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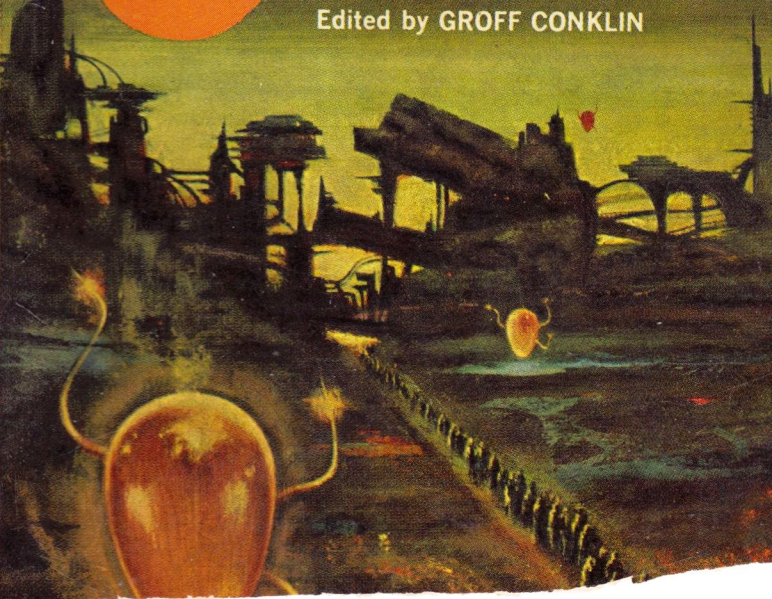
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5 UNEARTHLY VISIONS

**Edited by
GROFF CONKLIN**

GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

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LEGWORK

Eric Frank Russell

That a British citizen should write a completely circumstantial and vividly real story about American police methods is sufficiently remarkable in itself, and that he should have written a pre-Sputnik story (1956) about a space satellite (alien) that only needed minor changes in two or three paragraphs to make it completely logical today is even more remarkable: but those are the kinds of things that Eric Russell does, seemingly without thinking twice about it. (Actually, of course, nothing well-written is ever done without an ungodly lot of thinking and hard work.) It is true that Mr. R. once wrote a hilarious tale about the abolition of radio, back in 1937 *—but time, World War II, and television have made that one unusable for all practical intents and purposes—although its author could probably doctor it up without too great effort to make it amusing and “possible” today.

As nearly as an Andromedan thought form can be expressed in print, his name was Harasha Vanash. The formidable thing about him was his conceit. It was redoubtable because justified. His natural power had been tested on fifty hostile worlds and found invincible.

The greatest asset any living creature can possess is a brain capable of imagination. That is its strong point, its power center. But to Vanash an opponent's mind was a weak spot, a chink in the armor, a thing to be exploited.

Even he had his limitations. He could not influence a mind of his own species armed with his own power. He could not do much with a brainless life form except kick it in the rump. But if an alien could think and imagine, that alien was his meat.

Vanash was a twenty-four carat hypno, jeweled in every hole. Given a thinking mind to work upon at any range up to most of a mile, he could convince it in a split second that

* It was the second or third Russell science fiction tale to be published in this country.

black was white, right was wrong, the sun had turned bright green, and the corner cop was King Farouk. Anything he imposed stayed stuck unless he saw fit to unstick it. Even if it outraged common sense, the victim would sign affidavits, swear to it upon the Bible, the Koran or whatever, and then be led away to have his head examined.

There was one terminal restriction that seemed to have the nature of a cosmos-wide law; he could not compel any life form to destroy itself by its own hand. At that point the universal instinct of self-survival became downright mulish and refused to budge.

However, he was well able to do the next best thing. He could do what a snake does to a rabbit, namely, obsess the victim with the idea that it was paralyzed and completely unable to flee from certain death. He could not persuade a Bootean *appolan* to cut its own throat, but he could make it stand still while he performed that service.

Yes, Harasha Vanash had excellent basis for self-esteem. When one has walked into and out of fifty worlds one can afford to be confident about the fifty-first. Experience is a faithful and loving servant, always ready with a long, stimulating draught of ego when required.

So it was with nonchalance that he landed on Earth. The previous day he'd given the planet a look-over and his snooping had set off the usual rumors about flying saucers despite that his ship resembled no such object.

He arrived unseen in the hills, got out, sent the ship up to where its automechanisms would swing it into a distant orbit and make it a pinhead-sized moon. Among the rocks he hid the small, compact apparatus that could call it back when wanted.

The vessel was safe from interference up there, high in the sky. The chance of it being observed telescopically was very remote. If the creatures of Earth did succeed in detecting its presence, they could do nothing about it. They hadn't any rocketships. They could do no more than look and wonder and worry.

Yesterday's preliminary investigation had told him practically nothing about the shape and form of the dominant life. He hadn't got near enough for that. All he'd wanted to know was whether this planet was worthy of closer study and whether its highest life form had exploitable minds. It had not taken long to see that he'd discovered an especially juicy plum, a world deserving of eventual confiscation by the Andromedan horde.

The physical attributes of these future slaves did not matter much right now. Though not at all bizarre, he was suffi-

ciently like them to walk around, sufficiently unlike to raise a yelp of alarm on sight. There would be no alarm. In spite of a dozen physical differences they'd be soothed, positively soothed. Because they'd never get a true view of him. Only an imaginary one. He could be a mental mock-up of anything, anybody.

Therefore, the first thing to do was to find a mediocrity who would pass unnoticed in a crowd, get his mental image firmly fixed and impress that on all other minds subsequently encountered until such time as it might be convenient to switch pictures.

Communication was no problem, either. He could read the questions, project the answers, and the other party's own mind could be compelled to supply accompanying camouflage. If they communicated by making noises with their mouths or by dexterous jiggling of their tails, it would work out the same. The other's mastered imagination would get his message while providing the noises and mouth movements or the appropriate tail-jiggings.

Leaving the landing place, ~~he set forth~~ through the hills, heading for a well-used road observed during his descent. A flight of primitive jet-planes arced across the eastward horizon. He paused long enough to watch them with approval. The trouble with prospective servants already discovered elsewhere was that they were a bit too stupid to be efficient. Not here, though.

He continued on his way, bearing no instrument other than a tiny compass needed for eventual return and take-off. No weapon. Not a knife, not a gun. There was no need to burden himself with lethal hardware. By self-evident logic, local weapons were the equals of themselves. Any time he wanted one he could make the nearest sucker hand over his own and feel happy to do it. It was that easy. He'd done it a dozen times before and could do it a dozen times again.

By the roadside stood a small filling station with four pumps. Vanash kept watch upon it from the shelter of thick bushes fifty yards away. Hm-m-m! bipeds, vaguely like himself but with semi-rigid limbs and a lot more hair. There was one operating a pump, another sitting in a car. He could not get a complete image of the latter because only the face and shoulders were visible. As for the former, the fellow wore a glossy-peaked cap bearing a metal badge, and uniformlike overalls with a crimson cipher on the pocket.

Neither example was suitable for mental duplication, he decided. One lacked sufficient detail, the other had far too much. Characters who wore uniforms usually took orders,

had fixed duties, were liable to be noted and questioned if seen some place where they shouldn't be. It would be better to pick a subject able to move around at random.

The car pulled away. Peaked Cap wiped his hands on a piece of cotton waste and gazed along the road. Vanash maintained his watch. After a few minutes another car halted. This one had an aerial sticking from its roof and bore two individuals dressed alike; peaked caps, metal buttons and badges. They were heavy-featured, hard-eyed, had an official air about them. They wouldn't do either, thought Vanash. Too conspicuous.

Unconscious of this scrutiny, one of the cops said to the attendant, "Seen anything worth telling, Joe?"

"Not a thing. All quiet."

The police cruiser jerked forward and continued its patrol. Joe went into the station. Taking a flavor-seed from its small pack, Vanash chewed it and meditated while he bided his time. So they were mouth-talkers, nontelepathic, routine-minded and natural puppets for any hypno who cared to dangle them around.

Still, their cars, jetplanes and other gadgets proved that they enjoyed occasional flashes of inspiration. In Andromedan theory the rare touch of genius was all that menaced any hypno, since nothing else could sense his existence, follow his operations and pin him down.

It was a logical supposition—in terms of other-world logic. Everything the Andromedan culture possessed had been born one by one of numberless revealing shafts of revelation that through the centuries had sparked out of nothingness in the inexplicable way that such things do. But flashes of inspiration come spontaneously, of their own accord. They cannot be created to order no matter how great the need. Any species could go nuts for lack of one essential spark and, like everyone else, be compelled to wait its turn.

The trap in any foreign culture lies in the fact that no newcomer can know everything about it, imagine everything, guess everything. For instance, who could guess that the local life form were a bunch of chronic fidgets? Or that, because of it, they'd never had time to wait for genius? Vanash did not know, and could not suspect, that Earth had a tedious, conventional and most times unappreciated substitute for touches of genius. It was slow, grim, determined and unspectacular, but it was usable as and when required and it got results.

Variously it was called making the grade, slogging along, doing it the hard way, or just plain lousy legwork. Whoever heard of such a thing?

Not Vanash, nor any of his kind. So he waited behind the

bushes until eventually a nondescript, mousy individual got out of a car, obligingly mooched around offering every detail of his features, mannerisms and attire. This specimen looked the unattached type that are a dime a dozen on any crowded city street. Vanash mentally photographed him from every angle, registered him to perfection and felt satisfied.

Five miles to the north along this road lay a small town, and forty miles beyond it a big city. He'd seen and noted them on the way down, deciding that the town would serve as training-ground before going to the city. Right now he could step boldly from cover and compel his model to drive him where he wanted to go.

The idea was tempting but unwise. Before he was through with this world its life form would become aware of inexplicable happenings in their midst and it would be safer not to locate the first of such events so near to the rendezvous with the ship. Peaked Cap might talk too loudly and too long about the amazing coincidence of a customer giving a lift to an exact twin. The victim himself might babble bemusedly about picking up somebody who made him feel as though looking into a mirror. Enough items like that, and a flash of revelation could assemble them into a picture of the horrid truth.

He let the customer go and waited for Joe to enter the building. Then he emerged from the bushes, walked half a mile northward, stopped and looked to the south.

The first car that came along was driven by a salesman who never, never, never picked up a hitcher. He'd heard of cases where free riders had bopped the driver and robbed him, and he wasn't going to be rolled if he could help it. So far as he was concerned, thumbers by the wayside could go on thumbing until next Thursday week.

He stopped and gave Vanash a lift and lacked the vaguest notion of why he'd done it. All he knew was that in a moment of mental aberration he'd broken the habit of a lifetime and picked up a thin-faced, sad and silent customer who resembled a middle-aged mortician.

"Going far?" asked the salesman, inwardly bothered by the weakness of his own resolution.

"Next town," said Vanash. Or the other one thought he said it, distinctly heard him saying it and would take a dying oath that it really had been said. Sneaking the town's name from the driver's mind and thrusting it back again, Vanash persuaded him to hear the addition of, "Northwood."

"Any particular part?"

"Doesn't matter. It's a small place. Drop me wherever you find convenient."

The driver grunted assent, offered no more conversation. His thoughts milled around, baffled by his own Samaritanism. Arriving in Northwood, he stopped the car.

"This do?"

"Thanks." Vanash got out. "I appreciate it."

"Think nothing of it," said the salesman, driving away bopless and unrolled.

Vanash watched him depart, then had a look around Northwood.

The place was nothing much. It had shops on one long main street and on two short side streets. A railroad depot with a marshaling yard. Four medium-sized industrial plants. Three banks, a post office, a fire station, a couple of municipal buildings. He estimated that Northwood held between four and five thousand Earthlings and that at least a third of them worked on outlying farms.

He ambled along the main street and was ignored by suspecting natives while practically rubbing shoulders with them. The experience gave him no great kick; he'd done it so often elsewhere that he now took it for granted and was almost bored by it. At one point a dog saw him, let go a howl of dismay and bolted with its tail between its legs. Nobody took any notice. Neither did he.

First lesson in pre-city education was gained inside a shop. Curious to see how the customers got what they wanted, he entered with a bunch of them. They used a medium of exchange in the form of printed paper and metal disks. That meant he'd save himself considerable trouble and inconvenience if he got hold of a supply of the stuff.

Moving to a crowded supermarket, he soon learned the relative values of money and a fair idea of its purchasing power. Then he helped himself to a small supply and was smart enough to do it by proxy. The technique was several times easier than falling off a log.

Standing unnoticed at one side, he concentrated attention on a plump, motherly shopper of obvious respectability. She responded by picking the purse of a preoccupied woman next to her. Sneaking the loot out of the market, she dropped it unopened on a vacant lot, went home, thought things over and held her head.

The take was forty-two dollars. Vanash counted it carefully, went to a cafeteria, splurged some of it on a square meal. By other methods he could have got the feed for free, but such tactics are self-advertising and can be linked up by a spark of the inspiration. To his taste, some of the food

was revolting, some passable, but it would do until he'd learned how to pick and choose.

One problem not yet satisfactorily resolved was that of what to do with the night. He needed sleep as much as any inferior life form and had to find some place for it. A snooze in the fields or a barn would be inappropriate; the master does not accept the hay while the servants snore on silk.

It took a little while to find out from observation, mind-pickings and a few questions to passers-by that he could bed down at a hotel or rooming house. The former did not appeal to him. Too public and, therefore, too demanding upon his resources for concealment. In a hotel he'd have less opportunity to let up for a while and be himself, which was a welcome form of relaxation.

But with a room of his own free from constantly intruding servants armed with master-keys, he could revert to a normal, effortless state of mind, get his sleep, work out his plans in peace and privacy.

He found a suitable rooming house without much trouble. A blowzy female with four warts on her florid face showed him his hideout, demanded twelve dollars in advance because he had no luggage. Paying her, he informed her that he was William Jones, here for a week on business, and that he liked to be left alone.

In return, she intimated that her joint was a palace of peace for gentlemen, and that any bum who imported a hussy would be out on his neck. He assured her that he would not dream of such a thing, which was true enough because to him such a dream would have all the makings of a nightmare. Satisfied, she withdrew.

He sat on the edge of the bed and thought things over. It would have been an absurdly simple trick to have paid her in full without handing her a cent. He could have sent her away convinced that she had been paid. But she'd still be short twelve dollars and get riled about the mysterious loss. If he stayed on, he'd have to fool her again and again until at last the very fact that his payments coincided exactly with her losses would be too much even for an idiot.

A way out would be to nick someone for a week's rent, then move and take another boob. That tactic had its drawbacks. If the news got around and a hunt started after the bilker, he would have to change identities.

He wasn't averse to soaking a muttonhead or switching personalities, providing it was necessary. It irked him to have to do it frequently, for petty reasons hardly worth the effort. To let himself be the constant victim of trifling circumstances was to accept that these aliens were imposing conditions upon him. His ego resented such an idea.

All the same, he had to face a self-evident premise and its unavoidable conclusion. On this world one must have money to get around smoothly, without irritating complications. Therefore, he must acquire an adequate supply of the real thing or be continually called upon to create the delusion that he possessed it. No extraordinary intelligence was needed to divine which alternative gave the least trouble.

On other worlds the life forms had proved so sluggish and dull-witted, their civilizations so rudimentary, that it had not taken long to make a shrewd estimate of their worth as future foes and subsequent slaves. Here, the situation was a lot more complicated and required lengthier, more detailed survey. By the looks of it he'd be stalled quite a time. So he must get hold of money in quantities larger than that carried by the average individual. And when it ran out, he must get more.

Next day he devoted some time to tracing the flow of money back to a satisfactory source. Having found the source, he spent more time making careful study of it. In underworld jargon, he cased a bank.

The man lumbering along the corridor weighed two-fifty, had a couple of chins and a prominent paunch. At first sight, just a fat slob. First impressions can be very deceptive. At least half a dozen similarly built characters had been world heavyweight wrestling champs. Edward G. Rider was not quite in that category, but on rare occasion he could strew bodies around in a way that would make an onlooking chiseler offer his services as manager.

He stopped at a frosted glass door bearing the legend: UNITED STATES TREASURY—INVESTIGATION. Rattling the glass with a hammerlike knuckle, he entered without waiting for response, took a seat without being invited.

The sharp-faced individual behind the desk registered faint disapproval, said, "Eddie, I've got a smelly one for you."

"Have you ever given me one that wasn't?" Rider rested big hands on big kneecaps. "What's it this time? Another unregistered engraver on the rampage?"

"No. It's a bank robbery."

Rider frowned, twitched heavy eyebrows. "I thought we were interested only in counterfeit currency and illegal transfers of capital. What has a heist to do with us? That's for the police, isn't it?"

"The police are stuck with it."

"Well, if the place was government insured they can call in the Feds."

"It's not insured. We offered to lend a hand. You are the boy who will lend it."

"Why?"

The other drew a deep breath, explained rapidly, "Some smartie took the First Bank of Northwood for approximately twelve thousand—and nobody knows how. Captain Harrison, of the Northwood police, says the puzzle is a stinker. According to him, it looks very much as though at long last somebody has found a technique for committing the perfect crime."

"He would say that if he feels thwarted. How come we're dragged into it?"

"On checking up with the bank Harrison found that the loot included forty one-hundred-dollar bills consecutively numbered. Those numbers are known. The others are not. He phoned us to give the data, hoping the bills might turn up and we could back-track on them. Embleton handled the call, chatted a while, got interested in this perfect crime thesis."

"So?"

"He consulted with me. We both agreed that if somebody has learned how to truck lettuce the way he likes, he's as much a menace to the economy as any large-scale counterfeiter."

"I see," said Rider, doubtfully.

"Then I took the matter up at high level. Ballantyne himself decided that we're entitled to chip in, just in case something's started that can go too far. I chose you. The whole office block will sit steadier without your size fourteen boots banging around." He moved some papers to his front, picked up a pen. "Get out to Northwood and give Chief Harrison a boost."

"Now?"

"Any reason why it should be tomorrow or next week?"

"I'm baby-sitting tonight."

"Don't be silly."

"It's not silly," said Rider. "Not with this baby."

"You ought to be ashamed. You're not long married. You've got a sweet and trusting wife."

"She's the baby," Rider informed. "I promised her faithfully and fervently that I'd—"

"And I promised Harrison and Ballantyne that you'd handle this with your usual elephantine efficiency," the other interrupted, scowling. "Do you want to hold down your job or do you want out? Phone your wife and tell her duty comes first."

"Oh, all right." He went out, slammed the door, tramped

surlily along the corridor, entered a booth and took twenty-two minutes to do the telling.

Chief Harrison was tall, lean and fed up. He said, "Why should I bother to tell you what happened? Direct evidence is better than secondhand information. We've got the actual witness here. I sent for him when I learned you were coming." He flipped a switch on the desk-box. "Send Ashcroft in."

"Who's he?" Rider asked.

"Head teller of the First Bank and a worried man." He waited for the witness to enter, made an introduction. "This is Mr. Rider, a special investigator. He wants to hear your story."

Ashcroft sat down, wearily rubbed his forehead. He was a white-haired, dapper man in the early sixties. Rider weighed him up as the precise, somewhat finicky but solid type often described as a pillar of the community.

"So far I've told it about twenty times," Ashcroft complained, "and each time it sounds a little madder. My mind is spinning with the thoughts of it. I just can't find any plausible—"

"Don't worry yourself," advised Rider in soothing tones. "Just give me the facts as far as they go."

"Each week we make up the payroll for the Dakin Glass Company. It varies between ten and fifteen thousand dollars. The day before the company sends around a messenger with a debit-note calling for the required sum and stating how they want it. We then get it ready in good time for the following morning."

"And then?"

"The company collects. They send around a cashier accompanied by a couple of guards. He always arrives at about eleven o'clock. Never earlier than ten to eleven or later than ten past."

"You know the cashier by sight?"

"There are two of them, Mr. Swain and Mr. Letheren. Either of them might come for the money. One relieves the other from time to time. Or one comes when the other is too busy, or ill, or on vacation. Both have been well-known to me for several years."

"All right, carry on."

"When the cashier arrives he brings a locked leather bag and has the key in a pocket. He unlocks the bag, hands it to me. I fill it in such manner that he can check the quantities, pass it back together with a receipt slip. He locks the bag, puts the key in his pocket, signs the slip and walks out. I file the receipt and that's all there is to it."

"Seems a bit careless to let the same fellow carry both the bag and the key," Rider commented.

Chief Harrison chipped in with, "We've checked on that. A guard carries the key. He gives it to the cashier when they arrive at the bank, takes it back when they leave."

Nervously licking his lips, Ashcroft went on, "Last Friday morning we had twelve thousand one hundred eighty-two dollars ready for the Dakin plant. Mr. Letheren came in with the bag. It was exactly ten-thirty."

"How do you know that?" inquired Rider, sharply. "Did you look at the clock? What impelled you to look at it?"

"I consulted the clock because I was a little surprised. He was ahead of his usual time. I had not expected him for another twenty minutes or so."

"And it was ten-thirty? You're positive of that?"

"I am absolutely certain," said Ashcroft, as though it was the only certainty in the whole affair. "Mr. Letheren came up to the counter and gave me the bag. I greeted him, made a casual remark about him being early."

"What was his reply?"

"I don't recall the precise wording. I'd no reason to take especial note of what he said and I was busy tending the bag." He frowned with effort of thought. "He made some commonplace remark about it being better to be too early than too late."

"What occurred next?"

"I gave him the bag and the slip. He locked the bag, signed the slip and departed."

"Is that all?" Rider asked.

"Not by a long chalk," put in Chief Harrison. He nodded encouragingly at Ashcroft. "Go on, give him the rest of it."

"At five to eleven," continued the witness, his expression slightly befuddled, "Mr. Letheren came back, placed the bag on the counter and looked at me sort of expectantly. So I said, 'Anything wrong, Mr. Letheren?' He answered, 'Nothing so far as I know. Ought there to be?' "

He paused, rubbed his forehead again. Rider advised, "Take your time with it. I want it as accurately as you can give it."

Ashcroft pulled himself together. "I told him there was no reason for anything to be wrong because the money had been checked and rechecked three times. He then displayed some impatience and said he didn't care if it had been checked fifty times so long as I got busy handing it over and let him get back to the plant."

"That knocked you onto your heels, eh?" Rider suggested, with a grim smile.

"I was flabbergasted. At first I thought it was some kind of joke, though he isn't the type to play such tricks. I told him I'd already given him the money, about half an hour before. He asked me if I was cracked. So I called Jackson, a junior teller, and he confirmed my statement. He had seen me loading the bag."

"Did he also see Letheren taking it away?"

"Yes, sir. And he said as much."

"What was Letheren's answer to that?"

"He demanded to see the manager. I showed him into Mr. Olsen's office. A minute later Mr. Olsen called for the receipt slip. I took it out of the file and discovered there was no signature upon it."

"It was blank?"

"Yes. I can't understand it. I watched him sign that receipt myself. Nevertheless there was nothing on it, not a mark of any sort." He sat silent and shaken, then finished, "Mr. Letheren insisted that Mr. Olsen cease questioning me and call the police. I was detained in the manager's office until Mr. Harrison arrived."

Rider stewed it over, then asked, "Did the same pair of guards accompany Letheren both times?"

"I don't know. I did not see his escort on either occasion."

"You mean he came unguarded?"

"They are not always visible to the bank's staff," Harrison put in. "I've chased that lead to a dead end."

"How much did you learn on the way?"

"The guards deliberately vary their routine so as to make their behavior unpredictable to anyone planning a grab. Sometimes both accompany the cashier to the counter and back. Sometimes they wait outside the main door, watching the street. Other times one remains in the car while the other mooches up and down near the bank."

"They are armed, I take it?"

"Of course." He eyed Rider quizzically. "Both guards swear that last Friday morning they escorted Letheren to the bank once and only once. That was at five to eleven."

"But he was there at ten-thirty," Ashcroft protested.

"He denies it," said Harrison. "So do the guards."

"Did the guards say they'd actually entered the bank?" inquired Rider, sniffing around for more contradictory evidence.

"They did not enter on arrival. They hung around outside the front door until Letheren's delay made them take alarm. At that point they went inside with guns half-drawn. Ashcroft couldn't see them because by then he was on the carpet in Olsen's office."

"Well, you can see how it is," commented Rider, staring hard at the unhappy Ashcroft. "You say Letheren got the money at ten-thirty. He says he did not. The statements are mutually opposed. Got any ideas on that?"

"You don't believe me, do you?" said Ashcroft, miserably.

"I don't disbelieve you, either. I'm keeping judgment suspended. We're faced with a flat contradiction of evidence. It doesn't follow that one of the witnesses is a liar and thus a major suspect. Somebody may be talking in good faith but genuinely mistaken."

"Meaning me?"

"Could be. You're not infallible. Nobody is." Rider leaned forward, gave emphasis to his tones. "Let's accept the main points at face value. If you've told the truth, the cash was collected at ten-thirty. If Letheren has told the truth, he was not the collector. Add those up and what do you get? Answer: the money was toted away by somebody who was not Letheren. And if that answer happens to be correct, it means that you're badly mistaken."

"I've made no mistake," Ashcroft denied. "I know what I saw. I saw Letheren and nobody else. To say otherwise is to concede that I can't trust the evidence of my own eyes."

"You've conceded it already," Rider pointed out.

"Oh, no I haven't."

"You told us that you watched him sign the receipt slip. With your own two eyes you saw him append his signature." He waited for comment that did not come, ended, "There was nothing on the slip."

Ashcroft brooded in glum silence.

"If you were deluded about the writing, you could be equally deluded about the writer."

"I don't suffer from delusions."

"So it seems," said Rider, dry-voiced. "How do you explain that receipt?"

"I don't have to," declared Ashcroft with sudden spirit. "I've given the facts. It's for you fellows to find the explanation."

"That's right enough," Rider agreed. "We don't resent being reminded. I hope you don't resent being questioned again and again. Thanks for coming along."

"Glad to be of help." He went out, obviously relieved by the end of the inquisition.

Harrison found a toothpick, chewed it, said, "It's a heller. Another day or two of this and you'll be sorry they sent you to show me how."

Meditatively studying the police chief, Rider informed, "I didn't come to show you how. I came to help because you

said you needed help. Two minds are better than one. A hundred minds are better than ten. But if you'd rather I beat it back home—"

"Nuts," said Harrison. "At times like this I sour up on everyone. My position is different from yours. When someone takes a bank, right under my nose, he's made a chump of me. How'd you like to be both a police chief and a chump?"

"I think I'd accept the latter definition when and only when I'd been compelled to admit defeat. Are you admitting it?"

"Not on your life."

"Quit griping then. Let's concentrate on the job in hand. There's something mighty fishy about this business of the receipt. It looks cockeyed."

"It's plain as pie to me," said Harrison. "Ashcroft was deluded or tricked."

"That isn't the point," Rider told him. "The real puzzle is that of *why* he was outsmarted. Assuming that he and Letheren are both innocent, the loot was grabbed by someone else, by somebody unknown. I don't see any valid reason why the culprit should risk bollixing the entire set-up by handing in a blank receipt that might be challenged on the spot. All he had to do to avoid it was to scrawl Letheren's name. Why didn't he?"

Harrison thought it over. "Maybe he feared Ashcroft would recognize the signature as a forgery, take a closer look at him and yell bloody murder."

"If he could masquerade as Letheren well enough to get by, he should have been able to imitate a signature well enough to pass scrutiny."

"Well, maybe he didn't sign because he couldn't," Harrison ventured, "not being able to write. I know of several hoodlums who can write only because they got taught in the jug."

"You may have something there," Rider conceded. "Anyway, for the moment Ashcroft and Letheren appear to be the chief suspects. They'll have to be eliminated before we start looking elsewhere. I presume you've already checked on both of them?"

"And how!" Harrison used the desk-box. "Send in the First Bank file." When it came, he thumbed through its pages. "Take Ashcroft first. Financially well-fixed, no criminal record, excellent character, no motive for turning bank robber. Jackson, the junior teller, confirms his evidence to a limited extent. Ashcroft could not have hidden the Dakin consignment any place. We searched the bank from top to bottom, during which time Ashcroft did not leave the place for

one minute. We found nothing. Subsequent investigation brought out other items in his favor . . . I'll give you the details later on."

"You're satisfied that he is innocent?"

"Almost, but not quite," said Harrison. "He could have handed the money to an accomplice who bears superficial resemblance to Letheren. That tactic would have finagled the stuff clean out of the bank. I wish I could shake down his home in search of his split. One bill with a known number would tie him down but good." His features became disgruntled. "Judge Maxon refused to sign a search warrant on grounds of insufficient justification. Said he's got to be shown better cause for reasonable suspicion. I'm compelled to admit that he's right."

"How about the company's cashier, Letheren?"

"He's a confirmed bachelor in the late fifties. I won't weary you with his full background. There's nothing we can pin on him."

"You're sure of that?"

"Judge for yourself. The company's car remained parked outside the office all morning until ten thirty-five. It was then used to take Letheren and his guards to the bank. It couldn't reach the bank in less than twenty minutes. There just wasn't enough time for Letheren to make the first call in some other car, return to the plant, pick up the guards and make the second call."

"Not to mention hiding the loot in the interim," Rider suggested.

"No, he could not have done it. Furthermore, there are forty people in the Dakin office and between them they were able to account for every minute of Letheren's time from when he started work at nine o'clock up to when he left for the bank at ten thirty-five. No prosecutor could bust an alibi like that!"

"That seems to put him right out of the running."

Harrison scowled and said, "It certainly does—but we've since found five witnesses who place him near the bank at ten-thirty."

"Meaning they support the statements of Ashcroft and Jackson?"

"Yes, they do. Immediately after the case broke I put every available man onto the job of asking questions the whole length of the street and down the nearest side-streets. The usual lousy legwork. They found three people prepared to swear they'd seen Letheren entering the bank at ten-thirty. They didn't know him by sight, but they were shown Letheren's photograph and identified him."

"Did they notice his car and give its description?"

"They didn't see him using a car. He was on foot at the time and carrying the bag. They noticed and remembered him only because a mutt yelped and went hell-for-leather down the street. They wondered whether he'd kicked it and why."

"Do they say he *did* kick it?"

"No."

Rider thoughtfully rubbed two chins. "Then I wonder why it behaved like that. Dogs don't yelp and bolt for nothing. Something must have hurt or scared it."

"Who cares?" said Harrison, having worries enough. "The boys also found a fellow who says he saw Letheren a few minutes later, coming out of the bank and still with the bag. He didn't notice any guards hanging around. He says Letheren started walking along the street as though he hadn't a care in the world, but after fifty yards he picked up a prowling taxi and rolled away."

"You traced the driver?"

"We did. He also recognized the photo we showed him. Said he'd taken Letheren to the Cameo Theater on Fourth Street, but did not see him actually enter the place. Just dropped him, got paid and drove off. We questioned the Cameo's staff, searched the house. It got us nowhere. There's a bus terminal nearby. We gave everyone there a rough time and learned nothing."

"And that's as far as you've been able to take it?"

"Not entirely. I've phoned the Treasury, given them the numbers of forty bills. I've put out an eight-state alarm for a suspect answering to Letheren's description. Right now the boys are armed with copies of his pic and are going the rounds of hotels and rooming houses. He must have holed up somewhere and it could have been right in this town. Now I'm stuck. I don't know where to look next."

Rider lay back in his chair which creaked in protest. He mused quite a time while Harrison slowly masticated the toothpick.

Then he said, "Excellent character, financial security and no apparent motive are things less convincing than the support of other witnesses. A man can have a secret motive strong enough to send him right off the rails. He could be in desperate need of ten or twelve thousand in ready cash merely because he's got to produce it a darned sight quicker than he can raise it by legitimate realization of insurance, stocks and bonds. For example, what if he's got twenty-four hours in which to find ransom money?"

Harrison popped his eyes. "You think we should check on

Ashcroft's and Letheren's kin and see if any one of them is missing or has been missing of late?"

"Please yourself. Personally, I doubt that it's worth the bother. A kidnaper risks the death penalty. Why should he take a chance like that for a measly twelve thousand when he endangers himself no more by sticking a fatter victim for a far bigger sum? Besides, even if a check did produce a motive it wouldn't tell us how the robbery was pulled or enable us to prove it to the satisfaction of a judge and jury."

"That's right enough," Harrison agreed. "All the same, the check is worth making. It'll cost me nothing. Except for Ashcroft's wife, the relatives of both men live elsewhere. It's just a matter of getting the co-operation of police chiefs."

"Do it if you wish. And while we're making blind passes in the dark, get someone to find out whether Letheren happens to be afflicted with a no-good brother who could exploit a close family likeness. Maybe Letheren is the suffering half of a pair of identical twins."

"If he is," growled Harrison, "he's also an accessory after the fact because he can guess how the job was done and who did it, but he's kept his lips buttoned."

"That's the legal viewpoint. There's a human one as well. If one feels disgrace, one doesn't invite it. If you had a brother with a record as long as your arm, would you advertise it all over town?"

"For the fun of it, no. In the interests of justice, yes."

"All men aren't alike and thank God they're not." Rider made an impatient gesture. "We've gone as far as we can with the two obvious suspects. Let's work out what we can do with a third and unknown one."

Harrison said, "I told you I've sent out an alarm for a fellow answering to Letheren's description."

"Yes, I know. Think it will do any good?"

"It's hard to say. The guy may be a master of make-up. If so, he'll now look a lot different from the way he did when he pulled the job. If the resemblance happens to be real, close and unalterable, the alarm may help nail him."

"That's true. However, unless there's an actual blood relationship—which possibility you're following up anyway—the likeness can hardly be genuine. It would be too much of a coincidence. Let's say it's artificial. What does that tell us?"

"It was good," Harrison responded. "Good enough to fool several witnesses. Far too good for comfort."

"You said it," indorsed Rider. "What's more, an artist so exceptionally accomplished could do it again and again and again, working his way through a series of personalities more or less of his physical build. Therefore he may really

look as much like Letheren as I look like a performing seal. We haven't his true description and the lack is a severe handicap. Offhand, I can think of no way of discovering what he looks like right now."

"Me neither," said Harrison, becoming morbid.

"There's one chance we've got, though. Ten to one his present appearance is the same as it was before he worked his trick. He'd no reason to disguise himself while casing the job and making his plans. The robbery was so smooth and well-timed that it must have been schemed to perfection. That kind of planning requires plenty of preliminary observation. He could not cotton onto Dakin's collecting habits and Letheren's appearance at one solitary go. Not unless he was a mind reader."

"I don't believe in mind readers," Harrison declared. "Nor astrologers, swamis or any of their ilk."

Ignoring it, Rider ploughed stubbornly on, "So for some time prior to the robbery he had a hideout in this town or fairly close to it. Fifty or more people may have seen him repeatedly and be able to describe him. Your boys won't find him by circling the dives and dumps and showing a photo, because he didn't look like the photo. The problem now is to discover the hideout, learn what he looked like."

"Easier said than done."

"It's hard sledding, chief, but let's keep at it. Eventually we'll get ourselves somewhere even if only into a padded cell."

He lapsed into silence, thinking deeply. Harrison concentrated attention on the ceiling. They did not know it, but they were employing Earth's on-the-spot substitute for a rare flash of genius. A couple of times Rider opened his mouth as if about to say something, changed his mind, resumed his meditating.

In the end, Rider said, "To put over so convincingly the gag that he was Letheren he must not only have looked like him but also dressed like him, walked like him, behaved like him, smelled like him."

"He was Letheren to the spit," answered Harrison. "I've questioned Ashcroft until we're both sick of it. Every single detail was Letheren right down to his shoes."

Rider asked, "How about the bag?"

"The bag?" Harrison's lean face assumed startlement followed by self-reproach. "You've got me there. I didn't ask about it. I slipped up."

"Not necessarily. There may be nothing worth learning. We'd better be sure on that point."

"I can find out right now." He picked up the phone, called

a number, said, "Mr. Ashcroft, I've another question for you. About that bag you put the money into—was it the actual one always used by the Dakin people?"

The voice came back distinctly, "No, Mr. Harrison, it was a new one."

"What?" Harrison's face purpled as he bellowed, "Why didn't you say so at the start?"

"You didn't ask me and, therefore, I didn't think of it. Even if I had thought of it of my own accord I wouldn't have considered it of any importance."

"Listen, it's for me and not for you to decide what evidence is, or is not, important." He fumed a bit, threw the listening Rider a look of martyrdom, went on in tones edged with irritation. "Now let's get this straight, once and for all. Apart from being new, was the bag identically the same as the one Dakin uses?"

"No, sir. But it was very similar. Same type, same brass lock, same general appearance. It was slightly longer and about an inch deeper. I remember that when I was putting the money into it I wondered why they'd bought another bag and concluded that the purpose was to let Mr. Letheren and Mr. Swain have one each."

"Did you notice any distinguishing mark upon it, a price tag, a maker's sticker, initials, code letters, serial number, or anything like that?"

"Nothing at all. It didn't occur to me to look. Not knowing what was to come, I—"

The voice cut off in mid-sentence as Harrison irefully slammed down the phone. He stared hard at Rider who said nothing.

"For your information," Harrison told him, "I can say that there are distinct advantages in taking up the profession of latrine attendant. Sometimes I am sorely tempted." He breathed heavily, switched the desk-box. "Who's loafing around out there?"

Somebody replied, "It's Kastner, chief."

"Send him in."

Detective Kastner entered. He was a neatly attired individual who had the air of knowing how to get around in a sink of iniquity.

"Jim," ordered Harrison, "beat it out to the Dakin plant and borrow their cash-bag. Make certain it's the one they use for weekly collections. Take it to every store selling leather goods and follow up every sale of a similar bag within the last month. If you trace a purchaser, make him prove that he still possesses his bag, get him to say where he was and what he was doing at ten-thirty last Friday morning."

"Right, chief."

"Phone me the details if you latch onto anything significant."

After Kastner had gone, Harrison said, "That bag was bought specifically for the job. Therefore, the purchase is likely to be a recent one and probably made in this town. If we can't trace a sale through local stores, we'll inquire farther afield."

"You do that," Rider agreed. "Meanwhile, I'll take a couple of steps that may help."

"Such as what?"

"We're a scientific species, living in a technological age. We've got extensive, well-integrated communications networks and huge, informative filing systems. Let's use what we've got, eh?"

"What's on your mind?" Harrison asked.

Rider said, "A robbery so smooth, neat and easy is something that begs to be repeated *ad lib*. Maybe he's done it before. There's every likelihood that he'll do it again."

"So—?"

"We have his description, but it isn't worth much." He leaned forward. "We also have full details of his method and those *are* reliable."

"Yes, that's true."

"So let's boil down his description to the unalterable basics of height, weight, build, color of eyes. The rest can be ignored. Let's also condense his technique, reduce it to the bare facts. We can summarize the lot in five hundred words."

"And then?"

"There are six thousand two hundred eighty banks in this country, of which slightly more than six thousand belong to the Bank Association. I'll get Washington to run off enough handbills for the Association to send its entire membership. They'll be put on guard against a similar snatch, asked to rush us full details if any get taken despite the warning or already had been taken before they got it."

"That's a good idea," Harrison approved. "Some other police chief may nurse a couple of items that we lack, while we're holding a couple that he wants. A get-together may find us holding enough to solve both cases."

"There's a slight chance that we can take it farther still," said Rider. "The culprit may have a record. If he has not, we're out of luck. But if he's done it before, and been pinched, we can find his card in no time at all." He pondered reminiscently, added, "That filing system in Washington is really something."

"I know of it, of course, but haven't seen it," Harrison commented.

"Friend of mine down there, a postal inspector, found it handy not long ago. He was hunting a fellow selling fake oil stock through the mails. This character had taken at least fifty suckers by means of some classy print-work including official looking reserve reports, certificates and other worthless documents. There was no description of him. Not a victim had seen him in the flesh."

"That's not much to go on."

"No, but it was enough. Attempts by postal authorities to trap him had failed. He was a wily bird and that in itself was a clue. Obviously he was a swindler sufficiently experienced to have a record. So this friend took what little he'd got to the F.B.I."

"What happened?"

"A *modus operandi* expert coded the data and fed it into the high-speed extractor, like giving the scent to a hound. Electronic fingers raced over slots and punch-holes in a million cards a darned sight faster than you could blow your nose. Rejecting muggers, heistmen and various toughies, the fingers dug out maybe four thousand confidence tricksters. From those they then extracted perhaps six hundred bond-pushers. And from those they picked a hundred who specialized in phony oil stocks. And from those they took twelve who kept out of sight by operating through the mails."

"That narrowed it down," Harrison conceded.

