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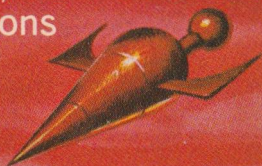


SCIENCE FICTION

# the third eye

THEODORE COGSWELL

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# **the third eye**

**THEODORE COGSWELL**

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**BELMONT BOOKS**



**NEW YORK CITY**

**THE THIRD EYE**  
**A BELMONT BOOK—September 1968**

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## no gun to the victor

*CON-SUM-ER (KON-SUM-ER), n., 1. A person who destroys, uses up, or wastes industrial production in order to control the size of the population and make possible the full employment that is necessary for a healthy economy. 2. One who has not yet achieved producer status. 3. Any person under twenty-one. 4. (Obs.) A person who uses goods or services to satisfy his needs rather than to resell them or to produce other goods with them.—The Authorized Dictionary (New Washington, Kansas: The Federal Printing Office, 3rd ed., 1984)*

It was Saturday so Alan had to go out and get the mail. Just as the letter carrier's tank clanked away, he got his cousin Alf to man the front door turret and went zigzagging down the communication trench that led to the street. As he reached cautiously up to open the small door in the bottom of the armored mail box, there was a sudden crack from across the way and the whine of a near miss sent him tumbling back into the slit trench. A moment later there was a coughing stutter as Alf opened up with the fifty and pounded a burst into the tungsten steel shutters of the house across the street. Alan jumped to his feet, dumped the mail out of the box, and then made a quick dive for safety just in case Alf's fire hadn't completely discouraged the Higgins kid.

The mail didn't look particularly exciting. There wasn't anything for him and aside from a few letters for his uncle, most of what had come consisted of advertisements for sniper-scopes and stuff like that. The only exceptions were two small black boxes. They looked like samples of something, and since, as the only consumer left in the family, samples were Alan's perquisite, he promptly stuffed them into his worn grenade carrier, and just as promptly forgot about

them. Until that evening when the man from Consolidated Munitions stopped by, that is.

Mr. Flugnet was so disturbed that he'd forgotten to take off his white truce hat. "We think the promotion crew passed out a batch on this street," he said as Alan slipped into the room and sat down quietly in the far corner. "But we're not sure."

"Why not?" asked Alan's uncle a weedy little man with a somewhat nasal voice.

"Because some damn kid dropped a mortar shell on their halftrack while they were on the way back to the warehouse to pick up another load. Got every one of them. Were any samples dropped off here?"

"Alan brought in the mail," volunteered Alf.

"Was there anything in it that somebody wanted that they didn't get?" asked Alan in a small voice. They all turned and looked at him, aware of his presence for the first time.

"I'm from Consolidated Munitions," said Mr. Flugnet.

"Yes, sir?"

"Did you find a small black box in the mail? We've been passing out samples of our new concussion grenade and we just discovered today that several . . . uh . . . overpowered experimental models had got mixed in with them by mistake. We're trying to track them down before its . . . well, before something unfortunate happens."

Alan was just about to reach into his grenade case and produce the two little cartons when the word "overpowered" registered. He struggled briefly against temptation and lost.

"I dumped all the advertising stuff on the hall table." He felt suddenly that his grenade case had become transparent and that the little black boxes inside, now grown to quadruple size, were visible to everybody in the room. He knew it couldn't be, but even so he let his hand drop casually over the carrier just in case there might be a revealing bulge. "I'll go check."

Once the door was safely shut behind him, he took the two boxes out, opened them, and examined their contents. There was a little metallic globe in each, but one had a roughly soldered seam that made it look like a hand production job. He gave a little whistle of excitement and stowed it away carefully in his pocket. If he was going to make it through the game with North, he was going to need super power. After replacing the other grenade in his box and putting it back in his carrier, he squatted down on his haunches and

listened at the keyhole. He wanted to find out something more about his new weapon.

"Fine young consumer, that," he heard Mr. Flugnet say in the voice that producers use when they want to say something nice that they really don't mean. Aunt Martha let out a long sniff.

"Too spindly! It's a wonder to us that he's made it this far. He just hasn't got the stuff that my boys have. Made it through, both of them, with hardly a scratch."

She nodded fondly over toward Reuban and Alf. Alf was sniggering through a comic book, one of the new improved kind without any words to distract the reader. Reuban just sat a thin driblet of saliva drooling from one corner of his mouth, and plucked aimlessly at the buttons on his shirt. As they looked at him, he began to squirm back and forth and to make little whimpering sounds.

"Better take Reuban upstairs before he dirties himself again," said Aunt Martha. Alf obediently took his younger brother by the arm and herded him out of the room. Alan ducked under the hall table until they had gone by.

"Which shock is he on?" asked Mr. Flugnet politely.

"He got his third today. That's always the worst."

Mr. Flugnet nodded his agreement.

"Another couple of weeks, though, and he'll be ready to start his reconditioning. And by spring he'll be ready to settle down as a full-fledged producer and start raising little consumption units of his own." She sighed. "I do wish they'd work out a faster method. For three weeks now I've had to take care of him just like I would a baby. It's no easy job for a woman of my age."

Alan's uncle clucked impatiently. "We all had to go through it once—and somebody had to take care of us. It's never pretty, but it's just the way things are."

Alan was just about to give up and go back in the room when he heard his uncle say, "This new grenade you have in production, it's something special?"

"It was supposed to be," said the visitor unhappily. "We figured it would be the hottest consumers item to hit the market in years."

"What do you mean, 'supposed to be'? Did some bugs show up after you got it into production?"

Mr. Flugnet shook his head. "There's nothing wrong with the grenade itself. It'll knock out anything within a radius of ten feet and not even bother anybody standing just the other side of the blast area. We thought we had the perfect con-

sumer item. No flying fragments to bother innocent producers, no danger of misfire. New Washington was so impressed that they gave us a heavy enough subsidy to make it possible for us to put three man hours in each one and still retail them for \$4.27 a gross. And then . . ."

"Yes?" Alan's uncle leaned forward eagerly in his chair.

For some reason or other, Mr. Flugnet changed the subject hurriedly. "What line are you in?"

"Small arms. But getting to those experimental models you're looking for . . ."

Mr. Flugnet wasn't about to get back. "How's production?" he asked.

Unwillingly, Alan's uncle moved off in the new direction. "Not bad considering. We're always the last to feel the pinch. Things are still tighter than I like, though. Shirey down the street got laid off at the burp gun plant last week and he doesn't know when he'll be taken back. I don't see why the government doesn't shorten the truce periods so as to give the kids more consuming time."

"It's not that simple," said Mr. Flugnet pontifically. "If you increase consumption much over what it is now, you'll decrease the number of consumers too fast. That causes overproduction, and pretty soon more factories start shutting down. Then bingo! we've got ourselves a fine recession."

"I hadn't thought about it that way," said Alan's uncle slowly. "And after all, things aren't too bad. Even if some of the arms plants do have to shut down once in a while, most of the producers do have jobs most of the time. And we are able to keep the population down to the point where the land that escaped dusting during the big war can produce enough food for everybody."

One of Alan's feet was going to sleep and the conversation didn't make much sense to him, so he decided that now was as good a time to make his entrance as any.

"I found it," he said, holding out the second sample.

"Took you long enough," grumbled his uncle. Mr. Flugnet didn't say anything, he just came over and took the box from Alan. Dumping the sphere that was inside out into the palm of his hand, he examined it closely.

"No soap," he said wearily and handed it back. "That's one of the regulars. Here, you can keep it".

"Thanks," Alan placed the little grenade carefully in his carrier. "I'll need this tonight. We're playing North and every little bit will help. Coach Blauman says that even if we haven't much in the way of equipment, it's the spirit that

counts. He says that if we really get in there and fight we'll be able to stop North cold."

"That's nice," murmured Mr. Flugnet vaguely as he reached for his hat. He obviously had his mind on other things.

"Sorry the boy didn't have what you were looking for," said Alan's uncle. "But probably the other men have rounded up the rest of them by now."

Mr. Flugnet looked dubious. "I doubt it. Kids are like packrats. When Security finally broke Harris down—he's the guy that's responsible for this whole mess—he admitted to having made at least three hundred and slipping them into sample cases. As of an hour ago we'd recovered exactly thirty-seven."

He caught himself with a start. "Shouldn't be talking about it. Though I can't see where it makes any difference now." He let out a long sigh. "Well, you're the last house on my list and I've done all that I can. Guess I'd better be going." He picked up his truce hat and planted it firmly on his head.

"Guess I'd better be going too," said Alan. "I've got to be getting over to the stadium to get dressed for the game."

"Don't rush off," said Alan's uncle. He didn't intend to let the visitor escape until he found out exactly what it was that was causing him so much concern. "No, not you, Alan. You run on. I'm talking to Mr. Flugnet. Why not wait until the cease-fire siren sounds? It's getting dark outside and some of the kids might take a potshot at you before they see your truce hat."

"Thanks just the same, but—"

"Aw, stay! I'll fix you a good stiff drink. You look as though you could use one."

Mr. Flugnet hesitated and then sat down again. "I guess I could at that," he said.

Alan's uncle hurried over to the liquor cabinet and poured two long ones. After he'd handed a drink to Mr. Flugnet, he settled back in his own chair and said as casually as he could, "You were saying something about somebody named Harris who did something to some grenades and got hauled in by Security?"

Mr. Flugnet didn't answer right away. Instead he took a long pull at his glass, coughed, and then took another. Alan looked at his watch and then started out of the room. He was almost to the door when his aunt said sharply, "Alan!"

He turned.

"If you get hit tonight, mind that you see that they do a

proper job of patching you up at the aid station. I don't want my sheets all messed up like last time."

"Yes, ma'am," Alan said obediently. As he went out nobody said good bye. They were all waiting for Mr. Flugnet to say something.

Alan stopped automatically at the front door and made a quick check of the street through the periscope. Nothing seemed to be moving but he didn't take any chances. Sliding the door open just wide enough to get through, he made a running dive for the communication trench. The kid across the street had got a sniper-scope for Christmas and a guy wasn't even safe after dark.

The field lights were already on and the stadium a quarter full when Alan slipped into the locker room. He was ten minutes late and had to hurry with his dressing, but for once the coach didn't bawl him out. Coach Blauman didn't even notice him—Coach Blauman had troubles of his own. He was over in one corner telling them to Dan Ericson, the sports reporter for the *Tribune* who covered most of the high school events.

The coach was a fat, florid man, and there was a slight thickness to his speech that indicated that he had gotten to the bottle he kept in the back of his locker earlier than usual.

"You want a quote?" he snorted. "I'll give you a quote. I'll give you enough quotes to fill that whole damn fish-wrapper you call a magazine from front to back. You can put my picture on page one and put a great big "Coach Blauman says" right underneath it."

Ericson gave a tired grin. "Go ahead, coach. What's the beef for the evening?"

"That damn PTA, that's what. I go to them and ask for four mortars, four stinking mortars, and all I get is the brush-off. Three thousand bucks they got salted away, and it's all going for new body armor for the band. I say, 'What's the use of having a pretty band when the team's so hard up for equipment that a bunch of sandlot grade school players could knock them over.' So old Stevens gives me the fish eye and throws me a line about how it ain't whether you win or lose but how you play the game."

"Don't let it get you down, Blauman," said the reporter. "Think of all the character you're building!"

Alan was lugged off the field at the end of the second action with a gash in his head that took six stitches to close. During the rest of the quarter he sat woodenly on the bench in the players dugout. A telescreen at the far end was following

the play but he didn't lift his head to look at it. He looked like a clockwork mannequin that had been temporarily turned off.

He was sent back in just before the end of the half. Illegally, it is true—the enemy had already received credit for one wounded, and according to NAA rules he was supposed to be ineligible to continue playing. Blauman didn't have any choice, however. The last drive of North's had torn up his whole center and he didn't have much left in the way of reserves.

As Alan trotted out toward the foxholes that marked his side's last stand, he passed stretcher bearers bringing back the dead and injured from the last play. Most of them were wearing the green helmets of Marshall. The PA system announced the substitution and there was a feeble cheer from the Marshall side of the stadium.

Alan went up to the referee's tank and threw a quick salute at the vision slit.

"Wetzel substituting for Mitchell."

"Check," said the bored voice of the official inside. "Fight clean and fight hard and may the best team win." The formula came mechanically. Neither the referee nor anybody else had any doubt that the best team had won.

Alan was half way to the hastily dug trenches that marked his team's position when a mortar shell exploded forty feet away and knocked him off his feet. There was a sudden outraged blast from the referee's siren, and then the enemy captain bobbed out of his foxhole.

"Sorry, sir," he yelled. "One of my mortar crews was sighting in and accidentally let off a round."

The referee wasn't impressed.

"That'll cost you exactly twenty yards," he said.

A yell came from the Marshall bleachers as the penalty for backfield illegally in motion was announced. The Marshall team was too tired to do any cheering. They just trudged forward and planted themselves in the defensive line they had been thrown out of five minutes before.

The North team was more careful this time. There wasn't a quiver of motion from their side until the referee's siren signaled the beginning of play. Then they opened up with everything they had. It seemed to Alan that every mortar North owned was zeroed in on his position and that every one of their grenade men was out to get him personally. Blast followed blast in such steady succession that the night air seemed one solid mass of jagged shrapnel. He'd had it bad be-

fore, but nothing like this. He flattened against the moist earth of his fox hole and waited numbly for the knife edges to rip him open. Then suddenly it stopped and without thinking he found himself rising into a defensive position. There was a savage spatter of victory yells from the other line and then they came swarming out of their positions, their bayonets gleaming wickedly in the overhead lights.

They were repeating the play that they had been using all evening, a hard punching thrust through center. The guidon bearer came charging forward, his tommy gunners fanned out in front of him in a protecting screen, their guns hosing the Marshall position with quick accurate bursts.

Alan forced himself to lift his head enough to sigh accurately, and opened up on the flag bearer. He was a difficult target as he came dancing forward, bobbing and shifting at every step. Alan fired methodically, remembering not to jerk his trigger finger as he squeezed off his shots. And then his gun jammed. He got a moment's breathing spell as Marshall's two surviving mortars opened up to give him some covering fire, but the Northers didn't stop altogether, they kept coming in short rushes.

Alan was singled out for their special attention. With him knocked out they could carry their flag right through the center of Marshall's line. With a sudden yell, four of them threw themselves into a crouching run and came charging down on his position. Alan hammered at the clearing lever of his rifle but it was stuck fast. Throwing it angrily off to one side, he tore open the cover of his grenade case and fumbled inside until his fingers closed around the sphere with the roughly soldered edge. He waited until the Northers were almost on him and then threw it at the middle man as hard as he could.

There was a blast. A blast of harsh purple light that punched through the protecting ramparts of his foxhole as if they weren't there. He felt a sudden wave of nausea, and then a stabbing tearing pain inside the back of his head as old neural channels were ripped out and new ones opened up. When he finally staggered to his feet he looked the same. Outside that is. Inside he wasn't the same sort of a human any longer. Neither was any other consumer in the stadium.

When Alan got back to the house, everybody was still in the living room. Mr. Flugnet was somewhat drunk and all the pressure that had been built up inside him was hissing out in speech. Alan stood silently in the doorway and listened.

". . . and then it was too late," said Mr. Flugnet. "Somebody must have slipped up in shock therapy or else some-



thing went haywire with the reconditioning machinery. Whatever it was, Harris came out with the job only half done. He waited ten years for a chance to strike back for what had been done to him while he was still a consumer. When he was put to work on the development of the new concussion grenade, he had his chance and he made the most of it."

"How?"

"He worked out a deconditioner that was so tiny it would fit into a grenade case and so powerful that it could blanket an area half a mile across."

"Deconditioner?" said Alan's uncle in a puzzled voice.

"You went through one while you were being changed. The old patterns have to be taken out before new ones can be put in."

"All that I remember is sitting in a long room with a silver helmet on my head that had a lot of wires attached to it. But I still don't understand about that Harris fellow."

"It's simple enough. He came out remembering."

"Remembering what?"

"Remembering what it was like to be a consumer," said Mr. Flugnet grimly.

"But everybody remembers that."

Mr. Flugnet shook his head. "You just think you do. Part of the reconditioning process is the introduction of a protective amnesia. Being a consumer isn't nice, isn't nice at all. The post natal blocks only operate on the conscious level. Underneath a tremendous pressure of anger and hatred and fear is built up over the years. The consumer pattern that has been conditioned in runs directly contrary to the instinct for self-preservation, or whatever you want to call it. That's why the change to producer status takes so long. The accumulated charge has to be drained off slowly before the reconditioning can take place. But if the blocks were to be removed at once, if the youngsters were to suddenly wake up and see their world as it actually is . . ." Mr. Flugnet's voice shuddered to a stop.

"Do you mind if I have another drink? Just a short one?" Without waiting for an answer he went and helped himself. "Maybe they'd understand," he muttered.

"Understand what?" said Alan's uncle blankly. "Who?"

"The consumers. Maybe they'd understand that there wasn't any other way to do it. The factories produce so fast that when everybody has all they want, they have to shut down—except the war plants, that is. That gets used up as fast as it's made. But when there was nobody left to fight,

when everybody else was dead, we had to keep producing. And if you produce, somebody has to consume. And . . .” His voice trailed off.

“I still don’t see what you’re so upset about,” said Alan’s uncle.

Alan stepped into the room. “I do,” he said in a strange flat voice.

Mr. Flugnet took one good look at him, made a funny little squawking sound, and huddled back in his chair.

“I almost got killed tonight,” said Alan.

His uncle shot him a surprised look. “That’s a funny remark for a consumer to make.”

“Yeah,” said Alan. “I guess it is.”

“Well, forget about it. If you’ve got what it takes, you’ll make it through like Alf and Reuban did. If you haven’t—well, that’s just the way things are.”

“And that’s the way things should be,” announced Alf. “Only the strong deserve the jobs. By the way, what happened to the celebration? We used to tear the town up after games.”

“We’re having it tomorrow.”

“You are not!” snapped his uncle indignantly. “Tomorrow’s Sunday. You kids have the streets to yourself three days a week as it is. If you think you’re going to be allowed to throw lead around while your elders are on their way to church, you’ve got another think coming!”

“I don’t think the producers will mind,” said Alan softly. He made a quick mental calculation and took one step backward. When his hand came out of his worn grenade case, it wasn’t empty.

There had been two little black boxes.

Mr. Flugnet had been right, the new concussion grenade did have a beautiful defined blast area. Aside from a slight ringing in his ears, Alan felt fine as he walked out of the house. For the first time in his life during a consumption period, he didn’t dive into the communication trench that led to the street. Instead he walked slowly across the lawn. When he got to the sidewalk he sat down on the curb and waited. There was a brief staccato rattle of a burp gun from across the way and a moment later the Higgins kid came out of his house.

“Over here,” yelled Alan. “The rest will be along in a minute.”

From houses all up and down the street began to come sharp crashing explosions.

"Over here," yelled Alan. "The rest will be along in a minute."

From all up and down the street began to come sharp crashing explosions.

"They sure are," said Alan. He sighed comfortably and cupped his chin in his hands. "But tomorrow we'll have to start collecting all the ones that are left over. You leave stuff like that laying around and somebody might get hurt."

# mr. hoskin's heel

## 1

ALBERT HOSKIN's seminar in Medieval Backgrounds had only four members, but Albert was used to that. He had long ago reconciled himself to the unhappy realization that even a large university with hundreds of graduate students moving down its intellectual assembly lines seldom produced a degree candidate who had an honest interest in the middle ages.

Donald Futzel, a prematurely bold young man who was on leave from Eastern State Teachers College for the purpose of getting the doctor's degree that would enable an enlightened administration to promote him to associate professor, was reading a paper on medieval sorcery. As usual, the report was a hodgepodge of poorly digested paragraphs selected almost at random from three or four books and altered only enough to spare him the embarrassment of being admonished for plagiarism.

"And this," said Futzel listlessly as he chalked a figure on the board, "is a pentagon."

Albert could restrain himself no longer. "A potent name, Mr. Futzel, and a potent figure. But I'm afraid the two don't go together. I believe the term you want is pentagram."

"Okay," said Futzel, "it's a pentagram. Anyway . . ." His voice droned on and on and Albert, after setting his ear to catch any particularly gross error, retired to a consideration of his own troubles.

In spite of being a recognized authority on the Cotton manuscript of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Mr. Hoskin had troubles in plenty. Production time was coming around and though he had assiduously mined the dissertation that had won him his Ph. D. and was published in the most respectable of scholarly journals, the department grapevine had it that he was about to be passed over in favor of a tweedy young man from Harvard named Lippencott who wrote articles for the little magazines.

To make matters worse, Lippencott seemed to be getting the inside track with Priscilla Yergut, a comely, though some-

what emaciated, teacher of Freshman English whom Albert had been escorting to the annual English Department tea for the past several years.

Something that Futzel was saying tripped a relay and Albert started listening actively rather than passively.

"... then the magician would take this brass rod and stick it in the fire and—"

"One moment please," said Albert. "Are you referring to the piece of magical apparatus that was commonly known as a 'blasting rod'?"

"Sure," said Futzel. "Why?"

"It's a matter of minor importance. But just to avoid any misconceptions I had better point out that blasting rods were made of ash with a metal tip at each end. You may proceed."

Futzel didn't. Instead he stuck out his jaw pugnaciously and said, "They were so brass rods. I saw a picture of one. It was brass all the way. It looked like a curtain rod."

"And where did you see this picture?"

"In a book. I got it right here. The librarian got it out of the locked case in the library for me."

Unzipping his brief-case, he produced a small vellum-bound volume, and handed it over triumphantly. Albert opened it, took one casual look, and then whistled. It wasn't too early—the title page said 1607 which explained why Futzel was able to read it—but it was evidently a copy of a much earlier manuscript work on black magic. Just then the bell rang and, with a sigh of relief, the class began to wriggle around in its chairs.

"My apologies, Mr. Futzel," said Albert. "Would you mind if I kept this overnight? It's a work that is new to me."

"Help yourself," said the other generously.

Albert dropped the small black book into his own briefcase and started across the campus toward the apartment he shared with his Aunt Agatha. He walked faster than usual because half way through the class hour he had left a luridly jacketed copy of *The Big Kill* in plain sight on the coffee table right beside his facsimile edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Aunt Agatha did not approve of a private investigator who went around shooting lovely ladies in the stomach on little or no provocation, and she was not a person whose likes and dislikes could be lightly disregarded.

He was panting slightly from his unaccustomed exercise when he reached up to the ledge over the apartment door to see if the key was still there. He gave a slight exclamation of

pleasure when his fingers encountered it. Aunt Agatha wasn't home yet.

He put the key in the lock and turned, but the mechanism stuck a little, as usual. As he struggled with the refractory lock, he sternly resolved for the hundredth time to write a stiff letter of protest to his ancient enemy, the janitor. An uncouth and hairy individual who paraded around all day in a dirty undershirt and smoke a vile-smelling pipe, he could at least attend to a rusty lock.

"Having trouble, Mac?"

Startled, Albert swung around. A hard-faced gentleman with the build of a mature gorilla was standing in the shadows watching him.

"Why, yes," said Albert. "The key, it sticks."

"Your name Hoskin?"

Albert nodded.

"Good," grunted the burly stranger and hit him on the head with a blunt object.

When Albert woke up again he was tied to a chair in a dusty apartment that didn't have that lived-in look. A second stranger, somewhat gone to fat, but even bigger and uglier than the first, stood looking down at him.

"So you're the creep that's giving us all the trouble."

"Beg pardon?" said Albert.

"I shouldn't have had to send Gutsy after you. Your school spirit should have fixed things up before we had to step in."

"That's right," Gutsy sternly. "Cosmo shouldn't a had to send me after you."

Albert looked up at them in honest confusion. "I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about."

"The game Saturday, what else? You got a kid named Martinelli in one of your classes, haven't you?"

Albert gave a puzzled nod.

"Well, word's come down the grapevine that you turned in a flunk for him. That makes him ineligible for Saturday's game. And with him out, State doesn't stand a chance. Do you get me?"

Albert didn't. He was busy trying to think of a protest that wouldn't give too much offense.

"Listen, knucklehead," said Cosmo angrily. "There's people in this town with a lot of money down on State at eight to five. They can't sit back and take a loss. So they asked me to talk to you about changing Martinelli's grade so he'll be

able to play." His jaw went out. "So you're going to pass this cookie—or else!"

"Are you suggesting that I falsify a grade report?" asked Albert in a horrified voice.

"Or else," continued the big man as if he hadn't heard Albert's protest. "I personally am going to bust you in the snoot so hard you'll be breathing through a hole the shape of my fist the rest of your life!"

He paused and then said softly.

"My friends wouldn't like it if I had to tell them you refused to cooperate. So . . . I'm not going to." He reached down suddenly, grabbed Albert by his lapels, and jerked him roughly into the air, chair and all. "Am I?"

"I'd be sorry to cause any discord between you and your friends," said Albert bravely, "but—"

He never finished the sentence. Something hit him. Hard. His head snapped back, his chair hit the floor with a thump and a small trickle of blood started at one corner of his mouth. He recoiled as he saw Cosmo pull back his fist again. He was frightened, frightened sick, but from somewhere within himself he dredged up enough strength to shake his head. Cosmo shrugged and went to work.

"You try for a while," he panted to the gentleman known as Gutsy. "I'm plumb fagged out."

"Me, too," said Gutsy a half hour later. "For a scrawny little son-of-gun like that he sure can take it."

It was an overstatement. For twenty-five of the thirty minutes the pounding hadn't been bothering Albert. He had been out cold.

A hurried council of war was held that didn't get anywhere until Gutsy had a sudden flash of inspiration.

"Look," he exclaimed, "in the third grade the teacher is telling us about a character named Achilles."

"So?"

"He was top man with the Greeks because he was bullet-proof. They'd open up on him, and the slugs would just bounce off. That was because when he was just a kid his old lady went and dunked him in something that made him like he was covered with armorplate."

"You find what it was, I'll buy it," said Cosmo, who was a practical man with an eye to the future.

"There was a catch to it. When his old lady dunked him in that stuff, the part of his foot where she was hanging on to him didn't get covered. So some character finds out about it and let's him have it where it hurts—in the heel."

"So how's shooting a guy in the heel going to pull down the curtains for him?"

Gutsy shrugged. "Maybe they put something on the slug that gave him blood poisoning. Anyway, they got him."

"So they got him, so they got him," said Cosmo in exasperation. "What's that got to do with cracking the prof?"

"So maybe he's got a soft spot, too. You put pressure on there and he gives. All we got to do is find out where it is and then we got him."

"You find out, it's your idea."

Gutsy went over and shook Albert until he had partially regained consciousness, pulled back one ham-like fist, and aimed it at his midriff. Albert fainted.

"We got to think of something different," he muttered.

"Yeah," said Cosmo sarcastically, "we sure got to."

He looked at Gutsy and Gutsy looked at him and then they both got the same idea at the same time.

"MacGruder!" they breathed in unison.

Cosmo was the first to snap back to reality. "If we can get him sobered up in time, that is."

"You get him and I'll go hit the old doc up for some bennies," said Gutsy. "Seventh sons of seventh sons what was born with caul's just don't grow on trees."

## 2

There was nothing about Rick MacGruder that would suggest he had any special psychic powers. He was a small woody man with a large thirst, and a perpetually wistful expression that was due in part to the fact that at stated intervals he wasn't able to do anything about it. MacGruder was a periodic drinker.

Every six months or so he would be seized by a sudden compulsion that would paralyze his will and find himself on the wagon in spite of himself. For two or three weeks he would wander around white-faced and shaking, unable to touch a drop, a pariah in the warm convivial world in which he ordinarily lived. In spite of all this, however, he was the seventh son of a seventh son and he had been born with a caul.

"Maybe I'd better have just another one to lubricate my powers," he said hopefully, gazing greedily at the bottle that stood upon the rickety kitchen table.



"Afterward," said Cosmo "We got a job to do and we don't want you popping out in the middle of it. Let's go, we ain't got all day."

"O.K.," said MacGruder unhappily, "but first you got to get the shades down and douse that glim. The chief don't like a lot of light."

The unshaded flyspecked bulb that hung from the ceiling was turned out and the dark window blinds pulled down. Except for a faint trickle of light from around their edges that made MacGruder's face dimly visible, the room was in darkness. Albert was given a few slaps for the purpose of clearing his head and plunked down on a chair.

"Now everybody grab hold of the other guy's hand and we'll get this show on the road."

Albert's right hand was taken by Gutsy and his left by the gang chief. They in turn each took one of MacGruder's.

"Here goes," said the little man and started to croon.

"Oh spirits! Oh dwellers in that great beyond whence all dwellers on this mortal coil must someday wend, listen to my call."

"Pretty classy patter, ain't it?" whispered Gutsy. "Just to look at him you'd never know that a bum like that could talk so good."

"You want conversation?" said MacGruder. "All right, go ahead make conversation. When you've said all you got to say, let me know so I can go ahead with this here seance."

Cosmo said a few choice words that had the effect of reducing Gutsy to speechlessness and then the little man continued.

"Oh, spirits, bear from us a plea to Chief Whooping Water that he come from his happy hunting ground to give us light and guidance." There was a long silence and then MacGruder jerked convulsively. His head came stiffly forward and his eyes opened and stared blindly around the table. As the others watched in the dim light, his features seemed to change as if an inward force were moulding them. His nose assumed a hawk-like shape and his cheekbones seemed to become more prominent. Albert began to be impressed in spite of himself.

MacGruder's mouth opened and a strange guttural voice came forth.

*From the land of sky blue waters  
Comes the chieftain Whooping Water  
Comes across the vasty darkness*

*Comes to speak through Rick MacGruder  
Left his tepee and papooses  
Left his squaw and council fires  
Came to answer to the calling  
Left the braves and mighty warriors  
Left the council of the chieftains  
Left the forest and the woodlands  
Left the mink and beaver playing  
Left the tomtoms and—*

What else was left was never known because Gutsy suddenly interrupted.

"How's Bosworth? Is he still sore at me for what I done?"

"Bosworth heap hot," grunted Whooping Water enigmatically, irritated by the interruption.

*Left the mink and beaver playing  
Left the tomtoms and—*

This time Cosmo broke in.

"Excuse the interruption, chief," he said apologetically, "it isn't that we aren't interested in where you came from, but MacGruder isn't good for much longer and there's something we go to find out."

MacGruder obviously wasn't good for much longer. He had a faint white froth on his lips and he seemed to be having trouble breathing.

Gutsy leaned over and whispered to Albert.

"Ya don't bust in, ya never find out nothing. That 'mink and beaver' routine of his can keep going all night."

"What I want to know is just this," continued Cosmo. "We got a guy from the U that . . ."

"Throw some water on him," said Cosmo.

Gutsy did and MacGruder came to with a start.

"Did he come through?" he asked groggily.

"He sure did, boy, he sure did. We found this Hoskin character's heel," said Cosmo triumphantly. "It's a tomato named Priscilla Yergut what teaches over at the University. I'm sending Gutsy over to put the snatch on her."

MacGruder reached out automatically for the bottle that was sitting in front of him and then recoiled as if it had suddenly become red hot.

"Oh, no!" he whispered, his face a mask of horror.

"No what?" asked Gutsy.

"No nothing for two whole weeks!" said MacGruder brokenly. "One of my periodicals just hit me!"

Without a backward glance he pulled himself to his feet and staggered from the room.

### 3

"Albert!" shrieked Priscilla as Gutsy dragged her into the room, "What have they been doing to you?"

Before Albert could answer, Cosmo cut in. "What's been done to him, lady, ain't nothing to what's going to be done to you unless he starts doing like he's told."

Albert blanched, and for the first time that day he felt his resolution slipping. "Don't you dare touch her!"

"I ain't," said Cosmo, "Gutsy here is the boy that'll handle the job. Take off your shirt, Gutsy, and show the lady what a real man looks like."

He grinned. "Take it off."

Bashfully, Gutsy did. He had a torso like a gorilla and just as much hair. Albert took one look and shuddered in revulsion. Priscilla shuddered too, but with something else.

"Make your choice, prof. Either you walk out of here with your lady friend on your arm or Gutsy gets her."

Gutsy, rather pleased at the second prospect, threw out his chest, and clenching his fists, held out his arms to exhibit his biceps.

Priscilla gasped again and then she let out a little whinny. She looked at Albert sagging in his chair and then back at Gutsy strutting up and down like a bull ape in mating season.

"Albert," she said in sudden decision, "I don't know what they want you to do, but whatever it is, remember that your integrity must come first."

Cosmo didn't like the way things were going. "Get her out of here," he shouted to Gutsy. When she was gone he turned ferociously to Albert. "It ain't as simple as you think," he growled. "First he's going to . . ."

When he had finished with his enumeration, Albert was whitefaced.

"Think it over, punk," said Cosmo. "I'm giving you exactly half an hour to make up your mind."

As he headed for the door he gave Albert's briefcase a kick that sent it sailing into the far corner. As the lock on the door clicked behind him, Albert slumped down and buried

his face in his hands. Then he straightened up again. The pressure of his palms on his swollen cheeks hurt too much.

"Got to think," he muttered to himself. "I've got to think fast."

His thoughts led him in a weird direction. When he finished them he found himself with a small black vellum-bound volume in one hand and his watch in the other. He kept looking back and forth from one to the other.

He didn't believe in the supernatural. No intelligent young Middle-English teacher did. But after his experience with MacGruder he found himself filled with serious doubts.

Twenty-four minutes left. There wasn't any use in prolonging Priscilla's agony. He dragged himself to his feet again and tottered toward the door. But . . . He looked at the book again.

On page 87 he found something he thought might work.

Chalk he had of course. The janitors were supposed to see that each class room had plenty, but they were all secret drinkers and never did. Albert was a man who was tonguetied without a blackboard to doodle on, and as a result he always kept a private stock in his pockets. He fished out the longest and chalked a pentagram on the floor, feeling rather foolish as he did so.

All that was left after that was the fire and the blasting rod. The fire was easy to provide. Albert didn't smoke but he always carried matches for the benefit of full professors who did. Taking off his undershirt—which fortunately was rather frayed anyway—he tore it into little strips and crumpled them in an old glass ashtray which he placed in the middle of the floor.

A piece of the tubular brass from which the curtains hung was taken down to serve as a blasting rod and he was finally ready to go. He ran through the incantation he had selected from the little black book until he was satisfied he had it letter perfect, and then touched a match to the scraps of undershirt.

Staring intently into the little pile of smoldering rags that served as his fire, he whispered: "Aglon, Tetragram, vaycheon stimulamaton ezipahers retragrammaton olyaram irion esytion existion eryona onera orasym mozm messias soter Emanuel Sabaoth Adonay, *te adora, et te invoco!*"

With that he spit into the fire.

"Venite, Venite, Submiritillor Lucifuge, or eternal torment shall overwhelm thee, by the great power of this blasting rod."

Grabbing the brass tube firmly in both hands, he waved it over the smoldering rags and waited. He didn't have to wait long.

There was a sudden popping sound and a small brown figure materialized in the middle of the room. His eyes were closed and he was swaying back and forth as he chanted:

*From the land of sky blue waters  
Comes the chieftain Whooping Water  
Comes across the vasty darkness  
Comes to speak to—*

"Oh, no!" moaned Albert.

The little Indian slowly opened his eyes. "Great White Father has look on face like brave who dial wrong number on talking machine."

Albert looked down at the black book and then back at Whooping Water.

The little Indian followed his glance and then snorted. "That thing! That's a pirated edition. Both the editor and the compositor were illiterate idiots. You would be lucky to raise a ninth order elemental with anything in there. I wouldn't be here myself if I weren't bored still with just sitting around the office waiting for a call. The one from MacGruder was the first this week. What's happened over on this side? The D.A. been closing up all the joints?"

Albert sat silent for a moment, trying to adjust to the new reality.

"Then none of this hocus-pocus really works?" he asked finally.

"Well," said Whooping Water slowly, "you did open the gate. But that can be done in a dozen different ways."

"What about this?" said Albert, picking up the blasting rod and jamming it suddenly into the smoldering rags of his little fire.

Whooping Water let out a sudden yell, and leaping to his feet, clapped both hands to his posterior.

Albert jerked the rod out of the fire. "Sorry," he said. "I was just trying to find out if I had any control over you."

"Next time you want to find out something, ask!" said the little Indian bitterly. "Now I'm here, what do you want?"

"Out," said Albert briefly.

"How?" asked the Indian with equal brevity.

Albert thought for a moment.

"I suppose the easiest way would be for you to transport Priscilla and me to the nearest police station."

Whooping Water shook his head. "Wish I could, old man, but I'm just not up to it. The only person I can directly affect is the one who calls me up—and even then my powers are extremely limited."

