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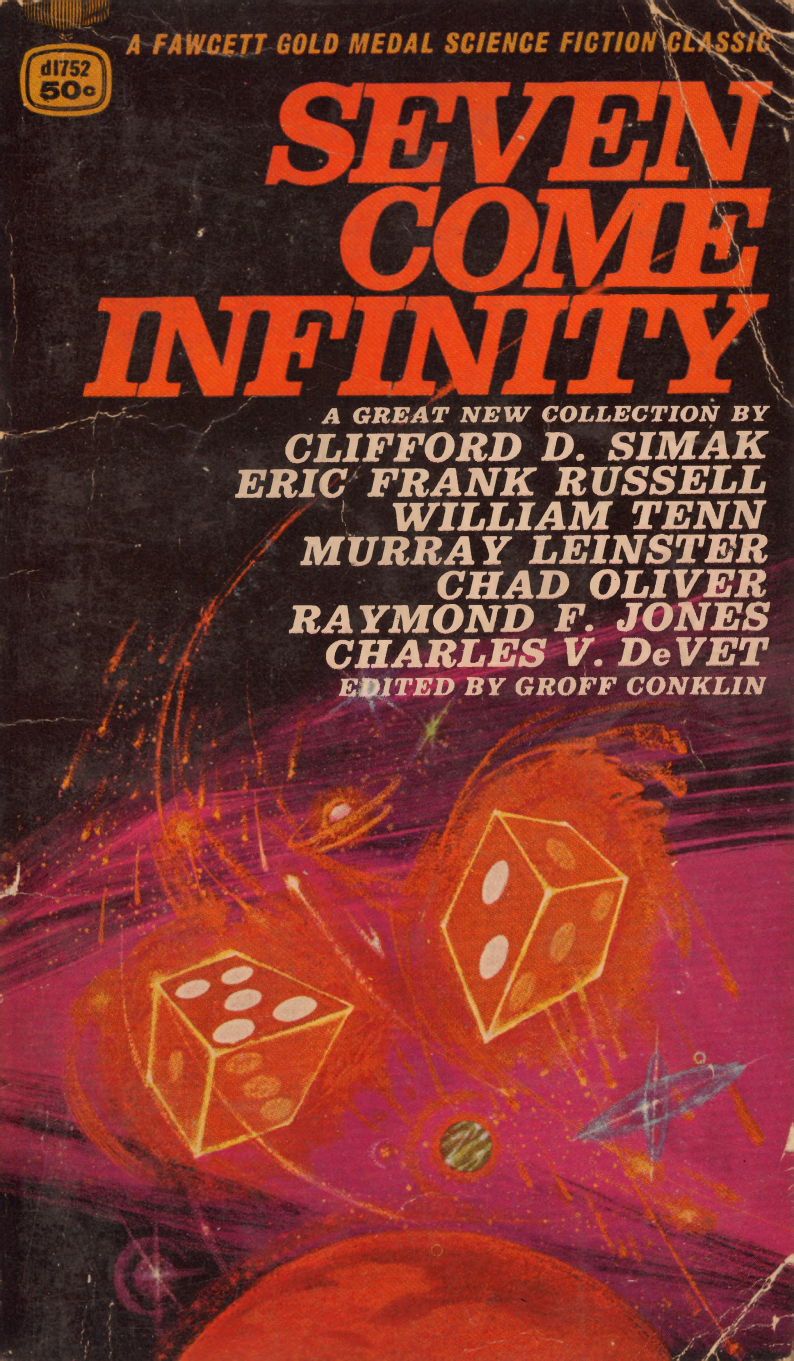
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SEVEN COME INFINITY

A GREAT NEW COLLECTION BY

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK
ERIC FRANK RUSSELL
WILLIAM TENN
MURRAY LEINSTER
CHAD OLIVER
RAYMOND F. JONES
CHARLES V. DeVET

EDITED BY GROFF CONKLIN



WHO'S TO SAY FLYING SAUCERS AREN'T REAL?

The art of science-fiction is the art of *almost*, the art of the *possible*, the art of "why *couldn't* it happen this way?"

It was in a science-fiction story published over thirty years ago that the atomic bomb was imagined, described, explained. The writer *projected*. Basing his suppositions on extensions of the known and suspected behavior of atomic particles, he tackled the big "if" and the sly "Supposing . . ." His story was prophecy. In its way, it forecast the modern world.

Perhaps in one of the seven imaginative exercises that follow there will turn out to be a similar germ, a take-off point for future scientists, statesmen, explorers. Maybe superior forms of life *do* exist on other planets, in other constellations. Who can gainsay that possibility—at a time when our own world has failed in so much of its promise, when we on this earth have failed to take advantage of so many scientific and rational possibilities for peace, plenty and harmony among mankind? . . .

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ANOTHER PART OF THE GALAXY

SEVEN COME INFINITY

Edited by Groff Conklin

A FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL BOOK
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PREFACE

There are twelve numbers on the twelve faces of a pair of dice, two each of six, all meticulously pinked out in careful little dots. For almost four thousand years men have played with dice, balancing their knowledge of the odds against the intriguing possibilities of the future—the next roll of the dice. The crapshooter knows, for example, that the odds against throwing the magic numbers seven and eleven are 5 to 1 and 17 to 1, respectively. He knows that the odds against throwing a seven, then an eleven, in two consecutive rolls, are 107 to 1, or the product of the odds for the individual rolls: $1/6 \times 1/18 = 1/108$.

These are high odds, indeed, and the crapshooter's plea for "Seven come eleven" is more an appeal for special favor from the gods than a realistic demand based on mathematical probabilities. But although the odds are high, they are nevertheless far from astronomical, and even farther from infinite. When, however, instead of exhorting those cubes to "come eleven," one pleads for *something* to "come infinity," as does the title of this book, one must simply stop figuring odds and lean back and have a good time.

Actually, though, why that title? Well, there are seven stories, and they deal with a special kind of infinity—the infinite variety of the future, and the inevitable role that chance will play in the worlds of tomorrow.

Of course, any story whatsoever is a selection from an infinite series of possibilities. The standard, more mundane fiction of the typical publishing season, however, deals with

places, people, and plots of the here and now or then—the present or the past. And although both the plot and the background material are of infinite variety in one respect, in another that infinity is limited to existent settings, to what the author considers real people, and to events which are familiar if not always pleasant.

But when an author writes science-fiction, his imagination is freed from the shackles of history. He is at liberty to write of any conceivable situation, restricted only by his eternal obligation to the reader. The title of this anthology reflects this obligation, hinting, as it does, at the strange kinship between the diceplayer and the writer of science-fiction.

The diceplayer weighs the odds against his expectations, and his success or failure at the game depends upon a careful balance of the two. In much the same way, the writer of science-fiction balances his knowledge of today against the infinite variety of the future to construct a plausible story that *has not happened yet.* His success depends upon a careful blending of imagination and knowledge. He must use his knowledge of men and matter to convince us of *an unheard-of event,* of unknown places and unborn beings which have existence only in his imagination.

Each story in this collection is, then, *almost* a leap into the wild blue yonder, a choice from a never-ending series of possible future happenings. Each story is based upon a never-before-thought-of incident from the bottomless grab-bag of the next minute, year, century, aeon—and not necessarily confined to earth, either. It can happen anywhere in our galaxy, or that of anyone else which in turn offers its own infinite variety of "cosmographical" locales, living beings, and civilizations.

But always we return from this profusion to the author, his unique imagination, particular training and bent. Chad Oliver, for example, is in addition to being a writer of first-rate science-fiction, an anthropologist. In RITE OF PASSAGE, Oliver uses his special knowledge of cultures to depict a "primitive" society—one, that is, which exists without advanced technology. But the simplicity of Oliver's imaginative "primitives" is deceptive, as the intruding

earthmen learn; and the story is a gently ironic comment on our clutter of conveniences.

In the same manner, each of the other six authors represented in this collection uses his own special genius to convince us of his vision. The seven stories contained here, magnificently different though each is from the other, nevertheless embody one essential quality: that mastery of matter and emotion that gives substance to an event which *could not have happened yet.* It is this *plausible* adventuring into the unknown that gives science-fiction its special allure.

And that is why I've never spent much time shooting craps, pleading "seven come eleven." Reading about the endless possibilities of elsewhere and elsewhen is much more rewarding.

So—*"Seven Come Infinity!"*

GROFF CONKLIN

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THE GOLDEN BUGS

Clifford D. Simak

It started as a lousy day.

Arthur Belsen, across the alley, turned on his orchestra at six oclock and brought me sitting up in bed.

I'm telling you, Belsen makes his living as an engineer, but music is his passion. And since he is an engineer, he's not content to leave well enough alone. He has to mess around.

A year or two before he'd gotten the idea of a robotic symphony, and the man has talent, you have to give him that. He went to work on this idea and designed machines that could read—not only play, but read—music from a tape, and he built a machine to transcribe the tapes. Then he built a lot of these music machines in his basement workshop.

And he tried them out!

It was experimental work, quite understandably, and there was redesigning and adjusting to be done and Belsen was finicky about the performance that each machine turned out. So he tried them out a lot—and loudly—not being satisfied until he had the instrumentation just the way he thought it should be.

There had been some idle talk in the neighborhood about a lynching party, but nothing came of it. That's the trouble, one of the troubles, with this neighborhood of ours—they'll talk an arm off you, but never do a thing.

As yet no one could see an end to all the Belsen racket. It had taken him better than a year to work up the percussion section and that was bad enough. But now he'd started on the strings and that was even worse.

Helen sat up in bed beside me and put her hands up to her ears, but she couldn't keep from hearing. Belsen had it turned up loud, to get, as he would tell you, the feel of it.

By this time, I figured, he probably had the entire neighborhood awake.

"Well, that's it," I said, starting to get up.

"You want me to get breakfast?"

"You might as well," I said. "No one's going to get any sleep with that thing turned on."

While she started breakfast, I headed for the garden back of the garage to see how the dahlias might be faring. I don't mind telling you I was delighted with those dahlias. It was nearly fair time and there were some of them that would be at bloom perfection just in time for showing.

I started for the garden, but I never got there. That's the way it is in this neighborhood. A man will start to do something and never get it done because someone always catches him and wants to talk awhile.

This time it was Dobby. Dobby is Dr. Darby Wells, a venerable old codger with white chin whiskers and he lives next door. We all call him Dobby and he doesn't mind a bit, for in a way it's a badge of tribute to the man. At one time Dobby had been an entomologist of some repute at the university and it had been his students who had hung the name on him. It was no corruption of his regular name, but stemmed rather from his one-time interest in mud-dauber wasps.

But now Dobby was retired, with nothing in the world to do except to hold long and aimless conversations with anyone he could manage to nail down.

As soon as I caught sight of him, I knew that I was sunk.

"I think it's admirable," said Dobby, leaning on his

fence and launching into full-length discussion as soon as I was in voice distance, "for a man to have a hobby. But I submit it's inconsiderate of him to practice it so noisily at the crack of dawn."

"You mean that," I said, making a thumb at the Belsen house, from which the screeching and the caterwauling still issued in full force.

"Exactly," said Dobby, combing his white chin whiskers with an air of grave deliberation. "Now, mind me, not for a moment would I refuse the man the utmost admiration . . ."

"Admiration?" I demanded. There are occasions when I have a hard time understanding Dobby. Not so much because of the pontifical way in which he talks as because of the way he thinks.

"Precisely," Dobby told me. "Not for his machines, although they are electronic marvels, but for the way in which he engineers his tapes. The machine that he rigged up to turn out those tapes is a most versatile contraption. Sometimes it seems to be almost human."

"When I was a boy," I said, "we had player pianos and the pianos ran on tapes."

"Yes, Randall, you are right," admitted Dobby, "the principle was there, but the execution—think of the execution! All those old pianos had to do was tinkle merrily along, but Belsen has worked into his tapes the most delicate nuances . . ."

"I must have missed them nuances," I told him, without any charity at all. "All I've heard is racket."

We talked about Belsen and his orchestra until Helen called me in for breakfast.

I had no sooner sat down than she dragged out her grievance list.

"Randall," she said, with determination, "the kitchen is positively crawling with grease ants again. They're so small you can hardly see them and all at once they're into everything."

"I thought you got rid of them," I said.

"I did. I tracked them to their nest and poured boiling water into it. But this time it's up to you."

"Sure thing," I promised. "I'll do it right away."

"That's what you said last time."

"I was ready to," I told her, "but you beat me to it."

"And that isn't all," she said. "There are those wasps up in the attic louvres. They stung the little Montgomery girl the other day."

She was getting ready to say more, but just then Billy, our eleven-year-old, came stumbling down the stairs.

"Look, Dad," he cried excitedly, holding out a small-size plastic box. "I have one here I've never seen before."

I didn't have to ask one what. I knew it was another insect. Last year it had been stamp collecting and this year it was insects—and that's another thing about having an idle entomologist for a next door neighbor.

I took the box without enthusiasm.

"A lady bug," I said.

"No, it's not," said Billy. "It's too big to be a lady bug. And the spots are different and the color is all wrong. This one is gold and a lady bug is orange."

"Well, look it up," I said, impatiently. The kid will do anything to keep away from reading.

"I did," said Billy. "I looked all through the book and I couldn't find it."

"Oh, for goodness sakes," snapped Helen, "sit down and eat your breakfast. It's bad enough to be overrun with ants and wasps without you spending all your time catching other bugs."

"But, Mom, it's educational." protested Billy. "That is what Dr. Wells says. He says there are 700,000 known families of insects . . ."

"Where did you find it, son?" I asked, a bit ashamed of how we both were hopping onto him.

"Right in my room," said Billy.

"In the house!" screamed Helen. "Ants aren't bad enough . . ."

"Soon as I get through eating, I'll show it to Dr. Wells."

"Now, don't you pester Dobby."

"I hope he pesters him a lot," Helen said, tight-lipped. "It was Dobby who got him started on this foolishness."

I handed back the box and Billy put it down beside his plate and started in on breakfast.

"Randall," Helen said, taking up her third point of complaint. "I don't know what I'm to do with Nora."

Nora was the cleaning woman. She came in twice a week.

"What did she do this time?"

"It's what she doesn't do. She simply will not dust. She just waves a cloth around and that is all there's to it. She won't move a lamp or vase."

"Well, get someone else," I said.

"Randall, you don't know what you're talking about. Cleaning women are hard to find and you can't depend on them. I was talking to Amy . . ."

I listened and made the appropriate replies. I'd heard it all before.

As soon as I finished breakfast, I took off for the office. It was too early to see any prospects, but I had some policies to write up and some other work to do and I could use the extra hour or two.

Helen phoned me shortly after noon and she was exasperated.

"Randall," she said, without preamble, "someone has dumped a boulder in the middle of the garden."

"Come again," I said.

"You know. A big rock. It squashed down all the dahlias."

"Dahlias!" I yipped.

"And the funny thing about it is there aren't any tracks. It would take a truck to move a rock that big and . . ."

"Now, let's take this easy. How big, exactly, is this boulder?"

"It's almost as tall as I am."

"It's impossible!" I stormed. Then I tried to calm myself. "It's a joke," I said. "Someone played a joke."

I searched my mind for someone who might have done

it and I couldn't think of anyone who'd go to all the trouble involved in that sort of joke. There was George Montgomery, but George was a sobersides. And Belsen, but Belsen was too wrapped up in music to be playing any jokes. And Dobby—it was inconceivable he'd ever play a joke.

"Some joke!" said Helen.

Nobody in the neighborhood, I told myself, would have done a trick like that. Everyone knew I was counting on those dahlias to win me some more ribbons.

"I'll knock off early," I told her, "and see what can be done about it."

Although I knew there was precious little that could be done about it—just haul the thing away.

"I'll be over at Amy's," Helen said. "I'll try to get home early."

I went out and saw another prospect, but I didn't do too well. All the time I was thinking of the dahlias.

I knocked off work in the middle of the afternoon and bought a spray-can of insecticide at a drugstore. The label claimed it was effective against ants, roaches, wasps, aphids and a host of other pests.

At home, Billy was sitting on the steps.

"Hello, son. Nothing much to do?"

"Me and Tommy Henderson played soldier for a while, but we got tired of it."

I put the insecticide on the kitchen table, then headed for the garden. Billy trailed listlessly behind me.

The boulder was there, squarely in the middle of the dahlia patch, and every bit as big as Helen said it was. It was a funny looking thing, not just a big slab-sided piece of rock, but a freckled looking job. It was a washed-out red and almost a perfect globe.

I walked around it, assessing the damage. There were a few of the dahlias left, but the better ones were gone. There were no tracks, no indication of how the rock might have gotten where it was. It lay a good thirty feet from the alleyway and someone might have used a crane to hoist it off a truck bed, but that seemed most un-

likely, for a heavy nest of utility wires ran along the alley.

I went up to the boulder and had a good, close look at it. The whole face of it was pitted with small, irregular holes, none of them much deeper than a half an inch, and there were occasional smooth patches, with a darker lustre showing, as if some part of the original surface had been knocked off. The darker, smoother patches had the shine of highly polished wax, and I remembered something from very long ago—when a one-time pal of mine had been a momentary rock collector.

I bent a little closer to one of the smooth, waxy surfaces and it seemed to me that I could see the hint of wavy lines running in the stone.

"Billy," I asked, "would you know an agate if you saw one?"

"Gosh, Dad, I don't know. But Tommy would. He is a sort of rockhound. He is hunting all the time for different kinds of rocks."

He came up close and looked at one of the polished surfaces. He wet his thumb against his tongue and rubbed it across the waxy surface to bring out the satin of the stone.

"I don't know," he said, "but I think it is."

He backed off a ways and stared at the boulder with a new respect.

"Say, Dad, if it really is an agate—if it was one big agate, I mean, it would be worth a lot of money, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know. I suppose it might be."

"A million dollars, maybe."

I shook my head. "Not a million dollars."

"I'll go get Tommy, right away," he said.

He went around the garage like a flash and I could hear him running down the driveway, hitting out for Tommy's place.

I walked around the boulder several times and tried to estimate its weight, but I had no knowledge I could go on.

I went back to the house and read the directions on the can of insecticide. I uncapped and tested it and the sprayer worked.

So I got down on my knees in front of the threshold of the kitchen door and tried to find the path the ants were using to come in. I couldn't see any of them right away, but I knew from past experience that they are little more than specks and almost transparent in the bargain and mighty had to see.

A glittery motion in one corner of the kitchen caught my eye and I wheeled around. A glob of golden shimmer was running on the floor, keeping close to the baseboard and heading for the cabinet underneath the kitchen sink.

It was another of the outsize lady bugs.

I aimed the squirt can at it and let it have a burst, but it kept right on and vanished underneath the cabinet.

With the bug gone, I resumed looking for the ants and found no sign of them. There were none coming in the door. Or going out, for that matter. There were none on the sink or the work table space.

So I went around the corner of the house to size up Operation Wasp. It would be a sticky one, I knew. The nest was located in the attic louvres and would be hard to get at. Standing off and looking at it, I decided the only thing to do was wait until night, when I could be sure all the wasps were in the nest. Then I'd put up a ladder and climb up and let them have it, then get out as fast as I could manage without breaking my fool neck.

It was a piece of work that I frankly had no stomach for, but I knew from the tone of Helen's voice at the breakfast table there was no ducking it.

There were a few wasps flying around the nest, and as I watched a couple of them dropped out of the nest and tumbled to the ground.

Wondering what was going on, I stepped a little closer and then I saw the ground was littered with dead or

dying wasps. Even as I watched, another wasp fell down and lay there, twisting and squirming.

I circled around a bit to try to get a better look at whatever might be happening. But I could make out nothing except that every now and then another wasp fell down.

I told myself it was all right with me. If something was killing off the wasps it would save me the job of getting rid of them.

I was turning around to take the insecticide back to the kitchen when Billy and Tommy Henderson came panting in excitement from the backyard.

"Mr. Marsden," Tommy said, "That rock out there is an agate. It's a banded agate."

"Well, now, that's fine," I said.

"But you don't understand," cried Tommy. "No agate gets that big. Especially not a banded agate. They call them Lake Superior agates and they don't ever get much bigger than your fist."

That did it. I jerked swiftly to attention and went pelting around the house to have another look at the boulder in the garden. The boys came pounding on behind me.

That boulder was a lovely thing. I put out my hand and stroked it. I thought how lucky I was that someone had plopped it in my garden. I had forgotten all about the dahlias.

"I bet you," Tommy told me, his eyes half as big as saucers, "that you could get a lot of money for it."

I won't deny that approximately the same thought had been going through my mind.

I put out my hand and pushed against it, just to get the solid and substantial feel of it.

And as I pushed, it rocked slightly under the pressure!

Astonished, I pushed a little harder and it rocked again.

Tommy stood bug-eyed. "That is funny, Mr. Marsden. By rights, it hadn't ought to move. It must weigh several tons. You must be awful strong."

"I'm not so strong," I told him. "Not as strong as that."

I tottered back to the house and put away the insecticide, then went out and sat down on the steps to do some worrying.

There was no sign of the boys. They probably had run swiftly off to spread the news throughout the neighborhood.

If that thing were an agate, as Tommy said it was—if it really were one tremendous agate, then it would be a fantastic museum piece and might command some money. But if it were an agate, why was it so light? No ten men, pushing on it, should have made it budge.

I wondered, too, just what my rights would be if it should turn out to be actually an agate. It was on my property and it should be mine. But what if someone came along and claimed it?

And there was this other thing: How had it gotten there to start with?

I was all tied up in knots with my worrying when Dobby came trundling around the corner of the house and sat down on the steps beside me.

"Lots of extraordinary things going on," he said. "I hear you have an agate boulder in the garden."

"That's what Tommy Henderson tells me. I suppose that he should know. Billy tells me he's a rockhound."

Dobby scratched at his whiskers. "Great things, hobbies," he said. "Especially for kids. They learn a lot from them."

"Yeah," I said, without enthusiasm.

"Your son brought me an insect for identification at breakfast time this morning."

"I told him not to bother you."

"I am glad he brought it," Dobby said. "It was one I'd never seen before."

"It looked like a lady bug."

"Yes," Dobby agreed, "There is *some* resemblance. But I'm not entirely certain—well, fact of the matter is, I'm not even sure that it is an insect. To tell the

truth, it resembles a turtle in many ways more than it does an insect. There is an utter lack of bodily segmentation, such as you'd find in any insect. The exoskeleton is extremely hard and the head and legs are retractable and it has no antennae."

He shook his head in some perplexity. "I can't be sure, of course. Much more extensive examination would be necessary before an attempt could be made at classifying it. You don't happen to have found any more of them, have you?"

"I saw one running on the floor not so long ago."

"Would you mind, next time you see one, grabbing it for me?"

"Not at all," I said. "I'll try to get you one."

I kept my word. After he had left I went down into the basement to look up a bug for him. I saw several of them, but couldn't catch a one. I gave up in disgust.

After supper, Arthur Belsen came popping from across the alley. He was in a dither, but that was not unusual. He is a bird-like, nervous man and it doesn't take too much to get him all upset.

"I hear that boulder in your garden is an agate," he said to me. "What do you intend to do with it?"

"Why, I don't know. Sell it, I suppose, if anyone wants to buy it."

"It might be valuable," said Belsen. "You can't just leave it out there. Someone might come along and pinch it."

"Guess there's nothing else to do," I told him. "I certainly can't move it and I'm not going to sit up all night to guard it."

"You don't need to sit up all night," said Belsen. "I can fix it for you. We can rig up a nest of trip wires and hook up an alarm."

I wasn't too impressed and tried to discourage him, but he was like a beagle on a rabbit trail. He went back to his basement and came out with a batch of wire and a kit of tools and we fell to work.

We worked until almost bedtime getting the wires rigged up and an alarm bell installed just inside the kitch-

en door. Helen took a sour view of it. She didn't like the idea of messing up her kitchen, agate or no agate.

In the middle of the night the clamor of the bell jerked me out of bed, wondering what all the racket was. Then I remembered and went rushing for the stairs. On the third step from the bottom I stepped on something that rolled beneath my foot and sent me pitching down the stairs into the living room. I lit sprawling and skidded into a lamp, which fell on top of me and hit me on the head. I brought up against a chair, tangled with the lamp.

A marble, I thought. That damn kid has been strewing marbles all over the house again! He's too big for that. He knows better than to leave marbles on the stairs.

In the bright moonlight pouring through the picture window I saw the marble and it was moving rapidly—*not rolling, moving!* And there were a lot of other marbles, racing across the floor. Sparkling golden marbles running in the moonlight.

And that wasn't all—in the center of the living room stood the refrigerator!

The alarm bell was still clanging loudly and I picked myself up and got loose from the lamp and rushed for the kitchen door. Behind me I heard Helen yelling at me from the landing.

I got the door open and went racing in bare feet through the dew-soaked grass around the corner of the house.

A puzzled dog was standing by the boulder. He had managed to get one foot caught in one of Belsen's silly wires and he was standing there, three-legged, trying to get loose.

I yelled at him and bent over, scrabbling in the grass, trying to find something I could throw at him. He made a sudden lurch and freed himself. He took off up the alley, ears flapping in the breeze.

Behind me the clanging bell fell silent.

I turned around and trailed back to the house, feeling like a fool.

I suddenly remembered that I had seen the refrigerator standing in the living room. But, I told myself, that must be wrong. The refrigerator was in the kitchen and no one would have moved it. There was, first of all, no reason for a refrigerator to be in the living room; its place was in the kitchen. No one would have wanted to move it and even if they did, they'd have made noise enough to wake the house if they'd tried to do it.

I was imagining things, I told myself. The boulder and the bugs had got me all upset and I was seeing things.

But I wasn't.

The refrigerator still stood in the center of the living room. The plug had been pulled out of the outlet and the cord trailed across the floor. A puddle of water from the slowly-thawing box had soaked the carpet.

"It's ruining the carpet!" Helen shrieked at me, standing in a corner and staring at the errant refrigerator. "And the food will all be spoiled and . . ."

Billy came stumbling down the stairs, still half asleep.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said.

I almost told him about the bugs I'd seen running in the house, but caught myself in time. There was no use upsetting Helen any more than she was right then.

"Let's get that box back where it belongs," I suggested, as matter-of-factly as I could. "The three of us can do it."

We tugged and shoved and hauled and lifted and got it back in its proper place and plugged it in again. Helen found some rags and started to mop up the sopping carpet.

"Was there something at the boulder, Dad?" asked Billy.

"A dog," I told him. "Nothing but a dog."

"I was against it from the start," declared Helen, on her knees, angrily mopping carpet. "It was a lot of foolishness. No one would have stolen the boulder. It isn't

something you can just pick up and carry off. That Arthur Belsen's crazy."

"I agree with you," I told her, ruefully. "But he is a conscientious sort of fellow and a determined cuss and he thinks in terms of gadgets . . ."

"We won't get a wink of sleep," she said. "We'll be up a dozen times a night, chasing off stray dogs and cats. And I don't believe the boulder is an agate. All we have to go on is Tommy Henderson."

"Tommy is a rockhound," Billy told her, staunchly defending his pal. "He knows an agate when he sees one. He's got a big shoe box full of ones he's found."

And here we were, I thought, arguing about the boulder, when the thing that should most concern us—the happening with the most brain-twisting implications—was the refrigerator.

And a thought came to me—a floating, random thought that came bumbling out of nowhere and glanced against my mind.

I shivered at the thought and it came back again and burrowed into me and I was stuck with it:

What if there were some connection between the refrigerator and the bugs?

Helen got up from the floor. "There," she said, accusingly, "that is the best that I can do. I hope the carpet isn't ruined."

But a bug, I told myself—no bug could move a refrigerator. No bug, nor a thousand bugs. And what was more and final, no bug would want to move one. No bug would care whether a refrigerator was in the living room or kitchen.

Helen was very businesslike. She spread the wet cloth out on the sink to dry. She went into the living room and turned out the lights.

"We might as well get back to bed," she said. "If we are lucky, we can get some sleep."

I went over to the alarm beside the kitchen door and jerked the connections loose.

"Now," I told her, "we can get some sleep."

I didn't really expect to get any. I expected to stay awake the rest of the night, worrying about the refrigerator. But I did drop off, although not for very long.

At six thirty Belsen turned on his orchestra and brought me out of bed.

Helen sat up, with her hands against her ears.

"Oh, not again!" she said.

I went around and closed the windows. It cut down the noise a little.

"Put the pillow over your head," I told her.

I dressed and went downstairs. The refrigerator was in the kitchen and everything seemed to be all right. There were a few of the bugs running around, but they weren't bothering anything.

I made myself some breakfast, then I went to work. And that was the second day hand-running I'd gone early to the office. If this kept up, I told myself, the neighborhood would have to get together and do something about Belsen and his symphony.

Everything went all right. I sold a couple of policies during the morning and lined up a third.

When I came back to the office early in the afternoon a wild-eyed individual was awaiting me.

"You Marsden?" he demanded. "You the guy that's got an agate boulder?"

"That's what I'm told it is," I said.

The man was a little runt. He wore sloppy khaki pants and engineer boots. Stuck in his belt was a rock hammer, one of those things with a hammer on one end of the head and a pick on the other.

"I heard about it," said the man, excitedly and a bit belligerently, "and I can't believe it. There isn't any agate that ever ran that big."

I didn't like his attitude. "If you came here to argue . . ."

"It isn't that," said the man. "My name is Christian Barr. I'm a rockhound, you understand. Been at it all my life. Have a big collection. President of our rock club.

Win prizes at almost every show. And I thought if you had a rock like this . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, if you had a rock like this, I might make an offer for it. I'd have to see it first."

I jammed my hat back on my head.

"Let us go," I said.

In the garden, Barr walked entranced around the boulder. He wet his thumb and rubbed the smooth places on its hide. He leaned close and inspected it. He ran a speculative hand across its surface. He muttered to himself.

"Well?" I asked.

"It's an agate," Barr told me, breathlessly. "Apparently a single, complete agate. Look here, this sort of pebbled, freckled surface—well, that's the inverse imprint of the volcanic bubble inside of which it formed. There's the characteristic mottling on the surface one would expect to find. And the fractures where the surface has been nicked show subconchoidal cleavage. And, of course, there is the indication of some banding."

