Because it was something I saw when I was just a little kid, not any bigger than Angelo is. I do not know where, but I saw it a long time ago.

For about a week I tried to forget it, but after that I was down in my knees looking through the grass everywhere and in the gutter and the cracks in the sidewalk, anyplace I could think of. If anybody asked, I was going to say I lost a contact lens. But nobody did.

Yesterday I stopped Angelo's dad in the hall and tried to talk to him, but he said his wife was sick and he had to get her prescription filled. I do not think he would have told me anything anyway. I thought Mrs. Dent would know where Angelo is because she seems to know everything, but she just said there are no children in our building and he must have been a visitor.

So here is what I did.

I bought a lot of candy, all different kinds but all of them with different-colored wrappers about like that one. I carry some in my jacket pocket, and here in the apartment I have bowls of it all over. I used to lock my door as soon as I got home, but I do not anymore. I do not even close it all the way until I go to bed.

Because you do not have to have just one middle, one place where the vertical axis crosses the horizontal like you have in high school. You can have two or three or four sets of axes, if you want to. There are formulas that will let you transfer from one set to another.

One day pretty soon I will see him again, probably this week. And I am going hold out one of the bowls or a piece out of my pocket and say, "Hello there, Angelo. Would you like some more candy?"

(I will write it all down next time, everything he says and everything that I say, too. Everything that happens.)

He will look up then with those wonderful, scary eyes he has. What is he going to say to me, I wonder? Will he leave me the new wrapper?

Most of all, I wonder what it is he sees when he looks through me.

A.E. VAN VOGT

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PROLOGUE TO FREEDOM

A.E. VAN VOGT

A state, I said, arises, as I conceive, out of the needs of mankind; no one is self-sufficing, but all of us have many wants. Can any other origin of a state be imagined?

Plato, 427-347 B.C.

2004 A.D.

or more than two decades capable government advisers had authored rules of survival, requiring the most profligate populace on the planet to operate sensibly.

So that, despite the energy shortage, planes still flew. Everybody still had his car. A proper diet was available for rich or poor. And this condition of temperate living could have gone on indefinitely, despite the usual multi-millions of sly evasions.

It turned out that the dwellers in paradise were angrier than was realized. In

California (where else would it begin but in earth's only heaven?) in the election of 2004. Proposition 8 passed with a majority vote of 67%.

(Only 19% voted against; the remaining 14% of those who went to the polls simply left that item unmarked.)

The business community, which had fought 8 with the biggest expenditure in the history of state elections, was stunned. At once there was a wild scramble to get out of San Francisco.

Actually, the scramble did not include everyone. Ed Clint, TV reporter from New York, who questioned people in various walks of life, estimated that approximately forty per cent of those who had voted for Proposition 8, didn't know what it was ("But something had to be done..." they said.)

Portions of this group and of other segments of the California population expressed a popular reaction: "If the Big Boys are scared of it, then it's got to be okay."

In the area of intellect where Sam Mebley operated his little grocery store in South San Francisco there was a mood of negative, uneasy vagueness. Meaning Sam did not have a clear picture of what would happen after the three-month transition time. However, he was not too disturbed. During the pre-election, a small group of U.C. students came to each store on his street with reassuring statements. Sam was not quite sure what it was they said. But the shoe store owner down the street expressed himself as being greatly cheered. As he interpreted the student message for Sam, "All competent small business people will be encouraged to carry on."

Sam, who had more than a quarter of a million in hidden funds, had a secret feeling of total competence. And, besides, he rented his building and owed for most of his stock. So what the hell!

He didn't mention the hidden hoard when he was interviewed by Clint before the election. But he did report what the students had said, and that evening he described his casual, dismissing attitude to Stella, his every-othernight bed companion, adding: "In this world you've got to be smarter than the next guy."

For Sam, being smarter meant that each weekend on Sunday night he took the train to Los Angeles. (He could have flown, but for that you had to give your name and attest that it was a necessary trip.)

So after an all-night journey Sam reached his destination Monday morning. His principal task: to rent three or four safety deposit boxes in outlying branches of different banks and place in each a bundle of cash.

By evening he was on the train again, and on his way back to San Francisco.

During the first four weekends there was no problem. But as he was returning on his fifth Monday night, the long passenger train with its puffing steam locomotive rolled to a stop just outside of Bakersfield. A trio of students came aboard Sam's car. Sam, who had been sleeping with his head against the window, had his first awareness of something new when he was shaken awake. It took a little while, then, but basically he was quick and obliging.

"Sure, sure-what's the prob?"

The interrogation trio told him. Sam nodded. "Oh, yeah, I get it. This is a check-up on who crosses the new border."

Quickly, he gave his name, stated his occupation, and gave his made-up explanation: "Kind've running out of supplies. So I thought I'd go down and see if I could get some of the stuff I needed." He added. "Got a few boxes of canned goods up in the express car."

That passed him. But it was obvious: his time was running out.

And he still had \$113,000 in stashed cash to get to safety deposit boxes in the second economic area.

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"When the words 'mine' and 'thine' had entered into the world and conflicts arose among citizens concerning ownership of things, and between neighboring peoples over boundaries, it became customary to have recourse to some one who would justly and effectively see that the poor suffered no violence from the rich, or the whole people from their neighbors."