"The machine ejected twelve cards," Rider continued. "An extra datum might have enabled it to throw out one and only one. But that was as far as it could go; it couldn't use what it hadn't been given. Not that it mattered. A quick check of other records showed that four of the twelve were dead and six more were languishing in the clink. Of the remaining two, one was picked up, proved himself in the clear. That left the last fellow. The postal authorities now had his name, mug-shot, prints, habits, associates and everything but his mother's wedding certificate. They grabbed him within three weeks."

"Nice work. Only thing I don't understand is why they keep dead men's cards on file."

"That's because evidence comes up—sometimes years later—proving them responsible for old, unsolved crimes. The evil that men do lives after them; the good, if any, is interred with their bones." He eyed the other, ended, "The slaves of the filing system don't like cases left open and unfinished. They like to mark them closed even if it takes half a lifetime. They're tidy-minded, see?"

"Yes, I see." Harrison thought a while, remarked, "You'd think a criminal would go honest once on the files, or at least have the sense not to repeat."

"They always repeat. They get in a rut and can't jack themselves out of it. I never heard of a counterfeiter who turned gunman or bicycle thief. This fellow we're after will pull the same stunt again by substantially the same method. You wait and see." He signed to the phone. "Mind if I make a couple of long-distance calls?"

"Help yourself. I don't pay for them."

"In that case I'll have three. The little woman is entitled to some vocal fondling."

"Go right ahead." Registering disgust, Harrison heaved himself erect, went to the door. "I'll get busy some place else. If one thing turns my stomach, it's the spectacle of a big man cooing a lot of slop."

Grinning to himself, Rider picked up the phone. "Get me the United States Treasury, Washington, Extension 417, Mr. O'Keefe."

Over the next twenty-four hours the steady, tiresome but determined pressure of Earth technique was maintained. Patrolmen asked questions of store owners, local gossips, tavern keepers, parolees, stool pigeons, any and every character who by remote chance might give with a crumb of worthwhile information. Plainclothes detectives knocked on doors, cross-examined all who responded, checked back later on any who'd failed to answer. State troopers shook down outlying motels and trailer parks, quizzed owners, managers, assistants. Sheriffs and deputies visited farms known to take occasional roomers.

In Washington, six thousand leaflets poured from a press while not far away another machine addressed six thousand envelopes. Also nearby, electronic fingers sought a specific array of holes and slots among a million variously punched cards. Police of half a dozen towns and cities loped around, checked on certain people, phoned their findings to Northwood, then carried on with their own work.

As usual, first results were represented by a stack of negative information. None of Ashcroft's relatives were missing or had been of late. There was no black sheep in Letheren's family, he had no twin, his only brother was ten years younger, was highly respected, bore no striking likeness and, in any case, had an unbreakable alibi.

No other bank had yet reported being soaked by an expert masquerader. Rooming houses, hotels and other possible hide-outs failed to produce a clue to anyone resembling Letheren's photograph.

The silent searcher through the filing system found forty-one bank swindlers, living and dead. But not one with the

same *modus operandi* or anything closely similar. Regretfully it flashed a light meaning, "No record."

However, from the deductive viewpoint enough negatives can make a few positives. Harrison and Rider stewed the latest news, came to the same conclusions. Ashcroft and Letheren were well-nigh in the clear. The unknown culprit was a newcomer to crime and his first success would induce him to do it again. Such a master of make-up had previously concealed himself under some identity other than that now being sought.

First break came in the late afternoon. Kastner walked in, tipped his hat onto the back of his head and said, "I may have something."

"Such as what?" asked Harrison, his features alert.

"There's no great demand for that particular kind of bag and only one store sells them in this town. Within the last month they've got rid of three."

"Paid for by check?"

"Cash on the nail." Kastner responded with a grim smile to the other's look of disappointment, went on, "But two of the buyers were local folk, recognized and known. Both made their purchases about three weeks ago. I chased them up. They've still got their bags and can account for their time last Friday morning. I've checked their stories and they hold good and tight."

"How about the third buyer?"

"That's what I'm coming to, chief. He looks good to me. He bought his bag the afternoon before the robbery. Nobody knows him."

"A stranger?"

"Not quite. I got a detailed description of him from Hilda Cassidy, the dame who waited on him. She says he was a middle-aged, thin-faced, meek sort of character with a miserable expression. Looked like an unhappy embalmer."

"Then what makes you say he's not quite a stranger?"

"Because, chief, there are eleven stores selling leather goods of one kind or another. I've lived here quite a piece, but I had to hunt around to find the one handling this kind of bag. So I figured that this miserable guy would have had to do some going the rounds, too. I tried all the stores a second time, giving them this new description."

"And—?"

"Three of them remembered this fellow looking for what they don't stock. All confirmed the description." He paused, added, "Sol Bergman, of the Travel Mart, says the guy's face was slightly familiar. Doesn't know who he is and can't make a useful guess. But he's sure he's seen him two or three times before."

"Maybe an occasional visitor from somewhere a good way out."

"That's how it looks to me, chief."

"A good way out means anywhere within a hundred-mile radius," growled Harrison. "Perhaps even farther." He eyed Kastner sourly. "Who got the longest and closest look at him?"

"The Cassidy girl."

"You'd better bring her in, and fast."

"I did bring her. She's waiting outside."

"Good work, Jim," approved Harrison, brightening. "Let's see her."

Kastner went out and brought her in. She was a tall, slender, intelligent person in the early twenties. Cool and composed, she sat with hands folded in her lap, answered Harrison's questions while he got the suspect's description in as complete detail as she was able to supply.

"More darned legwork," Harrison complained as she finished. "Now the boys will have to make all the rounds again looking for a lead on *this* guy."

Rider chipped in, "If he's an out-of-towner, you'll need the co-operation of all surrounding authorities."

"Yes, of course."

"Maybe we can make it lots easier for them." He glanced inquiringly across the desk toward the girl. "That is, if Miss Cassidy will help."

"I'll do anything I can," she assured.

"What's on your mind?" Harrison asked.

"We'll get Roger King to lend a hand."

"Who's he?"

"A staff artist. Does cartoon work on the side. He's good, very good." He switched attention to the girl. "Can you come round early and spend the morning here?"

"If the boss will let me."

"He will," put in Harrison. "I'll see to that."

"All right," said Rider to the girl. "You come round. Mr. King will show you a number of photographs. Look through them carefully and pick out distinguishing features that correspond with those of the man who bought that bag. A chin here, a mouth there, a nose somewhere else. Mr. King will make a composite drawing from them and will keep altering it in accordance with your instructions until he's got it right. Think you can do that?"

"Oh, sure," she said.

"We can do better," Kastner announced. "Sol Bergman is the eager-beaver type. He'll be tickled to death to assist."

"Then get him to come along, too."

Kastner and the girl departed as Rider said to Harrison. "Know a local printer who can run off a batch of copies within a few hours?"

"You bet I do."

"Good!" He gestured to the phone. "Can I hoist the bill another notch?"

"For all I care you can make the mayor faint at the sight of it," said Harrison. "But if you intend to pour primitive passion through the line, say so and let me get out."

"Not this time. She may be pining somewhat, but duty comes first." He took up the instrument. "Treasury Headquarters, Washington, Extension 338. I want Roger King."

Copies of the King sketch were mailed out along with a description and pick-up request. They had not been delivered more than a few minutes when the phone whirled and Harrison grabbed it: "Northwood police."

"This is the State Police Barracks, Sergeant Wilkins speaking. We just got that 'Wanted' notice of yours. I know that fellow. He lives right on my beat."

"Who is he?"

"Name of William Jones. Runs a twenty-acre nursery on Route Four, a couple of hours away from your town. He's a slightly surly type, but there's nothing known against him. My impression is that he's pessimistic but dead straight. You want us to pick him up?"

"Look, are you sure he's the fellow?"

"It's his face on that drawing of yours and that's as far as I go. I've been in the business as long as you, and I don't make mistakes about faces."

"Of course not, sergeant. We'd appreciate it if you'd bring him in for questioning."

"I'll do that."

He cut off. Harrison lay back, absently studied his desk while his mind juggled around with this latest news.

After a while, he said, "I could understand it better if this Jones was described as a one-time vaudeville actor such as a quick-change impressionist. A fellow operating a nursery out in the wilds sounds a bit of a hick to me. Somehow I can't imagine him doing a bank job as slick as this one."

"He might be just an accomplice. He got the bag beforehand, hid the cash afterward, perhaps acted as lookout man while the robbery was taking place."

Harrison nodded. "We'll find out once he's here. He'll be in trouble if he can't prove he made an innocent purchase."

"What if he does prove it?"

"Then we'll be right back where we started." Harrison

gloomed at the thought of it. The phone called for attention and he snatched it up. "Northwood police."

"Patrolman Clinton here, chief. I just showed that drawing to Mrs. Bastico. She has a rooming house at 157 Stevens. She swears that guy is William Jones who roomed with her ten days. He came without luggage but later got a new bag like the Dakin one. Saturday morning he cleared out, taking the bag. He'd overpaid by four days' rent, but he beat it without a word and hasn't come back."

"You stay there, Clinton. We'll be right out." He licked anticipatory lips, said to Rider, "Come on, let's get going."

Piling into a cruiser, they raced to 157 Stevens. It was a dilapidated brownstone with well-worn steps.

Mrs. Bastico, a heavy featured female with several warts, declaimed in self-righteous tones, "I've never had the cops in this house. Not once in twenty years."

"You've got 'em now," informed Harrison. "And it gives the place a touch of respectability. Now, what d'you know about this Jones fellow?"

"Nothing much," she answered, still miffed. "He kept to himself. I don't bother roomers who behave."

"Did he say anything about where he'd come from, or where he was going to, or anything like that?"

"No. He paid in advance, told me his name, said he was on local business, and that was that. He went out each morning, came back at a decent hour each night, kept sober and interfered with nobody."

"Did he have any visitors?" He extracted Letheren's photograph. "Someone like this, for example?"

"Officer Clinton showed me that picture yesterday. I don't know him. I never saw Mr. Jones talking to another person."

"Hm-m-m!" Harrison registered disappointment. "We'd like a look at his room. Mind if we see it?"

Begrudgingly she led them upstairs, unlocked the door, departed and left them to rake through it at will. Her air was that of one allergic to police.

They searched the room thoroughly, stripping bedclothes, shifting furniture, lifting carpets, even unbolting and emptying the washbasin waste-trap. It was Patrolman Clinton who dug out of a narrow gap between floorboards a small, pink, transparent wrapper, also two peculiar seeds resembling elongated almonds and exuding a strong, aromatic scent.

Satisfied that there was nothing else to be found, they carted these petty clues back to the station, mailed them to the State Criminological Laboratory for analysis and report.

Three hours afterward William Jones walked in. He

ignored Rider, glowered at the uniformed Harrison, demanded, "What's the idea of having me dragged here? I've done nothing."

"Then what have you got to worry about?" Harrison assumed his best tough expression. "Where were you last Friday morning?"

"That's an easy one," said Jones, with a touch of spite. "I was in Smoky Falls getting spares for a cultivator."

"That's eighty miles from here."

"So what? It's a lot less from where I live. And I can't get those spares any place nearer. If there's an agent in Northwood, you find him for me."

"Never mind about that. How long were you there?"

"I arrived about ten in the morning, left in the mid-afternoon."

"So it took you about five hours to buy a few spares?"

"I ambled around a piece. Bought groceries as well. Had a meal there, and a few drinks."

"Then there ought to be plenty of folk willing to vouch for your presence there?"

"Sure are," agreed Jones with disconcerting positiveness.

Harrison switched his desk-box, said to someone, "Bring in Mrs. Bastico, the Cassidy girl and Sol Bergman." He returned attention to Jones. "Tell me exactly where you went from time of arrival to departure, and who saw you in each place." He scribbled rapidly as the other recited the tale of his Friday morning shopping trip. When the story ended, he called the Smoky Falls police, briefed them swiftly, gave them the data, asked for a complete check-up.

Listening to this last, Jones showed no visible alarm or apprehension. "Can I go now? I got work to do."

"So have I," Harrison retorted. "Where have you stashed that leather cash-bag?"

"What bag?"

"The new one you bought Thursday afternoon."

Eying him incredulously, Jones said, "Hey, what are you trying to pin on me? I bought no bag. Why should I? I don't need a new bag."

"You'll be telling me next that you didn't hole-up in a rooming house on Stevens."

"I didn't. I don't know of any place on Stevens. And if I did, I wouldn't be seen dead there."

They argued about it for twenty minutes. Jones maintained with mulish stubbornness that he'd been working on his nursery the whole of Thursday and had been there most of the time he was alleged to be at the rooming house. He'd never heard of Mrs. Bastico and didn't want to. He'd

never bought a Dakin-type bag. They could search his place and welcome—if they found such a bag it'd be because they'd planted it on him.

A patrolman stuck his head through the doorway and announced, "They're here, chief."

"All right. Get a line-up ready."

After another ten minutes Harrison led William Jones into a back room, stood him in a row consisting of four detectives and half a dozen nondescripts enlisted from the street. Sol Bergman, Hilda Cassidy and Mrs. Bastico appeared, looked at the parade, pointed simultaneously and in the same direction.

"That's him," said Mrs. Bastico.

"He's the man," indorsed the Cassidy girl.

"Nobody else but," Sol Bergman confirmed.

"They're nuts," declared Jones, showing no idea of what it was all about.

Taking the three witnesses back to his office, Harrison queried them for a possible mistake in identity. They insisted they were not mistaken, that they could not be more positive. William Jones was the man, definitely and absolutely.

He let them go, held Jones on suspicion pending a report from Smoky Falls. Near the end of the twenty-four hours legal holding limit the result of the check came through. No less than thirty-two people accounted fully for the suspect's time all the way from ten to three-thirty. Road-checks had also traced him all the way to that town and all the way back. Other witnesses had placed him at the nursery at several times when he was said to have been at Mrs. Bastico's. State troopers had searched the Jones property. No bag. No money identifiable as loot.

"That's torn it," growled Harrison. "I've no choice but to release him with abject apologies. What sort of a lousy, stinking case is this, when everybody mistakes everybody for everybody else?"

Rider massaged two chins, suggested, "maybe we ought to try checking on that as well. Let's have another word with Jones before you let him loose."

Slouching in, Jones looked considerably subdued and only too willing to help with anything likely to get him home.

"Sorry to inconvenience you so much, Mr. Jones," Rider soothed. "It couldn't be avoided in the circumstances. We're up against a mighty tough problem." Bending forward, he fixed the other with an imperative gaze. "It might do us a lot of good if you'd think back carefully and tell us if there's any time you've been mistaken for somebody else."

Jones opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again. "Jeepers, that very thing happened about two weeks ago."

"Give us the story," invited Rider, a glint in his eyes.

"I drove through here nonstop and went straight on to the city. Been there about an hour when a fellow yelled at me from across the street. I didn't know him, thought at first he was calling someone else. He meant me all right."

"Go on," urged Harrison, impatient as the other paused.

"He asked me in a sort of dumfounded way how I'd got there. I said I'd come in my car. He didn't want to believe it."

"Why not?"

"He said I'd been on foot and thumbing a hitch. He knew it because he'd picked me up and run me to Northwood. What's more, he said, after dropping me in Northwood he'd driven straight to the city, going so fast that nothing had overtaken him on the way. Then he'd parked his car, started down the street, and the first thing he'd seen was me strolling on the other side."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said it couldn't possibly have been me and that his own story proved it."

"That fazed him somewhat, eh?"

"He got sort of completely baffled. He led me right up to his parked car, said, 'Mean to say you didn't take a ride in that?' and, of course, I denied it. I walked away. First I thought it might be some kind of gag. Next, I wondered if he was touched in the head."

"Now," put in Rider carefully, "we must trace this fellow. Give us all you've got on him."

Thinking deeply, Jones said, "He was in his late thirties, well-dressed, smooth talker, the salesman type. Had a lot of pamphlets, color charts and paint cans in the back of his car."

"You mean in the trunk compartment? You got a look inside there?"

"No. They were lying on the rear seat, as though he was in the habit of grabbing them out in a hurry and slinging them in again."

"How about the car itself?"

"It was the latest model *Flash*, duotone green, white side-walls, a radio. Didn't notice the tag number."

They spent another ten minutes digging more details regarding appearance, mannerisms and attire. Then Harrison called the city police, asked for a trace.

"The paint stores are your best bet. He's got all the looks of a drummer making his rounds. They should be able to tell you who called on them that day."

City police promised immediate action. Jones went home, disgruntled, but also vastly relieved. Within two hours his latest lead had been extended. A call came from the city.

“Took only four visits to learn what you want. That character is well known to the paint trade. He’s Burge Kimmelman, area representative of Acme Paint & Varnish Company of Marion, Illinois. Present whereabouts unknown. His employers should be able to find him for you.”

“Thanks a million!” Harrison disconnected, put through a call to Acme Paint. He yapped a while, dumped the phone, said to Rider, “He’s somewhere along a route a couple of hundred miles south. They’ll reach him at his hotel this evening. He’ll get here tomorrow.”

“Good.”

“Or is it?” asked Harrison, showing a trace of bitterness. “We’re sweating ourselves to death tracing people and being led from one personality to another. That sort of thing can continue to the crack of doom.”

“And it can continue until something else cracks,” Rider riposted. “The mills of *man* grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small.”

Elsewhere, seven hundred miles westward, was another legworker. Organized effort can be very formidable but becomes doubly so when it takes to itself the results of individual effort.

This character was thin-faced, sharp-nosed, lived in an attic, ate in an automat, had fingers dyed with nicotine and for twenty years had nursed the notion of writing the Great American Novel but somehow had never gotten around to it.

Name of Arthur Pilchard and, therefore, referred to as Fish—a press reporter. What is worse, a reporter on a harumscarum tabloid. He was wandering past a desk when somebody with ulcers and a sour face shoved a slip of paper at him.

“Here, Fish. Another saucer nut. Get moving!”

Hustling out with poor grace, he reached the address given on the slip, knocked on the door. It was answered by an intelligent young fellow in his late teens or early twenties.

“You George Lamothe?”

“That’s me,” agreed the other.

“I’m from the *Call*. You told them you’d got some dope on a saucer. That right?”

Lamothe looked pained. “It’s not a saucer and I didn’t describe it as such. It’s a spherical object and it’s not a natural phenomenon.”

“I’ll take your word for it. When and where did you see it?”

“Last night and the night before. Up in the sky.”

“Right over this town?”

"No, but it is visible from here."

"I've not seen it. So far as I know, you're the only one who has. How d'you explain that?"

"It's extremely difficult to see with the naked eye. I own an eight-inch telescope."

"Built it yourself?"

"Yes."

"That takes some doing," commented Art Pilchard admiringly. "How about showing it to me?"

Lamothe hesitated, said, "All right," led him upstairs. Sure enough a real, genuine telescope was there, its inquisitive snout tilted toward a movable roof-trap.

"You've actually seen the object through that?"

"Two successive nights," Lamothe confirmed. "I hope to observe it tonight as well."

"Any idea what it is?"

"That's a matter of guesswork," evaded the other, becoming wary. "All I'm willing to say is that it's located in a satellite orbit, it's perfectly spherical and appears to be an artificial construction of metal."

"Got a picture of it?"

"Sorry, I lack the equipment."

"Maybe one of our cameramen could help you there."

"If he has suitable apparatus," Lamothe agreed.

Pilchard asked twenty more questions, finished doubtfully, "What you can see anyone else with a telescope could see. The world's full of telescopes, some of them big enough to drive a locomotive through. How come nobody yet has shouted the news? Got any ideas on that?"

With a faint smile, Lamothe said, "Everyone with a telescope isn't staring through it twenty-four hours per day. And even when he is using it he's likely to be studying a specific area within the starfield. Moreover, if news gets out it's got to start somewhere. That's why I phoned the *Call*."

"Dead right!" agreed Pilchard, enjoying the savory odor of a minor scoop.

"Besides," Lamothe went on, "others *have* seen it. I phoned three astronomical friends last night. They looked and saw it. A couple of them said they were going to ring up nearby observatories and draw attention to it. I mailed a full report to an observatory today, and another to a scientific magazine."

"Hells bells!" said Pilchard, getting itchy feet. "I'd better rush this before it breaks in some other rag." A fragment of suspicion came into his face. "Not having seen this spherical contraption myself, I'll have to check on it with another source. By that, I don't mean I think you're a liar. I have to check stories or find another job. Can you give me the name

and address of one of these astronomical friends of yours?"

Lamothe obliged, showed him to the door. As Pilchard hastened down the street toward a telephone booth, a police cruiser raced up on the other side. It braked outside Lamothe's house. Pilchard recognized the uniformed cop who was driving but not the pair of burly men in plainclothes riding with him. That was strange because as a reporter of long standing he knew all the local detectives and called them by their first names. While he watched from a distance, the two unknowns got out of the cruiser, went to Lamothe's door, rang the bell.

Bolting round the corner, Pilchard entered the booth, called long distance, rammed coins into the box.

"Alan Reed? My name's Pilchard. I write up astronomical stuff. I believe you've seen a strange metal object in the sky. Hey?" He frowned. "Don't give me that! Your friend George Lamothe has seen it, too. He told me himself that he phoned you about it last night." He paused, glowered at the earpiece. "Where's the sense of repeating, 'No comment,' like a parrot? Look, either you've seen it or you haven't—and so far you've not denied seeing it." Another pause, then in leery tones, "Mr. Reed, has someone ordered you to keep shut?"

He racked the phone, shot a wary glance toward the corner, inserted more coins, said to somebody, "Art here. If you want to feature this, you'll have to move damn fast. You'll run it only if you're too quick to be stopped." He listened for the click of the tape being linked in, recited rapidly for five minutes. Finishing, he returned to the corner, looked along the street. The cruiser was still there.

In a short time a flood of *Calls* hit the streets. Simultaneously a long chain of small-town papers took the same news off their wire-service, broke into a rash of two-inch headlines.

SPACE PLATFORM IN SKY. OURS OR THEIRS?

Late in the following morning Harrison ploughed doggedly through routine work. At one side of his office Rider sat with columnar legs stretched straight out and read slowly and carefully through a wad of typed sheets.

The wad was the fruit of legwork done by many men. It traced, with a few gaps, the hour by hour movements of one William Jones known to be not the real William Jones. He'd been seen wandering around Northwood like a rubbernecking tourist. He'd been seen repeatedly on the main street and

examining its shops. He'd been seen in a supermarket around the time a customer's purse had been stolen. He'd eaten meals in cafes and restaurants, drunk beer in bars and taverns.

Ashcroft Jackson and another teller remembered a Jones-like stranger making idle inquiries in the bank during the week preceding the robbery. Letheren and his guards recalled the mirror-image of William Jones hanging around when they made the previous collection. Altogether, the tediously gathered report covered most of the suspect's time in Northwood, a period amounting to ten days.

Finishing his perusal, Rider closed his eyes, mulled the details over and over while his mind sought a new lead. While he was doing this, a muted radio sat on a ledge and yammered steadily, squirting across the office the reduced voice of an indignant commentator.

"The whole world now knows that someone has succeeded in establishing an artificial satellite up there in the sky. Anyone with a telescope or good binoculars can see it for himself at night. Why, then, does authority insist on pretending that the thing doesn't exist? If potential enemies are responsible, let us be told as much—the enemies already know it, anyway. If we are responsible, if this is our doing, let us be told as much—the enemies already are grimly aware of it. Why must we be denied information possessed by possible foes? Does somebody think we're a bunch of irresponsible children? Who are these brass hats who assign to themselves the right to decide what we may be told or not told? Away with them! Let the government speak!"

"Yeah," commented Harrison, glancing up from his work, "I'm with him there. Why don't they say outright whether it's ours or theirs? Some of those guys down your way have a grossly exaggerated idea of their own importance. A hearty kick in the pants would do them a lot—" He shut up, grabbed the phone. "Northwood police." A weird series of expressions crossed his lean features as he listened. Then he racked the phone, said, "It gets nuttier every minute."

"What's it this time?"

"Those seeds. The laboratory can't identify them."

"Doesn't surprise me. They can't be expected to know absolutely everything."

"They know enough to know when they're stuck," Harrison gave back. "So they sent them to some firm in New York where they know everything knowable about seeds. They've just got a reply."

"Saying what?"

"Same thing—not identifiable. New York went so far as to squeeze out the essential oils and subject remaining

solids to destructive distillation. Result: the seeds just aren't known." He emitted a loud sniff, added, "They want us to send them another dozen so they can make them germinate. They want to see what comes up."

"Forget it," advised Rider. "We don't have any more seeds and we don't know where to find 'em."

"But we do have something darned peculiar," Harrison persisted. "With those seeds we sent a pink transparent wrapper, remember? At the time I thought it was just a piece of colored cellophane. The lab says it isn't. They say it's organic, cellular and veined, and appears a subsection of the skin of an unknown fruit."

". . . A tactic long theorized and believed to be in secret development," droned the radio. "Whoever achieves it first thereby gains a strategic advantage from the military viewpoint."

"Sometimes," said Harrison, "I wonder what's the use of getting born."

His desk-box squawked and announced, "Fellow named Burge Kimmelman waiting for you, chief."

"Send him in."

Kimmelman entered. He was dapper, self-assured, seemed to regard his rush to the aid of the law as a welcome change from the daily round. He sat, crossed his legs, made himself at home and told his story.

"It was the craziest thing, captain. For a start, I never give rides to strangers. But I stopped and picked up this fellow and still can't make out why I did it."

"Where did you pick him up?" asked Rider.

"About half a mile this side of Seeger's filling station. He was waiting by the roadside and first thing I knew I'd stopped and let him get in. I took him into Northwood, dropped him, pushed straight on to the city. I was in a hurry and moved good and fast. When I got there I walked out of the car park and darned if he wasn't right there on the other side of the street." He eyed them, seeking comment.

"Go on," Rider urged.

"I picked on him then and there, wanting to know how he'd beaten me to it. He acted like he didn't know what I was talking about." He made a gesture of bafflement. "I've thought it over a dozen times since and can take it no further. I *know* I gave a lift to that guy or his twin brother. And it wasn't his twin brother because if he'd had one he'd have guessed my mistake and said so. But he said nothing. Just behaved offishly polite like you do when faced with a lunatic."

"When you were giving him this ride," asked Harrison,

"did he make any informative remarks? Did he mention his family, his occupation, destination, or anything like that? Did he tell you where he'd come from?"

"Not a word worth a cent. So far as I know he dropped straight out of the sky."

"So did everything else concerned with this case," remarked Harrison, feeling sour again. "Unidentifiable seeds and unknown fruit-skins and—" He stopped, let his mouth hang open, popped his eyes.

". . . A vantage-point from which every quarter of the world would be within effective range," gabbled the radio. "With such a base for guided missiles it would be possible for one nation to implement its policies in a manner that—"

Getting to his feet, Rider crossed the room, switched off the radio, said, "Mind waiting outside, Mr. Kimmelman?" When the other had gone, he continued with Harrison, "Well, make up your mind whether you're going to have a stroke."

Harrison shut his mouth, opened it again, but no sound came out. His eyes appeared to have protruded too far to retract. His right hand made a couple of meaningless gestures and temporarily that was the most he could manage.

Resorting to the phone, Rider got his call through, said, "O'Keefe, how's the artificial statellite business down there?"

"You called just to ask that? I was about to phone you myself."

"What about?"

"Eleven of those bills have come in. The first nine came from two cities. The last pair were passed in New York. Your man is moving around. Bet you ten to one in coco-nuts that if he takes another bank it'll be in the New York area."

"That's likely enough. Forget him for a moment. I asked you about this statellite rumpus. What's the reaction from where you're sitting?"

"The place is buzzing like a disturbed beehive. Rumor is rife that professional astronomers saw and reported the thing nearly a week before the news broke. If that's true, somebody in authority must have tried to suppress the information."

"Why?"

"Don't ask me," shouted O'Keefe. "How do I know why others do things that make neither rhyme nor reason?"

"You think they should say whether it's ours or theirs seeing that the truth is bound to emerge sooner or later?"

"Of course. Why are you harping on this subject, Eddie? What's it got to do with you, anyway?"

"I've been made vocal by an idea that has had the reverse effect on Harrison. He's struck dumb."

"What idea?"

"That this artificial satellite may not be an artificial satellite. Also that authority has said nothing because experts are unwilling to commit themselves one way or the other. They can't say something unless they've something to say, can they?"

"I've got something to say," O'Keefe declared. "And that's to advise you to tend your own business. If you've finished helping Harrison, quit lazing around and come back."

"Listen, I don't call long-distance for the fun of it. There's a thing up in the sky and nobody knows what it is. *At the same time* another thing is down here loping around and imitating people, robbing banks, dropping debris of alien origin, and nobody knows what that is, either. Two plus two makes four. Add it up for yourself."

"Eddie, are you cracked?"

"I'll give you the full details and leave you to judge." He recited them swiftly, ended, "Use all your Treasury pull to get the right people interested. This case is far too big to be handled by us alone. You've got to find the ones with enough power and influence to cope. You've got to kick 'em awake."

He cut off, glanced at Harrison who promptly got his voice back and said, "I can't believe it. It's too far-fetched for words. The day I tell the mayor a Martian did it will be the day Northwood gets a new chief. He'll take me away to have my head examined."

"Got a better theory?"

"No. That's the hell of it."

Shrugging expressively, Rider took the phone again, made a call to Acme Paint Company. That done, he summoned Kimmelman.

"There's a good chance that you'll be wanted here tomorrow and perhaps for two or three days. I've just consulted your employers and they say you're to stay with us."

"Suits me," agreed Kimmelman, not averse to taking time off with official approval. "I'd better go book in at a hotel."

"Just one question first. This character you picked up—was he carrying any luggage?"

"No."

"Not even a small bag or a parcel?"

"He'd nothing except what was in his pockets," said Kimmelman, positively.

A gleam showed in Rider's eyes. "Well, that may help."

The mob that invaded Northwood at noon next day came in a dozen cars by devious routes and successfully avoided the

attention of the press. They crammed Harrison's office to capacity.

Among them was a Treasury top-ranker, a general, an admiral, a Secret Service chief, a Military Intelligence brass hat, three area directors of the F.B.I., a boss of the Counter Espionage Service, all their aides, secretaries and technical advisers, plus a bunch of assorted scientists including two astronomers, one radar expert, one guided missiles expert and a slightly bewildered gentleman who was an authority on ants.

They listened in silence, some interested, some skeptical, while Harrison read them a complete report of the case. He finished, sat down, waited for comment.

A gray-haired, distinguished individual took the lead, said, "Personally, I'm in favor of your theory that you're chasing somebody not of this world. I don't presume to speak for others who may think differently. However, it seems to me futile to waste any time debating the matter. It can be settled one way or the other by catching the culprit. That, therefore, is our only problem. How are we going to lay hands on him?"

"That won't be done by the usual methods," said an F.B.I. director. "A guy who can double as anyone, and do it well enough to convince even at close range, isn't going to be caught easily. We can hunt down a particular identity if given enough time. I don't see how we can go after somebody who might have *any* identity."

"Even an alien from another world wouldn't bother to steal money unless he had a real need for it," put in a sharp-eyed individual. "The stuff's no use elsewhere in the cosmos. So it's safe to accept that he did have need of it. But money doesn't last forever no matter who is spending it. When he has splurged it all, he'll need some more. He'll try robbing another bank. If every bank in this country were turned into a trap, surely one of them would snap down on him."

"How're you going to trap somebody who so far as you know is your best and biggest customer?" asked the F.B.I. director. He put on a sly grin, added, "Come to that, how do you know that the fellow in question isn't *me*?"

Nobody liked this last suggestion. They fidgeted uneasily, went quiet as their minds desperately sought a solution some place.

Rider spoke up. "Frankly, I think it a waste of time to search the world for somebody who has proved his ability to adopt two successive personalities and by the same token can adopt two dozen or two hundred. I've thought about

this until I've gone dizzy and I can't devise any method of pursuing and grabbing him. He's far too elusive."

"It might help if we could learn precisely how he does it," interjected a scientist. "Have you any evidence indicative of his technique?"

"No, sir."

"It looks like hypnosis to me," said the scientist.

"You may be right," Rider admitted. "But so far we've no proof of it." He hesitated, went on, "As I see it, there's only one way to catch him."

"How?"

"It's extremely unlikely that he's come here for keeps. Besides, there's that thing in the sky. What's it waiting for? My guess is that it's waiting to take him back whenever he's ready to go."

"So—?" someone prompted.

"To take him back that sphere has got to swing in from several thousands of miles out. That means it has to be summoned when wanted. He's got to talk to its crew, if it has a crew. Or, if crewless, he's got to pull it in by remote control. Either way, he must have some kind of transmitter."

"If transmission-time is too brief to enable us to tune in, take cross-bearings and get there—" began an objector.

Rider waved him down. "I'm not thinking of that. We know he came to Northwood without luggage. Kimmelman says so. Mrs. Bastico says so. Numerous witnesses saw him at various times but he was never seen to carry anything other than the cashbag. Even if an alien civilization can produce electronic equipment one-tenth the size and weight of anything we can turn out, a long-range transmitter would still be far too bulky to be hidden in a pocket."

"You think he's concealed it somewhere?" asked the sharp-eyed man.

"I think it highly probable. If he has hidden it, well, he has thereby limited his freedom of action. He can't take off from anywhere in this world. He's got to return to wherever he has stashed the transmitter."

"But that could be any place. It leaves us no better off than before."

"On the contrary!" He picked up Harrison's report, read selected passages with added emphasis. "I may be wrong. I hope I'm right. There's one thing he could not conceal no matter what personality he assumed. He could not conceal his behavior. If he'd chosen to masquerade as an elephant and then become curious, he'd have been a very plausible elephant—but still obviously curious."

"What are you getting at?" demanded a four-star general.

"He was too green to have been around long. If he'd had

only a couple of days in some other town or village, he'd have been a lot more sophisticated when in Northwood. Consider the reports on the way he nosed around. He was raw. He behaved like somebody to whom everything is new. If I'm right about this, Northwood was his first port of call. And that in turn means his landing place—which is also his intended take-off point—must be fairly near, and probably nearer still to where Kimmelman picked him up."

They debated it for half an hour, reached a decision. The result was legwork on a scale that only high authority can command. Kimmelman drove nearly five miles out, showed the exact spot and that became the center of operations.

Attendants at Seeger's filling station were queried extensively and without result. Motorists known to be regular users of the road, bus drivers, truckers and many others to whom it was a well-used route, were traced and questioned. Dirt-farmers, drifters, recluses, hoboes and everyone else who lurked in the thinly populated hills were found and quizzed at length.

Four days' hard work and numberless questionings over a circle ten miles in diameter produced three people who nursed the vague idea that they'd seen something fall from or rise into the sky about three weeks ago. A farmer thought he'd seen a distant saucer but had kept quiet for fear of ridicule. Another believed he had glimpsed a strange gleam of light which soared from the hills and vanished. A trucker had spotted an indefinable object out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked directly at it, it had gone.

These three were made to take up their respective points of observation, sight through theodolites and line the cross-hairs as nearly as they could on the portions of skyline cogent to their visions. All pleaded inability to be accurate but were willing to do their best.

The bearings produced an elongated triangle that stretched across most of a square mile. This at once became the second focus of attention. A new area two miles in radius was drawn from the triangle's center. Forthwith police, deputies, troopers, agents and others commenced to search the target foot by foot. They numbered a small army and some of them bore mine-detectors and other metal-finding instruments.

One hour before dusk a shout drew Rider, Harrison and several bigwigs to a place where searchers were clustering excitedly. Somebody had followed the faint *tick-tick* of his detector, lugged a boulder aside, found a gadget hidden in the hollow behind it.

The thing was a brown metal box twelve inches by ten by eight. It had a dozen silver rings set concentrically in its top,

these presumably being the sky-beam antenna. Also four dials ready set in various positions. Also a small press-stud.

Experts knew exactly what to do, having come prepared for it. They color-photographed the box from every angle, measured it, weighed it, placed it back in its original position and restored the boulder to its former place.

Sharpshooters with night-glasses and high-velocity rifles were posted in concealed positions at extreme range. While data on the superficial appearance of the transmitter were being rushed to the city, ground-microphones were placed between the hiding place and the road, their hidden wires led back to where ambushers awaited stealthy footsteps in the dark.

Before dawn, four searchlight teams and half a dozen anti-aircraft batteries had taken up positions in the hills and camouflaged themselves. A command post had been established in a lonely farmhouse and a ground-to-air radio unit had been shoved out of sight in its barn.

For anyone else a road-block set up by tough cops would have served. Not for this character who could be anyone at all. He might, for all they knew, appear in the dignified guise of the Bishop of Miff. But if he made for that transmitter and laid hands on it—

A couple of days later a truck came from the city, picked up the transmitter, replaced it with a perfect mock-up incapable of calling anything out of the sky. This game of imitation was one at which two could play.

Nobody got itchy fingers and pressed the stud on the real instrument. The time wasn't yet. So long as the ship remained in the sky, so long would its baffling passenger enjoy a sense of false security and, sooner or later, enter the trap.

Earth was willing to wait. It was just as well. The bidding-time lasted four months.

A bank on Long Island got taken for eighteen thousand dollars. The same technique: walk in, collect, walk out, vanish. A high-ranking officer made a tour of the Brooklyn Navy Yard at a time when he was also attending a conference at Newport News. An official inspected television studios on the twentieth to twenty-fifth floors of a skyscraper while simultaneously tending to office work on the tenth floor. The invader had now learned enough to become impudent.

Blueprints were pored over, vaults were entered, laboratories were examined. Steelworks and armaments plants got a careful, unhurried lookover. A big machine-tool factory actually had its works manager conduct a phony visitor around the plant and provide technical explanations as required.

It wasn't all plain sailing even for someone well-nigh invincible. The cleverest can make mistakes. Harasha Vanash blundered when he flashed a fat roll in a tavern, got followed to his hide-out. Next day he went out without being tailed and while he was busily sneaking some more of Earth's knowledge, somebody was briskly plundering his room. He returned to find the proceeds of his last robbery had vanished. That meant he had to take time off from espionage to soak a third bank.

By August 21st he had finished. He had concentrated his attention on the most highly developed area in the world and it was doubtful whether anything to be learned elsewhere was sufficiently weighty to be worth the seeking. Anyway, what he'd got was enough for the purposes of the Andromedans. Armed with all this information, the hypnos of a two-hundred-planet empire could step in and take over another with no trouble at all.

Near Seeger's station he stepped out of a car, politely thanked the driver who was wondering why he'd gone so far out of his way to oblige a character who meant nothing to him. He stood by the roadside, watched the car vanish into the distance. It rocked along at top pace, as though its driver was mad at himself.

Holding a small case stuffed with notes and sketches, he studied the landscape, saw everything as it had been originally. To anyone within the sphere of his mental influence he was no more than a portly and somewhat pompous business man idly surveying the hills. To anyone beyond that range he was made vague by distance and sufficiently humanlike to the naked eye to pass muster.

But to anyone watching through telescopes and binoculars from most of a mile away he could be seen for what he really was—just a thing. A thing not of this world. They could have made a snatch at him then and there. However, in view of the preparations they'd made for him there was, they thought, no need to bother. Softly, softly, catchee monkey.

Tightly gripping the case, he hurried away from the road, made straight for the transmitter's hiding place. All he had to do was press the stud, beat it back to Northwood, enjoy a few quiet drinks in a tavern, have a night's sleep and come back tomorrow. The ship would come in along the transmitter's beam, landing here and nowhere else, but it would take exactly eighteen hours and twenty minutes to arrive.

Reaching the boulder, he had a final wary glance around. Nobody in sight, not a soul. He moved the rock, felt mild relief when he saw the instrument lying undisturbed. Bending over it, he pressed the stud.

The result was a violent *pouf!* and a cloud of noxious gas. That was their mistake; they'd felt sure it would lay him out for twenty-four hours. It did not. His metabolism was thoroughly alien and had its own peculiar reaction. All he did was retch and run like blazes.

Four men appeared from behind a rock six hundred yards away. They pointed guns, yelled to him to halt. Ten more sprang out of the ground on his left, bawled similar commands. He grinned at them, showing them the teeth he did not possess.

He couldn't make them blow off their own heads. But he could make them do it for each other. Still going fast, he changed direction to escape the line of fire. The four obligingly waited for him to run clear, then opened upon the ten. At the same time the ten started slinging lead at the four.

At top speed he kept going. He could have lounged on a rock, in complete command of the situation, and remained until everyone had bumped everyone else—given that there was no effective force located outside his hypnotic range. He could not be sure of just how far the trap extended.

The obviously sensible thing to do was to get right out of reach as swiftly as possible, curve back to the road, confiscate a passing car and disappear once more among Earth's teeming millions. How to contact the ship was a problem that must be shelved until he could ponder it in a safe place. It wasn't unsolvable; not to one who could be the President himself.