He pulled the rock hammer from his belt and idly banged the boulder. It rang like a monstrous bell.

Barr froze and his mouth dropped open.

"It hadn't ought to do that," he explained as soon as he regained some of his composure. "It sounds as if it's hollow."

He rapped it once again and the boulder pealed.

"Agate is strange stuff," he said. "It's tougher than the best of steel. I suppose you could make a bell out of it if you could only fabricate it."

He stuck the hammer back into his belt and prowled around the boulder.

"It could be a thunderegg," he said, talking to himself. "But, no, it can't be that. A thunderegg has agate in its center and not on the surface. And this is banded agate and you don't find banded agate associated with a thunderegg."

"What is a thunderegg?" I asked, but he didn't answer.

He had hunkered down and was examining the bottom portion.

"Marsden," he asked, "how much will you take for this?"

"You'd have to name a figure," I told him. "I have no idea what it's worth."

"I'll give you a thousand as it stands."

"I don't think so," I said. Not that I didn't think it was enough, but on the principle that it's never wise to take a man's first figure.

"If it weren't hollow," Barr told me, "it would be worth a whole lot more."

"You can't be sure it's hollow"

"You heard it when I rapped it."

"Maybe that's just the way it sounds."

Barr shook his head. "It's all wrong," he complained. "No banded agate ever ran this big. No agate's ever hollow. And you don't know where this one came from."

I didn't answer him. There was no reason for me to.

"Look here," he said, after a while. "There's a hole in it. Down here near the bottom."

I squatted down to look where his finger pointed. There was a neat, round hole, no more than half an inch in diameter; no haphazard hole, but round and sharply cut, as if someone might have drilled it.

Barr hunted around and found a heavy weed stalk and stripped off the leaves. The stalk, some two feet of it, slid into the hole.

Barr squatted back and stared, frowning, at the boulder.

"She's hollow, sure as hell," he said.

I didn't pay too much attention to him. I was beginning to sweat a little. For another crazy thought had come bumbling along and fastened onto me:

That hole would be just big enough for one of those bugs to get through!

"Tell you what," said Barr. "I'll raise that offer to two thousand and take it off your hands."

I shook my head. I was going off my rocker linking up

the bugs and boulder—even if there were a bug-size hole drilled into the boulder. I remembered that I likewise had linked the bugs with the refrigerator—and it must be perfectly obvious to anyone that the bugs could not have anything to do with either the refrigerator or the boulder.

They were just ordinary bugs—well, maybe not just ordinary bugs, but, anyhow, just bugs. Dobby had been puzzled by them, but Dobby would be the first, I knew, to tell you that there were many insects unclassified as yet. This might be a species which suddenly had flared into prominence, favored by some strange quirk of ecology, after years of keeping strictly undercover.

"You mean to say," asked Barr, astonished, "that you won't take two thousand?"

"Huh?" I asked, coming back to earth.

"I just offered you two thousand for the boulder."

I took a good hard look at him. He didn't look like the kind of man who'd spend two thousand for a hobby. More than likely, I told myself, he knew a good thing when he saw it and was out to make a killing. He wanted to snap this boulder up before I knew what it was worth.

"I'd like to think it over," I told him, warily. "If I decide to take the offer, where can I get in touch with you?"

He told me curtly and gruffly said good-bye. He was sore about me not taking his two thousand. He went stumping around the garage and a moment later I heard him start his car and drive away.

I squatted there and wondered if maybe I shouldn't have taken that two thousand. Two thousand was a lot of money and I could have used it. But the man had been too anxious and he'd had a greedy look.

Now, however, there was one thing certain. I couldn't leave the boulder out here in the garden. It was much too valuable to be left unguarded. Somehow or other I'd have to get it into the garage where I could lock it up. George Montgomery had a block and tackle and

maybe I could borrow it and use it to move the boulder.

I started for the house to tell Helen the good news, although I was pretty sure she'd read me a lecture for not selling for two thousand.

She met me at the kitchen door and threw her arms around my neck and kissed me.

"Randall," she caroled, happily, "it's just too wonderful."

"I think so, too," I said, wondering how in the world she could have known about it.

"Just come and look at them," she cried. "The bugs are cleaning up the house!"

"They're what!" I yelled.

"Come and look," she urged, tugging at my arm. "Did you ever see the like of it? Everything's just shining!"

I stumbled after her into the living room and stared in disbelief that bordered close on horror.

They were working in battalions and they were purposeful about it. One gang of them was going over a chair back, four rows of them in line creeping up the chair back, and it was like one of those before-and-after pictures. The lower half of the chair back was so clean it looked like new, while the upper half was dingy.

Another gang was dusting an end table and a squad of others was working on the baseboard in the corner and a small army of them was polishing up the television set.

"They've got the carpeting all done!" squealed Helen. "And this end of the room is dusted and there are some of them starting on the fireplace. I never could get Nora to even touch the fireplace. And now I won't need Nora. Randall, do you realize that these bugs will save us the twenty dollars a week that we've been paying Nora. I wonder if you'll let me have that twenty dollars for my very own. There are so many things I need. I haven't had a new dress for ages and I should have another hat and I saw the cutest pair of shoes the other day . . ."

"But bugs!" I yelled. "You are afraid of bugs. You de-

test the things. And bugs don't clean carpeting. All they do is eat it."

"These bugs are cute," protested Helen, happily, "and I'm not afraid of them. They're not like ants and spiders. They don't give you a crawly feeling. They are so clean themselves and they are so friendly and so cheerful. They are even pretty. And I just love to watch them work. Isn't it cunning, the way they get together in a bunch to work. They're just like a vacuum cleaner. They just move over something and the dust and dirt are gone."

I stood there, looking at them hard at work, and I felt an icy finger moving up my spine, for no matter how it might violate common sense, now I knew that the things I had been thinking, about the refrigerator and the boulder, had not been half as crazy as they might have seemed.

"I'm going to phone Amy," said Helen, starting for the kitchen. "This is just too wonderful to keep. Maybe we could give her some of the bugs. What do you think, Randall? Just enough of them to give her house a start."

"Hey, wait a minute," I hollered at her. "These things aren't bugs."

"I don't care what they are," said Helen, airily, already dialing Amy's number, "just so they clean the house."

"But, Helen, if you'd only listen to me . . ."

"Shush," she said, playfully. "How can I talk to Amy if you keep— Oh, hello, Amy, is that you . . ."

I saw that it was hopeless. I retreated in complete defeat.

I went around the house to the garage, intending to move some stuff to make room for the boulder at the back.

The door was open. Inside was Billy, busy at the work bench.

"Hello, son," I said, as cheerfully as I could manage. "What's going on?"

"I'm making bug traps, Dad. To catch some of the bugs

that are cleaning up the house. Tommy's partners with me. He went home to get some bait."

"Bait?"

"Sure. We found out that they like agates."

I reached out and grabbed a studding to hold myself erect. Things were going just a bit too fast to take.

"We tried out the traps down in the basement," Billy told me. "There are a lot of the bugs down there. We tried everything for bait. We tried cheese and apples and dead flies and a lot of other things, but the bugs weren't having any. Tommy had an agate in his pocket, just a little gravel agate that he had picked up. So we tried that . . ."

"But why an agate, son? I can't think of anything less likely . . ."

"Well, you see, it was this way, Dad. We'd tried everything . . ."

"Yes," I said, "I can see the logic of it."

"Trouble is," Billy went on, "we have to use plastic for the traps. It's the only thing that will hold the bugs. They bust right out of a trap made of anything but plastic . . ."

'Now, just a minute there," I warned him. "Once you catch these bugs, what do you intend to do with them?"

"Sell them, naturally," said Billy. "Tommy and me figured everyone would want them. Once the people around here find out how they'll clean a house, everyone will want them. We'll charge five dollars for half a dozen of them. That's a whole lot cheaper than a vacuum cleaner."

"But just six bugs . . ."

"They multiply," said Billy. "They must multiply real fast. A day or two ago we had just a few of them and now the house is swarming."

Billy went on working on the trap.

Finally he said: "Maybe, Dad, you'd like to come in with us on the deal. We need some capital. We have to

buy some plastic to make more and better traps. We might be able to make a big thing out of it."

"Look, son. Have you sold any of the bugs?"

"Well, we tried to, but no one would believe us. So we thought we'd wait until Mom noised it around a bit."

"What did you do with the bugs you caught?"

"We took them over to Dr. Wells. I remembered that he wanted some. We gave them to him free."

"Billy, I wish you'd do something for me."

"Sure, Dad. What is it?"

"Don't sell any of the bugs. Not right away at least. Not until I say that it's O.K."

"But, gee, Dad . . ."

"Son, I have a hunch. I think the bugs are alien."

"Me and Tommy figured that they might be."

"You what!"

"It was this way, Dad. At first we figured we'd sell them just as curiosities. That was before we knew how they would clean a house. We thought some folks might want them because they looked so different, and we tried to figure out a sales pitch. And Tommy said why don't we call them alien bugs, like the bugs from Mars or something. And that started us to thinking and the more we thought about it the more we thought they might be really bugs from Mars. They aren't insects, nor nothing else so far as we could find. They're not like anything on Earth . . ."

"All right," I said. "All right!"

That's the way kids are these days. You can't keep up with them. You think you have something all nailed down and neat and here they've beat you to it. It happens all the time.

I tell you, honestly, it does nothing for a man.

"I suppose," I said, "that while you were figuring all this out, you also got it doped how they might have got here."

"We can't be really sure," said Billy, "but we have a theory. That boulder out in back—we found a hole in it

just the right size for these bugs. So we sort of thought they used that."

"You won't believe me, son," I told him, "but I was thinking the same thing. But the part that's got me stumped is what they used for power. What made the boulder move through space?"

"Well, gee, Dad, we don't know that. But there is something else. They could have used the boulder for their food all the time they traveled. There'd be just a few of them, most likely, and they'd get inside the boulder and there'd be all that food, maybe enough of it to last them years and years. So they'd eat the agate, hollowing out the boulder and making it lighter so it could travel faster—well, if not faster, at least a little easier. But they'd be very careful not to chew any holes in it until they'd landed and it was time to leave."

"But agate is just rock . . ."

"You weren't listening, Dad," said Billy, patiently. "I told you that agate was the only bait they'd go for."

"Randall," said Helen, coming down the driveway, "if you don't mind, I'd like to use the car to go over and see Amy. She wants me to tell her all about the bugs."

"Go ahead," I said. "Any way you look at it, my day is shot. I may as well stay home."

She went tripping back down the driveway and I said to Billy: "You just lay off everything until I get back."

"Where you going, Dad?"

"Over to see Dobby."

I found Dobby roosting on a bench beneath an apple tree, his face all screwed up with worry. But it didn't stop him talking.

"Randall," he said, beginning to talk as soon as I hove in sight, "this is a sad day for me. All my life I've been vastly proud of my professional exactitude in my chosen calling. But this day I violated, willingly and knowingly and in a fit of temper, every precept of experimental observation and laboratory technique."

"That's too bad," I said, wondering what he was talk-

ing about. Which was not unusual. One often had to to wonder what he was getting at.

"It's those damn bugs of yours," Dobby accused me explosively.

"But you said you wanted some more bugs. Billy remembered that and he brought some over."

"And so I did. I wanted to carry forward my examination of them. I wanted to dissect one and see what made him go. Perhaps you recall my telling you about the hardness of the exoskeletons."

"Yes, of course I do."

"Randall," said Dobby, sadly, "would you believe me if I told you that exoskeleton was so hard I could do nothing with it. I couldn't cut it and I couldn't peel it off. So you know what I did?"

"I have no idea," I declared, somewhat exasperated. I hoped that he'd soon get to the point, but there was no use in hurrying him. He always took his time.

"Well, I'll tell you, then," said Dobby, seeething. "I took one of those little so-and-sos and I put him on an anvil. Then I picked up a hammer and I let him have it. And I tell you frankly that I am not proud of it. It constituted, in every respect, a most improper laboratory technique."

"I wouldn't let that worry me at all," I told him. "You'll have to simply put this down as an unusual circumstance. The important thing, it seems to me, is what you learned about the bug . . ."

And then I had a terrible thought. "Don't tell me the hammer failed!"

"Not at all," said Dobby, with some satisfaction. "It did a job on him. He was smashed to smithereens."

I sat down on the bench beside him and settled down to wait. I knew that in due time he'd tell me.

"An amazing thing," said Dobby. "Yes, a most amazing thing. That bug was made of crystals—of something that looked like the finest quartz. There was no protoplasm in him. Or, at least," he qualified, judiciously, "none I could detect."

"But a crystal bug! That's impossible!"

"Impossible," said Dobby. "Yes, of course, by any earthly standard. It runs counter to everything we've ever known or thought. But the question rises: Can our earthly standards, even remotely, be universal?"

I sat there, without saying anything, but somehow I felt a great relief that someone else was thinking the same thing I had thought. It went to prove, just slightly, that I wasn't crazy.

"Of course," said Dobby, "it had to happen sometime. Soon or late, it should be almost inevitable that some alien intelligence would finally seek us out. And knowing this, we speculated on monsters and monstrosities, but we fell far short of the actual mark of horr . . ."

"There's no reason at the moment," I told him, hastily, "that we should fear the bugs. They might, in fact, become a useful ally. Even now they are co-operating. They've seemed to strike up some sort of deal. We furnish them a place to live in and they, in turn . . ."

"You're mistaken, Randall," Dobby warned me solemnly. "These things are alien beings. Don't imagine for a moment that they and the human race might have a common purpose or a single common concept. Their life process, whatever it may be, is entirely alien to us. So must be their viewpoints. A spider is blood-brother to you as compared with these."

"But we had ants and wasps and they cleaned out the ants and wasps."

"They may have cleaned out the ants and wasps, but it was no part, I am sure, of a co-operative effort. It was no attempt on their part to butter up the human in whose dwelling place they happened to take refuge, or set up their camp, or carve out their beachhead, however you may put it. I have grave doubt that they are aware of you at all except as some mysterious and rather shadowy monstrosity they can't bother with as yet. Sure they killed your insects, but in this they did no more than operate on a level common with their own existence. The insects might have been in their way or they may

have recognized in them some potential threat or hindrance."

"But even so, we can use them," I told him impatiently, "to control our insect pests, our carriers of disease."

"Can we?" Dobby asked. "What makes you think we can? And it would not be insect pests alone, but rather all insects. Would you, then, deprive our plant life of its pollination agents—to mention just one example of thousands?"

"You may be right," I said, "but you can't tell me that we must be afraid of bugs, of even crystal bugs. Even if they should turn out to be a menace, we could find a way in which to cope with them."

"I have been sitting here and thinking, trying to get it straight within my mind," said Dobby, "and one thing that has occurred to me is that here we may be dealing with a social concept we've never met with on this planet. I'm convinced that these aliens must necessarily operate on the hive-mind principle. We face not one of them alone nor the total number of them, but we face the sum total of them as a single unit, as a single mind and a single expression of purpose and performance."

"If you really think they're dangerous, what would you have us do?"

"I still have my anvil and my hammer."

"Cut out the kidding, Dobby."

"You are right," said Dobby. "This is no joking matter, nor is it one for an anvil and a hammer. My best suggestion is that the area be evacuated and an atom bomb be dropped."

Billy came tearing down the path.

"Dad!" he was yelling. "Dad!"

"Hold up there," I said, catching at his arm. "What is going on?"

"Someone is ripping up our furniture," yelled Billy, "and then throwing it outdoors."

"Now, wait a minute—are you sure?"

"I saw them doing it," yelled Billy. "Gosh, will Mom be sore!"

I didn't wait to hear any more. I started for the house as fast as I could go. Billy followed close behind me and Dobby brought up the rear, white whiskers bristling like an excited billy goat.

The screen door off the kitchen was standing open as if someone had propped it, and outside, beyond the stoop, lay a pile of twisted fabric and the odds and ends of dismembered chairs.

I went up the steps in one bound and headed for the door. And just as I reached the doorway I saw this great mass of stuff bulleting straight toward me and I ducked aside. A limp and gutted love seat came hurtling out the door and landed on the pile of debris. It sagged into a grotesque resemblance of its former self.

By this time I was good and sore. I dived for the pile and grabbed up a chair leg. I got a good grip on it and rushed through the door and across the kitchen into the living room. I had the club at ready and if there'd been anybody there I would have let him have it.

But there was no one there—no one I could see.

But there was plenty else to see.

The refrigerator was back in the center of the room and heaped about it were piles of pots and pans. The tangled coil springs from the love seat were leaning crazily against it and scattered all about the carpeting were nuts and bolts, washers, brads and nails and varying lengths of wire.

There was a strange creaking noise from somewhere and I glanced hurriedly around to find out what it was. I found out, all right.

Over on one corner, my favorite chair was slowly and deliberately and weirdly coming apart. The upholstery nails were rising smoothly from the edging of the fabric —rising from the wood as if by their own accord—and dropping to the floor with tiny patterings. As I watched, a bolt fell to the floor and one leg bent underneath the chair and the chair tipped over. The upholstery nails kept right on coming out.

And as I stood there watching this, I felt the anger

draining out of me and a fear come dribbling in to take its place. I started to get cold all over and I could feel the gooseflesh rising.

I started sneaking out. I didn't dare to turn my back, so I backed carefully away and I kept my club at ready.

I bumped into something and let out a whoop and spun around and raised my club to strike.

It was Dobby. I just stopped the club in time.

"Randall," said Dobby calmly, "it's those bugs of yours again."

He gestured toward the ceiling and I looked. The ceiling was a solid mass of golden-gleaming bugs.

I lost some of my fear at seeing them and started to get sore again. I pulled back my arm and aimed the club up at the ceiling. I was ready to let the little stinkers have it, when Dobby grabbed my arm.

"Don't go getting them stirred up," he yelled. "No telling what they'd do."

I tried to jerk my arm away from him, but he hung onto it.

"It is my considered opinion," he declared, even as he wrestled with me, "that the situation has evolved beyond the point where it can be handled by the private citizen."

I gave up. It was undignified trying to get my arm loose from Dobby's clutching paws and I likewise began to see that a club was no proper weapon to use against the bugs.

"You may be right," I said.

He let go my arm. "Maybe you better call the cops," he told me.

I saw that Billy was peering through the door.

"Get out of there!" I yelled at him. "You're in the line of fire. They'll be throwing that chair out of here in another minute. They're almost through with it."

Billy ducked back out of sight.

I walked out to the kitchen and hunted through a cupboard drawer until I found the phone book. I looked up the number and dialed the police.

"This is Sergeant Andrews talking," said a voice.

"Now, listen closely, Sergeant," I said. "I have some bugs out here . . ."

"Ain't we all?" the sergeant asked in a happy tone of voice.

"Sergeant," I told him, trying to sound as reasonable as I could, "I know that this sounds funny. But these are a different kind of bug. They're breaking up my furniture and throwing it outdoors."

"I tell you what," the sergeant said, still happy. "You better go on back to bed and try to sleep it off. If you don't, I'll have to run you in."

"Sergeant," I told him, "I am completely sober . . ."

A hollow click came from the other end and the phone went dead.

I dialed the number back.

"Sergeant Andrews," said the voice.

"You just hung up on me," I yelled. "What do you mean by that? I'm a sober, law-abiding, taxpaying citizen and I'm entitled to protection, and even if you don't think so, to some courtesy as well. And when I tell you I have bugs . . ."

"All right," said the sergeant, wearily. "Since you are asking for it. What's your name and address?"

I gave them to him.

"And Mr. Marsden," said the sergeant.

"What is it now?"

"You better have those bugs. If you know what is good for you, there better be some bugs."

I slammed down the phone and turned around.

Dobby came tearing out of the living room.

"Look out! Here it comes!" he yelled.

My favorite chair, what was left of it, came swishing through the air. It hit the door and stuck. It jiggled violently and broke loose to drop on the pile outside.

"Amazing," Dobby panted. "Truly amazing. But it explains a lot."

"Tell me," I snapped at him, "what explains a lot?"

I was getting tired of Dobby's ramblings.

"Telekinesis," said Dobby.

"Tele-what?"

"Well, maybe only teleportation," Dobby admitted sheepishly. "That's the ability to move things by the power of mind alone."

"And you think this teleportation business bears out your hive-mind theory?"

Dobby looked at me with some astonishment. "That's exactly what I meant," he said.

"What I can't figure out," I told him, "is why they're doing this."

"Of course you can't," said Dobby. "No one expects you to. No one can presume to understand an alien motive. On the surface of it, it would appear they are collecting metal, and that well may be exactly what they're doing. But the mere fact of their metal grabbing does not go nearly far enough. To truly understand their motive . . ."

A siren came screaming down the street.

"There they are," I said, racing for the door.

The police car pulled up to the curb and two officers vaulted out.

"You Marsden?" asked the first one.

I told him that I was.

"That's funny," said the second one. "Sarge said he was stinko."

"Say," said the first one, staring at the pile of wreckage outside the kitchen door, "what is going on here?"

Two chair legs came whistling out the door and thudded to the ground.

"Who is in there throwing out that stuff?" the second cop demanded.

"Just the bugs," I told them. "Just the bugs and Dobby. I guess Dobby's still in there."

"Let's go in and grab this Dobby character," said the first one, "before he wrecks the joint."

I stayed behind. There was no use of going in. All they'd do would be ask a lot of silly questions and there were enough of them I could ask myself without listening to the ones thought up by someone else.

A small crowd was beginning to gather. Billy had rounded up some of his pals and neighbor women were rushing from house to house, cackling like excited chickens. Several cars had stopped and their occupants sat gawping.

I walked out to the street and sat down on the curbing.

And now, I thought, it all had become just a little clearer. If Dobby were right about this teleportation business, and the evidence said he was, then the boulder could have been the ship the bugs had used to make their way to Earth. If they could use their power to tear up furniture and throw it out of the house, they could use that selfsame power to move anything through space. It needn't have been the boulder; it could have been anything at all.

Billy, in his uninhibited, boyish thinking, probably had struck close to the truth—they had used the boulder because it was their food.

The policemen came pounding back out of the house and stopped beside me.

"Say, mister," said one of them, "do you have the least idea what is going on?"

I shook my head. "You better talk to Dobby. He's the one with answers."

"He says these things are from Mars."

"Not Mars," said the second officer. "It was you who said it might be Mars. He said from the stars."

"He's a funny-talking old coot," complained the first policeman. "A lot of the stuff he says is more than a man can swallow."

"Jake," said the other one, "we better start doing something about this crowd. We can't let them get too close."

"I'll radio for help," said Jake.

He went to the police car and climbed into it.

"You stick around," the other said to me.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

The crowd was good-sized by now. More cars had

stopped and some of the people in them had gotten out, but most of them just sat and stared. There were an awful lot of kids by this time and the women were still coming, perhaps from blocks away. Word spreads fast in an area like ours.

Dobby came ambling down the yard. He sat down beside me and started pawing at his whiskers.

"It makes no sense," he said, "but, then, of course, it wouldn't."

"What I can't figure out," I told him, "is why they cleaned the house. Why did it have to be spic and span before they started piling up the metal? There must be a reason for it."

A car screeched down the street and slammed up to the curb just short of where we sat. Helen came bustling out of it.

"I can't turn my back a minute," she declared, "but something up and happens."

"It's your bugs," I said. "Your nice house-cleaning bugs. They're ripping up the place."

"Why don't you stop them, then?"

"Because I don't know how."

"They're aliens," Dobby told her calmly. "They came from somewhere out in space."

"Dobby Wells, you keep out of this! You've caused me all the trouble I can stand. The idea of getting Billy interested in insects! He's had the place cluttered up all summer."

A man came rushing up. He squatted down beside me and started pawing at my arm. I turned around and saw that it was Barr, the rockhound.

"Marsden," he said, excitedly, "I have changed my mind. I'll give you five thousand for that boulder. I'll write you out a check right now."

"What boulder?" Helen asked. "You mean our boulder out in back?"

"That's the one," said Barr. "I got to have that boulder."

"Sell it to him," Helen said.

"I will not," I told her.

"Randall Marsden," she screamed, "you can't turn down five thousand! Think of what five thousand . . ."

"I can turn it down," I told her, firmly. "It's worth a whole lot more than that. It's not just an agate boulder any longer. It's the first spaceship that ever came to Earth. I can get anything I ask."

Helen gasped.

"Dobby," she asked weakly, "is he telling the truth?"

"I think," said Dobby, "that for once he is."

The wail of sirens sounded down the street.

One of the policemen came back from the car.

"You folks will have to get across the street," he said. "As soon as the others get here, we'll cordon off the place."

We got up to start across the street.

"Lady," said the officer, "you'll have to move your car."

"If you two want to stay together," Dobby offered, "I'll drive it down the street."

Helen gave him the key and the two of us walked across the street. Dobby got into the car and drove off.

The officers were hustling the other cars away.

A dozen police cars arrived. Men piled out of them. They started pushing back the crowd. Others fanned out to start forming a circle around the house.

Broken furniture, bedding, clothing, draperies from time to time came flying out the kitchen door. The pile of debris grew bigger by the moment.

We stood across the street and watched our house be wrecked.

"They must be almost through by now," I said, with a strange detachment. "I wonder what comes next."

"Randall," said Helen, tearfully, clinging to my arm, "what do we do now? They're wrecking all my things. How about it—is it covered by insurance?"

"Why, I don't know," I said. "I'd never thought of it."

And that was the truth of it—it hadn't crossed my mind. And me an insurance man!

I had written that policy myself and now I tried des-

perately to remember what the fine print might have said and I had a sinking feeling. How, I asked myself, could anything like this be covered? It certainly was no hazard that could be anticipated.

"Anyhow," I said, "we still have the boulder. We can sell the boulder."

"I still think we should have taken the five thousand," Helen told me. "What if the government should move in and just grab the boulder off?"

And she was right, I told myself. This would be just the sort of thing in which the government could become intensely interested.

I began to think myself that maybe we should have taken that five thousand.

Three policemen walked across the yard and went into the house. Almost at once they came tearing out again. Pouring out behind them came a swarm of glittering dots that hummed and buzzed and swooped so fast they seemed to leave streaks of their golden glitter in the air behind them. The policemen ran in weaving fashion, ducking and dodging. They waved their hands in the air above their heads.

The crowd surged back and began to run. The police cordon broke and retreated with what dignity it could.

I found myself behind the house across the street, my hand still gripping Helen's arm. She was madder than a hornet.

"You needn't have pulled me along so fast," she told me. "I could have made it by myself. You made me lose my shoes."

"Forget your shoes," I told her sharply. "This thing is getting serious. You go and round up Billy and the two of you get out of here. Go up to Amy's place."

"Do you know where Billy is?"

"He's around somewhere. He is with his pals. Just look for a bunch of boys."

"And you?"

"I'll be along," I said.

"You'll be careful, Randall."

I patted her shoulder and stooped down to kiss her. "I'll be careful. I'm not very brave, you know. Now go and get the boy."

She started away and then turned back. "Will we ever go back home?" she asked.

"I think we will," I said, "and soon. Someone will find a way to get them out of there."

I watched her walk away and felt the chilly coldness of the kindness of my lie.

Would we, in solemn truth, ever go back home again? Would the entire world, all of humanity, ever be at home again? Would the golden bugs take away the smug comfort and the warm security that Man had known for ages in his sole possession of a planet of his own?

I went up the backyard slope and found Helen's shoes. I put them in my pocket. I came to the back of the house and peeked around the corner.

The bugs had given up the chase, but now a squadron of them flew in a lazy, shining circle around and just above the house. It was plain to see that they were on patrol.

I ducked back around the house and sat down in the grass, with my back against the house. It was a warm and blue-sky summer day; the kind of day a man should mow his lawn.

A slobbering horror, I thought, no matter how obscene or fearful, might be understood, might be fought against. But the cold assuredness with which the golden bugs went directly to their purpose, the self-centered, vicious efficiency with which they operated, was something else again.

And their impersonal detachment, their very disregard of us, was like a chilly blast upon human dignity.

I heard footsteps and looked up, startled.

It was Arthur Belsen and he was upset.

But that was not unusual. Belsen could get upset at something that was downright trivial.

"I was looking for you everywhere," he chattered. "I

met Dobby just a while ago and he tells me these bugs of yours . . ."

"They're no bugs of mine," I told him sharply. I was getting tired of everyone talking as if I owned the bugs, as if I might be somehow responsible for their having come to Earth.

"Well, anyhow, he was telling me they are after metal."

I nodded. "That is what they're after. Maybe it is precious stuff to them. Maybe they haven't got too much of it wherever they are from."

And I thought about the agate boulder. If they had had metal, certainly they'd not used the agate boulder.

"I had an awful time getting home," said Belsen. "I thought there was a fire. There are cars parked in the street for blocks and an awful crowd. I was lucky to get through."

"Come on and sit down," I told him. "Stop your fidgeting."

But he paid no attention to me.

"I have an awful lot of metal," he said. "All those machines of mine down in the basement. I've put a lot of time and work and money into those machines and I can't let anything happen to them. You don't think the bugs will start branching out, do you?"

"Branching out?"

"Well, yes, you know—after they get through with everything in your house, they might start getting into other houses."

"I hadn't thought of it," I said. "I suppose that it could happen."

I sat there and thought about it and I had visions of them advancing house by house, cleaning out and salvaging all the metal, putting it into one big pile until it covered the entire block and eventually the city.

"Dobby says that they are crystal. Isn't that a funny thing for bugs to be?"

I said nothing. After all, he was talking to himself.

"But crystal can't be alive," protested Belsen. "Crystal

is stuff that things are made of. Vacuum tubes and such. There is no life in it."

"Don't try to fight with me," I told him. "I can't help it if they are crystal."

There seemed to be a lot of ruckus going on out in the street and I got to my feet to peer around the corner of the house.

For a moment there was not a thing to see. Everything looked peaceful. One or two policemen were running around excitedly, but I couldn't see that anything was happening. It looked just as it had before.

Then a door slowly, almost majestically, detached itself from one of the police cars parked along the curb and started floating toward the open kitchen door. It reached the door and made a neat left turn and disappeared inside.