Attributed to: Hubert Languet—1518-1581

In that first month or so a great deal of information was available from all news media.

It seemed that experts were being brought to San Francisco from the U.S.S.R. as advisors. Their first task—it was reported—was to gain control of the flow of goods, particularly of the food supply.

As, during the second month, the news rapidly grew less, it became obvious they were also getting control of the flow of information.

The food part, Sam noted early. His credit wholesalers cut him off from new supplies. But goods were still available for cash; and in fact several wholesalers came to him and offered him secret stores that they had if he would pay off in cash for what he owed them. Each man intimated he would accept a substantial discount as payment in full.

It turned out, in the consequent discussion, that some of these people were still hopeful that the government in Washington would interfere against Proposition 8. But a few days later both San Francisco newspapers quoted a government spokesman. It was a statement issued by the White House, and it said:

"All over the world for a generation or more, Capitalism and Communism have been confronting each other. Until now, citizens of either group have been able to migrate into the other's territory only with great difficulty, and seldom with the privilege of returning unscathed, when and if they desired to do so. But now in what was the great state of California we shall be able to observe in a relatively small arena what happens when there is easy access and easy return by law. It will also be interesting to observe if the new dual system will automatically cure the negative aspects of human nature, as the promoters of Proposition 8 have claimed."

Sam had two reactions to that. First was the sarcastic thought: "Boy, those advisors sure let that item be printed." Belatedly, later in the day, came the second feeling. A puzzlement: "For Pete's sake, what is this Proposition 8?"

That evening, en route to his own house, he pulled over to a curb in front of a small shack on the same street. Got out. Walked up to the unpainted door. And knocked.

Presently, there was the wrinkled, chunky woman who, daytimes, did housecleaning for people who did not wish to make out employer social security statements about occasional domestic help; and thus—as Sam had learned—since there was no record of her having an income, she was able to collect monthly welfare checks.

Sam said, "I've had a rough day, Stella. And though this isn't our regular time, I'll need a woman tonight."

Stella peered up at him. Not much up; they were fairly nearly the same height. For many seconds her dark eyes promised nothing. Then: "I'll see how I feel," she said finally, "and maybe come over."

Sam departed without argument. The plain, little woman generally treated him with compassion. Whenever she didn't "feel" like it she was usually willing "to take care of" him.

As he fully expected, she arrived about eight o'clock; and they had a drink. And somewhere, then, came Sam's question.

Stella didn't argue, or express surprise that he didn't know what it was he had voted for. She was a woman who, as a girl, had looked into a mirror. At which time she had the first of many ego-diminishing shocks. So that getting this plump-faced small man had been a better-thanaverage for a face like hers.

However, like most women she noticed the awesome limitations of her man without—since they were not married—taunting him with his stupidity.

So she explained Proposition 8, being careful the while not to make him feel like an idiot for having paid no attention to the most important election of his, or any Californian's lifetime.

The proposition split California in two just south of Bakersfield. The southern portion, with Los Angeles as its capital, would have a capitalistic economy. The northern half, with San Francisco as the capital, would have a Marxist economy.

Inhabitants of both economic areas would use the same money. They could migrate from one area to the other as many times as they pleased, but would be subject to the laws of whichever section they chose to live in.

When she had finished, Sam sat frowning for a while; then: "This Marxist thing—it's what they've got in Russia, uh, the U.S.S.R.?"

The woman nodded, yes. "The idea," he said, "is that everything is owned by the people." She added, "I don't quite know how they make sure it's all evenly split. But that's the idea."

After a small pause, Sam said, "Oh!" He was thinking of his \$113,000 in cash being divided among the fourteen million people who lived in Economic Area Number One. His feeling was negative.

"You going to stay?" Stella asked.

"I'll have to look the situation over," replied Sam, "and that may take a while. I got most of that 3-month transition period still to go."

It turned out that it didn't take quite as long as the words "transition period" had somehow implied. Or rather,

it had not occurred to Sam that he might be a subject for one of the changes made as a part of the transition.

"It is plain, therefore, that the distinguishing quality of humanity is the faculty or the power of understanding."
—Dante, 1265-1321 A.D.

* * * *

In both papers the following day, the entire front page was an advertisement. It requested—the actual phrase used was: "are requested"—all college students to register "at once" with the Department of Transitional Actions.

Elsewhere in the ad was the statement that "qualifying" college graduates would be given the available "higher paying jobs."

Presumably, all those college intellectuals would understand that there was nothing coercive in the request; and that the wording merely implied how urgent was the need, as, presumably, was the statement that those who registered first would naturally have the choice of the best positions.

It was the shoe store owner from down the street who showed Sam the advertisement. He seemed visibly less cheerful. "What they want to do is get the intellectuals on their side. That was what my son said. He's going down this morning."

Sam said, "You got a college education, Harry?"

"Well—no. But I put my son through." He added, "I had a living to make."

"Me, too," said Sam.

It was two days after that conversation that Sam looked up from a small transaction with old Mrs. Spidley. What he noticed was a car with the words, PROPOSITION 8 in large letters. And under it, somewhat smaller, was Department of Transitional Actions.

The car was in the action of pulling up in front of his door.