Albert took a quick look at his watch. He didn't have too much time left.

"Then what can you do?"

"I might temporarily superimpose a new character on your old one. Alexander, Napoleon, Julius Caesar—anybody at all."

"People get shock therapy for that in this world," said Albert. "What's the point?"

"A rather obvious one. Suppose you wanted to play the stock market. I could give you the attitudes and responses of an Insull or a Rothschild. By following the imposed set of impulses you'd know just what to do and when."

"I don't want to play the market," said Albert plaintively. "All that I want to do is rescue Priscilla before it's too late!"

"Then think of somebody who was an expert at the rescuing business."

"Well . . ." said Albert, and then suddenly smashed his right fist into his left palm in the most virile gesture he'd made in years. "Sir Gawain!"

"Beg pardon?" said Whooping Water with a start.

"Sir Gawain. He was King Arthur's nephew and one of the greatest knights of the Round Table."

There was a strange expression on Whooping Water's face as he shook his head vigorously. "You'd be making a terrible mistake," he said. "You see, actually the popular image of Gawain doesn't correspond at all to the real man. In fact—"

"For your information," interrupted Albert stiffly, "the Gawain myths happen to be my special field of study. In the first place, he had no actual existence. He was a folk hero who embodied all the characteristics of the ideal knight. And in the second—" He stopped suddenly as he realized that he was automatically swinging into the Gawain lecture that he always gave during the first week of his survey course.

"And in the second," he snapped, "I'm giving orders around here. You will go immediately to my apartment and skim through the manuscript that is sitting on the coffee table. That will give you an excellent picture of Gawain's character."

"But . . ."

"Get going!"

Whooping Water got.

Ten seconds later he was back. His face was perfectly blank but there seemed to be a look of secret amusement in his eyes.

"Mission completed," he said. "All set?" Albert nodded nervously.

"Go ahead," he said.

The little Indian held two fingers up to his forehead like horns and pointed them at Albert. They wriggled slightly and then a fat green spark jumped from each of them. Albert winced as a sudden convulsive shock ran through him.

"I hope I made the right choice," he muttered as he waited for the change.

"You didn't," said Whooping Water cheerfully, "so I took the liberty of making another selection."

Before Albert could answer, the change hit him. He felt himself being swept by surges of strange raw emotion such as he had never felt before. There were gongs beating inside his head and he wanted to smash somebody—hard. The part of him that was still Albert fought desperately for control.

"I'm not turning into Gawain!" he gasped.

Whooping Water grinned. "Heap sorry, boss. But I got reasons. Good reasons."

The air around the small Indian suddenly turned opaque.

## 4

When it cleared Whooping Water was gone and in his place stood a skinny and buck-toothed young man whose first words betrayed his English origin.

"Never did like that get-up," he said. "But for some reason or other most of the local mediums demand Indians. Anyway, the reason I was so set against your patterning yourself on Sir Gawain was that"—his voice dropped to a confidential whisper—"I am, or at least I was the one and original Gawain. And frankly, old man, I'm the last person in the world I'd recommend to a man in your predicament as a model."

"You're the Sir Gawain?" whispered Albert. "The one who triumphed over the Green Knight."

"I'm the Sir Gawain all right, but I didn't do any triumphing. That's just a bit of propaganda Uncle Arthur put out after I got my head whacked off. What happened was that

one night when we were all at dinner a drunk wearing green armor came staggering in looking for a fight.

"He was so old and feeble that the king didn't feel right about matching him with any of the regulars so he picked on me. I'd had a couple of drinks myself or I'd never have gone through with it.

"As it was, I didn't go very far. It was the shortest fight in the history of the Round Table. The old boy let fly with his battle axe and I ducked. Wasn't fast enough. The head that came off was mine. Arthur hushed things up as best he could for the sake of the family name, and then a couple of years later when he got news that the Green Knight had lost the decision in a bout with the D.T.'s, he had one of his bards cook up a story that didn't make me look so silly.

"Anyway, after taking a quick look at that manuscript I decided you needed somebody else, so I used the guy in the other book."

"What other book?" demanded Albert, a horrifying suspicion forming inside his head.

"Something called *The Big Kill*. That Hammer chap was quite a lad. He got himself out of worse spots than this in every other chapter."

"Turn me back," gasped Albert. "That character is a moral cesspool."

"Why not just give him a try?"

Albert felt himself being more and more lost in the new growling stranger who was taking over his body.

"I'll take care of you later!" he snarled. "Right now I'm going to smoke out some of the vermin that have been lousing up my city!"

Swinging the brass curtain rod like a war club, he stalked purposefully to the door and began to pound on it. A moment later Gutsy's voice was heard on the other side.

"What's going on in there?"

"Open up and you'll find out," growled Albert.

"Are you ready to talk business?"

"Yeah!"

There was a sound of a key turning and a little popping came from behind Albert as Whooping Water prudently removed himself from sight. Then the door swung open and Gutsy stepped in. There was an expression of deep disappointment on his face. He had been looking forward to his intimidation session with Priscilla with a great deal of anticipation.

Albert took one step forward and let loose a sudden swing



of the blasting rod that caught Gutsy square on top of the head. Then he stepped back quickly and waited for the giant figure to go crashing to the floor. It didn't. It just shook its head and said plaintively, "Now what did you want to go and do that for?"

Albert let out a snarl of rage as the gongs in his head suddenly crescendoed and let loose a right hook that smashed Gutsy full in the face. There was a splintering—but not of teeth. Albert howled in pain and began to hop up and down, cupping his broken knuckles in his left hand.

"You keep that up, you're going to hurt yourself," said Gutsy.

"Get out of here before I—" The other suddenly stopped as the part of him that was still Albert realized that there wasn't anything he could do.

"Before you what?" asked Gutsy curiously.

"Oh, nothing," said Albert. "Just go away. I got some thinking to do."

"Then you don't want to talk to Cosmo?"

"No!"

"O.K.!" said Gutsy as he lumbered out the door. "But remember that you only got ten minutes before that tomato of yours starts to get it."

As the lock clicked shut on the door again, Albert turned toward the center of the room and growled.

"All right, punk, turn yourself on again."

Whooping Water materialized. Only this time he was back in his Indian form again.

Albert picked up his blasting rod and advanced purposefully toward him. "I feel like bashing somebody!" he snarled, "and it might as well be you."

The little Indian took one good look at the advancing figure of wrath, jerked his hands up to his head, and wriggled them in a reverse direction. Albert stumbled to a stop as the alien character who had been controlling his nerve ends suddenly vanished.

"Easy does it," said Whooping Water consolingly. "It's all my fault and I apologize. I forgot that a disposition like Hammer's needed more beef to back it up than you've got. If you were up against a couple of amateurs, they'd run screaming. I've got another idea, though. How about this—"

"Shut up!" said Albert in a most unAlbertish voice. "I've got some thinking to do."

The Indian opened his mouth to protest but a threatening twitch of the blasting rod closed it again.

"I'm getting something," said Albert at last, "but I'm having trouble pinning it down." He ruminated in silence for a moment and then asked suddenly. "Who was that Bosworth that Gutsy was asking bout during the seance?"

"An old pal who got the inside track with a woman Gutsy wanted. He got part of his head taken off with a .45 slug."

"Got it!" exclaimed Albert.

"Got what?"

Albert explained and the little Indian let out a whistle of admiration.

## 5

Once Gutsy was safely tucked away in the closet, his hands and feet tied with strips torn from the curtains and a crude but effective gag in his mouth, they were ready for Cosmo. Whooping Water licked out of sight and then materialized as a large block of dripping and barnacle-encrusted concrete. Albert started toward the door but just as he got to it it swung open and Cosmo came storming in.

"Where in the hell's Gutsy?" he demanded. "And what's that?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Albert. "One minute it wasn't and the next minute it was. It talks."

"You're crazy!" snorted Cosmo.

"Maybe so, but just go up to it and listen."

Cosmo approached the dripping block cautiously and bent over it.

"Let me out," said a muffled voice.

Cosmo jumped back in fright and then suddenly turned to Albert.

"Funny guy, eh? Trying to make like a ventriloquist, eh? Well, I don't scare punk."

"It's not me," protested Albert. "Listen."

A chanting voice came from within the block.

*Got a clock to fix,  
Got a watch to stop,  
Got a bone to pick,  
Got a floor to mop.*

*Going to break some bones,  
Going to suck some blood,*

*Going to spill some guts,  
Someone's name is mud.*

Before the gang chief could make another accusation of ventriloquism, the block began to rock back and forth like a gigantic Mexican jumping bean. Then, as Cosmo watched wide-eyed, there was a splitting sound and a large fissure opened. A scrabbling sound came from inside and then slowly a hand appeared, a hand with swollen purple fingers that plucked at the edges of the split as if they were trying to force it open wider.

Cosmo had long prided himself on being a man of action. Now, if ever, action was called for.

"I'm getting out of here," he said.

"Not yet, my friend."

A soft voice from inside the block of cement froze him in his tracks. As he stood paralyzed, there was a sudden splintering crash and the whole block disintegrated into a pile of jagged shards.

Something moved in the debris, moved and then slowly squirmed out toward the shaking gangster. It was a man, a long dead man with his hands and feet wired together.

"I've been waiting for you, Cosmo," it croaked. "I've been waiting for you a long, long time."

Cosmo tried to raise the .45 that his reflexes had pulled out of its shoulder holster, but it hung limply from nerveless fingers.

"I've been wanting to ask you why you went and did it, pal. Me that gave you your start and was like a father to you. It weren't friendly—like to sap an old pal and put him in a box of wet concrete while he was still alive and then toss him in the bay. It weren't friendly—like at all. That's why I've come to take you back with me."

The bloated fingers curled around the gangster's ankles. He tried to raise his automatic again but it slipped from his fingers and went crashing to the floor. Then something snapped inside him. He let out a high-pitched scream and, kicking loose the clutching hands, dashed whimpering out of the room.

The swollen-faced man looked up at Albert and grinned.

Albert pointedly looked the other way.

"If you don't mind," he said. "Your Bosworth was bad enough, but this one—ugh!"

"All clear," said Sir Whooping Water Gawain.

Albert turned and greeted the sight of the little brown Indian with a sigh of relief.

"Thanks a million!"

"Really wasn't anything, old man," said Whooping Water with a depreciating gesture. "What time is it?"

Albert glanced at his watch. "Two forty-five. We made it with three minutes to spare."

"It's later than I thought," said the other. "Now that I've got all your troubles straightened out, I guess I might as well toddle on back. I'm due to go off shift at three."

Albert's momentary feeling of elation vanished. "What do you mean, 'all straightened out'? I'm no better off than I was this morning." Unable to restrain himself, he launched into a long narration of his woes.

"I don't get it," said Whooping Water when he had finally finished. "You let those thugs beat you unconscious rather than give up, but over at the University you let everybody and his brother shove you around."

"I just can't help it," said Albert miserably. "It's not that I'm a coward. It's just the way my glands work. Every time I start to stand up for myself, something triggers them off and they all let loose at once. I get so much adrenalin in my blood that all I can do is stand there and shake. And so I'm losing my girl and there isn't anything I can do about it."

Whooping Water looked dreamily at the ceiling. "You know," he said at last, "Mike Hammer's glands let loose too, but he knows how to use them. And against a couple of amateurs . . ."

Albert let out a sudden squawk of protest but he was too late. Two fat green sparks came arcing across and caught him square in the middle of the forehead. . . .

For some strange reason Priscilla wasn't so thrilled at being rescued as might have been expected. The look of eager anticipation that was on her face as the door opened was replaced by one of annoyance when she saw who had opened it.

"It took you long enough," she snapped pettishly as Albert undid the ropes that bound her to the chair. The old Albert would have quailed and began to stutter apologies, but this wasn't the old Albert.

When he dropped her off at her home she was breathing hard and there was a strange new look in her eyes.

"Won't you come up?" she whispered. "There's nobody home."

Albert wanted to but Hammer wouldn't let him.

"Got a couple of rats to take care of first," he growled. "After that . . ." He ran his hand up and down her back and she melted against him. He gave her a sudden shove.

"Beat it, kid. I got work to do . . ."

When Albert swaggered into his office, Lippencott was in the middle of the fifteenth reading of his latest essay in *TENSION, A Quarterly Journal of New Criticis*

"Easy does it, old man," he said lazily as the door crashed shut. "I take it that Dr. Quimbat finally broke the news to you about the switch in courses."

"What switch?" growled Albert.

"Next fall I'll be giving a seminar in the New Criticism and a graduate course in James. I'm afraid that means that you are going to have to take over my two sections of Freshman English. Tough luck, old man, but I know that when you think it over you'll realize that it's for the good of the department. And now if you'll excuse me. I'd better be taking off. Priscilla and I are going out tonight and I have a bit of work at home I want to get out of the way first."

"Not just yet, junior." Albert turned and clicked the lock on the door behind him. "You and I got a little talking to do first. For one thing, I ain't giving up my seminar or my Chaucer course for you or nobody else. And for another, you go woofing around the department head any more sticking knives in my back and you're going to find out all of a sudden your ears ain't mates!"

Lippencott grinned and blew a puff of tobacco smoke in Albert's face.

"Anything more, little man?"

"Yeah," said Albert in a soft voice. "I got Priscilla staked out. You come poaching and you're going to end up minus a head, not that you'd miss it none."

Lippencott stood up and flexed his muscles. "Albert," he said, "I've been wanting to paste you for a long time. But my conscience wouldn't let me because you were too little and too weak. But now I can do it with no regrets."

Proudly conscious of his beautifully muscled body, he stalked toward Albert.

"Put 'em up," he said, assuming the stance that had made him runner-up for the base middleweight championship during his war-time tour of duty as P.T. officer at Smutney Field.

Albert didn't cooperate. Instead one hand suddenly snaked out and grabbed an empty coke bottle that was sitting on the window sill. With a practiced twist of the wrist he smashed it against the floor.

"Pretty boy," he hissed as he advanced slowly forward, the jagged edges held at ready, "you ain't going to be any longer."

Lippencott stood his ground, but not very long. "Listen, Albert," he said nervously as he recoiled a step. "You're not acting like a gentleman."

"There's a good reason for that," said Albert, sliding closer with a horrible grin on his face. "I ain't no gentleman."

Without warning, his arm flashed out. It was only by grace of excellent reflexes and a great deal of luck that Lippencott was able to preserve his nose. It was too much. He let out a frightened howl and turned to run, but there wasn't any place to run to. The door was locked and Albert had him backed into a corner.

"You touch me and I'll report you to the administration," he whimpered as the jagged edges of the broken bottle came closer and closer to his face.

Albert chuckled. "Who'd believe you? Everybody knows what a mouse of a guy I am."

That did it. Lippencott cracked completely and sobbed promise after promise. Albert waited until he'd heard the words he wanted and then tossed the bottle end crashing against the wall.

"Just don't forget." He said as he swaggered out. "There's a coke machine in every building on the campus."

## 6

When Albert came into the English office, the gongs were still beating inside his head. He was informed by the secretary that the chairman was in conference—which meant that he was taking his daily two-hour nap on the rather bumpy divan he had brought back from his student quarters at Oxford. Albert didn't say anything, he just slapped her attractive posterior in a flattering way and, as she stood gasping, barreled into the inner sanctum and slammed the door behind him.

Ten minutes passed before he emerged. When he did the secretary was waiting for him with a melting smile. He gave her another spank and gestured toward the inner office.

"Boss man wants to see you, kiddo. He's got a few memos to dictate. He's changed his mind about dropping my Middle English courses. The one I want you to get right out, though,

is the recommendation for promotion." He flicked again and she ran squealing into Dr. Quimbat's office.

Dr. Quimbat was somewhat the worse for wear. He started to babble something about a coke bottle but then regained enough of his senses to think better of it and dictate what had to be dictated.

There was company waiting for him in Albert's own office. As soon as the door was shut, Whooping Water gave the little finger wiggle that was necessary to banish Mike Hammer.

"Want another shot before your date tonight? Mike's been doing all right by you so far."

Albert shuddered and shook his head. "No thanks! Every time she cuddles up to me I start getting ideas."

"What's wrong with that? You're a big boy now, and she isn't exactly a spring chicken."

"It's not that I'm objecting to. These ideas involve an erotic transference from the usual areas to her stomach. And that isn't all. I keep wanting to go out and buy a big .45."

"I see what you mean," said Whooping Water.

"So, thanks for everything. I'm going to be needing your help later today but there's no use your hanging around here until then."

"I'm dismissed?"

"You're dismissed."

When Whooping Water disappeared this time, he did it by slow stages. First his epidermis became transparent, and then bit by bit the rest of him faded out until there was nothing left but a stomach, a pair of lungs, and an intricately coiled large intestine, all hanging motionless in mid-air.

Without Hammer to back him up, Albert found himself growing nauseated. "Please," he gulped. "I've had about all I can take for one day."

The lungs contracted and a little snicker came from the air above them. Then slowly, much too slowly, the viscera faded from sight.

Albert had just put his feet up on his desk for the first time in his academic career when there was a knock on the door and Dick Martinelli, State's star quarterback, came diffidently in.

"No!" said Albert before the football player could get in a word.

"Wait a minute, doc," protested the other in an injured voice. "I ain't asking for no free ride. I just want one of them there retests."

"You want what!"

"A re-test. I went and read the book."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, I did. I'm going over to the drugstore to see if there's any new Spillane in, but there ain't. And while I'm looking over the pocket book rack to see if there's anything else that looks interesting, I sees a picture on a cover that makes me damn near drop my teeth. So I grabs it, and you know what?"

"What?" said Albert obediently.

"When I gets home I find I went and bought a copy of this here Canterbury Tales which I'm supposed to be reading for your course but don't because I take a look the first day and it's full of funny words. Only this time I start looking through to see if I can find the part they got the picture on the cover from and WOW!"

"Wow?"

"Yeah, WOW!" Martinelli sniggered. "There's stuff in there that I don't see how they let it get printed. Like for example there's one place where a guy climbs up a ladder to try and make a gal whose husband is supposed to be out of town and—"

"I have a certain familiarity with the story in question," said Albert. "Suppose you let me ask the questions."

"Sure thing, doc. Shoot!"

"Give me a precis of 'The Reeve's Tale.'"

Martinelli gulped. "A what?"

"A precis—an abstract, a summary, a . . . well, just tell me what happened."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place. Well, there were a couple of guys who were going to Oxford or some place like that and they got a couple of days off. So they're hitchhiking around and they happen to bump into this miller, see? And he's got a good-looking wife and a daughter who's really stacked. So that night while the old man's asleep, these guys . . ."

When Martinelli came back there was a happy smile on his face.

"I took your note about my grade change by the Dean's office and he says I'm eligible again. Then I went over to the library for the book you wanted but the gal at the desk couldn't help me. She said one copy was lost and the other was at the bindery."

"Oh well," said Albert. "I'll find a copy some place. At least you finally did find out where the library was."

"But I got it anyway," said Martinelli triumphantly. "There



was something about the title that stuck in my head so I went over to the drugstore and looked. Sure enough, they got it out in pocket book. Here." He tossed the small paper-backed volume on Albert's desk. "From the cover it looks like hot stuff. Maybe there's more to these here classics than I thought. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Just a second," said Albert and made a quick check of his brief case. He had chalk, a piece of brass tubing, and a small quantity of charcoal.

"I guess not," he said. "You run on back to the practice field. I have an engagement for this evening—I suppose you'd call it a heavy date—and I've got to get ready for it."

"Okay, Doc. I'll be seeing you." His hand was on the door knob when Albert stopped him.

"I have thought of something else. Will you scout around and see if you can find me a fire extinguisher? I've got to build a small fire in here shortly and I don't want to take any chances of it getting out of hand."

Martinelli looked bewildered, but he obeyed without question. "I got one in the car," he said, "I'll bring it right up."

As the door shut behind him, Albert picked up the pocket book and examined the provocative scene on the cover with a great deal of interest. It showed two god-like young creatures engaged in some sort of a Renaissance bed. Albert eyed the male figure with a certain amount of envy—and then shrugged. Even if he were no physical prize, Priscilla's dimensions were also several inches short of those of the impossibly curved and scantily dressed female who was sprawled out with a dreamy smile on her face.

"Aglon, Tetragram, vaycheon," he muttered to himself and then settled down to wait Martinelli's return with the extinguisher. With a sigh of anticipation, he flipped open the pocket book and began to read the first of *The Adventures of Casanova*.

# the cabbage patch

AUNT HESTER sent me to bed early that night. I lay quietly in the old four-poster, listening to the night sounds and the soft sleepy hisses as the narns who lived in the old fern tree underneath my window bedded themselves down in their holes. I was supposed to settle down too, but the tight excited feeling inside my chest wouldn't go away. I pulled the soft down pillow over my head and tried to make everything black. I wanted to go to sleep right away so I could wake up in time to see the birth-fairy when she came down with my new sister.

Priscilla Winters said babies came from the cabbage patch but I knew better. She brought a cabbage to school one day to prove it, and that night when we were supposed to be asleep she opened it up and showed me a baby inside. It was squishy and white like all soon-babies are before they make the change, but I knew it wasn't a real baby because it didn't have any teeth. We made a birthing-box out of a jar and gave it some flies to eat but it wouldn't eat them, it just kept crawling around and waving its feelers as if it didn't like it there. When we woke up the next morning it had turned brown and was all dead.

The narns in the fern tree had stopped their whispering, but I still couldn't get to sleep. The little moon had chased the big one up over the horizon so far that its light was shining through the window right into my eyes. I got up and shut the blinds but even having the room dark again didn't help. I kept seeing pictures of the birth-fairy fluttering down like a beautiful butterfly, and then after she'd put the babies safe in their birthing-box, flying off again with the year-father soaring after her on his fine new wings.

I wanted to see his wings but Mother wouldn't let me. For two months now she had kept him shut up in his room and she wouldn't even let me speak to him through the door. I wanted to say goodbye to him because even if he was only a year-father, he'd been nice to me. I was never supposed to be

with him unless Mother or Aunt Hester were around but sometimes I'd slip into the kitchen when they were away and we'd talk about things. I liked being with him best when he was baking preska because he'd give me bits of the dough and let me make funny things out of them.

Once Aunt Hester caught me alone with him and her face got all hard and twisted and she was going to call the patrol and have him beaten, but Mother came in just then. She sent the year-father to his room and then took me into the parlor. I knew that she was getting ready for one of her heart-to-heart talks but there wasn't anything I could do about it, so I just sat there and listened. Mother's talks always got so wound in on themselves that when she was through I usually couldn't figure out what all the fuss had been about.

First she asked me if I'd felt anything funny when I was alone with the year-father. I asked her what she meant by "funny" and she sort of stuttered and her face got all red. Finally she asked me a funny question about my stinger and I said "no." Then she started to tell me a story about the wasps and the meem but she didn't get very far with that either. She wanted to but she got all flustered and her tongue wouldn't work. Aunt Hester said nonsense, that I was still a little girl and next year would be soon enough. Mother said she wished she could be sure, then she made me promise that if ever my stinger felt funny when I was around a year-father, I'd run and tell her about it right away because if I didn't, something terrible might happen.

My pillow got all hot so I went and sat in my chair. The more I thought about the year-father, the more I wanted to go and see his new wings. Finally I went over to the door and listened. I could hear Mother and Aunt Hester talking in the front of the house so I tiptoed down the back stairs. When I got to the landing I stopped and felt around with my foot until I found the part of the next stair that was right against the railing. That's a bad stair because if you step in the middle of it without thinking, it gives a loud squeek that you can hear all over the house.

The year-father's room is right next to the kitchen. I gave a little scrtach on the door so he would know who it was and not be frightened. I stood there in the dark waiting for him to open up but he didn't so I went inside and felt for him in his nest. He wasn't there.

First I thought maybe I should go back up and get in bed because Aunt Hester said that if she ever again caught me up at night when I was supposed to be sleeping, she'd give me a

licking that I'd never forget. But then I started to think of what would happen to the year-father if he'd gone outside and the patrol caught him wandering around alone at night, and I decided that I'd better tell Mother right away, even if I did get a wallop afterwards.

Then I thought that first I'd better look in the kitchen for him. It was dark in there too so I shut the hall door and lit the lamp on the kitchen table. The stone floor was awfully cold on my feet and I began to wish that I'd remembered to put on my slippers before I came downstairs. Once my eyes got used to the light I looked all around but the year-father wasn't there either. I was about to blow out the lamp and go and tell mother when I heard a funny sound coming from the nursery.

I know it sounds funny to have a nursery in the kitchen, but since soon-babies have to be locked away in a dark place until it's time for them to make the change, Mother said we might as well use the old pantry instead of going to all the trouble of blacking out one of the rooms upstairs.

The big thick door that mother had put on was shut but she'd forgotten to take the key away so I went over and opened it a crack. I was real scared because at birthing time nobody is allowed to go in the nursery, not even Aunt Hester. Once the little ones are in the birthing-box, Mother locks the door and doesn't ever open it up again until after they've changed into real people like us.

At Priscilla's house they've got an honest-to-goodness nursery. There's a little window on the door that they uncover after the first month. It's awful dark inside but if you look real hard you can see the soon-babies crawling around inside. Priscilla let me look in once when her mother was downtown. They had big ugly mouths and teeth.

The sound came again so I opened the door. It was so dark inside that I couldn't see a thing so I went back and got the lamp. The noise seemed to be coming from the birthing-box so I went over and looked in. The year-father was hunched up in the bottom of it. He didn't have any wings.

He blinked up at me in the lantern light. He'd been crying and his face was all swollen. He motioned to me to go away but I couldn't. I'd never seen a father without his clothes on before and I kept staring and staring.

I knew that I should run and get Mother but somehow I couldn't move. Something terrible was happening to the year-father. His stomach was all swollen up and angry red, and every once in a while it would knot up and twist as if

there were something inside that didn't like it there. When that would happen he'd roll his head back and bite down on his lower lip real hard. He seemed to want to yell but he'd choke it back until nothing came out but a little whimper.

There was a nasty half-healed place on his stomach that looked as if he'd fallen on a sharp stick and hurt himself real bad. He kept pushing his hands against it as if he was trying to hold back something that was inside trying to get out.

I heard Mother's voice calling from the kitchen and then Aunt Hester's voice saying something real sharp but I couldn't look up or answer. Blood was trickling out through the year-father's locked fingers. Suddenly he emptied out in a raw scream and fell back so limp that it looked as if all his bones were gone. His hands dropped away and from inside his stomach something tore at the half-healed place until it split and opened like a big mouth. Then I could see the something. I knew it for what it was and I felt sick and scared in a different sort of way. It inched its way out and wiggled around kind of lost like until it finally lost its balance and fell to the bottom of the box. It didn't move for a minute and I thought maybe it was dead but then the feelers around its mouth began to reach out as if they were trying to find something. And then all of a sudden it started a fast wobbly crawl as if it knew just where it was going. I saw teeth as it found the year-father and nuzzled up to him. It was hungry.

Aunt Hester slammed and locked the pantry door. Then she made me a glass of hot milk and sent me up to bed. Mother came into my room a little later and stood by my bed looking down at me to see if I was asleep. I pretended I was because I didn't want to talk to her and she finally left. I wanted to cry but I couldn't because if I did she'd hear me and come back up again. I pulled the pillow down over my face real tight until I could hardly breathe and there were little red flashes of light in the back of my eyes and a humming hive sound in my head. I knew what my stinger was for and I didn't want to think about it.

When I did get to sleep I didn't dream about the year-father, I dreamed about the wasps and the meem.

## limiting factor

THE BEAUTIFUL GIRL slammed the door shut behind her and for a moment there was silence in the apartment. The blond young man in baggy tweeds looked at the closed door uncertainly, made a motion as if to follow her, and then stopped himself.

"Good boy," said a voice from the open window.

"Who's there?" The young man turned and squinted out into the darkness.

"It's me. Ferdie."

"You didn't have to spy on me. I told Karl I'd break off."

"I wasn't spying, Jan. Karl sent me over. Mind if I come in?"

Jan grunted indifferently and a short stocky man drifted in through the window. As his feet touched the floor, he gave a little sigh of relief. He went back to the window, leaned out, and looked down the full eighty stories to the street below.

"It's a long way down there," he said. "Levitation's fine, but I don't think it will ever take the place of the old-fashioned elevator. The way I look at it is that if Man was intended to fly, he'd have been born with wings."

"Man, maybe," said Jan, "but not superman. Want a drink? I do."

Ferdie nodded. "Maybe our kids will take it as a matter of course, but I just can't relax when I'm floating. I'm always afraid I'll blow a neuron or something and go spinning down." He gave a shudder and swallowed the drink in one gulp. "How did it go? Did she take it pretty hard?"

"Tomorrow will be worse. She's angry now and that acts as a sort of emotional anesthetic. When that wears off, it's really going to hurt. I don't feel so good myself. We were going to be married in March."

"I know," said Ferdie sympathetically, "but if it's any consolation, you're going to be so busy from now on that you won't have much time to think about it. Karl sent me over to pick you up because we're pulling out tonight. Which re-

minds me, I'd better call old Kleinholtz and tell him he'll have to find himself a new lab technician. Mind if I use your phone?"

Jan shook his head mutely and gestured toward the hallway.

Two minutes later, Ferdie was back. "The old boy gave me a rough time," he said. "Wanted to know why I was walking out on him just when the apparatus was about ready for testing. I told him I had a sudden attack of itchy feet and there wasn't much I could do about it." He shrugged. "Well, the rough work's done, anyway. About all that's left is running the computations and I couldn't handle that if I wanted to. It's strange, Jan—I've spent a whole year helping him put that gadget together, and I still don't know what it's for. I asked him again just now and the tight-mouthed old son of a gun just laughed at me and said that if I knew which side my bread was buttered on, I'd get back to work in a hurry. I guess it's pretty big. It's a shame I won't be around to see it." He moved toward the window. "We'd better be on our way, Jan. The rest will be waiting for us."

Jan stood irresolute and then slowly shook his head. "I'm not going."

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm not going."

Ferdie went over to him and took him gently by the arm. "Come on now, boy. I know it's hard, but you've made your decision and you've got to stick to it. You can't pull back now."

Jan turned away sullenly. "You can all go to hell! I'm going after her."

"Don't be a fool. No woman is worth that much."

"She is to me. I have been a fool, but I'm not going to be any longer. I was a pretty happy guy before you people came along. I had a job I liked and a girl I loved and the future looked good. If I backtrack fast enough, maybe I'll be able to salvage something. Tell the rest I've changed my mind and I'm pulling out."

The short stocky man went over and poured himself another drink. "No, you're not, Jan. You aren't enough of a superman to be able to forget those poor devils down there." He gestured at the peaceful city that spread out below them.

"There won't be any trouble in our time," Jan said.

"Or in our children's," agreed Ferdie, "but there will be in our grandchildren's and then it will be too late. Once the row

starts, you know how it will come out. You've got an extra something in your brain—use it!"

Jan looked out into the night and finally turned to answer. Before he could, an angry voice suddenly boomed inside his head.

*"What's holding you up over there? We haven't got all night!"*

"Come on," said Ferdie. "We can argue later. If Karl is wound up enough about something to telepath, it must be important. Me, I'll stick to the telephone. What's the point to having a built-in tranceiver, if you have to put up with a splitting headache every time you use it?" He stepped to the window and climbed up on the sill. "Ready?"

Jan hesitated and slowly climbed up beside him.

"I'll go talk to Karl, anyway," he said. "Maybe you're right, but it still hurts like hell."

"The head?"

"No, the heart. All set?"

Ferdie nodded. They both closed their eyes, tensed, and drifted slowly up into the night.

Karl was stretched out on the couch with his head in Miranda's lap and a look of suffering on his face. She was gently massaging his temples.

"Next time use a telephone," said Ferdie as he and Jan came in.

Karl sat up suddenly. "What took you so long?"

"What do you mean, so long? An aircab would have got us here a lot quicker, but we're supermen—we've got to Levitate." "I'm not amused," said Karl. "Are you all set?" Ferdie nodded. "All ties broken and everything prepared for a neat and tidy disappearance."

"And him?" Karl looked narrowly at Jan.

"He's all right."

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Jan.

"Girl and job dumped down the drain. Do you want the details? Ferdie's boss figured he'd be back. He said Ferdie knew which side his bread was buttered on. My girl didn't say anything; she just slammed the door in my face. And now that that's over, if you'll just detail me a female I'll start breeding little supermen for you. How about Miranda? She's one of the elect."

"Climb off it, Jan," Karl said sharply. "We know it wasn't easy, but dramatics won't help."

Jan threw himself sullenly into an overstuffed chair and stared morosely at the ceiling.



Karl pulled himself to his feet and made a quick survey of the room. ". . . thirty-seven, thirty-eight—I guess we're all here. Go ahead, Henry. You've got the floor."

A tall, prematurely gray man began to speak quietly. "It's got to be tonight. There is heavy cloud cover over Alta Pass that goes up to twenty thousand feet. If we're careful, we should be able to take off without detection. I suggest we leave at once. It'll take some time to move the ship out of the cave and we want to be on our way before the weather clears."

"Check," said Karl. He turned to Miranda. "You know your job. The ship will be back to pick up the new crop in ten months or so."

"I still think you should leave somebody else behind," she objected. "I can't listen twenty-four hours a day."

"You're just looking for company," Karl said impatiently. "The unconscious mental signals that mark the *change* go on for a week or more before the individual knows anything is happening. You'll have plenty of time to make contact."

"Oh, all right, but don't forget to send a relief back for me. It's going to be lonely with all of you gone."

Karl gave her a short but affectionate kiss. "O.K., gang, let's go."

The engine room of the ship consisted simply of an oval table with ten bucket seats spaced equidistantly around it. At the moment, only one of them was occupied. Ferdie sat there, his eyes closed and his face pale and tense. As a hand touched his shoulder, he jumped, and for a moment the ship quivered slightly until the new mind took over.

Ferdie ran his hands through his hair and then pressed them against his aching temples. Then he stood up. There was a slight stagger to his walk as he pulled himself up the ladder into the forward observation room.

"Rough shift?" said Jan.

Ferdie groaned. "They're all rough. If I'd known how much work was going to be involved in this superman stuff, I'd have arranged to be born to different parents. You may think there is something romantic about dragging this tin ark through hyperspace by sheer mental pressure, but to me it feels like the old horse-and-buggy days with me as the horse. Mental muscle, physical muscle—what's the difference? It's still plain hard work. Give me an old-fashioned machine where I can sit back and push buttons."

"Maybe this was your last turn at the table." Jan looked out at the gray nothingness on the other side of the observa-

tion port. "Karl says we're due to pull out of warp this evening."

"And by the time we look around and find that Alpha Centauri has no suitable planets, it'll be my turn to pull us back in again."

Late that evening, a bell clanged through the ship. A moment later, all ten seats in the engine room were occupied.

"Brace yourself and grab hold," snapped Karl. "This is going to take a heap of twisting."

It did. Three times, figures collapsed and were quickly replaced by those waiting behind them, but at last they broke through into normal space. With a sigh of relief, they all relaxed. Karl reached over and switched on the ship intercom.

"How does she look up there, Ferdie?"

"Alpha Centauri blazing dead ahead." There was a slight pause. "Also there's a small man in a derby hat directly off the starboard bow."

Those in the engine room deserted their posts and made a mad dash for the forward observation compartment. Ferdie was standing as if transfixed, staring raptly out into space. As Karl came up and grabbed his arm, he pointed with a shaking finger.

"Look!"

Karl looked. A plump little figure wearing a severely cut business suit, high-buttoned shoes, spats, and a derby hat was floating a scant five yards from the observation port. He waved cheerily at them and then opening the briefcase he carried, removed a large sheet of paper. He held it up and pointed to the words lettered on it in large black print.

"What does it say?" demanded Karl. "My eyes don't seem to be working."

Ferdie squinted. "This is insanity."

"It says that?"

"No, I do. It says, 'May I come on board?'"

"What do you think?"

"I think we're both crazy, but if he wants to, I say let him."

Karl made a gesture of assent to the figure floating outside and pointed aft to the airlock. The little man shook his head, unbuttoned his vest, and reached inside it. He twiddled with something for a moment and then disappeared. A split second later, he was standing in the middle of the observation compartment. He took off his hat and bowed politely to the jaw-dropped group.

"Your servant, gentlemen. My name is Thwiskumb—Fer-

zial Thwiskumb. I'm with Gliterslie, Quimbat and Swench, Exporters. I was on my way to Formalhaut on a customer service call when I noted an odd disturbance in sub-ether, so I stopped for a moment to see what would come out. You're from Sol, aren't you?"

Karl nodded dumbly.

"Thought so," said the little man. "Do you mind if I ask your destination?"