A rear vision mirror sailed flashing through the air. It was followed by a siren. Both disappeared within the house.

Good Lord, I told myself, the bugs are going after cars!

Now I saw that a couple of the cars were already minus hoods and fenders and that some other doors were missing.

The bugs, I thought, had finally really hit the jackpot. They wouldn't stop until they'd stripped the cars clean down to the tires.

And I was thinking, too, with a strange perverse reaction, that there wasn't nearly room enough inside the house to pack all those dismantled cars. What, I wondered, would the bugs do when the house was full?

A half dozen policemen dashed across the street and started for the house. They reached the lawn before the bug patrol above the house became aware of them and swooped down in a screaming, golden arc.

The policemen ran back pell-mell. The bug patrol, its duty done, returned to circling the house. Fenders, doors, tail lights, head lights, radio antennae, and other parts of cars continued to pour into the house.

A dog came trotting out of nowhere and went across the lawn, tail wagging in friendly curiosity.

A flight of bugs left the patrol and headed down toward him.

The dog, startled by the whistle of the diving bugs, wheeled about to run.

He was too late.

There was the sickening thud of missiles hitting flesh. The dog leaped high into the air and fell over on his back.

The bugs swooped up into the air again. There were no gaps in their ranks.

The dog lay twitching in the yard and blood ran in the grass.

I ducked back around the corner, sick. I doubled up, retching, trying hard to keep from throwing up.

I fought it off and my stomach quieted down. I peeked around the corner of the house.

All was peaceful once again. The dead dog lay sprawling in the yard. The bugs were busy with their stripping of the cars. No policemen were in sight. There was no one in sight at all. Even Belsen had disappeared somewhere.

It was different now, I told myself. The dog had made it different.

The bugs no longer were a mystery only; now they were a deadly danger. Each of them was a rifle bullet with intelligence.

I remembered something that Dobby had said just an hour or so ago. Evacuate the area, he had said, then drop an atom bomb.

And would it come to that, I wondered. Was that the measure of the danger?

No one, of course, was thinking that way yet, but in time they might. This was just the start of it. Today the city was alerted and the police were on the scene; tomorrow it might be the governor sending in some troops. And in time it would be the federal government. And after that, Dobby's solution might be the only answer.

The bugs hadn't spread too far as yet. But Belsen's fear was valid; in time they would expand, pushing out their beachhead block by block as there were more and more of them. For Billy had been right when he had said they must multiply real fast.

I tried to imagine how the bugs could multiply, but I had no idea.

First of all, of course, the government probably would try to make contact with them, would attempt to achieve some communication with them—not with the creatures themselves, perhaps, but rather with that mass mind which Dobby had figured them to have.

But was it possible to communicate with creatures such as these? On what intellectual level might one approach them? And what good could possibly come of such communication if it were established? Where was the basis for understanding between these creatures and the human race?

And I realized, even as I thought all this, that I was thinking with pure panic. To approach a problem such as the bugs presented, there was need of pure objectivity—there could be no question of either fear or anger. The time had come for Man to discard the pettiness of one-planet thinking.

It was no problem of mine, of course, but thinking of it, I saw a deadly danger—that the eventual authority, whoever that might be, might delay too long in its objectivity.

There had to be a way to stop the bugs, there must be some measure to control them. Before we tried to establish contact, there must be a way in which we could contain them.

And I thought of something—of Billy telling me that to hold them once you caught them one must have a plastic trap.

I wondered briefly how the kid had known that. Perhaps it had been no more than simple trial and error. After all, he and Tommy Henderson must have tried several different kinds of traps.

Plastic might be the answer to the problem I had posed. It could be the answer if we acted before they spread too far.

And why plastic, I wondered. What element within plastic would stop them cold and hold them once they were entrapped within it? Some factor, perhaps, that we would learn only after long and careful study. But it was something that did not matter now; it was enough we knew that plastic did the trick.

I stood there for a time, turning the matter in my mind, wondering who to go to.

I could go to the police, of course, but I had a feeling I would get little hearing there. The same would be true of the officials of the city. For while it was possible they might listen, they'd have to talk it over, they'd have to call a conference, they'd feel compelled to consult some expert before they did anything about it. And the government in Washington, at the moment, was unthinkable.

The trouble was that no one was scared enough as yet. To act as quickly as they should they'd have to be scared silly—and I had had a longer time to get scared silly than any of the rest.

Then I thought of another man who was as scared as I was.

Belsen.

Belsen was the man to help me. Belsen was scared stiff.

He was an engineer and possibly he could tell me if what I had been thinking was any good or not. He could sit down and figure how it might be done. He'd know where to get the plastic that we needed and the best type of it to use and more than likely he'd know how to go about arranging for its fabrication. And he might, as well, know someone it would do some good to talk to.

I went back to the corner of the house and had a look around.

There were a few policemen in sight, but not too many of them. They weren't doing anything, just standing there and watching while the bugs kept on working at the cars.

They had the bodies pretty well stripped down by now and were working on the engines. As I watched I saw one motor rise and sail toward the house. It was dripping oil and chunks of caked grease and dust were falling off of it. I shivered at the thought of what a mess like that would do to Helen's carpeting and the decorating.

There were a few knots of spectators here and there, but all of them were standing at quite a distance off.

It looked to me as if I'd have no trouble reaching Belsen's house if I circled round the block, so I started out.

I wondered if Belsen would be at home and was afraid he might not be. Most of the houses in the neighborhood seemed to be deserted. But it was a chance, I knew, that I had to take. If he wasn't at his house, I'd have to hunt him down.

I reached his place and went up the steps and rang the bell. There wasn't any answer, so I walked straight in.

The house seemed to be deserted.

"Belsen," I called.

He didn't answer me and I called again.

Then I heard footsteps clattering up a stairs.

The basement door came open and Belsen stuck his head out.

"Oh, it's you," he said. "I am glad you came. I will need some help. I sent the family off."

"Belsen," I said, "I know what we can do. We can get a monstrous sheet of plastic and drop it on the house. That way they can't get out. Maybe we can get some helicopters, maybe four of them, one for each corner of the sheet . . ."

"Come downstairs," said Belsen. "There's work for both of us."

I followed him downstairs into his workroom.

The place was orderly, as one might expect from a fussbudget such as Belsen.

The music machines stood in straight and shining lines the work bench was immaculate and the tools were al

in place. The tape machine stood in one corner and it was all lit up like a Christmas tree.

A table stood in front of the tape machine, but it was far from tidy. It was strewn with books, some of them lying flat and open and others piled haphazard. There were scribbled sheets of paper scattered everywhere and balled-up bunches of it lay about the floor.

"I cannot be mistaken," Belsen told me, jittery as ever. "I must be sure the first time. There'll be no second chance. I had a devil of a time getting it all figured out, but I think I have it now."

"Look, Belsen," I said, with some irritation, "I don't know what hare-brained scheme you may be working on, but whatever it may be, this deal of mine is immediate and important."

"Later," Belsen told me, almost hopping up and down in his anxiety. "Later you can tell me. I have a tape I have to finish. I have the mathematics all worked out . . ."

"But this is about the bugs!"

Belsen shouted at me: "And so is this, you fool! What else did you expect to find me working on? You know I can't take a chance of their getting in here. I won't let them take all this stuff I've built."

"But, Belsen . . ."

"See that machine," he said, pointing to one of the smaller ones. "That's the one we'll have to use. It is battery powered. See if you can get it moved over to the door."

He swung around and scurried over to the tape machine and sat down in front of it. He began punching slowly and carefully on the keyboard and the machine began to mutter and to chuckle at him and its lights winked on and off.

I saw there was no sense in trying to talk to him until he had this business done. And there was a chance, of course, that he knew what he was doing—that he had figured out some way either to protect these machines of his or to stop the bugs.

I walked over to the machine and it was heavier than

it looked. I started tugging at it and I could move it only a few inches at a time, but I kept on tugging it.

And suddenly, as I tugged away, I knew without a question what Belsen must be planning.

And I wondered why I hadn't thought of it myself; why Dobby, with all his talk of A-bombs, hadn't thought of it. But, of course, it would take a man like Belsen, with his particular hobby, to have thought of it.

The idea was so old, so ancient, so much a part of the magic past that it was almost laughable—and yet it ought to work.

Belsen got up from the machine and lifted a reel of tape from a cylinder in its side. He hurried over to me and knelt down beside the machine I'd tugged almost to the door.

"I can't be sure of exactly what they are," he told me. "Crystal. Sure, I know they're crystalline in form, but what kind of crystals—just what type of crystals? So I had to work out a sort of sliding shotgun pattern of supersonic frequencies. Somewhere in there, I hope, is the one that will synchronize with whatever structure they may have."

He opened a section of the small machine and started threading in the tape.

"Like the violin that broke the goblet," I said.

He grinned at me nervously. "The classical example. I see you've heard of it."

"Everyone has," I said.

"Now listen to me carefully," said Belsen. "All we have to do is flip this switch and the tape starts moving. This dial controls the volume and it's set at maximum. We'll open up the door and we'll grab the machine, one on each side of it, and we'll carry it as far as we can before we set it down. I want to get in close."

"Not too close," I cautioned. "The bugs just killed a dog. Couple of them hit him and went through him without stopping. They're animated bullets."

Belsen licked his lips. "I figured something like that."

He reached out for the door.

"Just a minute, Belsen. Have we got a right to?"

"A right to what?" he asked.

"A right to kill these things. They're the first aliens to come to visit us. There's a lot we might learn from them if we could only talk to them . . ."

"Talk to them?"

"Well, communicate. Get to understand them."

And I wondered what was wrong with me, that I should be talking that way.

"After what they did to the dog? After what they did to you?"

"Yes, I think," I said, "even after what they did to me."

"You're crazy," Belsen screamed.

He pulled the door wide open.

"Now!" he shouted at me.

I hesitated for a second, then grabbed hold.

The machine was heavy, but we lifted it and rushed out into the yard. We went staggering with it almost to the alley and there the momentum of our rush played out and we set it down.

I looked up toward my house and the bug patrol was there, circling at rooftop height, a flashing golden circle in the light of the setting sun.

"Maybe," Belsen panted, "maybe we can get it closer."

I bent to pick it up again and even as I did I saw the patrolling circle break.

"Look out!" I screamed.

The bugs were diving at us.

"The switch!" I yelled. "The switch!"

But Belsen stood there, staring at them, frozen, speechless, stiff.

I flung myself at the machine and found the switch and flipped it and then I was groveling in the dirt, rooting into it, trying to make myself extremely thin and small.

There was no sound and, of course, I had known there would be none, but that didn't stop me from wondering why I didn't hear it. Maybe, I thought, the tape had broken; maybe the machine had failed to work.

Out of the tail of my eye I saw the patrol arrowing

down on us and they seemed to hang there in the air, as if something might have stopped them, but I knew that that was wrong, that it was simply fright playing tricks with time.

And I was scared, all right, but not as scared as Belsen. He still stood there, upright, unable to move a muscle, staring at oncoming death in an attitude of stricken disbelief.

They were almost on top of us. They were so close that I could see each one of them as a dancing golden mote and then suddenly each little mote became a puff of shining dust and the swarm was gone.

I climbed slowly to my feet and brushed off my front.

"Snap out of it," I said to Belsen. I shook him.

He slowly turned toward me and I could see the tension going from his face.

"It worked," he said, in a flat sort of voice. "I was pretty sure it would."

"I noticed that," I said. "You're the hero of the hour."

And I said it bitterly, without even knowing why.

I left him standing there and walked slowly across the alley.

We had done it, I told myself. Right or wrong, we'd done it. The first things from space had come and we had smashed them flat.

And was this, I wondered, what would happen to us, too, when we ventured to the stars? Would we find as little patience and as little understanding? Would we act as arrogantly as these golden bugs had acted?

Would there always be the Belsens to outshout the Marsdens? Would the Marsdens always be unable or unwilling to stand up before the panic-shouting—always fearful that their attitude, slowly forming, might be antisocial? Would the driving sense of fear and the unwillingness to understand bar all things from the stars?

And that, I told myself, was a funny thing for me, of all people, to be thinking. For mine was the house the bugs had ruined.

Although, come to think of it, they might have cost

me not a dime. They might have made me money. I still had the agate boulder and that was worth a fortune.

I looked quickly toward the garden and the boulder wasn't there! I broke into a run, breath sobbing in my throat.

I stopped at the garden's edge and stared in consternation at the neat pile of shining sand.

There was one thing I'd forgotten: That an agate, as well as bugs and a goblet, was also crystalline!

I turned around and stared back across the yard and I was sore clean through.

That Belsen, I thought—him and his sliding shotgun pattern!

I would take one of those machines of his and cram it down his throat!

Then I stopped dead still. There was, I realized, nothing I could do or say.

Belsen was the hero, exactly as I had said he was.

He was the man, alone, who'd quashed the menace from the stars.

That was what the headlines would be saying, that was what the entire world would think. Except, perhaps, a few scientists and others of their kind who didn't really count.

Belsen was the hero and if I laid a finger to him I'd probably be lynched.

And I was right.

Belsen *is* the hero.

He turns on his orchestra at six o'clock each morning and there's no one in the neighborhood who'll say a word to him.

Is there anyone who knows how much it costs to soundproof an entire house?

SPECIAL FEATURE

Charles V. DeVet

Using only the strength in her sinewy forearms, Pentizel pulled herself up quietly through the hole in the ice. The small droplets of water that clung to her hairy body turned quickly to patches of shining glaze as she lay low and motionless against the hardened surface of the river.

She let her senses reach out for any indication of life above her. The bank of the river, directly ahead, was barren and deserted. In the distance she could hear the dull, muted sounds of a sleeping city. Nothing else.

She rose to her feet and treaded softly toward the river edge, warily observing everything about her. A row of semi-stripped freight cars stood on a siding to her right. To her left was an underpass. Straight ahead, tall shadow-shrouded buildings.

Among those buildings lay her danger—a danger of inarguable necessity. She must be cautious. A giant will be pulled down by a race of pigmies, unless he tempers his strength with cunning.

If she could reach the slum section of the city—the best place for a stranger to assimilate herself among the natives—without being seen, the balance would tip in her favor.

Pentizel drew from her memory the little her tapes had had about this typical Earth city in which she had landed: Name—St. Paul. Population seven hundred eighty thou-

sand. Capital city of local subdivision—an old city.

Without distraction from her alert progress, one part of her mind assayed the city's probable place in the sociological cycle. Center of commerce shifted from river bank, to rail center, and finally out to air terminals. The old section of the city should be located somewhere on the far side of the railroad tracks.

It was a simple matter for Pentizel to slip unseen through dim back streets, from building to building, until she reached the flats of old Lactonatown.

So far strictly according to preconceived plan. Next step—to obtain clothing, and if possible, local currency.

For nearly an hour Pentizel waited in the shadow of an alley mouth, with the patience of the stalking animal she was. The twenty-two degrees below zero temperature did not trouble her; it was less cold than an average day on her own world. The frigid climate was one main reason why she had chosen this northern hemisphere.

At last Pentizel caught a sharp, salt, fragrance on the cool breeze. She heard, a few seconds later, the sound of approaching footsteps. She concentrated—with an instinctive, intricate, sensory process.

The prospective victim was a male, heavy of body, and either old, or very tired.

Her quarry reached the mouth of the alley, and Pentizel sprang.

The brief action was the same as it had been before, with the other member of this race of clods: The shocked immobility of surprise; the slowly registering alarm; the frantic futile resistance; and the small stricken cry of capitulation to superior strength at the end.

Pentizel had carefully observed pictures, and video, of Earth natives during her flight here, but she had seen only briefly a living one. She studied closely the build and features of the unconscious male as she quickly stripped him.

The body structure was much the same as her own. She had anticipated that. The features were different, but of the same basic mold. There would have to be some

drastic changes made on her own face—before she could pass as one of them—but it was not an impossible task.

Leather foot casings, which Pentizel unsnapped and slipped on her own feet. Trousers—she did not bother with the undergarments, either on the feet or body—a synthetic-fur lined greatcoat, and matching head covering. These effete creatures needed a great deal of protection against the elements.

Pentizel's confidence mounted rapidly. She pulled the head covering down over the pointed tips of her ears, and the collar of the greatcoat up. When she snapped the collar close around the lower part of her face, she was satisfied. With ordinary luck she would escape discovery.

Next step—a place to rest and hide.

As rapidly as possible Pentizel put a dozen blocks between herself and her victim. An electric light blinked "RYAN HOTEL," and Pentizel went in. She had no doubt of her ability to speak the native language fluently—she and her race were particularly adept at that sort of thing, and she had used much of her time on the trip in studying tapes and practicing. She was certain she even had a fair grasp of their slang and colloquialisms.

Pentizel kept her face low in the coat collar as she walked to the hotel register desk. A sleepy-eyed clerk looked up at her and Pentizel made a motion of flailing herself with her arms. "Sure cold out," she muttered, keeping her voice in a low masculine range.

The clerk nodded and stifled a yawn with his hand. "You wanna room?"

"Yes. For two nights." Pentizel had examined the billfold in the trouser pocket and found several rectangular slips of green paper. Undoubtedly local currency. She took out one with the largest number on it—a ten—and laid it on the desk.

The clerk took the bill and made change. "Six-fifty from ten," he said, without interest. He laid three of the green slips—with ones printed on their corners—and a round silver coin on the desk. Beside them he tossed a

room key. "Third door to your right," he said. "Top of the stairs."

Pentizel had surveyed the small lobby of the hotel with a fleeting first glance on entering. She moved toward the stairs now without hesitation.

Once inside her room, she locked the door, drew in a deep breath, and let it out. Her whole body relaxed with the expelled breath. A world lay within the grasp of her eager hands. A world of decadent weaklings—waiting to be ravaged!

Vern Nelson was getting a bit drowsy. Two hours before he had been unable to sleep, and had come up to the monitor station to take over the nightwatch beam. It was a public service, donated by his employers, and always an intriguing diversion for him. As he idly tilted the control handle the scene on the huge screen before him shifted across the city. It passed the Bluff section, paused for a moment at the river edge, and swung on across the old railroad yards.

A few blocks farther on Nelson spotted a small darting movement in one corner of the screen. He swung back. Nothing. Whatever it had been was now hidden beneath the overhang of a low building.

A moment later the figure slipped across the street and into the shadow of a second building. Nelson could not see him plainly enough to make any identification—he stayed too deep in the shadows—but he was able to follow his movements easily.

Another block and the figure slipped into an alley mouth, and eased himself into a crouch beside a trash barrel.

An hour went by, and Nelson was beginning to think the crouching man would never move. He was getting sleepy again.

Then it happened!

A pedestrian, in the forefront of the camera screen had been approaching the alley from the south. Nelson, watching the figure in the shadow, gave only casual attention

to the approaching man. And it was not until the crouching figure made a sudden leap that he realized its intention.

The action was as swift as a shifting beam of sunlight, and the pedestrian went down without more than a brief second of struggle.

Nelson straightened in his chair. The stalker was dressed in some outlandish costume—from where Nelson sat it looked like a black and white striped fur suit.

Quickly Nelson cut the IBM machine at his elbow into synchronization with the video camera. It began its soft whirr.

"Identify!" Nelson barked.

The stalker stripped his victim and donned his clothes before he began to move away—in long graceful leaps on all fours!

Nelson pushed back his chair and stood up. A fine sprinkling of perspiration dotted his forehead. Something unusual had happened—was happening—out there. This was no ordinary assault and battery. Impatiently he punched the IBM response button.

"Insufficient data," the machine coughed.

"Stick with it," Nelson said, forgetting in his abstraction that he was speaking redundantly. Also, he shouldn't expect results yet. There wasn't much more for the IBM to tabulate than the sight of a man—or an animal—running on all fours.

In front of a cheap hotel the creature straightened and assumed the upright carriage of a man, and went in. Nelson switched to an inside-the-hotel camera and followed him as he went to the registration desk. He lost him on the first landing, but picked him up again as he entered a sleeping room. Another camera brought him inside the room.

With his attention still on the screen, Nelson pushed a button of the intercom on his desk. When a voice in the box said, "Nightwatch," he turned his head, but not his gaze. "A man's been assaulted on Eighth Street," he said. "Near Cedar, about a hundred feet from the entrance

to the Y. Send a pickup for him. Don't waste time; he's been stripped of his clothing. If he's still alive, he'll freeze quickly in this weather."

"I'll have a car there in two minutes," the voice in the intercom said.

Meanwhile the man—if it was a man—in the hotel room casually pulled off his stolen greatcoat and trousers, and tossed them along with his hat on the floor. Nelson got his first good look at the man then. His body, and most of his head, was covered with the black and white striped fur. Natural fur—not a costume! His earlier suspicions had been correct then—definitely an extraterrestrial. And he had a good idea what the creature's home world was. He punched the IBM response button again.

"Strong probability person is alien," the machine intoned monotonously. "Apparent evidence indicates cat race of planet Paarae. Not conclusive however."

That was enough for Nelson. This might be the opportunity of a lifetime. If he could just swing it right. He switched on the intercom again and spoke urgently. "Get me police headquarters. Rush it."

As he waited Nelson switched the screen ahead of him to the police bureau, bringing it in just as the bored desk sergeant answered the phone.

"This is Nelson, up at the RBC monitor building," he told the sergeant. "A few minutes ago we tabbed an assault at Eighth and Cedar. We have a pickup on the way now. O.K., if we handle this ourselves?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Why not? You spotted him. You still got the hood covered?"

"Yes. But we'd like permission to assume jurisdiction."

The sergeant looked up, but Nelson knew he did not see him; the big screen was one-way. "You accept complete responsibility?"

"Complete. Thanks. I'll remember this." Nelson cut the contact before the sergeant could hedge.

Now to move with speed—and adroitness. As he turned to the intercom again the IBM said, "Preliminary evi-

dence verified." He had forgotten to shut off the machine. He did so now.

It took him six minutes to contact Major Gower. He had been sleeping, naturally. Nelson knew he had to get his point across fast and well—or his big chance would be fumbled away. "Sorry to wake you, major," he said, and went quickly ahead. "I think I spotted a cat man here in the city, sir."

"A cat man?" The major was still not fully awake.

"Yes, sir. From the planet Paarae. This is an illegal entry. They're a treacherous race—killers—and barred from all the Human worlds. I've already recorded him committing assault. Don't know yet whether his victim is dead or not. I've sent out a pickup."

He had all Gower's attention now. "You're keeping him covered, of course," Gower said. He reached for his trousers on the chair at the side of his bed.

"Yes, sir. He's holed up in a cheap hotel on Robert Street." Now to make his own play. "This could be a mighty big thing for us, major. But we'll have to go into high gear if we want to get the full play on it. Do I have your permission to push things along?"

Gower brushed one hand impatiently through the air. "You're in charge," he stated. "What have you done so far? Call the police yet?"

Nelson nodded. "That's about all though. With your go-ahead I'll put on the express at this end. I'd suggest that sponsors be contacted without delay. Every minute will be precious. This could be the hottest live feature we've ever had the luck to stumble across. The contract men should be able to get a sponsor's right arm for an exclusive."

"I'll handle it personally," the major said. Nelson had to admire the sharpness of the man's mind. He had grasped the complete picture, from just the few sentences they had exchanged. "You go ahead with the coverage," the major added. "Give it the works; I'll back you all the way."

He had it! Now to move in bigtime style. Nelson paused

and wiped the moist palms of his hands down the sides of his shirt. For just a passing moment his mind was blank. Was he big enough for the job? There were a hundred loose ends to be tied together. Where to begin? The uncertainty passed. He was in full command of himself, and of the situation.

He leaned over and spoke into the intercom. "You get all that, Benny? I left the line open so you could listen in."

"I got it," Benny answered. "Who do you want me to get ahold of first?"

"Everybody. Connect me with the heads of all departments. Open line." Nelson spoke rapidly, ecstatically. This was playing the game. "I want you to get them on standby in fifteen minutes time. If you're unable to contact any of the top men, get their seconds in charge, but have someone from every last department. Got it?"

"I'll try," Benny said dubiously.

"Don't try, do it!" Nelson cut him off. While he waited he made a direct call to the Nightwatch crew. "You bring in that assault victim yet?"

"He's in the first-aid room in the basement now."

"Is he still alive?"

"Yes. Seems to be in pretty good shape. Except he's over being scared now, and starting to act indignant."

"Settle with him. Promise to replace his clothes with the best suit and storm coat in St. Paul. And give him whatever you have to for 'pain and suffering.' Try to hold it down to a thousand or two—but get his signed release before you let him out of the building."

"Will do."

Nelson paced the room impatiently, until summoned back to his desk by a call on the intercom. He glanced at his wrist watch. Seventeen minutes. Not half bad.

"Got them all—on direct wire," Benny said. "Holmgren of Personnel was out, but . . ."

"Never mind that," Nelson cut him off impatiently. He took a deep breath. "All you men, listen," he said. "The major has put me in charge on this thing. We don't have

time for discussion. I'll give you the situation, and the necessary details, of what's happened so far. You note whatever applies to your own department. When I finish I want you to move, and move with top speed. If you do, we've got the world by the tail; if you don't, we've got nothing."

"Now here it is: About an hour ago we spotted a cat man from the planet Paarae attacking a pedestrian on Eighth, near Cedar. If you're not up on your planetology, the cat men are killers. Barred from all the Human worlds, and most of the non-Human. I've got clearance from the police for an exclusive handling. We're going to follow that cat—every single move he makes. Follow him when he eats, and when he sleeps, and even when he's just breathing. Have your staffs collect all the background material they can find. Fill in with that background whenever it looks like the program's beginning to drag a little. But keep it exciting. If that cat has the venom in his soul I think he has, we won't have to fake much."

Nelson took time out to light a cigarette and pull in a deep drag. "I want you to locate his spaceship." He let the smoke billow out with his words. "It has to be hidden somewhere near the Mississippi. Then when you find how he came in, and where he hid his ship, make a mock-up. Use the enlarged-model technique, but make it look real. I know the critics will pan our pretending to have spotted him coming in, but who reads the critics? And the man in the lounge chair will eat it up. Carry on with shots of the cat leaving the ship—distant shots of a man in a black and white striped fur suit will cover that—and going up to the mouth of the alley on Eighth, between Cedar and Wabasha. You can cut in there with the film I have of the real thing. Right now the cat's sleeping in a cheap hotel down on Robert Street. We can close in the time easily enough to make it a continuous run.

"Now I want a top-grade buildup on this. Play up strong the potentiality of violence: Assault, murder, blood. Make it good. Start cutting in immediately—on whatever program's running on the channel now—with

tantalizers. Don't tell them exactly what the feature will be. Let them use their imagination. Build up their curiosity, and impatience, for the start of the biggest—live—thrill show in the annals of video. Make 'em wait for it on the edges of their seats, then make 'em watch that cat man with their hearts in their mouths. Make them cringe even when he turns over in his sleep.

"Oh yes. This denizen of Paarae is a mighty sharp individual. Don't you, or any of your men, go anywhere near him. And warn the other services that we'll sue them to within an inch of their lives if they spoil this by messing around. Black out the St. Paul-Minneapolis area for a hundred miles around. No, better make it two hundred. We don't want the curious yokels flocking in here. Cancel all scheduled programs for an indefinite period.

"That should do it. If there's anything else you need to know, call me back personally. But be sure it's necessary, because I won't have a minute to spare doing your thinking for you."

Nelson switched off the intercom and sat back in his chair. His undershirt was soaked with perspiration.

He had ten minutes to get his breath back before the intercom came alive again. "Skipper? You still there?"

Nelson bent forward. "Go ahead."

"This is Nightwatch. That assault victim's name is John Bowman. We got him to settle for five hundred. O.K.?"

"Fine. You get his signed release?"

"Got it right here in my hand."

"Good work."

Nelson put his head on his arms and stretched forward on his desk. The tension was beginning to ease, and he felt the first letdown. His buzzer sounded just before he dropped off to sleep. "Yeah?" he said.

"Survey," the voice in the box came in. "We're handling the search for the cat's ship. We located an unaccounted-for something or other buzzing on the bottom of the Mississippi, about a block east of Lambert's Landing. There's a fresh break in the ice just above. That must

be it. Do you want us to send a diver down to make sure?"

"We haven't time," Nelson said. "We'll have to take the chance." He switched to Composition.

"The ship has been located in the river, near Lambert's Landing," he said. "Make your mock-up showing it coming in, plunging through the ice, and the cat man coming out of the hole a few minutes later. Got that?"

"Got it. We've already made a 'fake' of his progress from the river bank to the Y. We'll do the ship-landing scene and tack it on in front. Anything else?"

"That should do it."

"Don't hang up," Benny's voice caught him. "The major's waiting to speak to you."

"Yes, sir?" Nelson asked.

"We've got General Motors & Transportation signed on for sponsor, Vern," Major Gower's voice said crisply. "I practically held them up. So you better come through now."

"I'm sure we will, sir," Nelson answered. "How high did they go?"

"A million and a half."

"A million and a half?" Nelson's voice held a hint of disappointment.

"With codicils," the major added. "I took your advice, and shot for the works on this. Demanded five million. A million and a half was as high as they'd go for a pig in a poke. So I insisted on retaining rerun rights. If you know what you're doing, we can make a fortune on them."

"Did they buy that?"

"Not quite. They're no fools. They made me insert an auxiliary clause giving them the privilege of claiming rerun rights in return for an additional three and a half million. How does that sound to you?"

"Great. If it turns out only mediocre, a million and a half is a fair price. If it goes over as I think it will. . . . Well, five million is a lot of money."

"That's about the way I figured it, too," Gower said. "Oh yes, Lloyd's of Minneapolis agreed to handle liability

insurance for a hundred thousand. So you can give it the works. We're in the clear on any suits for damage that victims of the cat man might bring."

Nelson switched in to a closed-circuit of the current video broadcast.