As he saw, one after the other, three men get out, Sam unconsciously began bracing himself. And, as the men walked towards the entrance of his store and then came inside, he uttered one small sigh of regret. It was midafternoon. All through the day, every hour he had taken his cash accruals for that hour, and had hidden the money in a specific place he had at the back of the small building. What elicited the sigh was that the current hour had just run its course; and he had intended to take care of those accruals in approximately one minute.

One of the three men was quite young: early 20s. He carried a black executive case, and he preceded the other two. The second in line was about fifty, and Number Three was fortyish. All three were Middle Class types.

The youngest placed his case on the counter in front of Sam, and said, "My name is Paul Vakor. Are you Mr. Sam Mebley?"

He didn't wait for a reply, but went on, "We've come to take over your store for the good of the people."

Sam did a special inner bracing job. And said, "Hey, I thought competent small business guys would be allowed to continue operating their small businesses in Economic Area One."

As his first answer the youth stepped over in front of his executive case, and opened it. He drew out a folder. "I have here," he said, "your tax reports for the past three years. They all show a loss, and are therefore evidence that you are not competent."

Sam said, "Oh!"

It wasn't that he had forgotten. But actually the competence he had developed in simultaneously making a large profit but never paying income tax, had become such an automatic skill that for a decade he had taken it for granted as a way of life.

At once, there was no point in protesting. But he did say bitterly, "You look like one of those college students

who came around before the election to tell me how great everything would be for me."

Off to one side, the oldest of the three men cleared his throat. And, speaking English with a thick, foreign accent, said, "He is college student, yes. But is also dedicated government agent for the people."

Sam gazed grimly into the speaker's brown eyes. "I heard about your kind," he said grimly. "One of those experts invited over from U.S.S.R. to tell kids like this what to do."

His thumb indicated the "kid."

He grew aware that the Russian was pointing with his thumb at the third man. "Mr. Thompson registered college student," he said. "Big job to do. Will take over, manage your store with competence. Put everything behind glass cases. All profits to the people."

The new "owner" of Mebley's Grocery Store walked to the end of the counter, and behind it. As he came back up to Sam, he said, "Show me where everything is, Mr. Mebley. I hope you'll be willing to give me a hand during the first couple of days."

They were all three looking at him. And it seemed to Sam that he got the thought right now. Quickly, he spoke the magic words, "Sure, sure. For the people."

"Law is reason or intelligence unperturbed, and free from the influence of anger, cupidity, hate, or prejudice; nor is it deflected by tears or threats. Man, on the other hand, however well endowed with reason, is seized and overcome by wrath, vengeance and other passions."

-Vindiciae Contra Tyrannons, 16th century.

Did a faint tendril of doubt ever move through Paul Vakor's mind? Was there a moment when he wondered if, perhaps, there was, in fact, any proof that Leninism-Marxism was the ultimate political solution for all problems?

The reality wasn't quite like that. Paul's personal struggle was with what he silently described to himself as the remaining attributes of his capitalist upbringing: ambition. Naturally, he had to conceal that he had any. And he tried to do things that would make him look selfless while he maneuvered for power.

The colossal success of Proposition 8, determinedly expected but not actually anticipated, required hundreds of individuals to fight for leadership positions. Yet each individual had to pretend he was no better than the lowliest worker—except for his dedication, of course.

That became the decisive thought... We were up front during the struggle days—People who jumped aboard the bandwagon after the victory, no matter how well educated, could not be trusted in this beginning period to carry through.

So here was Paul, one of hundreds of dedicated students, personally heading a takeover team. Feeling right about it. Convinced that human misbehavior derived only from Capitalism.

The first intimation that all might not be well with him had come a week earlier when he read a jubilant announcement, printed in identical words in both newspapers. It stated that members of the American Communist Party had been invited by the government of Califrania—the new name of the northern economic area—to come to San Francisco. Their help, and their intimate knowledge of Marxism, apparently, would make certain that everything was done right.

As the days went by, the papers and TV reported an enthusiastic response to the invitation. Every day, some 30,000 individuals were crossing the border from the other 50-odd states of the union.

It seemed that they could enter merely by showing their ACP membership card. The same card was all they needed to check in at the best hotels, and to obtain entrance to that sancrosanct of inner sanctums where, on the day after the election, the top promoters of 8 had set up the self-appointed government of Economic Area One, and started issuing orders "for the people."

Exactly one week after that flow of holders of the card began arriving, Paul Vakor returned from his Sam Mebley takeover and found waiting for him an order to go at once to Work Apportionment.

"...Why don't you," said the young woman at the desk in what had been the headquarters of Bank of America, "report to the commissar in charge of Central Area Collective Farm number twenty-three, which is in the process of organization, and needs dedicated help."

She reached to one side of her desk, which was piled with pamphlets, took one, and held it out to him.

"Here's a map on how to get there."

"B-but," protested Paul, "I'm a fourth year college student." He struggled inwardly to find the right words. "I can be more useful on a—" He had been about to say "higher level," and stopped just in time; finished lamely—"a job requiring training and education."

"That will come in time," said the woman. "At the moment we need farm workers."

A suspicion had been struggling inside Paul. So at this penultimate moment, when all was lost, he was able to gulp it out: "Uh, who recommended me for this?"