He had to repeat the question before he was able to get a coherent answer. Ferdie was the first to recover enough from shock to say anything.

"We were hoping to find a habitable planet in the Alpha Centauri system."

Mr. Thwiskumb pursed his lips. "There is one, but there are difficulties. It's reserved for the Primitives, you see. I don't know how the Galactic Council would view settlement. Of course, the population has been shrinking of late and there's practically nobody left on the southern continent." He stopped and thought. "Tell you what I'll do. When I get to Formalhaut, I'll give the Sector Administrator a call and see what he has to say. And now if you'll excuse me, I don't want to be late for my appointment. Gliterslie, Quimbat and Swench pride themselves on their punctuality."

He was reaching inside his vest again when Karl grabbed his arm. The flesh felt reassuringly solid.

"Have we gone insane?" begged the leader.

"Oh, dear me, of course not," said Mr. Thwiskumb, disengaging himself gently. "You're just a few thousand years behind on the development cycle. The migration of the Superiors from our home planet took place when your people were still in the process of discovering the use of fire."

"Migration?" repeated Karl blankly.

"The same thing you're off on," said the little man. He removed his glasses and polished them carefully. "The mutations that follow the release of atomic power almost always end up in the evolution of a group with some sort of control over the *terska* force. Then the problem of future relations with the Normals comes up, and the Superiors quite often decide on a secret migration to avoid future conflict. It's a mistake, though. When you take a look at Centauri III, you'll see what I mean. I'm afraid you'll find it a depressing place."

Placing his derby firmly on his head, he gave a genial wave of farewell and disappeared.

A wild look was in Karl's eyes as he held up his arms for silence.

"There's just one thing I want to know," he said. "Have I or have I not been talking to a small man in a derby hat for for the past five minutes?"

Forty-eight hours later, they pulled away from Centauri III and parked in free space until they could decide what they wanted to do. It was a depressed and confused group that gathered in the forward observation compartment to discuss their future.

"There's no use wasting time now talking about what we saw down there," said Karl. "What we've got to decide is whether we're going to push on to other solar systems until we find a planet that will suit our needs, or whether we are going to return to Earth."

A little red-headed girl waved her hand.

"Yes, Martha?" Karl said.

"I think we are going to have to talk about what we saw down there. If our leaving Earth means that we are condemning it to a future like that, we're going to have to go back."

There was an immediate objection from a tense young man in horn-rimmed glasses.

"Whether we go back or ahead will make little difference in our lifetimes, so we can't be accused of personal selfishness if we don't return to Earth. The people it will make a difference to are our descendants. That strange little man who materialized among us two days ago and then vanished is a concrete demonstration of what they can be—if we stay apart and develop the new powers that have been given us. I say the welfare of the new super-race is more important than that of the Ordinaries we left behind!"

There was a short muttering of agreement as he sat down.

"Next?" Karl asked.

Half a dozen people tried to get the floor at once, but Ferdie managed to get recognized.

"I say go back!" he stated. "And since the previous speaker was talking about accusations let me say that I can't be accused of personal bias, either. As far as I'm concerned, I would just as soon spend the next several years cruising around to the far corners to see what's up. But the longer we're gone, the harder it will be to fit ourselves back into normal society.

"Look, we left Earth because we thought it was the best thing for mankind. And when I say mankind, I mean the Normals, the parent race. What we saw down there—" he gestured in the direction of Centauri III—"is dramatic proof

that we were wrong. It would seem that a scattering of Superiors is somehow necessary to keep human society from collapsing. Maybe we act as a sort of essential catalyst or something. Whatever it is, we're needed. If we walk out on Man, we'll never be able to live with ourselves in our brave new world."

Karl looked worried. "I think I agree with you," he said, "but if we go back, we'll be dumped into the old problem of future relations again. Right now there are so few of us that if we were found out, we'd be looked upon as freaks. But what's going to happen when our numbers start to shoot up? Any group that has special powers is suspect, and I don't relish the thought of condemning our descendants to a world where they'll have to kill or be killed."

"If worst comes to worst, they can always take off the way we did," replied Ferdie. "But I'd like to point out that migration was the first solution proposed and the one we've given all our attention to. There must be other ways out, if we look for them. We've got to give it a try, anyway." He turned to the young man in the horn-rimmed glasses. "How about it, Jim?"

The other nodded reluctantly. "I'm dubious, but maybe we should go back and make the try you've been talking about." His voice sharpened. "Under one condition, though. If the Normals start to give us any trouble, we get out again!"

"I'll agree to that," said Ferdie. "How about the rest of you?"

The ayes had it.

There was a sound of polite applause from the doorway. Mr. Thwiskumb had returned. "A very wise decision," he said, "very wise. It demonstrates a commendable social maturity. I am sure your descendants will thank you for it."

"I don't know what for," said Karl sadly. "We're robbing them of all the things that you have. Instantaneous teleportation, for example. It's no particular sacrifice for us—we're just starting to develop the powers within us—but it will be for them. I don't know if we are right, asking them to pay such a price."

"What about the other price?" demanded Ferdie. "What about that scrawny grimy gang down on Centauri III, sitting apathetically in the hot sun and scratching themselves? We also have no right to condemn the Ordinaries to a future like that."

"Oh, you wouldn't be doing that," said Mr. Thwiskumb mildly. "Those people down there aren't Ordinaries."

"What!"

"Dear me, no. They weren't the ones that were left behind. They are the descendants of those who migrated. Those poor devils down there are pure-blooded Superiors. When they ran into the limiting factor, they just gave up."

"Then what accounts for you? You're obviously a Superior."

"That's a very kind thing to say," answered the little man, "but I'm just as ordinary as anyone can be. We're all Ordinaries where I come from. Our Superiors left a long time ago." He chuckled. "It's a funny thing—at the time, we didn't know they were gone, so we didn't miss them. We just went about business as usual. Later, we found them, but it was already too late. You see, the big difference was that we had an unlimited area of development and they didn't. There's no limit to the machine, but there is to the human organism. No matter how much training you have, there is a limit to how loud you can shout. After that, you have to get yourself an amplifier."

"A slight neural rearrangement makes it possible for you to tap and control certain sources of physical energy that aren't directly available to the ordinary man of your planet, but you are still dealing with natural forces . . . and natural organic limits. There is a point beyond which you can't go without the aid of the machine, an organic limiting factor. But after several generations spent in mastering what is inside your heads, rather than struggling for control of the world around you, and the time comes when your natural limits are reached, the very concept of the machine had been lost. Then where do you go from there?"

He waited for an answer, but nobody offered one.

"There is an old story in our folklore," he continued, "about a boy who bought himself an animal somewhat like your terrestrial calf. He thought that if he lifted it above his head ten times a day while it was little, he would build up his strength gradually until he would still be able to lift it over his head when it was a full-grown animal. He soon discovered the existence of a natural limiting factor. Do you see what I mean? When those people down there reached their natural limits, there was no place for them to go but backward. We had the machine, though, and the machine can always be made smaller and better, so we had no stopping point."

He reached inside his vest and pulled out a small shining object about the size of a cigarette case. "This is hooked by a

tight beam to the great generators on Altair. Of course I wouldn't but I could move planets with it if I wanted to. It's simply a matter of applying a long enough lever, and the lever, if you'll remember, is a simple machine."

Karl looked dazed. In fact, everyone did.

"Yeah," he muttered, "yeah, I see what you mean," He turned to the group. "All right, let's get back to the engine room. We've got a long flight ahead of us."

"How long?" asked the little man.

"Four months if we push it."

"Shocking waste of time."

"I suppose you can do better?" Karl inquired belligerently.

"Oh, dear me, yes," said Mr. Thwiskumb. "It would take me about a minute and a half. You Superiors dawdle so—I'm glad I'm normal."

Jan was doing a happy little dance through his apartment when his buzzer rang. He opened the door and Ferdie stepped in.

"I came up on the elevator," he said. "It's a lot easier on the nerves. My, you look pleased with yourself. I know why, too—I saw her coming out of the lobby when I came in. She walked as if she were wearing clouds instead of shoes."

Jan did a little caper. "We're getting married next week and I got my job back."

"I got mine back, too," said Ferdie. "Old Kleinholtz gave me a little lecture about walking out on him when work was at its heaviest, but he was too pleased with himself to do more than a perfunctory job. When he took me back into the lab, I saw why. He's finally got his gadget running."

"What did it turnout to be? A time machine?"

Ferdie grinned mysteriously. "Something almost as good. It lifts things."

"What kind of things?"

"Any kind. Even people. Old Kleinholtz had a little set of controls rigged up that he could strap to his chest. He turned the machine on and went flying around the lab like a bird."

Jan's jaw dropped. "The way we do?"

"Just the same, boy. He's found a way to tap the *terska* force. Really tap it, not suck little dribblets out, as we do. Another ten years and the Ordinaries will be able to do anything we can do, only better. And a good thing too. Telepathy gives us headaches, and levitation is a pleasant Sunday afternoon pastime, but hardly something to build a civilization on. As

Mr. Thwiskumb said, the machine has no natural limits, so I guess our worries about the future are over. Nobody is going to be unhappy about us being able to fly thirty miles an hour when they can make it instantaneous. Looks like superman is obsolete before he even had a chance to get started."

He stretched his arms and yawned. "Guess I'd better get home and hit the sack. It's going to be a busy day at the lab tomorrow."

He walked over to the open window and looked out.

"Flying home?" asked Jan.

Ferdie grinned and shook his head. "I'm waiting until the new improved model comes out."



## disassembly line

"THIS IS OUR MR. HIGGENS," said the blond young desk clerk. "He'll be in charge of taking you apart. And this is Mr. Montgomery, the best reassembler on our staff."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery.

"Likewise," said Mr. Higgs.

Aunt Hester gave a nod of cold acknowledgment of the introduction, and turned back to the reception desk. Higgs and Montgomery eyed her stiff back for a moment, looked at each other, and quietly left.

"One second, please," said the desk clerk, lifting a small stack of cards out of a file drawer.

"As I was saying," said Aunt Hester, "disorder I can tolerate, but not wilful mistreatment." She pointed towards two dejected looking plants that squatted in tubs on each side of the main entrance to the lobby. "Those rubber plants haven't been dusted in months! How do you expect the poor things to be happy with their pores all clogged up with filth and grime?"

There was no answer. She rapped on top of the counter with her umbrella. "Young man! I was speaking to you!"

The young man looked up briefly from the pile of cards he was checking.

"One minute, Miss Winston," he said. "As soon as I find your record, I'll be able to take care of you."

Aunt Hester sniffed through her enormous, beaklike nose and surveyed the general untidiness of the lobby with distaste. She didn't know where she was yet, but it certainly wasn't the sort of hostelry she would have selected for a home away from home, if she'd had any voice in the matter; during her annual trips to Boston she always stayed at the Aldrich, a quiet and dignified family hotel that had been patronized by the Winstons for four generations. But this wasn't Boston . . . and she hadn't had any choice about coming here. She'd just . . . come.

"Ah, here we are." The young man behind the counter

pulled out a card and scanned it quickly. "Sorry to have kept you waiting, but we're terribly shorthanded here. I have to act as desk clerk, registrar, and office manager at the same time."

Aunt Hester didn't look at all sympathetic. "That's no excuse for neglecting the rubber plants," she said severely. "While a plant is not human, it is still part of the divine pattern. The Good Lord put us on Earth to look after those who are unable to look after themselves." She spoke with the brusque assurance of one who had done considerable looking after, and intended to do a lot more.

"But you aren't on . . ." The clerk suddenly caught himself and looked back at her card. "You'll be in 327. It's an inside room, but it's all we have open at the moment. If you'll wait just a few minutes until I can bring your records up to date, I'll take you up there."

"I'll find my own way, thank you," sniffed Aunt Hester.

"I'm afraid you'll have to walk up, then," said the clerk. "I run the elevator too."

It wasn't a very nice room. There was only one window, and it was jammed open. Sulphur fumes from a small crater at the bottom of the air shaft curled yellow streamers into the room, making a tawny haze through which the single light bulb hanging from the ceiling shone dimly. Aunt Hester coughed genteelly and waved a lace-trimmed handkerchief ineffectually in front of her face.

"Something," she said to herself, "is going to have to be done about this."

Her face took on an expression of grim satisfaction as she began planning—she loved to manage things and lives, especially other people's. She was considering organizing a committee of guests to call upon the manager when there was a diffident knock upon her door.

"Who's there?" she called.

Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Higgins entered. Their shoulders were so broad that they had to turn sideways to get through the doorway.

"Time for your first lesson, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery.

"Lesson?" said Aunt Hester. "I made no arrangements for lessons."

"Oh, yes, you did, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery. "You wouldn't be here unless there was something you had to learn."

"Stuff and—"

Aunt Hester never got the "nonsense" out. Before she knew what was up, Mr. Higgins had thrown her to the floor and planted one large brogan firmly on her chest. Aunt Hester was a spare sort who was not too well equipped with natural paddling, and the hobnails hurt. But that hurt was nothing compared to the one that came when Mr. Higgins reached down, grabbed hold of her long and aquiline nose, and tore it out by the roots.

Aunt Hester threshed and howled.

Mr. Higgins handed the nose over to Mr. Montgomery and addressed Aunt Hester sternly: "Come now, ma'am, we can't have this carrying on. How do you expect Mr. Montgomery to reassemble you when you're bouncing around like that?"

She just screamed all the louder. It wasn't until Mr. Montgomery knelt down and locked her head firmly between his knees that he was able to replace her nose in roughly its original position.

He groaned and rubbed his back gingerly as he pulled himself to his feet. "If Dr. Walters doesn't do something for my arthritis, I'm going to transfer over to rack detail! The pay's less and there isn't as much variety, but there wouldn't be any of this infernal bending up and down all day."

"Don't worry, Herbert," said Mr. Higgins comfortingly. "As soon as this damp spell passes, you'll feel better about the whole thing. You know you'd never be happy doing the same thing day after day. You're an artist. Come on, now. As soon as we finish up that case in 814 we'll both go down and have a nice cup of hot tea."

They reached down, picked Aunt Hester up, and placed her on her lumpy bed.

"We'll be back tomorrow morning to give you your next lesson, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery.

They left.

Aunt Hester lay quivering for five minutes before she was able to drag herself over to the phone.

"Desk clerk," said a pleasant voice.

"I want the police!" gasped Aunt Hester.

"There, there," said the desk clerk in a soothing voice. "After a month or so you'll find yourself taking your lessons in your stride. If you'll try to cooperate with Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Higgins when they come around tomorrow, you'll find it will make things much easier."

"There won't be a tomorrow!" snapped Aunt Hester. "I'm leaving here at once!"

"You'll hear from my lawyer," promised Aunt Hester as she passed the desk clerk on her way through the lobby.

Without looking back, she opened the front door and went outside onto the veranda, which was unoccupied except for a sad-faced and somewhat portly man who looked as if he were suffering from a severe toothache. He was sitting in a sagging old rocker and had both feet up on the railing.

"How does one get to town from here?" Aunt Hester demanded.

"One doesn't," he said sadly. It seemed to hurt him to talk, and he tried to form his words without moving his lower jaw. "What were you sent here for?"

"I fail to see that it's any concern of yours," said Aunt Hester primly. "But it just so happens that . . . that . . ."

Her voice suddenly quavered to a stop and a panic-stricken expression came over her face.

"I don't know," she whispered in a frightened voice. "I just don't know. I can't seem to remember. I found myself standing in the lobby, and I seemed to have a reason for being there . . . but what went before is just a blur."

"I know," said the portly man sympathetically. "But you'll remember after a bit. I think they muddle us up at first to make it easier for us. After a lesson or two, you'll suddenly remember everything again, and then you'll understand why you're here."

"Oh, no, I won't! I'm leaving, right now."

"You'll never get as far as the gate."

"We'll see about that," said Aunt Hester. "Good day, sir."

The grounds were surrounded by a high wall, and through a wide archway in it a graveled drive curved up to the veranda. Aunt Hester fixed her eye on the wrought iron gate, which didn't seem more than three hundred yards away, and started toward it with a determined stride.

After ten minutes, she found she was only half way to it.

She glanced back to see if anyone was coming after her. The veranda was still unoccupied except for the portly man. He waved at her. She started to sniff, but finding her nose was still extremely sensitive, didn't. Instead, she started walking toward the gate again.

Aunt Hester was a past president of the Allentown Bird Watchers, and her stride was the efficient mile-eating one of an experienced hiker. On she walked, and on, fighting more and more unsuccessfully to keep down a feeling that something was wrong.

Twenty minutes later, she stopped again.

This time she was three-quarters of the way to the gate—close enough to see that it was partially open, and though a shimmering haze across it made it impossible to see clearly, that there seemed to be a broad highway on the other side.

"Hello!" called a voice from behind her.

She turned around. The pudgy man had come down from the veranda and had walked half way to the gate.

"You'd better start back now," he called. "If you don't, you won't make it in time for supper. In another hour you'll be close enough to the gate to reach forward and touch it, but you could walk the rest of your life and still never quite get through it."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Aunt Hester, and kept on walking.

Her legs were reaching out and taking precise one-yard strides, and when she looked down at little clumps of grass alongside the drive she saw she was passing them at a normal rate. But with the gate, it was a different matter. The longer she walked, the slower her approach became, until at last, in spite of what her senses told her about her rate of locomotion it seemed a though she was standing still.

On and on she went; but even her stubbornness had a limit, and when the dinner gong finally rang, she became aware that she was ravenously hungry as well as being somewhat footsore.

"I'll make a fresh start early tomorrow morning," she promised herself, and turned back toward the hotel. The pudgy man waved at her sympathetically and went in to dinner.

It took her just as long to go back as it had to go out. When she finally staggered back up the steps onto the veranda and collapsed into the nearest chair, it was pitch dark and dinner had been over for two hours. After she partially recovered her breath, she walked stiffly back through the lobby, looking neither left nor right, stonily ignoring the desk clerk's pleasant question as to whether she had enjoyed her walk.

Aunt Hester was an austere person little given to tears, but when she finally got back into her dingy room and shut the door behind her, she could control herself no longer. Exhausted and discouraged, she threw herself on her hard bed, buried her face in her lumpy pillow, and sobbed convulsively until the slight remaining swelling in her long nose was matched by a tearful puffiness around her reddened eyes.

Eventually, her lamentations were cut short by a knock at her door.

"Who's there?" she sniffled.

"Mr. McCreary. I'm the one who was talking to you out on the veranda this afternoon. I saved a piece of chicken for you from supper."

"Go away . . . please."

There was a moment of silence, and then as her stomach growled protestingly, she began to regret her words.

"Er . . . Mr. McCreary?" she said finally in a weak voice.

He was still there. "Yes?" he said eagerly.

"Did you say chicken?"

"I did. I brought some bread and butter, too."

"Just a moment," said Aunt Hester. Going over to the wash basin, she dampened a towel and did what she could to repair the ravages of tears.

"Come in," she said finally.

Ten minutes later, she felt somewhat happier about life. Conversation was a bit strained at first, of course—Aunt Hester had never been alone in a hotel room with a man before, and she was careful to leave the door partly open for appearance's sake.

"I guess I should have listened to you this afternoon," she said finally.

"There are some things people just have to find out for themselves," he said. "I did. I turned back after a half an hour, though." He patted his fat paunch apologetically. "I've got too much bulk on me to do very much in the way of long distance walking. If I ever get back, I'm going to get myself in condition again."

"What do you mean, 'if'?" said Aunt Hester. "You can't just give in and let them keep you here! There must be some way out!"

He shook his head. "There isn't. I've checked. There's some sort of area of distortion that goes all around the place—no matter how long you walk, you never quite get out. No matter how far you go, it always takes as long to cover half the remaining distance as it did to get where you are. Before very long, you're moving forward so slowly that you might as well be standing still. The mathematicians have a name for the process, but I'll be darned if I can remember it."

"Then we're trapped?" Aunt Hester was on the verge of tears again, but didn't want to show it.

"You can call it that. Once a person is brought here, he isn't allowed to return until he has learned his lesson."

"What lesson?" demanded Aunt Hester. "What's all this

talk about lessons? What am I doing here? Why can't I remember?"

"You will," said Mr. McCreary soothingly, "in due time." He stroked his jaw and grinned wryly. His pudgy face took on a boyish expression that Aunt Hester found strangely attractive.

"For once," he said, "I'm going to keep my big mouth shut. It's something you just have to figure out for yourself."

"Will I have to stay here long?" asked Aunt Hester anxiously.

"After all, I've got responsibilities. I've got a job. I've got a family. I can't stay away when everything needs taking care of!"

At the mention of the word family, Mr. McCreary's face fell.

"You're married?"

"No. First there was Mother to take care of, and then my niece, Muriel. I've raised her since her mother died, and I don't know what she'll do without me being around to take care of her."

"How old is she?" asked Mr. McCreary.

"Twenty-two. But she's still a child. Right now, she wants to marry some penniless writer, and if I'm not around to show her what's best for her, she's apt to make a terrible mistake! She's a sweet child, Mr. McCreary, but she just isn't practical . . . I've had Mr. Keeler, our branch manager, over for dinner a dozen times just so the two of them could get to know each other, and instead of playing her cards right, she practically ignores him just because he's a little fat and bald."

"I can understand that," said Mr. McCreary sadly. "It's been a long time since a girl's eyes kindled upon looking at me. I'm not married myself," he added. "For some reason, most people here aren't. It's usually the lonely ones that start tampering with the lives of those around them because they have nothing better to do."

He stood up and smiled shyly. "It's been nice being with you. Good night."

He was almost to the door when her voice halted him. "Mr. McCreary."

"Yes?"

"Please tell me why I'm here."

"I'm sorry, my dear—" the words seemed to slip out without his realizing it—"but I can't. If I did, they'd give me a special refresher course." He wiggled his lower jaw reflectively. "I don't know whether I could take it."

As he shut the door behind him, Aunt Hester sat staring blankly after him, the words *my dear* ringing pleasantly in her ears.

"Perhaps," she whispered to herself, "perhaps after all these lonely years . . ."

But when she thought of her long horse-face and her jutting beak of a nose, the words turned flat and cold. Sighing wearily, she undressed and crawled into bed.

At seven, she was awakened by the buzz of her telephone.

"Yes?" she said sleepily.

"Mr. Higgins and Mr. Montgomery will be up in twenty minutes to give you your lesson. They have a very tight schedule today, and the management would appreciate it if you would be as cooperative as possible."

The next quarter-hour was the longest and worst she had ever known. She thought again of flight, but knew it was hopeless—there was no lock on the door and no place to hide.

When they finally came in, she didn't fight them. She lay back on her bed and closed her eyes.

"That's good, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery encouragingly. "It'll all be over in a minute."

Mr. Higgins took hold of her long nose with his strong right hand, braced himself against the bed, and then, with a sudden wrench, ripped it off her face. It was worse than the day before, because she knew what was coming. She screamed, though she had resolved not to—and by the time Mr. Montgomery had completed his work of reassembly, she was almost unconscious.

It was several minutes after they left before she realized that she was alone—that the lesson for the day was over.

Five minutes later, her memory suddenly came back.

She found Mr. McCreary on the veranda.

He rose to his feet with a look of honest pleasure on his face, and held out his hands to her. Without thinking, she took them.

"It's good to see you," he said.

"It's good to see you, too," she answered. Then, suddenly aware that she was still holding his hands, she dropped them in embarrassment.

"How was the lesson?" he asked.

"Horrible," she said, "horrible."

"So was mine. But no more so than usual."

He led her over to a chair and they both sat in silence, looking out across the bright green grass to the gate that led



to . . . someplace. The haze along the wall rippled and danced like heat waves. There was heavy traffic on the highway beyond, traffic that moved both ways; but it was seen merely as a series of wavering blurs.

"I don't know," he said at last, in response to her unspoken question. "I can guess where they are going, but I have no way of checking on it. All I can say is that if by some weird chance you should discover a way to get through the gate, when you get on the road, turn right."

A faint sound of marching feet came from the other side of the wall, and a faint murmur as if voices were counting cadence. Aunt Hester strained her eyes, but the haze in front of the gate seemed to thicken and she could see nothing.

"They sound like soldiers," she said.

"They are," said Mr. McCreary soberly. "They pass every day now. And every night, too. Sometimes they glow in the dark."

There was another moment of silence and then Aunt Hester said, "Mr. McCreary."

"Why don't you call me Henry?" he said shyly, his eyes fixed on the worn wooden floor of the veranda.

"All right, Henry; if you'll call me Hester."

She paused

"Henry."

"Yes, Hester?"

"I remember now . . . the haze inside my head is all gone."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She nodded.

"Tell me."

"Well," she began, "Muriel and I were setting the table for supper, and I was arguing with her. I had invited Mr. Keeler for dinner, and I was planning to go out afterward and leave them alone. From the hints he'd dropped that day, I knew he was ready to propose. I was trying to persuade Muriel to say yes, and she was being stubborn—she had always been a very dutiful child, Henry, but now her head was so filled with that young writer that I couldn't seem to get any place with her. Then I'm afraid I lost my temper." She hesitated. "It's not very pleasant now that I look back on it . . ."

"Go ahead," said Mr. McCreary sympathetically. "Sometimes it's better to talk things out."

"I told her," said Aunt Hester in a subdued voice, "that I'd given up my whole life for her—that I'd passed up chances

to marry and have a home and children of my own, just so that I could raise her properly. Then I asked her if all those years meant nothing. Her face went white and all the resistance rushed out of her. I told her to pick up the phone and call her young man and tell him that she was getting married and could never see him again. She stood like a dead person, and I picked up the phone and closed her fingers over it. She started to dial his number . . . and then suddenly the whole room vanished, and I found myself standing in the hotel lobby. Did something like that happen to you?"

"Yes," said Henry. "Just about. Everybody here has a story something like that. I've always talked too much, and sometimes the things I say hurt people. I don't intend to, but things just slip out. It kept getting worse and worse.

"You see," he said, "I haven't any family, and ever since I've been in Allentown I've lived down at the Athletic Club. I've always been afraid of women, and sitting around the lounge talking is one of the only ways I have of fighting off loneliness. I guess you could call me an old gossip. I had no life of my own, so I gained a sort of vicarious excitement by talking about the lives of others."

As he talked, his hand crept over and touched hers. She shivered, but didn't pull away.

"I live in Allentown, too," she said.

It was two weeks later, after a most difficult lesson, that Mr. Montgomery paused at the door of her room and said: "Mr. McCreary is leaving us today, ma'am. I thought you might like to know."

She felt the old familiar loneliness start to grow within her again. "Can I say good-bye to him?"

Mr. Montgomery nodded. "You'd better hurry, ma'am. He's waiting for you out on the veranda."

She ran down the stairs and out to him.

"Henry," she said, and her voice choked. "I . . . I . . ." She stopped, annoyed at her sudden inarticulateness. All her life she had prided herself on her ability to call a spade a spade, and now she found herself blushing and stuttering like a schoolgirl. "I'm very glad for you," she finished lamely.

"Is that all?" he asked.

She started to say "no" but she couldn't form the word. There was a moment of awkward silence.

"Well," he said finally, "I guess I've finally learned to keep my big mouth shut." He fingered his chronically swollen jaw. "After thirty-seven hundred disassemblies, I should have."

"When are you leaving?"

"Any minute now." He, too, seemed to be having trouble with his vocal cords. He swallowed twice and then said, "Hester . . ."

"Yes, Henry?"

"When you come back, could I come and see you sometime?"

"Of course, Henry. Mine is a big house and an empty one. With Muriel gone, I'll be lonely."

Mutely, he reached out his arms as if to draw her to him. She shut her eyes and waited, her pulse throbbing in her throat. She felt suddenly young again. Then, just as suddenly, the warm feeling vanished, and she felt worn and tired and alone.

She opened her eyes to the empty veranda. Henry had been taken back.

Dry-eyed she went back to her room and picked up the telephone beside her bed.

"Desk."

"I want to see the man in charge of this place at once."

"He's terribly busy," said the clerk uncertainly.

Something had happened to Aunt Hester. Instead of snapping back, she said humbly, "I know, but this is terribly important."

There was a moment of silence at the other end of the wire and then he said, "He'll be right up."

Two minutes later, the blond young desk clerk walked into her room. Aunt Hester looked past him expectantly, waiting for somebody to follow him in. Nobody did.

"Isn't he coming?" she said finally.

The young man chuckled. "He did. I'm him. In addition to running the elevator, I also run the whole place. I wasn't kidding when I said we were short-handed. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I've got to get back," said Aunt Hester quietly. "I'm needed."

"Yes?"

"I want to triple my lesson load."

The young man looked suddenly grave. "I suppose you have a special reason?"

"A very special one."

"Mr. McCreary?"

Aunt Hester laughed mirthlessly and pointed at the mirror. "With a nose like that, what chance do you think I stand. No, it's my niece—she's about to make a stupid marriage, and I've got to get back in time to stop it."

"But Mr. McCreary seemed most attentive to you while he was with us."

"He was just lonely," said Aunt Hester sadly. "He won't be any more, once he gets back with his friends. Can I take the extra lessons?"

"Increasing the number doesn't necessarily mean shortening your stay, you know," warned the young man, "and once you've contracted for them, it is forbidden to cancel. Most of our students are barely able to keep going with one a day. Nobody has ever tried to take three."

"In that case, I'll be the first," said Aunt Hester grimly. "My mind's made up!"

"It may take you years yet."

"I know."

He picked up the phone and spoke softly into it. "In that case, we will begin at once," he said, turning back to her. "Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Higgins will be up in a minute."

He sat down in one of the straight-backed chairs and lit a cigarette. "Have you figured out where you are yet?"

She shook her head. "I know it isn't Hell, because people can return. And if there is anything to what I've heard in church all my life, this certainly isn't Heaven."

"It's under the same central management, though. This is my baby," he said proudly, "and I've got a private hunch that within another hundred years Hell will be running at less than twenty per cent of its rated capacity."

"I got the idea from watching Pavlov's experiments on conditioned reflexes in dogs. If it works on animals I thought, why shouldn't it work on humans? It was a tough fight to get permission to set this place up—the older group, with all their ideas about hellfire and damnation, have more power than you might think. But when I pointed out that after all these millennia of running Hell at full blast, the damnation rate has never dropped by a single per cent, they had to give in."

"'Reform's the ticket,' I said. 'Catch them before they've damned themselves and recondition them. What's the point in locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen?' They finally agreed to let me set up an experimental operation. I have a ridiculously small budget, and my teaching and research staff is only half the size it should be, but in spite of that I've had a redemption rate of one hundred per cent since I first started operations."

"Redemption through reconditioning! It's a simple matter of managerial common sense: Catch them when they first

start to slip off the straight and narrow, correct the slight moral defect that's causing the difficulty, and you've got no more trouble after that. I remember the case of a decent enough fellow whose only fault was that he'd talk the leg off somebody who came near him. He just wanted to be sociable, but it got so that people started shunning him. This just made matters worse, and he started to grow sour inside. Then one night he cornered some poor fellow at a party and . . ."

Aunt Hester never did find out what happened then, because Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Higgins made a sudden entrance.

"This is your last chance to change your mind," said the young man sternly. "Remember, it may be years before you will be permitted to leave here."

Aunt Hester shook her head and stretched out on the bed. "I'm ready," she said grimly, and shut her eyes.

There was a moment of whispered conversation among the three men, and then she felt Mr. Higgins strong fingers taking hold of her nose. She clenched her teeth and waited. When it came, the pain was not as severe as it usually was.

"What'll I do with it?" said the voice of Mr. Higgins.

"Throw it in the wastebasket," said the voice of Mr. Montgomery. Aunt Hester heard a dull thud as something thunked into the metal container.

She bit down on her lower lip and waited. She felt Mr. Montgomery's fingers working over the place where her nose had been. Wherever they touched, a blessed numbness took place of the searing pain. He seemed to be twisting and molding something.

At last he stepped back with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Mr. Montgomery," said Mr. Higgins in tones of awe, "you are a proboscitory Rembrandt."

"You may open your eyes now, Miss Winston," said the young man.

She did. The great beak that had cleft the air between her mouth and her eyes for the last forty-eight years was gone. She looked over at the wastebasket.

"It wasn't a thing of beauty," she said, "but it was the only nose I had. I'm going to miss it—especially when I have a cold."

The three men grinned at her.

"You haven't been ruined," the young man said. "Go look in the mirror."

She did. She blinked as if she couldn't believe her eyes, and then let out a whimper of delight.

"Well?" said the young man to Aunt Hester.

"I'm ready," she said quietly.

"What have you learned since you've been here?"

She told him.

There was a horrible moment of waiting, and then the look on his face told her that she had passed. She ran over and gave Mr. Higgins and Mr. Montgomery each a kiss so long and fervent that she left them breathless and blushing. She was starting toward the young man to do the same to him when suddenly, without warning, and with no period of transition, the hotel room vanished and she found herself standing by her own dining room table with three forks in her hand.

Across from her stood a pretty young girl, her face set and stubborn and her hands clenched.

"I don't care how much money he has!" the girl stormed. "He's old and he's fat and he's nasty and—" her voice broke and she started to wail—"and I love Alan."

Aunt Hester went over to her and gave her a little hug. "Look at me, child."

Muriel looked . . . and then looked again. "Aunt Hester! Your nose! What happened!"

"I had it taken care of, honey. You're just so used to me that you probably haven't taken a good look at me in years."

"But . . . you're beautiful!"

The older woman looked complacently into the mirror over the sideboard. "Stuff and nonsense," she said, and started removing one place setting from the table.

Muriel watched her in surprise. "Isn't Mr. Keeler coming?" she said hopefully.

"There's been a change of plans."

The girl let out a tremendous sigh of relief. "Then we can have dinner alone, just like always."

"Oh, no, we won't. You go find your young man and tell him to buy you a hot dog or something." Her fingers went up and caressed the pert snubness of her new nose lovingly. "And, Muriel, if you ever catch me sticking my nose into somebody else's business again, give me a good kick where it will do the most good. I've learned my lesson the hard way, and I'd hate to have to go back for a refresher course."

"Back where?" asked Muriel.

Aunt Hester put her arms around the girl and drew her close. "I hope you never find out, dear . . . Now be off with you!"

Muriel made one last feeble protest: "But I don't want to leave you alone in this gloomy old house."

Aunt Hester smiled a secret smile. "I have a feeling that somebody down at the Athletic Club is sitting by his telephone, waiting for an invitation to dinner. You run along, honey. I won't be lonely. Not ever again."

## a spudget for thwilbert

THERE WAS GLOOM in the small and dingy office of the Inter-galactic Breakfast Food Corporation. Herman Panzel, the president, sat glumly at his desk, staring at the sales chart on the farther wall and the thick red line that had started at zero six months ago and rested there securely ever since. His partner, Reuban Arnot, stood by the dirty window, gazing blankly out over the busy spaceport that linked the third planet of Sol with the rest of the galaxy.

"Well?" said Panzel at last.

Arnot turned and gave an expressive shrug. "We might as well face it," he said. "SNERPSIES has scooped the market with their Bild-a-Bomb kit."

"But look at the customers they are losing," growled Panzel. "A splattered child doesn't send in box tops."

"Maybe so, but SNERPSIES are selling and SQUIGGLES aren't." Arnot gestured sadly toward the sales chart. "The distributors won't touch our stuff until we come up with something special in the way of a premium, and that takes cash we haven't got." He leveled an accusing glance at his partner. "You and your big ideas of going legit! If we'd hung on to our take from that last sucker we could be out on one of the pleasure satellites right now really living it up."

"All right, so I was wrong," said Panzel defensively. "But you'll have to admit that a completely automatic breakfast food factory for only 25,000 U's looked like a real deal."

Arnot sneered. "It was a real deal all right. Especially when it turned out that every box we produce has to be stamped UNFIT FOR HUMANOID CONSUMPTION."

"So what? Nobody ever eats the stuff anyway. And speaking of eating, don't forget that if I wasn't roping in a patsy on that phony off-planet franchise deal once in a while, you wouldn't be!"



Further discussion was interrupted by a timid knock at the door.

"More trouble," said Panzel.

"Maybe not," said Arnot and yelled, "Come in."

There was a scrabbling noise at the knob and then the door swung open slowly and a sad-faced, lizard-like creature came waddling in. Rearing himself up on his hind legs until he stood his full three foot four, he blinked nearsightedly at the two through mild protruding eyes.

"I beg your pardon," he said in a meek voice that had strange whistling overtones to it, "but is this the office of the Intergalactic Breakfast Food Corporation?"

"Yeah," growled Panzel, obviously not impressed by the shabby appearance of the little reptile. "So what?"

"I am Count Whutzle, Count Thwilbert Whutzle, Hereditary War Lord of Hun." He paused for effect and then said proudly, "Licensed Galactic Trader. But I haven't got a family. Does that disqualify me?"