An announcer, with built-in dramatics in his voice, was saying, "Stay close to your sets, ladies and gentlemen. Sometime within the next hour there will be shown on this screen the greatest, most sensational feature it has ever been the privilege of this network to offer. The broadcast will be live. LIVE! But let me give you this urgent caution: Please—please—do not permit your children to view this program. It is strictly, FOR ADULTS ONLY. As for you ladies, please use the greatest discretion. If you can take violence; if you can face RAW, NAKED SAVAGERY, then it's safe for you to watch. If not, our advice is to leave this to the less fragile sex. But let me repeat: this is strictly, FOR ADULTS ONLY. And it is LIVE. See it while it happens! Please stand by for further information."

Nelson smiled. That "adults only" was good. And as for the women—they'd be glued to their seats. He contacted Production.

"Set the beginning time for the special feature for"—he glanced at his watch—"nine-thirty; that's twenty-five minutes from now. Continue giving spot announcements at five-minute intervals. Now put me on with whoever has charge in the cutting room."

Nelson waited a moment until he heard the click of the relay switch and began again. "Nelson speaking," he said. "We go on the air at nine-thirty. Cut that alley wait to four or five minutes. We want to get into the excitement fast. Also, we have to do some closing on the time we've lost so far, and that's a good place to do some of it. We'll close up the rest when we come to the cat sleeping in the hotel room. Give a splash of background immediately following the assault scene, but keep it brief. And make it as good as possible. Leave about an hour's lag

between filming and showing: there might be some parts along the way that just can't be allowed over the air. Got all that?"

"Right," Production cut in. "We've already made that preliminary background run. We think it's good."

"I'll depend on that," Nelson said.

The assault scene went over as big as Nelson had hoped. The speed, and sheer explosiveness of the attack, made even him gasp, and he, of course, had seen it before.

While the cat slept, the program switched smoothly to his home world. The camera focused in on a dim star, brought it up close and gave the illusion of landing on the frigid ice-bound planet. Brief shots were shown of the cat people living in their caves. Native fauna, especially the savage, semi-intelligent, bear tribe that waged a continual war against the cats, was shown with some good action bits.

Several scenes were run of ships of Earth and her colonies landing, and their crews meeting with the cat people. One scene caught an attack by the treacherous felines.

"How this cat man managed to leave his planet is not yet known," a commentator with the dignified mien of a college prof was saying. "His home world is rich in rare mineral deposits. It is hazarded that some unfortunate miner, poaching on the planet, in direct violation of Federation law, was killed by the cat man, and his ship taken. The ships are almost fully automatic, and the cats are an exceptionally adaptable race. They readily acquire the ability to operate quite complicated mechanisms, after only brief instructions or inspection. We have not yet determined whether or not this is an Earth vessel, however . . ."

The scene switched suddenly to the hotel room on Robert Street. The cat was stirring . . .

Pentizel awoke with a savage, stomach-tearing hunger. She had had nothing to eat during her nine-day trip

through space except the canned food stocked by the Human she had killed, and her digestive system had been just barely able to assimilate it. She ate only enough to sustain her life. Even of the canned food, she had eaten her last meal sixteen hours before. Now she was mean and sick with the pain of her fierce hunger. She had to have meat, red meat, red bloody meat.

She knew she was being foolhardy—she should at least make what effort she could to change her features to more resemble a Human's before venturing out—but her hunger, which by now was an all-consuming need, drove her to incautious activity. Viciously pulling on the clothing she had robbed she left the room.

Outside she found herself in the midst of a heavy snowstorm. She gave a soft yarr of satisfaction. The snow should give her the protection she needed; more, the attention of the passersby was concentrated in their efforts to evade the rigors of the storm.

Pentizel walked with her collar up around her face for several blocks. Each time she met a hurrying Human she had to restrain a snarl of hunger in her throat. Several times she felt her lips draw tightly apart, and she fought for restraint. Even a full view of her fanged teeth would give her away.

She had to find a victim at a spot where she could attack unseen, and dispose of the remains after she'd eaten. Her reason had just enough control over her brute appetite to understand that the gnawed remains of a Human body must not be left where it would be found. Up to now no one was aware of her presence on this world; she had to do her utmost to keep it that way.

A mongrel pup, drifting with the wind, ran between Pentizel's legs, nearly tripping her. She restrained her spit of annoyance as a new thought took possession. The remains of this smaller body would be simpler to dispose of than that of a Human. She turned and followed the young dog until it turned into a large parking lot.

"That poor mongrel," Nelson breathed, and shuddered

slightly. He watched the screen in half-nauseated fascination as the cat man tore apart the body of the unfortunate dog. He was crouched low, between two automobiles parked on the lot. As he bolted his food his mouth and claws were soon smeared with frozen blood. Finishing his meal quickly, he buried the remains of the slain dog in a bank of snow at the edge of the parking space.

The cat man returned to his hotel and curled up on his bed, and dropped instantly to sleep. The dignified announcer took his place on the screen and began urbanely. "You will note that the cat gulped its food. Because of its long canine fangs, which overlap the lower teeth in such a way as to prevent its moving its jaw freely forward and sideways, it is unable to chew, as we do. However, this overlapping allows the special teeth to sharpen themselves as they are employed, and thus the cat man is always equipped with dangerous knifelike weapons. Races so equipped are always meat-eaters.

"We Humans may take some satisfaction from this observation, for we have a definite advantage over them. Man, being omnivorous, ready and able to eat anything digestible, has a higher survival potential."

Pretty good impromptu stuff, Nelson noted mentally. His attention was diverted to the clicking intercom. "Nelson here," he said into it.

"This is Hesse, of Review," the voice in the box said anxiously. "I've been wondering. Just how much can we get by with here? We cut in with the commentator because the cat—" There was a brief hesitation. "Well, he's an animal, you know, and there are certain necessary functions . . ."

"I got you," Nelson said. "I'll check with the Mayes offices and call you back."

He rumpled through the directory on his desk and got the number of the Screen and Video Censor. He dredged his memory and brought up a face, and the name, Fred Matthews.

"Hello, Fred," he said jovially to the man whose face appeared on his desk screen a minute after his call.

"Hello," Matthews answered doubtfully. "Nelson, isn't it? Over at RBC?"

"That's right, Fred." Nelson kept his jovial smile. "You been getting our special feature?"

"I've been getting it," Matthews answered noncommittally.

"I have a question, Fred. That's not a Human we're covering, you understand; he's hardly even humanoid. More of an animal, wouldn't you say?" When there was no response, Nelson went on. "Being he's just an animal, it probably won't be neccessary to be an finicky as . . ."

He stopped. Matthews was shaking his head, very positively. "The answer is no."

"But Fred . . ."

"You're not getting any permission from me to violate the code," Matthews said. "Personally I'd bar some of that blood you've been splashing on the screen this afternoon. Unfortunately however, that's not my province. You're within the rules. But don't try what you have in mind now."

Nelson hung up with an inaudible, muttered, "Pussyfoot." He switched back to Review. "The lavatory stuff is out," he said.

Early the next morning Pentizel rose and made preparations she knew she should have made earlier. Seating herself uncomfortably on the chair in front of the room's mirror, she picked up the electric shaver from the toilet articles on the stand and experimented with it until she understood how it functioned. With it then she trimmed the hair from along her jowls and the sides of her head. She shaved back the peak of white hair on her forehead, and as much as she could reach on her neck. When she finished she was pleasantly surprised. Her features would not pass a close inspection, but to the casual observer they looked quite Human.

When she went out the second time she left her face exposed, but kept the collar of her coat up around the back of her neck.

The storm outside still held strong.

For several hours she wandered through Lactonatown, pausing now and then to read the signs on places of business. She did not find what she sought.

She would have to take a necessary risk. She walked for another hour before she spied a likely prospect: A bum huddling out of the storm in the entranceway of a vacant building. She went up to him and mumbled a few sentences, displaying the last of her money, which she held in her hand. The bum kept shaking his head stupidly.

She had more luck with the second man she chose. He led her several blocks through the slum section to an old rambler-style house, badly in need of paint. When he took her money and shuffled away Pentizel walked back and forth in front of the house for several minutes. At last she decided to wait until evening. That would be a safer time.

Nelson awoke from the nap he had been taking on the studio couch to hear the commentator say, ". . . us like a sixth sense. It is not. The cat people have only the same five senses we have. However, they do possess highly developed instincts. Students of the race suspect, furthermore, that they have a closer affinity with their subconscious. At any rate, some part of their brain, conscious or otherwise, seems to take in every sight, every sound and movement around them, and to swiftly evaluate and classify their observations and arrive at logical conclusions. It might be said—if you'll pardon my being a bit pedantic—that they have a singular, innate ability to reconstruct, from small fragments of fact, much of the whole of which those fragments are a part."

Nelson grunted with red-eyed dissatisfaction. Pedantic was right. He reached for the intercom, but the scene on the screen shifted back to the cat man. He was walking in front of—and studying with great interest—a beaten-down old house. After a few minutes he walked on.

The camera switched in for a closeup. Above the win-

dow on the left hand side of the house hung a sign with the printed letters:

R. L. Groggins, M. D.
BEAUTICIAN &
PLASTIC SURGEON

The clues clicked into place in Nelson's mind. The cat had been trying to change himself to look more like a Human. Now . . . Nelson looked up at the screen. The cat was still walking back toward his hotel.

He bent toward the intercom. "Benny," he called. "Get a man from Equipment down to the house of a Dr. Groggins, on College Avenue, probably about the eleven hundred block. He's a facial surgeon. Have our man use some excuse to get into the house. He can pretend he's a meter reader, or anything else that will do the trick. Someway he has to get into the doctor's operating room and put a bulb with a concealed camera and mike in a light socket there. It shouldn't be too hard. The doc won't be suspicious. But have him hump it down there."

Pentizel returned to the doctor's house late at night, when the streets were deserted. She circled the place several times, listening at doors and windows, until she was satisfied there was only one person inside.

The street was still deserted as she walked to the front porch and leaned a knuckle against the button of the door bell.

She waited several minutes, until she became nervous and edgy, before she received a response.

"What do you want?" The face of an old man peered out over the night chain through the small opening he had made in the doorway.

Pentizel threw her weight violently forward. The chain held for a brief moment, then pulled free from the wood with a dull twang, and Pentizel's thrust carried her inside.

The doctor had been hurled back by the rampant power behind the opening door. He bounced from the post at the bottom of a short flight of stairs, and slumped

against the hallway wall. Blood ran from a broken nose.

Pentizel circled his throat with one hooked hand, letting only the points of her claws sink into the flesh, but effectively shutting off his breath. She waited a moment, until the doctor began to struggle, and let him jerk about loosely for just a moment. Then she wrapped her free arm around his back and crushed him close. Savagely enough to show him the futility of further struggle.

After a minute she carried the limp body of the old doctor into an inner room and dropped him ungently on a table top that still held soiled dishes from the evening meal. He was barely conscious.

The doctor stared up at her with eyes that were filled with stark terror. He squirmed slightly. A dirty plate fell to the floor with a crash and the doctor shuddered and lay still.

Slowly, menacingly, Pentizel stretched out one hand and held it a few inches from the doctor's face. She let her claws ease out of their sheaths. "I can kill you with one stroke of these," she snarled. "Remember that."

She explained tersely what she wanted, and for the next three hours kept the old surgeon walking a thin line: Keeping him so frightened for his life that he obeyed her commands without question—and attempted no foolishness with his medical tools—yet not so terrorized that he could not perform his task effectively.

Twice during the operations Pentizel allowed the old man to rest, and to drink from a bottle which he kept in a cabinet. It seemed to quiet his nerves. But she refused him more than one drink each time.

She had told him to do everything he could to make her resemble an Earth woman, and he began by trimming the hair on her head, and cutting short the claw nails on her fingers.

Next he clipped the pointed tips from Pentizel's ears, and covered the raw wounds with plasti-flesh. She refused anaesthetics. They were too much of an unknown quality to her. However, when he began to grind down her long fangs, the pain became excruciating, and she al-

lowed him to shoot Novocain into her gums. The doctor finished his grinding, and capped both teeth, without her feeling any further pain.

Pentizel submitted to the doctor's knife and drill with less reluctance to bearing the pain than to the thought that they would ruin her racial conception of beauty. It would be six months before her ears regrew their beautiful tips, and years more before her teeth were as long again.

Finally Pentizel stripped and allowed the doctor to shave the hair from her body.

"That cat's a female!" Nelson almost shouted. The strain of the long drag, and the days and nights with only snatches of sleep had begun to take their toll. His nerves were tight as drawn wires, and he had taken to talking to himself.

When he observed the shaved body of the alien female on the operating table his first thought was of the censor. He was glad now that permission had been refused earlier for showing the more indelicate activities of the cat. Knowing that she was female would have made those shots more blatant in retrospect.

He spent an uneasy five minutes waiting for a call from the censor on the exposure of her naked body, but he had his arguments ready. While vulgarity, and lewdness, were strictly against the code, exposure in itself was not. The criterion, as stated explicitly, was that the exposure be "implicit to the story," and not inserted for carnal purposes. There could be no argument about it being "implicit to the story" in a live broadcast such as this—with nothing planned—except by the cat woman herself.

The censor did not call.

Nelson continued to follow the activities of the doctor and the alien woman with absorbed attention. This scene would make good showing; as engrossing as any of the earlier running.

The cat's face would readily pass as a Human's, he de-

cided—there was even a certain beauty there—but her body would not. It was too much an instrument of sinew and muscle. For a time he wondered why he had not suspected, before, that she was female. However, there was no way he could have guessed. Her most unEarthly features were her breasts. They ran in double rows of three down either side of her stomach. They were too small to have shown through the fur. Very probably they expanded considerably when she was childbearing.

The doctor walked to a sofa at one end of the room, after his work had been completed, and sat with his head in his hands. This had been at least as much of an ordeal for him as it had for the cat woman.

Suddenly Nelson jerked erect in his desk chair. Without warning the cat had swerved in her striding. She knocked the old doctor from his seat and throttled him, squeezing her hands around his throat until his laboring body weakened, and grew still.

It was over in a minute. The cat woman left by a rear door, making certain first that she was unobserved. She returned to her hotel and lay on her bed, dropping off into fitful slumber occasionally, but most of the time stirring restlessly. Often she snarled in her sleep. She scratched the exposed, itching, skin of her body almost continuously. Sweat soon formed a thin glistening film over her twitching muscles.

"And so the cat returns to her den to lick her wounds," the commentator said.

The night after her operation Pentizel still suffered, but a growing hunger edged aside her lesser discomfort, and at last drove her from her room. Her appetite, however, was not so great as to make her lose her caution. She waylaid two unwary pedestrians before she had the money she decided she needed. Afterward she bought a complete female outfit, and a large package of meat, at a late closing department store, and rented a room in a different hotel. She ate sparingly that night, and not very satisfactorily. Her teeth still pained her excruciating-

ly, and she had no liking for meat that was not dripping fresh.

She slept all during the following day. By evening her resilient organism had rebred much of its intense vitality. And with the vitality came her renewed hunger!

She waited in a barely restrained frenzy for the full darkness of night. Her new face gave her confidence she had not had before, but her hot-blooded caution was still dominant.

As she restlessly prowled her room Pentizel found a small bottle, a fourth filled with brown liquid, in the room's wastebasket. Her gnawing stomach prompted her to drink. She swallowed a tentative mouthful. It burned her throat harshly, but after a minute brought a strange warmth to her body. She tried a second drink with less reluctance. This seemed to intensify the warmth into a flow of excitement. She drained the bottle.

All her sly reason abandoned Pentizel. She went outside the hotel and sprang at the first pedestrian she met. She pulled him to the sidewalk and buried her nails in his neck. But her claws had been blunted, and as the man beneath her struggled, Pentizel's fingers slipped in the shallow flood of blood. Her victim jerked his head free and yelled for help, with an incredulous horror in his voice.

Pentizel lunged for his neck with her fangs, but they, too, had been stunted. Furiously she spun the sobbing man around and climbed on his back. Putting both hands under his chin she twisted his head around until his neck abruptly snapped.

Only then did she look up. Shouting pedestrians were running toward her from three directions. Pentizel's animal instincts came to her rescue, and she leaped into the street, knocking aside those who tried to block her way.

She soon outdistanced her pursuers, but others heard their cries and began shouting as she passed. It was not until Pentizel reached Lactonatown again that she was able to lose herself. She ran through back streets and

alleys, with her breath rasping in her throat, until she came to a large warehouse. She could find no way to enter, but found a board loose on the enclosed truck landing in front of the building and crawled inside.

No one observed Pentizel go into her hiding place, and soon she knew she was safe. As her agitation subsided the liquor began to take over again, and this time it made her drowsy. She curled up on the dirt where she lay and slept.

She awoke, hours later, with all her faculties sharply alert. Her first thought was that the rampant hunger pulling at her vitals had awakened her. However, as she lay without moving, she heard the sound of a small movement directly ahead. To her nostrils came a waft of scent—heavy, rancid, and sweet. Her eyes slit gently open. A small gray form moved cautiously across her vision.

In one swift motion she uncoiled herself, clutched the small animal, and killed it. Pentizel ate the rat with great gusto. After that she waited patiently until she had captured and eaten two more.

Vern Nelson swore softly. "If only I could have had a camera under that truck landing," he reviled himself. "There was blood on her hands and dress when she came out. Probably killed a rat." In his mind he pictured the sight of this beautiful woman—in outward appearance like any Earth woman—kneeling in the dirt, ravenously tearing apart a rat with her teeth. It would have made a great scene. But there was nothing he could do about it now.

Nelson's attention was soon taken with matters that required his more immediate concentration. It started with the commissioner of police on the vid-phone.

"We're canceling your exclusive on that cat woman," the commissioner said without preamble.

"But why?" Nelson assumed an innocent expression, though he knew what the answer would be. Even though the broadcast was blacked out in the St. Paul area, the

police would be keeping in touch, through connections outside, and probably had full details.

"That killing of the salesman outside the Emporium was too much," the commissioner said caustically. "As you are well aware. The old facial surgeon was an exfelon, with demerits a yard long—and with no relatives to complain. We let that pass. But when you allow a reputable citizen to be killed it has to stop."

"Can't you give us a few days to close it out?"

"I can't take the risk of more killing. I'm getting heat myself."

Nelson tried a new tact. "We have a contract," he said. "It's verbal, but legal."

"I'm canceling it—as of right now. *Domain Populi.* We're going to get that cat woman."

"Hold off just fifteen minutes, will you?" Nelson begged. "I'll call you back." He switched off before the commissioner could refuse.

"Get me the major, Benny," he said into the intercom. That was his only hope. If the commissioner could be stalled, the major could do it. He'd find out now just how big tracks Gower made in this town.

Nelson explained the situation to the major and left the matter in his hands.

Major Gower called with a twelve-hour reprieve twenty minutes later. An hour after that he paid a visit to Nelson's office. "You've done some mighty nice work with that special feature of ours, Vern," he said, easing himself gracefully into a visitor's chair. "We've topped all previous ratings—on any network."

"Thank you, sir," Nelson answered cautiously. He straightened the papers on his desk while he waited. This was more than a casual visit. The major had something on his mind. "I've been following those ratings with great interest myself," he said, when the major, instead of continuing, lit a cigar.

"What are your plans now?" Gower asked.

"Well, at this minute we're bringing the cat woman's ship up from the bottom of the Mississippi," Nelson said.

"The program's dragging a bit, with her skulking down by the river. I thought shots of the ship being raised would furnish some welcome diversion. And the ship will make good advertising display for the reruns. There's certain to be a big demand for them. If GM buys the rerun rights, you might offer them the ship as a good-will gesture."

"That's headwork," the major complimented. "But you realize that this will be all over by eight o'clock tonight. Twelve hours was the best I could browbeat out of the police commissioner. I had to threaten his job to get that. What do you have in mind for the finish?"

"Why . . . I hadn't given it any thought—that is, I haven't come up with any new ideas. I just figured that when the police took over, the cat would fight, and perhaps provide some final excitement."

"Not good enough, Vern. As far as we know she's unarmed. The police will simply shoot her down, and that will be the end of it. Rather anticlimactic, wouldn't you say?"

Nelson made a motion to speak, but the major stopped him with an upraised hand. "You understand, I'm not reprimanding you, Vern," he said. "You've done a splendid job. Better, I'm certain, than anyone else could have done in your place. But look at it this way. We've made a terrific run on this—so far. The greatest live spectacle of the century. There possibly will never be another like it. But. . . . A story such as this deserves a crash ending. We can't let it die with scarcely a whimper."

Nelson was forced to admit that the major was right. "Do you have any suggestions, sir?" he asked.

Gower shook his head regretfully. "I'm depending on you for that, son," he said. "You're my brand-new genius." He picked his hat and gloves from Nelson's desk, bowed genially, and walked out.

Nelson did not leave his office for lunch. He spent the morning and the early part of the afternoon going through files, old video programs, and generally racking his

brain. He called any of his friends and acquaintances who might have an idea that would help him. Without any concrete results.

He knew he needn't come up with anything sensational; there was no necessity for more spectacles such as those of the cat displaying her ferocity. Just something that would pick up the pace. Something that would hang a closing grip of suspense to the story. A sort of final curtain scene.

The beginning of his idea came to him about one in the afternoon. The cat would certainly die today. As the protagonist in the story, it was a shame that she had to die beneath the guns of the police—without a chance to fight back—without even a small chance to win. If the odds against her could be made more even . . .

Nelson's next thought was to hire a professional hunter to track down the cat woman, and kill her, but he discarded that after a few minutes' consideration. That would be little better than letting the police do it. To make good copy this final scene had to be more of an even contest. It would be played up, on video, as a matching of wits and ingenuity between Earth man and cat woman. There had to be more to the tableau than a mere shooting. But who then, if not a professional hunter?

An hour's pouring through the news sheets brought the answer. The Assassin. The reporters had given him that melodramatic alias when he'd killed his first man nearly eight years ago. He had been good for headlines many times since.

Nelson was a bit vague on the details of the Assassin's background, and he dug in the company files until he came up with the man's dossier.

His real name was Frank Hall. He lived in Anoka, Minnesota, about twenty miles from St. Paul. He could easily reach here in time, Nelson calculated mentally. Hall was definitely an eccentric, but a colorful eccentric.

He was a self-appointed dispenser of justice. Earth's courts, being dedicated to the maxim that "it is better that a thousand guilty men go free than that one innocent

man be wronged," naturally erred often. Many guilty men escaped their just punishment.

Eight years ago a quite notorious criminal, with a record of many previous offenses, had shot and killed a child during a "getaway" following a robbery. With the aid of a clever lawyer, and obviously corrupt witnesses, the killer had been acquitted.

The following day he had received a note from Hall: *"You are guilty—you will die within the week."* Hall signed his name, which gave the man a fair break—and showed that Hall loved the dangerous play. Three days later the man died—in an automobile accident. There was no way to connect Hall with the occurrence.

Another acquitted killer seven months later received the same worded note. He was found dead in the basement of his own home. All the evidence pointed to suicide. Again Hall could not be linked with the death.

Fifteen other times since, Hall had sent his note. All had died. Nine by accident, or by their own hand. The other six had tried to avert their fate by killing Hall before he could kill them. He had been able to prove self-defense each time. His surname, the Assassin, was well earned.

Nelson's call to Hall's home in Anoka was answered by his wife, Gladys. A charming girl, Nelson noted. Frank was not in, she informed him. He had gone to Grand Forks—to watch the cat woman feature!

That should save some explaining, Nelson told himself. He did some more, tortured, mental mathematics. Hall could still reach here in time by plane.

He found Hall in on his second call.

"Mr. Hall," Nelson said, deciding to strike sharply, "my name is Vern Nelson. I'm the director of the special feature on the cat woman. I'm prepared to offer you twenty thousand dollars to kill her."

For just a moment Hall's face registered his surprise, and incredulity. Then he smiled. A sense of humor hid in the crinkles about his eyes. "Are you certain you have

the right party?" he asked dryly. "I have never killed anyone—except in self-defense, of course."

"Of course." Nelson restrained his own smile. "However, my belief is that a man hunting the cat woman would very soon find himself in a position where he *would* be defending his life," he said, matching Hall's dry tone.

"Probably true," Hall agreed reflectively, and sat regarding Nelson for a long moment. "I won't be coy, and ask why you called me," he said finally. "But why aren't you simply turning this over to the police?"

"The police have given us until eight o'clock tonight to handle it our own way. After that time they will do the job themselves.'

"And this would be better video. The cat woman versus the Assassin."

"Touché," Nelson acknowledged. "I won't be coy either. That's exactly the reason why I'm offering you the twenty thousand dollars."

Hall shook his head regretfully. "This may sound ridiculous to you," he said, "but I'm just not constitutionally fitted to kill anyone in cold blood. Not even that she-animal. So I'm afraid I can't help you."

Nelson was not deterred. He had been leading toward the offer he was about to make since their conversation began. "Then let's pretend that this cat woman is one of the men you decided needed to be killed," he said. "Do it in the same manner you did the others—in a way that would leave you legally in the clear. If you succeed, I'll raise the ante to one hundred thousand. Or, I will pay you fifty thousand if you capture her, instead of killing her. How does that appeal to you?"

Hall was obviously intrigued. "She *is* a killer," he mused, almost to himself. "And it wouldn't be an unequal contest: There's a strong possibility that I might be killed myself." He paused, then made his decision. "You've hired yourself a hunter," he told Nelson.

Pentizel knew the time had come for her to change her plans; she was no longer safe in St. Paul. They would be

able to recognize her now—even though they still did not know what she was. Further quick thinking made her realize that she would probably be safe nowhere here. She had to get to her spaceship and leave this world.

The taste of defeat was sour in Pentizel's mouth as she headed for the river. She was here, in a world of weaklings, physically and mentally her inferiors. She should have been able to rape it at will. Instead, less than a week after landing she was slinking away. She spat bitterly, and tore the flimsy Earth garments from her body.

She reached the river without difficulty. There were few people about this early in the morning. However, soon after taking cover in the brush growing along the river bank, automobiles began to pass carrying workers to their jobs, and her movements became more difficult.

It took her most of the day to traverse the two miles of river bank. She reached the ship site late in the afternoon—and her heart sank at what she saw. All the signs indicated that the ship had been removed from the river!

She was marooned on this deadly world!

Refusing to abandon her last shred of hope, Pentizel slipped into the open place in the icy river and swam down to where the ship had rested. It was gone. When her head broke through the water a minute later she snarled forlornly.

Her only chance to stay alive now, she decided swiftly, was to reach wooded country. She had no idea where that might be, but her best guess was to head north.

Suddenly all Pentizel's senses sounded an urgent alarm. Above her lurked danger!

She flattened against the river bank and probed for the nature of the threat. Only very small sounds came down to her. For several long breaths she lay tense and motionless. The only certainty she arrived at was that her life hung on how well she conducted herself the next few minutes.

Another five minutes passed before Pentizel was satisfied that only one person waited above her. Much of her

high-pitched arrogance returned. She began to raise her head—infinitesimally slow. The first object that came within the range of her vision was the edge of an automobile top. That, then, was how her stalker had gotten here so soon. He had driven up while she had been submerged in the water.

Pentizel drew her body into a low crouch, and stealthily raised her head another fraction of an inch. And was caught ever so slightly off guard!

The barrel-chested man on the far side of the hood of the automobile stood so still that Pentizel found herself facing the mouth of his big-bellied pistol at the exact moment she became aware of his position. "If you move, you're dead," the man said, almost conversationally.

Pentizel froze. Quickly she assayed the situation. She could try a swift rush up the river bank—but she knew the potency of Earth guns. She had used them herself. She would have no slightest chance of reaching him before she died.

As Pentizel sought for another avenue of escape, or attack, a new realization came to her. Something in the man's manner, but mostly in the recalled inflections of his voice, told her that he did not intend to kill her. She puzzled that in her mind for an instant. Perhaps he thought he could capture her alive. If he thought that he was a fool—and it increased her chances of escape tremendously.

Knowing his intentions—at least to the extent that she was in no immediate danger—Pentizel allowed herself to relax slightly. If he were only foolhardy enough to allow her to come closer.

Almost as though he were co-operating with her secret thoughts, the man said, "Come up here." He paused. "Be very careful."

Pentizel began to move slowly, lithely, up the river bank. The big man directed her cautiously with his voice as she came. "Stay on the other side of the car from me . . . No, over this way . . . Careful . . . Don't make any sudden moves . . . Walk slower . . . Stop . . . Stand

still until the police arrive . . . Remember, if you try to run I'll have to kill you."

Pentizel stood across the automobile hood from her hunter. If the automobile were not between them, she reflected, he would already be dead. If she thought of nothing better, she would still chance a leap across at him. He might be under-estimating her speed and reflexes. She would probably still be able to kill him, even though he wounded her.

Two cautions in Pentizel's mind stopped that desperate rush: In her present circumstances, to be wounded would be as fatal as to be killed; and she would not take that last chance—until she was satisfied that she could find no better way.

The seconds crawled by. Pentizel studied the big man, the lack of fear in his eyes, the way he held his body, the steady grip of his hand on the butt of the big-bellied pistol. A bright sweep of exultation rushed through Pentizel! His hand on the pistol butt!

She had found the one small error she had been looking for.

He was holding the pistol aimed steadily at her, but—his finger was not on the trigger. Whether it was carelessness, or overconfidence, Pentizel did not know. It made no difference. Her body blurred into action.

She did not quite reach the big man, and her body was sprawled across the car hood—but she had allowed for that. She *had* reached the pistol. And she clutched it in her hand now!

She twisted on her side and squeezed the trigger!

The final scene was still showing on the video screen when the major glanced across at Nelson. The manner in which he raised his eyebrows was better than the most effuse congratulations.

They both turned their attention back to the screen as they watched the last tense minute of the Special Feature's finale. The exploding pistol had blown a great patch from the side of Pentizel's head. She lay struck in

tension for a long moment, her bloody hand still outstretched, then the starch went out of her body and she rolled off the hood of the automobile to the concrete pavement.

In the background the commentator's voice murmured softly.

"And so we end our story. . . ."

PANIC BUTTON

Eric Frank Russell

"The law of chance," said Lagasta ponderously, "lays it down that one cannot remain dead out of luck for everlasting." He had the fat oiliness typical of many Antareans; his voice was equally fat and oily. "Sooner or later the time must come when one finds a jewel in one's hair instead of a bug."