His immediate fear was well-founded. At twelve hundred yards there happened to be a beefy gentleman named Hank who found that a brazen escape during an outbreak of civil war was too much to be endured. Hank had a quick temper, also a heavy machine-gun. Seeing differently from those nearer the prey, and being given no orders to the contrary, Hank uttered an unseemly word, swung the gun, scowled through its sights, rammed his thumbs on its button. The gun went *br-r-r-r* while its ammo-belt jumped and rattled.

Despite the range his aim was perfect. Harasha Vanash was flung sidewise in full flight, went down and didn't get up. His supine body jerked around under the impact of more bullets. He was very decidedly dead.

Harrison got on the phone to pass the news, and O'Keefe said, "He's not here. It's his day off."

"Where'll I find him then?"

"At home and no place else. I'll give you his number. He might answer if he's not busy baby-sitting."

Trying again, Harrison got through. "They killed him . . . or it . . . just under an hour ago."

"Hm-m-m! Pity they didn't take him alive."

"Easier said than done. Anyway, how can you retain a firm hold on someone who can make you remove his manacles and get into them yourself?"

"That," said Rider, "is the problem of our Security boys in general and our police in particular. I work for the Treasury."

Replacing the phone, Harrison frowned at the wall. Beyond the wall, several hundreds of miles to the south, a group of men walked onto the dispersal-point of an airport, placed a strange box on the ground, pressed its stud. Then they watched the sky and waited.

The hordes of Andromeda were very, very old. That was why they'd progressed as far as they had. Flashes of inspiration had piled up through the numberless centuries until sheer weight of accumulated genius had given them the key to the cosmos.

Like many very old people, they had contempt for the young and eager. But their contempt would have switched to horror if they could have seen the methodical way in which a bunch of specialist legworkers started pulling their metal sphere apart.

Or the way in which Earth commenced planning a vast armada of similar ships.

A good deal bigger.

With several improvements.

CONDITIONALLY HUMAN

Walter M. Miller, Jr.

In 1950 the population of the United States was not much over 150,000,000 men, women, and children. In 1960 it had shot up to nearly 180,000,000. Four years later, in 1964, it had soared to over 192,000,000.* Extrapolate that population curve on your handy pocket calculator and see where you come out by the year 2,000. I can't; I'm too scared.

Back in 1952, Walter Miller also was scared, and in this violent and heartbreaking story he presents a solution to panic—a solution which is, in the long run, worse than the problem it was supposed to solve. Unless the quietly heroic couple who are the story's protagonists are able to make their solution to the "solution" work. In connection with this almost-insoluble ethical-humanitarian problem, I suggest you reread (or read, if you haven't already) Vercors' unforgettable *You Shall Know Them*. It is concerned with a different aspect of the same basic problem: which is, What is human?

For those of you who want to carry your little population study farther out with more data, the U.S. population was about 123,000,000 in 1930, and less than 132,000,000 in 1940—a growth for ten years that was actually three million fewer than the growth for the four years from 1960 to 1964. . . .

There was no use hanging around after breakfast. His wife was in a hurt mood, and he could neither endure the hurt nor remove it. He put on his coat in the kitchen and stood for a moment with his hat in his hands. His wife was

* The Equitable Life Assurance Company's "Demograph," at the New York World's Fair showed a population increase of 1,465,422 from the day the Fair opened, April 22, 1964, to the closing hour, 10:00 p.m. on October 18—an increase at the rate of one new United States citizen every twelve seconds during that period. The final total on October 18 was 192,974,586.

still at the table, absently fingering the handle of her cup and staring fixedly out the window at the kennels behind the house. He moved quietly up behind her and touched her silk-clad shoulder. The shoulder shivered away from him, and her dark hair swung shinningly as she shuddered. He drew his hand back and his bewildered face went slack and miserable.

"Honeymoon's over, huh?"

She said nothing, but shrugged faintly.

"You knew I worked for the F.B.A.," he said. "You knew I'd have charge of a district pound. You knew it before we got married."

"I didn't know you killed them," she said venomously.

"I won't have to kill many. Besides, they're only animals."

"*Intelligent* animals!"

"Intelligent as a human imbecile, maybe."

"A small child is an imbecile. Would you kill a small child?"

"You're taking intelligence as the only criterion of humanity," he protested hopelessly, knowing that a logical defense was useless against sentimentality. "Baby—"

"Don't call me baby! Call *them* baby!"

Norris backed a few steps toward the door. Against his better judgment, he spoke again. "Anne honey, look! Think of the *good* things about the job. Sure, everything has its ugly angles. But think—we get this house rent-free; I've got my own district with no bosses around; I make my own hours; you'll meet lots of people that stop in at the pound. It's a *fine* job, honey!"

She sipped her coffee and appeared to be listening, so he went on.

"And what can I do? You know how the Federation handles employment. They looked over my aptitude tests and sent me to Bio-Administration. If I don't want to follow my aptitudes, the only choice is common labor. That's the *law*."

"I suppose you have an aptitude for killing babies?" she said sweetly.

Norris withered. His voice went desperate. "They assigned me to it because I *liked* babies. And because I have a B.S. in biology and an aptitude for dealing with people. Can't you understand? Destroying unclaimed units is the smallest part of it. Honey, before the evolvotron, before Anthopos went into the mutant-animal business, people used to elect dogcatchers. Think of it that way—I'm just a dogcatcher."

Her cool green eyes turned slowly to meet his gaze. Her face was delicately cut from cold marble. She was a small woman, slender and fragile, but her quiet contempt made her loom.

He backed closer to the door.

"Well, I've got to get on the job." He put on his hat and picked at a splinter on the door. He frowned studiously at the splinter. "I—I'll see you tonight." He ripped the splinter loose when it became obvious that she didn't want to be kissed.

He grunted a nervous good-by and stumbled down the hall and out of the house. The honeymoon was over, all right.

He climbed in the kennel-truck and drove east toward the highway. The suburban street wound among the pastel plasticoid cottages that were set approximately two to an acre on the lightly wooded land. With its population legally fixed at three hundred million, most of the country had become one big suburb, dotted with community centers and lined with narrow belts of industrial development. Norris wished there were someplace where he could be completely alone.

As he approached an intersection, he saw a small animal sitting on the curb, wrapped in its own bushy tail. Its oversized head was bald on top but the rest of its body was covered with blue-gray fur. Its tiny pink tongue was licking daintily at small forepaws with prehensile thumbs. It was a cat-Q-5. It glanced curiously at the truck as Norris pulled to a halt.

He smiled at it from the window and called, "What's your name, kitten?"

The cat-Q-5 stared at him impassively for a moment, let out a stuttering high-pitched wail, then: "Kiyi Rorry."

"Whose child are you, Rorry?" he asked. "Where do you live?"

The cat-Q-5 took its time about answering. There were no houses near the intersection, and Norris feared that the animal might be lost. It blinked at him, sleepily bored, and resumed its paw-washing. He repeated the questions.

"Mama kiyi," said the cat-Q-5 disgustedly.

"That's right, Mama's kitty. But where is Mama? Do you suppose she ran away?"

The cat-Q-5 looked startled. It stuttered for a moment, and its fur crept slowly erect. It glanced around hurriedly, then shot off down the street at a fast scamper. He followed it in the truck until it darted onto a porch and began wailing through the screen, "Mama no run ray! Mama no run ray!"

Norris grinned and drove on. A class-C couple, allowed no children of their own, could get quite attached to a cat-Q-5. The felines were emotionally safer than the quasi-human chimp-K series called "neutroids." When a pet neutroid died, a family was broken with grief; but most couples could endure the death of a cat-Q or a dog-F. Class-C couples were allowed two lesser units or one neutroid.

His grin faded as he wondered which Anne would choose. The Norrises were class-C—defective heredity.

He found himself in Sherman III Community Center—eight blocks of commercial buildings, serving the surrounding suburbs. He stopped at the message office to pick up his mail. There was a memo from Chief Franklin. He tore it open nervously and read it in the truck. It was something he had been expecting for several days.

Attention All District Inspectors:

Subject: Deviant Neutroid.

You will immediately begin a systematic and thorough survey of all animals whose serial numbers fall in the Bermuda-K-99 series for birth dates during July 2234. This is in connection with the Delmont Negligency Case. Seize all animals in this category, impound, and run proper sections of normalcy tests. Watch for mental and glandular deviation. Delmont has confessed to passing only one non-standard unit, but there may be others. He disclaims memory of deviant's serial number. This could be a ruse to bring a stop to investigations when one animal is found. Be thorough.

If allowed to reach age-set or adulthood, such a deviant could be dangerous to its owner or to others. Hold all seized K-99s who show the slightest abnormality in the normalcy tests. Forward to central lab. Return standard units to their owners. Accomplish entire survey project within seven days.

C. Franklin

Norris frowned at the last sentence. His district covered about two hundred square miles. Its replacement-quota of new neutroids was around three hundred animals a month. He tried to estimate how many of July's influx had been K-99s from Bermuda Factory. Forty, at least. Could he do it in a week? And there were only eleven empty neutroid cages in his kennel. The other forty-nine were occupied by the previous inspector's "unclaimed" inventory—awaiting destruction.

He wadded the memo in his pocket, then nosed the truck onto the highway and headed toward Wylo City and the district wholesale offices of Anthropos, Inc. They should be able to give him a list of all July's Bermuda K-99 serial numbers that had entered his territory, together with the retailers to whom the animals had been sold. A week's deadline for finding and testing forty neutroids would put him in a tight squeeze.

He was halfway to Wylo City when the radiophone buzzed on his dashboard. He pulled into the slow lane and answered

quickly, hoping for Anne's voice. A polite professional purr came instead.

"Inspector Norris? This is Doctor Georges. We haven't met, but I imagine we will. Are you extremely busy at the moment?"

Norris hesitated. "Extremely," he said.

"Well, this won't take long. One of my patients—a Mrs. Sarah Glubbes—called a while ago and said her baby was sick. I must be getting absent-minded, because I forgot she was class C until I got there." He hesitated. "The baby turned out to be a neutroid. It's dying. Eighteenth order virus."

"So?"

"Well, she's—uh—rather a *peculiar* woman, Inspector. Keeps telling me how much trouble she had in childbirth, and how she can't ever have another one. It's pathetic. She *believes* it's her own. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Norris replied slowly. "But what do you want me to do? Can't you send the neutroid to a vet?"

"She insists it's going to a hospital. Worst part is that she's heard of the disease. Knows it can be cured with the proper treatment—in humans. Of course, no hospital would play along with her fantasy and take a neutroid, especially since she couldn't pay for its treatment."

"I still don't see—"

"I thought perhaps you could help me fake a substitution. It's a K-48 series, five-year-old, three-year set. Do you have one in the pound that's not claimed?"

Norris thought for a moment. "I think I have *one*. You're welcome to it, Doctor, but you can't fake a serial number. She'll know it. And even though they look exactly alike, the new one won't recognize her. It'll be spooky."

There was a long pause, followed by a sigh. "I'll try it anyway. Can I come get the animal now?"

"I'm on the highway—"

"Please, Norris! This is urgent. That woman will lose her mind completely if—"

"All right, I'll call my wife and tell her to open the pound for you. Pick out the K-48 and sign for it. And listen—"

"Yes?"

"Don't let me catch you falsifying a serial number."

Doctor Georges laughed faintly. "I won't, Norris. Thanks a million." He hung up quickly.

Norris immediately regretted his consent. It bordered on being illegal. But he saw it as a quick way to get rid of an animal that might later have to be killed.

He called Anne. Her voice was dull. She seemed depressed, but not angry. When he finished talking, she said, "All right, Terry," and hung up.

By noon, he had finished checking the shipping lists at the wholesale house in Wylo City. Only thirty-five of July's Bermuda-K-99s had entered his territory, and they were about equally divided among five pet shops, three of which were in Wylo City.

After lunch, he called each of the retail dealers, read them the serial numbers, and asked them to check the sales records for names and addresses of individual buyers. By three o'clock, he had the entire list filled out, and the task began to look easier. All that remained was to pick up the thirty-five animals.

And *that*, he thought, was like trying to take a year-old baby away from its doting mother. He sighed and drove to the Wylo suburbs to begin his rounds.

Anne met him at the door when he came home at six. He stood on the porch for a moment, smiling at her weakly. The smile was not returned.

"Doctor Georges came," she told him. "He signed for the—" She stopped to stare at him. "Darling, your face! What happened?"

Gingerly he touched the livid welts down the side of his cheek. "Just scratched a little," he muttered. He pushed past her and went to the phone in the hall. He sat eying it distastefully for a moment, not liking what he had to do. Anne came to stand beside him and examine the scratches.

Finally he lifted the phone and dialed the Wylo exchange. A grating mechanical voice answered, "Locator center. Your party, please."

"Sheriff Yates," Norris grunted.

The robot operator, which had on tape the working habits of each Wylo City citizen, began calling numbers. It found the off-duty sheriff on its third try, in a Wylo pool hall.

"I'm getting so I hate that infernal gadget," Yates grumbled. "I think it's got me psyched. What do you want, Norris?"

"Cooperation. I'm mailing you three letters charging three Wylo citizens with resisting a Federal official—namely *me*—charging one of them with assault. I tried to pick up their neutroids for a pound inspection—"

Yates bellowed lusty laughter into the phone.

"It's not funny. I've got to get those neutroids. It's in connection with the Delmont case."

Yates stopped laughing. "Oh. Well, I'll take care of it."

"It's a rush-order, Sheriff. Can you get the warrants tonight and pick up the animals in the morning?"

"Easy on those warrants, boy. Judge Charleman can't be disturbed just any time. I can get the neuts to you by noon,

I guess, provided we don't have to get a helicopter posse to chase down the mothers."

"That'll be all right. And listen, Yates—fix it so the charges will be dropped if they cooperate. Don't shake those warrants around unless they just won't listen to reason. But get those neutroids."

"Okay, boy. Gotcha."

Norris gave him the names and addresses of the three unwilling mothers. As soon as he hung up, Anne touched his shoulders and said, "Sit still." She began smoothing a chilly ointment over his burning cheek.

"Hard day?" she asked.

"Not too hard. Those were just three out of fifteen. I got the other twelve. They're in the truck."

"That's good," she said. "You've got only twelve empty cages."

He neglected to tell her that he had stopped at twelve for just this reason. "Guess I better get them unloaded," he said, standing up.

"Can I help you?"

He stared at her for a moment, saying nothing. She smiled a little and looked aside. "Terry, I'm sorry—about this morning. I—I know you've got a job that has to be—" Her lip quivered slightly.

Norris grinned, caught her shoulders, and pulled her close.

"Honeymoon's on again, huh?" she whispered against his neck.

"Come on," he grunted. "Let's unload some neutroids, before I forget all about work."

They went out to the kennels together. The cages were inside a sprawling concrete barn, which was divided into three large rooms—one for the fragile neuter humanoid creatures, and another for the lesser mutants, such as cat-Qs, dog-Fs, dwarf bears, and foot-high lambs that never matured into sheep. The third room contained a small gas chamber with a conveyor belt leading from it to a crematory-incinerator.

Norris kept the third locked lest his wife see its furnishings.

The doll-like neutroids began their mindless chatter as soon as their keepers entered the building. Dozens of blazing blond heads began dancing about their cages. Their bodies thwacked against the wire mesh as they leaped about their compartments with monkey grace.

Their human appearance was broken by only two distinct features: short beaverlike tails decorated with fluffy curls of fur, and an erect thatch of scalp-hair that grew up into a bright candleflame. Otherwise, they appeared completely hu-

man, with baby-pink skin, quick little smiles, and cherubic faces. They were sexually neuter and never grew beyond a predetermined age-set which varied for each series. Age-sets were available from one to ten years human equivalent. Once a neutroid reached its age-set, it remained at the set's child-development level until death.

"They must be getting to know you pretty well," Anne said, glancing around at the cages.

Norris was wearing a slight frown as he inspected the room. "They've never gotten this excited before."

He walked along a row of cages, then stopped by a K-76 to stare.

"*Apple cores!*" He turned to face his wife. "How did apples get in there?"

She reddened. "I felt sorry for them, eating that goo from the mechanical feeder. I drove down to Sherman III and bought six dozen cooking apples."

"That was a mistake."

She frowned irritably. "We can afford it."

"That's not the point. There's a reason for the mechanical feeders." He paused, wondering how he could tell her the truth. He blundered on: "They get to love whoever feeds them."

"I can't see—"

"How would you feel about disposing of something that loved you?"

Anne folded her arms and stared at him. "Planning to dispose of any soon?" she asked acidly.

"Honeymoon's off again, eh?"

She turned away. "I'm sorry, Terry. I'll try not to mention it again."

He began unloading the truck, pulling the frightened and squirming doll-things forth one at a time with a snare-pole. They were one-man pets, always frightened of strangers.

"What's the Delmont case, Terry?" Anne asked while he worked.

"Huh?"

"I heard you mention it on the phone. Anything to do with why you got your face scratched?"

He nodded sourly. "Indirectly, yes. It's a long story."

"Tell me."

"Well, Delmont was a greenhorn evolvotron operator at the Bermuda plant. His job was taking the unfertilized chimpanzee ova out of the egg-multiplier, mounting them in his machine, and bombarding the gene structure with sub-atomic particles. It's tricky business. He flashes a huge enlargement of the ovum on the electron microscope screen—large enough so he can see the individual protein molecules. He

has an artificial gene pattern to compare it with. It's like shooting sub-atomic billiards. He's got to fire alpha-particles into the gene structure and displace certain links by just the right amount. And he's got to be quick about it before the ovum dies from an overdose of radiation from the enlarger. A good operator can get one success out of seven tries.

"Well, Delmont worked a week and spoiled over a hundred ova without a single success. They threatened to fire him. I guess he got hysterical. Anyway, he reported one success the next day. It was faked. The ovum had a couple of flaws—something wrong in the central nervous system's determinants, and in the glandular makeup. Not a standard neutroid ovum. He passed it on to the incubators to get a credit, knowing it wouldn't be caught until after birth."

"It wasn't caught at all?" Anne asked.

"Funny thing, he was afraid it wouldn't be. He got to worrying about it, thought maybe a mental-deviant would pass, and that it might be dangerous. So he went back to its incubator and cut off the hormone flow into its compartment."

"Why that?"

"So it *would* develop sexuality. A neutroid would be born a female if they didn't give it suppressive doses of male hormone prenatally. That keeps ovaries from developing and it comes out neuter. But Delmont figured a female would be caught and stopped before the final inspection. They'd dispose of her without even bothering to examine for the other defects. And he could blame the sexuality on an equipment malfunction. He thought it was pretty smart. Trouble was they didn't catch the female. She went on through; they all *look* female."

"How did they find out about it now?"

"He got caught last month, trying it again. And he confessed to doing it once before. No telling how many times he *really* did it."

Norris held up the final kicking, squealing, tassel-haired doll from the back of the kennel truck. He grinned at his wife. "This little fellow, for instance. It might be a potential she. It might also be a potential murderer. *All* these kiddos are from the machines in the section where Delmont worked."

Annie snorted and caught the baby-creature in her arms. It struggled and tried to bite, but subsided a little when she disentangled it from the snare. "Kkr-r-reee," it cooed nervously. "Kkr-r-reeel"

"You tell him you're no murderer," Anne purred to it.

Norris watched disapprovingly while she fondled it. One thing he had learned: to steer clear of emotional attach-

ments. It was eight months old and looked like a child of two years—a year short of its age-set. And it was designed to be as affectionate as a human child.

"Put it in the cage, Anne," he said quietly.

She looked up and shook her head.

"It belongs to somebody else. If it fixes a libido attachment on you, you're actually robbing its owner. They can't love many people at once."

She snorted, but installed the thing in its cage.

"Anne—" Norris hesitated, hating to approach the subject. "Do you—want one—for yourself? I can sign an unclaimed one over to you to keep in the house. It won't cost us anything."

Slowly she shook her head, and her pale eyes went moody and luminous. "I'm going to have one of my own," she said.

He stood in back of the truck, staring down at her. "Do you realize what—"

"I know what I'm saying. We're class-C on account of heart-trouble in both our families. Well, I don't care, Terry. I'm not going to waste a heart over one of these pathetic little artificial animals. We're going to have a baby."

"You know what they'd do to us?"

"If they catch us, yes—compulsory divorce, sterilization. But they won't catch us. I'll have it at home, Terry. Not even a doctor. We'll hide it."

"I won't let you do such a thing."

She faced him angrily. "Oh, this whole rotten *world!*" she choked. Suddenly she turned and fled out of the building. She was sobbing.

Norris climbed slowly down from the truck and wandered on into the house. She was not in the kitchen nor the living room. The bedroom door was locked. He shrugged and went to sit on the sofa. The television set was on, and a newscast was coming from a local station.

". . . we were unable to get shots of the body," the announcer was saying. "But here is a view of the Georges residence. I'll switch you to our mobile unit in Sherman II, James Duncan reporting."

Norris frowned with bewilderment as the scene shifted to a two-story plasticoid house among the elm trees. It was after dark, but the mobile unit's powerful floodlights made daylight of the house and its yard and the police 'copters sitting in a side lot. An ambulance was parked in the street. A new voice came on the audio.

"This is James Duncan, ladies and gentlemen, speaking to you from our mobile unit in front of the late Doctor Hiram Georges' residence just west of Sherman II. We are waiting

for the stretcher to be brought out, and Police Chief Erskine Miler is standing here beside me to give us a word about the case. Doctor Georges' death has shocked the community deeply. Most of you local listeners have known him for many years—some of you have depended upon his services as a family physician. He was a man well known, well loved. But now let's listen to Chief Miler."

Norris sat breathing quickly. There could scarcely be two Doctor Georges in the community, but only this morning . . .

A growling drawl came from the audio. "This's Chief Miler speaking, folks. I just want to say that if any of you know the whereabouts of a Mrs. Sarah Glubbes, call me immediately. She's wanted for questioning."

"Thank you, Chief. This is James Duncan again. I'll review the facts for you briefly again, ladies and gentlemen. At seven o'clock, less than an hour ago, a woman—allegedly Mrs. Glubbes—burst into Doctor Georges' dining room while the family was at dinner. She was brandishing a pistol and screaming, 'You stole my baby! You gave me the wrong baby! Where's my baby?'

"When the doctor assured her that there was no other baby, she fired, shattering his salad plate. Glancing off it, the bullet pierced his heart. The woman fled. A peculiar feature of the case is that Mrs. Glubbes, the alleged intruder, *has no baby*. Just a minute—just a minute—here comes the stretcher now."

Norris turned the set off and went to call the police. He told them what he knew and promised to make himself available for questioning if it became necessary. When he turned from the phone, Anne was standing in the bedroom doorway. She might have been crying a little, but she concealed it well.

"What was all that?" she asked.

"Woman killed a man. I happened to know the motive."

"What was it?"

"Neutroid trouble."

"You meet up with a lot of unpleasantness in this business, don't you?"

"Lot of unpleasant emotions tangled up in it," he admitted.

"I know. Well, supper's been keeping hot for two hours. Shall we eat?"

They went to bed at midnight, but it was after one when he became certain that his wife was asleep. He lay in darkness for a time, listening to her even breathing. Then he cautiously eased himself out of bed and tiptoed quietly through the door, carrying his shoes and trousers. He put them on in the kitchen and stole silently out to the kennels.

A half moon hung low in a misty sky, and the wind was chilly out of the north.

He went into the neutroid room and flicked a switch. A few sleepy chatters greeted the light.

One at a time, he awoke twenty-three of the older doll-things and carried them to a large glass-walled compartment. These were the long-time residents; they knew him well, and they came with him willingly—like children after the Piper of Hamelin. When he had gotten them in the glass chamber, he sealed the door and turned on the gas. The conveyor would automatically carry them on to the incinerator.

Now he had enough cages for the Bermuda-K-99s.

He hurriedly quit the kennels and went to sit on the back steps. His eyes were burning, but the thought of tears made him sicker. It was like an assassin crying while he stabbed his victim. It was more honest just to retch.

When he tiptoed back inside, he got as far as the hall. Then he saw Anne's small figure framed in the bedroom window, silhouetted against the moonlit yard. She had slipped into her negligee and was sitting on the narrow windowstool, staring silently out at the dull red tongue of exhaust gases from the crematory's chimney.

Norris backed away. He went to the parlor and lay down on the couch.

After a while he heard her come into the room. She paused in the center of the rug, a fragile mist in the darkness. He turned his face away and waited for the rasping accusation. But soon she came to sit on the edge of the sofa. She said nothing. Her hand crept out and touched his cheek lightly. He felt her cool finger-tips trace a soft line up his temple.

"It's all right, Terry," she whispered.

He kept his face averted. Her fingers traced a last stroke. Then she padded quietly back to the bedroom. He lay awake until dawn, knowing that it would never be all right, neither the creating nor the killing, until he—and the whole world—completely lost sanity. And then everything would be all right, only it still wouldn't make sense.

Anne was asleep when he left the house. The night mist had gathered into clouds that made a gloomy morning of it. He drove on out in the kennel-truck, meaning to get the rest of the Bermuda-K-99s so that he could begin his testing.

Still he felt the night's guilt, like a sticky dew that refused to depart with morning. Why should he have to kill the things? The answer was obvious. Society manufactured them because killing them was permissible. Human babies could not be disposed of when the market became glutted. The neutroids offered solace to childless women, kept them satis-

fied with a restricted birth rate. And why a restricted birth rate? Because by keeping the population at five billions, the Federation could insure a decent living standard for everybody.

Where there was giving, Norris thought glumly, there was also taking away. Man had always deluded himself by thinking that he "created," but he created nothing. He thought that he had created—with his medical science and his end to wars—a longer life for the individual. But he found that he had only taken the lives of the unborn and added them to the years of the aged. Man now had a life expectancy of eighty, except that he had damn little chance of being born to enjoy it.

A neutroid filled the cradle in his stead. A neutroid that never ate as much, or grew up to be unemployed. A neutroid could be killed if things got tough, but could still satisfy a woman's craving to mother something small.

Norris gave up thinking about it. Eventually he would have to adjust to it. He was already adjusted to a world that loved the artificial mutants as children. He had been brought up in it. Emotion came in conflict with the grim necessities of his job. Somehow he would have to love them in the parlor, and kill them in the kennel. It was only a matter of adjustment.

At noon, he brought back another dozen K-99s and installed them in his cages. There had been two highly reluctant mothers, but he skipped them and left the seizure to the local authorities. Yates had already brought in the three from yesterday.

"No more scratches?" Anne asked him while they ate lunch. They did not speak of the night's mass-disposal.

Norris smiled mechanically. "I learned my lesson yesterday. If they bare their fangs, I get out without another word. Funny thing though—I've got a feeling one mother pulled a fast one."

"What happened?"

"Well, I told her what I wanted and why. She didn't like it, but she let me in. I started out with her neut, but she wanted a receipt. So I gave her one; took the serial number off my checklist. She looked at it and said, 'Why, that's not Chichi's number!' I looked at the neut's foot, and sure enough it wasn't. I had to leave it. It was a K-99, but not even from Bermuda."

"I thought they were all registered," Anne said.

"They are. I told her she had the wrong neutroid, but she got mad. Went and got the sales receipt. It checked with her neut, and it was from O'Reilley's pet shop—right place, wrong number. I just don't get it."

"Nothing to worry about, is it Terry?"

He looked at her peculiarly. "Ever think what might happen if someone started a black market in neutroids?"

They finished the meal in silence. After lunch he went out again to gather up the rest of the group. By four o'clock, he had gotten all that were to be had without the threat of a warrant. The screams and pleas and tears of the owners left him gloomily despising himself.

If Delmont's falsification had been widespread, he might have to turn several of the thirty-five over to central lab for dissection and ultimate destruction. That would bring the murderous wrath of their owners down upon him. He began to understand why bio-inspectors were frequently shifted from one territory to another.

On the way home, he stopped in Sherman II to check on the missing number. It was the largest of the Sherman communities, covering fifty blocks of commercial buildings. He parked in the outskirts and took a sidewalk escalator toward O'Reilley's address.

It was on a dingy sidestreet, reminiscent of past centuries, a street of small bars and bowling alleys and cigar stores. There was even a shop with three gold balls above the entrance, but the place was now an antique store. A light mist was falling when he stepped off the escalator and stood in front of the pet shop. A sign hung out over the sidewalk, announcing:

J. "DOGGY" O'REILLEY
PETS FOR SALE
DUMB BLONDES AND GOLDFISH
MUTANTS FOR THE CHILDLESS
BUY A BUNDLE OF JOY

Norris frowned at the sign and wandered inside. The place was warm and gloomy. He wrinkled his nose at the strong musk of animal odors. O'Reilley's was not a shining example of cleanliness.

Somewhere a puppy was yapping, and a parrot croaked the lyrics of *A Chimp to Call My Own*, which Norris recognized as the theme song of a popular soap-opera about a lady evolvotron operator.

He paused briefly by a tank of silk-draped goldfish. The shop had a customer. An elderly lady was haggling with a wizened manager over the price of a half grown second-hand dog-F. She was shaking her last dog's death certificate under his nose and demanding a guarantee of the dog's alleged F-5 intelligence. The old man offered to swear on a Bible, but he demurred when it came to swearing on a ledger.

The dog was saying, "Don' sell me, Dada. Don' sell me."

Norris smiled sardonically to himself. The non-human pets were smarter than the neutroids. A K-108 could speak a dozen words, and a K-99 never got farther than "mamma," "pappa," and "cookie." Anthropos was afraid to make the quasi-humans too intelligent, lest sentimentalists proclaim them really human.

He wandered on toward the back of the building, pausing briefly by the cash register to inspect O'Reilley's license, which hung in a dusty frame on the wall behind the counter. "James Fallon O'Reilley . . . authorized dealer in mutant animals . . . all non-predatory mammals including chimpanzee-K series . . . license expires June 1, 2235."

It seemed in order, although the expiration date was approaching. He started toward a bank of neutroid cages along the opposite wall, but O'Reilley was mincing across the floor to meet him. The customer had gone. The little manager wore an elfin professional smile, and his bald head bobbed in a welcoming nod.

"Good day, sir, good day! May I show you a dwarf kangaroo, or a—" He stopped and adjusted his spectacles. He blinked and peered as Norris flashed his badge. His smile waned.

"I'm Agent Norris, Mr. O'Reilley. Called you yesterday for that rundown on K-99 sales."

O'Reilley looked suddenly nervous. "Oh, yes. Find 'em all?"

Norris shook his head. "No. That's why I stopped by. There's some mistake on—" he glanced at his list—"on K-99-LJZ-351. Let's check it again."

O'Reilley seemed to cringe. "No mistake. I gave you the buyer's name."

"She has a different number."

"Can I help it if she traded with somebody?"

"She didn't. She bought it here. I saw the receipt."

"Then she traded with one of my other customers!" snapped the old man.

"Two of your customers have the same name—Adele Schultz? Not likely. Let's see your duplicate receipt book."

O'Reilley's wrinkled face set itself into a stubborn mask. "Doubt if it's still around."

Norris frowned. "Look, pop, I've had a rough day. I *could* start naming some things around here that need fixing—sanitary violations and such. Not to mention that sign—'dumb blondes.' They outlawed that one when they executed that shyster doctor for shooting K-108s full of growth hormones, trying to raise himself a harem to sell. Besides, you're required to keep sales records until they've been microfilmed. There hasn't been a microfilming since July."

The wrinkled face twitched with frustrated anger. O'Reilley shuffled to the counter while Norris followed. He got a fat binder from under the register and started toward a wooden stairway.

"Where you going?" Norris called.

"Get my old glasses," the manager grumbled. "Can't see through these new things."

"Leave the book here and *I'll* check it," Norris offered.

But O'Reilley was already limping quickly up the stairs. He seemed not to hear. He shut the door behind him, and Norris heard the lock click. The bio-agent waited. Again the thought of a black market troubled him. Unauthorized neutroids could mean lots of trouble.

Five minutes passed before the old man came down the stairs. He said nothing as he placed the book on the counter. Norris noticed that his hands were trembling as he shuffled through the pages.

"Let *me* look," said the bio-agent.

O'Reilley stepped reluctantly aside. Norris had memorized the owner's receipt number, and he found the duplicate quickly. He stared at it silently. "Mrs. Adele Schultz . . . chimpanzee-K-99-LJZ-351." It was the number of the animal he wanted, but it wasn't the number on Mrs. Schultz's neutroid nor on her original copy of the receipt.

He held the book up to his eye and aimed across the page at the light. O'Reilley's breathing became audible. Norris put the book down, folded two thicknesses of handkerchief over the blade of his pocket knife, and ran it down the seam between the pages. He took the sheet he wanted, folded it, and stowed it in his vest pocket. O'Reilley was stuttering angrily.

Norris turned to face him coldly. "Nice erasure job, for a carbon copy."

The old man prepared himself for exploding. Norris quietly put on his hat.

"See you in court, O'Reilley."

"*Wait!*"

Norris turned. "Okay, I'm waiting."

The old man sagged into a deflated bag of wrinkles. "Let's sit down first," he said weakly.

Norris followed him up the stairs and into a dingy parlor. The tiny apartment smelled of boiled cabbage and sweat. An orange-haired neutroid lay asleep on a small rug in a corner. Norris knelt beside it and read the tattooed figures on the sole of its left foot—K-99-LJZ-351. Somehow he was not surprised.

When he stood up, the old man was sagged in an ancient armchair, his head propped on a hand that covered his eyes.

"Lots of good explanations, I guess?" Norris asked quietly.

"Not good ones."

"Let's hear them, anyway."

O'Reilley sighed and straightened. He blinked at the inspector and spoke in a monotone. "My missus died five years back. We were class-B—allowed one child of our own—if we could have one. We couldn't. But since we were class-B, we couldn't own a neutroid either. Sorta got around it by running a pet shop. Mary—she always cried when we sold a neut. I sorta felt bad about it myself. But we never did swipe one. Last year this Bermuda shipment come in. I sold most of 'em pretty quick, but Peony here—she was kinda puny. Seemed like nobody wanted her. Kept her around so long, I got attached to her. 'Fraid somebody'd buy her. So I faked the receipt and moved her up here."

"That all?"

The old man nodded.

"Ever done this before?"

He shook his head.

Norris let a long silence pass while he struggled with himself. At last he said, "Your license could be revoked, you know."

"I know."

Norris ground his fist thoughtfully in his palm and stared at the sleeping doll-thing. "I'll take your books home with me tonight," he said. "I want to make a complete check for similar changes. Any objections?"

"None. It's the only trick I've pulled, so help me."

"If that's true, I won't report you. We'll just attach a correction to that page, and you'll put the neut back in stock." He hesitated. "Providing it's not a deviant. I'll have to take it in for examination."

A choking sound came from the armchair. Norris stared curiously at the old man. Moisture was creeping in the wrinkles around his eyes.

"Something the matter?"

O'Reilley nodded. "She's a deviant."

"How do you know?"

The dealer pulled himself erect and hobbled to the sleeping neutroid. He knelt beside it and stroked a small bare shoulder gently.

"Peony," he breathed. "Peony, girl—wake up."

Its fluffy tail twitched for a moment. Then it sat up, rubbing its eyes and yawning. It *looked* normal, like a two-year-old girl with soft brown eyes. It pouted at O'Reilley for awakening it. It saw Norris and ignored him, apparently too sleepy to be frightened.

"How's my Peony-girl?" the dealer purred.

It licked its lips. "Wanna g'ass o'water, Daddy," it said drowsily.

Norris caught his breath. No K-99 should be able to make a speech that long, even when it reached the developmental limit. He glanced at O'Reilley. The old man nodded slowly, then went to the kitchen for a glass of water. She drank greedily and eyed her foster-parent.

"Daddy crying."

O'Reilley glowered at her and blew his nose solemnly. "Don't be silly, child. Now get your coat on and go with Mister Norris. He's taking you for a ride in his truck. Won't that be fine?"

"I don't want to. I wanna stay here."

"Peony! On with you!"

She brought her coat and stared at Norris with childish contempt. "Can Daddy go, too?"

"Be on your way!" growled O'Reilley. "I got things to do."

"We're coming back?"

"Of course you're coming back! *Git* now—or shall I get my spanking switch?"

Peony strolled out the door ahead of Norris.

"Oh, inspector, would you be punching the night latch for me as you leave the shop? I think I'll be closing for the day."

Norris paused at the head of the stairs, looking back at the old man. But O'Reilley closed himself inside and the lock clicked. The agent sighed and glanced down at the small being beside him.

"Want me to carry you, Peony?"

She sniffed disdainfully. She hopped upon the banister and slid down ahead of him. Her motor-responses were typically neutroid—something like a monkey, something like a squirrel. But there was no question about it; she was one of Delmont's deviants. He wondered what they would do with her in central lab. He could remember no instance of an intelligent mutant getting into the market.

Somehow he could not consign her to a cage in the back of the truck. He drove home while she sat beside him on the front seat. She watched the scenery and remained aloof, occasionally looking around to ask, "Can we go back now?"

Norris could not bring himself to answer.

When he got home, he led her into the house and stopped in the hall to call Chief Franklin. The operator said, "His office doesn't answer, sir. Shall I give you the robot locator?"

Norris hesitated. His wife came into the hall. She stooped to grin at Peony, and Peony said, "Do you live here, too?" Anne gasped and sat on the floor to stare.

Norris said, "Cancel the call. It'll wait till tomorrow." He dropped the phone quickly.

"What series is it?" Anne asked excitedly. "I never saw one that could talk."

"It is a *she*," he said. "And she's a series unto herself. Some of Delmont's work."

Peony was looking from one to the other of them with a baffled face. "Can we go back now?"

Norris shook his head. "You're going to spend the night with us, Peony," he said softly. "Your daddy wants you to."

His wife was watching him thoughtfully. Norris looked aside and plucked nervously at a corner of the telephone book. Suddenly she caught Peony's hand and led her toward the kitchen.

"Come on, baby, let's go find a cookie or something."

Norris started out the front door, but in a moment Anne was back. She caught at his collar and tugged. "Not so fast!"

He turned to frown. Her face accused him at a six-inch range.

"Just what do you think you're going to do with that child?"

He was silent for a long time. "You know what I'm *supposed* to do."

Her unchanging stare told him that she wouldn't accept any evasions. "I heard you trying to get your boss on the phone."

"I canceled it, didn't I?"

"Until tomorrow."

He worked his hands nervously. "I don't know, honey—I just don't know."

"They'd kill her at central lab, wouldn't they?"

"Well, they'd need her as evidence in Delmont's trial."

"They'd kill her, wouldn't they?"

"When it was over—it's hard to say. The law says deviants must be destroyed, but—"

"Well?"

He paused miserably. "We've got a few days to think about it, honey. I don't have to make my report for a week."

He sidled out the door. Looking back, he saw the hard determination in her eyes as she watched him. He knew somehow that he was going to lose either his job or his wife. Maybe both. He shuffled moodily out to the kennels to care for his charges.

A great silence filled the house during the evening. Supper was a gloomy meal. Only Peony spoke; she sat propped on two cushions at the table, using her silver with remarkable skill.

Norris wondered about her intelligence. Her chronological

age was ten months; her physical age was about two years; but her mental age seemed to compare favorably with at least a three year old.

Once he reached across the table to touch her forehead. She eyed him curiously for a moment and continued eating. Her temperature was warmer than human, but not too warm for the normally high neutroid metabolism—somewhere around 101°. The rapid rate of maturation made I.Q. determination impossible.

"You've got a good appetite, Peony," Anne remarked.

"I like Daddy's cooking better," she said with innocent bluntness. "When can I go home?"

Anne looked at Norris and waited for an answer. He managed a smile at the flame-haired cherub. "Tell you what we'll do. I'll call your daddy on the phone and let you say hello. Would you like that?"

She giggled, then nodded. "Uh-huh! When can we do it?"

"Later."

Anne tapped her fork thoughtfully against the edge of her plate. "I think we better have a nice long talk tonight, Terry," she said.

"Is there anything to talk about?" He pushed the plate away. "I'm not hungry."

He left the table and went to sit in darkness by the parlor window, while his wife did the dishes and Peony played with a handful of walnuts on the kitchen floor.

He watched the scattered lights of the suburbs and tried to think of nothing. The lights were peaceful, glimmering through the trees.

Once there had been no lights, only the flickering campfires of hunters shivering in the forest, when the world was young and sparsely planted with the seed of Man. Now the world was infected with his lights, and with the sound of his engines and the roar of his rockets. He had inherited the Earth and had filled it—too full.

There was no escape. His rockets had touched two of the planets, but even the new worlds offered no sanctuary for the unborn. Man could have babies—if allowed—faster than he could build ships to haul them away. He could only choose between a higher death rate and a lower birth rate.