"From what?"

"From a BIG INCOME and a PERMANENT POSITION?" The little creature fished a crumpled news-facsimile sheet out of the worn pouch that hung at his side, smoothed it out, and began to read.

*"You owe it to yourself and your family to give us the opportunity to talk to you and let us prove that we can put you in the 6,000-15,000 a year bracket. Valuable distributorships now available. Spaceship required."*

"You can say that again," said Arnot.

Thwilbert's protruding, lackluster eyes blinked in bewilderment. "Pardon, but what?"

"Spaceship required."

The little reptile let out a burbling hiss of relief. "This I have. It isn't of the latest production but it does have many holds."

Arnot started to let out a snort of disbelief and then caught himself.

"Let's see your papers."

Obediently Thwilbert fished a green card out of his pouch and held it out. Panzel took it, examined it, and then let out a surprised whistle.

"He's got a Mark-61!"

"Clear title?"

"Yeah. What's more, he paid cash!"

With no transition, winter turned to spring. Thwilbert sud-

denly found himself hoisted in the air and tenderly deposited in the softest chair in the office.

"I hope you'll excuse the seeming lack of warmth in your reception," cooed Panzel. "We're just not used to being visited by celebrities . . . especially Hereditary War Lords."

Thwilbert's stubby tail gave an embarrassed twitch. "It isn't very much to be War Lord on Hun. I was third hatched, that's all. In fact, it's less than very much to be War Lord because on Hun we never have any wars. Everybody's too run-down to do any fighting. And anyway, there's nothing worth fighting over. On Hun there's just the sand and the spudgets and the whortle trees and us. There's enough whortle so that everybody can have all they want to eat and enough sand so that anybody who wanted any could have miles and miles all for himself." He sighed like a leaky tea-kettle. "There just wasn't much future to being Hereditary War Lord. That's why I volunteered."

Both Panzel and Arnot were somewhat confused at this point but they didn't let it show. The provocative scent of a liquefiable asset was titilating their nostrils.

"Volunteered?" said Panzel brightly.

"To be a galactic trader. All the other planets import and export so the Egg Father figured we'd better too. So he took part of the planetary treasury to buy a ship and gave the rest to me to buy additional trade goods."

"Additional trade goods?" said Arnot hungrily. "What did you start with?"

"Spudget eggs," said Thwilbert. "Spudgets are all we've got on Hun besides us. We sort of hoped that maybe someplace, somebody would be able to find a use for them. We've never been able to."

He reached into the pouch that hung at his side and took out a glittering jewel-like object.

"Here's one. Hold it up to the light and look through it. Spudgets are kind of pretty."

Panzel did. Within the transparent sphere was suspended a tiny green dragon with gauzey golden wings.

"It's beautiful," he said in an awed voice. He turned the egg slowly between his fingers. "It looks almost alive."

"It is," said Thwilbert. "Carry it around in your pocket for a couple of weeks so it gets a little of your body heat and one morning you'll wake up to find a beautiful little spudget flying around the room. They make wonderful pets. Especially for children. They love each other on first sight."

Arnot grabbed the egg from his partner and examined it

feverishly. "How many of these you got?" he demanded, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice.

"A couple of million," said Thwilbert. "They don't take up much space."

"And they eat . . .?"

"Whortle leaves. I got my aft hold full of it."

Arnot grabbed his partner and hustled him off to the far corner of the office. There was a moment of whispered consultation and then Panzel rushed over to his desk, picked up his com set, and dialed.

"Central Information," said a tiny voice.

"I want to find out something about a small reptile called the spudget."

"Planet of origin?"

"Hun."

"One moment, please," said the voice, and then a second, obviously recorded, voice came on.

"The spudget, sometimes known as the dwarf huxle, is a small herbivorous reptile found only on the planet Hun. Its eggs, prized throughout the planet for their beauty, remain dormant until exposed to a heat of eighty degrees for about two weeks.

"The spudget is an extremely affectionate creature that is constitutionally incapable of violence. Of special interest is its beautiful song. The spudget subsists on a variety of *cannibus sativa* known as whortle. Its dwarfed size is believed to be due to the absence of an essential—"

There was a sudden click as Panzel reached forward and turned the speaker off. He turned to Thwilbert. "Mr. Thwut-zle," he said and then hesitated. "What do they usually call you at home?"

"Well," said Thwilbert thoughtfully, "sometimes they say 'hey you' and sometimes they say 'hey you over there' but mostly they don't bother saying anything."

Panzel's genial smile stiffened.

"As Hereditary War Lord you must have a title."

Thwilbert thought for a moment. "Well, if somebody was to write me a really official letter I suppose they'd start out with Your Malignancy. Only nobody writes really official letters on Hun, and even if they did, knowing me, they'd probably begin with Hey You."

"Your Malignancy . . ." Panzel had trouble getting the title out but somehow he managed to keep a straight face while he was doing it. "Your Malignancy made a casual

reference to part of the planetary treasury being left over after your ship was bought?"

"It wasn't much of a treasury," said Thwilbert. "There was only about five thousand left. When I saw your advertisement about how H.P. of Arcturus made four hundred univs his first day out without any previous experience, I thought I might invest part of it in your product."

"Part of it?" Panzel frowned and then said severely, "Really, Your Malignancy, I don't think you realize the scope of our operations."

Thwilbert quailed at the stern tone and let out a squeaky little sigh as he hopped down and started for the door on all fours.

"I was afraid big executives like you wouldn't be interested in a little operation like mine." He reached up for the door-knob but he didn't quite make it. Somehow he was back in the soft seat again. Panzel bent over him, stabbed an index finger into the dusty scales of his hollow chest, and roared:

"ARE YOU A QUITTER!"

Thwilbert found himself involuntarily shaking his head in denial.

"Of course not! There is power within you, Whutzle—tremendous power just waiting to be released. You know it and I know it. Your chance is here! The time is now!"

The office seemed to ring with a flourish of invisible trumpets.

"Let me be the first to shake hands with our newest franchised dealer."

The little lizard looked slightly dazed as first Mr. Panzel and the Mr. Arnot pumped his right paw vigorously.

"And now," said the president smoothly, "to the matter of the necessary capital investment."

Thwilbert's throat pouch began to twitch nervously. "But that five thousand is all I've got and . . ."

"That's all right," interrupted Arnot. "I realize that you realize that it isn't enough but I'm sure that we can talk Mr. Panzel into accepting a first mortgage on your ship for the balance." With a swift gesture he whisked several complicated looking forms out . . .

"Now if you'll just sign here . . . and here . . . and here . . ."

Thwilbert began to wiggle unhappily. "Maybe I'd better take a little time to think it over," he said hesitantly. "I'm pleased and grateful that you gentlemen should have so much faith in me, but five thousand is an awful lot of money. And

if I mortgage my ship . . . well . . . I mean, it just isn't me. Hun is depending on me."

"Ah," said Panzel. "Mr. Arnot, it occurs to me that in our excitement we have neglected to show His Malignancy the proven item with which R.A. of Sirius made 3429 univs his first week."

"Thirty-four hundred in a single week!"

"Average, just average," said Panzel airily. He pulled open his desk drawer, reached in, and pulled out a gaudily colored carton. His voice lowered reverently. "SQUIGGLES, The Breakfast Food of Supermen, a wonderful body building product containing that rare vitamin complex, K-9."

"And that isn't all," chimed in Arnot. "They not only snap, crackle, and pop—they wiggle while you eat."

Thwilbert was properly impressed. Before he had a chance to realize just what was happening, he had affixed his name to several papers, signed a check for five thousand univs, given Panzel a mortgage on his Mark-61, and was being ushered smoothly out of the office.

"We'll be down to see you off in the morning," said Panzel. "Give us your berth number and we'll have that junk you're carrying dumped out so you'll be able to carry a maximum load of SQUIGGLES."

"I'm in slot thirty-seven," said Thwilbert, "but isn't tomorrow awfully early? I mean, shouldn't I spend some time here in the home office getting a little training?"

"Be a waste of time," said Arnot. "You're a natural, Your Malignancy, a natural!"

The next morning the early bird set out for Canopus 4 looking for the worm. In his heart was high resolve, in his pouch a spudget egg almost ready to hatch, and in his holds an incredible number of cartons of SQUIGGLES—each carefully stamped UNFIT FOR HUMANOID CONSUMPTION.

Once the distributors got a look at the premium, SQUIGGLE soared to fantastic heights. The Intergalactic Breakfast Food Corporation asked, and received, a hundred box tops and five univs for each spudget egg, and it wasn't long before several thousands of them were transferred to the pants pockets of a like number of small boys.

Business boomed even more as tiny spudgets began to come to life and break out of their shells. They were affectionate little beasts, loving everybody and being loved in return—but never more loved than when they began to sing. Their song was more golden than their wings, a liquid trilling that

pulsed out in rich impossible arpeggios. At sunset they sang, swinging the air in flashing spirals, but always when their song was done they came winging back to perch contentedly on the shoulders of their small masters and chirp sleepy little night tunes in their ears.

Delight rode the land . . . until the first spudgets hatched began to exhibit signs of hunger. Days passed, and as their little ribs began to project through their iridescent skins, their happy songs changed to mournful laments.

Small boys went sobbing to their fathers, and their fathers wrote long and angry letters to the Intergalactic Breakfast Food Corporation; only to receive soothing replies informing them that an adequate supply of whortle, the spudgets' favorite food, would shortly be made available at only five box tops and one univ per feeding.

"Flowers!" said Panzel suddenly as he poured himself another drink of Aldebaranian *stenga*. "I think we should send some flowers."

"Where and who for?" asked Arnot as he reached over and took possession of the bottle.

"To Canopus 4. What was that lizard's name anyway, Worsel?"

Arnot thought for a moment. "No, Worsel that was flying croc from out Valentia way who we conned out of his lens. Whutzle was our boy's name, Thwilbert Whutzle. But why send flowers?"

Panzel gave a nasty chuckle. "When I unloaded the whortle, I cleaned out the private stock he had tucked away in the ship's larder."

"So?"

Panzel snickered again. "You know what he's been eating for the last six weeks?"

The other shook his head.

"Squiggles!"

Just then there was an imperious knock at the door and before they could answer it, it swung open and an imposing figure in the uniform of the Galactic Guard stalked in. He spoke briefly and then left, leaving behind him two broken promoters.

"How was I to know that whortle was a dangerous narcotic?"

"Save your breath," growled Arnot, "We've got to move fast if we're going to salvage anything out of this mess."

"But they're going to burn our whortle. What'll we do about all those hungry spudgets?"

"Find something else they'll eat, stupid. Now let's get to work!"

They obtained one of the first spudgets to be hatched and anxiously tried every type of food they could think of. The little dragon would nibble lackadaisically at what was put before it, sob softly, and then promptly throw up. In the meantime sales of their main competitor, SNERPSIES, spurted ahead as grim faced small boys labored over Bild-a-Bomb kits in attics and basements. Things were at their worst when they got a sudden emergency call from outer space.

"It isn't for myself," said Thwilbert apologetically, his voice almost inaudible because of the distance the beam had to cover, "but my spudget. He hatched a week ago and he's hungry. In fact we're both hungry. You didn't leave us any whortle."

"Cut him off," growled Arnot to his partner. "We got enough troubles without spending the day yaking with an undersized lizard at five univs a minute. Tell him to break out the SQUIGGLES. That'll put them both out of their misery."

"We did," wailed the distant voice, "but my spudget . . ."

Arnot jumped up and shoved his partner away from the com set. "Hold it," he shouted. "Did you say you were feeding your spudget SQUIGGLES?"

"Yes, but he doesn't like them very well, and for the last couple of days . . ."

"He will eat them, though?"

"Yes, but . . ."

With a howl of glee Arnot broke the connection. "Let's get going, pal," he shouted to his partner. "This time we'll really clean up."

This time they really did. The automatic factory worked round the clock due to the unexpectedly hearty appetites displayed by the spudgets who, in spite of a certain amount of initial gagging, once the word was passed soon regained their normal tunefulness and plumpness on a steady diet of SQUIGGLES. Arnot and Panzel took one good look at their rapidly expanding bank account and promptly took off for a two-week swing around the plusher of the pleasure satellites. They returned just in time to find their newly acquired secretary emptying her desk with a determined expression on her face.

"I quit!" she said angrily. "I ain't going to work in no zoo. That pet of yours has gone through fifty boxes of SQUIGGLES in the last twenty-four hours."

"What's the matter?" asked Panzel anxiously.

Without a word she went over to the closet where the corporation's demonstration spudget was kept, and dramatically threw open the door. Instead of a twitter of welcome from a tiny glittering dragon, a five hundred pound lizard came wandering into the room, croaked affectionately, and tried to climb into Panzel's lap.

"And that ain't all," said the secretary as she started toward the door. "Its voice is changing. All morning it's been trying to sing bass." She shuddered, "Me, I don't want to be around when it finally gets its full growth."

After the door slammed there was a long moment of silence and Panzel slowly reached for his desk com.

"The spudget," said the tinny voice from Central Information, "sometimes known as the dwarf huxle, is a small herbivorous reptile . . ."

"I know all that," interrupted Panzel in a shaking voice. "What I want to know is why it's called the dwarf huxle. The one I've got is up to five hundred pounds and it's still growing."

"Its dwarfed size is believe to be due to the absence of an important vitamin complex in its only food, the whortle leaf. This complex has been tentatively identified as K-9, a growth complex essential to reptiles."

Panzel looked at Arnot and Arnot looked at Panzel and then they both looked at the box of SQUIGGLES. The large K-9 printed in red on its front seemed to wink at them.

Herman Panzel, former president of the Intergalactic Breakfast Food Corporation, and Reuban Arnot, former executive vice-president and treasurer of the same organization, having just squandered their last deciuniv on a cup of coffee substitute, sat disconsolately in a small dingy cafeteria down by the spaceport of a small dingy planet, half way across the galaxy, waiting for something to happen. Nothing was.

"At least we're alive," said Arnot. "They wanted to lynch us."

"We won't be for long unless we make some arrangement that involves a meal once in a while," said Panzel. "Let's face it, we're either going to have to go to work or starve, and much as I dislike the former . . ." His voice trailed off as he spotted a morning news-facsimile abandoned on an adjoining table. He went over and got it. Bringing it back, he spread it open to the Help Wanted section and began to pour through the ads.



"Find something light," suggested Arnot. "I've got a weak back."

"That isn't all that's weak," snorted the other. "It was your bright idea bout those spudget eggs that got us into all this. Now let's see you get us out."

"Give me the paper then," said Arnot and pulled it over to him. There was a moment of silence as he considered and then rejected offer after offer. Suddenly his eyes lit up.

"This is for us!"

"*'Would you like to make 150 univs in just half an hour? T.W. did'*"

"Go ahead," said Panzel eagerly. "This sounds like what we've been looking for."

Arnot let out a sudden whistle of amazement and then said in a strangled voice, "Thwilbert!"

"What?"

"Look!"

Sure enough, it was Thwilbert, in fact a pair of Thwilberts. Two pictures stood at the head of a quarter page advertisement. One was of a weak emaciated lizard who looked just like the one who had shambled into their office so many months before. It was captioned BEFORE. The other was of a sleek and handsome saurian, scales iridescent instead of a dirty gray, sunken chest now filled out with bulging muscles, and an alert air of vigorous self-confidence instead of the old diffidence. It was captioned AFTER. Above the pictures stretched a banner caption which proclaimed, FROM A 36 POUND WEAKLING TO THE GALAXY'S MOST PERFECTLY DEVELOPED REPTILE. Underneath it continued, *"Rejecting old inefficient substitutes, millions of sentient saurians are now demanding . . ."* Arnot's voice choked off. "Read me the rest," he said. "All of a sudden I can't see so good."

Panzel took the paper and continued

*"... millions of sentient saurians are now demanding SQUIGGLES, the wonder food that contains the magic reptilian growth element, K-9. Valuable franchises now open. Send 10 univs to Thwilbert Whutzle, President, Intergalactic Breakfast Food Company, Hun, for complete information."*

There was a long silence and then with a note of almost paternal pride, Herman Panzel said softly, "And he's making them pay for the privilege of being taken! Arnot, we're getting old."

"But he's not taking them," said Arnot. "The stuff works." He hesitated for a moment and then looked back at the ad-

vertisement. "Do you think he'd let us in for nothing? One fifty in half an hour sounds mighty good to me."

"Could be," said Herman Panzel rising decisively to his feet. "After all, we're the ones who gave him his start."

## training device

THE UNSHAVEN SERGEANT slowly surveyed the handful of new replacements and then let loose a stream of tobacco juice that just missed the feet of the blonde boy who stood at the end of the irregular line.

"Well?" he said finally.

Private Hatch stepped hesitantly forward, saluted awkwardly, and held out a manila envelope.

"We were told to report to Lieutenant Cutler, sir."

The sergeant spat again. "My name's Black," he growled. "Sergeant Black. The only one that gets sirred around here is the lieutenant and he ain't in no position to take any pleasure in it." He pointed to a bloodstained shelter half-covered with a swarm of buzzing green flies that had something under it. "He got his last night, so I'm running things until headquarters digs up a stray louie somewheres. Four of you go and dig a hole over there and get him underground. He's getting ripe already."

The replacements shuffled their feet and looked at each other, but nobody made a move toward the bloody bundle that once had been a man.

Black's voice cracked like a whip. "When I say do something, I want it done now, not tomorrow. "You!"—he stabbed a finger at the blond boy—"What's your name?"

"Hatch, sir . . . I mean, sergeant."

"You're in charge of the burial detail. Take the three men next to you and get that grave dug. And make it deep enough. God knows when we'll be getting out of this hole, and unless you get him a good three feet under he's going to stink up the place. The rest of you come with me."

The four men watched as the sergeant led the rest into a dugout that cut into the side of the steep hill that stood between them and the enemy, and then reluctantly turned to the business at hand. Private Hatch went off by himself and got sick afterward.

*"I'd like to resign, sir. I didn't know it was going to be like this."*

*"Nonsense, son. After you have a couple of actions under your belt, you won't mind a bit."*

*There was a momentary blaze of light through the side vision port as the great training ship's orbit took it out of the third planet's shadow into the incandescent glare of the sun, and then it dimmed as a damping shield slid automatically into place.*

*"But, sir, he'd be alive now if I hadn't got scared and made him run."*

*The officer shrugged impatiently. "Another week, another month, what difference does it make? After all, we don't start these wars. As for your losing your head—you obviously have to be censored for it, but I wouldn't worry about it too much. During your first action anything can happen. It's how you hold up during your second and third and fourth that's important."*

*"But for those few minutes I was him. I felt what he felt when I made him run away. When the bullet hit, it hit me!"*

*"So now you know what it feels like. Next time you'll be more careful. Request for permission to resign denied."*

*A soft chime sounded from the wall speaker and then a crisp voice said, "Now hear this. Now hear this. All cadets will report to training stations at 36:82. All cadets will report to training stations at 36:82. That is all."*

*As the voice from the speaker died, the officer behind the desk gave a gesture of dismissal.*

*"All right, Larn, you've had your say. Now report to your station and draw yourself a new body. And remember that someday before too long you may be in a spot where you'll have to use your own. The sooner you learn how to take care of it, the better."*

*"Replacements," announced Sergeant Black pontifically, "ain't worth the powder it takes to blow them to hell. And when they finally learn enough the hard way to be of some use around here, it usually ain't soon enough.*

*"Now listen, and listen good. We got that whole damn ridge to hold, and only half enough men to hold it with. Eighteen men got it during the last attack—for replacements for which I get you characters. I got just one word for you and I want you to remember it anytime you get a sudden impulse to make like a hero. You only got one body. When that's gone, the QM ain't going to issue you another one. So*

take care of it and don't get it full of holes. You ain't much, but you're all I got—and God knows when I'll get any more once you're gone!"

Private Hatch wiggled slowly along the shallow furrow in the hard ground that passed as a communication trench until he reached an emplacement on the crest of the ridge, a natural cleft in the rock that had been banked with sandbags.

"Sergeant Black said I was supposed to relieve you," he said to a hollow-eyed pfc who squatted listlessly beside the machine gun that poked out through a narrow slit to cover the forward slope. The other gave a tired nod and moved over to give him room.

"Got a cigarette?"

Hatch slid down beside him and handed over a crumpled pack.

"How many did they send up this time?"

"Eleven."

The pfc let out a low groan. "That means I don't get out of here for another two weeks anyway. Your first time up?" It was a statement rather than a question but Hatch nodded anyway.

"Fine experience for a young man," said the pfc with a sour grin. "Builds character." He took a last drag on the cigarette, aimed carefully, and with a quick flip of his index finger sent it arcing toward the machinegun slot in the sandbags in front of them. When it went through without touching either side he gave a little grunt of satisfaction, and picking up a small sharp rock, made a scratch on the boulder beside him.

"I'm getting better," he said. "That's thirty-six straight without a miss. Six more and I'll have the company record. There's no real competition left, though, with the lieutenant gone. That boy really had a good eye."

Hatch thought of the thing under the canvas and swallowed with difficulty.

"What happened?"

"Damn if I know," said the pfc. "Patrol came over last night—nothing special, they were just feeling around—and suddenly for no good reason at all the lieutenant starts to blubber like a baby and takes off over the skyline. They got him before he got twenty yards."

"I had to help bury him," said the blond boy. "I got sick."

"You'll get used to it," said the pfc. "Guess I'd better get down and get some chow and a little shut-eye. I've got a

hunch it may be rough out tonight. You hold the fort. I'll be back to relieve you about sundown."

Private Hatch peeped cautiously out through the firing slit at the arid expanse of rocky ground that stretched down in front of him, and then back at the pfc.

"Anything special I should watch for?" he asked uncertainly.

The pfc showed yellowed teeth as he gave a short bark of a laugh. "Yeah, our friends across the way. They start coming you stop 'em. The machine gun jams, you use your carbine. Your carbine jams, you use your teeth. Your teeth jam, you send a letter through channels and requisition a new set." He laughed again and then slapped the blond boy on the shoulder. "Relax, kid. Nothing ever happens around here until after sundown, and I'll be back to show you the ropes before then." With an expert wiggle he slipped into the shallow communication trench, and in a moment was gone.

Hatch found his fingers shaking a bit when he tried to light a cigarette. It didn't taste right and without thinking he flipped it toward the machinegun slot. It hit six inches to one side and rolled back to his feet. He sat staring at it for a moment and then picked it up and stuck it back in his mouth.

*It was a good quarter of a mile back to the training stations and Larn had to run to make it on time. Cadets weren't allowed to use the grey tubes except during emergencies and this wasn't an emergency—it was just the second day of advanced training. The other cadets in his section were already strapped into their transpsych trainers when he got there. Nobody said anything but he could tell from the way they were damping their thoughts that they hadn't forgotten his fiasco with the Blue lieutenant the day before. His fingers felt thick and clumsy as he slid the shining helmet over his head and adjusted the webbing that held him inert in his elongated cradle.*

*"Ready?"*

*He wanted to strip off his harness and run back to the cramped security of his quarters, but he didn't. Instead he reached out his foot and kicked over the switch that connected the helmet on his head with the disassociaters.*

The pfc had guessed wrong. For once the enemy didn't wait for darkness. One minute there was only sun and dust and the shrill chirp of a small bird hidden in a little pile of brush to the left, and the next a shrieking human wall structured itself out of nowhere and came howling up the arid slopes toward the forward positions. If anybody thought of

the green kid sitting alone in the observation post, they didn't have time to do anything about it. The enemy was almost through the left flank and were still coming.

The blond boy did the best he could. Two dozen figures were working their way up the slope toward him. Once his position was taken, heavy machine guns would be mounted in it to sweep the exposed flanks below.

Just a second before the yells had sent him diving to his gun, he had smiled for the first time that day and scratched his name and a single line on a clear spot on the boulder. After three hours of trying he had finally managed to flip a cigarette end through the firing slot. And then, glad in a way that nobody was there to see how scared he was, but wishing at the same time that there was somebody around to tell him what to do, he found himself at the gun, firing quick bursts at the sweaty-faced men who were running up the slope toward him.

He broke the first wave, and then the second, and then, when they started up again, the gun jammed. Closer they came, and closer until he could almost make out individual faces. They were more cautious now. They came in quick rushes, darting forward and hitting the ground to take advantage of every broken bit of shelter. He stood frozen, watching them as they worked their way closer, and then suddenly, without warning, he felt his nerve break and his legs bunch under him for the leap that would take him out of the fox-hole and down the back slope to safety.

And then, before his brain could release the signal that would send him running like a rabbit, something happened. He fell back against the parapet as he felt an indescribable twisting inside his head, a wrenching feeling as if blunt probes were being punched through his brain into the quivering grey matter cupped within—and then he was rammed back into the tiny corner of darkness and left impotent as some strange other took over the neutral controls that operated his strong young body.

Cadet Larn couldn't control the shudder of revulsion that swept through him as he took control of the strange new body. But, physically loathsome as it was with its pulp covered bone and light and almost hairless outer surface, he knew he had to control his disgust and use it as efficiently as he could in the short time that was allotted to him.

He knew what he was supposed to do, but when he managed to focus the oddly placed pair of eyes and saw what was coming toward him, the same feeling he had known the night

before flooded into him. He wanted to get away, as far away from the snarling men below as he could force his new legs to carry him. He'd be sent back in disgrace, but even garrison duty on Deneb, dull as it was, was better than this. He poised to run, but then something—perhaps the dreams he'd had before he knew the reality—stopped him. Maybe he could hang on just a little while. Maybe he could get used to it. Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as it was yesterday. Slowly, holding the body in the emplacement by sheer force of will, he began a check of the weapon that rested on its tripod in front of him.

This they called a heavy machine gun.

He tried to remember the diagram he had been shown during briefing. The force of expanding gases pushed this back this way and in turn activated that. It was crude, but it was deadly to soft bodies such as the one he controlled. Experimentally he peeped down over the sights and swung the weapon back and forth on its tripod. This was better than the clumsy hand weapon he had been equipped with the night before. Now the firing lever. He had dozed a bit during the lecture but this must be it. He pressed it. Nothing happened. If he retreated now, he was justified . . . but after last night the umpires might misunderstand his motives.

It took him another precious second before he could figure out what was wrong. When he did, he grabbed a heavy rock from the bottom of the trench and smashed at the clearing lever again and again until with a sudden snap the off-size cartridge that had been jamming the mechanism came flying out.

During the briefing lecture he had been instructed to fire in short, careful bursts, but the ones in the differently colored uniforms were so close, and there were so many of them, that he just held the trigger down and swung the muzzle back and forth like a deadly hose.

Twice men reached him. The first put a bullet in his right shoulder, the second jabbed him in the stomach with a long knife that was fastened to the end of his weapon before he could be disposed of. After that he found it increasingly difficult to make the body follow his commands. When a fragment of the grenade that smashed the breech mechanism of his machine gun ripped open his forehead so that he was blinded by his own blood, it was even worse. All that he could do was to fumble down into the red darkness for the grenades piled by his feet and hurl them as fast and as far in the direction of the firing as the weakening organic machine he was in command of would permit. The last thing he heard



was a shut from behind him, "Hold on, we're coming!" and then he slumped down into blackness.

*Cadet Larn sat on the edge of his trainer with his helmet in his lap, unable for a moment to disassociate himself from the savage action that was still going on ten thousand miles below. It wasn't until the speaker set flush in the bulkhead behind him boomed out, "All cadets report immediately to the briefing room for combat analysis!" that he was able to pull himself together enough to shuffle wearily over to join his fellows for the march down to the great hall in the belly of the training ship.*

*Talking in the ranks was strictly forbidden, but by properly focusing one's tendrils and using a minimum of power it was possible to communicate to the cadet next to you without the platoon leader being aware of it.*

*"How did it go today?" came a whisper from Larn's left.*

*"Rough. But not as bad as yesterday. At least I didn't run."*

*"Which side did you draw?"*

*"The Blues again."*

*The cadet to his left let out an incautious snort that drew an angry "No talking!" from the platoon leader.*

*"You think you had it rough? That's a laugh. I was assigned to the Reds. We had to go up a slope in broad daylight against a crazy human who didn't know enough to lie down and die. He hammered six slugs through my gut while I still had a good twenty yards to go. One of the umpires spotted it, too. I bet I get slapped ten demerits for not making use of available cover."*

*"Cadet Clung!"*

*The cadet that had been whispering to Larn stiffened apprehensively. "Yes, sir?"*

*"I warned you once. Book yourself five demerits for talking in ranks."*

*The rest of the march made use of available cover.*

*The hollow-eyed pfc stared down at the stretcher containing the unconscious form of the blond boy with something approaching awe.*

*"He going to make it through?"*

*The medical corpsman looked up from his bandaging and nodded briefly. "He'll be ready to go home and sell bonds in a month. They're hungry for heroes stateside. He a friend of yours?"*

*The pfc shook his head. "I never saw him before this*

morning. I sure never figured him for a Congressional medal."

The cadets sat at rigid attention as the umpires' reports were read.

". . . the decision of the judges in the case of Cadet Sergeant Stlarz is that his unorthodox expenditure of Red forces in a daylight raid though almost successful, was tratically unsound because of failure to employ available artillery support. Twenty-five demerits."

As one by one his fellows were censored or commended, the tension grew within Larn until he didn't see how he could stand it any longer. And then at long last his name was called.

"The case of Cadet Larn has given rise to considerable discussion. Although his defense of his position left much to be desired—the clearing of a routine jam in his weapon, for example, taking twice as long as it should have—it cannot be denied that his actions prevented the Red force from overrunning the blue positions. As a consequence, the hundred demerit penalty he incurred yesterday is hereby canceled. It was further felt, however, that Cadet Larn did not exercise sufficient care in protecting the training device that was assigned to him for use during today's action. Five demerits."

Cadet Larn didn't mind the five demerits. Cadet Larn has been blooded and he knew he would never run again. He was already dreaming of the time when he would no longer have to use clumsy substitutes but could instead hurl his own beautifully coordinated bulk against such enemies of the Empire as were important enough to demand the attention of an officer in the Frontier Service . . .

The pfc looked sleepily at the sky and yawned. Maybe he could get some sleep tonight for a change. After the way they'd been hurt, they should take it easy for a day or two. He leaned back, took a last drag on his cigarette, and flipped it lazily through the slot between the sandbags. As he reached over to mark up another point on the flat rock, he noticed for the first time the name scrawled a few hours before by the blond boy and the single scratch beside it.

"That guy ain't human," he said to nobody in particular. "First day up and he goes and wins himself a one-man war. Wonder what the hell ever got into him?"

# **impact with the devil**

**x7367 DH 964**

**TO: SOLAR SECTOR COORDINATOR.**

**FROM: UNASSIGNED AGENT X-27**

**JUST LOCATED THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN. CLIENT INSISTED ON USUAL AGREEMENT AND MADE USUAL MENTAL RESERVATION. WILL BE ABLE TO MAKE MY QUOTA FOR THIS DEMICYCLE IF YOU CAN MATERIALIZE A LANGRED WARPER IN THE CHICAGO FIELD OFFICE BY 21:30 TODAY WITHOUT FAIL.**

KRANS sidled warily through the heavy steel door that opened off the main laboratory of Technology Unlimited and gazed furtively around the large bare windowless room as if he were expecting some sort of a trap. The plain black walls seemed solid enough and there were no cracks in the gleaming jet expanse of freshly painted floor to betray trapdoors and hidden chutes leading down to hell knows where. The only really odd thing about the room was the cluster of ultra-violet and infrared lamps that were fixed in the ceiling and focused directly down on an old overstuffed easy chair that stood by itself in the exact center of the bare room. He went over to it, pushed it to one side, and carefully examined the section of floor it had occupied.

Satisfied at last, he shoved the chair back to its original position and went stealthily over to examine the only other furniture in the room, an ordinary desk and office chair that stood at the opposite end. Krans had lived too long by his wits to take anything for granted, and keeping one eye on the half-open heavy steel door at the far end of the room that was the only means of entrance, he made a quick inventory of the contents of the desk. The drawers were empty and the top contained only a large metal box covered with dials and

meters, a legal document bearing his signature and that of the other, a cheap pen, and a large bottle of black ink.

"All set?" There was an odd humming sound to the voice of the tall, thin, saturnine individual who stepped lithely into the room. It was as if the vocal chords that produced the speech weren't quite human. Except for an immaculate white laboratory smock, he was dressed entirely in black; a black that matched exactly in shade the glossy hair that rose in a widow's peak from his strangely high forehead.

"I guess so," said Krans, and then suddenly stabbed a suspicious finger at the bank of lamps that hung over the easy chair. "What are those for?"

The other chuckled. "I switch them on when I want to relax. The heating system in this place leaves much to be desired and I'm used to a somewhat warmer climate."

"Me too," said Krans, shivering slightly. "Chicago in January ain't my idea of a vacation resort. If one of my boys wasn't in a jam you wouldn't catch me within a thousand miles of here."

"Ah, yes," said the tall man, "your difficulty. You never did tell me exactly what you were up to when we signed the contract."

Krans went over to the easy chair and sat down. "One of the boys got stupid, that's all. There ain't nothing in the contract that says I got to tell you the details."

The man in the white jacket gave a delicate shrug. "I dare say I'll find out eventually," he said. "Did you bring the space time coordinates?"

"Yeah." Krans pulled a slip of paper out of his pocket and began to read. As he did so the dark man's hands danced over the controls of the square box that stood on the desk in front of him, deftly making adjustments.

"Time: anywhere between 12:10 and 12:50 p.m. According to what my boys have been able to dig up, the watchman always came by exactly on the hour so I won't have to worry about bumping into him. Date: March 17, 1968. Place: the blueprint room of the Anderson and Dickson Architectural Agency on the 12th floor of the Stadium Building."

The dark man's oddly slanted eyes made a quick sweep of the front of the machine and then he nodded. "I'm ready any time you are—though just to avoid future argument I feel that I should remind you again that changing the past in any noticeable way is impossible."

Krans just growled impatiently. "We went through all this before we signed the contract. You've agreed to take me back

ten years in time, give me freedom of movement once I get there, and then to see that I get back in the same condition I was in when I left. Right?

"Yes, but—"

"Then let's get on with it!" Krans opened his briefcase and took out a large India rubber eraser, a soft pencil, and a straight edged ruler. "I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

There was a sudden click of a switch on the front of the small black box and suddenly a shimmering oval sprang into being in front of the desk.

"Now what?" demanded Krans.

"Just walk through it. You'll come out in the place you've been asking for."

Krans hesitated and then squared his fat shoulders and took one step forward. The silver film rippled slightly as he pushed through it. Then, as long tapered fingers touched a control knob, it became transparent. Through the portal that opened into time could be seen the dimly lighted interior of the drafting room of the agency. Krans moved feverishly from board to board and then suddenly stopped before a large piece of paper covered with a number of small detail drawings. Squinting in the dim light he examined them one by one until he found the one he had come so far to find. His thick lips writhed back in a grimace of ugly triumph, and grasping firmly the large eraser he had brought with him, he began a series of slow deliberate strokes across the penciled lines of the drawing.

When he came charging back through the time warp, Krans looked as if he were on the verge of apoplexy.

"It wouldn't erase!" he growled in an ugly voice. "No matter how hard I rubbed, the eraser slid off like there was a layer of glass on top of the paper!"

"What did you expect?" asked the dark man blandly. "I gave you fair warning that the past couldn't be changed in any noticeable way. But of course that doesn't invalidate the contract. I merely promised to take you back ten years and return you. But before we move on to my part of the bargain—that part that says that you will make a substantial contribution to Technology, Unlimited—just as a matter of idle curiosity, what is this all about?"

"One of my boys is stuck inside the safe deposit vault of the First National," grumbled Krans. "Unless I can figure some way to get him out they're going to find him there when they open up Monday."

"So you got the bright idea that if you went back and tink-

ered with the plans used in the construction of the bank you could set up a way for your agent to escape without being detected. Clever idea that. Too bad it was impossible." He stretched himself like a lithe jungle cat and an eager look came into his eyes. "But let's get on with our transaction. You've got something I'd like very much to get my . . . ah . . . hands . . . on"

"Not just yet," said Krans harshly as he hunched forward in his chair. "Not just yet!"

As the dark man rose to his feet, a slight odor of brimstone began to fill the room. And then, as he took one step forward, there was a sudden crashing sound and a roaring swirl of angry flames came into being in the center of the room. When it finally died away Mr. Krans was gone. In his place loomed a figure right out of medieval demonology, complete with a pair of needle-sharp horns and a twitching barbed tail. The dark man took one step backward and then sat down again.

"Interesting," he said at last, "but what's the point?"

Little flames seemed to leap into being deep within the demon's glowing, saucerlike eyes.