"Speak for yourself," invited Kaznitz, not caring for the analogy.

"That time has arrived," Lagasta went on. "Let us rejoice."

"I am rejoicing," Kaznitz responded with no visible enthusiasm.

"You look it," said Lagasta. He plucked a stalk of grass and chewed it without caring what alien bacteria might be lurking thereon. "We have found a new and empty world suitable for settlement. Such worlds are plenty hard to discover in spite of somebody's estimate that there must be at least a hundred million of them. The vastness of space." He ate a bit more grass, finished, "But we have found one. It becomes the property of our species by right of first discovery. That makes us heroes worthy of rich reward. Yet I fail to see delirious happiness on what purports to be your face."

"I take nothing for granted," said Kaznitz.

"You mean you sit right here on an enormous lump of real estate and don't believe it?"

"We have yet to make sure that nobody has prior title."

"You know quite well that we subjected this planet to most careful examination as we approached. Intelligent life cannot help betraying its presence with unmistakable signs for which we sought thoroughly. What did we see? Nothing! Not a city, not a village, not a road, not a bridge, not one cultivated field. Absolutely nothing!"

"It was a long-range survey of the illuminated side only," Kaznitz pointed out. "We need to take a much closer look—and at both sides."

Havarre lumbered over and sat beside them. "I have ordered the crew to get out the scout boats after they have finished their meal."

"Good!" said Lagasta. "That should soothe Kaznitz. He refuses to believe that the planet is devoid of intelligent life."

"It is not a matter of belief or disbelief," Kaznitz gave back. "It is a matter of making sure."

"We are soon to do that," Havarre told him. "But I am not worried. The place looks completely uninhabited."

"You can't weigh up a world with one incoming stare no matter how long and hard you make it," Kaznitz asserted. "The absence of people spread widely and in large numbers doesn't necessarily mean no concentration of them in small number."

"You mean Terrans?" queried Havarre, twitching his horsy ears.

"Yes."

"He's been obsessed with Terrans ever since Plaksted found them encamped on B417," remarked Lagasta.

"And why shouldn't I be? Plaksted had gone a long, long way merely to suffer a disappointment. The Terrans had got there first. We've been told that they're running around doing the same as we're doing, grabbing planets as fast as they can find them. We've been warned that in no circumstances must we clash with them. We've strict

orders to recognize the principle of first come first served."

"That makes sense," opined Havarre. "In spite of years of haphazard contact we and the Terrans don't really know what makes the other tick. Each side has carefully refrained from telling the other anything more than is necessary. They don't know what we've got—but we don't know what they've got. That situation is inevitable. It takes intelligence to conquer space and an intelligent species does not weaken itself by revealing its true strength. Neither does it start a fight with someone of unmeasured and immeasurable size, power and resources. What d'you think we ought to do with Terrans—knock off their heads?"

"Certainly not!" said Kaznitz. "But I shall feel far happier when I know for certain that a task force of one thousand Terrans is not snoring its collective head off somewhere on the dark side of this planet. Until then I don't assume that the world is ours."

"Always the pessimist," jibed Lagasta.

"He who hopes for nothing will never be disappointed," Kaznitz retorted.

"What a way to go through life," Lagasta said. "Reveling in gloom."

"I fail to see anything gloomy about recognizing the fact that someone must get here first."

"How right you are. And this time it's us. I am looking forward to seeing the glum faces of the Terrans when they arrive tomorrow or next month or next year and find us already here. What do you say, Havarre?"

"I don't think the subject worthy of argument," answered Havarre, refusing to take sides. "The scout boats will settle the issue before long." He got to his feet, ambled toward the ship. "I'll chase the crew into action."

Lagasta frowned after him. "The company I keep. One has no opinions. The other wallows in defeat."

"And you wag your tail while the door is still shut," Kaznitz riposted.

Ignoring that, Lagasta gnawed more grass. They sat in

silence until the first scout boat came out, watched it take off with a loud boom and a rising whine. A bit later a second boat bulleted into the sky. Then more of them at regular intervals until all ten had gone.

"Waste of time, patience and fuel," declared Lagasta. "There's nobody here but us first-comers."

Kaznitz refused to take the bait. He gazed at the ragged horizon towards which a red sun sank slowly. "The dark side will become the light side pretty soon. Those boats won't get back much before dawn. Think I'll go and enjoy my bunk. A good sleep is long overdue."

"It's a wonder you can enjoy anything with all the worries you've got," observed Lagasta with sarcasm.

"I shall slumber with the peace of the fatalistic. I shall not sit up all night eating weeds while tormented with the desire to be proved right and the fear of being proved wrong."

So saying, he went to the ship conscious of the other scowling after him. Like all of the crew he was sufficiently weary to fall asleep quickly. Soon after dark he was awakened by the switching on of the radio beacon and the faint but hearable sound of the subsequent *bip-bip-yidder-bip*. Much later he was disturbed by Havarre going to bed and, later still, by Lagasta.

By dawn they were so deep in their dreams that none heard the return of the scout boats despite the outside uproar ten times repeated. They grunted and snuffled in unconscious unison while nine pilots emerged from their vessels looking exhausted and bored. The tenth came out kicking the grass and jerking his ears with temper.

One of the nine stared curiously at the tenth and asked, "What's nibbling your offal, Yaksid?"

"Terrans," spat Yaksid. "The snitgobbers!"

Which was a very vulgar word indeed.

"Now," said Lagasta, displaying his bile, "tell us exactly what you saw."

"He saw Terrans," put in Kaznitz. "Isn't that enough?"

"I want no interference from you," Lagasta shouted.

"Go squat in a thorny tree." He switched attention back to Yaksid and repeated, "Tell us exactly what you saw."

"I spotted a building in a valley, swept down and circled it several times. It was a very small house, square in shape, neatly built of rock slabs and cement. A Terran came out of the door, presumably attracted by the noise of my boat. He stood watching me zoom round and round and as I shot past the front he waved to me."

"Whereupon you waved back," suggested Lagasta in his most unpleasant manner.

"I made muck-face at him," said Yaksid indignantly, "but I don't think he saw me. I was going too fast."

"There was only this one house in the valley?"

"Yes."

"A very small house?"

"Yes."

"How small?"

"It could be described as little better than a stone hut."

"And only one Terran came out?"

"That's right. If any more were inside, they didn't bother to show themselves."

"There couldn't have been many within if the dump was almost a hut," Lagasta suggested.

"Correct. Six at the most."

"Did you see a ship or a scout boat lying nearby?"

"No, not a sign of one. There was just this house and nothing more," said Yaksid.

"What did you do next?"

"I decided that this lonely building must be an outpost belonging to a Terran encampment somewhere in the vicinity. So I made a close search of the district. I circled wider and wider until I'd examined an area covering twenty horizons. I found nothing."

"You're quite certain of that?"

"I'm positive. I went plenty low enough to detect a camp half-buried or well camouflaged. I couldn't find even the smell of a Terran."

Lagasta stared at him in silence a while and then said,

"There is something wrong about this. A Terran garrison could not cram itself into one hut."

"That's what I think," Yaksid agreed.

"And since it cannot be within the building it must be some place else."

"Correct. But there was no sign of it anywhere within the area I covered. Perhaps one of the other scout boats passed over it and failed to see it."

"If it did, the pilot must have been stone-blind or asleep at his controls."

Kaznitz interjected, "That wouldn't surprise me. We landed short of sleep and the pilots haven't been given a chance to catch up. You can't expect them to be in full possession of their wits when they're mentally whirly."

"It was necessary to make a check with the minimum of delay," said Lagasta defensively.

"That's news to me."

"What d'you mean?"

"You gave me clearly to understand that the check was a waste of time, patience and fuel."

"I said nothing of the sort."

Havarre chipped in with, "What was said or not said is entirely beside the point. The point is that we have to deal with the situation as it exists. We have landed in expectation of claiming a planet. Yaksid has since found Terrans. Therefore the Terrans were here first. What are we going to do about it?"

"There is no problem to be solved," said Kaznitz before Lagasta had time to answer. "We have been given orders simple enough for a fool to understand. If we arrive first, we claim the planet, sit tight and invite any later Terrans to take a high dive onto solid rock. If the Terrans arrive first, we admit their claim without argument, shoot back into space and waste no time beating them to the next planet."

"Where *is* the next one?" inquired Lagasta with mock pleasantness. "And how long is it going to take us to find

it? Inhabitable worlds don't cluster like ripe fruit, do they?"

"Certainly not. But what alternative do you suggest?"

"I think we'd do well to discover this missing garrison and estimate its strength."

"That would make sense if we were at war or permitted to start a war," said Kaznitz. "We are not permitted. We are under strict instructions to avoid a clash."

"I should think so, too," contributed Havarre. "Before we enter a war we must know exactly what we're fighting."

"There is nothing to stop us gathering useful information," Lagasta insisted.

"It's impossible for us to collect military data worth the effort of writing it down," Kaznitz gave back. "For the obvious reason that it will be years out of date by the time we get back home."

"So you think we should surrender a hard-earned world for the sake of one crummy Terran in a vermin-infested hut?"

"You know quite well there must be more of them somewhere around."

"I don't know it. I know only what I've been told. And I've been told that Yaksid has found one Terran in a hut. Nobody has seen a trace of any others. We should make further and closer search for others and satisfy ourselves that they really are here."

"Why?"

"It's possible that these others don't exist."

"Possible but highly improbable," Kaznitz opined. "I can't see Terran explorers contenting themselves with placing one man on a world."

"Perhaps they didn't. Perhaps he placed himself. The lone survivor of a space disaster who managed to get here in a lifeboat. What would be the worth of a Terran claim in those circumstances? We could easily remove every trace of the man and the hut and deny all knowledge of either. It couldn't be called a clash. One Terran just wouldn't get the chance to clash with a crew six hundred strong."

"That may be, but—"

"If we make more systematic search and find other Terrans in garrison strength, that will settle the matter and we'll take off. But if it proves that there are no others—" He let his voice tail off to add significance, finished, "All that stands between us and a world is one hunk of alien meat."

Kaznitz thought it over. "I dislike giving up a new planet fully as much as you do. But I'd dislike it even more if we were saddled with the blame for starting something that can't be finished. I think we'd like death and love it rather than endure the prolonged pain."

"Blame cannot be laid without someone to do the blaming," said Lagasta, "and a dead Terran positively refuses to talk. You worry too much. If you had nothing else with which to occupy your mind you'd grieve over the shape of your feet." He turned to Havarre. "You've had little enough to say. Have you no opinion about this?"

Immediately leery, Havarre replied, "If we stay put while we look around, I think we should be careful."

"Have you any reason to suppose that I intend to be rash?"

"No, no, not at all."

"Then why the advice?"

"You asked my opinion and I gave it. I don't trust these Terrans."

"Who does?" said Lagasta. He made a gesture indicative of ending the subject. "All right. We'll allow the pilots a good, long sleep. After their brains have been thoroughly rested we'll send them out again. Our next step will depend upon whether more Terrans have been found and, if so, whether they have been discovered in strength."

"What do you mean by strength?" Kaznitz asked.

"Any number in possession of a ship or a long-range transmitter. Or any number too large for us to remove without leaving evidence of it."

"Have it your own way," said Kaznitz.

"I intend to," Lagasta assured.

The first boat returned with the same news as before, namely, no Terrans, no sign that a Terran had ever been within a million miles of the planet. Eight more boats came back at varying intervals and made identical reports vouching for a total lack of Terrans in their respective sectors. One pilot added that he became so convinced that Yaksid must have suffered a delusion that on his return he had gone out of his way to cut through that worthy's sector. Yes, he had seen the stone house with his own two eyes. No, he had not observed any sign of life around the place.

Yaksid appeared last.

"I went straight to the house and circled it as before. Again a Terran came out and watched me. He also waved to me."

"It was the same Terran?" demanded Lagasta.

"He may have been. I don't know. One cannot study a face on the ground when flying a scout boat. Besides, all Terrans look alike to me. I can't tell one from another."

"Well, what happened after that?"

"I made low-level inspection of a surrounding area ten times larger than last time. In fact I overlapped by quite a piece the search lines of boats seven and eight. There was not another house or even a tent, much less an encampment."

Lagasta brooded over this information, eventually said, "The occupants of that house are by themselves in a strange world. That's a form of loneliness sufficiently appalling to guarantee that they'd rush out headlong for a look at a ship. If six, ten or twelve Terrans were crammed in that hut, they'd get stuck in the doorway in their haste to see Yaksid's boat. But only one showed himself the first time. Only one showed himself the second time. I think there's not more than one in that hut."

"So do I," offered Yaksid.

Kaznitz said to Yaksid, "He waved to you on both occasions. Did he appear to be waving for help?"

"No."

"Does it matter?" Lagasta asked.

"If he were a marooned survivor, one would expect him to jump at a chance of rescue."

"Not at our hands. He could see at a glance that the scout boat was not a Terran one. He'd take no chance with another species."

"Then why did he show himself? Why didn't he hide and leave us in sweet ignorance of his existence?"

"Because he couldn't conceal the hut," replied Lagasta, showing lack of patience.

"He wouldn't need to," Kaznitz persisted. "When you seek cover from a prospective enemy you don't take your house with you."

"Kaznitz, there are times when you irritate me beyond measure. Just what have you got on your mind?"

"Look, you believe that in that building is the only Terran upon this world. Right?"

"Right!"

"He can have got here in only one of two ways, namely, by accident or by design. Right?"

"Right!"

"If he doesn't want help, he's not here by accident. He's here by design. Right?"

Lagasta evaded the point. "I don't care if he's here by a miracle. It will take more than the presence of one lousy alien to make me give up a new world."

"I suspect there *is* more—more to it than meets the eye."

"That may be so. I am no fool, Kaznitz. Your suspicion of Terrans is no greater than mine. But I refuse to flee at first sight of one of them."

"Then what do you think we should do?"

"There are eight of us with enough knowledge of Terran gabble to limp through a conversation. We should have a talk with this character. If he's here for a purpose, we must discover what it is."

"And afterward?"

"It may prove expedient to make him disappear. A de-

plorable necessity. But, as you never cease to remind me, Kaznitz, life is full of deplorable things. And, like everyone else, this Terran must expect to have an unlucky day sooner or later. When he and his hut have vanished from the face of creation we can defy anyone to prove that we were not here first."

"Somehow I don't think it's going to be as easy as that," opined Kaznitz.

"You wouldn't. You were alarmed at birth and the feeling has never worn off."

Havarre put in uneasily, "As I said before, we should be very careful. But I see no harm in having a talk with this Terran. Neither his authorities nor ours can object to that. Nothing in our orders forbids us to speak."

"Thanks be to the suns for at least one bit of half-hearted support," said Lagasta piously. "We'll move the ship to where this stone hut is located. No need to load the scout boats on board. Let them fly with us. They'll help to make us look more imposing."

"Want me to order the crew to make ready right now?" inquired Havarre.

"Yes, you do that. We'll invite our prospective victim to dinner. Some of his kind are said to be fond of strong drink. We'll feed him plenty, sufficient to loosen his tongue. If he talks enough, he may save his neck. If he talks too much, he may get his throat cut. It all depends. We'll see."

"Bet you ten days' pay you're wasting your time," offered Kaznitz.

"Taken," agreed Lagasta with alacrity. "It will be a pleasant change to have you go moody over your losses and my gains."

As the ship came down Lagasta stood by a port and studied the rising house. "Neat and solid. He could possibly have built it himself. The door and windows could have come from a dismantled lifeboat. The rock slabs are local material and what looks like cement is probably hard mud."

"Still clinging to the theory of a lone survivor from some cosmic wreck?" asked Kaznitz.

"It's a likely explanation of why there is one Terran and only one." Lagasta glanced at the other. "Can you offer a better solution?"

"Yes. They've isolated a plague carrier."

"What?"

"Could be. What do we know of their diseases?"

"Kaznitz, why do you persist in producing the most unpleasant ideas?"

"Somebody has to consider the possibilities. When one knows almost nothing about another species what can one do but speculate? The only available substitutes for facts are guesses."

"They don't have to be repulsive guesses."

"They do—if your main purpose is to take no risks."

"If this character is bulging with alien bacteria to which we have no resistance, he could wipe out the lot of us without straining a muscle."

"That could happen," agreed Kaznitz cheerfully.

"Look here, Kaznitz, your morbid mind has put us in a fix. Therefore it is for you to get us out of it."

"How?"

"I am appointing you to go to that house and find out why that Terran is here. It's your job to make sure that he's safe and sanitary before we allow him aboard."

"He may refuse to come aboard. It could seem much like walking into a trap."

"If he won't come to us, we'll go to him. All you need do, Kaznitz, is first make sure that he is not loaded with death and corruption. I've no wish to expire as the result of breathing in bad company."

At that point the ship grounded with crunching sounds under the keel. The ten scout boats circled overhead, came down one by one and positioned themselves in a neat row. Lagasta had another look at the house now two hundred yards away. The alien occupant could be seen standing in the doorway gazing at the arrivals but his face was hidden in deep shadow.

"On your way, Kaznitz."

With a shrug of resignation, Kaznitz got going. While many pairs of eyes looked on he went down the gangway, trudged to the house, halted at the door. For a short while he and the Terran chatted. Then they went inside, remained for twenty minutes before they reappeared. They headed for the ship. Lagasta met them at the mid air lock.

"This," introduced Kaznitz, "is Leonard Nash, he says we should call him Len."

"Glad to know you," responded Lagasta with false cordiality. "It's all too seldom we meet your kind." He studied the Terran carefully. The fellow was short, broad and swarthy with restless eyes that seemed to be trying to look six ways at once. There was something peculiar about him that Lagasta could not place; a vague, indefinable air of being more different than was warranted even in an alien. Lagasta went on, "I don't think I've spoken to more than twenty Terrans in all my life. And then only very briefly."

"Is that so?" said Len.

"Yes," Lagasta assured.

"Too bad," said Len. His eyes flickered around. "Where do we eat?"

Silently disconcerted, Lagasta took the lead. "This way to the officers' mess. We are honored to have you as our guest."

"That's nice," responded Len, following.

At the table Lagasta seated the newcomer on his right, said to Havarre, "You speak some Terran so you sit on his other side." Then surreptitiously to Kaznitz, "You sit on my left—I want a word with you soon."

The ship's officers filed in, took their places. Lagasta made formal introductions while Len favored each in turn with a blank stare and a curt nod. Dinner was served. The Terran tasted the first dish with suspicion, pulled a face and pushed it away. The next course was much to his liking and he started scooping it up with single-minded

concentration. He was an unashamed guzzle-guts and didn't care who knew it.

Lagasta grabbed the opportunity to lean sidewise and question Kaznitz in his own language. "You sure he's not full of disease?"

"Yes."

"How d'you know?"

"Because he's expecting to be picked up and taken home before long. In fact he has recorded the date of his return."

"Ah! So the Terrans *do* know he's here?" Lagasta suppressed a scowl.

"Yes. They dumped him here in the first place."

"Alone?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"He doesn't know."

After digesting this information, Lagasta growled, "It doesn't make sense. I think he's lying."

"Could be," said Kaznitz.

Stewards brought bottles. Len's reaction to drink was the same as that to food: a wary and suspicious sip followed by lip-smacking approval and greedy swallowing. Whenever a new course was brought in his active eyes examined all the other plates as if to check that they didn't hold more than was on his own. Frequently he signed for his glass to be filled. His general manner was that of one cashing in on a free feed. Perhaps, thought Lagasta, it was excusable in one who'd had an entire world to himself and may have gone hungry most of the time. All the same, he, Lagasta, didn't like Terrans and liked this one even less.

With the long meal over and the officers gone, Lagasta, Kaznitz and Havarre settled down to more drinking and an informative conversation with their guest. By this time Len was feeling good, sprawling in his chair, a full glass in one hand, his face flushed with an inward glow. Obviously he was mellow and in the mood to talk.

Lagasta began politely with, "Company, even strange company, must be more than welcome to one leading such a lonely life as yours."

"Sure is," said Len. "There've been times when I've talked to myself for hours. Too much of that can send a fellow off his head." He took an appreciative swig from the glass. "Thank God I've a date marked on the wall."

"You mean you're here for a limited time?"

"I was dumped for four years maximum. Most of it's now behind me. I've only seven more months to go—then it's home, sweet home."

Seeing no satisfactory way of getting to the point obliquely, Lagasta decided to approach it on the straight. "How did you come to be put here in the first place?"

"Well, it was like this: I was a three-time loser and—"

"A what?"

"I'd done two stretches in prison when I qualified for a third. The judge gave me fifteen to twenty years, that being mandatory. So I was slung into the jug." He sipped his drink reminiscently. "Hadn't been there a week when I was called to the warden's office. Two fellows there waiting for me. Don't know who they were. Said to me, 'We've been taking a look at you. You're in good physical condition. You're also in a jam and plenty young enough to have regrets. How'd you like to do four years in solitary?' "

"Go on," urged Lagasta, managing to understand about three-quarters of it.

"Naturally, I asked who was crazy. I'd been plastered with fifteen to twenty and that was suffering enough. So they said they weren't trying to pin something more on me. They didn't mean four years in addition to—they meant four instead of. If I wanted it I could have it and, what's more, I'd come out with a clean sheet."

"You accepted?"

"After crawling all over them with a magnifying glass looking for the gag. There had to be one somewhere. The law doesn't suddenly ease up and go soft without good reason."

"What did they tell you?"

"Wanted me to take a ride in a spaceship. Said it might plant me on an empty world. They weren't sure about that but thought it likely. Said if I did get dumped all I had to do was sit tight for four years and behave myself. At the end of that time I'd be picked up and brought home and my prison records would be destroyed."

"So you're a criminal?"

"Was once. Not now. Officially I'm a solid citizen. Or soon will be."

Kaznitz put in with mild interest, "Do you intend to remain a solid citizen after your return?"

Giving a short laugh, Len said, "Depends."

Staring at him as if seeing him for the first time, Lagasta remarked, "If it were possible to make a person acquire respect for society by depriving him of the company of his fellows, it could be done in jail. There would be no need to go to the enormous trouble and expense of putting him on some faraway uninhabited planet. So there must be some motive other than the reformation of a criminal. There must be an obscure but worthwhile purpose in placing you here."

"Search me," said Len indifferently. "So long as I get the benefit, why should I care?"

"You say you've been here about three and a half Earth-years?"

"Correct."

"And nobody has visited you in all that time?"

"Not a soul," declared Len. "Yours are the first voices I've heard."

"Then," persisted Lagasta, "how have you managed to live?"

"No trouble at all. When the ship landed the crew prospected for water. After they'd found it they put down a bore and built the shack over it. They fixed a small atomic engine in the basement; it pumps water, heats it, warms and lights the place. They also swamped me with food, books, games, tape-recordings and whatever. I've got all the comforts of the Ritz, or most of them."

"Then they left you to do nothing for four years?"

"That's right. Just eat, sleep, amuse myself." Then he added by way of afterthought, "And keep watch."

"Ah!" Lagasta's long ears twitched as he pounced on that remark. "Keep watch for what?"

"Anyone coming here."

Leaning back in his seat, Lagasta eyed the other with ill-concealed contempt. Under clever questioning and the influence of drink the fellow's evasions had been driven from the sublime to the ridiculous. Persistent liars usually gave themselves away by not knowing when to stop.

"Quite a job," commented Lagasta, dangerously oily, "keeping watch over an entire planet."

"Didn't give me any gray hairs," assured Len. He exhibited an empty glass and Havarre promptly filled it for him.

"In fact," Lagasta went on, "seeing that you have to eat and sleep, it would be a major task merely to keep watch on the relatively tiny area within your own horizon."

"Sure would," Len agreed.

"Then how is it possible for one man to stand guard over a planet?"

"I asked them about that. I said, 'Hey, d'you chumps think I'm clairvoyant?' "

"And what was their reply?"

"They said, 'Don't worry your head, boy. If anyone lands north pole or south pole, your side or the other side, by day or by night, you don't have to go looking for them. *They'll come looking for you!*' " A smirk, lopsided and peculiarly irritating, came into Len's face. "Seems they were dead right, eh?"

Lagasta's temporary sensation of impending triumph faded away and was replaced by vague alarm. He slid a glance at Kaznitz and Havarre, found their expressions studiously blank.

"One can hardly describe it as keeping watch if one waits for people to knock on the door," he suggested.

"Oh, there was more to it than that," informed Len. "When they knock, I press the button."

"What button?"

"The one in the wall. Got a blue lens above it. If anyone comes, I press the button and make sure the blue lens lights up. If the lens fails to shine, it shows I've not pressed hard enough. I ram the button deep enough to get the blue light. That's all there is to it."

"In view of our arrival I presume the button has been pressed?" asked Lagasta.

"Yeah, couple of days ago. Something came snoring around the roof. I looked out the window, saw your bubble boat, recognized the pilot as non-Terran. So I did my chore with the button. Then I went outside and waved to him. Fat lot of notice he took. Did he think I was thumbing a lift or something?"

Ignoring that question, Lagasta said, "What happens when the button is pressed?"

"Darned if I know. They didn't bother to tell me and I didn't bother to ask. What's it to me, anyway?"

"There is no antenna on your roof," Lagasta pointed out.

"Should there be?" Len held his drink up to the light and studied it with approval. "Say, this stuff varies quite a lot. We're on a bottle much better than the last one."

"For the button to transmit a signal there'd have to be an antenna."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Therefore," Lagasta baited, "it does not transmit a signal. It does something else."

"I told you what it does—it makes the blue lens light up."

"What good does that do?"

"Does me lots of good. Earns me a remission. I get out in four instead of fifteen to twenty." Strumming an invisible guitar, Len sang a discordant line about his little gray cell in the west. Then he struggled to his feet and teetered slightly. "Great stuff that varnish of yours. The longer you hold it the stronger it works. Either I go now

under my own steam or I stay another hour and you carry me home."

The three stood up and Lagasta said, "Perhaps you'd like to take a bottle with you. After we've gone you can drink a toast to absent friends."

Len clutched it gratefully. "Friends is right. You've made my life. Don't know what I'd do without you. So far as I'm concerned you're welcome to stick around for keeps." Rather unsteadily he followed Kaznitz out, turned in the doorway and added, "Remember asking 'em, 'Where am I if some outlandish bunch wants to play rough with me?' And they said, 'They won't—because there'll be no dividends in it.' " He put on the same smirk as before but it was more distorted by drink. "Real prophets, those guys. Hit the nail smack-bang on the head every time."

He went, nursing his bottle. Lagasta flopped into a chair and stared at the wall. So did Havarre. Neither stirred until Kaznitz came back.

Lagasta said viciously, "I'd lop off his fool head without the slightest compunction if it weren't for that button business."

"And that may be a lie," offered Havarre.

"It isn't," Kaznitz contradicted. "He told the truth. I saw the button and the lens for myself. I also heard the faint whine of a power plant somewhere in the foundations." He mused a moment, went on, "As for the lack of an antenna, all we know is that in similar circumstances we'd need one. But do they? We can't assume that in all respects their science is identical with our own."

"Logic's the same everywhere, though," Lagasta gave back. "So let's try and look at this logically. It's obvious that this Len character is no intellectual. I think it's safe to accept that he is what he purports to be, namely, a criminal, an antisocial type of less than average intelligence. That raises three questions. Firstly, why have the Terrans put only one man on this planet instead of a proper garrison? Secondly, why did they choose a person

of poor mentality? Thirdly, why did they select a criminal?"

"For the first, I have no idea," responded Kaznitz. "But I can give a guess at the others."

"Well?"

"They used someone none too bright because it is impossible to coax, drug, hypnotize, torture or otherwise extract valuable information from an empty head. The Terrans don't know what we've got but one thing they do know: no power in creation can force out of a skull anything that isn't in it in the first place."

"I'll give you that," Lagasta conceded.

"As for picking on a criminal rather than any ordinary dope, seems to me that such a person could be given a very strong inducement to follow instructions to the letter. He'd be meticulous about pressing a button because he had everything to gain and nothing to lose."

"All right," said Lagasta, accepting this reasoning without argument. "Now let's consider the button itself. One thing is certain: it wasn't installed for nothing. Therefore it was fixed up for something. It has a purpose that makes sense even if it's alien sense. The mere pressing of it would be meaningless unless it produced a result of some kind. What's your guess on that?"

Havarre interjected, "The only possible conclusion is that it sounds an alarm somehow, somewhere."

"That's what I think," Kaznitz supported.

"Me, too," said Lagasta. "But it does more than just that. By sending the alarm it vouches for the fact that this watchman Len was still alive and in possession of his wits when we landed. And if we put him down a deep hole it will also vouch for the fact that he disappeared immediately after our arrival. Therefore it may provide proof of claim-jumping should such proof be necessary." He breathed deeply and angrily, finished, "It's highly likely that a fast Terran squadron is already bulleting this way. How soon it gets here depends upon how near its base happens to be."

"Doesn't matter if they catch us sitting on their world,"

Kaznitz pointed out. "We've done nothing wrong. We've shown hospitality to their sentinel and we've made no claim to the planet."

"I *want* to claim the planet," shouted Lagasta. "How'm I going to do it *now?*"

"You can't," said Kaznitz. "It's far too risky."

"It'd be asking for trouble in very large lumps," opined Havarre. "I know what I'd do if it were left to me."

"You'd do what?"

"I'd beat it at top speed. With luck we might get to the next new world an hour ahead of the Terrans. If we do we'll be more than glad that we didn't waste that hour on this world."

"I hate giving up a discovery," Lagasta declared.

"I hate giving up two of them in rapid succession," retorted Havarre with considerable point.

Lagasta growled, "You win. Order the crew to bring the scout boats aboard and prepare for take-off." He watched Havarre hasten out, turned to Kaznitz and rasped, "Curse them!"

"Who? The crew?"

"No, the Terrans." Then he stamped a couple of times around the cabin and added, "Snitgobbers!"

The vessel that swooped from the sky and made a descending curve toward the rock house was not a warship. It was pencil-thin, ultra-fast, had a small crew and was known as a courier boat. Landing lightly and easily, it put forth a gangway.