The woman looked down at her paper. "it's signed Tim Frantor," she said.

"Uh," stuttered Paul, "Uh-"

But she was motioning to the man at the head of the line ten feet away. "Next," she called out.

"In all well-attempered governments there is nothing which should be more jealously maintained than the spirit of obedience to law, more especially in small matters; for transgression creeps in unperceived and at last ruins the state."

—Aristotle, 364-322 B.C.

* * * * *

There comes an occasional moment in the life of a 22 year-old when a reluctant memory of parents surfaces without being instantly shoved back out of sight. Usually, when this rare event occurs, it has to do with a need for money.

Such a moment—and such a need—came for Paul Vakor as he emerged from his interview onto the late afternoon street. And so, after stumbling along for a while, he went into a phone booth, put in his two quarters, and made a collect call to the Second Economic Area.

At this early moment, no one had got around to "ratio-nalizing"—a word that was being used more and more—the telephone system. And so there, presently, was his father's voice saying, "Who?" And then, when the computer supplied the name of the caller a second time, the familiar voice said grimly, "Tell that S.O.B. to go to hell. Although I paid for his way through college, hoping for the best, I haven't had a son since he got mixed up with the radical left in his sophomore year."

And with those words completed, bang!—down went the receiver.

The tinkle of his quarters being returned somehow reminded Paul that he had been so zealous all day in pursuit of his studies that he had; not talked to Anasia. Or rather when he'd phoned in the morning there was no reply. And what with his numerous takeover actions of the day, he had not tried a second time.

He put the quarters back in, and tried again. After the phone had rung half a dozen times he was convinced. By then he had had another thought; and he recognized it immediately as his inspiration of the day. Instantly, came the feeling: saved!—

...Sam Mebley had waited until after dark. Not too early, not too late; so it seemed to him. A midnight prowler might be reported. But ten o'clock was surely a neutral hour.

After a careful survey, he stepped into the alleyway and walked to the rear of what, until mid-afternoon, had been his grocery store. In the dark it took a little longer to lift away the camouflage from his hiding place—and to replace it after he removed the money he had hidden there—his hourly accruals—during the day.

The amount was not large: slightly less than \$1,000. But worth a short trip. That was not a matter that Sam argued with himself; his acceptance of what had to be done was automatic.

The biggest shock, then, was when all the rear-of-thestore lights went on. They were flood bright, he'd had them that way for occasions when deliveries arrived after dark.

Sam did not try to run. After that first, stunned moment, he merely stood resigned, as the young college student who had headed the afternoon takeover, emerged from the back door, followed by Thompson, the new store-keeper.

It was the student who searched Sam, found the cash, and placed it in his executive case. As he closed the bag, Paul said to Sam in a savage tone, "We will be filing charges against you. But now, get!"

Sam got.

After the ex-owner had departed, Paul turned to the blond Thompson. "Thanks for coming to assist in this matter. But now, I'll take this to headquarters, and you'd better go home and get some sleep."

Both men went through the store. And then, after Thompson had locked up, went their separate ways in two different cars. Paul still had the official black machine with the lettering painted on the side. Fortunately, he was able to return it before midnight to the car pool of the Department of Transitional Actions. Which meant that no one would ask questions as to its whereabouts. And he still had a key to his office in the department itself. So he

sat there, and spoke into the computer, stating charges against Sam Mebley somewhat different than he had threatened. His accusation was that Sam had filed false income statements, and should be investigated by his successor. Hastily, he signed the computer printout, folded it into an envelope, and tossed it into the Work Load chute.

And so he had \$903. And the belief that it would be a long time before anyone discovered what had happened.

...Those S.O.B.s, he thought grimly, giving me a daily allowance; so I'd always be broke, and have to come back and do their dirty work. He who had been as dedicated as the next man, was being treated like a nobody who had to take any job they wanted to give. Well, they could all go they knew where!

It was after he counted the money that he phoned Anasia again. When—again—there was no answer, the first worry came. He had been intent all day, doing his job. Truth was, Anasia was an independent type, who didn't believe in telling her boy friend everything she did. So he had been merely puzzled. Until now.

He spent the night in one of the big hotels as a precaution—and phoned occasionally. But in the morning, after eating a hasty breakfast, he took a taxi over to her apartment.

"For we have full experience of the truth of Solon's saying, that all public matters depend on reward and punishment; that where these are wanting, the whole discipline of state totters and falls to pieces."

-John Calvin, 1509-1564

There are people who never forget a sharp remark against them. During the heat of the campaign for Proposition 8, Paul had spoken sharply to seven fellow students and to three professors.

That last had the most immediate effect. He was

failed in three subjects, and was accordingly not allowed to graduate.

Tim Frantor was one of the seven students. In the heat of a meeting on tactics, Paul had called Tim an idiot. The words were: "You're just another nut, Tim. An idiot, if you think anything like that will work."

...Paul let himself in to Anasia's apartment with his key. After checking the place, not sure just what he should look for, he settled down in front of the TV. And waited. The day went by slowly; but watching TV did have some interesting highpoints: the changes that had been made. The soap operas were still there; but they were dramatically changed; and words like Comrade, and terms like duty to the people, abounded. (His impression was that the writers didn't quite know how it should be; but they were trying.)