"Listen, man," he hissed. "Nobody believes in us any more—at least not until it's too late—so all that we got to do is walk around in the shape of a natural man and take what we want when we want it. Back in the old days it wasn't like that. People knew about us and were on guard against us. We really had to work for what little we got—and I mean work! Now we got it made and I'm not about to give up my twenty-hour week and all my easy pickings for nobody."

"My sympathy," murmured the dark man, "but I fail to see where all this is leading us."

"Right up to the fact that Bal Shire looks enough like me to be my twin brother . . . except that he's got three heads. What do you think's going to happen when he's discovered stuck in the main vault of the biggest bank in Chicago come Monday morning?"

The other settled back in his chair and put his feet on the desk. He seemed strangely unmoved by either Krans's transformation or his revelation.

"Couldn't he just dematerialize or something?" he suggested.

"If he could he wouldn't be stuck there now."

"What happened?"

"A deal I've been working on involves a little blackmail so I sent Bal-Shire down to the bank to sneak some papers out

of a safe deposit box after the vault was sealed for the weekend. The clumsy idiot wasn't paying any attention to what he was doing when he materialized and he knocked over a bottle of ink with his tail. The crash startled him so that he went straight up in the air. When he came down he landed right in the middle of a disruption pattern and he's been stuck there howling for help ever since. He can't dematerialize as long as he's inside it and there's nothing any of us can do for him. We can't even touch the edge of a field, let alone cross its boundaries." He paused and then growled in a rumbling voice. "That's where you come in. You're supposed to know all about this science stuff. You cook up something that will get my boy out . . . or else!"

"Or else what?" asked the dark man in an interested voice.

A great gust of white flame gushed suddenly from the demon's mouth and played along the edges of the heavy steel door until its edges and those of its massive frame ran together in one solid weld.

"Or else we'll give the police a real locked room mystery. The question as to how you managed to weld yourself into a bare room when you didn't have any equipment, and then tear yourself slowly into small chunks—that's going to give the newspapers a real field day."

The dark man sat quietly for a moment and then said, "You present a rather convincing argument. But if I'm going to be able to do anything for you, you've got to give me something more to go on. What is this disruption field you talk about? How does it work?"

The demon scowled. The whole subject was obviously extremely distasteful to him. "It's not really a field," he growled; "it's just a five-sided geometrical figure, a pentagram. If one of us gets stuck inside we can't change shape and we can't get out. We just freeze—it's something instinctive like the way a bird reacts to a snake. Something happened way back when . . . after the battle with the shining ones and the long fall . . . after we changed so much we couldn't fly high enough to get away."

He stared silently at the black shining floor for a moment and then his voice regained its normal gruffness. "We haven't got time to talk about the past. It's the present that's the problem. Are you going to start doing something about it or am I?"

"I could think better if I could relax," said the dark man plaintively. "You don't have to hog the only comfortable chair in the place."

The demon simply grunted, settled back more firmly, and producing a wicked looking dagger from some secret place, began to sharpen the tips of his long claws. There was a moment of hesitation and then the dark man said at last, "If I'm going to change the past without really changing the past, you'll have to give me a little more to go on. Just what were you trying to accomplish by going back and changing a set of construction plans?"

"Well," said the other reluctantly, "they were all ready to be inked in and blueprinted. Chances are that nobody would have noticed that the design for the ornamental inlaid pentagram for the center of the vault floor had had another side added to make it a hexagram. Six-pointed figures don't bother us at all. Bal-Shire could have walked right through it, done his business, and been back to the pits in no time. It was a good idea—"

"—only it didn't work. But maybe I've got hold of something that might. Any break in the lines of a pentagram causes it to lose its power, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it's an either—or deal."

The dark man nodded thoughtfully and then began to fiddle with the controls of the machine on his desk. Just as the familiar oval formed, Krans jumped to his feet and came roaring across the room, his great bat wings stretched out as if he were trying to take off.

"Oh, no, you don't," he boomed. "Maybe I don't know much about science but I do know something about humans. And my guess is that maybe you just got a bright idea that you could get out of this by going back before I sealed the room up and leaving me here to whistle."

The man in the white coat tried to say something but he didn't get a chance.

"Or maybe," continued the demon, "you're thinking that just because the contract has to be completed within thirty days that all you got to do is hop a couple of years in the future so that the whole agreement will lapse and I won't have a legal leg to stand on?"

"Of course I thought of all that," said the dark man impatiently, "but I wouldn't be fool enough to try to act on either. If I went back I'd obviously try to avoid any agreement with you in the future. And I couldn't do that because my so doing would mean a noticeable difference in the present. And as for the future, do you think I'm stupid enough to think that legal technicalities mean anything to your kind? Even if you can't travel in time you're immortal. No matter where I



tried to hide in the future, I'd know that eventually you'd be around looking for me."

Krans scratched his horns reflectively. "That makes sense," he admitted at last and went back to his easy chair and sat down.

The other made a final adjustment on the warper, picked up the bottle of ink on his desk, and popped through the silver oval. A moment later he popped out again. "Little off course," he said and twiddled with the knobs on his machine. When he came back the second time he had a satisfied grin on his face.

"Now you can't say I didn't complete my side of the bargain. Your boy is free. If he's not back at the pits by now its because he stopped on the way for a couple of quick doubles. And under the circumstances I can't say that I blame him."

The demon looked dazed. "But how? You said that nothing could be done in the past that would cause a noticeable change. How could you change the pentagram in any way that wouldn't be noticeable?"

"There was nothing to it," said the other modestly. "Bal-Shire knocked over a bottle of ink in the ordinary course of events, didn't he, and splashed it all over the floor?"

"Yes, but so what?"

"Nobody was around to notice it, were they?"

The demon shook his head mutely.

"And if I added another splash that cut across the lines of the inlaid pentagram and broke the figure so your boy could get out, there's no reason why it should be noted more than the other splotches, is there? The janitor will clean up the whole mess Monday morning and that will be the end of that."

Krans let out a grunt of relief, tossed his dagger into the air, and then caught it deftly. "And now you expect me to pay off," he said with a leer. "Chum, you already know the answer. I've never kept a bargain yet and I'm not about to start. And the police are going to be going around talking to themselves when they find what's left of you inside a locked room." A set of long tusks slid into view and gnashed hungrily as he grabbed hold of the arms of the chair and started to pull himself to his feet.

The man behind the desk jumped back, as if in fright, grabbed for the two switches set in the wall behind him, and flipped one on and the other off. As the electric lights went out, there was a moment of total darkness before an eerie glow came from the bank in infrared and ultraviolet lights set

in the ceiling. The demon let out an angry bellow and crouched to spring . . . and then as a glowing pentagram leapt into being around the chair, he made one convulsive movement and hurled his dagger just before he found himself locked in straining paralysis.

The shock of the blade that buried itself to the hilt in his back slammed the dark man against the wall. He started to slump and then pulled himself erect and turned to face the trapped demon. In spite of a little trickle of blood that welled out of the corner of his mouth when he spoke, his voice gave no indication that anything unusual had happened. If anything, it was a little more pedantic than usual.

"If you had diverted just a little of the time you expended in encouraging human corruption to an examination of human progress you might have learned that most inks fluoresce under ultraviolet light. When I went back through the time warp the first time I just made a hop of six hours. It only took me a couple of seconds to ink in a pentagram around your chair."

"But the ink," croaked the other. "There wasn't any there before. There would have been a noticeable difference!"

The dark man gave a strangled cough as the trickle of blood suddenly increased to a gush. He dipped one finger in the inkwell and flipped several drops in the direction of the demon. As soon as they hit the floor they became invisible.

"Jet black on a jet black floor?" He gasped. "Why should it be noticeable? You were right though. When the police finally break in here they'll have a real locked room mystery." He reached behind him with unsteady fingers and touched the hilt of the dagger that had ripped into him. "I couldn't have done it myself. Not at that angle. But back to our agreement. I said I'd give you what you wanted most . . . and I did . . . and now . . ."

The shining geometrical figure that flowed up from the floor at the paralyzed demon seemed to suck away all his strength, converting his once powerful bulk into a quivering, blubbery mass. He tried twice to speak. When he did his voice skidded out of control into a high falsetto.

"Who are you? What do you want of me?"

"You already know," said the dark man softly, a faint note of compassion in his voice. "If you want to, you can remember the time before you were exiled here, the time before you made yourself ugly with your own ugliness. If you want to you can remember us. But that would be painful, and even for you there is no need for needless pain—not any longer."

The angel's voice faded to a sibilant whisper as he let his hunting costume fall to the floor and sprawl out like a broken doll.

"And so," he hummed as he resolved himself into the pulsating pentagram of pure energy that was his normal shape and began to descend over the helpless Krans like a five-sided noose, "now is your time to vanish. But not softly. And not suddenly. And not away."

# machine record

"GOOD HEAVENS" said the disreputable political affairs researcher, "you must be a madman!"

"Exactly," said the mad scientist, his eyes glittering with insane cunning.

"But . . . but what does this manifestly evil machine do?"

"Isn't it evident?" The scientist cackled gaily. "It's designed to conquer the world for me. What else?"

"Of course. What else?"

"It is made of indestructible materials, has wheels, jointed legs, tractor treads, and seven death rays of different frequencies. It draws its energy from a little atomic engine, the size of your thumb nail, which produces about the same potential as Grand Coulee Dam."

"Remarkable," said the researcher, looking at his thumb nail.

The machine was, indeed, a sight to inspire dread. Pear-shaped, its gleaming body was topped with bristling, odd-angled radar-like antenna. A few feet above its complex underpinnings was a double row of formidable looking muzzles, pointing in all directions. On one side was a small, pushbutton switch of insidious portent. Here, in this high vaulted dungeon of an ancient, blood-stained castle, high on a storm-beset mountain, in a small European principality, the effect was incredibly sinister.

The political affairs researcher, unscrupulous as he was, gasped with will-concealed alarm.

"And what, sir," he said, "have I to do with all this?"

The scientist's eyes glittered. "You," he said, "are to help me organize my conquests into an empire."

"Good heavens," the other man said again. "And you have brought me here to this dank dungeon to ask my assistance in a fiendish plot to conquer the world?" His imagination had not as yet assimilated the grandeur of the scheme.

"It's not dank," the scientist said, waving his hand impatiently. "This dungeon is quite properly air-conditioned." And

so it was. The mad savant had, in a moment of rare lucidity, equipped his castle cellar with a remarkably efficient air conditioning machine, together with do-it-yourself asphalt tiling and a portable bar that played "The Last Rose of Summer" when you pressed the hidden button that brought it swinging out from its artful concealment behind a bookcase.

"That's beside the point," said the other. "I'm not altogether certain that I approve of your plot. Anyway," he added primly, "I'm making forty a week where I'm working now."

The scientist snapped his fingers, with a carefree, yet macabre laugh. "I'll double it," he said. "What's more, I have a beautiful daughter."

The researcher peeped at the machine out of the corner of his eye. "When do we turn it on?"

"As soon as you work out a campaign for me," said the other. "I want to assume complete political control with a minimum of fuss and bother. A few days perhaps?"

The researcher stared at him blankly. "Where," he said, "have you been for the past ten years?"

"Here," said the scientist, rubbing his hands together, "perfecting my designs. Is something wrong?"

"Well . . . I rather thought you planned to just kill everybody."

"Everybody?" A new glint flickered momentarily in the madman's eye and he licked a speculative tongue over his lower lip. "I hadn't thought of that."

"It would be so much simpler." The other's tone was ingratiating.

The scientist thought for a moment, grinning evilly. Then he shook his head, which, I forgot to mention, sat somewhat crookedly upon his shoulders. "No," he said, "no, I'm afraid not. That way my empire would be a little shabby. Nobody to rule," he shook his head, "nobody to torture and all that. No, just work out a simple way for me to run things."

"Hmm," said the researcher, who was, I also forgot to say, portly, bespectacled, and wearing a gravy spotted vest "this will take some thought."

"Well take it," said the scientist, "but don't dawdle. I'm getting impatient." His eyes took on a dreamy look. "I want to have a harem, and a movie made about my life, *The Arnspiegle Story*—that's my name, Arnspiegle—starring Larry Parks and with Gordon Macrae's voice dubbed in. I also want an orchid-coloured Rolls-Royce and a pear-shaped swimming pool."

"That's reasonable," said the researcher, "but it's going to

take a little doing." He frowned. "You'll have to give me a few days before we start blasting away."

"If it's absolutely necessary," said the mad scientist petulantly, his voice registering his annoyance. He walked over and patted the monstrous machine with affection. "I'm going to have Liberace play at all my weddings," he murmured.

Two weeks passed while the mad scientist tinkered with his machine, perfecting its lethal powers, and while the shabby political affairs researcher worked in a freshly Kemtoned upstairs chamber, surrounded by political research materials: editorial pages from *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Pravda*, and *The Boston Evening Transcript*. Every evening, glued to the short-wave receiver, with bated breath he listened to Edward R. Murrow.

Finally one day the mad scientist burst in on him, overflowing with impatience. "How's it going, Alfred?" he asked. The researcher's name was Alfred.

"Complete political control, did you say?" said Alfred evasively.

"Obviously. As Emperor of the World I have to have some simple central system for tax collection and young-virgin tribute and all. Why?"

"It's a tougher job than I thought," mumbled the other. "Or maybe I'm slipping. I used to be able to whip up a fool-proof world government between the second and third Martini." His voice suddenly became pleading. "Look," he said, "let's just kill everybody."

"No," the scientist said "definitely not. I've thought it all out and I've decided that it's all or nothing with me." He looked shyly at the great map of the world that covered the far wall. "I guess that's just the kind of a guy I am."

Two more weeks passed, and this time it was Alfred who came down to see the mad scientist. He found him busily installing a woofer in the far wall, trying obviously, for a greater fidelity on the low notes on his Liberace records.

His eyes lit up with their old evil gleam when he saw Alfred. "Ready?" he asked excitedly.

"Well . . ." Alfred said, "not exactly. I think maybe, while I'm ironing out the last few wrinkles, that there's some reading you ought to do. You ought to pick up a little background from this Emperor business. You know, administrative problems and all that."

"Oh." The mad scientist's voice was filled with disappointment.

The political researcher took him upstairs, where he pre-

sented him with copies of selected works of Marx, Freud, Darwin, Mary Baker Eddy, Veblen, and David Reisman. Also a considerable pile of clippings from Westbrook Pegler, Joseph Alsop and Dr. Brady; biographies of Joseph Stalin, I. V. Lenin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Bridey Murphy, Mao Tse-Tsung, Mahatma Gandhi, Joseph McCarthy, Chiang Kai-Chek. On top of the pile he placed a copy of *The Power of Positive Thinking*. There was also an assortment of books on metaphysics, cybernetics, phrenology, hydrostatics, the Rosicrucians, the destiny of Man, the meaning of history, the meaning of life and the meaning of poetry.

"These will do for a starter," he said, throwing in a copy of *The Reader's Digest* for good measure.

"Hmmm," said the mad scientist.

Six weeks later a far wiser mad scientist purposively mounted the castle steps to Alfred's room. He found the portly gentleman beside the short wave set, listening to Gabriel Heatter, a look of abject horror on his face.

"Turn that thing off and come with me!" he commanded. Alfred followed him down to the dungeon. It was dank; the air-conditioner had blown a tube. Books, pamphlets, and newspaper clippings were scattered all over the asphalt-tile floor. Broken Liberace records lay everywhere. A rat scurried away, into the bowels of the hi-fi set, at their approach.

"Good heavens, man," said Alfred. "What happened?"

The mad scientist looked at him and laughed a wicked, insane little laugh. "The scales," he said, "have dropped from my eyes."

"How's that?"

"I have become politically enlightened."

"It's about time," said Alfred. His gambit had paid off.

The mad scientist seemed hardly to hear him. His eyes had become focused sternly on some distant horizon. "I think what the situation calls for is a different approach."

"Like turning on the machine?"

"Of course not!" The mad scientist's voice fairly oozed authority. "It's merely that there seems to be more to this thing—world-governmentwise, that is—than I had suspected." He waved a hand dramatically over the clutter of magazines, books, and badly mimeographed pamphlets that littered the floor. "I'm beginning to see that what you need, Alfred, is a fresh approach. A positive one. A totally new concept. You've been too much of a research man—not enough of a creative thinker."

Alfred began eyeing him suspiciously. "So?" he said.

"I've decided that what we need is a middle man. Someone to handle the annoying administrative details." The mad scientist inserted his thumbs under his suspenders and began rocking back and forth on his heels, still gazing at the unseen horizon. He looked very important. "Why go to all the trouble of setting up a new political machine when there's one already in existence that is admirably suited to our purpose?"

Alfred began to look uneasy. The mad scientist fished an old fashioned coin purse from his pocket and took out a crumpled wad of bills. "Here," he said, "go and buy yourself a Homburg. And a briefcase."

"Well?" said the mad scientist.

"Defeat," said the disreputable political affairs researcher, dusting his Homburg with the sleeve of his grey flannel suit.

"Did you present my ultimatum to the U.N.?"

"Well, I did finally get in to see the sub-secretary of the sub-secretary of a very important sub-secretariat."

"Wouldn't believe you, heh?" The mad scientist bristled angrily and took a step toward the monster. "I think I'll wipe out Liechtenstein. That'll show them we mean business!"

"Oh, he believed me all right," said Albert hastily. "I told him that if the U.N. didn't do what he wanted, we'd be forced to destroy the world."

"So?"

"The trouble is I got there a little late. It seems that in the last six months fourteen major powers have delivered the same ultimatum."

Two days later the mad scientist emerged from his crypt, red-eyed from lack of sleep but with his lips curled in a sneer of cold command. He had been thinking positively and it had paid off.

"The solution is obvious," he said curtly. "We'll just back one of the big countries. Shop around and see who'll make us the best offer."

When Alfred got back he found the mad scientist waiting impatiently by the drawbridge.

"What was Washington's offer?"

The disreputable political researcher didn't answer until they reached the dungeon. When they did he set down his attaché case and then made a decisive thumbs-down gesture.

"The Secret Weapons Division was so secret that nobody knew where it was. I did finally get in to see the President's Advisory Council on Weapons for Peace though. They were all very pleasant but they turned me down flat. They pointed out economic implications that we hadn't realized."



“Such as?” demanded the mad scientist.

“Well, as they explained it, if they let one little machine take over the whole job, they’d have to abandon the National Defense Effort, and if they gave up the National Defense Effort, they wouldn’t be able to continue Deficit Financing, and without Deficit Financing to Keep the Wheels Turning, there would be Mass Unemployment and Rioting in the Streets.” He took a long pause to get his breath back. “And Rioting in the Streets might reflect on the Present Administration. And the NATO countries don’t want to give up NATO because of discounts and things.”

“Never Say Die,” said the mad scientist, capitalizing without realizing it. “If the ‘haves’ don’t want us, we’ll just have to try the ‘have nots.’ There must be some little country left somewhere that still has mad dreams of empire—and can’t raise the price of an H bomb.” He wandered over to the large wall map and eyed it reflectively. Suddenly his face lit up and his forefinger stabbed down on a little purple blotch in the Arabian peninsula.

“Hagistan!” he announced triumphantly. “The last remnant of the Hashishite Empire. Go and kindle the flame of world conquest in the breast of Ibn-ad-Ibn.”

“He didn’t kindle,” announced the disreputable political affairs researcher despairingly, his voice loud against the ominous sound of distant, rumbling thunder. “As a matter of fact, he threw me out.” He dropped his leatherette attaché case in one chair and then dropped himself wearily in another.

“Didn’t kindle”! The mad scientist seemed frantic. “But why?” he said. “Why? Why? He must dream of glory and empire, remembering the blood of ancient desert kings in his veins.”

“Not this one.” Alfred began scraping absently at a gravy spot on his chest. Thunder rumbled again, closer now. “Hagistan is swarming with Hombergs from fourteen major powers, all packers, all packing books of blank cheques for Ibn-ad-Ibn to fill in. Each country’s trying to get him on its side so they’ve got a contest going to see who can put in the most indoor plumbing, railroads, post offices, and airfields, who can give away the most Cadillacs to Crown Princes, and who can build the most dams and mix the direct Martinis. It’s what you call Diplomacy.” He shook his head sadly. “All deductible, too. I didn’t have a chance. The delegation from Red China was installing high fidelity in the seraglio when I came in, and Ibn-ad-ibn was lounging on the *ungalah* watch-

ing them doing it. I gave him a pitch about how he could conquer the world if he tied in with us. You know what he said?"

"How could I?" said the mad scientist sourly. "I wasn't there."

"He said, 'Why shoot Santa Clause?' I gotta admit I was stumped. He shook his head sadly again. "Why indeed?"

Through all this the mad scientist had been taking on the eerie, macabre look of a man possessed. Lightning now was flashing in abundance, sending weird, unwordly light through the casement, casting strange, half-real shadows on the walls of the dungeon. He turned and began to stare fixedly at the pear-shaped instrument of destruction, that instrument of prodigious lethality that embodied the very quintessence of his own twisted and brilliantly cunning mind.

And then, abruptly, there was a great clap of thunderous lightning, striking, seemingly, from the heart of heaven to the bowels of the very earth, and the whole ancient castle itself groaned with the mighty groan of Lucifer in Hell as the mad scientiest began walking, fixedly, like a man in a dream, towards the machine.

Alfred look aghast. "What are you going to do?"

There was no reply, only the muted distant sound of the now thunderous sea, beating crazily at the jagged base of the cliff, thousands of feet below them.

Alfred rose to his feet. "*What are you going to do?*" he demanded.

The voice of the mad scientist was soft, but it echoed hollowly in the now silent room. "The only thing that is left to do." His movements were methodical, as if the whole grisly chain of events had been rehearsed many times for this one, ultimate performance.

Alfred stood frozen in wonder as the scientist unscrewed a plate from the side of the machine and with exquisite care disconnected some wires. Then he pushed a small lever all the way over to the left and replaced the plate. His hand poised itself over a large red button on the side of the machine, a button with the single, terse word ON engraved upon it. He hesitated, and then with a strong movement pushed down.

Instantly, one wall dropped away, revealing a sheer drop seven thousand feet to the sea. Wind and rain whistled into the room, soaking them both. There came a whirring noise from the machine and then the rumbling sound of rubber tires, tractor treads, and metal feet against the asphalt tile. Ponderously the pear-shaped monster rolled up to the now

open wall, its muzzles, as always, pointing in all directions. The radar mast quivered expectantly.

The diabolical machine rolled through the gap in the wall to the edge of the cliff and stopped, ready to spew instant death out over a defenseless world. It clicked malevolently, and then with a sub-sonic rumble, hurled itself off the cliff into the sea. There was a long moment of silence followed by a breathtaking splash, and then the distant sound of dead fish popping to the surface.

The two men stood quietly for a moment, staring down at the churning water far below, each lost in his own gloomy thoughts. The mad scientist was the first to recover.

"Well," he said, squaring his thin shoulders, "back to the old drafting board. The next time they can come to me!"

"Have you got an idea for a better model?" Alfred stroked his rain-soaked Homberg wistfully.

"No," said the mad scientist sanely. "A better mousetrap."

## one to a customer

"AND," CONTINUED THE ALIEN persuasively, "I can allow only one to a customer."

Alan Shirey looked down at the clutter of oddly shaped gadgets that were spread out on the low coffee table.

"What's that?" he asked at last, pointing to a small sphere of a dull grey metal with a well-manicured finger.

Mccal smirked as he picked the little globe up and rolled it back and forth in one taloned hand.

"A force field generator that has a very special sort of effect of the female sympathetic nervous system."

"What sort of an effect?"

The little being tittered shrilly. "It makes them . . . eh . . . sympathetic. Once a girl gets within its operating radius, the most improper thing you can think of will seem to her to be the most natural . . . and delightful idea in the world. A little push here," the globe suddenly shimmered faintly, "and it's on. Another one here and it's off. Interested?"

Alan shook his head and then walked over and eyed himself complacently in the plate glass mirror above the fireplace.

"My dear fellow," he said with just a touch of condescension in his voice, "when you've been around this little planet of ours just a bit longer you'll find out that when a man has what I have, no mechanical aids are necessary. Why should I pay you ten thousand dollars for a widget to take care of an operation I've been able to handle satisfactorily by myself ever since I was fourteen?" Turning back to the mirror he patted a straying lock of blond hair back into place and then gave himself a boyish smile.

The alien bobbed his misshapen little head apologetically. "Sorry. Traveling salesman, you know. Week in this system, week in that. Never really get to know a place."

Alan wandered across the large living room and sprawled lazily out on a studio couch.

"Tell me, little friend," he said, "if you're what you say

you are, why are you trying to sell your samples? And while we're whying, why did you pick my back yard as a parking place for that whirley-gig of yours?"

Mccal shifted uneasily and then glanced apprehensively upwards as if he half expected some malignant being to come oozing down at him through the ceiling.

"I got reasons," he mumbled finally.

"What kind?" demanded Alan. "You might as well start talking, because you aren't about to sell me anything until I find out what's going on."

The alien stold another nervous look at the ceiling and then suddenly scuttled over to the coffee table. "Not to change the subject," he said, "but for fifteen thousand I could let you have a light shield. Complete invisibility at the flick of a switch and . . ."

"Climb off it," said Alan coldly. "I asked you a question."

Mccal lapsed into a sulky silence for a moment and then finally said grudgingly. "Well, if you've got to know this place sits pretty well out by itself and I thought I'd run less chance of being spotted. Another thing was the swimming pool out in back. I figured that if you could afford one of those you'd have enough cash around to pay my prices."

Alan pulled a plump wallet out of his pocket, tossed it in the air, and then caught it. "Sure I got money, lots of money. But if your gadgets will do what you say they will, you could walk into the front office of any big corporation in the country and come out with more millions than you'd know what to do with. Why don't you?"

The little alien sighed wistfully. "I know. But I don't dare go near any of the population centers with this stuff on me." He gestured toward the coffee table. "I radiates. If the Observers ever spotted me it would be the squeebls for sure, and this being a primitive area there'd be no torsion off for good behavior. That's why I have to peddle these things on the sly. I figured that by only bringing in one of a kind and making sure they would be used with decretion, there wouldn't be enough fuss raised to attract their attention, at least not until I had a chance to put a couple of thousand light years between me and Sol."

"Sounds good except for one thing. What are you going to do with United States currency when you get where you're going?"

"Oh, I won't take it with me," said Mccal. "I need it to buy things here."

"What kind of things?"

"Artifacts. Real preatomic blowup artifacts. I got a couple of collectors lined up back home who won't ask any questions about the source."

Alan eyed the little alien sceptically for a moment. "You don't strike me as a particularly ethical sort," he said. "With that invisibility gadget of yours you could walk off with anything you wanted. Why go to all this trouble?"

Mccal recoiled from the suggestion in obvious horror.

"Theft? From primitives? Do you know what the Observers would do to me if they . . ." He turned green at the thought of whatever it was and his voice trailed off into incoherence. Then with an effort he regained control of himself.

"Look," he said in a pleading voice. "In spite of everything you've said about being bored with everything, there must be something you want that you haven't got!" A sudden change in the expression on Alan's face spurred him on. "Or somebody you're afraid of?"

Alan got slowly to his feet and began to pace the floor, a strange brooding expression in his wide-set eyes.

"There is . . . and there is," he said huskily. "A girl named Marian . . . Marian Jonston. I want her and she wants me." He tossed his head petulantly. "I'm not accustomed to not getting things I want!" With an effort he slipped back into his usual pose of studied nonchalance.

"There's a husband involved. He looks like an oversized Neanderthal and he's tougher than I am and he's wealthier than I am . . . and a hell of a lot nastier. If I ran off with Marian he'd get to us eventually. And when he did it wouldn't be pleasant, not pleasant at all." The momentary tightness of Alan's face indicated that "not pleasant" was somewhat of an understatement.

Mccal rubbed his hands together happily, reached for a wicked-looking little pistol-like object that lay by itself at one corner of the table, and then pulled back in disappointment when the other shook his head and continued.

"I don't want to kill him. It wouldn't be any fun that way." His words were accompanied by a faintly unpleasant smile. "You see, little friend, I'm a spoiled brat. Marian is the first thing in my life that I've wanted that I haven't been able to get. He's got to pay for that, and worst thing I could do to him would be to let him live knowing I had her."

The alien gestured excitedly toward the little invisibility machine. "With this you could slip in and out of his house

whenever you wanted to. He'd never know anything about it."

Alan snorted impatiently. "Stupid! I just told you that the whole point would be in his knowing and not being able to interfere."

Mccal brooded over his stock, for a minute and then let out a sudden whoop. Grabbing up a small metallic box with a dial at one end and a push button in its center, he waved it excitedly in the air.

"All right," said Alan, "what is it?"

When the alien told him, he reached slowly for his wallet.

Later that evening Alan picked up the telephone from its cradle hesitated, and then turned. "You aren't trying to pull a fast one, are you?" he demanded harshly.

Mccal threw up his twisted little hands in protest. "Look for yourself," he said, gesturing toward the array on the coffee table. "Like I said before, there's only one of a kind. The one you bought is the only twister in the whole lot."

Satisfied, Alan started to dial. "O.K., little friend. It's a deal." He grinned savagely. "In fact I might even have another customer for you before we're through."

The hulking bull-necked man shambled slowly across the room toward the couple, his great hands clawed out before him as if they were seeking a throat. Mccal whimpered in terror and tried to huddle farther back in the far corner of the living room. Alan just smiled pleasantly and slid one carressing hand down the sleek contours of the girl who cowered against him.

"Easy does it, Jonston," he said. "Might as well relax and get used to the idea."

The approaching figure snarled and shuffled to a stop.

"Yeah," he said, his voice thick with rage, "yeah, let's. I don't want to get this over with too quick. I got a little place where we can be alone, just the three of us, alone for a long, long, time."

Alan didn't seem disturbed. "Tell me, laddy," he said lightly, "what would you say if I told you that you were going to have to spend the rest of your life sitting around gnawing your hairy knuckles while Marian and I were off someplace playing house?" He smiled satyr-like and ran his hand possessively over the girl again.

The taunting words almost goaded the other into a charge but with an effort he held himself back.

"I got you," he whispered thickly. "I got you dead to rights. But even if you was to get away I'd find you. You

know. I'd find you. There ain't no place where you could hide. No place at all."

Alan's left arm circled the girl tightly while his right hand gripped the little silver box concealed in his pocket.

"Place? No," he said lazily. "But time? YES! If you're still around five hundred years from now, look us up." With a patronizing smile he pushed the button on the time warper that would catapult him and the girl instantaneously into the future.

The country home was gone except for one crumbling wall but the sun was warm and the grass velvety soft against his bare skin. Alan reached languorously over and patted the tanned behind of the girl who sprawled beside him in abandoned exhaustion.

"That was fun, doll," he said lazily. He picked a long spear of grass and began to nibble it contently.

Closing his eyes, he lost himself in pleasant thoughts of the husband left behind.

"Alan!"

The shrill scream of terror catapulted him to his feet.

"What's the matter?" he shouted, and then spun around in response to her terrified pointing just as a great gorilla-like figure vaulted heavily over the wall and hurled itself upon him. In a moment he was caterwauling like a trapped animal and clawing to escape. And then, as the darkness rushed in, he felt great hands let go of his throat and clamp vice-like onto his right leg. There was a sudden twisting wrench and then a splintering agony that smashed him down into black unconsciousness . . .

The voice he knew. The rough stones against his back told him that he had been propped up against the ruined wall. He slowly forced his eyes open and looked dully down at the leg that bent out in front of him at an odd angle. He didn't want to look up.

"One to a customer," he said tonelessly, "and only one of each. He said he had only one of each."

A hand suddenly jerked back his head and he looked up into a distorted face, a face still grimed with fresh loam. The clothes had long since rotted away and the squat hairy figure looked more ape than human.

"Ya guessed right," it said, "but ya guessed wrong. He did only have one of each." One massive fist opened to show a shining cylinder with a needle like orifice at one end.

"Your little friend sold it to me—except I don't think the money did him much good. When I left he was staring at



something oozing through the ceiling and squeaking like a ruptured mouse." Jonston gave an obscene chuckle. "This thing worked, though, just like he said it would."

"What is it?" croaked Alan.

"Well, it's this way. Back where he came from a guy's maybe taking a trip from one star to another and it's maybe a thousand year deal. There ain't much in the way of scenery so he just sets this little knob for how long he wants to be knocked out, jabs the needle in a vein, and he's like dead until he gets there.

"You said to look you up in five hundred years so that's just what I set it for. Then I went and dug a hole and pulled it in after me. Slept like a baby, too, except I did a lot of dreaming." A great hand turned Alan's head slowly so that he could see the blank horror-filled face of the unclothed girl who huddled sobbing on the grass.

"Guess what I was dreaming about. Just guess."

## the man who knew grodnik

"I'M SORRY, REGGIE,"—there was a note of tired compassion in the agent's voice—"if you could figure out some way to stick around for the next century or so you might find yourself back on top again. In the meantime, this is all that Stuart was able to line up for you. It's a killer—thirty-five bucks per and you pay your own expenses—but let's face it, the market for bosom buddies of famous Greenwich Village characters of the twenties has hit a new low. There's a whole new generation come up in the women's clubs that hasn't even heard of most of the people you talk about, let alone read them."

The slim man with silver grey hair who sat on the other side of the desk picked up the itinerary, leafed through it quickly, and then gave a convulsive shudder.

"Not Kansas again! Scott, you can't do this to me!"

"I don't like it any better than you do, but at least you'll be eating."

"Fried chicken and creamed peas with the Malthusian Ladies Guild of East Potlatch, Kansas," said Reginald gloomily. "You call that eating?"

The agent began to study the nails on his left hand. "Maybe next year something will break. Harrison still hasn't vetoed the idea of bringing out *Red Hot Mama* in his American Classics series." He took a quick look at his watch, stood up and stretched out his hand.

"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, Reggie, I'm really booked up solid today. Drop me a line when you find time. If anything comes of that American Classics deal I'll shoot you a wire."

Reginald Southern rose gracefully to his feet, flicked a speck of dust off a frayed cuff, and then gave his agent a jaunty wave.

"See you in a hundred years," he said. "When the royalties

for *Red Hot Mama* start pouring in again, bank them for me, will you?"

When the long and garbled introduction was finally finished—for some reason or other the toastmistress insisted on confusing him with Rex Stout—Reginald rose to his feet, turned on his after-dinner smile, and beaming down on the perspiring pack of much-corseted females, delivered his opening line.

"Most of you are much too young to remember the fabulous nineteen twenties, but—" He paused automatically to let an appreciative twitter run through the audience. "But as John Barrymore said to me one evening when . . ."

He switched off conscious control and tried to ignore the sound of his own voice. The Barrymore story did make for a fast opening, but he always squirmed a little bit inside when he told it. Even though he hadn't written anything for twenty years, he had been a semi-great for a few months, and he had known a number of the real greats of the period, some of them quite well. His only meeting with Barrymore, however, had been a mumbled introduction at a cocktail party and an extremely short conversation.

"Hot, isn't it?" he'd said.

"Sure is," the great actor had agreed. "Makes me thirsty. Where's the bar?"

Reggie had pointed, Barrymore had nodded, and that had been the end of that.

The story he was telling was a true one, but the old friend he had been out with was John Grodnick, a poet nobody remembered any more. The forgotten were not proper fare for women's clubs—they wanted speakers who would leave them with a vicarious feeling of having rubbed shoulders with the great—and each year Reggie found he had to switch more and more names around as the number of still living reputations from his period dwindled.

For a while he had been able to salve his own conscience by introducing only those he had had some contact with—at least by correspondence—but for his Ernest Hemingway story he could make no real defense. Aside from a few mutual friends, he had never had any contact with the writer.

He wanted to drop it, but he couldn't. Hemingway was known. Hemingway was still read. When he launched into the hilarious story about how the two of them had crashed the coming out party of Dorthy Fernis—ears always pricked up at this point, Dorthy had just divorced her fourth duke—

dragging a protesting and still unknown Thomas Wolfe between them and introducing him as an illegitimate son of Kaiser Wilhelm, his audience always paid him the tribute of leaning forward eagerly. This is what they had paid for.

The passing of a hundred years had changed New York City. For one thing, it was now located in the middle of Pennsylvania. The Big War had altered the coastline enough, however, so that it was still a seaport town.

Reginald Southern drew a few curious looks as he stepped off the local belt at 34th Street—he was the only one in the crowd that was wearing any clothes—but nobody bothered him. New York still preserved its old tolerance for eccentrics.

Scott Akermann, Inc. was still in business. It took Reginald some time to talk his way past the robot secretary, but at last he found himself in the inner sanctum. A sudden wave of nostalgia swept over him as he looked around the office. Somehow the old desk had been salvaged, and the current Akermann bore a close enough resemblance to his great-grandfather to have been a younger brother.