Two technicians emerged and hurried to the house, intent on checking the atomic engine and the power circuits. The relief watchman appeared, scuffed grass with his feet, stared curiously around. He was built like a bear, had an underslung jaw, small, sunken eyes. His arms were thick, hairy and lavishly tattooed.

Moving fast, the crew manhandled crates and cartons out of the ship and into the house. The bulkiest item consisted of forty thousand cigarettes in air-tight cans.

The beneficiary of this forethought, a thug able to spell simple words, was a heavy smoker.

Leonard Nash went on board the ship, gave his successor a sardonic smirk in passing. The crew finished their task. The technicians returned. Leaning from the airlock door, an officer bawled final injunctions at the lone spectator.

"Remember, you *must* press until the blue lens lights up. Keep away from the local gin-traps and girlie shows—they'll ruin your constitution. See you in four years."

The metal disk clanged shut and screwed itself inward. With a boom the ship went up while the man with a world to himself became a midget, a dot, nothing.

Navigator Reece sat in the fore cabin gazing meditatively at the starfield when Copilot McKechnie arrived to keep him company. Dumping himself in a pneumatic chair, McKechnie stretched out long legs.

"Been gabbing with that bum we picked up. He's not delirious with happiness. Got as much emotion as a lump of rock. And as many brains. It's a safe bet his clean sheet means nothing whatever; he won't be back a year before the cops are after him again."

"Did he have any trouble on that last world?"

"None at all. Says a bunch of weirdies landed six or seven months ago. They pushed a hunk of brotherly love at him and then scooted. He says they seemed to be in a hurry."

"Probably had a nice grab in prospect somewhere."

"Or perhaps we've got them on the run. Maybe they've discovered at long last that we're outgrabbing them in the ratio of seven to one. Those Antareans are still staking claims by the old method. Ship finds a planet, beams the news home, sits tight on the claim until a garrison arrives. That might take five, ten or twenty years, during which time the ship is out of commission. Meanwhile, a ship of ours discovers A, dumps one man, pushes on to B, dumps another man, and with any luck at all has nailed down C and D by the time we've transported a garrison to A. The time problem is a tough one and the only way to cope is to hustle."

"Dead right," agreed Reece. "It's bound to dawn on them sooner or later. It's a wonder they didn't knock that fellow on the head."

"They wouldn't do that, seeing he'd pressed the button," McKechnie observed.

"Button? What button?"

"There's a button in that house. Pressing it switches on a blue light."

"Is that so?" said Reece. "And what else?' '

"Nothing else. Just that. A blue light."

Reece frowned heavily to himself while he thought it over. "I don't get it."

"Neither do unwanted visitors. That's why they scoot."

"I still don't get it."

"See here, to get into space a species must have a high standard of intelligence. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"Unlike lunatics, the intelligent are predictable in that they can be depended upon always to do the intelligent thing. They never, never, never do things that are pointless and mean nothing. Therefore a button and a blue light must have purpose, intelligent purpose."

"You mean we're kidding the Antareans with a phony setup, a rigmarole that is fundamentally stupid?"

"No, boy, not at all. We're fooling them by exploiting a way of thinking that you are demonstrating right now."

"Me?" Reece was indignant.

"Don't get mad about it. The outlook is natural enough. You're a spaceman in the space age. Therefore you have a great reverence for physics, astronautics and everything else that created the space age. You're so full of respect for the cogent sciences that you're apt to forget something."

"Forget what?"

McKechnie said, "That psychology is also a science."

DISCONTINUITY

Raymond F. Jones

The middle-aged blond woman was like a sleek and expensive cat. Now, she was afraid. Her bruised face swathed in healing bandages, she sat in the big chair by the window of her husband's office and watched his desk and the circle of his associates who were ringed about her.

She could feel hate like a hot radiance emitted by each of them. Their eyes stared as if she were some animal not of their species.

She spoke again. "I cannot give my permission. I would rather have David dead than—than like those others. Far rather!"

It was the third time she had said it and it only increased again the hate that surrounded her. Momentarily, she shrank in the chair. Then, as if she had retreated to a point beyond which she could not go, she sprang at them.

She stood erect in their midst, trembling with a fury that for once forced them back. "Stop staring at me that way! I'm his wife. Do you think I *want* him dead? You claim to be his friends, but if that were true would you offer him a return to life with an idiot's mind?"

She turned to one end of the circle, paused, and turned again, glaring at each of them in the maddened, cavernous silence.

There were the young laboratory girls in white smocks. They were all in love with David, she thought. There were the earnest college boys working out research seminars at the Institute laboratories under David's direction. They had come to plead for David's life—as an idiot.

At last, from the rear of the circle, the moment of balanced hate was broken. A tall, gray-haired man stepped to her side and took her arm.

"Will the rest of you please leave?" he said. "I would like to speak with Mrs. Mantell alone for a few minutes.

They hesitated, then turned. Silently, she watched them go, but she wanted to cry out for them to remain. Her fear of any one of them alone was greater than that in the presence of all. It doubled as each of the two dozen filed through the doorway. The last one closed it behind him.

Dr. Vixen, who remained, was her husband's first assistant and co-developer of the Mantell Synthesis. Older than David, he had the serene and confident bearing of a man who is aware that most of his life is behind him, and that he has spent it exactly as he would have wished.

He leaned back against the desk and placed his hands upon it. Alice Mantell slumped back into the chair as if he had forced her down.

"Now, I will answer the question you asked, Alice. Yes —I *do* think you want David dead. Regardless of the condition of his mind or his body you want him out of your life."

"I'll not listen—"

"Sit down and shut up, please. There are great peculiarities in the accident in which you and David were involved. Not the least of these is your own miraculous escape in comparison with his great brain injury. A suggestion to the police concerning this, along with a report of your own infidelities towards David would certainly result in a lengthy investigation, to say the least.

"This is how they might reconstruct it: Your friend, Jerrold Exter, was hiding in the darkness of the back seat of the car when you and David got in. There was no occa-

sion for David to glance back at him, almost invisible in the darkness.

"It was some sort of compressed air mallet that Jerrold used to crush David's skull. Then you got out and let the car plunge through the retaining wall at the end of Mayview Drive. You managed to beat yourself up a little so it wouldn't be too suspicious looking. And if the wreckage hadn't been spotted within a few minutes you might have succeeded in your plan."

The thing that she had feared was here, and with its coming the fear dwindled. Her heavy breathing slowed, and her face recovered from its whiteness.

"You mean this for blackmail?" she asked.

For a moment she believed that Dr. Vixen was going to hurl himself upon her, and the rage she incited within him was curiously pleasant to her.

"I want David," he said evenly, at last. "I want him alive and well. In return, David will certainly be willing to be relieved of your presence for the rest of his life."

"So he has lied to all of you about me!"

"We'll let that go," said Dr. Vixen. "You agree?"

She nodded quickly, again like a cat, striking for what seemed a precious offer of freedom from punishment, and security from the thing that she had loathed. She was going to be free at last of the incredible, alien world in which David Mantell lived, to which she had been bound by fifteen long years of marriage to him. For a time he had dragged her along like a small child at a fair that displayed things beyond her comprehension, and then he had abandoned her because she had failed to understand.

She relaxed in spite of Dr. Vixen's awareness of her evil, partly, even, because of it. "Do you think I'm *bad?*" she said suddenly.

He shook his head. "There are no bad people. Only sick ones, stupid ones, ignorant ones. David would have told you that. He would have let you go long before now if he had been sure that you wanted to."

"But I did want to! Surely he has told you that if he has told you anything."

"He always seemed to think there was a chance. You see, he loved you."

He was sorry when he had said it, for in the presence of this woman it was as if he had exposed his friend's nakedness to an obscene gaze.

But Alice Mantell startled him. Her eyes softened and the catlike tension of her body relaxed for just an instant. "I loved him, too," she said, "once—"

"Perhaps you can remember that, then, in giving the assistance that we need."

"You have my permission to perform the Synthesis! What more do I have to pay for freedom?"

"You have misunderstood because neither you nor they"—he nodded towards the closed door—"are aware of all the facts. Your permission to perform the Synthesis on your husband is relatively unimportant. Lack of it would be just one more illegality that would not have stood in our way.

"More important, Dr. Dodge, the Institute president, notified David only this morning that the Synthesis was banned, and the operation is now illegal with or without your permission.

"Those youngsters out there don't know it yet, but our careers and professional freedom are at stake as well as David's life. I'll tell them, of course, before we go ahead."

"What are you talking about? Why is the Synthesis forbidden?"

"The *others*—the first hundred Synthesis patients you mentioned a moment ago. The group who have made the Mantell Synthesis a one hundred percent failure so far. The public and the politicians have decided there are to be no more like them, regardless of possible benefits."

"Will David's be a failure, too?"

"We have no reason to believe otherwise."

"You're insane!" She rose and backed away as if in sudden fear of his madness. "Why will you persist in a deliberate failure that will turn him into an idiot?"

"Because—he is wholly lost to us otherwise. This way, he will at least be alive. As long as he is alive there is

hope. And, finally, because he would have wanted it this way."

"You're devils of the same litter."

He took her from the office into the Synthesis laboratory. There, her fear returned. She had been afraid all her married life of the world in which David walked. He could tear apart the brain of a man, cell by cell, and reconstruct it in the image of a living human being.

But she never had believed it could be anything but dead. David had penetrated to the very core of life—and had found nothing there that she could embrace. Sometimes—long ago—he had tried to tell her of the vast and intricate molecules that were the essence of a man. He told her the long and incomprehensible names of those protein structures that held the memory and intelligence of man. He could show her, he said, the exact cluster of molecules that held his love for her—and that, she thought, was the moment in which she stopped loving him.

The room was full of compact masses of equipment and long panels that ranged the entire length of the laboratory. Overhead, great cables and high-frequency pipes wove in intricate streams to knit the masses together. Like the interior of a great, expanded skull, this would be the kind of creation that David would build, she thought bitterly.

"Will I . . . see him?" she asked.

"No, that will not be necessary. We require what is termed a neural analogue so that those factors of David's life involving you may be reconstructed. Some patterns are inevitably lost, of course, but for the most part he will remember you and all that has passed between you."

"I should think you—and he'd be satisfied to have that forgotten."

"No. It is important that every possible element of his life be reconstructed and re-evaluated. Loss can be kept at a minimum that way. Your analogue, for example, will restore all that he has ever done or thought in connection with you, every opinion or feeling he has expressed to you or which has been colored by your presence. Then we

will call others who will contribute their share, but yours is among the most important."

She shuddered in revulsion. "No—you can do without me. I don't understand what you are talking about, but you can get along without me."

"We can't! Your mind holds the greatest part of the pattern we need. David's life is within the cells of your brain."

"I can't do it—I won't. I'm afraid of all this." Her eyes scanned the far ceiling where the webbed cables looped in ritualistic patterns. "You can't make me—"

"The accident—remember?"

"Some day I'll kill you," she sobbed.

A nurse assisted her in the preparations. Sick with fear, she permitted her clothing to be exchanged for a plain smock, and then lay upon the padded couch while the score of electrodes were carefully oriented and pasted to her skull. The paste had a thick, nauseating smell that made her stomach contract violently.

She was given then a gentle anaesthetic to control her voluntary thoughts and movements and was left alone in the faintly lighted room.

While Alice was being made ready, Dr. Vixen told the technicians of the Institute's ban on Synthesis, offering each of them the chance to leave. None did. He wished he hadn't had to tell them, but he had no right to make the decision for them though he felt sure of what each of them would do.

All of them were nervous and tense. As a group they were acting on their own in a move in which David had always been there to lead. The tension was multiplied by the fact that it was he upon whom they were operating. So great was this tension they held almost reckless disregard for the ban of the Institute. Yet each knew that he was gambling his whole future life and career in this illegal step.

Dr. Vixen, watching them, sensed the nervousness that threatened the very success they wanted so badly, but he could do nothing now to help them. David had trained

them well. They would have to rely on the excellence of that training.

He gave the signal for the beginning of the exacting, laborious process of transcribing the data from the mind of Alice Mantell to master molecules which would, in turn, be used to recreate large areas of the shattered brain of David Mantell.

From his glass observation window Dr. Vixen watched the inert form of the woman. Even in the drugged sleep her face held the cast of bitter lines. It was hard to remember, he thought, that she was only a sick child, a bewildered woman who had never understood the shadow of greatness in which she stood. It was hard to forget that she had broken the heart of David Mantell, and in the end had tried to kill him.

Somewhere, in her youth, there must have been a tone of gentleness, a graciousness and sweetness that David had loved. He would not have married her if she had been so wholly without charm. What had happened to it in the years between? Dr. Vixen did not know. He had heard David's story in snatches of unbearable bitterness that David had sometimes found impossible to contain. But he wondered if Alice might not have her side to the story, too.

A hurried call from one of the technicians brought an end to these considerations. He hurried to the post from which the man called. On the screen of the electron microscope there he saw the image of the pattern molecule that was building, being shaped by the impulses from the mind of Alice Mantell. It was a hundred thousand times the size of the one that would ultimately take its place in the reconstructed brain of her husband.

"Pathological, type 72-B-4," said the technician. "We can't possibly let that series go through! That woman's sick."

"What area are you working with now?"

"It's in her formulation of her relationship with Dr. Mantell."

Dr. Vixen gazed at the image forming before his eyes.

Here was proof of just how sick Alice really was. Ordinarily, he would have nodded without hesitation. Such a malformation should never be allowed to reproduce. But this was different. This was David, who knew more about the Mantell Synthesis than any other man alive. Dr. Vixen hesitated to deliberately modify a single factor that might alter the life and personality of his friend.

"Let it get as far as the selector banks and see what happens," he said.

The technican opened his mouth to protest, then shut it without a sound. He dared not utter what he thought.

But Dr. Vixen understood perfectly well what the man was thinking. They were in an uncharted field with only a few hard-won rules to guide them. It was foolhardy to abandon a single one that had been found to be empirically correct.

For centuries men had stood in yearning awe before the mystery of the human brain. Decades of skilled medicine passed before the smallest clue to its functioning was uncovered. That came in the discovery that the brain is mechanically analogous to a great punched-card machine —all the endless data that compose memory, emotion, intellect, reason—these are arrayed as on stacks of punched cards.

It was Von Foerster whose work suggested this analogy, who showed the possible nature of the punched cards in use within the brain. He demonstrated them as punched molecules, immense and intricate protein structures in which the atoms were stacked and arranged and tied together in a precise pattern, which pattern represented an item of intelligence.

Later, every control function of the human brain and body was found to originate with these figurate molecules. Some were trigger devices controlling circulating, delay-line types of storage for definite but transitory periods. Others, formed at birth, perpetuated themselves throughout the life of the individual and controlled the involuntary functions. The bulk of them, however, were proven to be occupied with storage of data.

Von Foerster's work produced a tremendous impetus in brain research, but it raised more problems than it solved, and it was centuries again before these were answered.

With a library of molecules numbering 10^{21} it seemed an impossible task for the brain to select and read off the data represented by any single one. Utterly impossible time intervals were implied if the process of selection went on by examining every molecule one by one. This was obviously not the means.

Carstairs broke the impasse by the demonstrated application of the principle of molecular resonance. He showed that not only was each figurate molecule a punched card carrying data, it was also a tuned, resonant, circuit unique among the endless numbers in the human brain.

He uncovered the mechanism which Von Foerster had overlooked, the comparatively insignificant number of molecules which formed a selector bank. These, Carstairs showed, were tuned by stimuli and aroused responses in the distant banks of punched molecules, which were sent along the neuron chains to cancel the punching in the selector banks and present themselves as required data. Mutiple resonance provided the cross-indexing necessary.

David Mantell had been a student of Dr. Carstairs. The great scientist had been a very old man then, but he had bestowed upon young Mantell the frustrated yearning to know all the secrets of the human mind.

The student, David Mantell, became Dr. Mantell, and in so doing provided the medical world with its most brilliant technique in thirty centuries of its history. He developed the Mantell Analysis, by which it was possible to probe the human brain and determine the exact molecule bearing any given piece of information.

That alone would have given him an immortal name, but he was not content with only half a step. The full pace consisted of being able to duplicate or repair such a mole-

cule and insert it into the vast mechanism of the mind if need be.

With one sweep he eliminated the centuries-old butchery of lobotomy and topectomy which had maimed hundreds of thousands in its long fad.

Or would have—

To date, his experiments had resulted only in intensifying the very conditions they were designed to heal.

In a hundred cases of extensive brain damage, his process had restored life, but only in varying degrees of hopeless aphasia.

At first the public hailed the magnitude of his stride, then, revolted by the horror of his failures, they had turned against him with a mighty clamor. Fed by the public affairs observers who shaped opinion, the clay of rumor and prejudice, the clamor had forced the politically fed Institute to ban the Synthesis.

And now David Mantell himself lay with a bare speck of life possessing his body. The back of his skull had been crushed and sixty percent of his brain stuff destroyed. He lay with a probe in his spinal column conducting mechanically generated, "wired-in" pulses to the organs of his body that the chemistry and mechanics of his corpse might still go on.

Alice Mantell could not have known by any means, Dr. Vixen thought, that she was providing the very next step that David had planned—though hardly in this degree.

He had planned to submit himself to Synthesis surgery to learn, if he might, the answer to the failures that he had produced. But it would have been gently and slowly, molecule by molecule, with constant checking, describing, and analyzing. Now, more than half his brain would have to be rebuilt, and of all his associates there were none who doubted that he would become a schizophrenic horror.

If one single spark of the old intelligence that was Dick Mantell should succeed in breaking through and giving just one clue to the failures, they knew that he would have been willing that the Synthesis be done. And it was worth the risk of their professional lives.

But Alice wanted him dead because he had chained her in a prison from which she wanted to flee. She wanted to be free of him forever, and to have been chained to an idiot would have tripled the horror of her prison.

She was a poor murderess. Her guilt had screamed from her sick eyes, and they had all interpreted its message. But none of them would talk—not now. The bargain that Dr. Vixen had made would be kept.

II

He awoke, and was aware of consciousness. There was thunder in the Earth, rippling sheets of light blinded him. He endured the pains of primal birth and felt suddenly alive as if sprung from the head of Jove.

The chaos was dying slowly, but it would be a long time before he ordered it, catalogued and tamed it. He waited confidently and with restrained exultation. To be alive was to be a god.

I am David Mantell, he thought, but more—much more than David Mantell ever was.

He thought then of Alice, and in this there was pain. He had never understood her—poor, stupid, bewildered little Alice. He had tried to lead her in his direction, and when she had floundered he had abandoned her. He had been stupid, too.

He remembered the ride in the car. He wondered curiously if he had actually failed to comprehend her intention beforehand. He supposed he had, but such ignorance seemed incomprehensible to him. He thought of Alice lying in the wreckage with torn clothes, and bruises on her body from careful blows by Jerrold.

He wanted to weep for her suffering, not of her body, but of her mind. He wanted to weep because she had believed she must be beaten and abandoned in the wreckage to be free of him. He wept because he had not known how to lift her to dignity and courage and esteem in her own mind.

He would make it up, he thought. He would make it

all up to his sick Alice and heal her. There was half a lifetime left to them. Surely it was enough to erase the errors of the first half.

His body was little damaged, but his brain had been subjected to the Synthesis. Fully aware of this, he arranged the known in precise order and shelved the unknown for later consideration, but of it all he became master.

He was alone, but they were watching him, he knew. The room was dimly but pleasantly lit. Furnishings, books and journals were familiar. That was the way it was always arranged—the way it had been for the hundred failures before him.

But *his* Synthesis was no failure!

For the first time, the tremendous impact of this realization settled upon him. He was alive, aware of himself and his past. He was alive when he might have been dead. And the work of his own hands and brain had made it possible.

He sat up on the edge of the bed, examining the physical sensations. He felt normal, yet there was a newness that he could not define.

Then the door opened slowly, and Dr. Vixen stood there, letting himself be recognized.

David Mantell smiled. "Come in, Vic. Everything's fine. I feel as if I'd had no more than a slight bump on the head. I imagine you must have had quite a repair job, considering the jolt I got from Exter. Sit down and give me the details of what hap—"

David stopped smiling. "What's the matter, Vic? Why are you looking at me like that? Why—?"

Dr. Vixen was staring, his face reflecting sickness of heart. Then he finally spoke. At least his mouth and lips moved, but his words were sheer gibberish.

David felt panic, like cold water rising swiftly about his chest. "What's the matter with you? Talk sense! Give it to me in English!"

Vixen spoke again, and still no understanding came. David had risen in greeting, but now he edged away until he collided with a desk. He passed a hand over his face

and heard the man's voice again. He barely sensed a connotation of dismay and anxiety.

Then he thought of the others, the hundred others who had preceded him through the doors of Synthesis to a prison of aphasia that could not be opened. These had spoken gibberish and had understood nothing said to them.

In sudden desperate horror, he grabbed a pencil and a pad from the desk and scrawled, "Vic, can you read this?"

Dr. Vixen stared at it with growing pity. He backed towards the door, retreating as if from a phantom. "Sit down, David. I'll get Dr. Martin and be right back." And he knew it was silly because David Mantell could not understand a single word.

David remained motionless for only an instant after he was alone. He knew what his fate would be. Visual, auditory, ataxic aphasia—schizophrenia—they would put a label on him and lock him in a jail. They'd lock him up for the rest of his life because somehow he had become imprisoned behind an incredible wall of communication failure.

The Synthesis was not a failure. There was only this one terrible defect that put its patients in a prison of noncommunication. He thought of the first one—over five years ago. A young man, an artist of superb abilities whose head was injured by a falling rock on a mountain vacation. Fifteen percent replacement, David recalled, and the fellow had been in solitary hell for that whole five years.

David did not know how the error had come about, but he had no time to analyze or consider the technical aspects of the problem. He had to get away.

He opened the door and cautiously scanned the corridor. Sixty feet away was the door to the exterior, but his nakedness prevented escape that way. In the other direction lay the great laboratories. The assistants' locker rooms always contained miscellaneous spare items of garb.

He ran swiftly in that direction. Twenty-five feet of corridor, then down a spiral stairway. At the foot of it he could look directly into the selector room. Vixen was there with Martin, a serious young medic. Their faces were bleak with the futility of their arguments as they scanned the files of David's Synthesis. The technicians were gathered around, listening to Vixen's story and the discussion they had all heard a hundred times before.

He had to cross in direct view of anyone looking towards this open exit from the laboratory. He waited impatiently, scanning the shifting positions of the people within the room. Then, for a single instant, he detected —almost predicted—that none of them was watching the hallway.

He darted across and into the locker room. He would have slugged anyone who appeared now, but he found himself alone.

Within seconds, he found and donned a pair of baggy brown trousers, a slip-over shirt and a pair of decrepit shoes that someone kept for rough maintenance work. He collected a bundle of articles and tossed them into the incinerator chute, but he grabbed up someone's dark coat and kept it, for the evening was cool.

It was dusk already when he opened the door towards the outside and stepped into the laboratory grounds.

He walked carefully away from the buildings, slipping from one to another of the shrubbery groups that lined the drive. He abandoned his car. They could easily trail that, but it would take considerable time to make up a description from the things they found missing from the locker room.

He walked along the street and mixed with passers-by. The laboratory seemed after a little while like a world he had known only in a dream.

Suddenly, he stopped and stood still, letting the mob flow about him like turbulent waters. Never had he loved the ugly, grotesque, hurrying crowd as he did now. He felt the jostle of bodies with the same sensual joy that a

child might experience driving his arms full length into warm sand on the seashore.

He did not hear the fat man who turned and snarled, "What ya think ye're doin' standin' there in everybody's way." Nor the salesgirls who caught sight of the expression on his face, and laughed.

He heard their muffled words on every side, and there was no meaning whatever. They were like words beyond a thick wall that deadened only the meaning but not the sound. But this was a wall that defied his efforts to tear it down because it could not be seen or felt.

He saw the smiles and lines of tension and hurry upon the faces, and was wholly a stranger in their midst. It was slowly becoming a physical agony, that urge to speak out and identify himself with the company of men. He wanted to take the hand of someone and say hello and be understood.

But there was no one who would think him anything but a fool.

He moved on again in the dusk, remembering locations of streets, but the signposts he could not read. Everywhere, the signs, the advertisements were as mystic symbols of some order into which all this vast throng had been initiated. Of them all, only he stood in naked ostracism. As darkness increased, there was a lull in the crowd between going home from work and the return to the streets for pleasure. In this time he sensed the beginnings of real hunger, but he had no solution. He recalled vaguely the need of money, but the symbols were less than shadows of memory. There was no money in his pockets. He could not beg enough for a meal. He dared not open his mouth.

There was his own home, of course, but the police would be watching for him there. Alice would certainly report him—provided she didn't make another blundering attempt to kill him.

He could not go home.

Through the evening hours he ranged among the pleasure crowds watching the faces of the dull, contented men and the pretty, flirtatious women. With increasing

wonder he scanned as if for something lost. He knew not what it was, but these among whom he searched seemed imperceptibly decreased in stature, and his panic grew.

With furious haste he almost ran among them peering at the face of each to whom he came, as if for a lost and forgotten image of himself. But these were not of himself —they were more than strangers; they were like foreign beings he had never known.

With each minute and each hour all that he looked upon became more alien and he more lost. While the beckoning urge to unite with them had not ceased, the gap across which he watched steadily widened. As if it were a spreading chasm in the Earth with him on one side and all mankind on the other, he saw himself hurled back and away while those for whom he yearned dwindled and diminished and were wholly unaware of any gap.

As darkness settled down for its long haul through the night the streets became increasingly deserted. Lights went out on signs and store fronts and he grew in conspicuousness as he moved in solitude about the city.

Almost alone, he ranged the streets with swifter pace and growing rage like some great animal clawing and thundering at the darkness of his loneliness. He paced before the perforated cliffsides of man's own making and watched the shadows against the little square flames, each marking the place of a man, side by side, row on row, until they seemed to reach the stars.

He raged through the city and into the hills above town where he sat at last upon a granite rock, suddenly motionless and still as if straining to unite with the Earth itself. Only his eyes were alive watching and dreading the coming of day and the awakening of the city.

He dreaded the blinking traffic beacons and suppressed a cry of fury at the neon lights with their beckoning invitation to a world he could not enter.

He slept at last there on the hillside, lying against the granite boulder that was still warm from the day's heat. He was later aware only of lying huddled on the ground and the Earth was full of chill. The sun was slow in its

warming of the face of the hill and he was depressed with hunger.

Below lay the city. He felt like a traveler who had arrived at a destination in the darkness of night. It was not merely the old transformed now. It was wholly new—and incredibly ugly. Yet it gave a sense of perspective that his hasty night flight had denied him.

Surely the situation was not as impossible as it seemed. Somehow he could prevent them from locking him up as aphasic or schizophrenic. It was unthinkable that there should be a complete barrier to communication between him and the world.

If only there were another of his kind with whom he might talk to diminish the unbearable loneliness of being the single member of his species in a strange and savage world.

Another—there *were* others, he thought. A hundred others! His throat caught in a sudden agony of relief as he wondered how he had forgotten in the night.

But the relief was short lived. How could two aphasics talk with each other? No solace or assistance could be offered by another of his kind if they were both in individual prisons. The barrier was doubled instead of broken.

He sat upon the rock again, knowing that in the hours to come he'd have to go down the hill to—somewhere. But for the duration of this instant he could remain.

His thoughts went back to Alice. He was aware of a sympathetic and lucid understanding of her that made him appalled at the thoughts of the blindness with which he had walked through the years of their marriage. They had started out with something fine and lovely between them, and he knew what had become of it now, he thought with startling clarity.

Alice had been sick even then. Her love for him had been genuine, but she could not come to marriage prepared to give the companionship it demanded—either to him or to anyone else she might have married. Her aspirations were chaotic and turned in upon herself.

And he had never helped her.

He had to get back to the world of men if for no other reason than to make amends to his wife and heal her soul of the bitter distortions that had made her life a hell.

It could be done. And then he thought for the first time of the Institute's ban on Synthesis. Vixen and the staff had defied the ban!

Frustration boiled into fury, and he rose and clenched fists in the face of the burning sun. He cursed his prison and damned the intolerable error that had been the mason of its stout walls. But he continued to stand—helpless.

He watched the sun revealing the city of dreadful ugliness. Structures of four different centuries stood side by side, and scarcely a single one revealed a line of imagination or beauty. The city was barren and full of discord to the senses. He hated it—and longed to re-enter it.

But the longing was becoming dim, even as the prolonged fast had diminished hunger. He felt a curious freedom from all that the city represented, and that itself was warning, he thought, of the deteriorating facilities of his mind.

It had been a futile dream to suppose that the human mind could be rebuilt by a machine. A hundred had been sacrificed to that dream, and he was the last. After him there would be no more.

In their common prison the hundred would be a living monument to the futility of his dream.

But it wasn't a common prison, he kept reminding himself. If it only were—!

He lifted his head sharply at the impact of new thought. For an instant the scene before him seemed suddenly shining and glorious beyond his power to behold. What if it *were* a common prison!

He dredged into his mind, stood aside, and examined his own thought processes. He recalled his utterance to Vixen, the utterance to which Vixen had responded as if it were sheer gibberish.

He recalled the exact words he had spoken then. And they *were* words—he let them flow through his mind

over and over again. They were discrete symbols for exact thought processes. They constituted a language, a real and infinitely precise language, a language given by the semantic selector as it oriented the prepunched molecules that formed his brain.

It was the same language spoken by the Synthesized patients, which *he* had once called gibberish.

He was never aware of starting to run, only of being actually in flight down the long hillside as if in some fleeting panic. But he knew where he was going.

He was going to find a human being with whom he could speak.

III

Marianne Carter had been a brilliant young selector technician in David's laboratory. Her brain had been virtually destroyed by electric shock.

Marianne's parents in desperate hope had asked David for help, but he had not helped them. He had given them back their daughter alive, but only as a bewildered, gibbering creature who neither spoke sense nor comprehended anything that was said to her.