During the evening, the phone—that had been silent all day—rang three times. Each time it was a feminine voice. And each time—it turned out—the owner of the voice had not been in touch with Anasia for a week or more.

That reminded Paul. His sweetheart's best friend was Bella Arne. Bella was in the phone book. And there, after four rings, was Bella's voice, saying, "Oh, Paul, I've been trying to phone you since two nights ago. But there was no reply at your place. Anasia tried to call you before she left.

"She phoned me from her bedroom. An "8" team came to her place, and said they had orders to send her to Satellite C.A."

Paul said, "Oh!" with a sinking feeling.

Satellite C.A. was the space factory complex assigned to the original California—now divided into two economic sections like the land far below.

"B-but," Paul protested, "how can you order somebody to?—" He stopped. Gulped. And asked, "Did she say who gave the order?"

"Somebody called Tim Frantor."

"Oh!" said Paul. Then, mumbling, "Thank you, Bella. I'll see if I can get in touch with her."

He hung up. And sat there.

The following morning he phoned Tim Frantor's office. And then again later; and every day two or three times. Every day, he was told by a woman's voice either that, "Mr. Frantor is in conference." "Mr. Frantor is on another line. Can I have him call you?" Or, "Mr. Frantor is not at his desk." Or, finally, "Mr. Frantor has left the office for the day."

But on the fifth day Frantor came to the phone. His voice had an urgent note in it: "Paul, I need your help. I was ordered confined to my office here this morning, and I haven't been able to make any calls out through the switchboard. Now listen, I'm on the second floor. So if you'll come over with one of those extension ladders—" Hastily, he described the location of his office; ended as hastily, "Don't let me down, Paul. I'll make it up to you."

"Wait!" yelled Paul, "don't hang up." When it was clear that the line was still open, Paul went on, "Before you leave your office, put through an order assigning Anasia back to San Francisco." He added desperately, "If you put that through channels, nobody will notice; you know by now how those things work."

"Oh, sure, sure," came the reply. "And also it'll show that I'm still on the job. See you. Be quick, for God's sake."

-Gertrude Stein, 1874-1946

No one gave Paul Vakor more than a passing glance or two, as he put up the ladder.

He had rented it and the truck for \$83 cash, plus \$100

deposit, also cash. The deposit was to be refunded when he returned the equipment.

So, now, he maneuvered the relatively long, aluminum ladder against the lower window sill; and he had a pail of water standing by, and cloths, and a can of glass cleaning spray. It was part of his pretense that he was a workman doing a routine job.

Frantor must have been waiting with a desperate impatience. Because, as the top of the ladder hit the sill, the window of that ancient building squeaked open. And, rapidly, a frantic, trousered leg poked out. It was swiftly followed by a second trousered leg, and the rear of the whole trousers.

What held up the rescue operation briefly, then, was that the part of Frantor that was still inside seemed to be busy. After nearly twenty seconds, however, the head and shoulders slid out, and one arm and hand emerged holding a large wastepaper basket, while the other hand reached down and grasped the top rung.

Like Paul's, his was a medium long body that, also, had the strength of a twenty-two year-old. And so, down he half slid, manipulating his basket, which, on reaching the sidewalk, he placed in the truck cab.

The two young ex-commissars teamed to unextend the extension ladder back to its short form. They did not, at this time, attempt to fit it into its cradle in the back of the truck, simply tossed it in. And departed; the truck, with Paul driving, swerved into the traffic, and then zipped around the first corner.

As they zoomed along, Paul watched the street, and was careful not to glance at his hard-breathing rider. There would have to be a few confrontations; but that was for later.

As the breathing slowed toward normal, Frantor spoke for the first time: "Don't worry, Paul. I'll make it up to you, what I had to do."

It was a good opening line. And it augured well for Paul's special scheme for their future. Presumably, he would have a willing collaborator.

Once more, the long-faced youth spoke: "I got two old style automatic pistols, two S.D. computers, and the most expensive small office items I could lay my hands on."

Neither man had even a momentary thought of the qualm variety, that this was thievery Frantor was describing. Paul was nodding; and he spoke now for the first time: "Best you could do under the circumstances."

The computers and the automatics, particularly, could be useful—that seemed to be true in the upside down world where they now had their being.

They were approaching the truck and ladder rental yard; and so Paul said quickly, "I have an idea I'm going to have a hard time getting back my \$100 deposit unless we play it tough as a team."

What they did, they entered the small office of the rental company; entered it with Frantor right behind Paul. Then they spoke to each other several times to establish that they were together. But Frantor waited at the door while Paul presented his duplicate copy.

The man behind the counter glanced at it. And said at once, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to have that truck checked in our garage for damages. And so you come back tomor—"

It was at that point that his eyes must have caught the movement of Frantor taking the automatic out of his pocket and slipping it into an exposed position at the top front of his trousers.

Pause; then: "Oh, well," came the words, "we have your address."

Whereupon, he counted out the \$100.