And unborn children were not eligible to vote when Man made his choice.

His choice had robbed his wife of a biological need, and so he made a disposable baby with which to pacify her. He gave it a tail and only half a mind, so that it could not be confused with his own occasional children.

But Peony had only the tail. Still she was not born of

the seed of Man. Strange seed, out of the jungle, warped toward the human pole, but still not human.

Norris heard a car approaching in the street. Its headlights swung along the curb, and it slowed to a halt in front of the house. A tall, slender man in a dark suit climbed out and stood for a moment, staring toward the house. He was only a shadow in the faint street light. Norris could not place him. Suddenly the man snapped on a flashlight and played it over the porch. Norris caught his breath and darted toward the kitchen. Anne stared at him questioningly, while Peony peered up from her play.

He stooped beside her. "Listen, child!" he said quickly. "Do you know what a neutroid is?"

She nodded slowly. "They play in cages. They don't talk."

"Can you pretend you're a neutroid?"

"I can play neutroid. I play neutroid with Daddy sometimes, when people come to see him. He gives me candy when I play it. When can I go home?"

"Not now. There's a man coming to see us. Can you play neutroid for me? We'll give you lots of candy. Just don't talk. Pretend you're asleep."

"Now?"

"Now." He heard the door chimes ringing.

"Who is it?" Anne asked.

"I don't know. He may have the wrong house. Take Peony in the bedroom. I'll answer it."

His wife caught the child-thing up in her arms and hurried away. The chimes sounded again. Norris stalked down the hall and switched on the porch-light. The visitor was an elderly man, erect in his black suit and radiating dignity. As he smiled and nodded, Norris noticed his collar. A clergyman. Must have the wrong place, Norris thought.

"Are you Inspector Norris?"

The agent nodded, not daring to talk.

"I'm Father Paulson. I'm calling on behalf of a James O'Reilley. I think you know him. May I come in?"

Grudgingly, Norris swung open the door. "If you can stand the smell of paganism, come on in."

The priest chuckled politely. Norris led him to the parlor and turned on the light. He waved toward a chair.

"What's this all about? Does O'Reilley want something?"

Paulson smiled at the inspector's brusque tone and settled himself in the chair. "O'Reilley is a sick man," he said.

The inspector frowned. "He didn't look it to me."

"Sick of heart, Inspector. He came to me for advice. I couldn't give him any. He told me the story—about this Peony. I came to have a look at her, if I may."

Norris said nothing for a moment. O'Reilley had better

keep his mouth shut, he thought, especially around clergymen. Most of them took a dim view of the whole mutant business.

"I didn't think you'd associate with O'Reilley," he said. "I thought you people excommunicated everybody that owns a neutroid. O'Reilley owns a whole shopful."

"That's true. But who knows? He might get rid of his shop. May I see this neutroid?"

"Why?"

"O'Reilley said it could talk. Is that true or is O'Reilley suffering delusions? That's what I came to find out."

"Neutroids don't talk."

The priest stared at him for a time, then nodded slowly, as if approving something. "You can rest assured," he said quietly, "that I'll say nothing of this visit, that I'll speak to no one about this creature."

Norris looked up to see his wife watching them from the doorway.

"Get Peony," he said.

"It's true then?" Paulson asked.

"I'll let you see for yourself."

Anne brought the small child-thing into the room and set her on the floor. Peony saw the visitor, chattered with fright, and bounded upon the back of the sofa to sit and scold. She was playing her game well, Norris thought.

The priest watched her with quiet interest. "Hello, little one."

Peony babbled gibberish. Paulson kept his eyes on her every movement. Suddenly he said, "I just saw your daddy, Peony. He wanted me to talk to you."

Her babbling ceased. The spell of the game was ended. Her eyes went sober. Then she looked at Norris and pouted. "I don't want any candy. I wanna go home."

Norris let out a deep breath. "I didn't say she couldn't talk," he pointed out sullenly.

"I didn't say you did," said Paulson. "You invited me to see for myself."

Anne confronted the clergyman. "What do you want?" she demanded. "The child's death? Did you come to assure yourself that she'd be turned over to the lab? I know your kind! You'd do anything to get rid of neutroids!"

"I came only to assure myself that O'Reilley's sane," Paulson told her.

"I don't believe you," she snapped.

He stared at her in wounded surprise; then he chuckled. "People used to trust the cloth. Ah, well. Listen, my child, you have us wrong. We say it's evil to create the creatures. We say *also* that it's evil to destroy them after they're made.

Not murder, exactly but—mockery of life, perhaps. It's the entire institution that's evil. Do you understand? As for this small creature of O'Reilley's—well, I hardly know what to make of her, but I certainly wouldn't wish her—uh—d-e-a-d."

Peony was listening solemnly to the conversation. Somehow Norris sensed a disinterested friend, if not an ally, in the priest. He looked at his wife. Her eyes were still suspicious.

"Tell me, Father," Norris asked, "if you were in my position, what would you do?"

Paulson fumbled with a button of his coat and stared at the floor while he pondered. "I wouldn't be in your position, young man. But if I were, I think I'd withhold her from my superiors. I'd also quit my job and go away."

It wasn't what Norris wanted to hear. But his wife's expression suddenly changed; she looked at the priest with a new interest. "And give Peony back to O'Reilley," she added.

"I shouldn't be giving you advice," he said unhappily. "I'm duty-bound to ask O'Reilley to give up his business and have nothing further to do with neutroids."

"But Peony's *human*," Anne argued. "She's *different*."

"I fail to agree."

"What!" Anne confronted him again. "What makes *you* human?"

"A soul, my child."

Anne put her hands on her hips and leaned forward to glare down at him like something unwholesome. "Can you put a voltmeter between your ears and measure it?"

The priest looked helplessly at Norris.

"No!" she said. "And you can't do it to Peony either!"

"Perhaps I had better go," Paulson said to his host.

Norris sighed. "Maybe you better, Padre. You found out what you wanted to know."

Anne stalked angrily out of the room, her dark hair swishing like a battle-pennant with each step. When the priest was gone, Norris picked up the child and held her in his lap. She was shivering with fright, as if she understood what had been said. Love them in the parlor, he thought, and kill them in the kennels.

"Can I go home? Doesn't Daddy want me any more?"

"Sure he does, baby. You just be good and everything'll be all right."

Norris felt a bad taste in his mouth as he laid her sleeping body on the sofa half an hour later. Everything was all wrong and it promised to remain that way. He couldn't give her back to O'Reilley, because she would be caught again when the auditor came to microfilm the records. And he certainly

couldn't keep her himself—not with other Bio-agents wandering in and out every few days. She could not be concealed in a world where there were no longer any sparsely populated regions. There was nothing to do but obey the law and turn her over to Franklin's lab.

He closed his eyes and shuddered. If he did that, he could do anything—stomach anything—adapt to any vicious demands society made of him. If he sent the child away to die, he would know that he had attained an "objective" outlook. And what more could he want from life than adaptation and objectivity?

Well—his wife, for one thing.

He left the child on the sofa, turned out the light, and wandered into the bedroom. Anne was in bed, reading. She did not look up when she said, "Terry, if you let that baby be destroyed, I'll . . ."

"Don't say it," he cut in. "Any time you feel like leaving, you just leave. But don't threaten me with it."

She watched him silently for a moment. Then she handed him the newspaper she had been reading. It was folded around an advertisement.

BIOLOGISTS WANTED
By
ANTHROPOS INCORPORATED
for
Evolvotron Operators
Incubator Tenders
Nursery Supervisors
Laboratory Personnel
in
NEW ATLANTA PLANT
Call or write: Personnel Mgr.
ANTHROPOS INC.
Atlanta, Ga.
Note: Secure Work Department
release from present job
before applying

He looked at Anne curiously. "So?"

She shrugged. "So there's a job, if you want to quit this one."

"What's this got to do with Peony, if anything?"

"We could take her with us."

"Not a chance," he said. "Do you suppose a talking neotroid would be any safer there?"

She demanded angrily, "Why should they want to destroy her?"

Norris sat on the edge of the bed and thought about it. "No particular *individual* wants to, honey. It's the law."

"But *why*?"

"Generally, because deviants are unknown quantities. They can be dangerous."

"That child—*dangerous*?"

"Dangerous to a concept, a vague belief that Man is something special, a closed tribe. And in a practical sense, she's dangerous because she's not a neuter. The Federation insists that all mutants be neuter and infertile, so it can control the mutant population. If mutants started reproducing, that could be a real threat in a world whose economy is so delicately balanced."

"Well, you're not going to let them have her, do you hear me?"

"I hear you," he grumbled.

On the following day, he went down to police headquarters to sign a statement concerning the motive in Doctor Georges' murder. As a result, Mrs. Glubbes was put away in the psycho-ward.

"It's funny, Norris," said Chief Miler, "what people'll do over a neutroid. Like Mrs. Glubbes thinking that neut was her own. I sure don't envy you your job. It's a wonder you don't get your head blown off. You must have an iron stomach."

Norris signed the paper and looked up briefly. "Sure, Chief. Just a matter of adaptation."

"Guess so." Miler patted his paunch and yawned. "How you coming on this Delmont business? Picked up any deviants yet?"

Norris laid down the pen abruptly. "No! Of course not! What made you think I had?"

Miler stopped in the middle of his yawn and stared at Norris curiously. "Touchy, aren't you?" he asked thoughtfully. "When I get that kind of answer from a prisoner, I right away start thinking—"

"Save it for your interrogation room," Norris growled. He stalked quickly out of the office while Chief Miler tapped his pencil absently and stared after him.

He was angry with himself for his indecision. He had to make a choice and make it *soon*. He was climbing in his car when a voice called after him from the building. He looked back to see Chief Miler trotting down the steps, his pudgy face glistening in the morning sun.

"Hey, Norris! Your missus is on the phone. Says it's urgent."

Norris went back grudgingly. A premonition of trouble gripped him.

"Phone's right there," the chief said, pointing with a stubby thumb.

The receiver lay on the desk, and he could hear it saying, "Hello—hello—" before he picked it up.

"Anne? What's the matter?"

Her voice was low and strained, trying to be cheerful. "Nothing's the matter, darling. We have a visitor. Come right home, will you? Chief Franklin's here."

It knocked the breath out of him. He felt himself going white. He glanced at Chief Miler, calmly sitting nearby.

"Can you tell me about it now?" he asked her.

"Not very well. Please hurry home. He wants to talk to you about the K-99s."

"Have the two of them met?"

"Yes, they have." She paused, as if listening to him speak, then said, "Oh, *that!* The game, honey—remember the game?"

"Good," he grunted. "I'll be right there." He hung up and started out.

"Troubles?" the chief called after him.

"Just a sick neut," he said, "if it's any of your business."

Chief Franklin's helicopter was parked in the empty lot next door when Norris drove up in front of the house. The official heard the truck and came out on the porch to watch his agent walk up the path. His lanky, emaciated body was loosely draped in gray tweeds, and his thin hawk face was a dark and solemn mask. He was a middle-aged man, his skin seamed with wrinkles, but his hair was still abnormally black. He greeted Norris with a slow, almost sarcastic nod.

"I see you don't read your mail. If you'd looked at it, you'd have known I was coming. I wrote you yesterday."

"Sorry, Chief, I didn't have a chance to stop by the message office this morning."

Franklin grunted. "Then you don't know why I'm here?"

"No, sir."

"Let's sit out on the porch," Franklin said, and perched his bony frame on the railing. "We've got to get busy on these Bermuda-K-99s, Norris. How many have you got?"

"Thirty-four, I think."

"I counted thirty-five."

"Maybe you're right. I—I'm not sure."

"Found any deviants yet?"

"Uh—I haven't run any tests yet, sir."

Franklin's voice went sharp. "Do you need a test to know when a neutroid is talking a blue streak?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just this. We've found at least a dozen of Delmont's units that have mental ages that correspond to their physical age. What's more, they're functioning females, and they have normal pituitaries. Know what that means?"

"They won't take an age-set then," Norris said. "They'll grow to adulthood."

"And have children."

Norris frowned. "How can they have children? There aren't any males."

"No? Guess what we found in one of Delmont's incubators."

"Not a—"

"Yeah. And it's probably not the first. This business about padding his quota is baloney! Hell, man, he was going to start his own black market! He finally admitted it, after twenty hours' questioning without a letup. He was going to raise them, Norris. He was stealing them right out of the incubators before an inspector ever saw them. The K-99s—the numbered ones—are just the ones he couldn't get back. Lord knows how many males he's got hidden away someplace!"

"What're you going to do?"

"*Do!* What do you *think* we'll do? Smash the whole scheme, that's what! Find the deviants and kill them. We've got enough now for lab work."

Norris felt sick. He looked away. "I suppose you'll want me to handle the destruction, then."

Franklin gave him a suspicious glance. "Yes, but why do you ask? You *have* found one, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," he admitted.

A moan came from the doorway. Norris looked up to see his wife's white face staring at him in horror, just before she turned and fled into the house. Franklin's bony head lifted.

"I see," he said. "We have a fixation on our deviant. Very well, Norris, I'll take care of it myself. Where is it?"

"In the house, sir. My wife's bedroom."

"Get it."

Norris went glumly in the house. The bedroom door was locked.

"Honey," he called softly. There was no answer. He knocked gently.

A key turned in the lock, and his wife stood facing him. Her eyes were weeping ice.

"Stay back!" she said. He could see Peony behind her, sitting in the center of the floor and looking mystified.

Then he saw his own service revolver in her trembling hand.

"Look, honey—it's *me*."

She shook her head. "No, it's not you. It's a man that wants to kill a little girl. Stay back."

"You'd shoot, wouldn't you?" he asked softly.

"Try to come in and find out," she invited.

"Let me have Peony."

She laughed, her eyes bright with hate. "I wonder where Terry went. I guess he died. Or adapted. I guess I'm a widow now. Stay back, Mister, or I'll kill you."

Norris smiled. "Okay, I'll stay back. But the gun isn't loaded."

She tried to slam the door; he caught it with his foot. She struck at him with the pistol, but he dragged it out of her hand. He pushed her aside and held her against the wall while she clawed at his arm.

"Stop it!" he said. "Nothing will happen to Peony, I promise you!" He glanced back at the child-thing, who had begun to cry.

Anne subsided a little, staring at him angrily.

"There's no other way out, honey. Just trust me. She'll be all right."

Breathing quickly, Anne stood aside and watched him. "Okay, Terry. But if you're lying—tell me, is it murder to kill a man to protect a child?"

Norris lifted Peony in his arms. Her wailing ceased, but her tail switched nervously.

"In whose law book?" he asked his wife. "I was wondering the same thing." Norris started toward the door. "By the way—find my instruments while I'm outside, will you?"

"The dissecting instruments?" she gasped. "If you intend—"

"Let's call them surgical instruments, shall we? And get them sterilized."

He went on outside, carrying the child. Franklin was waiting for him in the kennel doorway.

"Was that Mrs. Norris I heard screaming?"

Norris nodded. "Let's get this over with. I don't stomach it so well." He let his eyes rest unhappily on the top of Peony's head.

Franklin grinned at her and took a bit of candy out of his pocket. She refused it and snuggled closer to Norris.

"When can I go home?" she piped. "I want Daddy."

Franklin straightened, watching her with amusement. "You're going home in a few minutes, little neut. Just a few minutes."

They went into the kennels together, and Franklin headed

straight for the third room. He seemed to be enjoying the situation. Norris, hating him silently, stopped at a workbench and pulled on a pair of gloves. Then he called after Franklin.

"Chief, since you're in there, check the outlet pressure while I turn on the main line, will you?"

Franklin nodded assent. He stood outside the gas-chamber, watching the dials on the door. Norris could see his back while he twisted the main-line valve.

"Pressure's up!" Franklin called.

"Okay. Leave the hatch ajar so it won't lock, and crack the intake valves. Read it again."

"Got a mask for me?"

Norris laughed. "If you're scared, there's one on the shelf. But just open the hatch, take a reading, and close it. There's no danger."

Franklin frowned at him and cracked the intakes. Norris quietly closed the main valve again.

"Drops to zero!" Franklin called.

"Leave it open, then. Smell anything?"

"No. I'm turning it off, Norris." He twisted the intakes. Simultaneously, Norris opened the main line.

"Pressure's up again!"

Norris dropped his wrench and walked back to the chamber, leaving Peony perched on the workbench.

"Trouble with the intakes," he said gruffly. "It's happened before. Mind getting your hands dirty with me, Chief?"

Franklin frowned irritably. "Let's hurry this up, Norris. I've got five territories to visit."

"Okay, but we'd better put on our masks." He climbed a metal ladder to the top of the chamber, leaned over to inspect the intakes. On his way down, he shouldered a light-bulb over the door, shattering it. Franklin cursed and stepped back, brushing glass fragments from his head and shoulders.

"Good thing the light was off," he snapped.

Norris handed him the gas-mask and put on his own. "The main switch is off," he said. He opened the intakes again. This time the dials fell to normal open-line pressure. "Well, look—it's okay," he called through the mask. "You sure it was zero before?"

"Of course I'm sure!" came the muffled reply.

"Leave it on for a minute. We'll see. I'll go get the neut. Don't let the door close, sir. It'll start the automatics and we can't get it open for half an hour."

"I know, Norris. Hurry up."

Norris left him standing just outside the chamber, propping the door open with his foot. A faint wind was coming

through the opening. It should reach an explosive mixture quickly with the hatch ajar.

He stepped into the next room, waited a moment, and jerked the switch. The roar was deafening as the exposed tungsten filament flared and detonated the escaping anesthetic vapor. Norris went to cut off the main line. Peony was crying plaintively. He moved to the door and glanced at the smouldering remains of Franklin.

Feeling no emotion whatever, Norris left the kennels, carrying the sobbing child under one arm. His wife stared at him without understanding.

"Here, hold Peony while I call the police," he said.

"Police? What's happened?"

He dialed quickly. "Chief Miler? This is Norris. Get over here quick. My gas chamber exploded—killed Chief Agent Franklin. Man, it's awful! Hurry."

He hung up and went back to the kennels. He selected a normal Bermuda-K-99 and coldly killed it with a wrench. "You'll serve for a deviant," he said, and left it lying in the middle of the floor.

Then he went back to the house, mixed a sleeping capsule in a glass of water, and forced Peony to drink it.

"So she'll be out when the cops come," he explained to Anne.

She stamped her foot. "Will you tell me what's happened?"

"You heard me on the phone. Franklin accidentally died. That's all you have to know."

He carried Peony out and locked her in a cage. She was too sleepy to protest, and she was dozing when the police came.

Chief Miler strode about the three rooms like a man looking for a burglar at midnight. He nudged the body of the neutroid with his foot. "What's this, Norris?"

"The deviant we were about to destroy. I finished her with a wrench."

"I thought you said there weren't any deviants."

"As far as the public's concerned, there aren't. I couldn't see that it was any of your business. It still isn't."

"I see. It may become my business, though. How'd the blast happen?"

Norris told him the story up to the point of the detonation. "The light over the door was loose. Kept flickering on and off. Franklin reached up to tighten it. Must have been a little gas in the socket. Soon as he touched it—wham!"

"Why was the door open with the gas on?"

"I told you—we were checking the intakes. If you close the door, it starts the automatics. Then you can't get it open till the cycle's finished."

"Where were you?"

"I'd gone to cut off the gas again."

"Okay, stay in the house until we're finished out here."

When Norris went back in the house, his wife's white face turned slowly toward him.

She sat stiffly by the living room window, looking sick. Her voice was quietly frightened.

"Terry, I'm sorry about everything."

"Skip it."

"What did you do?"

He grinned sourly. "I adapted to an era. Did you find the instruments?"

She nodded. "What are they for?"

"To cut off a tail and skin a tattooed foot. Go to the store and buy some brown hair-dye and a pair of boy's trousers, age two. Peony's going to get a crewcut. From now on, she's Mike."

"We're class-C, Terry! We can't pass her off as our own."

"We're class-A, honey. I'm going to forge a heredity certificate."

Anne put her face in her hands and rocked slowly to and fro.

"Don't feel bad, baby. It was Franklin or a little girl. And from now on, it's society or the Norrises."

"What'll we do?"

"Go to Atlanta and work for Anthropos. I'll take up where Delmont left off."

"Terry!"

"Peony will need a husband. They may find all of Delmont's males. I'll *make* her one. Then we'll see if a pair of chimp-Ks can do better than their makers."

Wearily, he stretched out on the sofa.

"What about that priest? Suppose he tells about Peony. Suppose he guesses about Franklin and tells the police?"

"The police," he said, "would then smell a motive. They'd figure it out and I'd be finished. We'll wait and see. Let's don't talk; I'm tired. We'll just wait for Miler to come in."

She began rubbing his temples gently, and he smiled.

"So we wait," she said. "Shall I read to you, Terry?"

"That would be pleasant," he murmured, closing his eyes.

She slipped away, but returned quickly. He heard the rustle of dry pages and smelled musty leather. Then her voice came, speaking old words softly. And he thought of the small child-thing lying peacefully in her cage while angry men stalked about her. A small life with a mind; she came into the world as quietly as a thief, a burglar in the crowded house of Man.

"I will send my fear before thee, and I will destroy the

peoples before whom thou shalt come, sending hornets to drive out the Hevite and the Canaanite and the Hethite before thou enterest the land. Little by little I will drive them out before thee, till thou be increased, and dost possess the land. Then shalt thou be to me a new people, and I to thee a God . . ."

And on the quiet afternoon in May, while he waited for the police to finish puzzling in the kennels, it seemed to Terrell Norris that an end to scheming and pushing and arrogance was not too far ahead. It should be a pretty good world then.

He hoped Man could fit into it somehow.

STAMPED CAUTION

Raymond Z. Gallun

November 28, 1964—This is being written on the day the radio announced the departure of a "photo-reconnaissance" rocket to spy on Mars and report back with (we hope) some interesting data.* It is expected that contact will not be made until next summer, by which time you should have this book in your hands and be reading all about the Martians' other-way-round success in getting in touch with us.

Raymond Z. Gallun, who began selling science fiction stories in 1931, when he was twenty, published the following tale in August, 1953, four years before Sputnik I showed that someone had the technology to enable mankind to escape—at least from the heaviest layers of earth's atmosphere. However, interplanetary travel for people? Not yet! We are still just dipping our toes in the shallows of Deep Space—just a couple of hundred miles "offshore," so to speak.

So it is that not one single word of this story has had to be changed to eliminate obsolescences or bring it up to date. You will note, of course, that Gallun assumed the necessity for a hydrogen-fusion reaction motor to make a manned Mars trip possible; and that may well be an assumption which will turn out to be true in the long run.

Ten minutes after the crackup, somebody phoned for the Army. That meant us. The black smoke of the fire, and the oily residues, which were later analyzed, proved the presence of a probable petroleum derivative. The oil was heavily tainted with radioactivity. Most likely it was fuel from the odd, conchlike reaction motors, the exact principles of which died, as far as we were concerned, with the crash.

* Postscript, November 30: so now we have Soviet competition on our Mars "photo-spy" experiment! As one radio commentator suggested, it would have been nice if we had been able to coordinate our *Mariner IV* with the Russian rocket; we might have arranged for some tri-di, or stereo, pictures!

The craft was mainly of aluminum, magnesium and a kind of stainless steel, proving that, confronted with problems similar to ones we had encountered, aliens might solve them in similar ways. From the crumpled-up wreckage which we dug out of that Missouri hillside, Klein even noticed a familiar method of making girders and braces lighter. Circular holes were punched out of them at spaced intervals.

I kept hunting conviction by telling myself that, for the first time in all remembered history, we were peeking behind the veil of another planet. This should be the beginning of a new era, one of immensely widened horizons, and of high romance—but with a dark side, too. The sky was no longer a limit. There were things beyond it that would have to be reckoned with. And how does unknown meet unknown? Suppose one has no hand to shake?

The mass of that wreck reeked like a hot cinder-pile and a burning garbage dump combined. It oozed blackened goo. There were crushed pieces of calcined material that looked like cuttlebone. The thin plates of charred stuff might almost have been pressed cardboard. Foot-long tubes of thin, tin-coated iron contained combined chemicals identifiable as proteins, carbohydrates and fats. Food, we decided.

Naturally, we figured that here was a wonderful clue to the plant and animal life of another world. Take a can of ordinary beef goulash; you can see the fibrous muscle and fat structure of the meat, and the cellular components of the vegetables. And here it was true, too, to a lesser degree. There were thin flakes and small, segmented cylinders which must have been parts of plants. But most was a homogeneous mush like gelatin.

Evidently there had been three occupants of the craft. But the crash and the fire had almost destroyed their forms. Craig, our biologist, made careful slides of the remains, tagging this as horny epidermis, this as nerve or brain tissue, this as skeletal substance, and this as muscle from a tactile member—the original had been as thin as spaghetti, and dark-blooded.

Under the microscope, muscle cells proved to be very long and thin. Nerve cells were large and extremely complex. Yet you could say that Nature, starting from scratch in another place, and working through other and perhaps more numerous millions of years, had arrived at somewhat the same results as it had achieved on Earth.

I wonder how an other-world entity, ignorant of humans, would explain a shaving-kit or a lipstick. Probably for like reasons, much of the stuff mashed into that wreck had to remain incomprehensible to us. Wrenches and screwdrivers,

however, we could make sense of, even though the grips of those tools were not *hand-grips*. We saw screws and bolts, too. One device we found had been a simple crystal diaphragm with metal details—a radio. There were queer rifles. Lord knows how many people have wondered what the extraterrestrial equivalents of common human devices would look like. Well, here were some answers.

A few of the instruments even had dials with pointers. And the numeral 1 used on them was a vertical bar, almost like our own. But zero was a plus sign. And they counted by twelves, not tens.

But all these parallels with our own culture seemed canceled by the fact that, even when this ship was in its original undamaged state, no man could have gotten inside it. The difficulty was less a matter of human size than of shape and physical behavior. The craft seemed to have been circular, with compartmentation in spiral form, like a chambered nautilus.

This complete divergence from things we knew sent frost imps racing up and down my spine.

And it prompted Blaine to say: "I suppose that emotions, drives, and purposes among off-Earth intelligences must be utterly inconceivable to us."

We were assembled in the big trailer that had been brought out for us to live in, while we made a preliminary survey of the wreck.

"Only about halfway, Blaine," Miller answered. "Granting that the life-chemistry of those intelligences is the same as ours—the need for food creates the drive of hunger. Awareness of death is balanced by the urge to avoid it. There you have fear and combativeness. And is it so hard to tack on the drives of curiosity, invention, and ambition, especially when you know that these beings made a spaceship? Cast an intelligence in any outward form, anywhere, it ought to come out much the same. Still, there are bound to be wide differences of detail—with wide variations of viewpoint. They could be horrible to us. And most likely it's mutual."

I felt that Miller was right. The duplication of a human race on other worlds by another chain of evolution was highly improbable. And to suppose that we might get along with other entities on a human basis seemed pitifully naive.

With all our scientific thoroughness, when it came to examining, photographing and recording everything in the wreck, there was no better evidence of the clumsy way we were investigating unknown things than the fact that at first we neglected our supreme find almost entirely.

It was a round lump of dried red mud, the size of a soft

baseball. When Craig finally did get around to X-raying it, indications of a less dense interior and feathery markings suggesting a soft bone structure showed up on the plate. Not entirely sure that it was the right thing to do, he opened the shell carefully.

Think of an artichoke . . . but not a vegetable. Dusky pink, with thin, translucent mouth-flaps moving feebly. The blood in the tiny arteries was very red—rich in hemoglobin, for a rare atmosphere.

As a youngster, I had once opened a chicken egg, when it was ten days short of hatching. The memory came back now.

"It looks like a growing embryo of some kind," Klein stated.

"Close the lump again, Craig," Miller ordered softly.

The biologist obeyed.

"A highly intelligent race of beings wouldn't encase their developing young in mud, would they?" Klein almost whispered.

"You're judging by a human esthetic standard," Craig offered. "Actually, mud can be as sterile as the cleanest surgical gauze."

The discussion was developing unspoken and shadowy ramifications. The thing in the dusty red lump—whether the young of a dominant species, or merely a lower animal—had been born, hatched, started in life probably during the weeks or months of a vast space journey. Nobody would know anything about its true nature until, and if, it manifested itself. And we had no idea of what that manifestation might be. The creature might emerge an infant or an adult. Friendly or malevolent. Or even deadly.

Blaine shrugged. Something scared and half-savage showed in his face. "What'll we do with the thing?" he asked. "Keep it safe and see what happens. Yet it might be best to get rid of it fast—with chloroform, cyanide or the back of a shovel."

Miller's smile was very gentle. "Could be you're right, Blaine."

I'd never known Miller to pull rank on any of the bunch. Only deliberate thought would remind us that he was a colonel. But he wasn't really a military man; he was a scientist whom the Army had called in to keep a finger on a possibility that they had long known might be realized. Yes—space travel. And Miller was the right guy for the job. He had the dream even in the wrinkles around his deep-set gray eyes.

Blaine wasn't the right guy. He was a fine technician, good at machinery, radar—anything of the sort. And a nice fellow. Maybe he'd just blown off steam—uncertainty, tension.

I knew that no paper relating to him would be marked, "Psychologically unsuited for task in hand." But I knew just as surely that he would be quietly transferred. In a big thing like this, Miller would surround himself only with men who saw things his way.

That night we moved everything to our labs on the outskirts of St. Louis. Every particle of that extraterrestrial wreck had been packed and crated with utmost care. Klein and Craig went to work to build a special refuge for that mud lump and what was in it. They were top men. But I had got tied up with Miller more or less by chance, and I figured I'd be replaced by an expert. I can say that I was a college man, but that's nothing.

I guess you can't give up participation in high romance without some regret. Yet I wasn't too sorry. I liked things the way they'd always been. My beer. My Saturday night dates with Alice. On the job, the atmosphere was getting a bit too rich and futuristic.

Later that evening, Miller drew me aside. "You've handled carrier pigeons and you've trained dogs, Nolan," he said. "You were good at both."

"Here I go, back to the farmyard."

"In a way. But you expand your operations, Nolan. You specialize as nurse for a piece of off-the-Earth animal life."

"Look, Miller," I pointed out. "Ten thousand professors are a million times better qualified, and rarin' to go."

"They're liable to *think* they're very qualified, when no man could be—yet. That's bad, Nolan. The one who does it has to be humble enough to be wary—ready for whatever *might* happen. I think a knack with animals might help. That's the best I can do, Nolan."

"Thanks, Miller." I felt proud—and a little like a damn fool.

"I haven't finished talking yet," Miller said. "We know that real contact between our kind and the inhabitants of another world can't be far off. Either they'll send another ship or we'll build one on Earth. I like the idea, Nolan, but it also scares the hell out of me. Men have had plenty of trouble with other ethnic groups of their own species, through prejudice, misunderstanding, honest suspicion. How will it be at the first critical meeting of two kinds of things that will look like hallucinations to each other? I suspect an awful and inevitable feeling of separateness that nothing can bridge—except maybe an impulse to do murder.

"It could be a real menace. But it doesn't have to be. So we've got to find out what we're up against, if we can. We've got to prepare and scheme. Otherwise, even if intentions on

that other world are okay, there's liable to be an incident at that first meeting that can spoil a contact across space for all time, and make interplanetary travel not the success it ought to be, but a constant danger. So do you see our main objective, Nolan?"

I told Miller that I understood.

That same night, Klein and Craig put the lump of mud in a small glass case from which two-thirds of the air had been exhausted. The remainder was kept dehydrated and chilled. It was guess work, backed up by evidence: The rusty red of that mud; the high hemoglobin content of the alien blood we had seen; the dead-air cells—resistant to cold—in the shreds of rough skin that we had examined. And then there was the fair proximity of Mars and Earth in their orbits at the time.

My job didn't really begin till the following evening, when Craig and Klein had completed a much larger glass cage, to which my outlandish—or, rather, outworldish—ward was transferred. Miller provided me with a wire-braced, airtight costume and oxygen helmet, the kind fliers use at extreme altitudes. Okay, call it a spacesuit. He also gave me a small tear-gas pistol, an automatic, and a knife.

All there was to pit such armament against was a seemingly helpless lump of protoplasm, two inches in diameter. Still, here was an illustration of how cautiously you are prompted to treat so unknown a quantity. You are unable to gauge its powers, or lack of them, for you have nothing on which to base a judgment.

I became like a monk—my pressure armor was my robe; the chilly semi-vacuum inside that glass cage, my cell. Nights out with Alice were going to be far between.

On the third evening, that lump of mud, resting in dried-out soil similar to itself, split along the line where Craig had originally cut it. Out onto the cage floor crept what the records designated as *E.T.L.*—Extra-Terrestrial-Life. It was finished with the mud shell that had enabled it to survive a crash and fire.

Craig, Klein, Miller and a lot of news reporters stared into the glass cage from outside. There was nothing for me to do just then except watch that tiny monster, and try to read, in its every clumsy, dragging movement, some fragmentary unveiling of many riddles.

Although it might have shrunk a bit since I had last seen it, it looked more complete. The dusky pink of its wrinkled integument was darker. It had dozens of short tendrils, hardly thicker than horsehair, with which it pulled itself along. It had lost some leaflike pieces of skin. Laterally, two eyes

gleamed, clear and slit-pupiled. Its jaws, hinged on a horizontal plane, opened and closed between fleshy flaps. Through the thin plastic of my oxygen helmet, I heard a querulous "chip-chip-chip," which reminded me of the squeaking of an infant bat.

The E.T.L. crept in a small looping course on the cage floor, back to one half of the mud shell that had encased it. It tried to mount this, perhaps to gain a vantage point for better observation. But it fell and turned over. Its ventral surface was ceilingward; its tendrils writhed furiously as it tried to right itself. I thought of a horseshoe crab, stranded on its back and kicking helplessly. But this thing's form and movement were even more alien.

After a moment, I followed an impulse which was part duty to my job and part pity. I tipped the little horror back on its bottom, glad that there was a glove between me and it. Then I did the same thing I would do with a pet puppy or kitten. I set a dish of food—chemically prepared to duplicate the contents of the tubes we had found in the wreck—right down in front of the E.T.L.

It fumbled at the stuff and, possibly because of a gravity two-and-a-half times as great as it was made for, it almost got itself stuck in the mess. But it freed itself. Its mouth-flaps began to make lapping movements as it sucked the nourishment.

I felt prematurely relieved. This was no potentially dominant wizard in a strange body, I told myself. This was pure animal.

Over my helmet radiophone—there was a mike outside the cage, so they could communicate with me when I was inside—I heard Miller say to the reporters:

"The feeding instinct. They've got it, too. Now we know for sure . . ."

I think that the E.T.L. had colic from that first meal, though, like any half-smart puppy trainer, I tried not to let it eat too much. It writhed for a while, as if in pain. And I was on pins. How was I supposed to know just what was best to feed the thing, so it would survive? Everything was guesswork, varying formulas cautiously, groping. And it wasn't only the food. There was the searching for the temperature, the air-pressure and the degree of dryness at which the E.T.L. seemed most comfortable. And there was also the fiddling around with light-composition and intensities, variable in the sun lamps, to find what seemed best.

We seemed to have figured things out right—or else the monster was just rugged. It shed several skins, thrived and grew active. Its size increased steadily. And other things

began to grow in that cage. Odd, hard-shelled, bluish-green weeds; lichenous patches, dry as dust; invisible, un-Earthly bacteria—all were harmless, possibly even beneficial, to my charge.

How did all this stuff come into being? Miller and Craig had examined the dried clay of the E.T.L.'s discarded casing with microscopes. They scraped dust from every fragment of the wreck that hadn't been blasted too much with fire, and made cultures. They were looking for spores and seeds and microbes. And it wasn't long before they had classified quite a list of other-world biological forms. The most common of these they transplanted into the cage.

Often I even slept inside the cage, clad in my armor. That's devotion to a purpose for you. It was like living on a little piece of Mars. Often enough I was bored stiff.

But plenty did happen. From the start Etl—we began calling the thing that—showed an almost electrically intense curiosity for everything. Some of the habits of its kind were written in its instincts. It basked in strong light, but it liked dark corners, too. At night—when we turned the sun lamps off, that is—it would bury itself in the dusty soil. Protection against nocturnal cold might have been the reason for that.

When he was a month and two days out of his clay shell, Etl tried to rear up vertically on his tendrils. He kept toppling over. Maybe he was trying to "walk." But there were no bones in those tendrils and, of course, the strong Earth gravity defeated him.

Lots of times I tried to see what he could do. A real scientist would call this "making tests." I just called it fooling around. I made him climb a stool for his food. He seemed to make a careful survey first, eying each rung; then he drew himself up in one motion.

During one of my rare nights in town—to get a refresher from outlandish stuff in Alice's company—I bought some toys. When I came back to relieve Craig, who had taken care of Etl during my absence, I said: "Etl, here's a rubber ball. Let's play."

He caught it on the second try, in those swift, dextrous tendrils. There was a savagery in the way he did it. I thought of a dog snapping a bumblebee out of the air. Yet my idea that Etl was just an animal had almost vanished by then.

I got into the habit of talking to him the way you do to a pup. Sort of crooning. "Good fella, Etl. Smart. You learn fast, don't you?"

Stuff like that. And I'd coax him to climb up the front of my spacesuit. There were fine, barblike prongs along the length of his many tentacles; I could feel them pulling in the

tough, rubberized fabric, like the claws of a climbing kitten. And he would make a kind of contented chirping that might have had affection in it.

But then there was the time when he bit me. I don't know the reason, unless it was that I had held onto his ball too long. He got my finger, through the glove, with his snaggy, chalk-hued mandibles, while he made a thin hissing noise.

Pretty soon my hand swelled up to twice its size, and I felt sick. Klein had to relieve me in the cage for a while. The bite turned out to be mildly venomous. Before that, I'd had a rash on my arms. An allergy, probably; maybe some substance from those Martian plants had gotten inside my space-suit and rubbed onto my skin. Who knows? Perhaps Earthly flesh can sense alien life, and reddens to fight it off. And there you have one of the potential disadvantages of contact with unknown worlds.

That poisoned bite was one thing. But Etl's show of rage was another—a sign of the mixed nature of all his kind, emerging a bit from the shadows of enigma. Here revealed was the emotion on which things like murder are based. These creatures had it, just as we did. Maybe it's necessary for any kind of thing that can progress upward from nothing. Still, people did not find it reassuring when they heard about it on the newscast.

After that, popular opinion insisted that the cage be constantly surrounded by four manned machine-guns pointing inward. And tanks of cyanogen were so arranged that the poison gas could be sent gushing into the cage at any time.

Part of my mind felt these precautions were completely exaggerated. There is a certain, ever-present segment of any public, whose jittery imagination is a constant fuse-cap for panic. Such cowardice angered me.

But the rest of me went along with Miller when he said: "We're in the dark, Nolan. For all we know, we might be up against very swift maturity and inherited memory. And we've got to go on testing Etl . . . with toys, psychological apparatus and tools and devices made by his own people. Suppose he 'remembers' skills from his ancestors, and can build dangerous new devices, or make old ones work again? If his kind are bent on being enemies, we'd better find it out as soon as possible, too, hadn't we? No, I don't truly expect any serious developments, Nolan. Still—just for insurance—eh?"

A year passed without great mishap—unless I should mention that Alice and I got married. But it didn't spoil anything, and it raised my morale. We got a bungalow right on the lab grounds.

A lot had been accomplished, otherwise. Once I let Etl play with my gun, minus cartridges. He was avidly interested; but he paid no attention to the Hopalong cap pistol that I left in its place when I took the gun back. He figured out how to grip simple Martian tools, threading his tactile members through the holes in their handles; but complicated devices of the same origin seemed more of a puzzle to him than to the rest of us. So our inherited-memory idea faded out.

Etl liked to work with those slender tendrils of his. The dexterity and speed with which he soon learned to build many things with a construction set seemed to prove a race background of perhaps ages of such activities. I made a tower or a bridge, while he watched. Then he was ready to try it on his own, using screwdrivers that Klein had made with special grips.

Of course we tried dozens of intelligence tests on Etl, mostly of the puzzle variety, like fitting odd-shaped pieces of plastic together to form a sphere or a cube. He was hard to rate on any common human I.Q. scale. Even for an Earthian, an I.Q. rating is pretty much of a makeshift proposition. There are too many scattered factors that can't be touched.

With Etl, it was even tougher. But at the end of that first year Miller had him pegged at about 120, judging him on the same basis as a five-year-old child. This score scared people a lot, because it seemed to hint at a race of super-beings.