"I'm afraid the message the secretary sent through was a bit garbled," said the agent politely. "Just who did you say you were again?"

Reginald drew the last of his cigarettes from its crumpled pack, put it in a stained ivory cigarette holder, and lit it with a flourish. Nobody seemed to smoke any longer he had noted with regret, but then his doctor had been after him to quit for years.

"I am," he said with simple dignity, "Reginald Southern. The Reginald Southern."

Akermann stared at him blankly.

Reginald gave a quiet little smile "I dare say this is all going to be a bit of a shock, but it will clear up after you check the files. I am Reginald Southern, the author of *Red Hot Mama*."

The agent's face cleared suddenly and his hand began to creep toward the button that would activate the automatic ejector.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Southern," he said, "but we never read unsolicited manuscripts. If yours hasn't been returned to you, you might check with the secretary on the way out to see if you enclosed sufficient return postage."

Reginald chuckled. It was going to be rather embarrassing for the agent when he realized who he was.

"Tell me, young man," he said. "Is the American Classics series still in existence?"

Akermann looked at him in surprise. "Of course. Why?"

A tremor of uneasiness ran through the writer. "The name Reginald Southern still doesn't mean anything to you?"

The agent's hand moved forward again until it hovered over the ejector button again. "Much as I hate to terminate this most interesting discussion," he said, "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to—" He stopped suddenly. "What's your name got to do with the American Classics series?"

Reginald felt a sudden sinking feeling, but he didn't let it show. Instead he started to explain.

When, after a long search, the yellowed folder bearing the name SOUTHERN, REGINALD J. had been exhumed from the inactive file, and Reginald had answered the last of the questions on the test sheet smoothly and confidently, Scott Akermann sat rigid in his chair, obviously shaken. He pushed a faded clipping toward Reginald.

"But this says you were killed!"

Reggie skipped over the part which referred to him as an obscure village writer who had gained temporary notoriety in the mid-twenties when his novel *Red Hot Mama* was banned in Boston, and concentrated on the details of the accident.

"You'll note," he said when he had finished reading, "that this just says that I disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Tevis's body was found in the wreckage of his machine, but I wasn't. Luckily for me, the time field, or whatever it was he called it, had already formed around me when his dingbat blew up."

"Time travel!" said Akermann in an awed voice. "It's fantastic!" He gulped suddenly as a practical thought hit him. "This Tevis . . . did he explain how his machine worked?"

"He tried to," said the other apologetically, "but I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention. Things like that have always confused me. He did say something about squaring infinity . . . or was he unsquaring it? I do remember that he said he was doing something with it that nobody had ever thought of before.

"Anyway," continued Reggie, a far away look in his eyes, "it all started in Helopolis, Kansas. I hadn't seen Tevis since we were undergraduates together and you could have knocked me over with a feather when he came rushing up to me at the bus station and dragged me home with him.

"He was head of the Physics Department at Helopolis

State Teachers College—in fact, he was the Physics Department. They also had him teaching Community Dynamics, Advanced Basket Weaving, and something called Project Four, Democracy at Work.”

“Do go on,” said Akermann. There was an acid note to his voice that jerked Reginald out of his digression.

“Anyway,” he said hastily, “during all those years at Helopolis, Tevis had been tinkering away in his basement, trying to build a machine that would put his theory about time travel into practice. He’d just completed it when I hit town on my lecture tour.

“When we got to his house we settled down for a long talk about the old days, but after thirty years of moving in such completely different directions, we really didn’t have much to talk about. The things I remembered he didn’t—and vice versa—so we soon got around to our own troubles. He had his share, but at least he had tenure. Me, I was making my last round of the women’s clubs, and I knew it.

“‘My place is in the future,’ I said. ‘It’s just a matter of time before I’m rediscovered. But I’m fifty-four now. Look how long John Donne had to wait. What I need is some way to jump a hundred years into the future.’

“Tevis didn’t say anything for a moment. Then he jumped up with a wild look in his eyes and dragged me down into his basement. It was there he told me about his time machine. I really didn’t believe it would work, but I was desperate enough to try anything. So I wrote a long letter to Scott—to your great-grandfather—mailed it, and then came back and sat down in an old swivel chair that was surrounded with loops and loops of silvery looking wire.”

“And?”

“He pushed a button. It must have blown up just as it kicked me forward. I was hoping that *Red Hot Mama* would have been rediscovered and gone over well enough so that I would find a comfortable accumulation of royalties—and an established literary position—waiting for me.” The writer paused and looked at the agent forlornly. “I guess I should have had Tevis set the machine for five hundred years. Look how long it took Chaucer.”

In spite of everything he had gone through, Scott Akermann was still an agent. He hastily leafed through the folder until he found what he was looking for, pulled it out and smoothed it reverently.

“What’s that?” asked Reginald.

“Your original contract with Scott Akermann, Inc. I notice

that it contains the usual twelve month cancellation clause. You didn't, did you?"

"Didn't what?"

"Give notice that you wanted to terminate your contract?"

Reginald shook his head.

Akermann began to beam. "I guess that legally I still represent you then." He coughed delicately. "There have been a few changes since your day. For one thing, the standard agent's fee is now fifty per cent. I don't approve of it myself, of course . . ." He coughed again. "But what with inflation, and the war on, and the high price of paper . . ." His face brightened. "But on the other hand, Patagonian rights are only forty per cent."

"That's nice," said Reginald vaguely. He couldn't get excited about the division of non-existent royalties. In fact, he couldn't get excited about anything. The failure of *Red Hot Mama* to have its expected revival had completely crushed him.

"But even with necessary deductions," continued the agent, "you should make enough out of the reprinting of your book to set you up for life."

Reprinting! Reginald couldn't quite believe his ears.

"Do you really think there's a chance?" he asked tremulously.

"Chance?" Scott laughed. "With a 'man from the past' publicity tie-in we can't miss." He put his fingers together and gazed dreamily at the ceiling.

"First we'll have a reception for the press, and then a big dinner for the major publishers at the Waldorf-Hilton at which you'll be the principal speaker." He closed his eyes and then suddenly snapped them open.

"Say," he demanded, "did you by any chance know Grodnick? John Grodnick, the neo-Puritan poet?"

"Of course," said Reggie in surprise. "He was a good friend of mine. But why call him neo-Puritan? John's poetry was strictly wine, women, and song stuff."

The agent shrugged. "Not according to the university boys. But anyway he's really hot this season." He thought for a moment and then said enthusiastically, "The Man Who Knew Grodnick." With a kicker like that we've really got it made! We'll keep the build-up going for a couple of months and then we'll let the big boys fight over reprint rights. What did you say your book was called?"

"*Red Hot Mama*," said Reginald patiently.

Akermann made a quick note on a scratch pad. "I guess I'd

better take a look at it before I do anything else." He switched on his intercom and gave an order to his robot secretary.

"Look at the paper!" protested Reginald. "Look at the binding! I've been pirated by some cheap, fly-by-night outfit!"

"Cheap, hell!" said Akermann grimly. He tossed the book down on his desk angrily. "Do you know how much I had to pay for this?"

Reginald shook his head.

"Fifty credits!"

"Is that a lot?"

"A lot? A credit is worth about two of your mid-twentieth century dollars."

Reginald let out a whistle. "A hundred dollars! For a copy of my book!" He gave an ecstatic smile. "Why didn't you tell me I was that important."

"Because I didn't know it," said Akermann sourly. "I'm not in the habit of buying pornography."

"*Pornography!*" Reginald jumped wildly to his feet. "Not that again!"

"Again?"

"I went through all that in Boston. But the courts supported me. If you'll check back into chapter six, you'll find that when Alice climbs into bed with the sheep herder, she has her bathrobe on and never takes it off. If a dirty minded public chooses to assume she did," he continued virtuously, "it's not my responsibility. James Joyce and I, we both—"

"Mr. Southern!" interrupted Akermann sharply. "You don't understand the changes that have taken place since your time. For an unmarried couple to go to bed with their clothes on . . . or a married one for that matter . . ." He blushed in spite of himself. "I like a risqué story as well as the next man, but after all . . . I mean, really, Reggie . . ." He controlled himself with difficulty. "We'll just have to think of something else."

The trouble was that he couldn't. "Have you got any ideas?" he said at last.

"Well," said Reginald unhappily, "there's always . . ." His voice broke and it took him a moment before he got it back under control again. "There's always . . ."

Reginald Southern stepped out on the platform and took an appreciative breath of the dry cool air that billowed in through the open windows. Now that automatic weather control had been installed, Kansas wasn't so bad after all. He looked down at the smiling faces of the expectant audience



(it was a shame, though, that 'corsets had had to go out with all the rest) and gave them an affectionate nod as he thought of the banquet that was to follow his lecture. After six months of the sloppy synthetics that New Yorkers were so fond of, the prospect of fried chicken and creamed peas was enough to make a man's salivary glands work overtime.

As he waited for the toastmistress to finish her introduction, he ran quickly through his mental notes for the coming lecture. He's better scrap that "most of you are too young to remember" line. After a hundred years it wasn't as complementary as it once had been. The Hemingway story . . . he'd have to keep that—at least until the current revival was over—but he could dump John Barrymore and restore Grodnick to his rightful place.

Next year, if the American Classics series brought out *Red Hot Mama* in an expurgated edition as Akermann had promised they would, he wouldn't have to make any more one night stands. He'd be able to stay in New York and . . .

It was the *and* that did it. He suddenly realized that he couldn't finish the sentence. The passage of a century hadn't changed New York. It was still cluttered with the once greats, the burned-out rockets who had made a single spectacular flight twenty or thirty years before, and had never gone up again.

If he wanted it, there was always the place at the bar and the free drinks—tourists were kind—and the talk about the time when the critics would suddenly discover that the old writing was best after all. If he wanted it . . . but he suddenly realized that he didn't. Here he was somebody. Here there were people who would listen with respect while he told of John Grodnick and the rest.

"Dear Ladies," he said with a note of honest pleasure in his voice, "I can't tell you how good it is to be back in Kansas."

## lover boy

SHELDON'S THIN ARISTOCRATIC FACE reflected a mixture of defiance, despair and horror, as he stood in the center of the housekeeper's sitting room and looked down at the fat woman sprawled out on the worn divan.

"I'll do anything you say," he said. "Anything but that! I'll . . . I'll set up a trust fund so that you'll never have to worry about money again as long as you live. But I won't kill her. I love her. Can't you understand that? I love her!"

Mrs. Higgins looked up at him contemptuously. "Love!" she snorted. "That's a laugh. You knock off her old man so you can marry her and get your mitts on his money, and now you go soft and start talking about love. It's no soap, lover boy, you belong to me and nobody else. You're going to feed her enough champagne at the wedding supper so that she gets good and loaded, and then you're going to see that she accidentally falls off the bedroom balcony while she's out getting a breath of fresh air. That's the way it's going to be. Period! You see?"

"I'll kill myself first!"

Mrs. Higgins popped another chocolate in her mouth, sucked on it noisily, then drawled, "It's a nice idea, lover boy, but let's face it—you just ain't got the guts. And since you haven't, there's nothing you can do but what I tell you, when I tell you, the way I tell you. You're mine, little man—until I get tired of you or death doth us part."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, as if she knew the chain of thought her last words had triggered inside his head.

"And it better be your death that does the parting, lover boy, not mine. I know, with the kind of dough you're going to have after the wedding, it wouldn't be too hard for you to arrange an accident . . ." She let her voice trail off, then gave a nasty chuckle. "If it wasn't for that package of evidence I got tucked away where you'll never find it. Your story about old man Arnett busting his head falling downstairs wouldn't be worth spit if the police got their hands on

my signed statement and a blood-stained poker with your fingerprints on it. Just don't forget that, and we'll get along fine."

She waved one pudgy hand in a gesture of dismissal. "You'd better go down and find your little Virginia. She'll be wondering what happened to you." She sighed and leaned back luxuriously. "But first give me a little kiss to tide me over till evening." Her voice sharpened. "*And kiss me as if you meant it!*"

Sheldon was seized with a momentary fit of obstinacy. "The nights are bad enough," he said. "At least you can leave me alone during the day."

"*Lover boy!*"

It was only a whisper, but it held a quality of command that caused him to stiffen convulsively, as if a flying stiletto had suddenly pierced him between the shoulder blades. With a wretched attempt at an affectionate smile, he walked woodenly over and knelt beside her.

"That's better, lover boy," she crooned as she drew him down to her. "This is the way it's going to be with us—for ever and ever."

As Sheldon walked down the back stairs from the servants' quarters to where Virginia was waiting, he found himself fingering a business card in his jacket pocket. Every word of the prediction whispered by the small, dark man who had accosted him after the funeral was coming true. Every single word.

He pulled the card out for the tenth time and looked at it. On it were a neatly engraved name and address—DeWitt Norman, Room 427 Temple Building—but as he stared reflectively at the oblong white cardboard, two words, written in a strange archaic script, suddenly appeared and then just as suddenly vanished.

#### DEATH INSURANCE

Mr. Norman looked quite human . . . except for his eyes. They glowed with a strange ruby-like fire in the semi-darkness of his dimly lighted office.

"She's a monster," said Sheldon, "a demon—a succubus who's fastened onto me and won't let go. Her flabby body is bad enough, but what's inside is worse. I look into her eyes and see crawling things leering out at me. I listen to that croaking voice whispering obscene suggestions in the night

and . . ." His hands moved as if they were gripping a fat neck, then fell helplessly to his sides. "Sometimes I think she's possessed!"

Mr. Norman grinned. Sheldon noticed something odd about his teeth. They were more pointed than they had any right to be. "In her case, it hasn't been necessary," he said. "She's been doing such an effective job all by herself that she hasn't needed any inside help. That's not the immediate point, however. You obviously came to see me about something more concrete than a mere discussion of the villainous nature of the late Mr. Arnett's housekeeper. Right?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," said Sheldon slowly. "I've had a strange feeling that you might . . . er . . . help me." He seemed to be having trouble formulating his words.

"By removing this female?" asked Mr. Norman helpfully. "Why, of course. That's my business. You'd be surprised at the number of amateurs who come to me for help in tidying up jobs they've botched. And yours, if you don't mind my saying so, was a singularly clumsy affair. Permitting a servant to wander in, right in the middle of your operation, then letting her get away with a piece of such incriminating evidence as the murder weapon—really!"

"How was I to know she was watching?" Sheldon burst out. He stopped suddenly, his eyes widening. "How did you know about that?" he demanded hoarsely.

"The usual way. The home office supplies us with leads on prospective clients, and I got a routine notice on you the day after Mr. Arnett's unfortunate . . . accident. But as my client—" his voice seemed to italicize the word—"you may rely on my discretion just as you would upon that of your doctor or lawyer. Ours is an extremely ethical profession, you know. It has to be. But back to business." He gave Sheldon a calculating look. "You do want to go on with this, don't you?"

Sheldon gulped and nodded.

"Good," said Mr. Norman. "If we can agree on the details now, I'll draw up a policy and send it directly to the home office for approval. It should be ready for your signature by tomorrow." He tapped the desk top thoughtfully with long tapered fingers. "Ordinarily, I would recommend what is often incorrectly referred to as an Act of God—something like a bolt of lightning or a small twister—but in this case, the party you are concerned with has been clever enough to protect herself against such obvious measures. Her death would immediately insure yours, since that package of incriminating evidence would be forwarded to the police at once."

"Couldn't you just arrange to have the package destroyed?" Sheldon suggested.

Mr. Norman shook his head regretfully. "It wouldn't be ethical. The president of the bank that has custody of the package is also a client of mine. No, what is needed is a procedure that will keep Mrs. Higgins alive and, at the same time, helpless."

"And the price?" asked Sheldon uneasily.

"We can discuss that later. It's the problem that interests me. Let me think about it a moment."

A long silence followed.

"Got it!" said the small dark man suddenly.

"Remember, she's got to remain alive!"

"I know that; she will. But once I've decanted her, the fat creature you know as Mrs. Higgins could be written off as a threat."

"Once you've what?"

"Decanted her. I believe the vulgar refer to the process as soul-snatching. If the soul is removed skillfully from its container—"

"Container?"

"Body, if you prefer," said Mr. Norman patiently. "If properly decanted, the body will remain alive, but that's all. Your overweight courtesan will be an empty, mindless husk—but not dead. As long as she isn't, by your own admission, you have nothing to worry about."

"Sounds good," said Sheldon thoughtfully. "Excellent, in fact. But to get back to the matter of price . . ." He tried to look squarely into the dark man's eyes, but found he couldn't. There was a strange magnetic quality in the dull red glowing orbs that gave him the feeling he was being sucked out of himself.

"Let's get back to the price," he said at last. "If the old tales are true, it may be more than I can afford to pay."

"The price is the usual one," said Mr. Norman. "But you must remember that most of the stories you've heard originated with a handful of malcontents. Anyway," he added quickly, "billing you for the premium is obviously only a technicality. You must be aware that your unauthorized and premeditated liquidation of your employer has already given the home office a permanent lien on your future services. Why not get something out of the deal?"

The more Sheldon thought about it, the more he wavered. The dark man waited until the opportune moment and then,

with the skill of an experienced salesman, added, "I might even be able to toss in something extra."

"Huh? Such as?" asked Sheldon cautiously.

"I haven't made my quota yet this month. Just to keep the home office off my neck, I might be willing to throw in an extra wish. The standard policy calls for only one to the insuring party, but if you'll agree to close the deal within the next forty-eight hours, I'll toss in another absolutely free. That way, you'll be able to take care of Mrs. Higgins with the first one and still have one left over for anything else your heart desires."

"Forty-eight hours doesn't give me much time to think it over," Sheldon complained unhappily.

"More than you need," answered Mr. Norman. "You're getting married tomorrow afternoon. Right? And I believe Mrs. Higgins has certain plans for the disposal of your bride shortly after the ceremony. Miss Arnett is a pleasant little morsel and it would be a shame to lose her."

Sheldon was in obvious agreement with the last statement. "That second wish," he said, "did you say I could have anything I wanted?"

"Well," said the dark man slowly, "almost anything. Let's say anything that isn't under direct control of our heavenly competitors. As long as your wish doesn't directly violate one of the divine ordinances, we can give it to you."

"One more thing . . . I'm naturally concerned about when payment will have to be made."

"At the usual time—on your death bed."

Sheldon hesitated and looked at Mr. Norman dubiously. "You seem to specialize in accidents. What's to keep you from arranging a fatal one for me in the near future?"

The dark man seemed shocked at the suggestion.

"You apparently have no idea of the ethics of my profession," he said coldly. "But if it will make you any happier, I'll give you my word that neither I nor any member of my organization will do anything, directly or indirectly, to hasten your death."

"Can I have that in writing?" asked Sheldon cannily.

"Certainly." Mr. Norman still looked hurt. "I'll even insert a clause to the effect that the whole agreement becomes null and void in case of any breach of contract on our part. Now, does that satisfy you?"

"I'll have to think about it a bit more," said Sheldon, as he rose to go. He paused at the door. "In case I decide to . . .

to take out a policy with your company, how can I get in touch with you?"

"Don't worry about that," said the dark man. "When you need me, I'll be there."

Sheldon tapped lightly on the dressing room door. "I have to step out for a moment, Virginia. I'll be right back," he said.

"Don't be long, darling," a soft voice whispered from the other side. "I'm almost ready."

He stepped into the hallway and shut the bedroom door securely behind him. Mr. Norman wasn't late. There was a slight shimmer in the air, and he stood before Sheldon.

"Did you bring the policy?"

The dark man nodded and snapped his fingers. A glowing piece of parchment materialized in the air in front of them.

"All complete, except for your formal agreement."

Now that the moment had arrived, Sheldon felt a sudden desire to temporize. If he had miscalculated, if just one little thing went wrong, he was lost. As he thought of the consequences, his courage began to drain from him.

"Perhaps we'd better wait until morning," he said in a hesitant voice.

"I wouldn't be wise," said Mr. Norman. "The fat one is sitting in her room, watching the clock. It's already half an hour past the appointed time for the accident. She is mad with jealousy and if, during the night, her passion should overcome her self-interest, she might give orders for that package to be sent to the police. Unless you act now, it may be too late."

The man was right. He couldn't put it off any longer. He took a deep breath and managed to force out two words.

"I agree."

As he spoke, his signature appeared in letters of fire on the bottom of the parchment that was hanging in front of him.

"Your first wish?"

"Mrs. Higgins. You know what to do. Be quick about it!"

The dark man gave a sardonic salaam and disappeared.

A few seconds later, he was back again.

"The decanting is complete. The fat one is alive, but nothing looks out through her eyes."

Sheldon let out a shuddering sigh as the weight that had been oppressing him for so long seemed to slide off his shoulders. He stood in silence for a moment, savoring the champagne bouquet taste of freedom.

"And your second?" said the dark man. "Have you thought of what it will be?"

Sheldon nodded slowly.

"Good. You might as well make it now, so I can have the home office get to work on it. If you want to be world dictator or something like that, they'll need a little advance notice. Even with their tremendous resources, things like that take time, you know. What is it—power?"

"No, with the Arnett millions, I already have that," Sheldon said firmly.

"Wisdom, perhaps?"

"That can be bought, also. I want one thing that money can't buy."

"And that is?"

A blaze kindled in Sheldon's eyes that almost matched that in the dark man's.

"Immortality!"

He waited, but felt no change take place within himself. "Now!" he cried impatiently. The dark man spread both hands forward, palms up in an apologetic gesture. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but that is one thing I can't grant now. You should have asked for it before the marriage ceremony."

Sheldon fought for control, as he felt himself being sucked into the quicksand of sudden panic and despair.

"But . . ." he barely whispered. "But you said . . ."

"I said the home office had control over all matters except those coming under celestial jurisdiction"

"What's all that got to do with denying me immortality?" There was a note of desperation in Sheldon's voice.

"Marriage is a divine sacrament," said the little man unctuously. "Surely, you remember the part of the service in which it is said, 'Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.'"

"But you're not a man!" Sheldon objected.

"It's all a matter of definition," said Mr. Norman. "And unfortunately, in the case of *McGinty vs Molach*, it was decided that for actuarial purposes, the term *man* was to be construed to include all sentient beings except currently bona fide residents of the celestial regions. The home office fought the case all the way up to the highest authority, but the original decision was sustained. It was the first time in the history of our organization that the underwriters were unable to collect the premium due on an issued policy."

"I still don't get it," said Sheldon.

"You should—it's really quite simple. To grant you im-



mortality and leave your wife mortal would be the surest way of tearing your marriage apart. For a few years, things would be fine, but what about afterward? When the years begin to erode Virginia's beauty, what then? How long would she be able to stand the contrast between your youth and her age? And how long would you?"

"That would be our affair, not yours."

"I'm afraid the authorities would take a different view. They would be sure to hold that my original action was the primary cause of the eventual sundering. Sorry, Sheldon, but you'll have to think of something else."

He gave a lecherous wink. "How would you like to be Casanova's successor?"

"Not interested. The only woman I want is waiting for me in there." He gestured toward the bedroom.

"Then, how about—"

"No!" interrupted Sheldon savagely. "I don't want anything else. Give me a chance to think, will you!"

He rubbed his knuckles against his temples, as if somehow the action would speed up the thought. Immortality was the only thing that would save him, but—"let no man put asunder." However, if she were immortal also . . . of course!

There was no spectacular show, only a rippling sense of vitality that tingled momentarily through every nerve cell in his body.

"It's done?"

The dark man plucked the parchment out of the air and put it away carefully in his inside coat pocket.

"It's done. Neither of you can ever know physical death. A clever solution to your dilemma, Mr. Sheldon, an extremely clever solution. May I congratulate you on it?"

Sheldon made no effort to conceal the exultation that was blazing inside him. "You may, but on something shrewder than that. I've tricked you—you and your whole damned organization. Hasn't it occurred to you that, according to the terms of my policy, the premium doesn't fall due until my death? And I'm immortal . . . *immortal!*"

There was a singing wonder to the last word that made him repeat it again and again, as if he didn't quite believe it.

Mr. Norman didn't say anything, but an odd little smile flickered across his face as he bowed politely and vanished.

Sheldon felt some apprehension which he quickly dismissed. She was gone, gone forever, and he had his new bride and his new fortune to pleasure him through all eternity.

Slowly, almost timidly, he opened the bedroom door and quietly slipped inside.

Virginia was so beautiful that his breath caught in his throat and his heart began pounding so wildly that it seemed to him the sound must be echoing through the room like drumbeats. As he knelt beside his bride, her lovely heart-shaped face turned up to his and a little pointed tongue licked full red lips.

"My darling!" he whispered. "Tell me it's always going to be like this."

Two deep sapphire blue eyes opened and Mrs. Higgins looked out through them at her lover. Slowly, she voluptuously ran her hands over the full rich curves of her new container.

"'Till death doth us part,' " she crooned. "Kiss me, lover boy. Kiss me as if you meant it."

## the other cheek

ALL THINGS BEING CONSIDERED, Pilot Officer Kit Carpenter was as calm as a young and somewhat unwilling reserve officer who had never seen a planet blown up in anger could be expected to be when his ship was about to be blasted out from underneath him. His only outward sign of agitation was the way in which his eyes kept shifting back and forth as he tried to focus them simultaneously on the image of authority on his number one telescreen and the image of wrath on his number two. He was trying to consult the first about the second but he wasn't getting very far.

"Can't hear you, sir," he bellowed to the figure on the first screen.

Commander Simmons' voice sounded back faintly through the surrounding din. "Turn off your hooter, you knuckle-head!"

Kit gave an abashed start and punched a stud on the control board in front of him. The racous *beep BLOOP beep BLOOP* of the alarm siren that had been echoing through the deserted companionways and empty compartments of the old freighter dwindled to a last despairing squawk and silence.

"Well!" said the commander sourly. He obviously wasn't happy about wasting his time.

"WCD! Six o'clock at thirty seven degrees. What do I do now?"

There was a moment of silence and then Commander Simmons snorted.

"The first thing you can do is to familiarize yourself with your code book. For your information, WCD means 'enemy spacecraft preparing to attack.' When you've checked that, you might also take a look at your *Officer's Guide* and brief yourself on the proper way to report to a superior officer!"

"Sorry, sir," said Kit, "but I thought . . ."

"Pilot officers aren't supposed to think," growled the other. "They are supposed to pilot. Now if it's not asking too much—your name, ship, and destination!"

Kit was trying desperately to sit at attention, but in spite of his best efforts, he couldn't keep his eyes off the other tele-screen.

"When you're being addressed by a superior," the commander continued, "look him square in the face. The service has no place for shifty-eyed officers. Now report!"

"Pilot Officer Kit Carpenter, sir. Auxilliary freighter *Pelican* on courier detail. I'm supposed to rendezvous with a guard squadron some place around here and continue on to Saar with them. I've a pouch for Space Marshall Kincaide."

"That's better," said the commander. "We're the outfit you're looking for. Now what's your trouble? It better be serious enough to justify that all-channel alarm you just blatted out or you're going to find yourself on report."

"WCD," said Kit. "Begging your pardon, sir, but there is an enemy spacecraft preparing to attack."

The commander jerked himself erect in his seat. "What!" He swung as if to bark an order and then caught himself and looked back at Kit with a dubious expression on his face.

"Are you sure you aren't seeing things? Let's have a look at what's out there."

After a moment's fumbling Kit managed to swing his number two plate around on its gimbals so the commander could see it.

"There she is, sir. She must have on her battle black because all that comes through on visual is a big blur."

Commander Simmons sighed and relaxed in his seat. "Sorry to disappoint you, Carpenter, but it would take a star class cruiser to throw a smudge that size. And star class cruisers don't go around jumping on auxiliary freighters. What do you get on your radar scope? Battle black won't soak up UHF."

Kit squirmed unhappily. "Nothing, sir. But . . ." Kit stammered to an embarrassed stop.

"Stop stuttering! What's the matter, your scanner out of kilter?"

"Not exactly . . ." The words came out in a rush. "The truth is that I just don't know how to operate the darn thing. I missed that lecture when I was taking basic."

"You what?" howled the commander.

Kit's look of embarrassment was becoming chronic. "You see, Commander, I'm a Planetary Ferry Command service pilot and . . ."

Simmons clapped his hands dramatically to his head. "Oh,

no! Are they going crazy back home? What's a peefee doing out in deep space?"

"Couldn't we go into that later, sir? I'm about to be blown apart."

"Stop that nonsense!" snapped the commander. "When a superior officer asks you a question, you will give him a direct answer."

Kit looked unhappily at the blur on his other screen. "This was a rush job and there weren't any fleet pilots available so they punched out a navigation tape for me and sent me out on full automatic. They said once I made contact with you, you'd take me in the rest of the way. I came out of warp ten minutes ago and this baby jumped me. I've got three minutes to surrender or else."

"For your information," said the commander with a strained sweetness in his voice, "ships of one system do not attack ships of another without a prior declaration of war. We are not at war. Do I make myself clear? You've probably got a bug in your detection gear that's throwing a shadow on your screen."

"Commander," said Kit doggedly, "maybe we aren't at war with anybody, but somebody is sure at war with us. Or with me anyway. Fouled up detectors don't talk. Whatever it is that's out there does. If I don't surrender within the next couple of minutes she's going to open fire!"

On the innermost planet of the system of Saar, the hundred and twenty-seventh consecutive meeting of the respective liberation forces of the Solar Alliance and the Polarian Empire were under way. In one tent Space Marshall Kincaide, Supreme Commander, Solar Expeditionary Forces, and His Royal Highness, Prince Tarz, Duke of the Outer Marches and War Lord of the Imperial Polarian Fleet, had passed from the table thumping stage and were now busily engaged in trying to outshout each other. Off in one corner by himself, his usual dignity completely surrendered, sat the unhappy representative of the Saarians, his eyes closed and his hands pressed tightly against his ears. As usual, nobody was paying him the slightest attention.

Two tents down, the sub-commission on the exchange of civilian prisoners was in full session. Since there were no civilian prisoners to be exchanged, they were passing time by showing each other pictures of wives and fiancées. Both Terrestrials and Polarrians were finding the exchange rather stimulating because, though female anatomical structure was the same in both systems, ideas as to which areas of the body

should be clothed as a matter of natural modesty varied greatly.

Back of the cookhouse a couple of privates were shooting craps. The Earthman had already taken over the Polarian's thurk skin and was busy working on his green battle beard. The dice weren't loaded, but they were a little flat on one side.

Squadron Commander Simmons knew that Kit couldn't be in any real trouble, but he found himself wishing half consciously that he were. The commander was facing technological unemployment and he wasn't happy about it. He had a vested interest in the coming war . . . and now the coming war wasn't coming. Once the stellite deposits on Saar—which, as everyone agreed, the Saarians had little use for, having no expensive battle fleet to maintain—were equitably divided between Earth and Polarius, there would no longer be any necessity for a show of force, and the reserve components of the Solar Fleet would be demobilized.

Squadron Commander Simmons' permanent rank was Pilot Officer, Senior Grade, and he wasn't particularly anxious to return to it. He ran his fingers regretfully over the golden comets on his shoulder straps. This was his last mission. Negotiations for an agreement whereby the Saarians would turn over part of their stellite to Earth for protection against the Polarians and the remainder to the Polarians for protection against the Solar Alliance were almost completed. Escorting Space Marshall Kincaide back to Earth would be his last flight as commander. After . . . His fingers were creeping up to the golden comets again when a crisp voice snapped him out of his reverie.

"Word from the spotting room, sir. They swept the courier and there is a ship alongside her. A big on! She looks like a Polarian star class cruiser, commander. Her nose turrets show up plain as day!"

Simmons' fist crashed down on the general alarm button. "All hands to battle stations! Prepare to proceed under full emergency power! You!" he barked at Kit. "Make a run for it. Throw on your boosters and take evasive action! We'll get to you as fast as we can."

"Beg pardon, sir," said Kit, "but before I took off they gave me strict orders not to touch the controls. Said I'd get lost for sure if I started fooling around with them."

"I don't give a damn what they said," roared the commander. "I'm giving you a direct order to make a run for it. And above all, don't let that pouch fall into enemy hands. If

it looks as if you aren't going to get clear, destroy it. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. But about that pouch . . ."

"Carry on," snapped Simmons. The screen went dark. Kit looked up unhappily at the sweeping second hand of the clock above the instrument panel and prepared to obey orders, to his best ability.

Squadron 7 hurtled through the gray nothingness of hyperspace in a tight cone. In the lead ship Commander Simmons sat hunched before his blank combat screen, battle ready, his fingers spread over the controls that bound the whole squadron together into a flashing thunderbolt of destruction.

A flat mechanical voice echoed from the concealed speaker behind him.

"Request permission to snap out, sir."

Without turning his head, Simmons grunted, "Permission granted." There was a sudden wrenching and then the combat screen lit up as the squadron flipped into normal space. There was the usual exasperating moment of waiting for the detector beams to bridge the distance to the objective and back and then two sharp silhouettes leaped into being. Simmons' executive officer pointed excitedly at the larger of the two.

"It's a Polarian all right, sir!"

Simmons nodded tensely.

As the squadron closed in, the smaller silhouette began to move rapidly away from the larger one, zigzagging as it went.

"He's making a run for it!"

For a moment it looked as if the courier might make it. Then with an easy twist like a shark pursuing a mud turtle, the larger silhouette overtook the smaller one.

Suddenly the battle screen began to shimmer. Action was lost in a spreading cloud of light points. Commander Simmons punched the spotting room call button.

"What the hell's going on down there?"

An apologetic voice answered. "The big ship's jamming, sir. There's nothing we can do until we get within range of the visuals."

Minutes went by and still the screen remained blank. Then suddenly it cleared and the two ships could be seen again. There was little change in their positions. Then again the little ship changed course suddenly and began to pull away. The cruiser made no effort to follow.

"Two minutes to target, sir," called a voice from the wall speaker.

The courier drew farther and farther away. Commander Simmons was just beginning to relax when without warning from the nose of the great cruiser darted a flashing speck.

"There's a homing torp after him!"

The courier seemed to realize its danger and began to take evasive action but the tiny point kept on its trail, closing in with relentless persistency.

A second later the two points touched. A blinding burst of actinic light flared up on the screen and then nothing was left but a glowing spreading cloud of radioactive gas.

The enemy cruiser hung motionless for a moment and then with a flick, vanished as its great converters warped it into hyperspace.

Commander Simmons' comets seemed to grip his shoulder tabs as if they had a permanent place there.

"Set course for Saar! If it's war they want, war is what they will get!"

He adjusted his look of command and glared sternly around at such of his staff as were on duty in the control room.

"Gentlemen, it may take twenty years, but the *Pelican* will be avenged!" He frowned as he detected a certain lack of enthusiasm in the "Aye, aye, sirs" with which the more civilian-hearted members of his staff responded.

"Service before Self," he barked, and then, chest out, shoulders back, and chin in, he marched from the control room.

On Saar negotiations were proceeding as usual. Prince Tarz and Space Marshall Kincaide were glaring at each other in sullen silence while the Saarian emissary fidgeted forgotten at the end of the table. Finally the little man spoke in a quiet voice.

"Please, gentlemen, you know how these scenes upset me. Couldn't we adjourn until you are in a better frame of mind?"

Kincaide looked down at him in disgust.

"If you're not happy here, why don't you go home? We'll send word to you when it's time for you to come back and sign the treaty."

Prince Tarz nodded. It was the first time he and Kincaide had agreed upon anything for days.

"Let's get back to work," grunted Kincaide impatiently. He pulled a topographical map of the northern hemisphere toward him and indicated an irregular area marked in red.

"My government contends that . . ."



The Saarian interrupted for the second time. "That area contains some of our best grazing land!"

Prince Tarz gave a wolfish grin. "It is unfortunate, but think of the protection you'll be getting. If anyone ever tries to bother you, we'll drive them out. I don't see any way that occupation can be avoided—unless of course you'd prefer to detail a couple of your own battalions for defense detail."

"You know that we have no troops," said the Saarian with dignity.

Tarz winked at Kincaide. "Then draft a few."

The little man caught the exchange of amused looks.

"You find it amusing that our culture is such that my people are incapable of any act of true violence, don't you? This is not a matter for laughter, but for thought. I have warned you before that if you insist on thrusting yourselves upon us, terrible consequences must follow. On your heads be it, then."

"Nuts!" said Kincaide. Turning back to Tarz he stabbed his finger down on the map and protested violently.

As voices began to rise again, the Saarian shuddered and slipped down in his chair. He didn't think they would come to the point of actually striking each other, but even the threat of violence nauseated him.