She had been his last patient, and she was now the closest. By the roundabout way through the city's outskirts, which was the only route David dared travel, she was fully ten miles away.

She was located at one of the small, public sanatoriums that had long ago replaced the gray prison houses once used for the mentally sick. David knew the place well. Others of his patients had been cared for there at times but Marianne was the only one there now.

It was well beyond noon when he finally arrived at the rear of the grounds surrounding the place. Through the heavy shrubbery that hid it he could see the faint, pink glow of the barrier field that fenced the grounds. Beyond, numerous patients were out on the lawn. If luck were with him, he might be able to see Marianne. Like some fantastic peeping Tom, he thought, a deep and

desperate urge within him would be satisfied by a single glimpse of her and a world that he could understand.

He crouched down, watching first one side of the big grounds and then the other. Increasingly aware of the weakness and hunger that was returning, he knew that it was not long that he could wait.

And it was futile, he repeated. In the end he would have to give up and submit to hospitalization—and imprisonment. But first he had to see Marianne. He had to know about the language.

The afternoon dimmed and took on the quality of night. He watched the patients herded to the buildings by the attendants. There was as yet no sign of Marianne.

He shifted his cramped position, knowing he had come as far as he could go yet unwilling to cross that final pass between this meager freedom and the captivity he must face.

As he moved slightly he became aware for the first time of the two men who crouched a little way beyond him on the other side of the shrubs and right next to the barrier fence. He had no idea how long they had been there. They hunched beside a small wire hoop that one of them held against the fence.

With instinctive caution, David retreated to his former immobile crouch. In a moment he saw a figure moving. swiftly across the lawn beyond. A woman's skirt fluttered wildly with her running in the half darkness. She ducked down as she neared the barrier. On hands and knees she crawled forward and *through*.

He sucked in his breath with sharp intake as she appeared through the hoop that the men held. There was no power on Earth that was known to be capable of breaking through that barrier field—until now.

Then she stood up and he saw her face in full view. It was Marianne.

He must have made a movement and a sound. The two men turned and saw him. Almost in the same instant they were upon him. For a brief moment he fought back, but

their fury was merciless, and his physical weakness gave them quick and easy victory.

They held him upright between them and stared in perplexity as if debating his fate in their own minds. David shook his head, his senses foggy from the beating, and felt the blood flowing from a cut lip. Then he saw Marianne standing before him. As his eyes met hers, her face flooded with startled recognition.

"David Mantell! Dr. Mantell—!"

Now it was his attackers who were startled. They loosed their grasp and backed in awe. He heard them exclaim beneath their breaths—his name.

It took a moment to realize that he had heard Marianne's words for what they were, that he had recognized his own name. In consecutive order he marveled at his understanding of the men's words.

And then he was close to crying with the sheer joy of a human voice that he understood. He managed a smile with his bloody lips.

"Hello, Marianne."

"You are one of us!" she breathed.

"I have a Synthesized brain," he said. "I escaped the laboratory to avoid imprisonment in a place like this." He waved a hand towards the building. "I couldn't talk —"

"I know. All of us nearly went crazy at first."

"What does this mean? Your coming through the fence, and these . . . friends . . . of yours? Who are they?"

"Don't you remember? This is John Gray. He was your first patient. And this is Martin Everett."

The first man held out his hand and took David's warmly. He was a thin-faced, sensitive man, the artist of whom David had been thinking that very morning.

"We're terribly sorry," said John Gray. "We couldn't risk detection. We've planned too long to chance a failure now."

"I remember . . . five years ago—" said David.

He remembered faintly the name of Martin Everett, too. A spaceport engineer, he had been browned with

the sun of several planets, but now he was pale from long confinement.

"Tell me what have you done? What do you know of our condition? What do you plan?"

"There's no time for that," said Martin urgently. "We've got to get away from here. We'll explain later, in our quarters."

The other two nodded and David found himself being hurried along between them, his consent being taken for granted. They had parked a large car on the road beyond the shrubbery and no one said anything more as they climbed in. He was too full of wonderment to do anything more than observe.

In the car Marianne attempted to wipe the blood from his face. His gratitude for that simple attention was beyond all consideration of the act itself. It was a symbol that he was back in the fraternity of mankind. Each of them would be kinder to other men all the days of their lives because they had seen the dark, lonely walls of hell.

The four rode with little comment, but from each to all the others there seemed a mingling of spirit, almost as if they were become of common substance.

Marianne was a small, light-haired girl. Sitting beside him she reminded David of Alice when Alice was young and sweet and unembittered. But Marianne had the clarity of mind that Alice had never known.

The two men in front, the engineer and the artist, seemed aged far more than the gap of years since he had last seen them would account for. They were different men, of stature and humanity. In contrast he thought of the hordes among whom he had walked the previous night searching for a nameless something. Here it was, he thought. In the profile of these men—and in Marianne—was the thing he had sought, the lost and forgotten image of himself.

In all of them was strange newness that he could not name or define. It was the same new strength he had felt in the first moments of awakening, but it had been overshadowed and strangled in the darkness of that lone-

liness during those first hours. Now it was back and he began to examine it for what it was.

They drove to a dilapidated house in the oldest section of town. Cautiously alert for followers, they stopped at the rear, and all of them got out.

The interior of the house was more pleasant than the outside. It had the atmosphere of an apartment where a couple of highly civilized men had lived for a long time.

Before she allowed him to question or be questioned, Marianne took David into the bathroom to finish the repairs to his face, and into the kitchen where she prepared a soup for him.

She sat at the opposite end of the table and watched as he ate. He was aware of her presence like a warming radiance. When he looked up abruptly she smiled at him, her deep brown eyes alive with *human* qualities, but, as if she read in his eyes that he was reminded of other things, she did not speak.

How many long, cold years had it been since he had sat thus in communion with Alice, he thought. Which of them had been the first to break the spell? Fault was in them both, but he was willing to assume all blame if the healing powers of Synthesis could answer his yearning for her.

Finshed with the light meal, he allowed Marianne to lead him to the living room where John and Martin were waiting expectantly.

"For us this is unexpected luck to have you with us," said John. "For you it may not be the tragedy you have believed if some of the things we have figured out are correct. We hope we can look to look to you for the advice we have long needed and an explanation of just what has happened to us."

"I am afraid you know more than I," said David. "What have you done?"

"Little more than getting together and communicating with each other. Martin and I were in the same sanatorium cell, and we discovered we could talk to each other. Through the shop they provided for occupational therapy

we succeeded in devising a gadget to pass through the fences. We took it easy at first because we wanted to find out what had happened to cut us off from everyone else. We still don't know, but we have concluded it's not wholly bad.

"We gradually contacted most of the others, about seventy-five so far, and then planned to escape permanently as a group. This is the beginning, and now you have come along. What would you advise?"

"I don't know. You'll have to wait for an answer to that."

He sat down before the group and faced them. He spoke again slowly. "It has only been hours since I believed that I was utterly alone and incapable of communication with any other person in the world. I don't need to tell you about that hell. Each of you has been in it longer than I.

"I am beginning to have a faint understanding of what may have caused it."

"We thought at first that it might have been deliberate," said Martin. "We thought it might have been given during Synthesis to replace other faculties that couldn't be used. But that didn't make sense in the light of what was done to us afterwards, locking us up."

David shook his head. "It was not deliberate—not on our part at least. I think it was entirely accidental in the sense of being unforeseen, but that does not imply a failure of the process. Rather, I think it has worked entirely too well!

"It would not be the first time that a semantic mechanism has gone on its own and turned up surprising results. You may recall Jamieson's experiences when he first devised a semantic selector and it turned out Scott's 'History of Mankind'. Historians are still trying to show that it is a true forecast of the future, but for some reason he would never reveal during his lifetime Jamieson was positive that it would never happen as the book related. He said the chances of it were mathematically zero and let it go at that."

"After I knew that I possessed a language common to the Synthesized," said Marianne, "it seemed to me that its only possible origin was in the semantic selector."

"You're leaving us behind," said John. "We don't know much about those particular things."

"The Mantell Synthesis," said David, "consists of replacing the library of the brain, but of equal importance are the two halves of the process. Information is restored in punched card form, which in this case consists of punched molecules.

"Duplication of the basic cell structure, the complex cortical processes, and establishing metabolistic reactions —these things have been done by biochemists for half a century in an effort to create an artificial thinking brain. But none of their efforts succeeded because they had no data mechanism and stubbornly refused to recognize it in spite of the antiquity of Von Foerster's work on punched molecules.

"Synthesis builds up these molecular files in previously prepared basic cell structures. Blank molecules are first created chemically. Then they are 'punched' with data from giant pattern molecules which have been prepared from a number of sources. That is old, too. At least as early as the twentieth century the principle of molecular molding was suspected.

"The chief data source is the brains of associates of the patient. Electroencephalographic data was taken first from my wife's brain, then from about thirty others. This covered a vast sector of my life. Then data was poured in from all the trivia and impedimenta that could be discovered to have ever been in my possession. All these carried connotations and implications far beyond the bare artifact.

"Lastly, book data were poured in. Thousands of tomes that I had read and thousands more that I hadn't. All of this added up to a pretty complete mass of information that came very close to duplicating what had been in my brain before the accident.

"That was the first half of the process, but in that

state a brain is like a great library that has just been moved to new quarters, in which the truckers have dumped the books and file cards in a hopeless jumble in the middle of the floor. A brain that regained consciousness in such a condition would be in a state of lethal insanity. The body would die within minutes from the confusion of impulses."

"I begin to see where the semantic selector comes in," said Martin. "That's the librarian."

"Right. The earliest work in direct line with selector development was the mathematical theory of communication developed by Shannon in the twentieth century. It flowered in the discovery of the Law of Random by Jamieson and his subsequent invention of the semantic selector. Marianne can tell you what the selector does. She's spent five years as nursemaid to them."

The girl smiled. "No Jamieson selector ever did what the Mantell Synthesis demands. The old ones were mere toys that could take random combinations of a few items, several hundred thousand up to a couple of million, and arrange them in order, rejecting all semantic noise and nonsense. But Synthesis demands that this be done for a set of items numbering around 10^{21}."

"Surely a man in a whole lifetime doesn't accumulate that many items of data," exclaimed John.

"No—but he could. The wastage of the human brain has been deplored for centuries, and I wonder if we haven't stumbled onto the answer to it right here.

"The learning process we all go through is a clumsy mess at best. Unable to cope with the world in childhood, we acquire tens of thousands of erroneous learning sets, which are seldom corrected in later life. They remain all our lives cross-indexed with masses of reasonably correct data. When the brain is asked for a certain response it fumbles around through these incorrect sets and brings them up about as often as the correct ones to which they are cross-indexed."

"That explains it!" Marianne cried in sudden excitement. "That's what's happened! The selector has sorted

out and done away with every one of those semantically erroneous learning sets. We've got the same data with a modern filing system."

David smiled at her almost childish excitement, but he felt the same superb confidence that bubbled out in her.

"I think you're quite right," he said. "I was working up to it by a slower approach. The learning of a child is a hodgepodge of accumulating experiences—like the delivery of books dumped on a library floor. These are carelessly filed and cross-indexed by emotion, a poor, inefficient librarian who hates her job but bitterly resents the rightful attempts of reason to take it over and put emotion in her own place as head, say, of the art department. Emotion is a selfish old spinster who wants the whole job and glory and makes a mess of all of it."

"Are we then cold and rational beings wholly without feeling?" said Martin in dismay. "Surely that is as bad as what we once were!"

"Is that the way you feel?"

"No—I think I feel an emotional sensitivity as great as I ever did."

"Probably greater. With emotion in her own place she is much more effective than when she was in charge of the files, which she messed up so badly.

"The semantic selector, in arranging the pre-punched molecules in precise order with semantically correct cross-indexing, has swept clean the crazy, nonsensical filing system accumulated over the years. Learning has been speeded up because there are prepared vast numbers of blank molecules that can efficiently receive new data now. The ties that required us to evaluate present data on the basis of early experiences are gone.

"The greatest evolutionary deficiency of the human brain is lack of a built-in semantic selector system. Some selection must go on it is true, but from an evolutionary standpoint the selector must be as primitive as the brain of a worm.

"The Law of Random is a perplexing thing that men have never fathomed," he went on quietly. "We know

it exists and we have fashioned semantic selectors to abide by it, but we have never seen the heights or the depths of it.

"Evolution appears to follow the Law, but in a smooth and flowing curve along which mutations themselves are part of a continuous process.

"We have jumped the curve entirely. We are a discontinuity. If we understood more than a fragment of the Law of Random, we could determine if we are an error that is to be erased or if we are the beginnings of a new and higher curve. Perhaps in a sufficiently large scale of time the whole curve is naturally discontinuous. We'll never live long enough—the race may not—to know the answer empirically. Some day we might solve it epistemologically.

"Without any way of knowing we may as well assume that we won't have to wait for the mutations of evolution. We have within our hands the means to make a new kind of man, one which can displace the old and bring reason into the world.

"Neurosis and psychosis have been driven beyond the reach of us forever. I am very certain we are the most completely sane people the world has ever known!"

IV

The two men blinked sharply as if stung by a quick shock. Marianne gasped a little at the appalling nakedness of his claim. But none of them spoke to deny it.

As if it were the suddenly perceived answer to a long and intricate problem upon which he had spent his whole life, David felt the delicate pleasure of discovery. It was the logical goal achieved after a lifetime of wandering amid faint clues and whispered rumors. He felt as if he were standing upon a high peak beholding a vast and beautiful sea which he had always known would be there.

But his companions were not with him in spirit. They were not ready to behold such vastness without terror.

"How can we ever be sure of what we have lost?"

said Marianne. She was sitting in a contracted position, hugging her arms close to her as if sudden cold had pervaded the room.

"We are not what we once were. You say we have emotion, but is it anything more than the recorded emotion of a symphony which can be stamped out by the thousands? Are we anything more than the products of a machine and, therefore, machines ourselves? Where is individuality, personality if the soul of man is no more than a collection of figurate molecules?"

"You have answered your own question," he said kindly. "You are afraid and I am not. If a single molecule among all the billions that have been recreated in your brain is different from those in mine then we are not identical.

"There is individuality enough for the most rugged of rebels against the herd. As for personality, that has certainly been changed, but little of value has been lost. Fear-born hate is certainly gone. In its place there is understanding of the motives of men. Greed is no longer in you because you can evaluate your own worth.

"Yet the intensity of your laughter, your capacity for sorrow, and your intellectual interests are specifically your own and different from any other man's. Every brain upon the whole Earth could pass beneath the selector, but no man would emerge the duplicate of any one of us."

"I cannot comprehend it," said John. "I have spent my life building symbols of my own emotional responses in order to convey those responses to others. But I—"

He stopped short. David smiled. "Keep going. You can't deny the logic of your own train of thought. Perhaps this is the key you need: No one else in the whole world could have painted the same pictures you have made."

A great peace seemed to flow over the artist. He settled back in the chair, his face calm as if a great turbulence within him had suddenly calmed.

"That's what you did," he said, "you took my pictures and out of *them* you obtained data to punch the mole-

cules that now make up the only brain in the world that could direct the painting of those pictures—mine."

"That is it. And still you might fear that much is lost, but it is not. A single hour's contact with another brain leaves enough imprint of our personality that it would suffice for fifty percent reproduction. No Synthesis has been performed with the assistance of less than twenty such persons who have known the patient for long periods.

"True, Synthesis could not exist without these recordings we have made upon other brains. Though it has not yet been done I believe that a one hundred percent restoration could be made with adequate assistance and no one could tell the difference in the Synthesized individual except for the increased efficiency of mind. Nothing essential would be lost."

"But the language—" said Martin. "You have not explained yet the advantages or even the full reason for this substitution of a wholly artificial language for the one we knew."

"I can name one advantage very quickly," said David. "How long do you suppose our conversation has taken so far?"

"About fifteen or twenty minutes."

"I've been noting Marianne's watch since I sat down. That was just thirty-eight seconds ago."

Marianne jerked her arm up as if she could confirm the statement with a glance. Then slowly, disbelief faded and they realized how incredibly short a time their discussion had taken.

"Shannon introduced the factor of entropy into his formulations," said David. "His work has scarcely been improved upon since his day.

"As the organization of a communication system increases so that there is minimum freedom of choice, increased certainty, and minimum noise of both semantic and engineering kinds—as these things approach the ideal the entropy of the system approaches zero. I suggest

that the communication systems of our brains have been reduced to virtually zero entropy by the selector.

"As a result, there is zero redundancy also—there is absolutely no part of a message between us which could be omitted and leave possible a correct translation. Likewise, any possible sound that we can make has a single, definite, and completely understandable semantic significance. Ideas that once would have required minutes of speaking can be conveyed with a single sound of almost infinitely precise intonation. There is no possible misunderstanding on the part of the hearer whose communication faculties likewise have been ordered by the semantic selector.

"For this reason we have found it impossible to understand those about us in any form of communication—speech, reading, sign language. All are beyond our comprehension because, as Shannon demonstrated so long ago, a channel cannot pass a message of greater entropy than the channel capacity without equivocation. Since we demand zero entropy and ordinary communication employs so much higher values, we understand nothing."

Martin spoke up. "How well we know! In the hospital John and I beat our brains trying to work up a code system with the attendants and doctors. They did nothing but stare and grin as if we were cute monkeys cutting capers."

"Consider what it would mean as a universal language," said David. "Never has it been possible for one man to know another's thoughts with hundred percent certainty. Now it can be done. The new language makes possible unity of thought and action that has scarcely been dreamed of. What it would do to the advertisers, the politicians, and all those who thrive by breeding misunderstanding between men!"

"How can we remain in our present isolation?" exclaimed John. "What can we *do?* There are only the hundred of us. Is there no possibility of our ever breaking through?"

David looked carefully at each of them. The sharpness of his perceptions made the very presence of the others a thing of exquisite pleasure. But this was only an oasis where the drink of companionship with his own kind could be tasted for a short time. Dawn was coming with its necessities that would break the perfection of this hour.

They could not exist in this isolated world within a world.

"Suppose it were possible," said David thoughtfully, "to increase the entropy of our brains somewhat, deliberately introducing the necessary disorganization that would permit communication with the world, retaining if possible the present speech channels so that we could translate from one to the other."

"From what you said previously such a thing sounded impossible," said Martin.

"It may be. As long as the present semantic entropy approaches zero without actually achieving it, however, the selector might be able to fix it for us. It's a gamble, but I'm willing to try. Yet I couldn't be the first."

He saw the change come upon their faces now. They, who a moment ago were terrified at the vastness of the world which they had entered with him, now shrank before the implications of his words.

"We can't go *back!*" cried Marianne. "Not after this—have dim memories of a period of terrible confusion and uncertainty, pain and misunderstanding, a period worse than the first days after the Synthesis."

"Such residual impressions are possible," said David. "I am appalled by the ugliness of what I see in the city about us, and the stupidity it signifies. Those I saw on the streets seemed to have shrunk to moronic stature. Have any of you checked your I.Q.?"

"How could we without standards?" said Martin.

"That's why it did not seem very astounding that you could penetrate the barrier field around the hospital with a baling wire gadget made in the therapy shop—when it

has been mathematically proven the field cannot be penetrated."

"Why . . . we'd never thought of it. It seemed a simple problem."

"I'd say your I.Q.—and that of all of us—has gone up by one to two hundred points at least."

"Supermen, huh?" John smiled.

"No!" Marianne exclaimed seriously. "That's an ugly word that puts us above and beyond humanity. We are not that. We are part of it. We are the first *normal* men. We are the first of what all men could and should be. Anything less is illness of the normal man. We have been healed of that universal illness."

"That's a better definition," said David. "Every man who is born with adequate biochemical proportions is potentially a noble creature. We are the first of our kind to be put in the way to achieve our potentialities.

"Yet—we must give it up. To a degree, at least—if we are to re-enter the world we have left. Of that I am certain."

"Suppose we do? What then?"

"There is a far broader field for Synthesis than gross physical injuries. Reorientation by the selector should be made available to every man. It could banish neurosis and psychosis from the Earth—if it were permitted."

"There would hardly be opposition to that," said John.

"Perhaps. But Synthesis is now illegal because of the failures it has produced so far. I have long worked on borrowed time."

"But we've got to restore contact! How can it be done?"

"I'll take one of you with me for increase of entropy. That one can be an interpreter so that Dr. Vixen can take care of me. Then we will see what happens to the opposition."

"Who do you want?"

Each of them was looking at him now with eyes of dread. Though it possessed its own private hell of isola-

tion from humanity, this was a paradise they regretted leaving.

"Let's draw names," said David.

It was Marianne.

V

It was the night following when they drove into the darkened grounds of the Institute. A few random lights showed in laboratories in some of the buildings, but the Synthesis building was dark.

As the car drew to a halt the four of them left it and fanned out like silent, skillful thieves. David applied the combination to gain entrance through the main door, but they had to slug a watchman who surprised them. He greeted David with recognition and a friendly smile. They couldn't take the risk.

Inside, David hurried Marianne through the dark hallways and past the great banks of the selector equipment that was silent now like a herd of sleeping giants. John and Martin followed at a short distance.

David turned on the lights as they entered the operating chamber. Marianne shrank in momentary hesitation as she saw the operating table before her.

David tried to smile reassuringly, but he understood her fear. "You don't have to go through with it," he said.

"Yes . . . I do. But you don't know what I'll be like when I get up from there, do you?"

"No. I don't know for sure."

While she changed to the operating robe he set the matrix of the semantic selector to widen the communication channels of her mind. Then he helped her to the table so that she lay with her face in a cradle that permitted access to anaesthetic and oxygen. Seconds later she was unconscious.

He picked up the electrode helmet from its sterilizing case and poised it over her head. At that moment he

saw the shadowy figure standing in the dark depths between two panels of selector control equipment.

With a single uttered sound he commanded John and Martin. They circled unseen and collared the watcher with sudden speed that was seemingly more than human.

It was Vixen they brought out half suspended between them, his eyes wide with terror.

"I need his help if he'll give it," said David, "but if he thinks we're insane and is part of a trap to catch us he can't give it."

"Shall we tie him up to be safe?"

"Wait. Let his arms go. But be ready to grab him again."

David held the helmet in his hands, its hundred spiny probes a terrible weapon to hurl into a man's face if he had to do it.

Cautiously, he held it out as if to Vixen, and then lowered it over the head of Marianne. Vixen advanced slowly towards the table, his eyes flashing from one to the other of the men at his side. Then he reached for the helmet and touched the adjustments with gentle skill.

They worked together swiftly then, no sound passing between any of them. By electroencephalograph they positioned the helmet with exacting care. Carefully, the hundred or more probes, scarcely a dozen molecules in thickness, were screwed down, penetrating the skull and into precise loci of the brain structure of Marianne.

It was exhausting labor. Time after time the probes had to be withdrawn when they fell short of correct placement by a few cell diameters. David was grateful for the presence of Vixen and prayed that his friend would have faith enough in him to go through with it with all the skill at his command, but he knew he could not be certain yet of Vixen's motives.

He finished the last probe. Vixen was perspiring, but they did not pause. He cut in the switches that let the impulses begin pouring through the giant, overhead cable that connected with the helmet, upsetting the per-

fection that had previously been created within the mind of Marianne.

It seemed a grim and ugly thing to do, yet it must be done to all of them if they were to survive, he thought. Such a tiny minority could not exist behind the barrier that rose between them and all the rest of the world. If the process were successful, they could then bridge both worlds and invite the rest of mankind to share their fortune.

For two hours the selector mechanism shifted and surged and poured its disturbing pulses through the brain of Marianne. David did not know how long it would take for completion and he worried for her safety and the possible discovery of all of them.

Halfway from midnight to dawn the great mechanism chucked to a halt and the flow of symbols ceased. Tediously, the probes were withdrawn, and Vixen lent a needed hand again not knowing if he had helped perform a miracle or been accessory to murder.

They revived Marianne as quickly as possible. David remembered his awakening to loneliness and wondered if Marianne would know again a forsaken desolation, having crossed back over the barrier.

But even so, he was not prepared for her reaction. She sat up slowly and looked about with wild expectancy in her eyes. Then her face filled with understanding and a gasp of horror came from her throat—a single long scream of despair.

"Marianne!" David rushed to comfort her in his arms, but he could not still the violent shaking of her body.

They let her cry, and in time she quieted as if some psychic storm had swept her. She looked up at them finally with the quietness of desolation.

"How have we lived like beasts all our lives?"

"Do you recall the language, Marianne? Can you speak with Dr. Vixen?"

She nodded absently and spoke a phrase uncomprehended by David and his two companions. But Dr. Vix-

en's face lighted with relief and joy. It seemed an endless conversation then upon which they embarked.

When she turned again to David her voice was flat and the joy of life seemed to have gone from her. "We can understand. He says he has waited here for you each night believing you would come back. He did not believe you were insane. The workers here have kept the secret of your escape so that no one knew of it. You were not pursued.

"I have explained a little of what we have done, but I can hardly get through the high semantic noise level. I want to think in Synthesized terms while speaking in English. Let's go back to our isolation. I feel I can't endure this chaos of thought."

"You are more sensitive than before," said David. "You are on a bridge between paradise and hell. In either one, with no knowledge of the other, you could be content. Understanding both is a special hell of its own. Those whose entropy is never reduced to the low levels we know will not experience it.

"But I'm coming to join you. Ask Vixen if he'll stay and follow through with the same treatment for me."

"He has already agreed."

David awoke to nightmare. The chaos was like some great machine gone wrong, every part working against all others yet inexplicably still moving. Chaotic sounds, shrill and wild, rang in his ears and ten thousand unbidden visions marched before his eyes.

He remembered Marianne's cry of despair and understood it fully. He was aware of her by his side clutching his hand tightly in both of hers.

"It gets better after a little while," she murmured. "I hope so." He managed a grin. "It's pretty bad at first, isn't it?"

Vixen was there, anxiously. "Are you all right, David? Can you understand me now? Can you tell me what went wrong?"

David had the continued impression of birdlike flutter-

ing. He wondered if all men would seem to be of such reduced stature as Vixen—and knew it was so.

"I'm all right," he said. "Order breakfast for all of us sent to my office, and we'll determine what needs to be done next."

Dr. Dodge, President of the Institute of Bio-Sciences, was a small, pudgy man. His thick hands could scarcely manipulate a scalpel or the focusing dials of a microscope. That was a major reason why he was a research executive instead of a practicing scientist, David thought.

David had heard all of the doctor's weary arguments. They had been over the same ground again and again in the past months—but he had not had Marianne on previous visits. Dodge had not yet learned that David himself was a Synthesized.

"I want to present Marianne Carter," David said. "She is the first direct proof of the success of the Mantell Synthesis. The most recent case, she required eighty percent replacement and is willing to submit to any test required to demonstrate the success of Synthesis."

Dodge glanced at Marianne somewhat as if she were a specimen under glass. He pursed his lips in displeasure, then turned angry eyes towards David.

"Have you disobeyed the memorandum I issued to your department? This girl was as much a failure as the rest! If you have experimented further, you have disobeyed my order."

"She is proof of the success of Synthesis."

"After my order was given!"

"Is that important in the face of success?"

"Extremely important." He patted a stack of documents on his desk. "Here are the accumulated protests that have come from every humanitarian society in the country. Every public affairs observer has broadcast disapproval of your continued experiments with human beings. Now we have a threat in Congress to stop the flow of funds while a long investigation of the entire In-

stitute is conducted. You have threatened the very existence of our organization!

"I have pacified the opposition by publication of my memorandum which I issued your laboratory. If I should now announce a resumption of Synthesis they'd have my hide. If I uttered the very word in public, our funds would be dried up."

"Are we to be dictated to and be directed in our research by news propagandists and politicians?"

"We are to serve the public interest," said Dodge as if he spoke an infallible maxim. "We exist by public acclaim and to serve those who support us."

"All right. Let's give them proof that Synthesis can rebuild a human mind. Let me show Marianne to the whole world."

Dodge glanced at her distastefully. "Eighty percent replacement. Who could ever be sure if he were speaking with a human being or a mechanical robot? I have never favored your attempts to reclaim the dead, and I will not support your fantasies now in the face of the threat you have brought to the Institute.

"No. Your refusal to obey orders shows you are unfit to direct the tremendous facilities of the laboratory entrusted to you. From this moment they are closed to you. You are dismissed. You may have time to remove your personal effects. Your further appearance will constitute illegal trespass."

"That's not fair!" cried Marianne. "What of the others like me? What is to become of them?"

"There will be no more tampering with those poor specimens of humanity. They will be permitted to live out their lives in adequate custody, but we want no more like them."

David was about to speak in reckless fury now, but Marianne stopped him with a single sharp word in their new tongue, which Dodge scarcely noticed, thinking it only an exclamation.

But it conveyed to David all that he understood he should have perceived by himself. Dodge deluded even

himself as to his real reasons for opposing Synthesis. He was a miserable little monarch, greedy and fearful of his empire. There was bitter hate for one such as David who had ranged so far beyond in the vast plains of research that the short-winded capacities of Dr. Dodge could scarcely keep him in sight.

It was the envy and hate of a little man for a big one. He would never attempt to understand, but he would wield all the power of his governmental authority to destroy that which he could not comprehend.

David rose. "We may return," he said, "with a better argument."

They returned to the laboratory. During their absence, John and Martin had been treated for increased entropy under Vixen's direction. They were in a state of despair.

With Vixen, the four of them met in David's office once again. David felt sorry for Vixen. Not only so seemingly incompetent in their midst, he was now a bewildered little man. It was as if they were simply taller than he and could look over a high wall into a garden that was hidden from his vision even as he talked with them.

"Dodge refused to remove the ban on the operation," said David. For Vixen's benefit he spoke in English.

"I don't understand your urgency," said Vixen slowly. "There is something new in all of you. It makes me afraid. Perhaps it made Dodge afraid, too. Tell me what it is that is different, and what it is that you are so urgent about. There is more involved than mere continuance of the Synthesis operations."

"Much more. It involves the whole race. We have in our hands the capacities for development that might have been learned or evolved in the next million years—if we hadn't killed ourselves off by then."