But Miller wasn't jumping to conclusions. He pointed out to the reporters that Etl's kind seemed to grow up very rapidly; 120 was only twenty points above the norm—not uncommon among Earth youngsters, especially those from more gifted families. Etl seemed to have sprung from corresponding parentage, he said, for it seemed clear that they had been of the kind that does big things. They'd made a pioneering voyage across space, hadn't they?

Etl could make chirps and squeaks and weird animal cries. Human speech, however, was beyond his vocal powers, though I knew that he could understand simple orders. He had a large tympanic membrane or "ear" on his ventral surface. Of course we wondered how his kind communicated with one another. The way he groped at my fingers with certain of his tentacles gave us a clue. There were tiny, nerve-like threads at their extremities. Seeing them prompted Miller to do something as brave as it was foolhardy.

He called in a surgeon and had a nerve in his arm bared. It must have hurt like the devil, but he let Etl clutch it with those thread-like members.

I was cockeyed enough to follow Miller's example and found out how much it really hurt. The idea was to establish

a nerve channel, brain to brain, along which thoughts might pass. But nothing came through except a vague and restless questioning, mixed with the pain of our experiment.

"It doesn't work with us, Nolan," Miller said regretfully. "Our nervous systems aren't hooked up right for this sort of stunt, or Etl's nerve cells are too different from ours."

So we had to fall back on simpler methods of communication with Etl. We tried teaching him sign language, but it didn't work too well, because tentacles aren't hands. Klein's inventive ability, plus some pointers from me about how Etl used his tendrils, finally solved the problem.

Klein made a cylindrical apparatus with a tonal buzzer, operated by electricity, at one end. It had dozens of stops and controls, their grips in the shape of tiny metal rings, along the sides of the cylinder.

First I had to learn a little about how to work that instrument with my big fingers. The trick was to mold the sounds of the buzzer, as human lips and tongue mold and shape tones of the vocal cords, so that they became syllables and words.

"Hell-oh-g-g-Et-t-l-l . . . Chee-s-s-ee-whad-d I-ee got-t?"

It was tougher for me than learning to play a saxophone is for a boy of ten. And the noises were almost as bad.

I turned the apparatus over to Etl as soon as I could. Let him figure out how to use it. I'd just give him the words, the ideas. Of course he had to get educated, learn his cat, dog and rat, and his arithmetic, the same as a human kid, even if he was from another world. In a way, it was the law. You can't let a youngster, capable of learning, stay home from school.

And I was Etl's tutor. I thought what a crazy situation we had here; an entity from one planet being brought up on another, without any real knowledge of his own folks, and unable to be very close to those entities by whom he was being reared. It was strange and sad and a little comic.

For a while I thought I had a stammering parrot on my hands: "Hel-l-l-lo . . . Hell-oh-g-o . . . N-n-ol-l-an-n-n . . . Hell-lo-oh."

Etl never lost that habit of repetition. But he made progress in his studies.

"One, two, t'ree, fo', fibe, siss . . . One time one ee one. toot time one ee two . . ."

Picture it the way it was—I, clad in a spacesuit, crouching beside Etl in the cold, thin air inside that cage, tracing numbers and words in the dusty soil on the floor, while he read aloud with his voice tube or copied my words and figures with a sharp stick. Outside the transparent cage, the television cameras would be watching. And I would think that

maybe in a way Etl was like Tarzan, being raised by apes.

Four more years went by. I had offspring of my own. Patty and Ron. Good-looking, lovable brats. But Etl was my job—and maybe a little more than that.

At the end of two years, he stopped growing. He weighed fifty-two pounds and he was the ugliest-looking, elongated, gray-pink, leathery ovoid that you could imagine. But with his voice tube clutched in his tendrils, he could talk like a man.

He could take the finest watch apart, repair and clean it in jig-time—and this was just one skill among scores. Toward the end of the four years, a Professor Jonas was coming in regularly and getting into a spacesuit to give him lessons in physics, chemistry, college math, astronomy and biology. Etl was having his troubles with calculus.

And Etl could at least ape the outward aspects of the thoughts and feelings of men. There were things he said to me that were characteristic, though they came out of apparent sullenness that, for all I knew, had seeds of murder in it: "You're my pal, Nolan. Sort of my uncle. I won't say my father; you wouldn't like that."

Nice, embarrassing sentiment, on the surface. Maybe it was just cool mimicry—a keen mind adding up human ways from observation of me and my kids, and making up something that sounded the same, without being the same at all. Yet somehow I hoped that Etl was sincere.

Almost from the building of the cage, of course, we'd kept photographs and drawings of Mars inside for Etl to see.

Hundreds of times I had said to him things like: It's a ninety-nine and ninety-nine hundredths per cent probability that your race lives on that world, Etl. Before the ship that brought you crashed on Earth, we weren't at all sure that it was inhabited, and it's still an awful mystery. I guess maybe you'll want to go there. Maybe you'll help us make contact and establish amicable relations with the inhabitants—if there's any way we can do that."

During those five years, no more ships came to Earth from space, as far as we knew. I guessed that the Martians understood how supremely hard it would be to make friendly contact between the peoples of two worlds that had always been separate. There was difference of form, and certainly difference of esthetic concepts. Of custom, nothing could be the same. We didn't have even an inkling of what the Martian civilization would be like.

One thing happened during the third year of Etl's existence.

And his presence on Earth was responsible. Enough serious interest in space travel was built up to overcome the human inertia that had counteracted the long-standing knowledge that such things were possible. A hydrogen-fusion reaction motor was built into a rocket, which was then hurled to the moon.

Miller went along, ostensibly to help establish the first Army experimental station there, but mostly to acquire the practical experience for a far longer leap.

In a way, I wished I could have gone, too; but, after all, the shadows in Etl's background were far more intriguing than the dead and airless craters and plains of the lunar surface.

Before Miller and the other moon-voyagers even returned, Detroit was busy forging, casting and machining the parts for a better, larger and much longer-range rocket, to be assembled in White Sands, New Mexico.

When Miller got back, he was too eager and busy to say much about the moon. For the next two and a half years, he was mostly out in White Sands.

But during the first of our now infrequent meetings, he said to Craig and Klein and me: "When I go out to Mars, I'd like to keep my old bunch as crew. I need men I'm used to working with, those who understand the problems we're up against. I have a plan that makes sense. The trouble is, to join this expedition, a man has to be part damn-fool."

Klein chuckled. "I'll sell you some of mine."

I just nodded my way in. I'd never thought of backing out.

Craig grabbed Miller's hand and shook it.

Miller gave Etl a chance to say no. "You can stay on Earth if you want to, Etl."

But the creature said: "I have lived all my life with the idea of going, Miller. Thank you."

Miller briefed us about his plan. Then he, Klein, Craig and I all took a lot of psych tests—trick questioning and so forth to reveal defects of conviction and control. But we were all pretty well indoctrinated and steady. Etl had taken so many tests already that, if there were any flaws still hidden in him, they would probably never be found.

Mars and Earth were approaching closer to each other again in their orbital positions. A month before takeoff time, Craig, Klein and I took Etl, in a small air-conditioned cage, to White Sands. The ship towered there, silvery, already completed. We knew its structure and the function of its machinery intimately from study of its blueprints. But our

acquaintance with it had to be actual, too. So we went over it again and again, under Miller's tutelage.

Miller wrote a last message, to be handed to the newscast boys after our departure:

"If, by Martian action, we fail to return, don't blame the Martians too quickly, because there is a difference and a doubt. Contact between worlds is worth more than the poison of a grudge . . ."

I said good-by to Alice and the kids, who had come out to see me off. I felt pretty punk. Maybe I was a stinker, going off like that. But, on the other hand, that wasn't entirely the right way to look at things, because Patty's and Ron's faces fairly glowed with pride for their pa. The tough part, then, was for Alice, who knew what it was all about. Yet she looked proud, too. And she didn't go damp.

"If it weren't for the kids, I'd be trying to go along, Louie," she told me. "Take care of yourself."

She knew that a guy has to do what's in his heart. I think that the basic and initial motive of exploration is that richest of human commodities—high romance. The metallic ores and other commercial stuff that get involved later are only cheap by-products. To make the dream of space travel a reality was one of our purposes. But to try to forestall the danger behind it was at least as important.

We blasted off in a rush of fire that must have knocked down some self-operating television cameras. We endured the strangling thrust of acceleration, and then the weightlessness of just coasting on our built-up velocity. We saw the stars and the black sky of space. We saw the Earth dwindle away behind us.

But the journey itself, though it lasted ninety days, was no real adventure—comparatively speaking. There was nothing unpredictable in it. Space conditions were known. We even knew about the tension of nostalgia. But we understood, too, the mental attitudes that could lessen the strain. Crossing space to another world under the tremendous power of atomic fusion, and under the precise guidance of mathematics and piloting devices, reduces the process almost to a formula. If things go right, you get where you're going; if not, there isn't much you can do. Anyway, we had the feeling that the technical side of interplanetary travel was the simplest part.

There is a marking near the Martian equator shaped like the funnel of a gigantic tornado. It is the red planet's most conspicuous feature and it includes probably the least arid territory of a cold, arid world. Syrtis Major, it is called. Astronomers had always supposed it to be an ancient sea-

bottom. That was where our piloting devices were set to take us.

Over it, our retarding fore-jets blazed for the last time. Our retractable wings slid from their sockets and took hold of the thin atmosphere with a thump and a soft rustle. On great rubber-tired wheels, our ship—horizontal now, like a plane—landed in a broad valley that must have been cleared of boulders by Martian engineers countless ages before.

Our craft stopped rumbling. We peered from the windows of our cabin, saw the deep blue of the sky and the smaller but brilliant Sun. We saw little dusty whirlwinds, carved monoliths that were weathering away strange blue-green vegetation, some of which we could recognize. To the east, a metal tower glistened. And a mile beyond it there was a tremendous flat structure. An expanse of glassy roof shone. What might have been a highway curved like a white ribbon into the distance.

The scene was quiet, beautiful and sad. You could feel that here maybe a hundred civilizations had risen, and had sunk back into the dust. Mars was no older than the Earth; but it was smaller, had cooled faster and must have borne life sooner. Perhaps some of those earlier cultures had achieved space travel. But, if so, it had been forgotten until recent years. Very soon now its result would be tested. The meeting of alien entity with alien entity was at hand.

I looked at Etl, still in his air-conditioned cage. His stalked eyes had a glow and they swayed nervously. Here was the home-planet that he had never seen. Was he eager or frightened, or both?

His education and experience were Earthly. He knew no more of Mars than we did. Yet, now that he was here and probably at home, did difference of physical structure and emotion make him feel that the rest of us were enemies, forever too different for friendly contact? My hide began to pucker.

High in the sky, some kind of aircraft glistened. On the distant turnpike there were the shining specks of vehicles that vanished from sight behind a ridge shaggy with vegetation.

Miller had a tight, nervous smile. "Remember, men," he said. "Passivity. Four men can't afford to get into a fight with a whole planet."

We put on spacesuits, which we'd need if someone damaged our rocket. It had been known for years that Martian air was too thin and far too poor in oxygen for human lungs. Even Etl, in his cage, had an oxygen mask that Klein had made for him. We had provided him with this because the

Martian atmosphere, drifting away through the ages, might be even leaner than the mixture we'd given Etl on Earth. That had been based on spectroscopic analyses at 40 to 60 million miles' distance, which isn't close enough for any certainty.

Now all we could do was wait and see what would happen. I know that some jerks, trying to make contact with the inhabitants of an unknown world, would just barge in and take over. Maybe they'd wave a few times and grin. If instead of being met like brothers, they were shot at, they'd be inclined to start shooting. If they got out alive, their hatred would be everlasting. We had more sense.

Yet *passivity* was a word that I didn't entirely like. It sounded spineless. The art of balancing naive trust exactly against hard cynicism, to try to produce something that makes a little sense, isn't always easy. Though we knew something of Martians, we didn't know nearly enough. Our plan might be wrong; we might turn out to be dead idiots in a short time. Still, it was the best thing that we could think of.

The afternoon wore on. With the dropping temperature, a cold pearly haze began to form around the horizon. The landscape around us was too quiet. And there was plenty of vegetation at hand to provide cover. Maybe it had been a mistake to land here. But we couldn't see that an arid place would be any good either. We had needed to come to a region that was probably inhabited.

We saw a Martian only once—scampering across an open glade, holding himself high on his stiffened tentacles. Here, where the gravity was only thirty-eight percent of the terrestrial, that was possible. It lessened the eeriness a lot to know beforehand what a Martian looked like. He looked like Etl.

Later, something pinged savagely against the flank of our rocket. So there were trigger-happy individuals here, too. But I remembered how, on Earth, Etl's cage had been surrounded by machine-guns and cyanogen tanks, rigged to kill him quickly if it became necessary. That hadn't been malice, only sensible precaution against the unpredictable. And wasn't our being surrounded by weapons here only the same thing, from another viewpoint? Yet it didn't feel pleasant, sensible or not.

There were no more shots for half an hour. But our tension mounted with the waiting.

Finally Klein said through his helmet phone: "Maybe Etl ought to go out and scout around now."

Etl was naturally the only one of us who had much chance for success.

"Go only if you really want to, Etl," Miller said. "It could be dangerous even for you."

But Etl had already put on his oxygen mask. Air hissed into his cage from the greater pressure outside as he turned a valve. Then he unlatched the cage-door. He wouldn't be harmed by brief exposure to atmosphere of Earth-density while he moved to our rocket's airlock. Now he was getting around high on his tendrils. Like a true Martian.

He left his specially built pistol behind, according to plan. We had weapons, but we didn't mean to use them unless everything went dead wrong.

Etl's tendrils touched the dusty surface of Mars. A minute later, he disappeared behind some scrub growths. Then, for ten minutes, the pendant silence was heavy. It was broken by the sound of a shot, coming back to us thinly through the rarefied air.

"Maybe they got him," Craig said anxiously.

Nobody answered. I thought of an old story I'd read about a boy being brought up by wolves. His ways were so like an animal's that hunters had shot him. He had come back to civilization dead. Perhaps there was no other way.

By sundown, Etl had not returned. So three things seemed possible: He had been murdered. He had been captured. Or else he had deserted to his own kind. I began to wonder. What if we were complete fools? What if there were more than differences of body and background, plus the dread of newness, between Earthmen and Martians, preventing their friendship?

What if Martians were basically malevolent?

But speculation was useless now. We were committed to a line of action. We had to follow it through.

We ate a meager supper. The brief dusk changed to a night blazing with frigid stars. But the darkness on the ground remained until the jagged lump of light that was Phobos, the nearer moon, arose out of the west. Then we saw two shapes rushing toward our ship to find cover closer to it. As they hid themselves behind a clump of cactiform shrubs, I had only the memory of how I had seen them for a moment, their odd masks and accoutrements glinting, their supporting tendrils looking like tattered rags come alive in the dim moonlight.

We'd turned the light out in our cabin, so we couldn't be seen through the windows. But now we heard soft, scraping sounds against the outer skin of our rocket. Probably they meant that the Martians were trying to get in. I began to

sweat all over, because I knew what Miller meant to do. Here was a situation that we had visualized beforehand.

"We could shut them out till dawn, Miller," I whispered hoarsely. "We'd all feel better if the meeting took place in daylight. And there'd be less chance of things going wrong."

But Miller said, "We can't tell what they'd be doing in the dark meanwhile, Nolan. Maybe fixing to blow us up. So we'd better get this thing over with now."

I knew he was right. Active resistance to the Martians could never save us, if they intended to destroy us. We might have taken the rocket off the ground like a plane, seeking safety in the upper air for a while, if we could get it launched that way from the rough terrain. But using our jets might kill some of the Martians just outside. They could interpret it as a hostile act.

We didn't matter much, except to ourselves. And our primary objective was to make friendly contact with the beings of this planet, without friction, if it could be done. If we failed, space travel might become a genuine menace to Earth.

At Miller's order, Craig turned on our cabin lights. Miller pressed the controls of our ship's airlock. While its outer valve remained wide, the inner valve unsealed itself and swung slowly toward us. Our air whooshed out.

The opening of that inner valve meant we were letting horror in. We kept out of line of possible fire through the open door.

Our idea was to control our instinctive reactions to strangeness, to remain passive, giving the Martians a chance to get over their own probable terror of us by finding out that we meant no harm. Otherwise we might be murdering each other.

The long wait was agony. In spite of the dehumidifying unit of my spacesuit, I could feel the sweat from my body collecting in puddles in the bottoms of my boots. A dozen times there were soft rustles and scrapes at the airlock; then sounds of hurried retreat.

But at last a mass of gray-pink tendrils intruded over the threshold. And we saw the stalked eyes, faintly luminous in the shadowy interior of the lock. Grotesquely up-ended on its tentacles, the monster seemed to flow into the cabin. Over its mouth-palps was the cup of what must have been its oxygen mask.

What was clearly the muzzle of some kind of pistol, smoothly machined, was held ready by a mass of tendrils that suggested Gorgon hair. Behind the first monster was a second, similarly armed. Behind him was a third. After that I lost count, as the horde, impelled by fear to grab control

in one savage rush, spilled into the cabin with a dry-leaf rustle.

All my instincts urged me to yank my automatic out of my belt and let go at that flood of horror. Yes, that was in me, although I'd been in intimate association with Etl for four years. Psychologists say that no will power could keep a man's reflexes from withdrawing his hand from a hot stove for very long. And going for my gun seemed almost a reflex action.

There was plenty of sound logic to back up the urge to shoot. In the presence of the unfathomable, how could you replace the tried defenses of instinct with intellectual ideas of good will?

On the other hand, to shoot now would be suicide and ruin our hopes, besides. So maybe there'd have to be human sacrifices to faith between the planets. If we succeeded in following the plan, our faith would be proven either right or wrong. If we didn't act passively, the failure would be partly our fault. In any case, if we didn't get back to Earth, hatred and fear of the Martians would inevitably arise there, whether it had been the Martians' fault or ours. The message that Miller had left for newscast might only give people the self-righteous attitude that Earthly intentions had been good. If another expedition ever came to Mars, it might shoot any inhabitants on sight, and maybe get wiped out itself.

Still, how could we know that the Martians weren't preparing the kind of invasion of Earth that had been imagined so often? It was a corny notion, but the basis for it remained sound. Mars was a dying world. Couldn't the Martians still want a new planet to move to?

All these old thoughts popped back into my head during that very bad moment. And if I was almost going for my pistol, how much worse was it for Craig, Klein and Miller, who hadn't been as friendly with Etl as I had been? Maybe we should have put our weapons out of our own reach, in preparation for this incident. Then there would have been no danger of our using them.

But any freedom of action was swiftly wrested from us. The Martians rolled over us in a wave. Thousands of dark tendrils with fine, sawlike spines latched onto our bodies. I was glad that I wore a spacesuit, as much from the revulsion I felt at a direct contact as for the small protection it gave against injury.

I am sure that there was panic behind that wild Martian rush. To get us pinned down and helpless quickly, they

drove themselves in spite of their own fear of the horrid human forms. For did I feel a tremor in those tendrils, a tendency to recoil from me? I was trembling and sweating. Still, my impressions were vivid. Those monsters held us down as if they were Malay beaters holding down trapped pythons. Maybe they had known beforehand what men looked like—from previous, secret expeditions to Earth. Just as we had known about Martians from Etl. But it wouldn't have made any difference.

Or perhaps they weren't even aware that we were from the neighboring planet. But it would be obvious that we were from another world; nothing from their own planet could be so strange.

Our own reactions to the situation differed a little. Craig gasped curses through his helmet phones. Miller said, "Easy, men! Easy!" It was as if he were trying to build up his own morale, too. I couldn't utter a sound.

It wasn't hard for our captors to recognize our weapons. We were disarmed. They carried us out into the night and around a hill. We were piled onto a flat metallic surface. A vehicle under us began to throb and move; you could have called it a truck. The nature of its mechanism was hinted at only by a small, frosty wisp of steam of vapor up front. Perhaps it came from a leak. The Martians continued to hold us down as savagely as ever. Now and then a pair of them would join the nerve-ends of tendrils, perhaps to converse. Others would chirp or hoot for no reason that I could understand.

The highway rolled away behind us, under the light of Phobos. Buildings passed, vague as buildings along a road usually are at night. It was the same with the clumps of vegetation. Lights, which might have been electrical, flashed into my eyes and passed by. In a deep valley through which we moved in part of our short trip, a dense, stratified fog arose between the lights and me. I noticed with an odd detachment that the fog was composed of minute ice crystals, which glinted in the glow of the strange lamps. I tried to remember our course. I knew that it was generally east. Off in the night there were clangings and hisses that might have been factory noises.

Once Miller asked, "Is everybody okay?"

Klein's and Craig's responses were gruff and unsteady in the phones.

"Sure . . ."

"More or less—if heart-failure doesn't get me."

"I guess our skins are still intact," I said.

We didn't talk after that.

At last we entered a long, downward-slanting tunnel full of soft luminescence that seemed to come out of the white-tiled walls themselves. My attention grew a little vague. It could be that my mind turned in on itself, like a turtle drawing in its head for protection. In that state of semi-consciousness, I experienced a phantasm. I imagined I was a helpless grub being dragged down into the depths of an ant-hill.

But such a grub belongs in an ant-hill a lot more than a man belonged where I was going. This became plainer when the large tunnel ended, and we were dragged and carried along winding burrows, never more than three feet in diameter. Mostly they were tiled, but often their walls were of bare rock or soil. Twice we passed through airlocks.

I couldn't describe too much of what I saw or the noises I heard in those warrens. In one place, incandescence glowed and wheels turned. In a great low-ceilinged chamber full of artificial sun-rays there was a garden with strange blooms. The architecture of the city was not altogether utilitarian and it was not unpleasing. I saw a lot more. But my mind was somewhat fuzzy, probably from shock and fatigue.

I know we traversed another chamber, where trays full of round lumps of soil were set in frames. A Martian nursery, no doubt.

Some minutes later, my companions and I were left in a small room, high enough so that we could stand erect in it. Here the Martians let go of us. We sprawled on the floor, faces down. We'd had a busy day. Our nerve-energy was burned out.

Hopelessness warped all of my thoughts. I must have slipped into the coma of exhaustion. I had jangled dreams about Alice and the kids and home, and almost imagined I was there.

Half awake again, I had a cursing spree, calling myself fifty kinds of a numbskull. Be passive before the people of other worlds! Reassure them! How did we ever think up that one? We'd been crazy. Why didn't we at least use our guns when we'd had the chance? It wouldn't have made any difference to be killed right away.

Now we were sacrificial lambs on the altar of a feather-brained idea that the inhabitants of worlds that had always been separate from the beginning should become friends, learn to swap and to benefit from the diverse phases of each other's cultures. How could Martians who hatched out of lumps of mud be like humans at all?

Klein, Craig, Miller and I were alone in that room. There

were crystal-glazed spy-windows in the walls. Perhaps we were still being observed.

While I was sleeping, the exit had been sealed with a circular piece of glassy stuff. Near the floor there were vents through which air was being forced into the room. Hidden pumps, which must have been hastily rigged for our reception, throbbed steadily.

Miller, beside me, had removed his oxygen helmet. His grin was slightly warped as he said to me: "Well, Nolan, here's another parallel with what we've known before. We had to keep Etl alive in a cage. Now the same thing is being done to us."

This could be regarded as a service, a favor. Yet I was more inclined to feel that I was like something locked up in a zoo. Maybe Etl's case was a little different. For the first thing he had known in life was his cage.

I removed my oxygen helmet, too, mainly to conserve its air-purifier unit, which I hoped I might need sometime soon—in an escape.

"Don't look so glum, Nolan," Miller told me. "Here we have just what we need, a chance to observe and learn and know the Martians better. And it's the same for them in relation to us. It's the best situation possible for both worlds."

I was thinking mostly—belatedly—of my wife and kids. Right then, Miller was a crackpot to me, a monomaniac, a guy whose philosophical viewpoint went way beyond the healthy norm. And I soon found that Craig and Klein agreed with me now. Something in our attitude had shifted.

I don't know how long we were in that sealed room. A week, perhaps. We couldn't see the daylight. Our watches had vanished along with our weapons. Sometimes there were sounds of much movement in the tunnels around us; sometimes little. But the variation was too irregular to indicate a change based on night and day.

Lots of things happened to us. The air we breathed had a chemical smell. And the Martians kept changing its composition and density constantly—experimenting, no doubt. Now it would be oppressively heavy and humid; now it would be so dry and thin that we began to feel faint. They also varied the temperature, from below freezing to Earthly desert heat. And I suspected that at times there was a drug in the air.

Food was lowered to us in metal containers from a circular airlock in the ceiling. It was the same kind of gelatinous stuff that we had found in the wreck of the ship that had brought the infant Etl to Earth. We knew that it was

nourishing. Its bland sweetishness was not to our taste, but we had to eat.

Various apparatus was also lowered to us. There were odd mechanical puzzles that made me think how grotesquely Earthly Martian scientific attitudes were. And there was a little globe on a wire, the purpose of which was never figured out, though Miller got an electric shock from it.

I kept looking for Etl among the Martians at the spy-windows, hoping that he'd turn up again. I had noticed that Martians showed variations of appearance, like humans—longer or shorter eye-stalks, lighter or darker tendrils . . . I figured I'd recognize Etl. But I didn't see him.

We were none of us quite ourselves. Not even Miller, whose scientific interest in the things around him sustained him even in captivity. Mine had worn out. And Klein and Craig were no better off. I was desperately homesick, and I felt a little ill, besides.

I managed to loosen the metal heel-plate from one of my boots, and with this, when I thought that no Martian was watching, I started to dig the gummy cement from around the circular glassy disc with which the main exit of our quarters had been sealed. Craig, Klein and I worked at it in brief and sporadic shifts. We didn't really hope that we could escape. It was just something to do.

"We're going to try to get to the ship, Miller, if it's still there," I whispered once. "Probably it won't work. Want to join up with the rest of us?"

I just didn't think of him as being in command now. And he seemed to agree, because he didn't protest against my high-handed way of talking. Also, he didn't argue against a projected rashness that could easily get us killed. Apparently he understood that our lives weren't worth much to us as things were.

He smiled a little. "I'll stick around, Nolan. If you do manage to get back to Earth, don't make the Martians sound too bad."

"I won't," I answered, troubled by an odd sense of regret.

Loosening that exit disc proved in the end to be no special trick. Then we just waited for a lull in the activity in the tunnels around us. We all put on our oxygen helmets, Miller included, for the air-pressure here in our "cage" would drop as soon as the loosened disc was dislodged. We put our shoulders against it and pushed. It popped outward. Then the three of us, with Miller staying behind, scrambled on hands and knees through the tunnel that lay before us.

A crazy kind of luck seemed to be with us. For one thing,

we didn't have to retrace our way along the complicated route by which we had been brought down to our prison. In a minute we reached a wide tunnel that slanted upward. A glassy rotary airlock worked by a simple lever—for, of course, most of the city's air would be pressurized to some extent for the Martians—led into it.

The main passage wasn't exactly deserted, but we traversed it in leaps and bounds, taking advantage of the weak Martian gravity. Shapes scattered before us, chirping and squeaking.

We reached the surface quickly. It was frigid night. We stumbled away into it, taking cover under some lichenous bushes, while we looked for the highway. It was there, plain to see, in the light of Phobos. We dashed on toward it, across what seemed to be a planted field. A white layer of ice-crystal mist flowed between and over those tough cold-endured growths. For a minute, just as two shots rang out behind us, we were concealed by it completely.

I thought to myself that, to the Martians, we were like escaped tigers or leopards—only worse. For a moment I felt that we had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. But, as we reached the highway, my spirits began to soar. Perhaps—only perhaps—I'd see my family again before too long. There was traffic on the road, trains of great soft-tired wagons, pulled by powered vehicles ahead. I wondered if, like on Earth, much freight was moved at night to avoid congestion.

"When I was a college kid, I used to hitch-hike sometimes," Craig remarked.

"I don't guess we had better try that here," Klein said. "What we can do is more of a hobo stunt."

We found the westerly direction we needed easily enough from the stars. The constellations naturally looked the same as they did at home. We hid behind some rustling leaves, dry as paper, and waited for the next truck train to pass. When one came, we used the agility which Martian gravity gave us and rushed for the tail-end wagon and scrambled aboard. There we hid ourselves under a kind of coarse-fibered tarpaulin.

Peering past boxes and bales, we kept cautious watch of the road. We saw strange plaques, which might have served as highway signs. Again we saw buildings and passing lights.

We were dopes of course, ever to think that we were going to get away with this. Our overwrought nerves had urged us to unreasoning rebellion, and we had yielded to them.

Our last hope was punctured when at last we saw the floodlights that bathed our ship. The taste on my tongue was suddenly bitter. There were roughly three things we could do now, and none of the choices was especially attractive.

We could go back where we had come from. We could try to keep concealed in the countryside, until we were finally hunted down, or until our helmet air-purifiers wore out and we smothered. Or we could proceed to our rocket, which was now surrounded by a horde of Martians. Whichever one we chose, it looked as if the end would be the same—death.

"I'm for going on to the ship," Klein said in a harsh whisper.

"The same with me," Craig agreed. "It's where we want to go. If they're going to kill or capture us, it might as well be there."

Suddenly, for no good reason, I thought of something. No special safeguards had been set up around that sealed room in the city.

Escape had been easy. What did that mean?

"Okay," I said. "Maybe you've both got the same hunch I just got. We walk very slowly toward our rocket. We get into the light as soon as possible. Does that sound right to you? We'd be going back to the plan. And, it could be, to common sense."

"All right," Klein answered.

"We'll give it a whirl," Craig agreed.

We jumped off that freight wagon at the proper moment and moved toward the rocket. Nothing that we'd done on Mars—not even making our first acquaintance with the inhabitants—was as ticklish an act.

Step after slow step, we approached the floodlighted area, keeping close together before that horde which still looked horrible to us. One thing in our favor was that the Martians here had probably been warned of our escape by whatever means of communication they used. And they could certainly guess that our first objective would be our ship. Hence they would not be startled into violence by our sudden appearance.

One of them fired a shot which passed over our heads. But we kept on going, making our movements as unafrightening as we could to counteract the dread of us that they must have still felt.

Panic and the instinctive fear of the strange were balanced in our minds against reason. We got to the nose of our ship, then to the open doors of its airlock. The horde kept moving back before us and we clambered inside. Martian eyes remained wary, but no more action was taken against us.

Our cabin had been ransacked. Most of the loose stuff had been removed . . . even my picture of Alice, and our two kids.

"Who cares about trifles?" I muttered. "Rap on wood, guys—I think we've won. So have the local people."

"You're right," Klein breathed. "What other reason can

there be for their not jumping us? Miller's passive strategy must've worked the first time. The story that we meant no harm must have gotten around. They don't want to make trouble, either. And who, with any sense, does?"

I felt good—maybe too good. I wondered if the Martians felt the same eager fascination for the enigmas of space that we felt, in spite of the same fear of the nameless that we too could feel. My guess was that they did. Undoubtedly they also wanted interplanetary relations to be smooth. They could control their instinctive doubts to help attain this objective. If they coveted Earth's resources, it was still far away, and could defend itself. Besides, they were not built to live in comfort under the raw conditions of its strange environment. Commerce was the only answer.

Suddenly Mars was no longer a hostile region to me, out in the reaches of space. Again it was full of endless, intriguing mysteries. It was beautiful. And knowledge of that beauty and mystery had been won, in spite of some blundering. The scheme that we had practiced, and that Miller had stuck to, had paid off. It had broken down that first inevitable barrier of alienness between Earthmen and Martians enough so that they now had a chance to start looking for the countless similarities between us.

A fraction of our food stores aboard the rocket had been taken, probably for analysis. But there was plenty more. We closed the airlock, repressurized the cabin from air-tanks, and cooked ourselves a meal. Then we slept in shifts, one of us always awake as guard.

At dawn, Miller hammered at a window. He'd been brought out from the city. We weren't too surprised by then.

Etl turned up at noon. He came in a kind of plane, which landed right beside our rocket, making quite a noise. I recognized him easily enough; I'd know those eye-stalks anywhere. Besides, as he came out of the plane, he was carrying the speech-tube that Klein had made for him.

We let him into the cabin. "Hello, gang," he said, manipulating the tube with his tendrils. "I see you passed your tests almost as well as I did on those weird things you were always making me take on Earth."

"So they were tests," I said.

"Sure. Otherwise, why do you think I didn't come to you before? They said you had to solve your own problems."

"How did they treat you?" Miller wanted to know.

"Mostly my people were nice to me. They took me to a great desert city, far away. Sort of the capital of Mars. It's in an 'oasis' where a network of 'canals' join. The canals fit an old theory of your astronomers. They're ribbons of ir-

rigated vegetation. But the water is piped underground. I spoke to my people in the way that you once thought I would, trying to convince them that you were okay. But I guess that you did most of the job yourselves."

"In spite of a lot of blunders, maybe we did, Etl," I replied dryly. "What are your plans? Going to stay here now? Or will you come back with us?"

I sensed that he would stay. It was natural. Maybe I even sensed a remoteness in him, a kind of withdrawal. Not unfriendly, but . . . we both knew it was the parting of the ways.

"It's best for what we're trying to accomplish, Nolan," he said. "I can tell my people about Earth; you can tell yours about Mars. Besides, I like it here. But I'll be back on Earth some time. Just so you'll come here again. Thanks to you guys for everything."

"I'd like to stay too, Nolan," Miller said, smiling. "If they'll have me. Under Etl's instructions, they might improve my quarters."

So that much was settled. I felt a certain longing myself now. But I'm a family man, with home still in my blood. Klein and Craig weren't tied as I was, but they had a lot to hold them to Earth. Besides, somebody had to report back.

We were on Mars two days longer, though we didn't go any farther than back to the neighboring city. We took thousands of photographs. We were given samples of common Martian apparatus, pieces of jade that were covered with queer, beautiful carvings made millions of years before, bars of radioactive metal.

Earth was still near enough in its orbit to be reached without too much trouble. We jacked our rocket into a vertical position, from which an interplanetary takeoff could best be made. The cabin, swinging on its universal joints, stayed level. Martians watched, interested, but still obviously not quite ready to cast aside their deeper suspicions. Yet, when we blasted clear, we knew that a ship of theirs, halfway around the planet, was doing the same and would follow us back to Earth. Ambassadors, of course, and commercial attachés.

I'd lost my picture of Alice, Patty and Ron to some local souvenir hunter. But I knew that I was going to see them . . .

The friendly contact between Earth and Mars can still be queered by somebody's silly blunder, of course. Human or Martian. You have to be careful. But a beginning has been made.

DIO

Damon Knight

The average mortal, possessed of little or no sense of Time—capital-T time, by the con—often says to himself, "Gosh, it sure would be great if I could live forever. Think of all the fun I could have, dames I could make, millions I could spend!" Others, with more imagination, shudder at the idea; immortality to them presents nothing but a vision of endless, dreary weariness.

Dio lived in a world of unimaginative immortals; they had a ball. Living from day to day, they never even thought about tomorrow—at least, not much. Dio, who had a mighty imagination—being a Planner, he had to have—also turned out to be mortal. And in that "disease," that shocking, truly human condition, he found greatness—and tragedy: the tragedy of age, that agonizing and (for him) unavoidable catastrophe.

How he lived up to it, faced it, is the basis of this story. It is one of the most memorable in modern science fiction.

It is noon. Overhead the sky like a great silver bowl shimmers with heat; the yellow sand hurls it back; the distant ocean is dancing with white fire. Emerging from underground, Dio the Planner stands blinking a moment in the strong salt light; he feels the heat like a cap on his head, and his beard curls crisply, iridescent in the sun.

A few yards away are five men and women, their limbs glinting pink against the sand. The rest of the seascape is utterly bare; the sand seems to stretch empty and hot for miles. There is not even a gull in the air. Three of the figures are men; they are running and throwing a beach ball at one another, with far-off shouts. The two women are half reclining, watching the men. All five are superbly muscled, with great arched chests, ponderous as Percherons. Their skins are smooth; their eyes sparkle. Dio looks at his own forearm: is there a trace of darkness? is the skin coarsening?

He drops his single garment and walks toward the group. The sand's caress is briefly painful to his feet; then his skin

adapts, and he no longer feels it. The five incuriously turn to watch him approach. They are all players, not students, and there are two he does not even know. He feels uncomfortable, and wishes he had not come. It isn't good for students and players to meet informally; each side is too much aware of the other's good-natured contempt. Dio tries to imagine himself a player, exerting himself to be polite to a student, and as always, he fails. The gulf is too wide. It takes both kinds to make a world, students to remember and make, players to consume and enjoy; but the classes should not mix.

Even without their clothing, these are players; the wide, innocent eyes that flash with enthusiasm, or flicker with easy boredom; the soft mouths that can be gay or sulky by turns. Now he deliberately looks at the blonde woman, Claire, and in her face he sees the same unmistakable signs. But, against all reason and usage, the soft curve of her lips is beauty; the poise of her dark-blonde head on the strong neck wrings his heart. It is illogical, almost unheard-of, perhaps abnormal; but he loves her.

Her gray eyes are glowing up at him like sea-agates; the quick pleasure of her smile warms and soothes him. "I'm so glad to *see* you." She takes his hand. "You know Katha of course, and Piet. And this is Tanno, and that's Mark. Sit here and talk to me, I can't move, it's so hot."

The ball throwers go cheerfully back to their game. The brunette, Katha, begins talking immediately about the choirs at Bethany: has Dio heard them? No? But he must; the voices are stupendous, the choir-master is brilliant; nothing like it has been heard for centuries.

The word "centuries" falls carelessly. How old is Katha—eight hundred, a thousand? Recently, in a three-hundred-year-old journal, Dio has been surprised to find a reference to Katha. There are so many people; it's impossible to remember. That's why the students keep journals; and why the players don't. He might even have met Claire before, and forgotten. . . . "No," he says, smiling politely, "I've been rather busy with a project."

"Dio is an Architectural Planner," says Claire, mocking him with the exaggerated syllables; and yet there's a curious, inverted pride in her voice. "I told you, Kat, he's a student among students. He rebuilds this whole sector, every year."

"Oh," says Katha, wide-eyed, "I think that's absolutely fascinating." A moment later, without pausing, she has changed the subject to the new sky circus in Littlam—perfectly vulgar, but hilarious. The sky clowns! The tumblers! The delicious mock animals!

Claire's smooth face is close to his, haloed by the sun,

gilded from below by the reflection of the hot sand. Her half-closed eyelids are delicate and soft, bruised by heat; her pupils are contracted, and the wide gray irises are intricately patterned. A fragment floats to the top of his mind, something he has read about the structure of the iris: ray-like dilating muscles interlaced with a circular contractile set, pigmented with a little melanin. For some reason, the thought is distasteful, and he pushes it aside. He feels a little light-headed; he has been working too hard.

"Tired?" she asks, her voice gentle.

He relaxes a little. The brunette, Katha, is still talking; she is one of those who talk and never care if anyone listens. He answers, "This is our busiest time. All the designs are coming back for a final check before they go into the master integrator. It's our last chance to find any mistakes."

"Dio, I'm sorry," she says contritely. "I know I shouldn't have asked you." Her brows go up; she looks at him anxiously under her lashes. "You should rest, though."

"Yes," says Dio.

She lays her soft palm on the nape of his neck. "Rest, then. Rest."

"Ah," says Dio wearily, letting his head drop into the crook of his arm. Under the sand where he lies are seventeen inhabited levels of which three are his immediate concern, over a sector that reaches from Alban to Detroy. He has been working almost without sleep for two weeks. Next season there is talk of beginning an eighteenth level; it will mean raising the surface again, and all the force-planes will have to be shifted. The details swim past, thousands of them; behind his closed eyes, he sees architectural tracings, blue-prints, code sheets, specifications.

"Darling," says her caressing voice in his ear, "you know I'm happy you came, anyhow, even if you didn't want to. *Because* you didn't want to. Do you understand that?"

He peers at her with one half-open eye. "A feeling of power?" he suggests ironically.

"No. Reassurance is more like it. Did you know I was jealous of your work? . . . I am, very much. I told myself: If he'll just leave his project, now, today—"

He rolls over, smiling crookedly up at her. "And yet you don't know one day from the next."

Her answering smile is quick and shy. "I know, isn't it awful of me: but *you* do."

As they look at each other in silence, he is aware again of the gulf between them. *They need us*, he thinks, *to make their world over every year—keep it bright and fresh, cover up the past—but they dislike us because they know that whatever they forget, we keep and remember.*

His hand finds hers. A deep, unreasoning sadness wells up in him; he asks silently, *Why should I love you?*

He has not spoken, but he sees her face contract into a rueful, pained smile; and her fingers grip hard.