As soon as they were outside, Paul said, "And now, let me tell you what I think we should do to get some real money." Whereupon, he described the Sam Mebley incident. Explained: "The guy that's running the store now—Thompson—told me he took in over \$1100 the last half of his first afternoon. True, that's the busy time; people going home from work do the most shopping. But if you add what I got and what he got, it comes to over \$2000. And that's for one day. My guess: Sam has been grossing \$60,000 a month in that little place. And somehow declaring income tax on only half of that. So—here's the point—he's got cash around somewhere; and we have to pry some of it away from him."

And the illegality of *that* did not seem to disturb Frantor either. It was almost as if they agreed that, during the transitional period, money and goods belonged to anyone who could grab first.

"How," was all Frantor asked, "do you think we should work it?"

"He doesn't know you," said Paul. "So our job is to keep track of him; and you do all the front work, and any necessary contacts, while I remain out of sight but handy. I have a feeling he's going to head south. So we'll need a car. Right now, I've got to wait here until Anasia is returned from Satellite C.A. And then—"

"Oh, she'll be back tonight," said Frantor.

"That makes it all simple," was Paul's relieved reply.

"...certain rights can never be granted to the government, but must be kept in the hands of the people."

-Eleanor Roosevelt, 1884-1962

Sam and Stella drove down Highway 38—the mountain-desert route (by way of Lake Tahoe). In addition to some funds he had in his billfold, Sam had \$6,000 hidden in the trunk. His hope was that the "commies" during this transitional stage, hadn't got around to "setting up shop"—as he put it—"in hot as Hades Mojave."

But there was a bad moment when the computerized car responded to a radar speed warning, and presently rolled to a stop in front of a computer eye-o, which was embedded in a metal roadside communication post.

On the post, a light blinked. So Sam maneuvered the machine by hand control until he could reach over and pick up the receiver.

A man's voice said, "Our electronic check shows that this car is registered in the name of Sam Mebley."

"This is he," replied Sam gloomily.

"According to our system report your vehicle was traveling at excessive speed. The fine is \$48. Stop at the patrol station automat in Palmdale and pay the full amount before proceeding."

Sam was recovering. "You sure these fines are still legal under the new system?" he asked.

There was no verbal reply. Only a clicking sound, presumably of disconnect.

But he was actually glad to stop. And did, in fact, pay the fine into an automat machine; but all the time thinking happily: "By God this proves that this is still an open route."

Which meant that before they plugged this loophole he could go up every day, and come back—every day until those one hundred and eight remaining G's were safe in G-land.

The rest of the trip was in that very same G-land, now called Angelona—the new name of the second economic area. It was after they had been (safe?) in what had formerly been southern California, for at least an hour, that Stella said, "How are you going to live, Sam. Are you going to ask for public assistance?"

The plump-faced man was too flabbergasted by the question to answer immediately. Long ago, he had made the decision never to tell a woman his true financial situation. His observation: women got awfully big ideas awfully quick. So the chunky little woman knew nothing of his savings.

What staggered him about her suggestion was that it might be a handy concealment for his situation. At the moment he merely said, "I got a few hundred bucks. That'll give us a chance to look around, and see what's what. May be some changes down here, also."

What he had found on each of his previous visits was that Los Angeles was swarming with refugees; and according to the papers hotel rooms were hard to get.

As it turned out, there had been an odd, partial solution to that problem.

Essentially, concern for people who asked for, or needed welfare, devolved upon a small percentage of the populace. There were religious workers who dealt with the poor and the sick, and there were the town, city, or government officials who were constantly confronted by the problem of what to do with an individual, or a family, without income of any kind.

The rest of the people would rather not see, or have any direct contact with the problem. Or, if they took note, they had a negative reaction.

It was an organized body of this latter group in Angelona who saw the condition of California as an opportunity. More important, individuals among them were sufficiently educated so that they knew what had happened in Russia in 1917 and in China in '48. This group spread the word where it would do the most good, from their point of view.

How quickly does news travel? How soon do people act? The reaction started the first week.

The poor districts of Los Angeles and San Diego—particularly those two cities—experienced a remarkable upheaval. People began to leave. Social workers reported that ten, twenty, and even thirty year welfare cases simply got up and left their rented houses or apartments.

Since there are always observers and tale-bearers, the story was that long lines of old jalopy cars headed north over Interstate 5, 101 and 1 (the coast highway), and even 385 by way of Mojave—headed by all three routes in the general direction of San Francisco. After these various caravans crossed the "border" into Califrania, it wasn't long before a dozen cars would take this or that off ramp and, in a manner of speaking, were never seen again.

But there, also, were observers. And so reports came of how they drove into small and large communities, to ranches and farm houses, and simply moved in and took over: homes, farms, businesses.

In some places signs appeared. They all had the same justified thought printed on them: "This property taken over for the people." The signs were mostly crudely done. Sometimes, they were scrawled on white cardboard. Yet here and there was actually carved wood or shaped metal nailed onto a solidly dug-in post.

(Some owners were quick. They had their own signs up, so that when the caravan arrived it looked as if that place had already been seized "for the people.")

But when Ed Clint knocked on the door behind one or another of these signs, and asked what the thought was, one man said, "When I heard that this is what the poor people did in Russia and China, I realized it was up to me to do my share, and show where I stood."

It turned out that the caravans were a little late for Nob Hill and other fine residential sections in northern Califrania. In those areas, members of the American Communist Party had moved their families into all the fancy homes.