Kit did the best he could but his best wasn't good enough. Trying to carry on evasive action in an old clunker whose worn plates begin to buckle at a 5G side-thrust is a rather pointless procedure. His run for it lasted exactly fifteen seconds. Then, with an effortless spurt of its great planetary drives, the cruiser flashed up to his side and gripped the *Pelican* securely with her magnagravs. As he was hauled closer to the great ship, he followed out the last of his orders. The sealed package addressed to Space Marshall Kincaide was tossed regretfully into the incinerator chute.

Kit wasn't happy about being captured but there didn't seem to be much he could do about it so, after switching his number two screen to BOW CLOSE so he could see what was going on, he busied himself with collecting his few belongings in his flight bag.

Lovingly he took down a framed photo from the bulkhead and gazed regretfully upon his past greatness. There next to a small shed that bore a very large sign, AJAX CARRIERS, rested the Ajax fleet, an old flare-jetted DeWitt open-system lunar cargo rocket. Beside its open cargo hatch stood the Ajax staff, owner and chief pilot Kittridge Carpenter and his chief of maintenance and supply, Egghead Shirey, who in ad-

dition to being the mechanic, kept the books, collected the bills, and loaded and unloaded the ship.

Kit sighed as he placed the picture gently in his bag. Egg-head was doing all he could to keep the business running but he couldn't swing it alone. It would take Kit's presence and a fist full of money to get the Ajax Carriers back off the rocks. And now . . . Kit stared gloomily at the telescreen.

The cruiser's midship landing hatch was gaping open, but the man at the magnagrav controls seemed to be having trouble estimating relative speeds. At last after several false swings the *Pelican* was jockeyed in through the landing hatch and lowered roughly to the hangar floor.

A clanging vibration ran through the deck plates of the cruiser and up into his ship as the great entrance hatch clanged shut. And then his vision screen went blank as air hissed into the hanger compartment and frosted over the scanner ports. Kit sat watching the external pressure needle climb until it reached Earth normal. When it did, he climbed down into the pressure chamber and undogged the locks on the outside port. There did not seem any point in hanging around. The actual surrender was only a formality that he might as well get over with. When he stuck his head out the hatch and looked down, he almost changed his mind.

Waiting for Kit on the flight deck were several unsavory looking characters clumped together in a disorderly knot. Over their massive shoulders were slung tawny thurk skins, and partially covering the stubble on their scowling, unshaven faces hung the false green beards that were the traditional battle wear of Polarian fighting men. As Kit started down the ladder that led from the exit hatch of the *Pelican*, they began to howl up at him. They carried a miscellaneous assortment of blunt objects in their hands and seemed intent on making as immediate and forceful a presentation of them as possible. Kit scurried back through his memory trying to pick up something in the way of a guide to survival. There had been a training film on *What To Do If Captured*, but the only thing he could remember from it was that it was highly important that one reveal nothing more to the enemy than his name, rank, and serial number. Unfortunately, the menacing crowd down below seemed more interested in collecting blood than information.

He was tempted to reverse his direction but a moment's reflection convinced him that forcing them to cut their way into the *Pelican* to get him wouldn't improve their tempers.

Somewhat whitefaced, he continued on down to the deck, raising both hands above his head in token of surrender.

The green-bearded warriors closed around him in a muttering semi-circle. Kit licked his lips nervously and fumbled behind his back for the first rung of the ladder. He tensed, ready for a quick pivot and a fast scramble, when a massive officer pushed his way through the ranks and came to a stop in front of him.

The bright green ringlets of the ceremonial beard that draped the lower half of his face only half concealed the three days' growth of stubble underneath. His tunic was smudged with food stains and his bloodshot eyes had a mean and crazy look in them as they eyed Kit with the intentness of a hound dog surveying a chunk of raw meat. Kit felt an immediate and pressing need to talk things over. He wracked his brain in an effort to salvage something of the two weeks course in Extra-Terrestrial, the lingua franca of the spaceways, he'd had at OCS, but all he could remember was *pigna sna krutvik*,—"have you lost your toothbrush." Considering the condition of the other's teeth, it hardly seemed like a politic question.

With a scowl, the officer gestured to the blaster that hung at Kit's side and barked, "Therkal!" Kit meekly unbuckled it and handed it over, butt first as the regulations provided. The other gripped the heavy weapon and with an ugly chuckle raised it up until it was aligned with a point roughly one inch above Kit's snubbed nose. The landing area grew suddenly silent as one grimy finger began to crook down on the firing stud. The officer's eyes narrowed as he slowly began to count. "Urp! . . . Det! . . . Twik! . . ."

Kit's lesson in Polarian numerals was suddenly interrupted by the dissonant clang of a gong. Then it sounded again, and from the other side of the hangar deck came a procession of white robed figures. Their leader was a slight elderly man but the wand he bore impressively before him had an unpleasant resemblance to a human thigh bone. He stopped a short distance from Kit and addressed the warriors briefly. They responded with short snarls of protest and then reluctantly began to struggle away from the landing area. Only the officer remained.

"I am the Soother of Souls. The position is somewhat equivalent to that of chief chaplain in your forces. It's a bit messier, though. When we sacrifice a captive, I have to examine his entrails to see whether Thweela is kindly disposed toward our venture."

Kit gulped and changed the subject in a hurry.

"What's behind all this? One minute I'm cruising along minding my own business, and the next I'm the prisoner of a bunch of loonies whose only interest in life seems to be finding newer and more interesting ways to beat my brains out. What gives?"

"You're an Earthman," said the Soother of Souls, as if that explained everything.

"So what?"

"Earth always takes! She masses her fleets off a little system, points her guns, and takes. I think maybe Polarius will change things. She's got big ships—big guns too. Thweela will drink much blood soon!"

"Why pick on me?" protested Kit. "I'm not mad at anybody. All that I want to do is get home before my business goes bankrupt. What have you got to gain by taking me prisoner?"

"You'll find out," said the Soother of Souls cryptically and then turned as the officer beside him tugged at his sleeve, gestured toward Kit, and growled something.

"What does he want?" asked Kit nervously.

"Captain Klag says he's leaving now. He says he'll see you at dinner."

"Tell him I'm not hungry."

"That's irrelevant. You are the dinner. The ritual banquet is an old Polarian custom. By eating the enemy we rob him of his power. A long time ago we used to use a spit and roast him over a fire. Now we use diathermy so as not to spoil so much meat."

As Kit's face went white, Captain Klag gave a satisfied smile and swaggered away. The high priest barked a quick command and suddenly the hangar deck became a hive of activity as his followers tossed their robes to one side and went efficiently to work.

A cart was trundled up carrying what Kit recognized as some sort of remote control rig. Four of the priests grabbed it and quickly muscled it up the ladder and into the hatch of the *Pelican*. They remained inside for several minutes, and then one stuck his head out and nodded to the high priest. A moment later all four came out of the ship and closed the hatch behind them.

While the first crew was working inside the *Pelican*, another had trundled out a space torpedo and was busy arming its atomic warhead and adjusting its homing controls. They set it carefully on the guide rails that lead to the exit hatch

and then, after a careful check, waved a go-ahead signal to the high priest. He called a quick order. Robes were reassumed, the procession reformed, and, with a bang of the ceremonial gong, double-timed toward the entrance port that led to the interior of the ship. Kit brought up the rear, assisted by two husky priests.

As the hatch banged shut behind them, Kit stole a glance back through the transparent port. The *Pelican* rose slowly from the deck and with a short spurt from her rear jets vanished through the exit hatch into the blackness of outer space. A moment later the homing torp vibrated slightly and began to move slowly in pursuit.

It was pitch dark in the cell block. Kit slumped on the iron ledge that served him for a bunk and tried to estimate how long it had been since they had brought him down from the flight deck and locked him up. On the way down there had been the muffled thunder of drive tubes and then just as they clanged the grilled door shut on him, the familiar wrenching as the cruiser twisted into hyperspace.

His stomach was his clock and for obvious reasons he tried to avoid thinking about any part of the eating process. Being a prisoner of war under normal circumstances was bad enough, but to be the *pièce de résistance* at a ritual banquet was a course of another color. What he had to do was obvious; it was the how that was putting pinwheels in his brain. There were scout ships on the landing stage, but to get to them he would first have to get out of the cell. And then, even if he could slip down to the flight deck undetected, there was still the problem of getting the launching port open so he could blast out.

The only thing he knew for sure was that he had to get out, and he had to get out fast.

Suddenly a dim light blinked on overhead and he heard the sound of a hatch opening at the other end of the cell block. There was the sound of footsteps and a moment later he could distinguish an approaching figure in the semi-darkness. It stopped in front of his cell and looked in.

Kit glanced down at the gleaming, sharp battle sickle that hung at the other's side. A horrifying suspicion grew that this could very well be the ship's butcher come to prepare him for dinner. Drawing his shoulders back, he said in a voice whose sternness was somewhat spoiled by a slight quaver, "I am an officer in the Solar Fleet and I demand to be treated as such. Interspatial law provides extreme penalties for the mistreatment of prisoners!"

The other answered his protest by hoisting up the broad, flat tail of the thurk skin that was draped over his left shoulder and blowing his nose on it noisily.

When he made no overt move Kit advanced to the front of his cell, tapped himself on the chest, and said slowly, "Me Earth," and pointing toward the other, "You Polarius. Friends." Then he stretched his hand out through the bars. "Shake."

The warrior looked at him coldly. "Regulations of the Polarian Imperial Fleet provide that all personnel refrain from unauthorized physical contact. During my current avatar I am appearing in the physical guise of a Polarian officer. Do I make myself clear?"

He was smug about it.

Kit withdrew his hand. "Not quite. Would you mind going over that 'current avatar' part again?"

"You may substitute the terms 'embodiment' or 'manifestation' if you prefer," said the other stiffly. "Regulations also provide that guards shall not carry on unnecessary conversations with prisoners. This conversation is unnecessary." With that he turned his back to Kit.

Kit was bothered. There was something about the whole situation that was wrong, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Why should the Polarians want to break the peace? And if they did, why did they tip their hand by knocking off an old clunker like the *Pelican*? And above all, why did they go to all the trouble of taking him prisoner? He certainly didn't know anything that would be of value to them. It didn't make sense! Nothing made sense—including the position of the guard who was now leaning against the bars with his back toward Kit so that the bunch of keys protruding from his back pocket were within easy reach.

Without stopping to think, Kit stretched out his hand cautiously. His fingers had almost touched the key ring when the guard gave a sudden bound like a frightened rabbit and then lurched into the opposite corridor wall.

As Kit watched him his eyes turned glassy and rolled up slightly. He stood rigid, head half-cocked as if listening to inaudible voices.

"Do you hear them?" he demanded.

Kit shook his head cautiously. "Who?"

"The voices. The voices that are one voice." The guard's voice dropped into a rumbling chant. "The voices that cry out through the empty blackness between the stars."

Kit shifted uneasily. He couldn't get at the guard, but the guard could get at him.

"The rabbits have gathered in their warrens. They are summoning death, cold wracking death streaming in from the dark nebula. The millions are kneeling together, their minds throbbing out a single cry . . . over and over . . . over and over . . . Come Thweela . . . COME THWEELA!"

He pressed both hands against his head and began to shake and tremble. His eyeballs turned up until only the muddy whites could be seen and he seemed to be choking on his own tongue. He pushed back against the bulkhead, spreading his arms out. His head lolled down on his chest and in the half darkness it almost seemed as if he hung there crucified.

Kit felt surge after surge of alarm as he watched the guard. Thweela? Thweela was the old Polarian god of death and destruction. But this!

There was silence for a moment, and then a strangled sob burst from the guard's throat.

"Not the Death! Let me live out this avatar in peace!" He stood as if waiting for an answer. When it came his massive chest expanded as his shoulders squared and his head came up. Like a great automaton he stalked slowly, majestically toward Kit.

High above the liberators' headquarters on Saar there were brilliant bursts of purple flame as Squadron 7 entered atmosphere with braking jets roaring out their full-throated thunder. Commander Simmons was in his stateroom checking over his full dress uniform for the umpteenth time. When he was quite satisfied, he stiffened, adjusted his face to a maximum of sternness, and said briskly to his mirror, "At 0748 this morning a WCD was received from the auxiliary freighter *Pelican* . . ."

Kit retreated rapidly to the rear of the cell and looked around desperately for something he could use as a weapon. There wasn't anything. Realizing the hollowness of the gesture, he cocked his fists and assumed what he hoped was a defensive position. A roaring contemptuous laugh came from the guard.

"You dare raise your hands against Thweela the Mighty?"

Kit's fists and jaw dropped at the same time.

"Thweela?"

The guard nodded majestically. "I have selected this body for my purposes." he said.

Even though Kit carried a rabbit's foot in his pocket, he had always vaguely considered himself an agnostic. As a result he wasn't quite sure how one was supposed to behave in the presence of a god, but he did the best he could. Trying to keep thought one step ahead of action, he flopped down on his knees and stretched out his arms.

"My Lord!"

"You know me then?" A terrible light shone in Thweela's eyes as he glared through the bars at the Earthman.

"There is but one Thweela and Carpenter is his prophet."

The guard's expression of wrath changed to one of doubt.

"Thou art somewhat flat-chested to be the chosen sword of Thweela." There was a moment of pregnant silence. "But so be it. Thou shalt stand at our right hand and be our sword and buckler."

Kit knocked his head three times against the deck plates in acknowledgement of his gratitude.

"Have I my lord's permission to rise?"

Taking silence for assent Kit hoisted himself to his feet. A vague plan was beginning to form in the back of his mind.

"Will not my lord now reveal himself to the others on this ship so that they too may worship him?" he pleaded.

A grim smile played over Thweela's face and his hand dropped to caress his battle sickle.

"They shall know me in my time and in my fashion."

Kit had a feeling it was now or never. Trying to keep from sounding too concerned, he asked, "Would it not be well for the Prophet of Thweela to go before and prepare his people to greet him? It is not well that a god should go forth unannounced."

The other considered the suggestion gravely and then nodded. Taking the keys that dangled from his back pocket, he produced a small glowing sliver of metal and inserted it in the lock. There was a click and the cell door swung open. Kit slipped out quickly and bowed.

"If my lord will wait here, I will go ahead and assemble the ship's company to do him homage."

Thweela shook his head. "My mission brooks no waiting!"

Kit made another quick try. "May I suggest then that we proceed at once to the flight deck. There is space there sufficient for grouping all those who will assemble to hear thy words."

He waited, taut. Finally there was a majestic nod of assent.

Three minutes later he was half way to the flight deck. He kept two steps behind the guard, trying to look as much as



possible like a prisoner being conducted some place on official business. Several green bearded warriors passed, but none gave the pair more than casual attention.

With the occasional white-robed priest that went by, the situation was somewhat different. It seemed to Kit that they recognized him but for some reason or other wanted to give him the impression that they didn't. There was something fishy about the whole business. Things were going too smoothly. Then, suddenly, everything blew up in his face.

As he turned into a narrow passageway that looked as if it might lead to the flight deck, he saw a noisy precession advancing toward him. As it drew nearer, he saw it was headed by a familiar figure. It was Captain Klag, the officer who had threatened to blow his head off. He was still wearing Kit's blaster. Behind him came several warriors who were beating out a cacophonous march on an odd assortment of pots and pans. It occurred to Kit that they might be celebrating the coming banquet, and he pressed against the corridor wall to get out of their way. Head averted, he started to sidle by the group. For a moment he thought he was going to make it, but just as he was almost past them, a harsh voice bawled in his ear and a rough hand grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Kit decided not to answer on ground that it might incriminate him and turned to Thweela for assistance. The guard wasn't there. He was thirty feet down the corridor, leaning against a bulkhead and shaking his head as if to clear it.

"Lord Thweela," shouted Kit, "this person is trying to interfere with our mission."

The warrior who was holding Kit started to laugh. "That's not Thweela. Sometimes he thinks he is, but the real God is with us!" He pointed triumphantly to Klag.

"Behold the god of death and destruction!"

The towering figure of Klag stalked forward with the intentness of a panther preparing to pounce upon a rabbit. The men behind him began to inch in until Kit found himself penned back against the cold steel of the corridor wall by a menacing human bulwark.

A tremor ran through the crowd, a ripple of hostility that grew in intensity until it hung over him like a tidal wave. As it started to break, he saw a white-robed figure trying to force its way through the crowd to him.

The new Thweela shoved his ugly face close to Kirk's, cleared his throat and changed the course of Terrestrial history.

Pilot Officer Carpenter was a peace loving citizen who enjoyed nothing more than avoiding a good brawl, but there are certain insults that no normal human male can accept. When the small savage that lurks within all of us saw what the warrior was preparing to do, it seized control. Raw impulse pulsed down Kit's neurons and he suddenly exploded into an awkward pistoning of arms and legs. By luck more than design, one fist smashed into a scowling bearded face. The results was chaos.

Warriors went hooting and screaming in all directions. In a moment only the priest was left and even he seemed to be on the verge of becoming violently sick to his stomach.

"Barbarian!" he choked. "Madman! You hit him! You struck another entity! Yes—" His words choked off as matter momentarily triumphed over mind and his stomach broke out in open rebellion.

Kit left him gagging in a corner and started down the corridor. His knuckles were sore but there was an uncommon erectness to his carriage. Green-beraded warriors peeped timidly out at him from side passageways, but none of them came near.

On Saar negotiations had skidded to a sudden halt. In spite of the strain imposed by keeping a thirty-eight inch waist sucked in so that it approximated a regulation thirty-two, Squadron Commander Simmons was completing a report that was a model of military crispness.

". . . and at 0813 galactic time our courier again took evasive action. The Polarian cruiser launched a homing torpedo which completely destroyed it. We came in to attack, but the cruiser flipped into hyperspace and disappeared."

Prince Tarz pounded his fist on the table angrily. "I tell you again it's impossible. All our units have received strict orders to observe the peace."

"You are sure that the cruiser was Polarian?" asked Space Marshall Kincaide.

"No doubt about it, sir," answered Simmons. "They are the only ones that have their front blasters mounted in ball turrets."

Kincaide's face was white with anger as he turned to Prince Tarz. "I think you have some explaining to do."

"I have already said that all our units were under orders to refrain from any hostile acts," said Tarz. "Polarian spacemen do not disobey orders. Your man is obviously mistaken."

Kincaide rose slowly to his feet. "The squadron com-

mander is not mistaken!" He pointed to a folder of documents on the table. "There is the evidence. Sworn statements of other crew members. Photographs of your ship. Examine it, sir."

Prince Tarz brushed the pile of documents aside contemptuously. "It is not necessary to examine them." His voice was frosty. "The word of a Polarian officer is sufficient in itself!"

Kincaide's voice carried an equal chill. "In this case we shall have to insist on something a little more substantial."

Prince Tarz' face tightened, and he came slowly to his feet. With an angry shake of his shoulders he shrugged his thurk skin to one side, exposing his gleaming battle sickle.

"I trust I misunderstand you, sir." His hand dropped to the hilt of his curved blade. "Though we wear these for tradition's sake, we have not forgotten how to use them!"

There was open anger in the space marshall's voice as he said slowly, "In the face of evidence, my government will require more than the word of a barbarian, even though it is backed by the weapons of a barbarian."

As the Polarian's blade hissed out of its scabbard, the Saarian emissary gave a horrified gasp and fainted.

"Barbarian, is it! My ancestors were blazing the starways when yours were still crawling around in the mud of your stinking planet. And by Thweela, if it's war you want, we'll beat you back so deep into that same mud that you'll never dare brave space again!"

The Saarian had by now revived and was forcing himself to watch. Tarz suddenly caught himself and bowed formally.

"My apologies, sir. In my anger I forgot that we were meeting under a flag of truce. Unless you wish to apologize, I suggest that we continue this beyond planetary limits."

Kincaide bowed with equal formality. "It will be a pleasure, sir." He turned to his executive officer who was standing by with jaw hanging. "Give orders for immediate embarkation of all personnel. We are leaving Saar."

"But Marshall," protested the other, "what about our business here?"

"File it under 'unfinished,'" snapped Kincaide. "Right now we've got a war to fight."

At the word "War," Commander Simmons brightened perceptibly. So, oddly enough, did the Saarian emissary.

Space Marshall Kincaide was packing his personal gear when an orderly entered.

"Beg pardon, sir, but there's a pilot officer outside who insists on seeing you. He says he's captured a battle cruiser and

wants to know what you want him to do with it." Kincaide stopped pacing.

"He what?"

"He wants to know what he's supposed to do with it," repeated the orderly stolidly.

Kincaide exploded. "Tell him he can take it and . . . No, send him in here. I'll teach him to play games at a time like this."

A moment later Kit entered and gave an awkward salute. Before Kincaide could say anything, Simmons gave a gasp of amazed recognition.

"Marshall! This is the officer who was captured by the Polarians!" He slapped Kit on the back. "Good boy! How did you manage to escape?"

"It wasn't difficult once I figured what they were up to," said Kit. "They had me locked up for a while and they said they were going to eat me, so I convinced the guard that I was his prophet and he let me out and . . ."

"Just a second," said Kincaide. "I'm lost already. Whose prophet?"

"Thweela's sir. He's the Polarian god of violent death and destruction. And then we ran into another fellow who was Thweela, too, so there was a sort of mixup until I took my gun away from him and took over the ship. I figured I'd better get here in a hurry and stop the war before it had a chance to really get started, so I smashed the cruiser's main drive and left it hanging out there."

"Just a second," said Kincaide. "Are you trying to tell me you took over a star class cruiser armed only with a blaster?"

Kit shook his head. "I used a much more effective weapon. You see, sir, they really weren't Polarians even if they were wearing green beards. The whole thing was just a plot to make me think they were so that when I escaped . . ."

"Let me get this clear," said Kincaide. "You say that everybody on the ship was plotting against you?"

"Yes, sir. But it wasn't just me."

Kincaide turned to Simmons. "Are you sure that this is the pilot of the ship that was destroyed by the Polarians?"

"No question about it, sir."

A look of compassion came into Kincaide's eyes. "Poor devil! They must have used a psychoprobe on him and cracked him wide open. You'd better have him taken over to the psychcorpsmen. If his brain isn't damaged too much, they may be able to bring him around enough to find out how he

managed to escape." His voice became hard. "Tarz is going to pay for this!"

"You've got it all wrong," protested Kit. "They didn't hurt me at all. And they weren't Polarians. They just thought they were. They were really Saarians."

"That's right," said Kincaide soothingly. "You captured a cruiser with a secret weapon and it was full of Saarians who thought they were Polarians."

"Not all of them," said Kit. "The priests knew what was up all the time because they weren't really priests, they just pretended to be."

Simmons beckoned to the orderly. He came up and took Kit by the arm.

"You've had a rough time, boy," said Kincaide, "but we're going to take care of you. You just go along with the orderly and everything will be all right."

"But, sir, you haven't heard the whole story."

"We'll talk about it when you feel better."

Before Kit could say anything more, he was propelled vigorously out of the tent by the orderly.

As soon as Kincaide's indignation drained away, a feeling of uncertainty began to take its place. He looked across the table at Commander Simmons and then down at the damning pile of documents. He couldn't be wrong. But yet he had never known a Polarian officer to tell a lie. He began to wonder how to best break the news to the Solar Alliance that he had managed to involve Earth in a large scale war. Then he thought of what had been done to Kit. He was starting to get angry all over again when, without pausing to have himself announced, Prince Tarz stormed into the tent.

"Will you step outside? There is a matter of personal honor to be settled."

Kincaide had an unhappy feeling that he was going to have to eat his words about barbarian weapons. Prince Tarz had handled the side arm that tradition required him to wear with an air of familiar competence. An equally traditional and equally anachronistic weapon hung at Kincaide's side. The only trouble was that he hadn't the slightest idea how one went about using it. Damning the custom that required flag rank officers to wear sabers rather than blasters, he stepped out into the bright sunshine.

In front of the tent stood an Earthman, surrounded by an angry group of Polarian officers. Tarz stabbed a stiff forefinger at him. "This . . ."—his voice shook—"this person has

subjected Phalanx Leader Der to an insult so terrible that it can only be wiped out with blood!"

"Why inform me," said Kincaide stiffly. "My men are perfectly competent to conduct their own affairs of honor."

"Your man said he can't accept the challenge until you give your permission."

"My permission?" said Kincaide in amazement. "Here, let me talk to him." He shouldered his way through the crowd with Commander Simmons at his heels.

"What kind of nonsense is . . ." His voice suddenly trailed off. "OH, NO! Not you again! Didn't I order you sent to the psychcorpsman for observation?"

Kit saluted respectfully and nodded.

Kincaide snorted in disgust and turned to Prince Tarz. "Much as I dislike it, this is one case where I'm going to have to interfere. I can't let this man fight, he's mentally unbalanced."

Prince Tarz looked at Kit skeptically. "He looks all right to me."

"He's suffering from delusions of grandeur," explained Kincaide. "He was the pilot of the courier that was blasted by your cruiser. He was captured somehow and later escaped. The poor fellow's mind cracked during his ordeal. He believes that he captured your cruiser with his bare hands and took it as a prize of war. He's obviously unfit for combat."

Prince Tarz' disbelief was obvious. "Since no Polarian ship has been involved in an incident with one of your fleet units, this man could not have been captured. Since he could not have been captured, you are obviously lying to protect him."

It was Kincaide's turn to have his face whiten.

"You are calling me a liar, sir?"

"I am calling you a liar, sir."

"In that case may I suggest that two fighters be made ready at once. I will meet you at sunset at eighty thousand feet."

Prince Tarz saluted stiffly, made an abrupt about face, and started away, his officers following close at his heels.

The gap between the two groups widened for a moment and then suddenly a slight figure bolted from the Earthman's ranks. It was Kit.

He was yelling hotly.

"Prince Tarz! Prince Tarz! Wait up! I can explain everything." He heard Kincaide's angry voice behind him, "Corpsman, place that man under restraint!" Grabbing hold of the Prince's arm desperately, Kit swung him half around.

"Sir, you've got to listen to me. It was a Saarian ship that captured me. They're trying to get us to fight each other!"

Tarz gave him a look usually reserved for small crawling things and brushed his hand away.

Kit's Adam's apple jerked convulsively as he swallowed twice and then suddenly jerked his blaster from its holster and jammed it into Prince Tarz' midriff. A gasp of horror went up from both parties.

Kit's voice shook. "I'm a peace loving citizen and I'm not going to sit back and let myself get sucked into a war that has no point. I've got something to say and I'm going to be listened to or else!" Kit's voice wasn't the only thing that was shaking. His hand was trembling so badly that his trigger finger kept bouncing against the firing stud. Prince Tarz noticed it and felt a sudden urge to talk things over.

From the corner of his eye, Kit saw Space Marshall Kincaide running toward him. "Stand back, sir," he yelled. "If you try to grab me, this thing might go off." Kincaide skidded to a sudden halt.

"Put that gun down, Carpenter. This is a truce site."

Kit's voice had steadied. "I'll put it down under one condition. You two have got to promise that you'll give me ten minutes to explain what's going on. After that I don't care what you do with me."

"Certainly not!" snapped Kincaide. "I refuse to be intimidated!"

"You refuse to be intimidated?" howled Prince Tarz. "Whose belly is that blaster sticking in, anyway? You can have your ten minutes," he said to Kit.

"No!" said Kincaide stubbornly.

"May I point to the consequences if I should be killed by a member of your forces on a truce site," said Tarz.

Kincaide thought about it for a moment and then reluctantly growled, "All right, ten minutes it is."

"I have complete freedom to do anything I want without interference?" asked Kit.

The two commanders nodded. With a shaky sigh of relief, Kit shoved his blaster back in its holster.

"Good. Now follow me." With the two groups trailing behind him, he walked across the field to the six-man scout in which he had arrived two hours before. Kit punched the release stud beneath the outer hatch of its entrance lock. A moment later the assembled officers gasped in amazement as two warriors wearing tremendous thurk pelts and gigantic green beards swaggered out into the bright sunlight.

"It can't be!" gasped Tarz.

Kit stepped back three paces, flopped down on his knees, and knocked his head against the earth three times. He was the only one aware that he had all his fingers crossed and was trying desperately to interlock his toes. Raising his head, he addressed a point half way between the two figures.

"Your pardon, Holyness, but would you deign to reveal which of these bodies is the vessel of thy terrible spirit? It would be unseemly if we gave homage to the wrong one, for is it not written, 'There is but one Thweela.'"

The two green bearded figures stepped forward as one god and proclaimed in unison, "I am Thweela."

Kit uncrossed his fingers.

"Lord, we cannot give worship until we know in truth which of thee is the true god of death and destruction. Let the true strike down the false that we may tremble before him.

A moment went by without response and then simultaneously the two figures sprang apart and faced each other in a half crouch. There was a flicker of light on steel and each held his glittering battle sickle ready. Slowly, light as jungle cats and as terrible to the sight, they circled each other warily until without warning, his lips spewing insults, one danced forward, his blade set for a midriff cut. The other dropped his guard and with an underhand swing caught his opponent's sickle in the hook of his own. There was a moment's ferocious tugging as each sought to wrest away the other's weapon. They pulled closer until they were pressed chest to chest. Faces twisting horribly, they howled at each other. A thin white froth began to form on their lips.

Prince Tarz and Space Marshall Kincaide stood side by side watching the struggle in amazement, their differences momentarily forgotten. With the air of a ringmaster about to present the special feature attraction, Kit stepped up to them and saluted.

"By your leave, gentlemen."

Before either of them could answer, he stepped over to the two straining warriors and gripped each by the shoulder. With a sudden wrench he jerked them apart and swung them around so they both stood facing him. Then slowly and deliberately, he unhooked his gun belt and dropped both harness and blaster to the ground.

"Watch it, Carpenter," yelled Kincaide involuntarily. "They're battle-crazy. They'll split your skull if you interfere!"

Kit ignored him and suddenly, without warning, adminis-



tered the supreme insult as with cold deliberation he spit first in the right eye of the warrior on his left and then in the left eye of the warrior on his right. Then without waiting for either of them to react, he reached forward and grabbed hold of both their beards simultaneously. With a quick jerk he pulled them completely off and threw them to the ground. With the air of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat, he pointed to the bared faces.

"Observe, gentlemen. No chins."

Then, pulling his right hand in close to his chest so that it couldn't be seen by the groups behind him, he made a sudden gesture. The result was electric. Two shrieks of fright rang out and a second later all that could be seen of the two Thweelas were their backs as they scuttled in terror back into the scout.

Kit turned and displayed his clenched fist. "My secret weapon," he said modestly.

Space Marshall Kincaide fingered his lantern jaw and Prince Tarz rubbed his long pointed one. Then they went to look for the Saarian emissary who didn't have any chin at all.

". . . and so," Kit finally concluded, "the escape they had planned for me to make didn't come off. The way they had it set up, I was supposed to knock out the guard, take his keys, and escape in a scout that had just happened to be standing by with its jets primed. My report on what they were planning to do with me would have made conflict inevitable. Fortunately Thweela moved in just at the right time."

An old and walrus-mustached staff officer harrumphed. "But spitting! Really, Carpenter, things like that just aren't done by gentlemen—not even temporary gentlemen!"

"I know," said Kit apologetically, "but you all thought I was crazy. I had to do something drastic to get you all to listen to me long enough for me to show what had happened."

Prince Tarz held up his hand for silence. "I'm still confused. For one thing, the crew of that cruiser carried side arms. A Saarian not only couldn't carry a weapon, he'd get sick at his stomach at the sight of one."

"A normal Saarian, you mean," corrected Kit. "What you overlooked was that, even though they have a fear of violence that you might term psychopathic, the Saarians are not a stupid race. We put them in a spot where they had to take action, so they did. Knowing the pugnacious nature of both our cultures, what easier way to get us off their necks than to have a supposed Polarian cruiser destroy an Earth ship dur-

ing negotiations? They predicted the consequence perfectly. Earth would accuse, Polarius would deny, both sides would lose their tempers and BANG!" He turned to the Saarian emissary.

"If you were up in a tree with two jungle beasts prowling around underneath, would you be able to use a blaster in your own defense?"

The Saarian shuddered at the thought. "Of course not!"

"But if they started fighting among themselves?"

"If violent creatures choose to destroy themselves, it is no concern of mine," said the little man.

Kincaide was still not wholly convinced, "But where could they find a crew for a ship of war?"

"It's simple," said Kit. "Check over the pattern of violence displayed by the crew after they captured me. They destroyed my ship, but before they did so they were careful to get me off safely. Once I was prisoner, there was a constant threat of violence, but note that it was never actually carried out. It's true that no sane Saarian would act as they did—but why assume they were sane? When the Saarians had to find men capable of the show of violence they went to the only place where such men could be found, their insane asylums. Obviously, in a non-violent culture, the violent men would be considered mad. So the Saarians solved their problem by staffing the cruiser with men they considered to be homicidal maniacs. Unfortunately for them, when it came to an actual show of violence, when I socked one of them on the nose, the madmen weren't any better able to take it than the sane."

"The sane?" asked Kincaide.

"There were some—the priesthood. They were really the crew's keepers. There had to be somebody along to keep that bunch in line. Being by profession in constant contact with the violent, they had stronger stomachs than the rest.

He paused and motioned to an alert-looking, white-haired man who had just entered the tent. "Here's the chief psychtech now. I think he'll be able to back up what I just told you."

The white-haired man advanced, saluted, and began his report.

"A thorough examination of the two Saarians brought in by Pilot Officer Carpenter has just been completed. In both cases we found conflicting delusional syndromes. Each of them is a psychotic whose paranoia expresses itself periodically in grandiose delusions. What makes these cases interesting, however, is that a second delusional pattern has artificially been imposed on them so that they are usually under

the impression that they are members of the Polarian space forces. This, however, occasionally breaks down and the original syndrome becomes temporarily dominant."

"In other words," said Kincaide helpfully, "they're nuts!"

The psychtech frowned and said severely, "Paranoid syndromes are a phenomenon that is by no means foreign to normal human psychology. The degree of divergency can only be determined by relating it to the norm. Since the norm itself is relative . . ."

"All right," said Kincaide hastily, "they're not nuts."

The psychtech frowned at the interruption and continued. "On Saar these men would be considered detention cases because the Saarian social pattern has moved so far along the road to nonviolence that the symbol—the angry word or the threatening gestures—is viewed with the same alarm that more aggressive cultures reserve for the actual deed itself. Placed in a Polarian or a Terrestrial context, however, these men would be viewed as harmless eccentrics. No matter how they want and posture, they're constitutionally incapable of actual violence."

"Well, I guess that ties it up," said Tarz. "I guess it does," said Kincaide, and then struck by a sudden thought, he turned to Kit, "I know you've had a hard day, Carpenter, but if it wouldn't be too much to ask . . . that pouch you were sent out from Earth with . . . it had my laundry in it."

"Regret to report, sir," said Kit, "that I had to destroy it. You see . . ."

Negotiations returned to normal as Tarz stabbed his finger down at the point on the map that marked the largest of the stellite deposits. "Now my government insists . . ."

There was an interruption from the Saarian end of the table. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said the little emissary, "but I am afraid that on the behalf of my government I shall have to ask you to give up this division of what isn't yours and remove yourselves and your forces to your home systems."

Tarz and Kincaide stared at him in amazement. Then the Polarian gave a short barking laugh. "Look at who's giving orders. The rabbit is showing his teeth."

For once the Saarian didn't subside in frightened confusion. Instead he rose to his feet and held his hands up for silence. He trembled visibly, but even so there was a certain dignity about him as if he were drawing on sources of hidden internal strength.

"You have called us rabbits," he said quietly. "This is not

correct. Though you cannot understand it, we have come of age. In this coming we have put the brawling manner of our childhood so far behind us that only our unfortunates, our psychotics, are still capable of even the threat of violence."

"But this you should remember: there are cultures in this galaxy of a wildness that makes yours seem those of meek and timid children. Space wolves straining at the leash, begging for an excuse to spring at your throats."

He turned to Tarz. "You who boast of martial prowess, would you care to match ships with the Rigelians?"

A momentary expression of fear flickered across the Prince's face.

"We have other madmen and other ships," said the Saa-rian. "An exact replica of your own flagship is hanging off Orionis now manned by green-bearded men. If it came out of hyperspace in the middle of a crowded space land and blasted a merchant ship, would not the Rigelian war lords be grateful?"

Tarz turned deathly pale and sat down abruptly.

"And you, Space Marshall," the little man continued, "Has Earth no enemies?"

Kincaide sickened inside as he had a momentary vision of a blackened, burning Earth englobed by the blood-red ships of Achernar.

The little man left his place at the end of the table and walked through the silence to the door of the tent.

"And now if you'll excuse me," he said politely, "I am late for my lute lesson. On behalf of the people of Saar, may I wish you both a pleasant and speedy voyage home."