Above them, the shouts of the ball throwers have changed to noisy protests. Dio looks up. Piet, the cotton-headed man, laughing, is afloat over the heads of the other two. He comes down slowly and throws the ball; the game goes on. But a moment later Piet is in the air again: the others shout angrily, and Tanno leaps up to wrestle with him. The ball drops, bounds away: the two striving figures turn and roll in mid-air. At length the cotton-headed man forces the other down to the sand. They both leap up and run over, laughing.

"Someone's got to tame this wild man," says the loser, panting. "I can't do it, he's too slippery. How about you, Dio?"

"He's resting," Claire protests, but the others chorus, "Oh, yes!" "Just a fall or two," says Piet, with a wide grin, rubbing his hands together. "There's lots of time before the tide comes in—unless you'd rather not?"

Dio gets reluctantly to his feet. Grinning, Piet floats up off the sand. Dio follows, feeling the taut surge of back and chest muscles, and the curious sensation of pressure on the spine. The two men circle, rising slowly. Piet whips his body over, head downward, arms slashing for Dio's legs. Dio overleaps him, and, turning, tries for a leg-and-arm; but Piet squirms away like an eel and catches him in a waist lock. Dio strains against the taut chest, all his muscles knotting; the two men hang unbalanced for a moment. Then, suddenly, something gives way in the force that buoys Dio up. They go over together, hard and awkwardly into the sand. There is a surprised babble of voices.

Dio picks himself up. Piet is kneeling nearby, white-faced, holding his forearm. "Bent?" asks Mark, bending to touch it gently.

"Came down with all my weight," says Piet. "Wasn't expecting—" He nods at Dio. "That's a new one."

"Well, let's hurry and fix it," says the other, "or you'll miss the spout." Piet lays the damaged forearm across his own thighs. "Ready?" Mark plants his bare foot on the arm, leans forward and presses sharply down. Piet winces, then smiles; the arm is straight.

"Sit down and let it knit," says the other. He turns to Dio. "What's this?"

Dio is just becoming aware of a sharp pain in one finger, and dark blood welling. "Just turned back the nail a little," says Mark. "Press it down, it'll close in a second."

Katha suggests a word game, and in a moment they are all sitting in a circle, shouting letters at each other. Dio does poorly; he cannot forget the dark blood falling from his fingertip. The silver sky seems oppressively distant; he is tired of the heat that pours down on his head, of the breathless air and the sand like hot metal under his body. He has a sense of helpless fear, as if something terrible had already happened; as if it were too late.

Someone says, "It's time," and they all stand up, whisking sand from their bodies. "Come on," says Claire over her shoulder. "Have you ever been up the spout? It's fun."

"No, I must get back, I'll call you later," says Dio. Her fingers lie softly on his chest as he kisses her briefly, then he steps away. "Good-bye," he calls to the others, "good-bye," and turning, trudges away over the sand.

The rest, relieved to be free of him, are halfway to the rocks above the water's edge. A white feather of spray dances from a fissure as the sea rushes into the cavern below. The water slides back, leaving mirror-wet sand that dries in a breath. It gathers itself; far out a comber lifts its green head, and rushes onward. "Not this one, but the next," calls Tanno.

"Claire," says Katha, approaching her, "it was so peculiar about your friend. Did you notice? When he left, his finger was still bleeding."

The white plume leaps higher, provoking a gust of nervous laughter. Piet dances up after it, waving his legs in a burlesque entrechat. "What?" says Claire. "You must be wrong. It couldn't have been."

"Now, come on, everybody. Hang close!"

"All the same," says Katha, "it was bleeding." No one hears her; she is used to that.

Far out, the comber lifts its head menacingly high; it comes onward, white-crowned, hard as bottle glass below, rising, faster, and as it roars with a shuddering of earth into the cavern, the Immortals are dashed high on the white torrent, screaming their joy.

Dio is in his empty rooms alone, pacing the resilient floor, smothered in silence. He pauses, sweeps a mirror into being on the bare wall: leans forward to peer at his own gray face, then wipes the mirror out again. All around him the universe presses down, enormous, inexorable.

The time stripe on the wall has turned almost black: the day is over. He has been here alone all afternoon. His door and phone circuits are set to reject callers, even Claire—his only instinct has been to hide.

A scrap of yellow cloth is tied around the hurt finger. Blood has saturated the cloth and dried, and now it is stuck

tight. The blood has stopped, but the hurt nail has still not reattached itself. There is something wrong with him; how could there be anything wrong with him?

He has felt it coming for days, drawing closer, invisibly. Now it is here.

It has been eight hours . . . his finger has still not healed itself.

He remembers that moment in the air, when the support dropped away under him. Could that happen again? He plants his feet firmly now, thinks, *Up*, and feels the familiar straining of his back and chest. But nothing happens. Incredulously, he tries again. Nothing!

His heart is thundering in his chest; he feels dizzy and cold. He sways, almost falls. It isn't possible that this should be happening to him. . . . Help; he must have help. Under his trembling fingers the phone index lights; he finds Claire's name, presses the selector. She may have gone out by now, but sector registry will find her. The screen pulses grayly. He waits. The darkness is a little farther away. Claire will help him, will think of something.

The screen lights, but it is only the neutral gray face of an autosec. "One moment please."

The screen flickers; at last, Claire's face!

"—is a recording, Dio. When you didn't call, and I couldn't reach you, I was very hurt. I know you're busy, but— Well, Piet has asked me to go over to Toria to play skeet polo, and I'm going. I may stay a few weeks for the flower festival, or go on to Rome. I'm sorry, Dio, we started out so nicely. Maybe the classes really don't mix. Good-bye."

The screen darkens. Dio is down on his knees before it. "Don't go," he says breathlessly. "Don't go." His last courage is broken; the hot, salt, shameful tears drop from his eyes.

The room is bright and bare, but in the corners the darkness is gathering, curling high, black as obsidian, waiting to rush.

CHAPTER II

The crowds on the lower level are a river of color, deep electric blue, scarlet, opaque yellow, all clean, crisp and bright. Flower scents puff from the folds of loose garments; the air is filled with good-natured voices and laughter. Back from five months' wandering in Africa, Pacifica and Europe, Claire is delightfully lost among the moving ways of Sector Twenty. Where the main concourse used to be, there is a maze of narrow adventure streets, full of gay banners and musky with perfume. The excursion cars are elegant little baskets of silver filigree, hung with airy grace. She gets into

one and soars up the canyon of windows on a long, sweeping curve, past terraces and balconies, glimpse after intimate glimpse of people she need never see again: here a woman feeding a big blue macaw, there a couple of children staring at her from a garden, solemn-eyed, both with ragged yellow hair like dandelions. How long it has been since she last saw a child! . . . She tries to imagine what it must be like, to be a child now in this huge world full of grown people, but she can't. Her memories of her own childhood are so far away, quaint and small, like figures in the wrong side of an opera glass. Now here is a man with a bushy black beard, balancing a bottle on his nose for a group of laughing people . . . off it goes! Here are two couples obliviously kissing. . . . Her heart beats a little faster; she feels the color coming into her cheeks. Piet was so tiresome, after a while; she wants to forget him now. She has already forgotten him; she hums in her sweet, clear contralto, "Dio, Dio, Dio . . ."

On the next level she dismounts and takes a robocab. She punches Dio's name; the little green-eyed driver "hunts" for a moment, flickering; then the cab swings around purposefully and gathers speed.

The building is unrecognizable; the white street has been done over in baroque facades of vermilion and green. The shape of the lobby is familiar, though, and here is Dio's name on the directory.

She hesitates, looking up the uninformative blank shaft of the elevator well. Is he there, behind that silent bulk of marble? After a moment she turns with a shrug and takes the nearest of a row of fragile silver chairs. She presses "3"; the chair whisks her up, decants her.

She is in the vestibule of Dio's apartment. The walls are faced with cool blue-veined marble. On one side, the spacious oval of the shaft opening; on the other, the wide, arched doorway, closed. A mobile turns slowly under the lofty ceiling. She steps on the annunciator plate.

"Yes?" A pleasant male voice, but not a familiar one. The screen does not light.

She gives her name. "I want to see Dio—is he in?"

A curious pause. "Yes, he's *in*. . . . Who sent you?"

"No one *sent* me." She has the frustrating sense that they are at cross purposes, talking about different things. "Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter. Well, you can come in, though I don't know when you'll get time today." The doors slide open.

Bewildered and more than half angry, Claire crosses the threshold. The first room is a cool gray cavern: overhead are fixed-circuit screens showing views of the sector streets. They make a bright frieze around the walls, but shed little light.

The next room is a huge disorderly space full of machinery carelessly set down; Claire wrinkles her nose in distaste. Down at the far end, a few men are bending over one of the machines, their backs turned. She moves on.

The third room is a cool green space, terrazzo-floored, with a fountain playing in the middle. Her sandals click pleasantly on the hard surface. Fifteen or twenty people are sitting on the low curving benches around the walls, using the service machines, readers and so on: it's for all the world like the waiting room of a fashionable healer. Has Dio taken up mind-fixing?

Suddenly unsure of herself, she takes an isolated seat and looks around her. No, her first impression was wrong, these are not clients waiting to see a healer, because, in the first place, they are all students—every one.

She looks them over more carefully. Two are playing chess in an alcove; two more are strolling up and down separately; five or six are grouped around a little table on which some papers are spread; one of these is talking rapidly while the rest listen. The distance is too great; Claire cannot catch any words.

Farther down on the other side of the room, two men and a woman are sitting at a hooded screen, watching it intently, although at this distance it appears dark.

Water tinkles steadily in the fountain. After a long time the inner doors open and a man emerges; he leans over and speaks to another man sitting nearby. The second man gets up and goes through the inner doors; the first moves out of sight in the opposite direction. Neither reappears. Claire waits, but nothing more happens.

No one has taken her name, or put her on a list; no one seems to be paying her any attention. She rises and walks slowly down the room, past the group at the table. Two of the men are talking vehemently, interrupting each other. She listens as she passes, but it is all student gibberish: "the delta curve clearly shows . . . a stochastic assumption . . ." She moves on to the three who sit at the screen.

The screen still seems dark to Claire, but faint glints of color move on its glossy surface, and there is a whisper of sound.

There are two vacant seats. She hesitates, then takes one of them and leans forward under the hood.

Now the screen is alight, and there is a murmur of talk in her ears. She is looking into a room dominated by a huge oblong slab of gray marble, three times the height of a man. Though solid, it appears to be descending with a steady and hypnotic motion, like a waterfall.

Under this falling curtain of stone sit two men. One of them is a stranger. The other—

She leans forward, peering. The other is in shadow; she cannot see his features. Still, there is something familiar about the outlines of his head and body. . . .

She is almost sure it is Dio, but when he speaks she hesitates again. It is a strange, low, hoarse voice, unlike anything she has ever heard before: the sound is so strange that she forgets to listen for the words.

Now the other man is speaking: "—these notions. It's just an ordinary procedure—one more injection."

"No," says the dark man with repressed fury, and abruptly stands up. The lights in that pictured room flicker as he moves, and the shadow swerves to follow him.

"Pardon me," says an unexpected voice at her ear. The man next to her is leaning over, looking inquisitive. "I don't think you're authorized to watch this session, are you?"

Claire makes an impatient gesture at him, turning back fascinated to the screen. In the pictured room, both men are standing now; the dark man is saying something hoarsely while the other moves as if to take his arm.

"Please," says the voice at her ear, "*are* you authorized to watch this session?"

The dark man's voice has risen to a hysterical shout—hoarse and thin, like no human voice in the world. In the screen, he whirls and makes as if to run back into the room.

"Catch him!" says the other, lunging after the running form.

The dark man doubles back suddenly, past the other who reaches for him. Then two other men run past the screen; then the room is vacant: only the moving slab drops steadily, smoothly, into the floor.

The three beside Claire are standing. Across the room, heads turn. "What is it?" someone calls.

One of the men calls back, "He's having some kind of a fit!" In a lower voice, to the woman, he adds, "It's the discomfort, I suppose. . . ."

Claire is watching, uncomprehendingly, when a sudden yell from the far side of the room makes her turn.

The doors have swung back, and in the opening a shouting man is wrestling helplessly with two others. They have his arms pinned and he cannot move any farther, but that horrible, hoarse voice goes on shouting, and shouting. . . .

There are no more shadows: she can see his face.

"Dio!" she calls, getting to her feet.

Through his own din, he hears her and his head turns. His face gapes blindly at her, swollen and red, the eyes glaring.

Then with a violent motion he turns away. One arm comes free, and jerks up to shield his head. He is hurrying away; the others follow. The doors close. The room is full of standing figures, and a murmur of voices.

Claire stands where she is, stunned, until a slender figure separates itself from the crowd. That other face seems to hang in the air, obscuring his—red and distorted, mouth agape.

The man takes her by the elbow, urges her toward the outer door. "What are you to Dio? Did you know him before?"

"Before what?" she asks faintly. They are crossing the room of machines, empty and echoing.

"Hm. I remember you now—I let you in, didn't I? Sorry you came?" His tone is light and negligent; she has the feeling that his attention is not really on what he is saying. A faint irritation at this is the first thing she feels through her numbness. She stirs as they walk, disengaging her arm from his grasp. She says, "What was wrong with him?"

"A very rare complaint," answers the other without pausing. They are in the outer room now, in the gloom under the bright frieze, moving toward the doors. "Didn't you know?" he asks in the same careless tone.

"I've been away." She stops, turns to face him. "Can't you tell me? What is wrong with Dio?"

She sees now that he has a thin face, nose and lips keen, eyes bright and narrow. "Nothing you want to know about," he says curtly. He waves at the door control, and the doors slide noiselessly apart. "Good-bye."

She does not move, and after a moment the doors close again. "*What's wrong with him?*" she says.

He sighs, looking down at her modish robe with its delicate clasps of gold. "How can I tell you? Does the verb 'to die' mean anything to you?"

She is puzzled and apprehensive. "I don't know . . . isn't it something that happens to the lower animals?"

He gives her a quick mock bow. "Very good."

"But I don't know what it is. Is it—a kind of fit, like—" She nods toward the inner rooms.

He is staring at her with an expression half compassionate, half wildly exasperated. "Do you really want to know?" He turns abruptly and runs his fingers down a suddenly glowing index stripe on the wall. "Let's see . . . don't know what there is in this damned reservoir. Hm. Animals, terminus." At his finger's touch, a cabinet opens and tips out a shallow oblong box into his palm. He offers it.

In her hands, the box lights up; she is looking into a cage in which a small animal crouches—a white rat. Its fur is dull

and rough-looking; something is caked around its muzzle. It moves unsteadily, noses a cup of water, then turns away. Its legs seem to fail; it drops and lies motionless except for the slow rise and fall of its tiny chest.

Watching, Claire tries to control her nausea. Students' cabinets are full of nastinesses like this; they expect you not to show any distaste. "Something's the matter with it," is all she can find to say.

"Yes. It's dying. That means to cease living: to stop. Not to be any more. Understand?"

"No," she breathes. In the box, the small body has stopped moving. The mouth is stiffly open, the lip drawn back from the yellow teeth. The eye does not move, but glares up sightless.

"That's all," says her companion, taking the box back. "No more rat. Finished. After a while it begins to decompose and make a bad smell, and a while after that, there's nothing left but bones. And that has happened to every rat that was ever born."

"I don't *believe* you," she says. "It isn't like that; I never heard of such a thing."

"Didn't you ever have a pet?" he demands. "A parakeet, a cat, a tank of fish?"

"Yes," she says defensively, "I've had cats, and birds. What of it?"

"What happened to them?"

"Well—I don't know, I suppose I lost them. You know how you lose things."

"One day they're there, the next, not," says the thin man. "Correct?"

"Yes, that's right. But why?"

"We have such a tidy world," he says wearily. "Dead bodies would clutter it up; that's why the house circuits are programmed to remove them when nobody is in the room. Every one: it's part of the basic design. Of course, if you stayed in the room, and didn't turn your back, the machine would have to embarrass you by cleaning up the corpse in front of your eyes. But that never happens. Whenever you saw there was something wrong with any pet of yours, you turned around and went away, isn't that right?"

"Well, I really can't remember—"

"And when you came back, how odd, the beast was gone. It wasn't 'lost,' it was dead. They die. They all die."

She looks at him, shivering. "But that doesn't happen to *people*."

"No?" His lips are tight. After a moment he adds, "Why do you think he looked that way? You see he knows; he's known for five months."

She catches her breath suddenly. "That day at the beach!" "Oh, were you there?" He nods several times, and opens the door again. "Very interesting for you. You can tell people you saw it happen." He pushes her gently out into the vestibule.

"But I want—" she says desperately.

"What? To love him again, as if he were normal? Or do you want to help him? Is that what you mean?" His thin face is drawn tight, arrow-shaped between the brows. "Do you think you could stand it? If so—" He stands aside, as if to let her enter again.

She takes a step forward, hesitantly.

"Remember the rat," he says sharply.

She stops.

"It's up to you. Do you really want to help him? He could use some help, if it wouldn't make you sick. Or else— Where were you all this time?"

"Various places," she says stiffly. "Littlam, Paris, New Hol."

He nods. "Or you can go back and see them all again. Which?"

She does not move. Behind her eyes, now, the two images are intermingled: she sees Dio's gorged face staring through the stiff jaw of the rat.

The thin man nods briskly. He steps back, holding her gaze. There is a long suspended moment; then the doors close.

CHAPTER III

The years fall away like pages from an old notebook. Claire is in Stambul, Winthur, Kumoto, BahiBlanc . . . other places, too many to remember. There are the intercontinental games, held every century on the baroque wheel-shaped ground in Campan: Claire is one of the spectators who hover in clouds, following their favorites. There is a love affair, brief but intense; it lasts four or five years; the man's name is Nord, he has gone off now with another woman to Deya, and for nearly a month Claire has been inconsolable. But now comes the opera season in Milan, and in Tusca, afterwards, she meets some charming people who are going to spend a year in Papeete. . . .

Life is good. Each morning she awakes refreshed; her lungs fill with the clean air; the blood tingles in her fingertips.

On a spring morning, she is basking in a bubble of green glass, three-quarters submerged in an emerald-green ocean. The water sways and breaks, frothily, around the bright disk of sunlight at the top. Down below where she lies, the cool

green depths are like mint to the fire-white bite of the sun. Tiny flat golden fishes swarm up to the bubble, turn, glinting like tarnished coins, and flow away again. The memory unit near the floor of the bubble is muttering out a muted tempest of Wagner: half listening, she hears the familiar music mixed with a gabble of foreign syllables. Her companion, with his massive bronze head almost touching the speakers, is listening attentively. Claire feels a little annoyed; she prods him with a bare foot: "Ross, turn that horrible thing off, won't you please?"

He looks up, his blunt face aggrieved. "It's *The Rhinegold*."

"Yes, I know, but I can't understand a word. It sounds as if they're clearing their throats. . . . Thank you."

He has waved a dismissing hand at the speakers, and the guttural chorus subsides. "Billions of people spoke that language once," he says portentously. Ross is an artist, which makes him almost a player, really, but he has the student's compulsive habit of bringing out these little kernels of information to lay in your lap.

"And I can't even stand four of them," she says lazily. "I only listen to opera for the music, anyhow, the stories are always so foolish; I wonder why?"

She can almost see the learned reply rising to his lips; but he represses it politely—he knows she doesn't really want an answer—and busies himself with the visor. It lights under his fingers to show a green chasm, slowly flickering with the last dim ripples of the sunlight.

"Going down now?" she asks.

"Yes, I want to get those corals." Ross is a sculptor, not a very good one, fortunately, nor a very devoted one, or he would be impossible company. He has a studio on the bottom of the Mediterranean, in ten fathoms, and spends part of his time concocting menacing tangles of stylized undersea creatures. Finished with the visor, he touches the controls and the bubble drifts downward. The waters meet overhead with a white splash of spray; then the circle of light dims to yellow, to lime color, to deep green.

Beneath them now is the coral reef—acre upon acre of bare skeletal fingers, branched and splayed. A few small fish move brilliantly among the pale branches. Ross touches the controls again; the bubble drifts to a stop. He stares down through the glass for a moment, then gets up to open the inner lock door. Breathing deeply, with a distant expression, he steps in and closes the transparent door behind him. Claire sees the water spurt around his ankles. It surges up quickly to fill the airlock; when it is chest high, Ross opens the outer door and plunges out in a cloud of air bubbles.

He is a yellow kicking shape in the green water; after a

few moments he is half obscured by clouds of sediment. Claire watches, vaguely troubled; the largest corals are like bleached bone.

She fingers the memory unit for the Sea Pieces from *Peter Grimes*, without knowing why; it's cold, northern ocean music, not appropriate. The cold, far calling of the gulls makes her shiver with sadness, but she goes on listening.

Ross grows dimmer and more distant in the clouding water. At length he is only a flash, a flicker of movement down in the dusky green valley. After a long time she sees him coming back, with two or three pink corals in his hand.

Absorbed in the music, she has allowed the bubble to drift until the entrance is almost blocked by corals. Ross forces himself between them, levering himself against a tall outcropping of stone, but in a moment he seems to be in difficulty. Claire turns to the controls and backs the bubble off a few feet. The way is clear now, but Ross does not follow.

Through the glass she sees him bend over, dropping his specimens. He places both hands firmly and strains, all the great muscles of his limbs and back bulging. After a moment he straightens again, shaking his head. He is caught, she realizes; one foot is jammed into a crevice of the stone. He grins at her painfully and puts one hand to his throat. He has been out a long time.

Perhaps she can help, in the few seconds that are left. She darts into the airlock, closes and floods it. But just before the water rises over her head, she sees the man's body stiffen.

Now, with her eyes open under water, in that curious blurred light, she sees his gorged face break into lines of pain. Instantly, his face becomes another's—Dio's—vividly seen through the ghost of a dead rat's grin. The vision comes without warning, and passes.

Outside the bubble, Ross's stiff jaw wrenches open, then hangs slack. She sees the pale jelly come bulging slowly up out of his mouth; now he floats easily, eyes turned up, limbs relaxed.

Shaken, she empties the lock again, goes back inside and calls Antibe Control for a rescue cutter. She sits down and waits, careful not to look at the still body outside.

She is astonished and appalled at her own emotion. It has nothing to do with Ross, she knows: he is perfectly safe. When he breathed water, his body reacted automatically: his lungs exuded the protective jelly, consciousness ended, his heartbeat stopped. Antibe Control will be here in twenty minutes or less, but Ross could stay like that for years, if he had to. As soon as he gets out of the water, his lungs will

begin to re-absorb the jelly; when they are clear, heartbeat and breathing will start again.

It's as if Ross were only acting out a part, every movement stylized and meaningful. In the moment of his pain, a barrier in her mind has gone down, and now a doorway stands open.

She makes an impatient gesture, she is not used to being tyrannized in this way. But her arm drops in defeat; the perverse attraction of that doorway is too strong. *Dio*, her mind silently calls. *Dio*.

The designer of Sector Twenty, in the time she has been away, has changed the plan of the streets "to bring the surface down." The roof of every level is a screen faithfully repeating the view from the surface, and with lighting and other ingenious tricks the weather up there is parodied down below. Just now it is a gray cold November day, a day of slanting gray rain: looking up, one sees it endlessly falling out of the leaden sky: and down here, although the air is as always pleasantly warm, the great bare slabs of the building fronts have turned bluish gray to match, and silvery insubstantial streamers are twisting endlessly down, to disappear before they strike the pavement.

Claire does not like it; it does not feel like *Dio's* work. The crowds have a nervous air, curious, half-protesting; they look up and laugh, but uneasily, and the refreshment bays are full of people crammed together under bright yellow light. Claire pulls her metallic cloak closer around her throat; she is thinking with melancholy of the turn of the year, and the earth turning cold and hard as iron, the trees brittle and black against the unfriendly sky. This is a time for blue skies underground, for flushed skins and honest laughter, not for this echoed grayness.

In her rooms, at least, there is cheerful warmth. She is tired and perspiring from the trip; she does not want to see anyone just yet. Some American gowns have been ordered; while she waits for them, she turns on the fire-bath in the bedroom alcove. The yellow spiky flames jet up with a black-capped *whoom*, then settle to a high murmuring curtain of yellow-white. Claire binds her head in an insulating scarf, and without bothering to undress, steps into the fire.

The flame blooms up around her body, cool and caressing; the fragile gown flares and is gone in a whisper of sparks. She turns, arms outspread against the flow. Depilated, refreshed, she steps out again. Her body tingles, invigorated by the flame. Delicately, she brushes away some clinging wisps of burnt skin; the new flesh is glossy pink, slowly paling to rose-and-ivory.

In the wall mirror, her eyes sparkle; her lips are liquidly red, as tender and dark as the red wax that spills from the edge of a candle.

She feels a somber recklessness; she is running with the tide. Responsive to her mood, the silvered ceiling begins to run with swift bloody streaks, swirling and leaping, striking flares of light from the bronze dado and the carved crystal lacework of the furniture. With a sudden exultant laugh, Claire tumbles into the great yellow down bed: she rolls there, half smothered, the luxuriant silky fibers cool as cream to her skin; then the mood is gone, the ceiling dims to grayness; and she sits up with an impatient murmur.

What can be wrong with her? Sobered, already regretting the summery warmth of the Mediterranean, she walks to the table where Dio's card lies. It is his reply to the formal message she sent en route; it says simply:

THE PLANNER DIO
WILL BE AT HOME.

There is a discreet chime from the delivery chute, and fabrics tumble in in billows of canary yellow, crimson, midnight blue. Claire chooses the blue, anything else would be out of key with the day; it is gauzy but long-sleeved. With it she wears no rings or necklaces, only a tiara of dark aquamarines twined in her hair.

She scarcely notices the new exterior of the building; the ascensor shaft is dark and padded now, with an endless chain of cushioned seats that slowly rise, occupied or not, like a disjointed flight of stairs. The vestibule above slowly comes into view, and she feels a curious shock of recognition.

It is the same: the same blue-veined marble, the same mobile idly turning, the same arched doorway.

Claire hesitates, alarmed and displeased. She tries to believe that she is mistaken: no scheme of decoration is ever left unchanged for as much as a year. But here it is, untouched, as if time had queerly stopped here in this room when she left it: as if she had returned, not only to the same choice, but to the same instant.

She crosses the floor reluctantly. The dark door screen looks back at her like a baited trap.

Suppose she had never gone away—what then? Whatever Dio's secret is, it has had ten years to grow, here behind this unchanged door. There it is, a darkness, waiting for her.

With a shudder of almost physical repulsion, she steps onto the annunciator plate.

The screen lights. After a moment a face comes into view.

She sees without surprise that it is the thin man, the one who. . . .

He is watching her keenly. She cannot rid herself of the vision of the rat, and of the dark struggling figure in the doorway. She says, "Is Dio—" She stops, not knowing what she meant to say.

"At home?" the thin man finishes. "Yes, of course. Come in."

The doors slide open. About to step forward, she hesitates again, once more shocked to realize that the first room is also unchanged. The frieze of screens now displays a row of gray-lit streets; that is the only difference; it is as if she were looking into some far-distant world where time still had meaning, from this still, secret place where it has none.

The thin man appears in the doorway, black-robed. "My name is Benarra," he says, smiling. "Please come in; don't mind all this, you'll get used to it."

"Where is Dio?"

"Not far. . . . But we make a rule," the thin man says, "that only students are admitted to see Dio. Would you mind?"

She looks at him with indignation. "Is this a joke? Dio sent me a note . . ." She hesitates; the note was noncommittal enough, to be sure.

"You can become a student quite easily," Benarra says. "At least, you can begin, and that would be enough for today." He stands waiting, with a pleasant expression; he seems perfectly serious.

She is balanced between bewilderment and surrender. "I don't—what do you want me to do?"

"Come and see." He crosses the room, opens a narrow door. After a moment she follows.

He leads her down an inclined passage, narrow and dark. "I'm living on the floor below now," he remarks over his shoulder, "to keep out of Dio's way." The passage ends in a bright central hall from which he leads her through a doorway into dimness.

"Here your education begins," he says. On both sides, islands of light glow up slowly: in the nearest, and brightest, stands a curious group of beings, not ape, not man: black skins with a bluish sheen, tiny eyes peering upward under shelving brows, hair a dusty black. The limbs are knot-jointed like twigs; the ribs show; the bellies are soft and big. The head of the tallest comes to Claire's waist. Behind them is a brilliant glimpse of tropical sunshine, a conical mass of what looks like dried vegetable matter, trees and horned animals in the background.

"Human beings," says Benarra.

She turns a disbelieving, almost offended gaze on him. "Oh, no!"

"Yes, certainly. Extinct several thousand years. Here, another kind."

In the next island the figures are also black-skinned, but taller—shoulder high. The woman's breasts are limp leathery bags that hang to her waist. Claire grimaces. "Is something wrong with her?"

"A different standard of beauty. They did that to themselves, deliberately. Woman creating herself. See what you think of the next."

She loses count. There are coppery-skinned ones, white ones, yellowish ones, some half naked, others elaborately trussed in metal and fabric. Moving among them, Claire feels herself suddenly grown titanic, like a mother animal among her brood: she has a flash of absurd, degrading tenderness. Yet, as she looks at these wrinkled gnomish faces, they seem to hold an ancient and stubborn wisdom that glares out at her, silently saying, *Upstart!*

"What happened to them all?"

"They died," says Benarra. "Every one."

Ignoring her troubled look, he leads her out of the hall. Behind them, the lights fall and dim.

The next room is small and cool, unobtrusively lit, unfurnished except for a desk and chair, and visitor's seat to which Benarra waves her. The domed ceiling is pierced just above their heads with round transparencies, each glowing in a different pattern of simple blue and red shapes against a colorless ground.

"They are hard to take in, I know," says Benarra. "Possibly you think they're fakes."

"No." No one could have imagined those fierce, wizened faces; somewhere, sometime, they must have existed.

A new thought strikes her. "What about *our* ancestors—what were they like?"

Benarra's gaze is cool and thoughtful. "Claire, you'll find this hard to believe. Those were our ancestors."

She is incredulous again. "Those—absurdities in there?"

"Yes. All of them."

She is stubbornly silent a moment. "But you said, they *died*."

"They did; they died. Claire—did you think our race was always immortal?"

"Why—" She falls silent, confused and angry.

"No, impossible. Because if we were, where are all the old ones? No one in the world is older than, perhaps, two thousand years. That's not very long. . . . What are you thinking?"

She looks up, frowning with concentration. "You're saying it happened. But how?"

"It didn't happen. We did it, we created ourselves." Leaning back, he gestures at the glowing transparencies overhead. "Do you know what those are?"

"No. I've never seen any designs quite like them. They'd make lovely fabric patterns."

He smiles. "Yes, they are pretty, I suppose, but that's not what they're for. These are enlarged photographs of very small living things—too small to see. They used to get into people's bloodstreams and make them die. That's bubonic plague—" blue and purple dots alternating with larger pink disks—"that's tetanus—" blue rods and red dots—"that's leprosy—" dark-spotted blue lozenges with a cross-hatching of red behind them. "That thing that looks something like a peacock's tail is a parasitic fungus called *streptothrix actinomyces*. That one—" a particularly dainty design of pale blue with darker accents—"is from a malignant oedema with gas gangrene."

The words are meaningless to her, but they call up vague images that are all the more horrible for having no definite outlines. She thinks again of the rat, and of a human face somehow assuming that stillness, that stiffness . . . frozen into a bright pattern, like the colored dots on the wall. . . .

She is resolved not to show her revulsion. "What happened to them?" she asks in a voice that does not quite tremble.

"Nothing. The Planners left them alone, but changed us. Most of the records have been lost in two thousand years, and of course we have no real science of biology as they knew it. I'm no biologist, only a historian and collector." He rises. "But one thing we know they did was to make our bodies chemically immune to infection. Those things—" he nods to the transparencies above—"are simply irrelevant now, they can't harm us. They still exist—I've seen cultures taken from living animals. But they're only a curiosity. Various other things were done, to make the body's chemistry, to put it crudely, more stable. Things that would have killed our ancestors by toxic reactions—poisoned them—don't harm us. Then there are the protective mechanisms, and the parapsychical powers that *homo sapiens* had only in potential. Levitation, regeneration of lost organs. Finally, in general we might say that the body was very much more homeostatized than formerly, that is, there's a cycle of functions which always tends to return to the norm. The cumulative processes that used to impair function don't happen—the 'matrix' doesn't thicken, progressive dehydration never gets started,

and so on. But you see all these are just delaying actions, things to prevent you and me from dying prematurely. The main thing—" he fingers an index stripe, and a linear design springs out on the wall—"was this. Have you ever read a chart, Claire?"

She shakes her head dumbly. The chart is merely an un-aesthetic curve drawn on a reticulated background: it means nothing to her. "This is a schematic way of representing the growth of an organism," says Benarra. "You see here, this up-and-down scale is numbered in one-hundredths of mature weight—from zero here at the bottom, to one hundred per cent here at the top. Understand?"

"Yes," she says doubtfully. "But what good is that?"

"You'll see. Now this other scale, along the bottom, is numbered according to the age of the organism. Now: this sharply rising curve here represents all other highly developed species except man. You see, the organism is born, grows very rapidly until it reaches almost its full size, then the curve rounds itself off, becomes almost level. Here it declines. And here it stops: the animal dies."

He pauses to look at her. The world hangs in the air; she says nothing, but meets his gaze.

"Now this," says Benarra, "this long shallow curve represents man as he was. You notice it starts far to the left of the animal curve. The planners had this much to work with: man was already unique, in that he had this very long juvenile period before sexual maturity. Here: see what they did."

With a gesture, he superimposes another chart on the first.

"It looks almost the same," says Claire.

"Yes. Almost. What they did was quite a simple thing, in principle. They lengthened that juvenile period still further, they made the curve rise still more slowly . . . and never quite reach the top. The curve now becomes asymptotic, that is, it approaches sexual maturity by smaller and smaller amounts, and never gets there, no matter how long it goes on."

Gravely, he returns her stare.

"Are you saying," she asks, "that we're *not* sexually mature? Not anybody?"

"Correct," he says. "Maturity in every other complex organism is the first stage of death. We never mature, Claire, and that's why we don't die. We're the eternal adolescents of the universe. That's the price we paid."

"The price . . ." she echoes. "But I still don't see." She laughs. "Not *mature*—" Unconsciously she holds herself straighter, shoulders back.

Benarra leans casually against the desk, looking down at

her. "Have you ever thought to wonder why there are so few children? In the old days, loving without any precautions, a grown woman would have a child a year. Now it happens perhaps once in a hundred billion meetings. It's an anomaly, freak of nature, and even then the woman can't carry the child to term herself. Oh, we *look* mature; that's the joke—they gave us the shape of their own dreams of adult power." He fingers his glossy beard, thumps his chest. "It isn't real. We're all pretending to be grown-up, but not one of us knows what it's really like."

A silence falls.

"Except Dio?" says Claire, looking down at her hands.

"He's on the way to find out. Yes."

"And you can't stop it . . . you don't know why."

Benarra shrugs. "He was under strain, physical and mental. Some link of the chain broke, we may never know which one. He's already gone a long way up that slope—I think he's near the crest now. There isn't a hope that we can pull him back again."

Her fists clench impotently. "Then what good is it all?"

Benarra's eyes are hooded; he is playing with a memocube on the desk. "We learn," he says. "We can do something now and then, to alleviate, to make things easier. We don't give up."

She hesitates. "How long?"

"Actually, we don't know. We can guess what the maximum is; we know that from analogy with other mammals. But with Dio, too many other things might happen." He glances up at the transparencies.

"Surely you don't mean—" The bright ugly shapes glow down at her, motionless, inscrutable.

"Yes. Yes. He had one of them already, the last time you saw him—a virus infection. We were able to control it; it was what our ancestors used to call 'the common cold'; they thought it was mild. But it nearly destroyed Dio—I mean, not the disease itself, but the moral effect. The symptoms were unpleasant. He wasn't prepared for it."

She is trembling. "Please."

"You have to know all this," says Benarra mercilessly, "or it's no use your seeing Dio at all. If you're going to be shocked, do it now. If you can't stand it, then go away now, not later." He pauses, and speaks more gently. "You can see him today, of course; I promised that. Don't try to make up your mind now, if it's hard. Talk to him, be with him this afternoon; see what it's like."

Claire does not understand herself. She has never been so foolish about a man before: love is all very well; love never lasts very long and you don't expect that it should, but while

it lasts, it's pleasantness. Love is joy, not this wrenching pain.

Time flows like a strong, clean torrent, if only you let things go. She could give Dio up now and be unhappy, perhaps, a year or five years, or fifty, but then it would be over, and life would go on just the same.

She sees Dio's face, vivid in memory—not the stranger, the dark shouting man, but Dio himself, framed against the silver sky: sunlight curved on the strong brow, the eyes gleaming in shadow.

"We've got him full of antibiotics," says Benarra compassionately. "We don't think he'll get any of the bad ones. . . . But aging itself is the worst of them all. . . . What do you say?"

CHAPTER IV

Under the curtain of falling stone, Dio sits at his workbench. The room is the same as before, the only visible change is the statue which now juts from one wall overhead, in the corner above the stone curtain: it is the figure of a man reclining, weight on one elbow, calf crossed over thigh, head turned pensively down toward the shoulder. The figure is powerful, but there is a subtle feeling of decay about it: the bulging muscles seem about to sag; the face, even in shadow, has a deformed, damaged look. Forty feet long, sprawling immensely across the corner of the room, the statue has a raw, compulsive power: it is supremely ugly, but she can hardly look away.

A motion attracts her eye. Dio is standing beside the bench, waiting for her. She advances hesitantly: the statue's face is in shadow, but Dio's is not, and already she is afraid of what she may see there.

He takes her hand between his two palms; his touch is warm and dry, but something like an electric shock seems to pass between them, making her start.

"Claire—it's good to see you. Here, sit down, let me look." His voice is resonant, confident, even a trifle assertive; his eyes are alert and preternaturally bright. He talks, moves, holds himself with an air of suppressed excitement. She is relieved and yet paradoxically alarmed: there is nothing really different in his face; the skin glows clear and healthy, his lips are firm. And yet every line, every feature, seems to be hiding some unpleasant surprise; it is like looking at a mask which may suddenly be whipped aside.

In her excitement, she laughs, murmurs a few words without in the least knowing what she is saying. He sits facing her across the corner of the desk, commandingly intent.

"I've just been sketching some plans for the next year. I

have some ideas . . . it won't be like anything people expect." He laughs, glancing down; the bench is covered with little gauzy boxes full of shadowy line and color. His tools lie in disorder, solidopens, squirts, calipers. "What do you think of this, by the way?" He points up, behind him at the heroic statue.

"It's very unusual. . . . Yours?"

"A copy, from stereographs—the original was by Michelangelo, something called 'Evening.' But I did the copy myself."

She raises her eyebrows, not understanding.

"I mean I didn't do it by machine. I carved the stone myself—with mallet and chisel, in these hands, Claire." He holds them out, strong, calloused. It was those flat pads of thickened skin, she realizes, that felt so warm and strange against her hand.

He laughs again. "It was an experience. I found out about texture, for one thing. You know, when a machine melts or molds a statue, there's no texture, because to a machine granite is just like cheese. But when you carve, the stone fights back. Stone has character, Claire, it can be stubborn or evasive—it can throw chips in your face, or make your chisel slip aside. Stone fights." His hand clenches, and again he laughs that strange, exultant laugh.

In her apartment late that evening, Claire feels herself confused and overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. Her day with Dio has been like nothing she ever expected. Not once has he aroused her pity: he is like a man in whom a flame burns. Walking with her in the streets, he has made her see the Sector as he imagines it: an archaic vision of buildings made for permanence rather than for change; of masonry set by hand, woods hand-carved and hand-polished. It is a terrifying vision, and yet she does not know why. People endure; things should pass away. . . .

In the wide cool rooms an air whispers softly. The border lights burn low around the bed, inviting sleep. Claire moves aimlessly in the outer rooms, letting her robe fall, pondering a languorous stiffness in her limbs. Her mouth is bruised with kisses. Her flesh remembers the touch of his strange hands. She is full of a delicious tiredness; she is at the floating, bodiless zenith of love, neither demanding nor regretting.

Yet she wanders restively through the rooms, once idly evoking a gust of color and music from the wall; it fades into an echoing silence. She pauses at the door of the playroom, and looks down into the deep darkness of the diving well. To fall is a luxury like bathing in water or flame. There is a sweetness of danger in it, although the danger is unreal.