Attempts made to interview this level of takeover were mostly repulsed. But here and there Clint elicited a reply. One woman came to the door of a 20-room mansion, and said, "We are dedicated persons who have the interest of the people at heart. This house was formerly occupied by someone who had no such concern."

Ed Clint pointed out, "The outward appearance is that

another elite group has taken over. What do you think of the claim of Proposition 8 promoters that the two interacting economic areas will solve all these problems of human greed and the negative side of human nature in general?"

There was no verbal answer to the question. At that point the door was slammed in Clint's face.

"Genuine government
Is but the expression of a nation, good
Or less good—even as all society,
However unequal, monstrous, crazed and cursed
Is but the expression of men's single lives,
The loud sum of the silent units.

Sonnets from the Portuguese by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1806-61

Stella's suggestion, and his reaction, had an important immediate effect on Sam: when they arrived in Los Angeles he drove straight down to one of the well-defined welfare areas.

Everywhere they looked there were "to let" signs on small houses. Many of the signs also stated: "Furnished."

It was one of these furnished 2-bedroom houses that Sam rented for one month for \$2,000. Inflation, that exact measure of the phenomenon known as a Seller's Market, had moved into Los Angeles, along with two million refugees from Califrania.

The following day Sam was still inwardly arguing as to what his best course of action would be—when the phone rang. It was a youthful male voice that represented itself as being from the local office of the Internal Revenue Service. The voice gave the address of a hotel, and a room number.

"Come by this afternoon. Ask for Mark Armour."

"What time?" asked Sam, gloomily.

"Two o'clock."

"Okay, okay. I'll be there."

"Oh, and by the way-"

"Yes?" Resignedly.

"Don't be surprised at the appearance of confusion. "There's hundreds of us down here from the northern economic area. And we're all in temporary quarters."

As he broke the connection after that call, Sam was bitter. "Those damn computers!" he complained. "If you sign up to live somewhere, instantly your name is recorded; and, boy! they've got you."

Stella said nothing. She had been strangely quiet since the previous day. She had accepted the better of the two bedrooms without argument. Accepted a visit from him in the late evening; and made breakfast for him this morning. But now, as she sat on the couch beside him, Sam grew aware of a strange expression on her face.

The chunky little woman seemed to shrink down there beside him on the couch. Her plain and wrinkled face acquired a timid expression.

Finally, in a small voice she said, "Maybe the time has come for us to get married." She added quickly, "I promise always to treat you just as good as I do now."

Sam did not need her to explain what she meant. There was a time when Sam had married. During the courtship period it had looked like he was involved with a sex maniac. Twice an evening was nothing. Several times a week she would let herself into his house at 6 A.M. and crawl into bed with him. And a number of times she showed up at his store during her lunch hour—she was a secretary in a government office. (They went into the back room.)

But within a week after the wedding bells ceased to toll, she developed her first not-tonight headache. And thereafter it was all downhill.

He ended the marriage after two years by simply filing suit for divorce; and the two attorneys worked out the financial settlement. Fortunately, she presently remarried. And Sam was off the hook.

"What bothers me," said Sam now, "is, I think there's supposed to be some recompense for expropriated property. And I should get, uh, maybe one-fifty for my equity in my place in San Francisco. And maybe if that happens we can get married."

It was the best excuse he could manage on short notice. Truth, he was not entirely opposed to the idea of marrying the little woman. Two pre-Stella associations with considerably better looking females had taught him his final lesson: the fancier a woman looked, the more expensive she was.

That afternoon, 2 P.M.

The confusion at the temporary office of the Internal Revenue Service wasn't that great. There were boxes, loaded with what looked like files and stacks of white paper, piled in one corner—Paul and Tim had carted the boxes up a back stairway of the hotel one at a time.

The hotel desk in the room they had hauled over to the window on the other side of the bed. The person sitting at the desk was a young man; and he faced the door. There was an extra chair to his right; and he motioned Sam toward it.

As he settled into it Sam noticed that there were the usual IRS pamphlets spread along one edge, and some invoices with Internal Revenue Service printed onto them—that had been a hasty Xerox achievement. But, in fact, there was no problem. Sam had no suspicion as he gazed uneasily at the young man who now said, "I'm Mark Armour. And you?"

"Sam Mebley."

The lean youth looked down at some papers on his desk. Nodded. And drew them closer to him. While still studying them, he explained that the two economic areas were transmitting information to each other, as required by Proposition Eight. And that, as a result—at that point he looked up and stared balefully into Sam's eyes.

"Charges have been filed against you," he said.

"By whom?"

"By our San Francisco office."

Since that was the correct location, Sam braced himself. "What are the charges?

"That you falsified your income tax reports, and that in fact you made a considerable hidden profit each year of the four years examined."

It was truth. And, oddly, it felt good to have it stated openly. Sam said in a relieved voice, "I can see that whoever filed the charges is not familiar as yet with the problems of operating a grocery store in a poor neighborhood."

"You deny the charges?"

"Totally."