Late that evening a pilot officer of the Planetary Ferry Command walked happily up the embarkation ramp of Space Marshall Kincaide's flagship, his discharge papers tucked safely away in an inner pocket. The diamond studded Terrestrial Cross and the great gleaming Polarian emerald of the Order of Merit, Third Grade, that had just been pinned to his chest, sparkled under the floodlights. There was a beatific smile on his face and a song in his heart as his fingers stroked these tributes from two great peace loving systems. Meanwhile a busy little calculating machine inside his head was rapidly converting them into crisp piles of one hundred credit notes. Civilian-to-be Kittridge Carpenter, owner and chief pilot of Ajax Carriers, was going home.

## minimum sentence

FLIP DANIELSON came striding into his forty-credit-a-day suite at the Hotel Metro, wearing a broad grin and a checked suit.

"I've got him right where we want him," he said. "He's hanging on the ropes."

Stretched out on the bed with a wet towel swathed around his head like a turban, the pudgy figure groaned and turned over, burying his face in the covers.

"Go 'way. I'm a sick man."

Flip skipped across the room, tossed the covers aside, and bounced up and down on the bed.

"Snap out of it, Potsy. I've got us an out."

The fat man winced at the motion and feebly raised his head.

"I'll never live to use an out. What was I drinking last night, straight fusel-oil?"

"Quang Dal was mixing cocktails out of creme de menthe and anisette, and you were taking two to every one of his just to be sociable."

"That explains it," groaned Potsy. "Hand me that bottle on the bureau, like a good fellow. I've got to do something to get rid of that aftertaste."

Flip went over and got it, stopped to take a short sample himself, and then handed it over. There was a liquid gurgle as the bottle dropped an inch and a half, and then a satisfied sigh.

"Maybe I'll live, after all. Now, who's on the ropes?"

"Quang Dal. No thanks to you, though. You were passed out in the corner, snoring like a pig, when I rolled him."

The fat man looked up in sudden interest. "How much did you get?"

"Looks like about four thousand. I haven't bothered to count it yet."

"Toss it over. I'll be glad to."

"It'll do for chicken feed."

Potsy clucked like a hen and grabbed the billfold. He pulled out a thick sheaf of currency and ran his fingers over it reverently.

"Think of the time we can have—" He broke off suddenly and tossed the money despondently on the floor. "Could have had, I mean. We won't have any use for money were we're going. Twenty years—minimum!" He grabbed his head between his hands as it started in throbbing again.

"And forty years maximum," said Flip unsympathetically. "Next time you line up an easy mark, made sure she's not the Police Commissioner's mother-in-law."

"Maybe something will happen. We've still got three weeks before we have to report for sentencing."

"So?"

"We've still got the ship. We could make a run for it."

"Where to? If it's any place in the Solar System where people can live, the law's there. And if it's a place where the law isn't, people can't live."

Potsy drank unhappily from his bottle. "What gets me is that the floppers and the crawlers and the wigglers and the rest can hop around the Galaxy in just about nothing flat while we humans can't go past Pluto. If we could just get our hands on one of their faster-than-light drives, we could thumb our noses at the law." He sighed. "If wishes were horses . . ."

"Get ready to saddle up." There was a complacent smile on Flip's face as he tossed a long manila envelope on to the bed. "The thought of sitting in a Lunar prison cell for the next twenty years with nothing to look at but your fat face was just too much . . . so I went and did something about it."

Potsy opened the envelope and stared at its contents in bewilderment.

Flip grinned. "Return ticket, passport, identity card—the works. His ship takes off at ten and I've pumped enough DDT into him to keep him under for another six hours. When Quang Dal comes to, he's going to be an unhappy little Centaurian—broke, stranded, and friendless. Do you begin to get the picture?"

Potsy looked up at his partner with open admiration. "Not friendless. He's got us."

When Quang Dal's six legs had recovered sufficient strength to carry him down the corridors in a tottering crawl, the first think he did was go to the police.

"Get outta here before I squash ya," growled the desk sergeant. "If we're such ignorant bums we ain't good enough to be let in your Galactic Union, we sure ain't smart enough to help you out when you get into a jam."

"But, sir," protested Quang Dal, "I am just poor private Centaurian citizen who have nothing to do with admission standards whatsoever. Is not to be despairing for that, however. Has not Grand Council given fine promise that admission shall be accompaniment of attainment of minimum socialization percentile?"

"Scram," said the desk sergeant. "I ain't paid to get lectured by cockroaches."

Quang Dal drew himself up with dignity. "Is, one, inaccurate statement—terrestrial cockroach is not sapient being. Is, two, obviously hostile manifestation. Is through politeness and well wishing comes minimum socialization, not harsh speaking. In Cosmos, all entities are siblings. Translation: brother and/or sisters."

With a quick wobble to the left, he avoided the descending boot and scuttled toward the door.

"I love you," he said ceremoniously, but earnestly. "Is well wishing with a vengeance."

At the Bureau of Extraterrestrial Affairs, he received a polite reception, but little in the way of help.

"Terribly sorry, old man," said the Third Assistant. "Wouldn't have had it happen for all the worlds. Don't know quite what I can do about it, though, now that your ship's gone. It was the first one in twenty years and there's no telling when the next one will stop by. It is rather shameful the way the rest of the Galaxy tends to avoid us, you know. I mean, after all, if you chaps would let us in on the faster-than-light drive and a few things like that, we wouldn't be so embarrassingly provincial."

"Are explaining many times before," said Quang Dal patiently. "Is no such thing as faster-than-light drive. As your good man Einstein show you long time ago, is theoretical impossibility."

The Third Assistant sniffed his disbelief. "And how many months has it been since you left Alpha Centauri?"

"Three months between time, but is not workable for Solar peoples. Is only what you call a convenience."

The official maintained his professional calm, but there was a little edge to his voice.

"I take it, then, that you consider us too stupid to know how to use it?"

"Did not say," said Quang Dal. "Is only unachiewement of minimumnal socialization. Are principles involved that might be used for harm to other entities."

The Third Assistant glanced at his watch, rose from his desk, and ushered the little Centaurian to the door.

"You'll have to excuse me, old man. Tea time, you know. Sorry I can't offer you a lift home on one of our ships, but since we've never been able to do better than one-fifth light speed, I'm afraid that we'll just have to putter around inside our own solar system until you chaps decide we're socialized enough to be given the galactic drive. I'll make a personal note of your case however, and when an extraterrestrial ship drops in, one of my successors will get in touch with you immediately."

Quang Dal's attempt to explain again that there was no such thing as a faster-than-light drive was cut short by the closing of the door in his face. Rearing up on his hind legs, he ran his voice tube through the keyhole and said politely, "Note, please—I love you."

His only friends in a strange and hostile world, Potsy and Flip, were waiting for him when he got back to the hotel.

"How did it go?"

"Is, as you say, without soap," said Quang Dal mournfully. "Is constant expectoration upon by unwell-wishers."

"Don't let it get you down, pal," comforted Potsy. "What do you expect from a bunch of bums with a low-grade socialization index?" He reached in his pocket, pulled out a bulging billfold, and peeled off several bills. "Here's a little ready cash. Just remember that no matter what happens, you've still got us."

Flip nodded his agreement. "What's ours is yours. It may be fifty years before another galactic ship stops by, and even then it may be going the wrong way, but we'll stand by you!"

"If fifty years, not too bad," said Quang Dal. "Is seventy-five, is too late, I think so maybe. Is now Ides of March. Would be most inconweniencing to spouses-to-be if not returning by June. Is getting married then," he explained, "and sewening no good with only six."

"If you're saying what I think you're saying," Potsy said, sympathetically, "you're in a tough spot. If you've got to wait fifty years, it won't be much of a marriage."

"Yeah," agreed Flip. "I can just see the poor girls waiting for their lover to come home, hopefully setting a light in their windows each night, slowly losing hope as the years pass



—growing lined and gray and bitter with the thoughts of what might have been.”

“Is many misconceptions here,” said Quang Dal. “In first place, is not year question, is month question. In second, is not females on Alpha Centauri same kind like Earth. Is seven sexes. I am *splanton*, number four kind.” He went into a detailed description of relations and permutations that left the two Earthmen confused.

“If this is what is meant by being socialized,” said Potsy finally, “I don’t see how Earth will ever make it.”

“Potsy,” Flip said, “if our friend has to be home by June to get married, we’re going to see that he makes it. Like he’s always saying, all entities are siblings under the epidermis.”

“I’m all for it,” said his partner, “but how?”

“We’ve got a ship, haven’t we?”

“Yeah, but without the galactic drive, it would take him twenty years to get back and he’s due in June.”

“He can make it,” said Flip confidently. “All he has to do is build one of those faster-than-light gadgets and install it in the ship. Then he could make it back in time.”

“Is not faster than light,” objected Quang Dal once more. “Is merely convenience. But if loanation of ship could be made, would be well-wishing with a wegeance and impressive sign of attainment of minimumnal socialization.”

Three weeks later, the job was done.

“Is all fix and workable fine,” said Quang Dal. “You come down and see me off in morning. Is needful to express final love and gratitude.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” said Flip.

“I think I go make last-time checkup.”

When he left, Potsy pulled off his shoes and stretched on the bed.

“Looks like we’ll make it.”

“Just in time, too,” said Flip. “In case you’ve forgotten, we’re due down at the Justice Department at noon tomorrow for sentencing.” He shuddered. “Twenty years would have been a long time!”

“Not as long as forty,” said Potsy. “I think I’ll have a bottle sent up. I feel like celebrating.”

“Excellent idea. Order up five women while you’re at it. We owe it to our race to see if we can get onto this sevening.”

At eight sharp the next morning, the two were standing in

the control room of their spaceship listening to Quang Dal's last grateful good-bys.

"It's nothing at all," said Flip. "We'd do the same for any friend. How about showing us around before you take off?"

Quang Dal thought for a moment and then quivered assent.

"Would be no real violation of Galactic Union order. Secret things are all behind panels."

The control room had been considerably altered. In place of the complicated banks of controls that had flanked the pilot's seat, there were two push buttons set in a simple black box.

"This one take care of navigation," explained Quang Dal. "One push, I go home. Start, go, stop—whole think automatic. Could not change course if wanted to."

"You don't have to tell us what the other one controls," said Potsy. "One push and WHOOSH, Alpha Centauri in June."

"Is not whoosh. Is putt-putt-putt. Wery convenient, though."

"Well, I guess we're ready," said Potsy. "Do you want to do the honors, Flip, or shall I?"

"Is not understanding," Quang Dal equivalently frowned.

"Didn't you tell him?" asked Flip.

"I thought he'd take it for granted. After all, somebody has to bring the ship back."

Quang Dal reared up on his back four legs in an agitated fashion.

"Accompaniment cannot be, sweet entities. Is not only Galactic Union law violation, but not possible for two-legged human peoples."

Flip produced a large and vicious-looking gun.

"Anything bugs can do, we can do better. Get aft before I splatter you against the bulkhead!"

"Weapon-using is sign of low socialization," said Quang Dal with regret and pity.

"Are you talking or walking?" demanded Flip, sighting down the barrel of his gun.

"Is terrible thing you doing," warned the little Centaurian as he backed out of the control room. "You have no right to do this to selves."

Potsy walked over to the control box. He reached out to press the first button and then hesitated.

"What if something should happen?" he asked worriedly.

"Couldn't be worse than twenty years in a Luner isolation

cell," said Flip. "You can stay behind if you want to, but I'm getting out of here."

Potsy still hesitated. Finally he came back and sat down.

"You push it," he offered.

Flip snorted in disgust and tossed his gun over to his partner. "Go on back and lock our little friend up in the aft stateroom. If we let him run around loose, he might get into mischief. I'll take care of things up here."

When Potsy had left the compartment, Flip took a deep breath, walked over to the control box, and slowly pushed the first button. The results weren't spectacular. There was a hum of lifters as the ship rose slowly, and then, with a gentle push, they were off. Once out of the atmosphere, the ship pointed its nose toward Alpha Centauri and began to pick up speed.

Potsy came back into the control room and took a quick look out the side port to where the Moon hung like a great pockmarked balloon. The penal colony itself couldn't be seen, but Lunaport was visible as a small glittering splotch.

He gave a little shiver and turned away.

"Everything under control?"

"So far. Do you think I ought to hit the other stud?"

Potsy shook his head. "The galactic ships never seem to use their drives until they are far enough away to be out of detection range. There must be a reason for it. Maybe the gadget blows up if it's set off near a sun."

They waited two days before Flip pressed the second button. There was a low whine from beneath the deck and then a squeal of fright from Potsy as a nerve-scraping vibration ran through the ship. A strange mistiness covered everything, as though matter of which the ship was composed were turning to nothingness and then back again a thousand times a second.

With a final shudder, the ship returned to normal.

Potsy gave a sigh of relief and mopped his forehead. "Well, we're still in one piece. And I guess we're finally on our way."

"Go let Quang Dal out," said Flip. "If these controls are as completely automatic as he says, he can't do us any harm now."

Potsy came back five minutes later, alone.

"He's got his door locked from the inside. He says that he's going to take a little nap and we should wake him come June."

Flip shrugged. "If that's the way he wants it."

As the weeks crawled slowly by, the two Earthmen found themselves growing more and more irritable.

"I think I'd almost prefer the Lunar prison colony," said Potsy.

"Oh, well," growled Flip, "we've only got two weeks left. I guess I can stand your ugly face that long."

Potsy gestured toward Alpha Centauri which glimmered palely directly ahead. "You'd think it would be getting bigger by now."

"It'll stay like that almost to the end," said Flip. "The way I got it figured, we're going so fast that most of the light shoots past before it has a chance to get in. If you want to see the difference, go take a look through the rear 'scope. The Sun should be out of sight by now."

Potsy trotted obediently to the rear and took a look out through the aft telescope. A moment later, he returned and asked in a timid and somewhat frightened voice, "If the Sun's supposed to be so far away, how come I can still see most of the planets?"

"Huh? You can?" Flip looked nervous as Potsy nodded. "That lousy little bug must have given us cockeyed instructions, knowing the galactic drive is Greek to us."

"But why should he?"

"How do I know? Maybe he wants us to break our necks some way while he's safe in his cabin. Well, I'll break his if he doesn't give us the right dope!"

"Go easy," Potsy advised anxiously. "Try to con the information out of him first. Then let him have it if he won't talk."

After considerable pounding, they managed to wake Quang Dal. His voice tube poked out through the grille at the top of his locked door and he asked politely, "Is June already?"

"No," said Flip, "it's only the middle of May. Potsy and I are sorry to have to wake you up, but something seems to have gone wrong with the drive. Would you mind coming out and fixing it?"

"Is nothing wrong," replied Quang Dal. "Can hear with properness from here. Sound smooth."

"The planetary drive is on, all right, but the faster-than-light didn't cut in. After all this time, we're still only a stone's throw from Earth. We should be almost to Alpha Centauri by now."

There was silence within the stateroom for a minute. "Is unhappiness to say this," the little Centaurian said regretfully, "but as I explain past times, faster-than-light drive is theoretic-

cal impossibility. Galactic Union scientists work two, maybe three million years now. For all this time, nothing, except once in a while little convenience. Is still taking twenty years going Earth, Alpha Centauri, or vice-versa."

"Then how in hell do you expect to get home in three months?"

"Is three months between time, not three months pass time. Very different things," said Quang Dal. "Between time is from little convenience I tell you before about. With it, can take trip maybe two hundred years and still not be away from family too long. Very fine convenience."

"Two hundred years!" gasped Potsy.

"Is one other thing which you mistake for faster-than-light drive. Old galactic peoples like Centaurians live thirty-five, maybe forty thousands Earth years. Would not be socialized to tell poor Earth two-legged stander-uppers they live and die same thing like I get up and go bed. Is not well-wishing to make other entities unhappy. Would not tell you this, only I think you unhappier if I do not explain. So sorry."

Flip stood rigid, his brain freezing as the cold and horrid truth began to seep in.

"Then the second button . . ."

"Is biggest convenience. Faster-than-light drive impossible, but not time travel. Push second button, whole ship come back nineteen years, nine months. Could make it exactly same time of same year we leave Earth when we reach Alpha Centauri, but I like better awaken at time of sewing, so I set controls for June."

His voice was drowsier.

"You will wake me in June, kindly? Until, I take small nap only twenty years. Apologizing that you cannot do likewise."

Quang Dal's voice was almost inaudible as he withdrew his voice tube from the grille.

"Is wishing well with a vengeance," he said, too conditioned to politeness to let weariness excuse him from the ritual of farewell. "Note, please—I love you."

## the short count

"HOW DOES THIS SOUND?"

"Go ahead," she said.

"I have seen the years pass like frightened men, and now I am afraid."

She wrinkled her nose. "You're lifting again."

"Who this time?"

"Eliot. The bang and whimper thing, isn't it?"

He thought for a minute and then wet his finger and drew an invisible line in the air. "Half a point for your side. It is Eliot. *Prufrock*, though. Something about the eternal footman holding his coat and snickering."

He picked up the empty pack of cigarettes beside him for the tenth time, fished in it, and then suddenly aware of what he was doing, snorted and threw it in the wastebasket beside his desk.

"Any decent-sized butts in your ashtray?"

"Two. But I'm saving them."

"Pig."

"Smoke your pipe. You paid three-fifty for it and you've only used it twice."

"It bites my tongue." He got up and went and got it out of the brass bowl on top of the bookcase. It was filled with charred, half smoked tobacco. He grimaced and put it back.

"It stinks." He fished around in his own ashtray but there was nothing there over half an inch long. He pulled open his desk drawer, took out a thin, translucent second sheet, and carefully tore a long rectangle from one corner. Taking the tobacco from several of the short butts, he shredded it in his palm, poured it into the paper, and deftly rolled a passable cigarette. He eyed it critically. "Not bad."

"I don't see how you can smoke those things."

"Necessity is the toothless mother of. Out of the depression and sired by Spain. I always ate but cigarettes were scarce. In high school we used to have the institution of first and second butts. Nobody was passing out cigarettes then but if you

could afford them you were expected to be fairly generous with the fag ends.

"It was a silly damn habit to pick up on a two bit a week allowance but somehow one felt that a cigarette between the lips and long nonchalant jets of smoke through the nostrils had an almost aphrodisiac effect on the girls who gathered in little clusters on the sidewalk in front of school during the lunch hour. I guess they wore lipstick for the same reason."

"You're half right," she said. "The direction was the same but the drive was more diffuse. What we primarily wanted . . . was to be wanted. At least my phantasies were social rather than sexual. I saw myself being taken to smart places by handsome men." She paused and chuckled. "I'll admit that sometimes they took me to their apartments, but that was the end of the evening rather than the beginning."

She closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. "I'm wearing a jade green evening gown and we're sitting at a little table in the corner drinking champagne. There's a gypsy violinist playing softly to us and Raoul is pleading with me to marry him. As he talks I can see the curling wrought iron grillwork set in the windows of his hacienda. Gauchos are singing softly behind the stables where he keeps his thoroughbreds . . . He and I are standing side by side on the balcony and I'm smoking a gold-tipped monogrammed cigarette in a long jade cigarette holder." She laughed softly. "If you'd been around, I'd have given you first butts."

There was a sudden flare as his homemade cigarette burst into flame from too hard a drag.

"Damn. They're always doing that."

"Do you want to see it?"

"What?"

"My jade cigarette holder."

"Sure."

"Wait a minute." She got up and went into the bedroom. He found his eyes sliding back to the silent television screen and for a moment he was afraid again. A minute later she came back out carrying a twine-tied cardboard box.

"Hey, don't you ever get tired of staring at that thing?"

He started at the sound of her voice and turned to face her. "It fascinates me. Ten years of wrangling over color television and all we finally get is a pretty amber glow on a blank screen."

"Just be glad it's only amber," she said. "Look." Carefully she untied the string on the box and took the frayed cover

off. She set a ribbon-tied package of letters to one side and took out a long slim object wrapped in tissue paper.

"I put this away fifteen years ago." She slowly unwrapped it and passed it to him. It was a long green cigarette holder made of some glasslike substance.

"Ming?"

"Walgreens. They were on sale for eighty-seven cents. I borrowed seventeen cents from Marcy Thomas and bought it, I only used it once."

He cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Where?"

"At the Winston Roof after the Senior Prom Bill Hendricks and I had a corner table. He wandered off for some reason or other and I was left alone. The setting wasn't all that I had dreamed of—most of the people at the other tables looked like the people next door all dressed up for a night out, but there was soft music and the lights weren't too bright. I was trying to work up nerve enough to take the holder out of my purse, but every time. I'd put my fingers on it the lights would seem to get brighter and everybody would seem to be looking at me. Then HE came in and I tenned. Did you ever ten?"

"Ten?"

"You know, when there's something you want to do or have to do but you're scared to do it so you start a long slow count inside your head and promise yourself that when you get to ten you'll do whatever it is that's supposed to be done."

"Only half the time you chicken out and jump to twenty." He grinned reflectively and blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling. "I got all the way to forty on my first pick-up."

"Stop looking so pleased with yourself. Before you did what?"

"A proper story has a beginning, a middle, and an end," he said sternly.

She tucked her legs under her and curled up like a small grave kitten. "Carry on."

"Bob and I were over on the North Side in his dad's new Terraplane. Women over there were reputed to be easy and eager, and we drove up and down the side streets whistling at the girls. Sometimes they'd look back at us and giggle. We didn't stop though. Bob would say, 'Christ what a couple of pigs,' or else I'd say it, and we'd drive on sort of relieved. We finally parked by an old beat-up church that had half its windows busted out and sat there listening to the radio. Bob talked about driving out to a roadhouse we'd heard about as



being a really rough place, but we both knew they wouldn't let us in so we didn't do anything about it. Then a couple of girls walked by and Bob made a crack. They laughed but kept on going. A couple of minutes later they came by again. This time they stopped and one thing led to another and pretty soon Bob had one in front and I had the other in the back seat.

"We drove out into the country and I was glad of the radio because I couldn't think of anything to say. I kept smoking one of Bob's cigarettes after another, not because I wanted them but because the ritual of lighting and puffing gave me something to do with my hands. She didn't smoke.

"Bob had his arm around his girl. Mine was sitting way over on the other side of the seat kind of stiff like. The two feet between us seemed like a million miles and I couldn't figure out how to get across it. Then Bob took a corner fast and she came tumbling over. When we got untangled I had my arm around her and she didn't seem to mind.

"Then Bob parked on a side road and he and his girl started to kid back and forth. He'd say something like, 'Boy, am I hot tonight,' and she'd say, 'Don't be a fool, crank down the window.' And then they'd both laugh like crazy and he'd reach over to her and pretty soon they'd be all tangled up.

"I wanted to try something like that but I was suffering from a sort of personality paralysis. So I started tenning. I must have stretched that count to a good three minutes. When I finally got to ten I couldn't make it so I went on to twenty. The silence kept getting silenter and I couldn't think of anything to say so I kept on counting and waiting for the dam to break."

"The poor girl," she said.

"Poor girl, hell! Poor me. At thirty-nine I almost decided to stretch the count to fifty but I knew that if I did I'd be counting for the rest of the evening so I pulled her to me and bent my head down. She turned her face up to me and shut her eyes just like in the movies, but her lips were dry and I could feel her teeth through them and neither of us got much out of it. Her name was Edna and she'd eaten something for supper with garlic in it and I could smell the garlic more than I could feel the kiss.

"After we dropped the girls, I climbed up into the front seat and Bob and I started swapping progress reports. I knew darn well he hadn't done anything but fool around a bit but to hear him tell about it you'd have thought he had her stripped.

" 'I could have had it,' he said, 'but she was a pig.'

" 'Mine was too,' I said. 'She was practically begging me; but you know what? She'd been eating garlic. How do you like that?'

" 'What do you expect from a pig,' said Bob."

There was silence in the apartment and then he lifted his head suddenly. "Now how in the hell did I get off on that?"

She laughed. "You were tenning."

"Oh, yeah. So were you. Sorry to cut in on you like that."

"Don't give it a thought. It's all out of the same cloth." She looked down at the long green cigarette holder and twisted it reflectively between her fingers. "You made out better than I did. I wasn't able to salvage anything."

"He was tall and dark and he wore his tuxedo beautifully. He stood by the entrance as if he were waiting for somebody. Then he shrugged his shoulders and started across the room in my direction. I reached in my purse for the holder, but my fingers froze so I started tenning. He stopped at somebody's table and said something. They offered him a chair but he shook his head, I tenned twice before I got the holder out. There was a panicky minute when I couldn't get the cigarette in but I finally made it. It took two matches to get it going."

"He started across the floor again. I could see he was going to walk right by my table and I was all set. I put a bored expression on my face, tilted my head, lifted my beautiful jade holder, and after inhaling slowly, started to let the smoke trickle out through my nostrils."

There was a sudden shrill of a whistle from the street and an angry voice roared up. "Hey, you on third! Either close those curtains tight or switch off your lights. You're letting enough light through to be spotted ten miles away."

"I wonder if he means us," she said.

He shrugged. "Maybe. Turn off the lamp."

"I don't like to smoke in the dark. Shut the window. The wind must be blowing the blackout curtains open."

"It'll be too hot in here with no air," he protested.

"So you can mix yourself a cold drink. Hurry up before he puts a couple of bullets through the window. The wardens have been getting awfully jumpy the last week or so."

"Can't blame them," he said and shut the window.

"Mix me one while you're at it."

"I don't want a drink, I want a decent smoke. I wonder if McGarvy's is still open."

"Even if he is, it won't do you any good. You'd be lucky

to get half way there before some guardsman potted you for a chutist."

He sighed, tore another rectangle from the second sheet, and began to poke around in the ashtray for the most presentable of the remaining butts.

"Look," she said, "do you want to hear the rest of this story or don't you?"

"What story?" he asked vaguely as he licked the white cylinder. He examined it and then stuck out his tongue and licked it again. "Takes a lot of spit to make these things hold."

"My story, you dope. The story of the green jade cigarette holder" He flicked his lighter, puffed, and coughed. "Go ahead."

"As he came by the table I looked up at him through half-closed eyes and smiled mysteriously."

"And?"

"He stopped dead in his tracks and said 'Jesus Christ' so loud that everybody heard him and looked at me. He was a gentleman, though, he didn't laugh even though the rest of them did. He just got a strangled look on his face and made a beeline for the men's room."

"That was a sadder story than mine."

"I don't know, he hadn't been eating garlic. At least I assume he hadn't."

"Damn!"

"What's the matter?"

"Cigarette fell apart."

There was a sudden distant barking as the guns out beyond the airport began to thud away. The amber "alert" glow on the television screen was replaced by an angry red.

"Bill."

"Yes?"

"How fast does sound travel?"

"Seven or eight hundred miles an hour. Why?"

"It it should hit down by the depot, how long would it be before we could hear it?"

"Isn't that a rather academic question?"

"I want to know."

"Five or six seconds I guess."

She switched out the lamp. "Open the curtains, I want to see."

"I thought you were interested in hearing."

"I want to see it when it hits."

"All right." He pulled open the curtains and raised the window.

"The breeze has stopped."

There were flashes and distant crackles directly overhead.

"They're coming in high. You might as well smoke that butt you've been hoarding. There's no use saving it now."

"Can I use my green jade cigarette holder?"

"If you'll save me first butts."

"It's a deal."

There was a spurt of flame in the darkness and then the red glowing tip of the cigarette.

"I hate to smoke in the dark."

"Turn on the lamp."

"What about the warden?"

"To hell with the warden. That's better." She blew a puff of smoke in his face.

"Maybe if we went down in the basement . . ."

"With the new heavy ones?"

"I guess you're right," he said. "Hey, save me a drag! You're a pig."

"Deodorized, though. Count to ten."

"It won't last that long."

"Count fast."

"One."

The sky toward the depot turned to sun.

"Here, darling. I'm not a pig."

"Four"

"Kiss me!"

"Sev—"

# conventional ending

Robert P. Mills, Ltd  
156 East 52nd St.  
New York 22, New York

Dear Bob:

Poul Anderson, Gordon Dickson, and I were over at my place last night batting around story ideas when the subject of science fiction conventions came up. The conversation naturally went on to the high cost of liquor at same, and how we always ended up drinking beer when we were in the mood for Scotch. Then Gordy came up with a wonderful idea. Why, he said, don't the three of us knock out a special convention story and earmark the proceeds for vintage firewater. I'd just been talking about the strange character who has the apartment upstairs, a chap by the name of Gergen who believes that if he can hook enough junk radios together in the proper fashion he'll be able to talk to Mars—and starting with him we blocked out a nice story idea. We're calling the yarn "Conventional Ending." The gimmick is that a character like the one upstairs actually does make contact with Mars, and the Martians take over his mind. By a process of mental ingestion he takes over the three of us so that the aliens have an embryonic group mind at their disposal. The final twist to the story is that the four of us go to the San Francisco science fiction convention, lure the big name writers and editors up to our hotel room one by one, and absorb them into the Martian group mind. They in turn start inviting fans up. We haven't as yet figured out why the Martians should want to take over fandom, but Poul is going to do the last third of the story and he'll come up with some sort of a snapper. We're figuring on the yarn as a letter series, and it shouldn't run over two thousand.

Here's where you come in. Since the story has a definite time place focus, it will have to be placed within the next few weeks if it's going to hit the stands before the convention.

The three of us are all pressed for time so we'd like a definite go-ahead signal from somebody before we turn it out. Will you check around and see if anybody is interested? Let us know on this as soon as you can.

Salud,

Ted  
Poul  
Gordy

WESTERN UNION 1954 APR 8 PM 0216

LOWNDES LIKES CONVENTIONAL ENDING ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS WORTH. WANTS IT FOR OCTOBER ISSUE OF FUTURE DUE TO HIT STAND ONE AUGUST. PROMISED HIM STORY IN TWO WEEKS LATEST. CAN DO?

BOB MILLS

WESTERN UNION 1954 APR 9 AM 0917 FOR ONE HUNDRED WE WOULD GIVE HIM THE SEVENTH STAGE LENSMAN BY SATURDAY. CAN DO!

TED, POUL, GORDY

WESTERN UNION 1954 APR 28 PM 0400  
WHERE IS THAT STORY?

BOB MILLS

WESTERN UNION 1954 APR 29 AM 1127  
HAVING TROUBLE WITH POUL. LETTER FOLLOWS

TED AND GORDY

29 April 1954  
Minneapolis, Minn.

Robert P. Mills, Ltd.  
156 East 52nd Street  
New York 22, New York,

Dear Bob:

Sorry for the delay on "Conventional Ending." We're been

waiting for Poul to come up with an ending before we turned out our thirds. He kept promising to get it done, but he was trying to finish that novel for Shasta and kept putting us off. We'd have finished the story ourselves, only we still haven't been able to figure out why the Martians would want to take over fandom.

Last night we finally went over to Poul's, dragged him out of his study and over to Ted's, plunked him down in front of a typewriter with a stack of paper on one side and a half a dozen bottles of cold beer on the other, and told him that he wasn't leaving until he'd written us out of the hole he'd gotten us into. He thshed and moaned and made a dozen false starts. Finally he came out shaking his head and saying he was completely stuck. So we all went to work on the ending, but we couldn't accomplish any more collectively than he could by himself. Finally he had a flash. Look, he said, maybe if we all go upstairs and have a talk with this mad genius something will pop. Gergen never lets anybody in his apartment, but after a couple of more beers we decided to make a try.

The three of us went up and beat on the door. Gergen finally opened it a crack and peeked out at us. Ted introduced us and said that he'd been telling us about his attempts to contact Mars and that we wondered if he'd mind showing us his apparatus. Gergen didn't say anything for a moment and then he stabbed one bony forefinger out at Poul. "*He be the only one that be welcome,*" he said.

Poul sort of hung back. He obviously didn't like the idea of being closeted alone with Gergen, but we each grabbed an arm and pushed him in. We waited outside for a while and then went back downstairs. Two hours later Poul still hadn't come down so we went upstairs after him.

After we beat on the door for a good ten minutes, Gergen stuck his head out and snarled, "*He be at home!*" and slammed the door shut again. We beat it downstairs and called Poul's right away. He finally answered the phone but he sounded awfully funny. Finally he said that if Gordy would come by his place in the morning he'd discuss the ending. Gordy suggested that we both drop over, but for some reason Poul vetoed it. We've about lost patience with him. If he doesn't come through this time we'll drop him out of the story, dig up an ending ourselves, and have it come out under a double rather than a triple byline.

If we'd known how much trouble this was going to cost everyone, we'd have stuck to our beer in the first place.

Salud,

Ted  
Gordy

WESTERN UNION 1954 MAY 1 AM 1131

JUST PHONED LOWNDES. HE SAYS AT THIS LATE DATE ANY STORY IS BETTER THAN NONE BUT WITHOUT POUL'S NAME ON IT IT IS ONLY WORTH FIFTY. HURRY HURRY HURRY.

BOB MILLS

WESTERN UNION 1954 MAY 4 AM 1049

HAVING TROUBLE WITH GORDY NOW. WILL LOWNDES TAKE STORY UNDER MY NAME ONLY?

TED

WESTERN UNION 1954 MAY 5 PM 0445

RWL JUST CALLED HOPPING MAD. SAYS HE GOT TELEGRAM FROM GORDY AND POUL THIS PM SAYING QUOTE THERE BE NO REASON WHY MARTIANS BE INTERESTED IN TAKING OVER FANDOM UNQUOTE. WANTED TO KNOW IF EVERYBODY IN MINNEAPOLIS HAD GONE CRAZY. I TOLD HIM YOU WOULD HANDLE THE STORY SOLO. HE SAID OK BECAUSE PRINTER IS HOLDING SPACE OPEN AND HE HAS TO FILL IT BUT TWENTY FIVE WAS AS HIGH AS HE WOULD GO FOR AN ORIGINAL COGSWELL.

BOB MILLS

17 May 1954.

Minneapolis, Minn.

Robert P. Mills Ltd.  
156 East 52nd Street  
New York 22, New York

Dear Bob:

Whew! "Conventional Ending" is finally in the mail. After this I'm never going to try a collaboration with anybody. Found a note under the door this morning saying, "Be over tonight to explain everything. Poul, Gordy, Gergen." All that I can say is that whatever their story is, it better be good. I'll let you know what the gag is as soon as I find out myself.



Does *Future* pay on acceptance or publication, these days?

Salud,

Ted

27 May, 1954  
New York City, N.Y.

Theodore R. Cogswell  
918 University Ave. SE  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Dear Ted:

Enclosed is the check for "Conventional Ending." You will notice that after deductions for unnecessary telegrams you are ending up with the grand sum of \$2.67. On this you're going to drink Scotch?

Bob

WESTERN UNION 1954 MAY 31 PM 1147

DEAR BOB. WE ARE ARRIVING IN NEW YORK SUNDAY PM ON NORTHWEST AIRLINES FLIGHT FOUR SEVEN. MAKE ARRANGEMENTS FOR PRIVATE REPEAT PRIVATE CONFERENCE WITH YOU MONDAY MORNING AND LOWNDES MONDAY AFTERNOON ON SPECIAL PLANS FOR SAN FRANCISCO SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION. GERGEN BE LOOKING FORWARD TO MEETING BOTH OF YOU.

TED, POUL AND GORDY

THE END

*Editor's note: This be as good a place as any to put in a plug for the Twelfth World Science Fiction Convention which will be held in San Francisco on Labor Day weekend in September. I be looking forward to meeting as many of you as possible. Individually, of course.*

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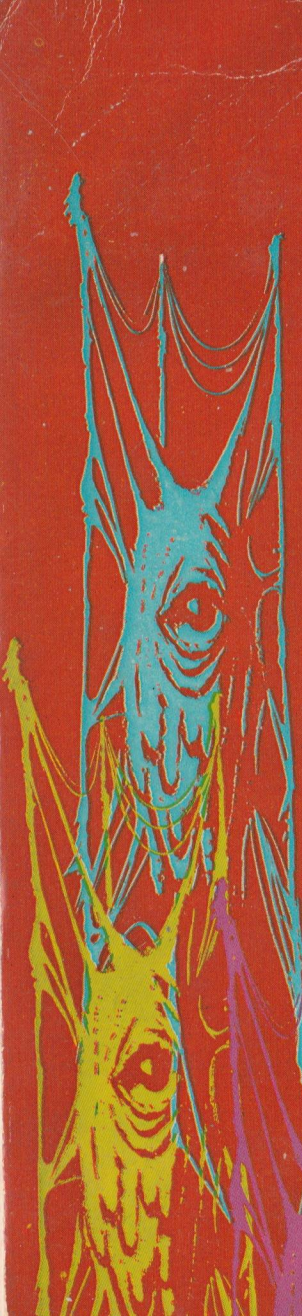
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