Smiling, she breathes deep, stands poised, and steps out into emptiness. The gray walls hurtle upward around her: with an effort of will she withholds the pulse of strength that would support her in midair. The floor rushes nearer, the effort mounts intolerably. At the last minute she releases it; the surge buoys her up in a brief paroxysmal joy. She comes to rest, inches away from the hard stone. With her eyes dreamily closed, she rises slowly again to the top. She stretches: now she will sleep.

CHAPTER V

First come the good days. Dio is a man transformed, a demon of energy. He overflows with ideas and projects; he works unremittingly, accomplishes prodigies. Sector Twenty is the talk of the continent, of the world. Dio builds for permanence, but, dissatisfied, he tears down what he has built and builds again. For a season all his streets are soaring, incredibly beautiful laceworks of stone; then all the ornament vanishes and his buildings shine with classical purity: the streets are full of white light that shines from the stone. Claire waits for the cycle to turn again, but Dio's work becomes ever more massive and crude; his stone darkens. Now the streets are narrow and full of shadows; the walls frown down with heavy magnificence. He builds no more ascensor shafts; to climb in Dio's buildings, you walk up ramps or even stairs, or ride in closed elevator cars. The people murmur, but he is still a novelty; they come from all over the planet to protest, to marvel, to complain; but they still come.

Dio's figure grows heavier, more commanding: his cheeks and chin, all his features thicken; his voice becomes hearty and resonant. When he enters a public room, all heads turn: he dominates any company; where his laugh booms out, the table is in a roar.

Women hang on him by droves; drunken and triumphant, he sometimes staggers off with one while Claire watches. But only she knows the defeat, the broken words and the tears, in the sleepless watches of the night.

There is a timeless interval when they seem to drift, without anxiety and without purpose, as if they had reached the crest of the wave. Then Dio begins to change again, swiftly and more swiftly. They are like passengers on two moving ways that have run side by side for a little distance, but now begin to separate.

She clings to him with desperation, with a sense of vertigo. She is terrified by the massive, inexorable movement that is carrying her off: like him, she feels drawn to an unknown destination.

Suddenly the bad days are upon them. Dio is changing under her eyes. His skin grows slack and dull; his nose arches more strongly. He trains vigorously, under Benarra's instruction; when streaks of gray appear in his hair, he conceals them with pigments. But the lines are cutting themselves deeper around his mouth and at the corners of the eyes. All his bones grow knobby and thick. She cannot bear to look at his hands, they are thick-fingered, clumsy; they hold what they touch, and yet they seem to fumble.

Claire sometimes surprises herself by fits of passionate weeping. She is thin; she sleeps badly and her appetite is poor. She spends most of her time in the library, pursuing the alien thoughts that alone make it possible for her to stay in contact with Dio. One day, taking the air, she passes Katha on the street, and Katha does not recognize her.

She halts as if struck, standing by the balustrade of the little stone bridge. The building fronts are shut faces, weeping with the leaden light that falls from the ceiling. Below her, down the long straight perspective of stair, Katha's little dark head bobs among the crowd and is lost.

The crowds are thinning; not half as many people are here this season as before. Those who come are silent and unhappy; they do not stay long. Only a few miles away, in Sector Nineteen, the air is full of streamers and pulsing with music: the light glitters, people are hurrying and laughing. Here, all colors are gray. Every surface is amor-phously rounded, as if mumbled by the sea; here a baluster is missing, here a brick has fallen; here, from a ragged alcove in the wall, a deformed statue leans out to peer at her with its malevolent terra cotta face. She shudders, averting her eyes, and moves on.

A melancholy sound surges into the street, filling it brim-full. The silence throbs; then the sound comes again. It is the tolling of the great bell in Dio's latest folly, the building he calls a "cathedral." It is a vast enclosure, without beauty and without a function. No one uses it, not even Dio himself. It is an emptiness waiting to be filled. At one end, on a platform, a few candles burn. The tile floor is always gleaming, as if freshly damp; shadows are piled high along the walls. Visitors hear their footsteps echo sharply as they enter; they turn uneasily and leave again. At intervals, for no good reason, the great bell tolls.

Suddenly Claire is thinking of the Bay of Napol, and the white gulls wheeling in the sky: the freshness, the tang of ozone, and the burning clear light.

As she turns away, on the landing below she sees two slender figures, hand in hand: a boy and a girl, both with shocks of yellow hair. They stand isolated; the slowly moving

crowd surrounds them with a changing ring of faces. A memory stirs: Claire recalls the other afternoon, the street, so different then, and the two small yellow-haired children. Now they are almost grown; in a few more years they will look like anyone else.

A pang strikes at Claire's heart. She thinks, *If we could have a child. . . .*

She looks upward in a kind of incredulous wonder that there should be so much sorrow in the world. Where has it all come from? How could she have lived for so many decades without knowing of it?

The leaden light flickers slowly and ceaselessly along the blank stone ceiling overhead.

Tiny as an ant in the distance, Dio swings beside the shoulder of the gigantic, half-carved figure. The echo of his hammer drifts down to Claire and Benarra at the doorway.

The figure is female, seated; that is all they can distinguish as yet. The blind head broods, turned downward; there is something malign in the shapeless hunch of the back and the thick, half-defined arms. A cloud of stone dust drifts free around the tiny shape of Dio; the bitter smell of it is in the air; the white dust coats everything.

"Dio," says Claire into the annunciator. The chatter of the distant hammer goes on. "Dio."

After a moment the hammer stops. The screen flicks on and Dio's white-masked face looks out at them. Only the dark eyes have life; they are hot and impatient. Hair, brows and beard are whitened; even the skin glitters white, as if the sculptor had turned to stone.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Dio—let's go away for a few weeks. I have such a longing to see Napol again. You know, it's been years."

"You go," says the face. In the distance, they see the small black figure hanging with its back turned to them, unmoving beside the gigantic shoulder. "I have too much to do."

"The rest would be good for you," Benarra puts in. "I advise it, Dio."

"I have too much to do," the face repeats curtly. The image blinks out; the chatter of the distant hammer begins again. The black figure blurs in dust again.

Benarra shakes his head. "No use." They turn and walk out across the balcony, overlooking the dark reception hall. Benarra says, "I didn't want to tell you this just yet. The Planners are going to ask Dio to resign his post this year."

"I've been afraid of it," says Claire after a moment. "Have you told them how it will make him feel?"

"They say the Sector will become an Avoided Place. They're

right; people already are beginning to have a feeling about it. In another few seasons they would stop coming at all."

Her hands are clasping each other restlessly. "Couldn't they give it to him, for a Project, or a museum, perhaps—?" She stops; Benarra is shaking his head.

"He's got this to go through," he says. "I've seen it coming."

"I know." Her voice is flat, defeated. "I'll help him . . . all I can."

"That's just what I don't want you to do," Benarra says.

She turns, startled; he is standing erect and somber against the balcony rail, with the gloomy gulf of the hall below. He says, "Claire, you're holding him back. He dyes his hair for you, but he has only to look at himself when he comes down to the studio, to realize what he actually looks like. He despises himself . . . he'll end hating you. You've got to go away now, and let him do what he has to."

For a moment she cannot speak; her throat aches. "What does he have to do?" she whispers.

"He has to grow old, very fast. He's put it off as long as he can." Benarra turns, looking out over the deserted hall. In a corner, the old cloth drapes trail on the floor. "Go to Napoli, or to Timbuk. Don't call, don't write. You can't help him now. He has to do this all by himself."

In Djuba she acquires a little ring made of iron, very old, shaped like a serpent that bites its own tail. It is a curiosity, a student's thing; no one would wear it, and besides it is too small. But the cold touch of the little thing in her palm makes her shiver, to think how old it must be. Never before has she been so aware of the funnel-shaped maw of the past. It feels precarious, to be standing over such gulfs of time.

In Winthur she takes the waters, makes a few friends. There is a lodge on the crest of Mont Blanc, new since she was last here, from which one looks across the valley of the Doire. In the clear Alpine air, the tops of the mountains are like ships, afloat in a sea of cloud. The sunlight is pure and thin, with an aching sweetness; the cries of the skiers echo up remotely.

In Cair she meets a collector who has a curious library, full of scraps and oddments that are not to be found in the common supply. He has a baroque fancy for antiquities; some of his books are actually made of paper and bound in synthetic leather, exact copies of the originals.

"'Again, the Alfurs of Poso, in Central Celebes,'" she reads aloud, "'tell how the first men were supplied with their requirements direct from heaven, the Creator passing down his gifts of them by means of a rope. He first tied a stone to the rope and let it down from the sky. But the men would

have none of it, and asked somewhat peevishly of what use to them was a stone. The Good God then let down a banana, which, of course, they gladly accepted and ate with relish. This was their undoing. 'Because you have chosen the banana,' said the deity, 'you shall propagate and perish like the banana, and your offspring shall step into your place. . . .'" She closes the book. "What was a banana, Alf?"

"A phallic symbol, my dear," he says, stroking his beard, with a pleasant smile.

In Prah, she is caught up briefly in a laughing horde of athletes, playing follow-my-leader; they have volplaned from Omsk to the Baltic, tobogganed down the Rose Club chute from Danz to Warsz, cycled from there to Bucur, ballooned, rocketed, leaped from precipices, run afoot all night. She accompanies them to the mountains; they stay the night in a hostel, singing, and in the morning they are away again, like a flock of swallows. Claire stands grave and still; the horde rushes past her, shining faces, arrows of color, laughs, shouts. "Claire, aren't you coming?" . . . "Claire, what's the matter?" . . . "Claire, come with us, we're swimming to Linz!" But she does not answer; the bright throng passes into silence.

Over the roof of the world, the long cloud-packs are moving swiftly, white against the deep blue. Northward is their destination; the sharp wind blows among the pines, breathing of icy fiords.

Claire steps back into the empty forum of the hostel. Her movements are slow; she is weary of escaping. For half a decade she has never been in the same spot more than a few weeks. Never once has she looked into a news unit, or tried to call anyone she knows in Sector Twenty. She has even deliberately failed to register her whereabouts: to be registered is to expect a call, and expecting one is halfway to making one.

But what is the use? Wherever she goes, she carries the same darkness with her.

The phone index glows at her touch. Slowly, with unaccustomed fingers, she selects the sector, group, and name: Dio.

The screen pulses; there is a long wait. Then the gray face of an autosec says politely, "The registrant has removed, and left no forwarding information."

Claire's throat is dry. "How long ago did his registry stop?"

"One moment please." The blank face falls silent. "He was last registered three years ago, in the index of November thirty."

"Try central registry," says Claire.

"No forwarding information has been registered."

"I know. Try central, anyway. Try everywhere."

"There will be a delay for checking." The blank face is silent a long time. Claire turns away, staring without interest at the living frieze of color which flows along the borders of the room. "Your attention please."

She turns. "Yes?"

"The registrant does not appear in any sector registry."

For a moment she is numb and speechless. Then, with a gesture, she abolishes the autosec, fingers the index again: the same sector, same group; the name: Benarra.

The screen lights: his remembered face looks out at her. "Claire! Where are you?"

"In Cheky. Ben, I tried to call Dio, and it said there was no registry. Is he—?"

"No. He's still alive, Claire; he's retreated. I want you to come here as soon as you can. Get a special; my club will pay the overs, if you're short."

"No, I have a surplus. All right, I'll come."

"This was made the season after you left," says Benarra. The wall screen glows; it is a stereo view of the main plaza in Level Three, the Hub section: dark, unornamented buildings, like a cliff-dweller's canyon. The streets are deserted; no face shows at the windows.

"Changing Day," says Benarra. "Dio had formally resigned, but he still had a day to go. Watch."

In the screen one of the tall building fronts suddenly swells and crumbles at the top. Dingy smoke spurts. Like a stack of counters, the building leans down into the street, separating as it goes into individual bricks and stones. The roar comes dimly to them as the next building erupts, and then the next.

"He did it himself," says Benarra. "He laid all the explosive charges, didn't tell anybody. The council was horrified. The integrators weren't designed to handle all that rubble—it had to be amorphized and piped away in the end. They begged Dio to stop, and finally he did. He made a bargain with them, for Level One."

"The whole level?"

"Yes. They gave it to him; he pointed out that it would not be for long. All the game areas and so on up there were due to be changed, anyhow; Dio's successor merely canceled them out of the integrator."

She still does not understand. "Leaving nothing but the bare earth?"

"He wanted it bare. He got some seeds from collectors,

and planted them. I've been up frequently. He actually grows cereal grain up there, and grinds it into bread."

In the screen, the canyon of the street has become a lake of dust. Benarra touches the controls; the scene shifts.

The sky is a deep luminous blue; the level land is bare. A single small building stands up blocky and stiff; behind it there are a few trees, and the evening light glimmers on fields scored in parallel rows. A dark figure is standing motionless beside the house; at first Claire does not recognize it as human. Then it moves, turns its head. She whispers, "Is that Dio?"

"Yes."

She cannot repress a moan of sorrow. The figure is too small for any details of face or body to be seen, but something in the proportions of it makes her think of one of Dio's grotesque statues, all stony bone, hunched, shrunken. The figure turns, moving stiffly, and walks to the hut. It enters and disappears.

She says to Benarra, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't leave any word; I couldn't reach you."

"I know, but you should have told me. I didn't know . . ."

"Claire, what do you feel for him now? Love?"

"I don't know. A great pity, I think. But maybe there is love mixed up in it too. I pity him because I once loved him. But I think that much pity is love, isn't it, Ben?"

"Not the kind of love you and I used to know anything about," says Benarra, with his eyes on the screen.

He was waiting for her when she emerged from the kiosk.

He had a face like nothing human. It was like a turtle's face, or a lizard's: horny and earth-colored, with bright eyes peering under the shelf of brow. His cheeks sank in; his nose jutted, and the bony shape of the teeth bulged behind the lips. His hair was white and fine, like thistle-down in the sun.

They were like strangers together, or like visitors from different planets. He showed her his grain fields, his kitchen garden, his stand of young fruit trees. In the branches, birds were fluttering and chirping. Dio was dressed in a robe of coarse weave that hung awkwardly from his bony shoulders. He had made it himself, he told her; he had also made the pottery jug from which he poured her a clear tart wine, pressed from his own grapes. The interior of the hut was clean and bare. "Of course, I get food supplements from Ben, and a few things like needles, thread. Can't do everything, but on the whole, I haven't done too badly." His voice was abstracted; he seemed only half aware of her presence.

They sat side by side on the wooden bench outside the hut.

The afternoon sunlight lay pleasantly on the flagstones; a little animation came to his withered face, and for the first time she was able to see the shape of Dio's features there.

"I don't say I'm not bitter. You remember what I was, and you see what I am now." His eyes stared broodingly; his lips worked. "I sometimes think, why did it have to be me? The rest of you are going on, like children at a party, and I'll be gone. But, Claire, I've discovered something. I don't quite know if I can tell you about it."

He paused, looking out across the fields. "There's an attraction in it, a beauty. That sounds impossible, but it's true. Beauty in the ugliness. It's symmetrical, it has its rhythm. The sun rises, the sun sets. Living up here, you feel that a little more. Perhaps that's why we went below."

He turned to look at her. "No, I can't make you understand. I don't want you to think, either, that I've surrendered to it. I feel it coming sometimes, Claire, in the middle of the night. Something coming up over the horizon. Something—" He gestured. "A feeling. Something very huge, and cold. Very cold. And I sit up in my bed, shouting, 'I'm not ready yet!' No. I don't want to go. Perhaps if I had grown up getting used to the idea, it would be easier now. It's a big change to make in your thinking. I tried—all this—and the sculpture, you remember—but I can't quite do it. And yet—now, this is the curious thing. I wouldn't go back, if I could. That sounds funny. Here I am, going to die, and I wouldn't go back. You see, I want to be myself; yes, I want to go on being myself. Those other men were not me, only someone on the way to be me."

They walked back together to the kiosk. At the doorway, she turned for a last glimpse. He was standing, bent and sturdy, white-haired in his rags, against a long sweep of violet sky. The late light glistened grayly on the fields; far behind, in the grove of trees the birds' voices were stilled. There was a single star in the east.

To leave him, she realized suddenly, would be intolerable. She stepped out, embraced him: his body was shockingly thin and fragile in her arms. "Dio, we mustn't be apart now. Let me come and stay in your hut; let's be together."

Gently he disengaged her arms and stepped away. His eyes gleamed in the twilight. "No, no," he said. "It wouldn't do, Claire. Dear, I love you for it, but you see . . . you see, you're a goddess. An immortal goddess—and I'm a man."

She saw his lips work, as if he were about to speak again, and she waited, but he only turned, without a word or gesture, and began walking away across the empty earth: a dark spindling figure, garments flapping gently in the breeze that

spilled across the earth. The last light glowed dimly in his white hair. Now he was only a dot in the middle distance. Claire stepped back into the kiosk, and the door closed.

CHAPTER VI

For a long time she cannot persuade herself that he is gone. She has seen the body, stretched in a box like someone turned to painted wax: it is not Dio, Dio is somewhere else.

She catches herself thinking, *When Dio comes back . . .* as if he had only gone away, around to the other side of the world. But she knows there is a mound of earth over Sector Twenty, with a tall polished stone over the spot where Dio's body lies in the ground. She can repeat by rote the words carved there:

Weak and narrow are the powers implanted in the limbs of men; many the woes that fall on them and blunt the edges of thought; short is the measure of the life in death through which they toil. Then are they borne away; like smoke they vanish into air; and what they dream they know is but the little that each hath stumbled upon in wandering about the world. Yet boast they all that they have learned the whole. Vain fools! For what that is, no eye hath seen, no ear hath heard, nor can it be conceived by the mind of man.

—Empedocles
(5th cent. B. C.)

One day she closes up the apartment; let the Planner, Dio's successor, make of it whatever he likes. She leaves behind all her notes, her student's equipment, useless now. She goes to a public inn, and that afternoon the new fashions are brought to her: robes in flame silk and in cold metallic mesh; new perfumes, new jewelry. There is new music in the memory units, and she dances to it tentatively, head cocked to listen, living into the rhythm. Already it is like a long-delayed spring; dark withered things are drifting away into the past, and the present is fresh and lovely.

She tries to call a few old friends.^a Katha is in Centram, Ebert in the South; Piet and Tanno are not registered at all. It doesn't matter; in the plaza of the inn, before the day is out, she makes a dozen new friends. The group, pleased with itself, grows by accretion; the resulting party wanders from the plaza to the Vermilion Club gardens, to one member's rooms and then another's, and finally back to Claire's own apartment.

Leaving the circle toward midnight, she roams the apartment alone, eased by comradeship, content to hear the singing blur and fade behind her. In the playroom, she stands idly looking down into the deep darkness of the diving well. How luxurious, she thinks, to fall and fall, and never reach the bottom. . . .

But the bottom is always there, of course, or it would not be a diving well. A paradox: the well must be a shaft closed at the bottom; it's the sense of danger, the imagined smashing impact, that gives it its thrill. And yet there is no danger of injury: levitation and the survival instinct will always prevent it.

"We have such a tidy world. . . ."

Things pass away; people endure.

Then where is Piet, the cottony haired man, with his laughter and his wild jokes? Hiding, somewhere around the other side of the world, perhaps; forgetting to register. It often happens; no one thinks about it. But then, her own mind asks coldly, where is the woman named Marla, who used to hold you on her knee when you were small? Where is Hendry, your own father, whom you last saw . . . when? Five hundred, six hundred years ago, that time in Rio. Where do people go when they disappear . . . the people no one talks about?

The singing drifts up to her along the dark hallway. Claire is staring transfixed down into the shadows of the well. She thinks of Dio, looking out at the gathering darkness: "I feel it coming sometimes, up over the horizon. Something very huge, and cold."

The darkness shapes itself in her imagination into a gray face, beautiful and terrible. The smiling lips whisper, for her ears alone, *Some day*.

SHADOW WORLD

Clifford Simak

Anyone who has kept up with the latest developments in the study of the origins of life on earth is aware of the controversy between those who say that life was an incredible accident that could never happen again, and those who say that, considering the almost-infinite variety of chances for matter to combine and evolve, it seems inevitable that life of some sort—probably including intelligent varieties—would appear on many of the millions of planets with suitable environmental conditions that (probably) exist in the galaxy.

I opt for the latter "those." With Clifford Simak—and a very sizable number of "respectable" scientists, too—I believe that life is not a unique, earthbound experiment, but rather that it is semi-universal, and that it can take semi-endless forms. In following that belief, Simak has described a possible type of humanoid on the verdant planet of a distant star, and has shown it performing in a thoroughly believable, immensely advanced, and slightly silly civilization—which we never even see! Read on, no questions, please, and find out how he does it.

I rolled out early to put in an hour or so of work on my sector model before Greasy got breakfast slopped together. When I came out of my tent, Benny, my Shadow, was waiting for me. Some of the other Shadows also were standing around, waiting for their humans, and the whole thing, if one stopped to think of it, was absolutely crazy. Except that no one ever stopped to think of it; we were used to it by now.

Greasy had the cookshack stove fired up and smoke was curling from the chimney. I could hear him singing lustily amid the clatter of his pans. This was noisy time. During the entire morning, he was noisy and obnoxious, but toward the middle of the afternoon, he turned mousy quiet. That was when he began to take a really dangerous chance and hit the peeper.

There were laws which made it very rough on anyone who had a peeper. Mack Baldwin, the project superintendent, would have raised merry hell if he had known that Greasy had one. But I was the only one who knew it. I had found out by accident and not even Greasy knew I knew and I had kept my mouth shut.

I said hello to Benny, but he didn't answer me. He never answered me; he had no mouth to answer with. I don't suppose he even heard me, for he had no ears. Those Shadows were a screwy lot. They had no mouths and they had no ears and they hadn't any noses.

But they did have an eye, placed in the middle of the face, about where the nose would have been if they'd had noses. And that eye made up for the lack of ears and mouth and nose.

It was about three inches in diameter and strictly speaking, it wasn't built exactly like an eye; it had no iris or no pupil, but was a pool of light and shadow that kept shifting all around so it never looked the same. Sometimes it looked like a bowl of goop that was slightly on the spoiled side, and at other times it was hard and shining like a camera lens, and there were other times when it looked sad and lonely, like a mournful hound dog's eyes.

They were a weird lot for sure, those Shadows. They looked mostly like a rag doll before any one had gotten around to painting in the features. They were humanoid and they were strong and active and I had suspected from the very first that they weren't stupid. There was some division of opinion on that latter point and a lot of the boys still thought of them as howling savages. Except they didn't howl—they had no mouths to howl with. No mouths to howl or eat with, no nose to smell or breathe with, and no ears to hear with.

Just on bare statistics, one would have put them down as plain impossible, but they got along all right. They got along just fine.

They wore no clothes. On the point of modesty, there was no need of any. They were as bare of sexual characteristics as they were of facial features. They were just a gang of rag dolls with massive eyes in the middle of their faces.

But they did wear what might have been a decoration or a simple piece of jewelry or a badge of Shadowhood. They wore a narrow belt, from which was hung a bag or sack in which they carried a collection of trinkets that jingled when they walked. No one had ever seen what was in those sacks. Cross straps from the belt ran over the shoulders, making the whole business into a simple harness, and at the juncture of the straps upon their chest was mounted a huge

jewel. Intricately carved, the jewel sparkled like a diamond, and it might have been a diamond, but no one knew if it was or not. No one ever got close enough to see. Make a motion toward that jewel and the Shadow disappeared.

That's right. Disappeared.

I said hello to Benny and he naturally didn't answer and I walked around the table and began working on the model. Benny stood close behind me and watched me as I worked. He seemed to have a lot of interest in that model. He had a lot of interest in everything I did. He went everywhere I went. He was, after all, my Shadow.

There was a poem that started out: *I have a little shadow* . . . I had thought about it often, but couldn't recall who the poet was or how the rest of it went. It was an old, old poem and I remembered I had read it when I was a kid. I could close my eyes and see the picture that went with the words, the brightly colored picture of a kid in his pajamas, going up a stairs with a candle in his hand and the shadow of him on the wall beyond the stairs.

I took some satisfaction in Benny's interest in the sector model, although I was aware his interest probably didn't mean a thing. He might have been just as interested if I'd been counting beans.

I was proud of that model and I spent more time on it than I had any right to. I had my name, Robert Emmett Drake, spelled out in full on the plaster base and the whole thing was a bit more ambitious than I originally had intended.

I had let my enthusiasm run away with me and that was not too hard to understand. It wasn't every day that a conservationist got a chance to engineer from scratch an absolutely virgin Earth-type planet. The layout was only one small sector of the initial project, but it included almost all the factors involved in the entire tract and I had put in the works—the dams and roads, the power sites and the mill sites, the timber management and the water-conservation features and all the rest of it.

I had just settled down to work when a commotion broke out down at the cookshack. I could hear Greasy cussing and the sound of thudding whacks. The door of the shack burst open and a Shadow came bounding out with Greasy just a leap behind him. Greasy had a frying pan and he was using it effectively, with a nifty backhand technique that was beautiful to see. He was laying it on the Shadow with every leap he took and he was yelling maledictions that were enough to curl one's hair.

The Shadow legged it across the camp with Greasy close

behind. Watching them, I thought how it was a funny thing that a Shadow would up and disappear if you made a motion toward its jewel, but would stay and take the kind of treatment Greasy was handing out with that frying pan.

When they came abreast of my model table, Greasy gave up the chase. He was not in the best of condition.

He stood beside the table and put both fists belligerently on his hips, so that the frying pan, which he still clutched, stood out at a right angle from his body.

"I won't allow that stinker in the shack," he told me, wheezing and gasping. "It's bad enough to have him hanging around outside and looking in the windows. It's bad enough falling over him every time I turn around. I will not have him snooping in the kitchen; he's got his fingers into everything he sees. If I was Mack, I'd put the lug on all of them. I'd run them so fast, so far, that it would take them—"

"Mack's got other things to worry about," I told him rather sharply. "The project is way behind schedule, with all the breakdowns we've been having."

"Sabotage," Greasy corrected me. "That's what it is. You can bet your bottom dollar on that. It's them Shadows, I tell you, sabotaging the machines. If it was left to me, I'd run them clear out of the country."

"It's their country," I protested. "They were here before we came."

"It's a big planet," Greasy said. "There are other parts of it they could live in."

"But they have got a right here. This planet is their home."

"They ain't got no homes," said Greasy.

He turned around abruptly and walked back toward the shack. His Shadow, which had been standing off to one side all the time, hurried to catch up with him. It didn't look as if it had minded the pounding he had given it. But you could never tell what a Shadow was thinking. Their thoughts don't show on them.

What Greasy had said about their not having any homes was a bit unfair. What he meant, of course, was that they had no village, that they were just a sort of carefree bunch of gypsies, but to me the planet was their home and they had a right to go any place they wanted on it and use any part of it they wished. It should make no difference that they settled down on no particular spot, that they had no villages and possibly no shelters or that they raised no crops.

Come to think of it, there was no reason why they should raise crops, for they had no mouths to eat with, and if they didn't eat, how could they keep on living and if . . .

You see how it went. That was the reason it didn't pay to

think too much about the Shadows. Once you started trying to get them figured out, you got all tangled up.

I sneaked a quick look sideways to see how Benny might be taking this business of Greasy beating up his pal, but Benny was just the same as ever. He was all rag doll.

Men began to drift out of the tents and the Shadows galloped over to rejoin their humans, and everywhere a man might go, his Shadow tagged behind him.

The project center lay there on its hilltop, and from where I stood beside my sector table, I could see it laid out like a blueprint come to life.

Over there, the beginning of the excavation for the administration building, and there the gleaming stakes for the shopping center, and beyond the shopping center, the ragged, first-turned furrows that in time would become a street flanked by neat rows of houses.

It didn't look much like a brave beginning on a brand-new world, but in a little while it would. It would even now, if we'd not run into so much hard luck. And whether that hard luck could be traced to the Shadows or to something else, it was a thing that must be faced and somehow straightened out.

For this was important. Here was a world on which Man would not repeat the ancient, sad mistakes that he had made on Earth. On this, one of the few Earth-like planets found so far, Man would not waste the valuable resources which he had let go down the drain on the old home planet. He'd make planned use of the water and the soil, of the timber and the minerals, and he'd be careful to put back as much as he took out. This planet would not be robbed and gutted as Earth had been. It would be used intelligently and operated like a well-run business.

I felt good, just standing there, looking out across the valley and the plains toward the distant mountains, thinking what a fine home this would be for mankind.

The camp was becoming lively now. Out in front of the tents, the men were washing up for breakfast and there was a lot of friendly shouting and a fair amount of horseplay. I heard considerable cussing down in the equipment pool and I knew exactly what was going on. The machines, or at least a part of them, had gone daffy again and half the morning would be wasted getting them repaired. It certainly was a funny deal, I thought, how those machines got out of kilter every blessed night.

After a while, Greasy rang the breakfast bell and everyone dropped everything and made a dash for it and their Shadows hustled along behind them.

I was closer to the cookshack than most of them and I am

no slouch at sprinting, so I got one of the better seats at the big outdoor table. My place was just outside the cook-shack door, where I'd get first whack at seconds when Greasy lugged them out. I went past Greasy on the run and he was grumbling and muttering the way he always was at chow, although sometimes I thought that was just a pose to hide his satisfaction at knowing his cooking still was fit to eat.

I got a seat next to Mack, and a second later Rick Thorne, one of the equipment operators, grabbed the place on the other side of me. Across from me was Stan Carr, a biologist, and just down the table, on the other side, was Judson Knight, our ecologist.

We wasted no time in small talk; we dived into the wheat cakes and the side pork and the fried potatoes. There is nothing in all the Universe like the morning air of Stella IV to hone an edge on the appetite.

Finally we had enough of the edge off so we would waste time being civil.

"It's the same old story again this morning," Thorne said bitterly to Mack. "More than half the equipment is all gummed up. It'll take hours to get it moving."

He morosely shoveled food into his mouth and chewed with unnecessary savagery. He shot an angry glance at Carr across the table. "Why don't you get it figured out?" he asked.

"Me?" said Carr, in some astonishment. "Why should I be the one to get it figured out? I don't know anything about machines and I don't want to know. They're stupid contraptions at best."

"You know what I mean," said Thorne. "The machines are not to blame. They don't gum up themselves. It's the Shadows and you're a biologist and them Shadows are your business and—"

"I have other things to do," said Carr. "I have this earthworm problem to work out, and as soon as that is done, Bob here wants me to run some habit-patterns on a dozen different rodents."

"I wish you would," I said. "I have a hunch some of those little rascals may cause us a lot of trouble once we try our hand at crops. I'd like to know ahead of time what makes the critters tick."

That was the way it went, I thought. No matter how many factors you might consider, there were always more of them, popping up from under rocks and bushes. It seemed somehow that a man never quite got through the list.

"It wouldn't be so bad," Thorne complained, "if the Shadows would leave us alone and let us fix the damage after they've done their dirty work. But not them. They breathe down our necks while we're making the repairs, and they've

got their faces buried in those engines clear up to their shoulders, and every time you move, you bump into one of them. Someday," he said fiercely, "I'm going to take a monkey wrench and clear some space around me."

"They're worried about what you're doing to their machines," said Carr. "The Shadows have taken over those machines just like they've adopted us."

"That's what you think," Thorne said.

"Maybe they're trying to find out about the machines," Carr declared. "Maybe they gum them up so that, when you go to fix them, they can look things over. They haven't missed a single part of any machine so far. You were telling me the other day it's a different thing wrong every time."

Knight said, solemn as an owl: "I've been doing a lot of thinking about this situation."

"Oh, you have," said Thorne, and the way he said it, you could see he figured that what Knight might think would cut no ice.

"I've been seeking out some motive," Knight told him. "Because if the Shadows are the ones who are doing it, they'd have to have a motive. Don't you think so, Mack?"

"Yeah, I guess so," said Mack.

"For some reason," Knight went on, "those Shadows seem to like us. They showed up as soon as we set down and they've stayed with us ever since. The way they act, they'd like us to stay on and maybe they're wrecking the machines so we'll have to stay."

"Or drive us away," Thorne answered.

"That's all right," said Carr, "but why should they want us to stay? What exactly is it they like about us? If we could only get that one on the line, we might be able to do some bargaining with them."

"Well, I wouldn't know," Knight admitted. "There might be a lot of different reasons."

"Name just three of them," Thorne challenged him nastily.

"Gladly," said Knight, and he said it as if he were slipping a knife into the left side of Thorne's gizzard. "They may be getting something from us, only don't ask me what it is. Or they may be building us up to put the bite on us for something that's important. Or they may be figuring on reforming us, although just what's in us they object to, I can't faintly imagine. Or they may worship us. Or maybe it's just love."

"Is that all?" asked Thorne.

"Just a start," said Knight. "They may be studying us and they may need some time to get us puzzled out. They may be prodding us to get some reactions from us—"

"Studying us!" yelled Thorne, outraged. "They're just lousy savages!"

"I don't think they are," Knight replied.

"They don't wear any clothes," Thorne thundered, slamming the table with his fist. "They don't have any tools. They don't have a village. They don't know how to build a hut. They don't have any government. They can't even talk or hear."

I was disgusted with Thorne.

"Well, we got that settled," I said. "Let's go back to work."

I got up off the bench, but I hadn't gone more than a step or two before a man came pounding down from the radio hut, waving a piece of paper in his hand. It was Jack Pollard, our communications man, who also doubled in brass as an electronics expert.

"Mack!" he was hollering. "Hey, Mack!"

Mack lumbered to his feet.

Pollard handed him the paper. "It was coming in when Greasy blew the horn," he gasped. "I was having trouble getting it. Relayed a long way out."

Mack read the paper and his face turned hard and red.

"What's the matter, Mack?" I wanted to know.

"There's an inspector coming out," he said, and he choked on each and every word. He was all burned up. And maybe scared as well.

"Is it likely to be bad?"

"He'll probably can the lot of us," said Mack.

"But he can't do that!"

"That's what you think. We're six weeks behind schedule and this project is hotter than a pile. Earth's politicians have made a lot of promises, and if those promises don't pay off, there'll be hell to pay. Unless we can do something and do it fast, they'll bounce us out of here and send a new gang in."

"But considering everything, we haven't done so badly," Carr said mildly.

"Don't get me wrong," Mack told him. "The new gang will do no better, but there has to be some action for the record and we're the ones who'll get it in the neck. If we could lick this breakdown business, we might have a chance. If we could say to that inspector: 'Sure, we've had a spot of trouble, but we have it licked and now we're doing fine—' if we could say that to him, then we might save our hides."

"You think it's the Shadows, Mack?" asked Knight.

Mack reached up and scratched his head. "Must be them. Can't think of anything else."

Somebody shouted from another table: "Of course it's them damn Shadows!"

The men were getting up from their seats and crowding around.

Mack held up his hands. "You guys get back to work. If any of you got some good ideas, come up to the tent and we'll talk them over."

They started jabbering at him.

"Ideas!" Mack roared. "I said *ideas*! Anyone that comes up without a good idea, I'll dock him for being off the job."

They quieted down a little.

"And another thing," said Mack. "No rough stuff on the Shadows. Just go along the way we always have. I'll fire the man who strongarms them."

He said to me: "Let's go."

I followed him, and Knight and Carr fell in beside me. Thorne didn't come. I had expected that he would.

Inside Mack's tent, we sat down at a table littered with blueprints and spec sheets and papers scribbled with figures and offhand diagrams.

"I suppose," said Carr, "that it has to be the Shadows."

"Some gravitational peculiarity?" suggested Knight. "Some strange atmospheric condition? Some space-warping quality?"

"Maybe," said Mack. "It all sounds a bit far-fetched, but I'm ready to grab any straw you shove at me."

"One thing that puzzles me," I put in, "is that the survey crew didn't mention Shadows. Survey believed the planet was uninhabited by any sort of intelligence. It found no signs of culture. And that was good, because it meant the project wouldn't get all tangled up with legalities over primal rights. And yet the minute we landed, the Shadows came galloping to meet us, almost as if they'd spotted us a long way off and were waiting for us to touch down."

"Another funny thing," said Carr, "is how they paired off with us—one Shadow to every man. Like they had it all planned out. Like they'd married us or something."

"What are you getting at?" growled Mack.

I said: "Where were the Shadows, Mack, when the survey gang was here? Can we be absolutely sure they're native to this planet?"

"If they aren't native," demanded Mack, "how did they get here? They have no machines. They haven't even got tools."

"There's another thing about that survey report," said Knight, "that I've been wondering about. The rest of you have read it—"

We nodded. We had not only read it, we had studied and digested it. We'd lived with it day and night on the long trip out to Stella IV.

"The survey report told about some cone-shaped things," said Knight. "All sitting in a row, as if they might be boundary markers. But they never saw them except from a long way off. They had no idea what they were. They just wrote them off as something that had no real significance."

"They wrote off a lot of things as having no significance," said Carr.

"We aren't getting anywhere," Mack complained. "All we do is talk."

"If we could talk to the Shadows," said Knight, "we might be getting somewhere."

"But we can't!" argued Mack.

"We tried to talk to them and we couldn't raise a ripple. We tried sign language and we tried pantomime and we filled reams of paper with diagrams and drawings and we got exactly nowhere. Jack rigged up that electronic communicator and he tried it on them and they just sat and looked at us, all bright and sympathetic, with that one big eye of theirs, and that was all there was. We even tried telepathy—"

"You're wrong there, Mack," said Carr. "We didn't try telepathy, because we don't know a thing about it. All we did was sit in a circle, holding hands with them and thinking hard at them. And of course it was no good. They probably thought it was just a game."

"Look," pleaded Mack, "that inspector will be here in ten days or so. We have to think of something. Let's get down to cases."

"If we could run the Shadows off somehow," said Knight. "If we could scare them away—"

"You know how to scare a Shadow?" Mack asked, "You got any idea what they might be afraid of?"

Knight shook his head.

"Our first job," said Carr, "is to find out what a Shadow is like. We have to learn what kind of animal he is. He's a funny kind, we know. He doesn't have a mouth or nose or ears . . ."

"He's impossible," Mack said. "There ain't no such animal."

"He's alive," said Carr, "and doing very well. We have to find out how he gets his food, how he communicates, what tolerances he may have, what his responses are to various kinds of stimuli. We can't do a thing about the Shadows until we have some idea of what we're dealing with."

Knight agreed with him. "We should have started weeks ago. We made a stab at it, of course, but our hearts were never in it. We were too anxious to get started on the project."

Mack said bitterly: "Fat lot of good it did us."

"Before you can examine one, you have to have a subject," I answered Knight. "Seems to me we should try to figure out how to catch a Shadow. Make a sudden move toward one and he disappears."

But even as I said it, I knew that was not entirely right. I remembered how Greasy had chased his Shadow from the cookshack, lamming him with the frying pan.

And I remembered something else and I had a hunch and got a big idea, but I was scared to say anything about it. I didn't even, for the moment, dare to let on to myself I had it.

"We'd have to take one by surprise somehow and knock him out before he had a chance to disappear," Carr said. "And it has to be a sure way, for if we try it once and fail we've put the Shadows on their guard and we'll never have another chance."

Mack warned, "No rough stuff. You can't go using violence until you know your critter. You don't do any killing until you have some idea how efficiently the thing that you are killing can up and kill you back."

"No rough stuff," Carr agreed. "If a Shadow can bollix up the innards of some of those big earthmovers, I wouldn't like to see what he could do to a human body."

"It's got to be fast and sure," said Knight, "and we can't even start until we know it is. If you hit one on the head with a baseball bat, would the bat bounce or would you crush the Shadow's skull? That's about the way it would be with everything we could think of at the moment."

Carr nodded. "That's right. We can't use gas, because a Shadow doesn't breathe."

"He might breathe through his pores," said Knight.

"Sure, but we'd have to know before we tried using gas. We might jab a hypo into one, but what would you use in the hypo? First you'd have to find something that would knock a Shadow out. You might try hypnotism—"

"I'd doubt hypnotism," said Knight.

"How about Doc?" I asked. "If we could knock out a Shadow, would Doc give him a going over? If I know Doc, he'd raise a lot of hell. Claim the Shadow was an intelligent being and that it would be in violation of medical ethics to examine one without first getting its consent."

"You get one," Mack promised grimly, "and I'll handle Doc."

"He'll do a lot of screaming."

"I'll handle Doc," repeated Mack. "This inspector is going to be here in a week or so—"

"We wouldn't have to have it *all* cleared up," said Knight. "If we could show the inspector that we had a good lead, that we were progressing, he might play ball with us."

I was seated with my back to the entrance of the tent and I heard someone fumbling with the canvas.

Mack said: "Come in, Greasy. Got something on your mind?"

Greasy walked in and came up to the table. He had the bottom of his apron tucked into his trouser band, the way he always did when he wasn't working, and he held something in his hand. He tossed it on the table.

It was one of the bags that the Shadows carried at their belts!