Pause. The young man was straightening in his chair. His expression was grim, as he said, "It turns out, Mr. Mebley, that you're actually very fortunate. Because of the special situation created by Proposition Eight, we could waste a lot of time discovering the exact amount of your debt. Accordingly, I am authorized to fine you \$26,000; and that will be all there is against you. However—" the eyes were baleful—"if the fine is not paid into this office by tomorrow morning you will be subject to Clause Eleven of Proposition Eight."

There was silence while Sam unhappily considered parting with \$25,000. Yet, in fact, to a practical person like himself, it had the look of being an easy way out.

"Let me understand you," he said. "If I can, uh, borrow \$25,000 from some friends up north, I will be given a release from all IRS claims against me?"

"You will receive a proper release document," was the reply.

"Can I pay it to your office in San Francisco?" Sam asked. "I'll have to fly up tonight, and borrow the money."

"Let me check on that," said the false Mike Armour, "and I'll phone you."

When the phone call came an hour later, it developed that Armour had been assigned to ride herd on the situation. "So," his voice came on the phone, "I'll fly up with you, and we'll settle the matter."

As Sam explained it to Stella, that was obviously a practical solution to the many confusions created by Proposition Eight. "I guess they figure it's better for me to talk to one guy than keep meeting new people who don't know what's gone before."

Stella would stay behind and hold onto the rented house.

"Indeed, I thought, slipping the silver into my purse, it is remarkable, remembering the bitterness of those days, what a change of temper a fixed income will bring about."

-Virginia Woolf, 1882-1941

After Sam departed the hotel room, Paul entered from the bedroom. They stood looking at each other; and for a long moment Paul did not notice that his companion-incrime was not smiling jubilantly as he was; and, in fact, he was not smiling at all."

"What's the matter?" asked Paul.

"We may have to kill the old S.O.B.," said Frantor, "after we get the money."

Paul was astounded. "Whatever for?"

"He may go to the authorities and describe us. You, particularly."

"He's not going to see me in this situation. And he'll never see you again. This is a one-shot deal. And, besides—" Paul smiled grimly—"he has to keep a low profile, so no one will suspect how much more cash he's got."

"Well!!!" The other youth seemed uncertain. "I'm ready to do what has to be done. In this Proposition Eight shiftover it's beginning to look as if it's every man for himself."

There was a pause. A silence. Paul Vakor stood and Tim Frantor remained seated; and they looked not exactly at each other but slightly off to one side, two young instant criminals, with one of them—Paul—suddenly remembering what Frantor had already done against him... Every man for himself... I'm going to have to watch out for this so-and-so.

At once he was cunning. "Okay, Tim, count me. We'll do what has to be done. But I don't think we have to do that."

"I guess you're right," was the quick reply from a young man who had suddenly had his own private thought, that the less he confided in anyone, the better.

"Step one," said Paul, "we get the money. Step two, then we decide what to do next..."

The money, they got. That was no problem. Sam had made his peace with the payment of 25 thousand in full in return for an IRS receipt, a Xerox version, which Tim signed with the name Mike Armour. By the time he arrived back in Los Angeles, with 12 thousand more of his hidden funds, Sam was feeling quite cheerful. And wondering what his next move should be in the game of life under proposition 8.

Stella had some puzzling news for him. "The I.R.S. called," she said. "They want you to come and see them. Here's the number to call."

It was a different number and a different name. And, when he got there it was actually inside a building devoted entirely to government business. No piled boxes. No hotel room confusion. Everything was in order. Neat desks, private rooms; and in one of the latter a big, well-dressed man in his thirties whose name was Warren Tate.

It took a while. Sam explained. Sam showed his receipt. Twice, Warren Tate went out, and twice came back, presumably after consulting with someone else. In fact, the second time he returned with a middle-aged woman, who also listened to Sam's story.

And, evidently, there had been other persons contacted; for a young man came in, and said, "The hotel reports that the room was occupied by a young man named Mike Armour."

The woman asked, "Did they verify his name?"

"Well—" a pause—"it seems that a newly hired night clerk let him in. Maybe a bribe—"

(A bribe it had been: a \$200 direct payment, not counting the room rent for two days and two nights.)

(No one suspected Paul Vakor. His action in originally filing the charges somehow proved him to be unconnected with what followed.)

After about ten minutes, the woman came over to Sam, and said, "Proposition Eight has created many confusions that, apparently, cannot be easily resolved."

They let him go.

Later, when Ed Clint got onto the story, he found Sam and Stella in their rented house, waiting—as the TV reporter described the situation to the vast audience in the eastern United States—for the government of Califrania to reimburse Sam for his expropriated house in South San Francisco, so that he and his lady could get married.

Clint added, "This is just one little event of many that I have observed in bits and pieces as they developed."

The reporter, to whom millions listened every night for an update on the west coast situation, concluded:

"It would appear that, although Proposition Eight has not yet produced the morality claimed for it by its proponents, there is a rough justice beginning to show through. Sam Mebley was persuaded by some inner reaction to the new conditions to pay his back taxes without an argument. This was a result that was achieved only when the state took over his small enterprise. And, equally important, those who stole the money from him will gain thereby only a brief postponement of their personal rendezvous with destiny, prices out here being what they are."

A.E. VAN VOGT

As Clint later observed to his own lady friend, a news media person who expected to operate in both Angelona and Califrania, had better learn to notice every favorable aspect because there were so many unfavorable ones.

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