We all sucked in our breath and Mack's hair fairly stood on end.

"Where did you get this?" he demanded.

"Off my Shadow, when he wasn't looking."

"When he wasn't looking!"

"Well, you see, it was this way, Mack. That Shadow is always into things. I stumble over him everywhere I go. And this morning he had his head halfway into the dishwasher and that bag was hanging on his belt, so I grabbed up a butcher knife and just whacked it off."

As Mack got up and pulled himself to his full height, you could see it was hard for him to keep his hands off Greasy.

"So that was all you did," he said in a low, dangerous voice.

"Sure," said Greasy. "There was nothing hard about it."

"All you've done is spill the beans to them! All you've done is made it almost impossible—"

"Maybe not," Knight interrupted in a hurry.

"Now that the damage has been done," said Carr, "we might as well have a look. Maybe there's a clue inside that bag."

"I can't open it," grumbled Greasy. "I tried every way I know. There's no way to open it."

"And while you were trying to open it," asked Mack, "what was the Shadow doing?"

"He didn't even notice. He had his head inside that washer. He's as stupid as—"

"Don't say that! I don't want anyone thinking a Shadow's stupid. Maybe they are, but there's no sense believing it until we're sure."

Knight had picked up the bag and was turning it around and around in his hand. Whatever was inside was jingling as he turned and twisted it.

"Greasy's right," he said. "I don't see any way to get it open."

"You get out of here!" Mack roared at Greasy. "Get back to your work. Don't you ever make another move toward any of the Shadows."

Greasy turned around and left, but he was no more than out of the tent when he gave a yelp that was enough to raise your scalp.

I almost knocked the table over getting out of there to see what was going on.

What was happening was no more than plain solemn justice.

Greasy was running for all he was worth, and behind him was the Shadow with a frying pan, and every jump that Greasy took, the Shadow let him have it, and was every bit as good with that frying pan as Greasy was.

Greasy was weaving and circling, trying to head back for the cookshack, but each time the Shadow got him headed off and went on chasing him.

Everyone had stopped work to watch. Some of them were yelling advice to Greasy and some of the others were cheering on the Shadow. I'd have liked to stay and watch, but I knew that if I was going to put my hunch into execution, I'd never have a better chance to do it.

So I turned and walked swiftly down the street to my own tent and ducked inside and got a specimen bag and came out again.

I saw that Greasy was heading for the equipment pool and that the Shadow still was one long stride behind. Its arm was holding up well, for the frying pan never missed a lick.

I ran down to the cookshack and, at the door, I stopped and looked back. Greasy was shinnying up the derrick of a shovel and the Shadow was standing at the bottom, waving the frying pan as though daring him to come down and take it like a man. Everyone else was running toward the scene of action and there was no one, I was sure, who had noticed me.

So I opened the cookshack door and stepped inside.

The dishwasher was chugging away and everything was peaceable and quiet.

I was afraid I might have trouble finding what I was looking for, but I found it in the third place I looked—underneath the mattress on Greasy's bunk.

I pulled the peeper out and slipped it in the bag and got out of there as fast as I could go.

Stopping at my tent, I tossed the bag into a corner and threw some old clothes over it and then went out again.

The commotion had ended. The shadow was walking back toward the cookshack, with the pan tucked underneath its arm, and Greasy was climbing down off the shovel. The men were all gathered around the shovel, making a lot of

noise, and I figured that it would take a long, long time for Greasy to live down what had happened. Although, I realized, he had it coming to him.

I went back into Mack's tent and found the others there. All three of them were standing beside the table, looking down at what lay there upon the surface.

The bag had disappeared and had left behind a little pile of trinkets. Looking at the pile, I could see that they were miniatures of frying pans and kettles and all the other utensils that Greasy worked with. And there, half protruding out of the pile, was a little statuette of Greasy.

I reached out a hand and picked up the statuette. There was no mistaking it—it was Greasy to a T. It was made of some sort of stone, as if it might have been a carving, and was delicate beyond all belief. Squinting closely, I could even see the lines on Greasy's face.

"The bag just went away," said Knight. "It was lying here when we dashed out, and when we came back, it was gone and all this junk was lying on the table."

"I don't understand," Carr said.

And he was right. None of us did.

"I don't like it," Mack said slowly.

I didn't like it, either. It raised too many questions in my head and some of them were resolving into some miserable suspicions.

"They're making models of our stuff," said Knight. "Even down to the cups and spoons."

"I wouldn't mind that so much," Carr said. "It's the model of Greasy that gives me the jitters."

"Now let's sit down," Mack told us, "and not go off on any tangents. This is exactly the sort of thing we could have expected."

"What do you mean?" I prompted.

"What do we do when we find an alien culture? We do just what the Shadows are doing. Different way, but the same objective. We try to find out all we can about this alien culture. And don't you ever forget that, to the Shadows, we're not only an alien culture, but an *invading* alien culture. So if they had any sense at all, they'd make it their business to find out as much about us as they could in the shortest time."

That made sense, of course. But this making of models seemed to be carrying it beyond what was necessary.

And if they had made models of Greasy's cups and spoons, of the dishwasher and the coffee pot, then they had other models, too. They had models of the earthmovers and the shovels and the dozers and all the rest of it. And if they

had a model of Greasy, they had models of Mack and Thorne and Carr and all the rest of the crew, including me.

Just how faithful would those models be? How much deeper would they go than mere external appearances?

I tried to stop thinking of it, for I was doing little more than scaring myself stiff.

But I couldn't stop. I went right on thinking.

They had been gumming up equipment so that the mechanics had to rip the machines all apart to get them going once again. There seemed no reason in the world why the Shadows should be doing that, except to find out what the innards of those machines were like. I wondered if the models of the equipment might not be faithful not only so far as the outward appearance might go, but faithful as well on the most intricate construction of the entire machine.

And if that was true, was that faithfulness also carried out in the Greasy statuette? Did it have a heart and lungs, blood vessels and brain and nerve? Might it not also have the very essence of Greasy's character, the kind of animal he was, what his thoughts and ethics might be?

I don't know if, at that very moment, the others were thinking the same thing, but the looks on their faces argued that they might have been.

Mack put out a finger and stirred the contents of the pile, scattering the miniatures all about the tabletop.

Then his hand darted out and picked up something and his face went red with anger.

Knight asked: "What is it, Mack?"

"A peeper!" said Mack, his words rasping in his throat. "There's a model of a peeper!"

All of us sat and stared and I could feel the cold sweat breaking out on me.

"If Greasy has a peeper," Mack said woodenly, "I'll break his scrawny neck."

"Take it easy, Mack," said Carr.

"You know what a peeper is?"

"Sure, I know what a peeper is."

"You ever see what a peeper does to a man who uses one?"

"No, I never did."

"I have." Mack threw the peeper model back on the table and turned and went out of the tent. The rest of us followed him.

Greasy was coming down the street, with some of the men following along behind, kidding him about the Shadow treeing him.

Mack put his hands on his hips and waited.

Greasy got almost to us.

"Greasy!" said Mack.

"Yes, Mack."

"You hiding out a peeper?"

Greasy blinked, but he never hesitated. "No, sir," he said, lying like a trooper. "I wouldn't rightly know one if somebody should point it out to me. I've heard of them, of course."

"I'll make a bargain with you," said Mack. "If you have one, just hand it over to me and I'll bust it up and fine you a full month's wages and that's the last that we'll say about it. But if you lie to me and we find that you have one hidden out, I'll can you off the job."

I held my breath. I didn't like what was going on and I thought what a lousy break it was that something like this should happen just when I had swiped the peeper. Although I was fairly sure that no one had seen me sneak into the cookshack—at least I didn't think they had.

Greasy was stubborn. He shook his head. "I haven't got one, Mack."

Mack's face got hard. "All right. We'll go down and see."

He headed for the cookshack and Knight and Carr went along with him, but I headed for my tent.

It would be just like Mack, when he didn't find the peeper in the cookshack, to search the entire camp. If I wanted to stay out of trouble, I knew, I'd better be zipping out of camp and take the peeper with me.

Benny was squatted outside the tent, waiting for me. He helped me get the roller out and then I took the specimen bag with the peeper in it and stuffed it in the roller's carrying bag.

I got on the roller and Benny jumped on the carrier behind me and sat there showing off, balancing himself—like a kid riding a bicycle with no hands.

"You hang on," I told him sharply. "If you fall off this time, I won't stop to pick you up."

I am sure he didn't hear me, but however that may be, he put his arms around my waist and we were off in a cloud of dust.

Until you've ridden on a roller, you haven't really lived. It's like a roller coaster running on the level. But it is fairly safe and it gets you there. It's just two big rubber doughnuts with an engine and a seat and it could climb a barn if you gave it half a chance. It's too rambunctious for civilized driving, but it is just the ticket for an alien planet.

We set off across the plain toward the distant foothills. It was a fine day, but for that matter, every day was fine on Stella IV. It was an ideal planet, Earth-like, with good weath-

er all the time, crammed with natural resources, free of vicious animal life or deadly virus—a planet that virtually pleaded for someone to come and live on it.

And in time there'd be people here. Once the administration center was erected, the neat rows of houses had been built, once the shopping centers had been installed, the dams built, the power plant completed—then there would be people. And in the years to come, sector by sector, project community by community, the human race would spread across the planet's face. But it would spread in an orderly progression.

Here there would be no ornery misfits slamming out on their own, willy-nilly, into the frontier land of wild dream and sudden death; no speculators, no strike-it-rich, no go-for-broke. Here there would be no frontier, but a systematic taking over. And here, for once, a planet would be treated right.

But there was more to it than that, I told myself.

If Man was to keep going into space, he would have to accept the responsibility of making proper use of the natural resources that he found there. Just because there might be a lot of them was no excuse for wasting them. We were no longer children and we couldn't gut every world as we had gutted Earth.

By the time an intelligence advances to a point where it can conquer space, it must have grown up. And now it was time for the human race to prove that it was adult. We couldn't go ravaging out into the Galaxy like a horde of greedy children.

Here on this planet, it seemed to me, was one of the many proving grounds on which the race of Man must stand and show its worth.

Yet if we were to get the job done, if we were to prove anything at all, there was another problem that first must be met and solved. If it was the Shadows that were causing all our trouble, then somehow we must put a stop to it. And not merely put a stop to it, but understand the Shadows and their motives. For how can anybody fight a thing, I asked myself, that he doesn't understand?

And to understand the Shadows, we'd agreed back in the tent, we had to know what kind of critters they might be. And before we could find that out, we had to grab off one for examination. And that first grab had to be perfect, for if we tried and failed, if we put them on their guard, there'd be no second chance.

But the peeper, I told myself, might give us at least one free try. If I tried the peeper and it didn't work, no one

would be the wiser. It would be a failure that would go unnoticed.

Benny and I crossed the plain on the roller and headed into the foothills. I made for a place that I called the Orchard, not because it was a formal orchard, but because there were a lot of fruit-bearing trees in the area. As soon as I got around to it, I was planning to run tests to see if any of the fruit might be fit for human food.

We reached the Orchard and I parked the roller and looked around. I saw immediately that something had happened. When I had been there just a week or so before, the trees had been loaded with fruit and it seemed to be nearly ripe, but now it was all gone.

I peered underneath the trees to see if the fruit had fallen off and it hadn't. It looked for all the world as if someone had come in and picked it.

I wondered if the Shadows had done the picking, but even as I thought it, I knew it couldn't be. The Shadows didn't eat.

I didn't get the peeper out right away, but sat down beneath a tree and sort of caught my breath and did a little thinking.

From where I sat, I could see the camp and I wondered what Mack had done when he hadn't found the peeper. I could imagine he'd be in a towering rage. And I could imagine Greasy, considerably relieved, but wondering just the same what had happened to the peeper and perhaps rubbing it into Mack a little how he had been wrong.

I got the feeling that maybe it would be just as well if I stayed away a while. At least until mid-afternoon. By that time, perhaps, Mack would have cooled off a little.

And I thought about the Shadows.

Lousy savages, Thorne had said. Yet they were far from savages. They were perfect gentleman (or ladies, God knows which they were, if either) and your genuine savage is no gentleman on a number of very fundamental points. The Shadows were clean in body, healthy and well-mannered. They had a certain cultural poise. They were, more than anything else, like a group of civilized campers, but unencumbered by the usual camp equipment.

They were giving us a going over—there could be no doubt of that. They were learning all they could of us and why did they want to know? What use could they make of pots and pans and earthmovers and all the other things?

Or were they merely taking our measure before they clobbered us?

And there were all the other questions, too.

Where did they hang out?

How did they disappear, and when they disappeared, where did they go?

How did they eat and breathe?

How did they communicate?

Come right down to it, I admitted to myself, the Shadows undoubtedly knew a great deal more about us than we knew about them. Because when you tried to chalk up what we knew about them, it came out to almost exactly nothing.

I sat under the tree for a while longer, with the thoughts spinning in my head and not adding up. Then I got to my feet and went over to the roller and got out the peeper.

It was the first time I'd ever had one in my hands and I was interested and slightly apprehensive. For a peeper was nothing one should monkey with.

It was a simple thing to look at—like a lopsided pair of binoculars, with a lot of selector knobs on each side and on the top of it.

You looked into it and you twisted the knobs until you had what you wanted and then there was a picture. You stepped into the picture and you lived the life you found there—the sort of life you picked by the setting of the knobs. And there were many lives to pick from, for there were millions of combinations that could be set up on the knobs and the factors ranged from the lightest kind of frippery to the most abysmal horror.

The peeper was outlawed, naturally—it was worse than alcoholism, worse than dope, the most insidious vice that had ever hit mankind. It threw psychic hooks deep into the soul and tugged forevermore. When a man acquired the habit, and it was easy to acquire, there was no getting over it. He'd spend the rest of his life trying to sort out his life from all the fantasied ones, getting further and further from reality all the while, till nothing was real any more.

I squatted down beside the roller and tried to make some sense out of the knobs. There were thirty-nine of them, each numbered from one to thirty-nine, and I wondered what the numbering meant.

Benny came over and hunkered down beside me, with one shoulder touching mine, and watched what I was doing.

I pondered over the numbering, but pondering did no good. There was only one way to find out what I was looking for. So I set all the knobs back to zero on the graduated scales, then twisted No. 1 up a notch or two.

I knew that was not the way to work a peeper. In actual operation, one would set a number of the knobs at different settings, mixing in the factors in different proportions to

make up the kind of life that one might want to sample. But I wasn't after a life. What I wanted to find out was what factor each of the knobs controlled.

So I set No. 1 up a notch or two and lifted the peeper and fitted it to my face and I was back again in the meadow of my boyhood—a meadow that was green as no meadow ever was before, with a sky as blue as old-time watered silk and with a brook and butterflies.

And more than that—a meadow that lay in a day that would never end, a place that knew no time, and a sunlight that was the bright glow of boyish happiness.

I knew exactly how the grass would feel beneath bare feet and I could remember how the sunlight would bounce off the wind-ripples of the brook. It was the hardest thing I ever did in my entire life, but I snatched the peeper from my eyes.

I squatted there, with the peeper cradled in my lap. My hands were unsteady, longing to lift the peeper so I could look once again at that scene out of a long-lost boyhood, but I made myself not do it.

No. 1 was not the knob I wanted, so I turned it back to zero and, since No. 1 was about as far away as one could imagine from what I was looking for, I turned knob 39 up a notch or two.

I lifted the peeper halfway to my face and then I turned plain scared. I put it down again until I could get a good grip on my courage. Then I lifted it once more and stuck my face straight into a horror that reached out and tried to drag me in.

I can't describe it. Even now, I cannot recall one isolated fragment of what I really saw. Rather than seeing, it was pure impression and raw emotion—a sort of surrealist representation of all that is loathsome and repellent, and yet somehow retaining a hypnotic fascination that forbade retreat.

Shaken, I snatched the peeper from my face and sat frozen. For a moment, my mind was an utter blank, with stray wisps of horror streaming through it.

Then the wisps gradually cleared away and I was squatting once again on the hillside with the Shadow hunkered down beside me, his shoulder touching mine.

It was a terrible thing, I thought, an act no human could bring himself to do, even to a Shadow. Just turned up a notch or two, it was terrifying; turned on full power, it would twist one's brain.

Benny reached out a hand to take the peeper from me.

I jerked it away from him. But he kept on pawing for it and that gave me time to think.

This, I told myself, was exactly the way I had wanted it to be. All that was different was that Benny, by his nosiness, was making it easy for me to do the very thing I'd planned.

I thought of all that depended on our getting us a Shadow to examine. And I thought about my heart if the inspector should come out and fire us and send in another crew. There just weren't planets lying around every day in the week to be engineered. I might never get another chance.

So I put out my thumb and shoved knob 39 to its final notch and let Benny have the peeper.

And even as I gave it to him, I wondered if it would really work or if I'd just had a pipe-dream. It might not work, I thought, for it was a human mechanism, designed for human use, keyed to the human nervous system and response.

Then I knew that I was wrong, that the peeper did not operate by virtue of its machinery alone, but by the reaction of the brain and the body of its user—that it was no more than a trigger mechanism to set loose the greatness and the beauty and the horror that lay within the user's brain. And horror, while it might take a different shape and form, appear in a different guise, was horror for a Shadow as well as for a human.

Benny lifted the peeper to that great single eye of his and thrust his head forward to fit into the viewer. Then I saw his body jerk and stiffen and I caught him as he toppled and eased him to the ground.

I stood there above him and felt the triumph and the pride—and perhaps a little pity, too—that it should be necessary to do a thing like this to a guy like Benny. To play a trick like this on my Shadow who had sat, just moments ago, with his shoulder touching mine.

I knelt down and turned him over. He didn't seem so heavy and I was glad of that, because I'd have to get him on the roller and then make a dash for camp, going as fast as I could gun the roller, because there was no telling how long Benny would stay knocked out.

I picked up the peeper and stuck it back into the roller's bag, then hunted for some rope or wire to tie Benny on so he would not fall off.

I don't know if I heard a noise or not. I'm half inclined to think that there wasn't any noise—that it was some sort of built-in alarm system that made me turn around.

Benny was sagging in upon himself and I had a moment of wild panic, thinking that he might be dead, that the shock of the horror that leaped out of the peeper at him had been too much for him to stand.

And I remembered what Mack had said: "Never kill a thing until you have figured out just how efficiently it may up and kill you back."

If Benny was dead, then we might have all hell exploding in our laps.

If he was dead, though, he sure was acting funny. He was sinking in and splitting at a lot of different places, and he was turning to what looked like dust, but wasn't dust, and then there wasn't any Benny. There was just the harness with the bag and the jewel and then there wasn't any bag, but a handful of trinkets lying on the ground where the bag had been.

And there was something else.

There still was Benny's eye. The eye was a part of a cone that had been in Benny's head.

I recalled how the survey party had seen other cones like that, but had not been able to get close to them.

I was too scared to move. I stood and looked and there were a lot of goose pimples rising on my hide.

For Benny was no alien. Benny was no more than the proxy of some other alien that we had never seen and could not even guess at.

All sorts of conjectures went tumbling through my brain, but they were no more than panic-pictures, and they flipped off and on so fast, I couldn't settle on any one of them.

But one thing was clear as day—the cleverness of this alien for which the Shadows were the front.

Too clever to confront us with anything that was more than remotely human in its shape—a thing for which we could feel pity or contempt or perhaps exasperation, but something that would never rouse a fear within us. A pitiful little figure that was a caricature of our shape and one that was so stupid that it couldn't even talk. And one that was sufficiently alien to keep us puzzled and stump us on so many basic points that we would, at last, give up in sheer bewilderment any attempts that we might make to get it puzzled out.

I threw a quick glance over my shoulder and kept my shoulders hunched, and if anything had moved, I'd have run like a frightened rabbit. But nothing moved. Nothing even rustled. There was nothing to be afraid of except the thoughts within my head.

But I felt a frantic urge to get out of there and I went down on my hands and knees and began to gather what was left of Benny.

I scooped up the pile of trinkets and the jewel and dumped them in the bag along with the peeper. Then I went back

and picked up the cone, with the one eye looking at me, but I could see that the eye was dead. The cone was slippery and it didn't feel like metal, but it was heavy and hard to get a good grip on and I had quite a time with it. But I finally got it in the bag and started out for camp.

I went like a bat winging out of hell. Fear was roosting on one shoulder and I kept that roller wheeling.

I swung into camp and headed for Mack's tent, but before I got there, I found what looked like the entire project crew working at the craziest sort of contraption one would ever hope to see. It was a mass of gears and cams and wheels and chains and whatnot, and it sprawled over what, back home, would have been a good-sized lot, and there was no reason I could figure for building anything like that.

I saw Thorne standing off to one side and superintending the work, yelling first at this one and then at someone else, and I could see that he was enjoying himself. Thorne was that kind of bossy jerk.

I stopped the roller beside him and balanced it with one leg.

"What's going on?" I asked him.

"We're giving them something to get doped out," he said.

"We're going to drive them crazy."

"Them? You mean the Shadows?"

"They want information, don't they?" Thorne demanded.

"They've been underfoot day and night, always in the way, so now we give them something to keep them occupied."

"But what does it do?"

Thorne spat derisively. "Nothing. That's the beauty of it."

"Well," I said, "I suppose you know what you're doing. Does Mack know what's going on?"

"Mack and Carr and Knight are the big brains that thought it up," said Thorne. "I'm just carrying out orders."

I went on to Mack's tent and parked the roller there and I knew that Mack was inside, for I heard a lot of arguing.

I took the carrier bag and marched inside the tent and pushed my way up to the table and, up-ending the sack, emptied the whole thing on the tabletop.

And I plumb forgot about the peeper being in there with all the other stuff.

There was nothing I could do about it. The peeper lay naked on the table and there was a terrible silence and I could see that in another second Mack would blow his jets.

He sucked in his breath to roar, but I beat him to it.

"Shut up, Mack!" I snapped. "I don't want to hear a word from you!"

I must have caught him by surprise, for he let his breath out slowly, looking at me funny while he did it, and Carr and Knight were just slightly frozen in position. The tent was deathly quiet.

"That was Benny," I said, motioning at the tabletop. "That is all that's left of him. A look in the peeper did it."

Carr came a bit unfrozen. "But the peeper! We looked everywhere—"

"I knew Greasy had it and I stole it when I got a hunch. Remember, we were talking about how to catch a Shadow—"

"I'm going to bring charges against you!" howled Mack. "I'm going to make an example out of you! I'm going to—"

"You're going to shut up," I said at him. "You're going to stay quiet and listen or I'll heave you out of here tin cup over appetite."

"Please!" begged Knight. "Please, gentlemen, let's act civilized."

And that was a hot one—him calling us gentlemen.

"It seems to me," said Carr, "that the matter of the peeper is somewhat immaterial if Bob has turned it to some useful purpose."

"Let's all sit down," Knight urged, "and maybe count to ten. Then Bob can tell us what is on his mind."

It was a good suggestion. We all sat down and I told them what had happened. They sat there listening, looking at all that junk on the table and especially at the cone, for it was lying on its side at one end of the table, where it had rolled, and it was looking at us with that dead and fishy eye.

"Those Shadows," I finished up, "aren't alive at all. They're just some sort of spy rig that something else is sending out. All we need to do is lure the Shadows off, one by one, and let them look into the peeper with knob 39 set full and—"

"It's no permanent solution," said Knight. "Fast as we destroyed them, there'd be other ones sent out."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. No matter how good that alien race may be, they can't control those Shadows just by mental contact. My bet is that there are machines involved, and when we destroy a Shadow, it would be my hunch that we knock out a machine. And if we knock out enough of them, we'll give those other people so much headache that they may come out in the open and we can dicker with them."

"I'm afraid you're wrong," Knight answered. "This other race keeps hidden, I'd say, for some compelling reason. Maybe they have developed an underground civilization

and never venture on the surface because it's a hostile environment to them. But maybe they keep track of what is doing on the surface by means of these cones of theirs. And when we showed up, they rigged the cones to look like something slightly human, something they felt sure we would accept, and sent them out to get a good close look."

Mack put up his hands and rubbed them back and forth across his head. "I don't like this hiding business. I like things out in the open where I can take a swipe at them and they can take a swipe at me. I'd have liked it a whole lot better if the Shadows had really been the aliens."

"I don't go for your underground race," Carr said to Knight. "It doesn't seem to me you could produce such a civilization if you lived underground. You'd be shut away from all the phenomena of nature. You wouldn't—"

"All right," snapped Knight, "what's *your* idea?"

"They might have matter transmission—in fact, we know they do—whether by machine or mind, and that would mean that they'd never have to travel on the surface of the planet, but could transfer from place to place in the matter of a second. But they still would need to know what was going on, so they'd have their eyes and ears like a TV radar system—"

"You jokers are just talking round in circles," objected Mack. "You don't know what the score is."

"I suppose you do," Knight retorted.

"No, I don't," said Mack. "But I'm honest enough to say straight out I don't."

"I think Carr and Knight are too involved," I said. "These aliens might be hiding only until they find out what we're like—whether they can trust us or if it would be better to run us off the planet."

"Well," said Knight, "no matter how you figure it, you've got to admit that they probably know practically all there is to know about us—our technology and our purpose and what kind of animals we are and they probably have picked up our language."

"They know too much," said Mack. "I'm getting scared."

There was a scrabbling at the flap and Thorne stuck in his head.

"Say, Mack," he said, "I got a good idea. How about setting up some guns in that contraption out there? When the Shadows crowd around—"

"No guns," Knight said firmly. "No rockets. No electrical traps. You do just what we told you. Produce all the useless motion you can. Get it as involved and as flashy as possible. But let it go at that."

Thorne withdrew sulkily.

Knight explained to me: "We don't expect it to last too long, but it may keep them occupied for a week or so while we get some work done. When it begins to wear off, we'll fix up something else."

It was all right, I suppose, but it didn't sound too hot to me. At the best, it bought a little time and nothing more. It bought a little time, that is, if we could fool the Shadows. Somehow, I wasn't sure that we could fool them much. Ten to one, they'd spot the contraption as a phony the minute it was set in motion.

Mack got up and walked around the table. He lifted the cone and tucked it beneath one arm.

"I'll take this down to the shop," he said. "Maybe the boys can find out what it is."

"I can tell you now," said Carr. "It's what the aliens use to control the Shadows. Remember the cones the survey people saw? This is one of them. My guess is that it's some kind of a signal device that can transmit data back to base, wherever that might be."

"No matter," Mack said. "We'll cut into it and see what we can find."

"And the peeper?" I asked.

"I'll take care of that."

I reached out a hand and picked it up. "No, you won't. You're just the kind of bigot who would take it out and smash it."

"It's illegal," Mack declared.

Carr sided with me. "Not any more. It's a tool now—a weapon that we can use."

I handed it to Carr. "You take care of it. Put it in a good safe place. We may need it again before all this is over."

I gathered the junk that had been in Benny's bag and picked up the jewel and dropped it into a pocket of my coat.

Mack went out with the cone underneath his arm. The rest of us drifted outside the tent and stood there, just a little footloose now that the excitement was all over.

"He'll have Greasy's hide," worried Knight.

"I'll talk to him," Carr said. "I'll make him see that Greasy may have done us a service by sneaking the thing out here."

"I suppose," I said, "I should tell Greasy what happened to the peeper."

Knight shook his head. "let him sweat a while. It will do him good."

Back in my tent, I tried to do some paper work, but I couldn't get my mind to settle down on it. I guess I was ex-

cited and I'm afraid that I missed Benny and I was tangled up with wondering just what the situation was, so far as the Shadows were concerned.

We had named them well, all right, for they were little more than shadows—meant to shadow us. But even knowing they were just camouflaged spy rigs, I still found it hard not to think of them as something that was alive.

They were no more than cones, of course, and the cones probably were no more than observation units for those hidden people who hung out somewhere on the planet. For thousands of years, perhaps, the cones had been watching while this race stayed in hiding somewhere. But maybe more than watching. Maybe the cones were harvesters and planters—bringing back the plunder of the wilds to their hidden masters. More than likely, it had been the cones that had picked all the Orchard fruit.

And if there was a culture here, if another race had primal rights upon the planet, then what did that do to the claims that Earth might make? Did it mean we might be forced to relinquish this planet, after all—one of the few Earthlike planets found in years of exploration?

I sat at my desk and thought about the planning and the work and the money that had gone into this project, which, even so, was no more than a driblet compared to what eventually would be spent to make this into another Earth.

Even on this project center, we'd made no more than an initial start. In a few more weeks, the ships would begin bringing in the steel mill and that in itself was a tremendous task—to bring it in, assemble it, mine the ore to get it going and finally to put it into operation. But simpler and easier, infinitely so, than freighting out from Earth all the steel that would be needed to build this project alone.

We couldn't let it go down the drain. After all the years, after all the planning and the work, in face of Earth's great need for more living space, we could not give up Stella IV. And yet we could not deny primal rights. If these beings, when they finally showed themselves, would say that they didn't want us here, then there would be no choice. We would simply have to clear out.

But before they threw us out, of course, they would steal us blind. Much of what we had would undoubtedly be of little value to them, but there would be some of it that they could use. No race can fail to enrich itself and its culture by contact with another. And the contact that these aliens had established was a completely one-sided bargain—the exchange flowed only in their direction.

They were, I told myself, just a bunch of cosmic sharpers.

I took the junk that had been in Benny's bag out of my pocket and spread it on the desk and began to sort it out. There was the sector model and the roller and the desk and my little row of books and the pocket chess set and all the other stuff that belonged to me.

There was all the stuff but me.

Greasy's Shadow had carried a statuette of Greasy, but I found none of me and I was a little sore at Benny. He could have gone to the extra effort to have made a statuette of me.

I rolled the things around on the desk top with a finger and wondered once again just how deeply they went. Might they not be patterns rather than just models? Perhaps, I told myself, letting my imagination run away with me, perhaps each of these little models carried in some sort of code a complete analysis and description of whatever the article might be. A human, making a survey or an analysis, would write a sheaf of notes, would capture the subject matter in a page or two of symbols. Maybe these little models were the equivalent of a human notebook, the aliens' way of writing.

And I wondered how they wrote, how they made the models, but there wasn't any answer.

I gave up trying to work and went out of the tent and climbed up the little rise to where Thorne and the men were building their flytrap for the Shadows.

They had put a lot of work and ingenuity into it and it made no sense at all—which, after all, was exactly what it was meant to do.

If we could get the Shadows busy enough trying to figure out what this new contraption was, maybe they'd leave us alone long enough to get some work done.

Thorne and his crew had gotten half a dozen replacement motors out of the shop and had installed those to be used as power. Apparently they had used almost all the spare equipment parts they could find, for there were shafts and gears and cams and all sorts of other things all linked together in a mindless pattern. And here and there they had set up what looked like control boards, except, of course, that they controlled absolutely nothing, but were jammed with flashers and all sorts of other gimmicks until they looked like Christmas trees.

I stood around and watched until Greasy rang the dinner bell, then ran a foot race with all the others to get to the tables.

There was a lot of loud talk and joking, but no one wasted too much time eating. They bolted their food and hurried back to the flytrap.

Just before sunset, they set it going and it was the screwiest mass of meaningless motion that anyone had ever seen. Shafts were spinning madly and a million gears, it seemed, were meshing, and cams were wobbling with their smooth, irregular strokes, and pistons were going up and down and up and down.

It was all polished bright and it worked slicker than a whistle and it was producing nothing except motion but it had a lot of fascination—even for a human. I found myself standing rooted in one spot, marveling at the smoothness and precision and the remorseless non-purpose of the weird contraption.

And all the time the fake control boards were sparkling and flashing with the lamps popping on and off, in little jagged runs and series, and you got dizzy watching them, trying to make some pattern out of them.

The Shadows had been standing around and gaping ever since work had started on the trap, but now they crowded closer and stood in a tight and solemn ring around the thing and they never moved.

I turned around and Mack was just behind me. He was rubbing his hands in satisfaction and his face was all lit up with smiles.

"Pretty slick," he said.

I agreed with him, but I had some doubts that I could not quite express.

"We'll string up some lights," said Mack, "so they can see it day and night and then we'll have them pegged for good."

"You think they'll stay with it?" I asked. "They won't catch on?"

"Not a chance."

I went down to my tent and poured myself a good stiff drink, then sat down in a chair in front of the tent.

Some of the men were stringing cable and others were rigging up some batteries of lights and down in the cookshack I could hear Greasy singing, but the song was sad. I felt sorry for Greasy.

Mack might be right, I admitted to myself. We might have built a trap that would cook the Shadows' goose. If nothing else, the sheer fascination of all that motion might keep them stuck there. It had a hypnotic effect even for a human and one could never gauge what effect it might have on an alien mind. Despite the evident technology of the aliens, it was entirely possible that their machine technology might have developed along some divergent line, so that the spinning wheel and the plunging piston and the smooth fluid gleam of metal was new to them.

I tried to imagine a machine technology that would require

no motion, but such a thing was entirely inconceivable to me. And for that very reason, I thought, the idea of all this motion might be just as inconceivable to an alien intellect.

The stars came out while I sat there and no one wandered over to gab and that was fine. I was just as satisfied to be left alone.

After a time, I went into the tent, had another drink and decided to go to bed.

I took off my coat and slung it on the desk. When it hit, there was a thump, and as soon as I heard that thump, I knew what it was. I had dropped Benny's jewel into the pocket of the coat and had then forgotten it.

I fished into the pocket and got out the jewel, fearing all the while that I had broken it. And there was something wrong with it—it had somehow come apart. The jewel face had come loose from the rest of it and I saw that the jewel was no more than a cover for a box-shaped receptacle.

I put it on the desk and swung the jewel face open and there, inside the receptacle, I found myself.

The statuette was nestled inside a weird piece of mechanism and it was as fine a piece of work as Greasy's statuette.

It gave me a flush of pride and satisfaction. Benny, after all, had not forgotten me!

I sat for a long time looking at the statuette, trying to puzzle out the mechanism. I had a good look at the jewel and I finally figured out what it was all about.

The jewel was no jewel at all; it was a camera. Except that instead of taking two-dimensional pictures, it worked in three dimensions. And that, of course, was how the Shadows made the models. Or maybe they were patterns rather than just models.

I finished undressing and got into bed and lay on the cot, staring at the canvas, and the pieces all began to fall together and it was beautiful. Beautiful, that is, for the aliens. It made us look like a bunch of saps.

The cones had gone out and watched the survey party and had not let it get close to them, but they had been ready for us when we came. They'd disguised the cones to look like something that we wouldn't be afraid of, something perhaps that we could even laugh at it. And that was the safest kind of disguise that anyone could assume—something that the victim might think was mildly funny. For no one gets too upset about what a clown might do.

But the Shadows had been loaded and they'd let us have it and apparently, by the time we woke up, they had us pegged and labeled.

And what would they do now? Still stay behind their log,

still keep watching us, suck us dry of everything that we had to offer?

And when they were ready, when they'd gotten all they wanted or all they felt that they could get, they'd come out and finish us.

I was somewhat scared and angry and felt considerably like a fool and it was frustrating just to think about.

Mack might kid himself that he had solved the problem with his flytrap out there, but there was still a job to do. Somehow or other, we had to track down these hiding aliens and break up their little game.

Somewhere along the way, I went to sleep, and suddenly someone was shaking me and yelling for me to get out.

I came half upright and saw that it was Carr who had been shaking me. He was practically gibbering. He kept pointing outside and babbling something about a funny cloud and I couldn't get much more out of him.

So I shucked into my trousers and my shoes and went out with him and headed for the hilltop at a run. Dawn was just breaking and the Shadows still were clustered around the flytrap and a crowd of men had gathered just beyond the flytrap and were looking toward the east.

We pushed our way through the crowd up to the front and there was the cloud that Carr had been jabbering about, but it was a good deal closer now and was sailing across the plains, slowly and majestically, and flying above it was a little silver sphere that flashed and glittered in the first rays of the sun.

The cloud looked, more than anything, like a mass of junk. I could see what looked like a derrick sticking out of it and here and there what seemed to be a wheel. I tried to figure out what it might be, but I couldn't, and all the time it was moving closer to us.

Mack was at my left and I spoke to him, but he didn't answer me. He was just like Benny—he couldn't answer me. He looked hypnotized.

The closer that cloud came, the more fantastic it was and the more unbelievable. For there was no question now that it was a mass of machinery, just like the equipment we had. There were tractors and earthmovers and shovels and dozers and all the other stuff, and in between these bigger pieces was all sorts of little stuff.

In another five minutes, it was hovering almost over us and then slowly it began to lower. While we watched, it came down to the ground, gently, almost without a bump, even though there were a couple or three acres of it. Besides the big equipment, there were tents and cups and spoons and

tables and chairs and benches and a case or two of whisky and some surveying equipment—there was, it seemed to me, almost exactly all the items there were in the camp.

When it had all sat down, the little silver sphere came down, too, and floated slowly toward us. It stopped a little way away from us and Mack walked out toward it and I followed Mack. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Carr and Knight were walking forward, too.

We stopped four or five feet from it and now we saw that the sphere was some sort of protective suit. Inside it sat a pale little humanoid. Not human, but at least with two legs and arms and a single head. He had antennae sprouting from his forehead and his ears were long and pointed and he had no hair at all.

He let the sphere set down on the ground and we got a little closer and squatted down so we would be on a level with him.

He jerked a thumb backward over his shoulder, pointing at the mass of equipment he'd brought.

"Is pay," he announced in a shrill, high, piping voice.

We didn't answer right away. We did some gulping first.

"Is pay for what?" Knight finally managed to ask him.

"For fun," the creature said.

"I don't understand," said Mack.

"We make one of everything. We not know what you want, so we make one of all. Unfortunate, two lots are missing. Accident, perhaps."

"The models," I said to the others. "That's what he's talking about. The models were patterns and the models from Greasy's Shadow and from Benny—"

"Not all," the creature said. "The rest be right along."

"Now wait a minute," said Carr. "Let us get this straight. You are paying us. Paying us for what? Exactly what did we do for you?"

Mack blurted out: "How did you make this stuff?"

"One question at a time," I pleaded.

"Machines can make," the creature said. "Knowing how, machines can make anything. Very good machines."

"But why?" asked Carr again. "Why did you make it for us?"

"For fun," the creature explained patiently. "For laugh. For watch. Is a big word I cannot—"

"Entertainment?" I offered.

"That is right," the creature said. "Entertainment is the word. We have lot of time for entertainment. We stay home, watch our entertainment screen. We get tired of it. We

seek for something new. You something new. Give us much interesting. We try to pay you for it."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Knight. "I begin to get it now. We were a big news event and so they sent out all those cones to cover us. Mack, did you saw into that cone last night?"

"We did," said Mack. "As near as we could figure, it was a TV sender. Not like ours, of course—there would be differences. But we figured it for a data-sending rig."

I turned back to the alien in his shiny sphere. "Listen carefully," I said. "Let's get down to business. You are willing to keep on paying if we provide you entertainment?"

"Gladly," said the creature. "You keep us entertained, we give you what you want."

"Instead of one of everything, you will make us many of one thing?"

"You show it to us," the creature said. "You let us know how many."

"Steel?" asked Mack. "You can make us steel?"

"No recognize this steel. Show us. How made, how big, how shaped. We make."

"If we keep you entertained?"

"That right," the creature said.

"Deal?" I asked.

"Deal," the creature said.

"From now on? No stopping?"

"Long as you keep us happy."

"That may take some doing," Mack told me.

"No, it won't," I said.

"You're crazy!" Mack yelled. "They'll never let us have them!"

"Yes, they will," I answered. "Earth will do anything to cinch this planet. And don't you see, with this sort of swap, we'll beat the cost. All Earth has to do is send out one sample of everything we need. One sample will do the trick. One I-beam and they'll make a million of them. It's the best deal Earth has ever made."

"We do our part," the creature assured us happily. "Long as you do yours."

"I'll get that order right off now," I said to Mack. "I'll write it up and have Jack send it out."

I stood up and headed back toward camp.

"Rest of it," the creature said, motioning over his shoulder.

I swung around and looked.

There was another mass of stuff coming in, keeping fairly low. And this time it was men—a solid press of men.

"Hey!" cried Mack. "You can't do that! That just isn't right!"

I didn't need to look. I knew exactly what had happened. The aliens had duplicated not only our equipment, but the men as well. In that crowd of men were the duplicates of every one of us—everyone, that is, except myself and Greasy.

Horried as I might have been, outraged as any human would be, I couldn't help but think of some of the situations that might arise. Imagine two Macks insisting on bossing the operation! Picture two Thornes trying to get along together!

I didn't hang around. I left Mack and the rest of them to explain why men should not be duplicated. In my tent, I sat down and wrote an imperative, high-priority, *must-deliver* order for five hundred peepers.

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