Swiftly, and in crude terms that Vixen could understand, David explained the thing that had happened to their brains through the manipulation of the semantic selector. "Any mind, then, can pass beneath the selector," he concluded, "and become ordered and rational

just as ours have done, and become aware of the new language as well as the old."

Vixen was staring at him and breathing heavily when David finished. "And you suppose that you can entice the whole world to change themselves over?" he demanded.

"The thousands in the mental hospitals will be our first opportunity," said David. "We'll take the most demented and raise them to heights of genius that cannot be imagined—or ignored. Who will be able to resist our offer then?"

"Ninety-nine percent of the population," said Vixen. "*I* would resist if I were one of them—"

"You!" David's voice was filled with sudden contempt, and then he recognized his error. Vixen was not the stupid creature he seemed. It was the Synthesized who had changed and Vixen was still in the intellectual vanguard of his race.

"Why?" David spoke more gently.

"I am fifty years old. I have a wife and children. I like things the way they are. I like myself the way I am, if you please. I am content. And I, who understand very well the inconstancy of our established interpretations of the laws of nature, am far more pliable than the mass of men. You will find few takers if you try to sell your new world literally as such."

"But *you will* join us?"

"I don't know. I really don't know, David. I'll have to think about it very much for a long time."

The four of them stood looking at him incredulously. It was no longer within their power to comprehend the workings of neurons that could lead to such a response as his. It represented only illness.

Yet Dr. Vixen was an independent being with his own right to choose or reject—and so were the billions who were even less than he.

"You have not shown me this world which you see," Vixen went on as if trying to soften a blow whose impact he fully sensed. "You cannot show it, perhaps, but

tell it only in words which you have said are feeble things to convey that which you have experienced.

"Perhaps you will find enough clients among the young and adventurous, but neither quality is strong in me any longer."

"How can a blind man be told the color of the sky?" asked Marianne. "How can a frightened child be made to understand what it's like to be free? Only by experience can it be known."

"You have a viewpoint we had not dreamed of," said David, "but one that we must consider."

In their new language he said, "Vixen may be right. In the end we may have to ram this down humanity's throat, but we can't even put the rest of the hundred in communicable condition unless we change Dodge's mind. Tomorrow at the latest they'll be here with a dismantling order."

"How can we change Dodge except by force?" said Martin.

"We can't. You get Dodge here tonight," he said to John and Martin. "I'm going to get one other at the same time—my wife, Alice."

Marianne gasped incredulously. "You don't want *her!*"

Watching, David saw her face crumple momentarily as she lost control. Then she murmured, "I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry. Forgive me."

He understood how it must have seemed to her. They were the first to cross back over the bridge to contact with fellow humans. There had seemed for a time a companionship and a narrow unity between them. Of it she had fashioned a dream.

He touched her arm. "She's my wife, Marianne. I've loved her for a long time—loved and neglected and hurt her. I'm going to make it up. You've dreamed a lovely and a foolish thing. You could almost have been our daughter."

"That would have been something," she said almost bitterly.

He smiled with tenderness and lifted her chin. At least

no one need fear that Synthesis would make the race an emotionally sterile group of creatures intent only on intellectual forms of tick-tack-toe.

"Please, Marianne. I'm going to need your help."

"Of course. Forgive me."

His own house looked strange to him as if he had been gone a very long time and had forgotten the details of its lines. Yet he remembered well the last night he had been here, the night that Alice plotted murder.

He could see lights and hoped she was alone. He was not prepared for murder, but the urge would be great if Exter were there.

She was alone. He let himself in quietly and was suddenly before her in the same living room they had shared for so many long and empty years.

She uttered a scream that he thought would never die. White faced, she cowered in the depths of the sofa on which she sat.

"David! Don't come nearer—leave me alone! Vixen promised . . . I gave you back your life!"

"I'm not going to hurt you, Alice. Please don't be afraid, and don't try to explain. Listen to what I have to say."

She watched his approach as if hypnotized in terror by a creeping cobra. He sat down and put his arm along the back of the sofa, but she shrank from it.

"Something very wonderful has come out of this thing that has happened to us. We have learned how to control Synthesis, how to reorder the human mind so that life can be lived as it should be. The hates and fears can be cleaned out of our minds to make a fresh start in complete understanding and trust.

"You and I can make a fresh start. I want you to come to the laboratory with me and submit to the selector. Things can be again the way they were fifteen years ago—except better."

Her fear-wide eyes had not blinked once. "No . . . I

won't let you do anything to me, David. You can't make me. Go away and let me alone!"

He tried to tell her again in other words, and she remained hidden still behind her wall of terror. He felt suddenly very tired.

"Alice, you loved me once. I did nothing to let you know how much it meant to me or make it grow. But, if I thought there was nothing left of it, I'd never have come back tonight. I love you and I want you back the way we were so long ago, and it can be that way. I'm telling you the truth, Alice."

"The day after we were married you disappeared into your laboratory, and I've scarcely seen you since."

It was then that he was sure, for her eyes became soft with the fleeting memory of a time beyond their troubled years.

"I'll make it up, every day of neglect. I promise you I will, darling."

He hit her then sharply and carefully on the point of the chin. She uttered a brief, low cry and sagged back against the sofa.

They had Dr. Dodge already in the operating room when he carried Alice's moaning, half limp form into the laboratory.

Vixen helped them. His face was white and he moved like a man in a nightmare. He had gone too far now to do anything but go the whole way.

He needed sleep badly, but the rest of them seemed unaware that they were starting their second twenty-four hours without rest. Vixen watched David's sure hands, beside which his own were clumsy paws. David had always possessed great skill in the laboratory, but his fingers seemed inspired now.

He was baffled and half angered by David's tenderness towards his wife. Vixen had known them over the years and had watched Alice grow from a vibrant, beautiful girl into a harsh, treacherous creature who could look upon murder.

Vixen tried to allow for the neglect that David had shown her, but then he thought of his own wife. She had been patient. No, Alice would have been discarded as a worthless human by all but David who still saw in her the dreams he had held long ago.

For good or for evil, the Synthesis had produced a mighty upheaval in those upon whom it was performed.

With difficulty, Vixen performed the work of driving the probes into the brain of Dodge with precision. He would have enjoyed much more smashing that shining pate with a hammer, he thought. And his life would be no more forfeit than for what he was already doing. For assault and kidnaping they were already dead men.

He sat down when his work was through and watched David switch on the simultaneous channels of the selector that fed pulses to the brains of Dodge and of Alice. The room was silent and there was nothing to be done during the long hours ahead.

He must have slept, dozing in the uncomfortable chair by the wall. He was roused at last by the excited babbling of voices and recognized the speech of the Synthesized in their wild new tongue.

They were around the two tables, and the helmets and probes had been removed from the two figures. Dodge had been turned over and was struggling to sit up, his face suffused with the red blush of rage. He looked like a pudgy Buddha squatting on the table in the shapeless gown that covered him. Vixen felt a chill of dread.

But a slow change spread over the face of Dodge. He reminded Vixen suddenly of a man blind for many years who was seeing again the dawn. His face lighted, and he looked around.

After a moment, his head bowed, and he wept quietly.

David was not watching. He was beside Alice. She had not yet seen him, and Vixen could glimpse only the side of her face, but ugly lines of strain and dark intent seemed to have vanished. A quality of rightful youth had taken possession of her.

She turned then, and caught sight of David. Her arms

went out to him, and he crushed her close to him. Vixen could see the tears rising in her eyes and spinning down her cheeks and heard her murmuring over and over, "My darling—"

Marianne sat beside Vixen, her face wistful but not bitter, and Vixen's eyes continued to shift from the face of Dodge to Alice and back.

"If *those* two could be changed," he whispered half to himself, "the whole world could be made over."

"I'm next. You'll let me be next?" he demanded urgently. "And after me, the whole world!"

THE CORIANIS DISASTER

Murray Leinster

When the *Corianis* vanished in space between Kholar and Maninea, she was missed at once, which was distinctly unusual. Jack Bedell was aboard her at the time, but his presence had nothing to do with it; it was pure chance. Ordinarily a ship is missed only when her follow-up papers, carried from her port of departure by another ship, arrive at her port of destination and say that she left at such-and-such a time, bound for the place where she didn't arrive. This can be a surprisingly long time later.

But in the case of the *Corianis*, there was no time lost. The Planetary President of Maninea had paid a state visit to Kholar for the beginning of negotiations for a trade-treaty between the two neighbor worlds. Now he headed back home on the *Corianis,* which was chartered for the trip. Important political figures of Kholar accompanied him to try to finish the trade-treaty job on Maninea. It was a charming picture of interplanetary political cordiality, and Jack Bedell got passage by accident. It was a short hop anyhow—barely six light-years—calling for two days in overdrive. Then, the day after the *Corianis'* departure, a political storm blew up in the Planetary Congress of Kholar, and a second ship was chartered to follow and give new and contradictory in-

structions to the Kholarian negotiators. So the second ship arrived less than two days after the *Corianis* should have touched ground. Only, the *Corianis* hadn't; it had vanished in space.

From any viewpoint, it was a nasty business. There was a limit to the distance at which ships could communicate in space, and there was a limit to the speed of radiation by which a distress signal could be sent; the combination was depressing. Call a light-second an inch: then six light years is thirty-six miles. In this frame of reference, a ship like the *Corianis*—a big one—is smaller than a virus particle; and if something happens to it on the two-day run, the job of finding it is strictly comparable to finding one lost virus-particle on several dozen miles of highway, with only a very few other motes able to move around and look for it.

It was an extra-nasty bit of business, too, because the Planetary President of Maninea was on board, accompanied by the Minister of State of Kholar; the Minister of Commerce of Kholar; the Speaker of the Planetary Senate of Maninea; the Chairman of the Lower House Committee on Extra-Planetary Affairs of Kholar; and a thronging assortment of assistants, aides, secretaries, wives, children, and servants. They were all settled down for the journey when Jack Bedell diffidently applied for passage. Somebody misunderstood, and thought him part of the two official parties; he got on board less than ten minutes before take-off.

He wasn't important; he was only a mathematical physicist. When the *Corianis* was realized to be missing, people worried about the more important people and felt badly about the women and children. Nobody was disturbed about Bedell, but the *Corianis* needed to be found and helped in her emergency. Nobody had ever yet located a ship once vanished in space, but the *Corianis* was remarkably well-found, with special devices for distress signals. She might be located.

II

Naturally, when she lifted off there was no faintest hint of disaster ahead. She was a huge ship and licensed for journeys of any length within the galaxy. On the Kholar City spaceport she towered twenty-five stories high, and was at least as much in diameter. She was an imposing spectacle as she waited for the clear-to-rise signal. When she rose, she was even more stately.

She lifted at 4:11 Kholar City time. In two minutes, the sky outside her ports was dark. In four minutes, stars appeared and automatic shutters cut off the burning light of the local sun. In twelve minutes, she was well out of atmosphere and merely a speck of dazzling sunlight reflected down to those who watched her departure. She was an artificial star, visible in daylight. She went on out and out and out for some tens of thousands of miles, then she swung slightly about some inner axis; she steadied.

She flicked instantaneously out of sight as her overdrive field sprang into being, and drove for the Maninean solar system at some hundreds of times the speed of light. By the nature of the structured field about her, the *Corianis* could not remain stationary. Wherever the field was, the fact of being there was intolerable. It acted as if it, and all its contents, were possessed of a negative inertia, so that enormous energy would be needed to hold it still. The theory of the overdrive field was not fully understood, but the best guess was that it partly neutralized those cosmic forces which tend to keep things as they are, and what they are, and where they are. Nobody knew just how delicate the balance of such forces might be, but the overdrive field worked.

Anyhow, the *Corianis* translated herself from one place to another with a celerity that was unthinkable. She did not so much move through space as exist for infinitesimal parts of a second in a series of places where she could not continue to exist. Yet she was safe enough. Since two things cannot be in the same place at the same time, the *Corianis* could not come to be in a place where

there was something else; she could not collide with a meteor, for example. If one existed at the spot where she should be a single one-millionth-of-a-second ahead—why—she skipped that space and existed temporarily where otherwise she would have been two one-millionths-of-a-second in the future. There were limits to the process, to be sure; it was doubtful as to how far a ship in overdrive could skip; it would not be wise to risk collision with a sun, or even a small planet. But such a thing had never been known to happen.

So the big ship seemed to float, utterly tranquil, in her bubble of modified space, while actually she changed her position with relation to the planet she'd left at the rate of some seven hundred fifty thousand million miles per hour. She was divided into dozens of compartments with separate air-systems and food-supplies for each, and she had two overdrive units—one a spare—and she was equipped with everything that could make for safety. If any ship should have made the journey from Kholar to Maninea without incident, that ship was the *Corianis*. It seemed that nothing less than a special intervention of cosmic ill-will could possibly do her any harm.

The cause of her disaster, however, was pure blind chance. It was as unreasonable as the presence of Jack Bedell among her passengers. He was a small man with a thoughtful expression and a diffident manner. To a few men working in extremely abstruse research, Bedell was a man to be regarded with respect. But he was almost painfully shy; to an average under-secretary he was unimpressive. He was on the *Corianis* because a man he'd gone to Kholar to consult had stepped in front of a speeding ground-car the day before his arrival in Kholar City, and there was no reason for him to stay there. The whole thing was accident.

The disaster to the *Corianis* was at least as unreasonable. Something of the sort had to happen some time or another, but it didn't have to be the *Corianis*—and it didn't have to be the particular mass of planetary debris it was.

For the first twenty-seven hours of her journey, the state of things aboardship was perfectly normal. The Planetary President of Maninea remained in his suite, except for a single formal appearance at dinner. The Minister of State of Kholar practiced equal dignity. The Kholarian Minister of Commerce relaxed—which meant that he strolled through the public rooms and looked over the girl secretaries with a lecherously parental air. Other political figures did other things, none of them outstanding. Nurses took children to the children's diversion-rooms, and some were obediently diverted, while others howled and had to be taken back to their mothers. Jack Bedell wandered about, watching his fellow-passengers with interest, but much too shy to make acquaintances.

The time for sleep arrived—the time by Kholar City meridian, which the passengers observed. It passed. The time for getting up arrived. It passed. The time for breakfast came around. It went by.

Bedell sat in a recreation-room, mildly watching his ship-companions, when the disaster took place. He was probably the only person in the passenger's part of the ship who noticed. The vanishing of the *Corianis* was not spectacular, to those who vanished with it.

The lights dimmed momentarily; there was the faintest possible jar. That was all.

III

From outside, something visible did occur. True, the *Corianis* could not be seen; where she was, she existed for such immeasurably small fractions of a microsecond that she wouldn't have been visible even in the light of a close-crowding sun. But there was no sun hereabouts; the sun Kholar was a fourth-magnitude star back along the ship's course, the sun of Maninea was a third-magnitude star ahead. Here was only starlight.

It was very faint and unable to make anything seem brighter than the tiny glitterings of the galaxy's uncount-

able distant suns. Even if somebody had been hereabouts in a ship out of overdrive, it is unlikely that any warning would have appeared. Now and again a tiny pin-point of light winked out and on again. It couldn't have been observed; there were too many stars, and too few of them blinked out for too-short instants. But there was something out here.

It was debris—a clump of lumps of stone and metal, hurtling to nowhere. They were the fragments of a planet, broken to bits and thrown away through space by the explosion of a nova, like the one that formed the Crab Nebula. The explosion happened before men, back on Earth, had learned to warm themselves by camp-fires. The gas-nebula part of the explosion was long-since expanded to nothingness, but the fragments of a world went on. There were scraps of stone the size of pebbles, and lumps of metal the size of mountains. Some floated alone, up to hundreds of miles from any other. But there was a loose mass of objects gathered together by their small gravitational fields, which was of the size but not the solidity of a minor moon.

All these objects flew onward as they had since the galaxies were closer and almost new. The moon-sized mass of clumped objects crossed the path along which the *Corianis* translated itself. The ship was invisible, the planetary debris undetectable.

There was a sudden, monstrous flare of light. It blazed frenziedly where the largest clump of fragments floated. It was an explosion more savage than any atomic explosion; it volatilized a quantity of metal equal to half the *Corianis'* mass. It jolted the few hundreds of cubic miles of celestial trash which had gathered into a clump. It made a flame of white-hot metal vapor ten miles in diameter, which in milliseconds expanded and dimmed, and in hundredths of a second had expanded so far that it did not even glow.

From a few thousand miles away, it would have looked like a fairly bright spark which went out immediately. From a few million, it would have seemed the temporary

shining of a rather faint star. At a distance the *Corianis* would cover in three heartbeats, a naked eye could not have seen it at all. It was merely some few thousands of tons of metal turned to vapor and expanding furiously. Presently it would constitute a cloud of iron-and-nickel atoms floating in space—which would be unusual; there are calcium clouds between the stars, and hydrogen clouds, but no iron-and-nickel ones. But this would be one.

The *Corianis* was gone.

IV

Bedell tensed a little where he sat in an easychair in a lounge on board the *Corianis*. The lights had blinked; there was a barely noticeable jar. In a partly-filled dining-room just beyond him, people continued with what might be either breakfast or lunch, depending on when they got up. Those who sipped at drinks did not miss a drop. Jack Bedell gazed around him and automatically cocked an eye where speaker-units permitted warnings and information to be given to the entire ship at once. But nothing happened. Nothing. In a city, perhaps, one might not notice if the electricity flickered, or if the floor bumped slightly; but in a ship in space such things are matters of importance.

After a little, Bedell stood up and moved toward the door of that particular room. He glanced along the corridor outside. Yes. At the end there was a view-port, closed now because the ship was in overdrive and there was nothing to be seen. But such ports were very popular among ship passengers at landing-time; they offered the thrill of seeing a world from hundreds, then scores, and then tens of miles as the ship went down to its landing.

A stout woman got in his way, and Bedell diffidently moved aside. He went on to the end of the corridor. There was a manual control by which the shutters outside the port could be opened. He took the handle to open them.

Someone said hesitantly, "Is—is that allowed?"

Bedell turned. It was a girl, a fellow-passenger. He'd noticed her. With the instinct of one who is shy himself, he'd known that she suffered, like himself, the unreasonable but real agonies of self-consciousness. She flushed as he looked at her.

"I—I just thought it might be—forbidden," she half-stammered.

"It's quite all right," he said warmly. "I've done it before, on other ships."

She stood stock-still and he knew she wished herself away; he'd felt that way, too. So he turned the handle and the shutters drew aside. Then he forgot the girl completely for a moment; his hair tried to stand on end.

Because he saw the stars. In overdrive, one does not see the stars; in mid-journey, one does not go out of overdrive. But the stars were visible now—more, there was an irregular blackness which shut out many of them. It moved very slowly with relation to the ship. It was an object floating in emptiness. It could be small and very near, or farther away and many times the size of the *Corianis.*

There was another object, jagged and irregular. There were others. The *Corianis* was out of overdrive and in very bad company, something like three light-years from port.

He swallowed, and then moved aside.

"There are the stars," he told the girl. He very carefully kept his voice steady. "They're all the colors there are. Notice?"

She looked; and the firmament as seen from space is worth looking at. "Oh-h-h!" she cried. She forgot to be shy. "And that blackness . . ."

"It's the effect of the overdrive field," he said untruthfully.

She looked. She was carried away by the sight. Bedell figured she would probably find someone to tell about it, and if there was an emergency—and there was—the fewer passengers who knew about it, the better.

She asked eager questions, and then she turned and

looked at him and realized that she had been talking; she was embarrassed.

"Look!" said Bedell uncomfortably. "I've done quite a lot of space-travel, but I—I find it hard to talk to people, though it's perfectly proper for fellow-passengers to talk. I'd be grateful . . ."

She hesitated; but his diffidence was real. He'd spoken because she would not tell anyone that the ship was out of overdrive. Maybe—maybe—something could be done about it. And people who are shy can often talk together because they understand.

"Then we'll find a place to sit down," he suggested.

Presently, inconspicuously, he wiped sweat off his forehead. The ship would be about halfway on its journey. If it made a signal, and if the signal could reach so far, it would reach the two nearest planets some three years from now, when the *Corianis* was forgotten. There were other resources, but they depended on the ship being missed right away. That wasn't likely.

So he talked to the girl. Her name was Kathy Sanders. She was secretary to an assistant to the Secretary of Commerce.

When they separated, he thought of something.

"Now, why the hell didn't I remember that a passenger ship has to have a spare overdrive unit?" he demanded of himself. "How silly can I get? Everything's all right. It must be!"

But it wasn't.

V

The *Corianis* lay dead in space. Dark objects floated about her; they were lumps, bits, masses, mountain-sized things which millions of years before had been part of a planet.

There'd been only the skipper and the first officer and a quartermaster in the control-room when the disaster happened. Utterly without warning of any sort, the overdrive unit bucked and roaring arcs leaped and crackled;

the overdrive unit turned to scrap metal in less than seconds. The brownish, featureless haze outside the unshuttered ports vanished. There were myriads of stars—and objects. Something the size of a mountain-range turned slowly, off to one side of the ship. Innumerable other floating things hung suspended on every hand.

Save for the arcs—and they were momentary—there was no sound. There was a jar from the bucking of the unit before it slumped into melted metal, but there was no flash of flame—no explosion of any sort. Yet the ship which had moved at the rate of three-quarters of a trillion miles per hour was still, and the first officer gaped stupidly out the ports, and the quartermaster began to shake visibly where he stood.

This was while the *Corianis* lay dead in space. But the skipper sprang across the control-room. He flipped on the ship's radars and swung the control which would warm up the planetary drive, normally used only for lifting from a space-port and for landing. The radars began to register. The *Corianis* was within miles of a floating rock-and-metal continent which existed in emptiness. She was within tens of miles of hundreds of bits of cosmic junk, ranging from the size of sand-grains to that of houses. Within hundreds of miles, there were thousands of floating dangers.

The "ready" light for planetary drive glowed green. The skipper jerked the lever to minimum power; the ship gathered way. He steered her clear of the nearest dangers. Below, the engine-room crew matter-of-factly cut away the wrecked drive-unit and began to braze the spare to functioning connection.

Time passed. The skipper, sweating, navigated the *Corianis* among the leisurely, rolling, gigantic things which could crush the ship's hull like an eggshell. It took him hours to get to where he dared use more than a quarter-gravity drive. It was more hours before he dared use half-gravity. Many hours passed before the radars promised safety if he went again into overdrive.

When the brown haze settled before the control-room

ports once more, the skipper was jumpy; the ship would be at least ten hours late to Maninea. The skipper let his third officer make the announcement over the public-address system. He couldn't do it himself; his throat clicked spasmodically shut when he tried to talk.

The *Corianis* should have been destroyed! She should have gone out of existence in a monstrous gout of flame; by this instant she should be no more than a cloud of vapor-fine particles, floating in emptiness. She had hit an enormous mass of planetary wreckage while speeding faster than light; she had hit a solid object she could not skip beyond. She had burned out her overdrive in what could only have been a collision! But it was not conceivable that the ship would remain as she was, solid and unstrained, after a collision with a continent of metal out between the stars.

The skipper knew he couldn't be alive. He had a strange, numb conviction that he was a ghost, and the ship and all on board her with him. Despite this belief, however, he was cautious in his approach to Maninea. Ordinarily he'd have come out of overdrive for a corrective sight something over a minute short of estimated time of arrival; a thousand thousand million miles is leeway enough for anybody. But the skipper cut overdrive three hours short of arrival, and an hour, and twice more before he went on interplanetary drive again and called down hoarsely for permission to land. The *Corianis* was more than thirteen hours late.

Even so, she didn't land immediately. Instead of getting clearance in forty-five seconds, it required more than an hour to get permission to descend. There was confusion aground; there was argument; there was acute apprehension and flat disbelief and the deepest of deep suspicion. When the *Corianis* did settle on the spaceport tarmac, there was hysteria.

Because the *Corianis*—at least *a Corianis*—was already aground. She had landed on Maninea just forty-seven hours thirteen minutes after lifting off from Kholar. She had brought home the Planetary President of Maninea,

the Speaker of the Senate of Maninea, and various persons dependent upon them. She had also brought the Minister of State for Kholar, the Minister of Commerce, the Chairman of the Lower House Committee on Extra-Planetary affairs, and a mass of aides, assistants, secretaries, wives, children, and servants. The ship itself was still aground at the spaceport.

When the *Corianis* landed—the *Corianis*-with-a-burned-out-drive-unit—she settled down beside herself. There were two *Corianis*. There were two Planetary Presidents of Maninea. There were also two Speakers of the Senate, two Ministers of State for Kholar, two Ministers of Commerce, two Chairmen of the Lower House Committee, and two of very nearly everybody else who'd sailed from Kholar. And the twos, the twins, the sets, the pairs of individuals, were not merely as much alike as two peas are like each other. They were as much alike as a pea is to itself. They were exactly alike.

It was quite impossible. It was utterly impossible.

But it was even more embarrassing.

VI

Barely a day after the departure of the *Corianis* from Kholar, a hastily-chartered mail-ship lifted off to carry corrected instructions to the emissaries negotiating a trade-treaty on Maninea. This other ship went out some twenty thousand miles from the planet Kholar, winked into overdrive, stayed in overdrive with its position relative to Kholar changing at the rate of seven hundred fifty thousand million miles per hour, and arrived at the Maninean solar system on schedule and without incident. But the *Corianis* had not arrived before her. The *Corianis* was overdue. There had been a disaster; the *Corianis* was missing.

The shipping-service force on Maninea tore its collective hair. There was a ship aground, taking off for Ghalt. It carried away with it a plea from the shipping

service for ships to help hunt for the missing *Corianis.* The mail-ship sped back to Kholar; it carried a plea for aid in the urgently necessary search. Meanwhile, Maninea would take all possible measures. Kholar would do the same.

The main reason for hope, about the *Corianis,* was that she carried on board the very latest distress-signal system for ships of her size and class. She carried a rocket which could drive some thousands of miles away from a disabled ship, and then detonate a fission-type atomic bomb. The rocket was of iron, which would be volatized by the explosion. It would be spread as a cloud of iron particles in space. In less than a week the infinitesimally thin cloud should spread to a million miles. In a month it would be a sizeable patch of vapor. It would be thinner than an ordinary hard vacuum, but it could be detected. In six months it would still be detectable, and it would cover an almost certainly observable area of a spectrotelescope's field between Kholar and Maninea.

The point was that there are no iron-atom clouds in space. Should one appear it would have to be artificial and hence a distress-signal. In the case of the *Corianis,* her course was known; one could know along what line to look for an appeal for aid.

So, immediately, the shipping-service force on Maninea sent up a space lifeboat with a spectrotelescope on board. It would look for an iron cloud in space along the line to Kholar. The evidence for such a cloud would be the fact that it absorbed iron-spectrum frequencies from the starlight passing through it.

If the *Corianis* set off her signal-bomb a mere one hundred sixteen thousand thousand million miles from Maninea, the cloud could be detected within a week. If it were set off farther away, its detection would be delayed. But ships to search had been asked for; when they came, they'd follow the *Corianis'* course back toward Kholar, stopping to look for iron-clouds every few light-days along the way. They'd pick up an artificial cloud of iron vapor

long before light passing through it could get to either planet.

So the shipping-service forces hoped. The job of finding one space-ship on a sight-light-year course, with possible errors in all three dimensions—it wasn't an easy one. But if the shipping service did find the *Corianis*, it could feel proud.

But it didn't. It only found out where the *Corianis* had vanished.

VII

The *Corianis*' loudspeaker system bellowed, demanding attention. An agitated voice tried to explain to the passengers why they must remain on board for the time being. There was now in port—in fact right next to the *Corianis* —another ship of the same name and same design and same interior and exterior fitting. That other ship had brought passengers to Maninea who had claimed to be, and been believed to be, the persons the *Corianis* brought. Somebody who claimed to be the Planetary President had been on that other ship. Naturally, there was concern when a second claimant to that identity and office appeared. There'd been a Minister of State from Kholar on the other vessel. And a Speaker of the Senate, and a Chairman of a Lower House Committee and—in short—persons claiming to be nearly everybody down to the smallest child on board the ship.

The passengers on the *Corianis* erupted in indignation. Everybody knew who *he* was! It was ridiculous to ask him to stay on board while the identification of the other person claiming to be him was investigated! That other person was an impostor! He was a scoundrel! Clap him in jail and . . .

Jack Bedell was possibly the only person on board the *Corianis* who really tried to make sense of the agitated words from the public-address system. The others seethed and growled and roared their resentment; he listened.

His expression changed from astonishment to in-

credulity, and then much later to a very great thoughtfulness. Kathy watched his face as bewilderment and uneasiness increased in her.

"It's official!" he said presently, almost in awe. "And no politician would dare try to make anybody believe such a thing! It's panic—pure, unimaginative panic that makes them admit it!"

Kathy swallowed. "I can—imagine one person impersonating somebody else," she said uneasily. "But a lot of people—a shipload! And—the President of the planet? How could anybody impersonate him? Too many people know him too well!— Couldn't they be crazy to suspect us of being impostors?"

Bedell shook his head. "Delusions have a sort of cockeyed logic to them," he told her. "Nothing is as crazy as facts. I believe this. Reality can always outguess imagination!"

She stared at him.

"I've forgotten the figures," he added, "but the odds are billions to one against any person having the same fingerprints as any other member of the human race since time began. Of course, two in a generation is unthinkable. And here we've got scores of identical-fingerprint pairs of people turning up. The odds against it—oh, nobody will believe it!"

"But it can't be true, can it?" asked Kathy. She felt more comfortable, talking to Bedell, than she'd ever felt with anybody else. She hoped he felt the same way.

"Oh, it's probably true," said Bedell. "It's just impossible. That's always upsetting . . . Let's get some lunch and think about it."

They moved past corridors full of people who had been prepared to leave the ship and now were forbidden to do so. They were infuriated; they were insulted.

"Leaving aside the impossibility of the thing," observed Bedell as he and Kathy seated themselves in one of the ship's dining salons, "there are some other angles. There are two Planetary Presidents. Which is which? There are two Ministers of State for Kholar. The duplication runs

all down the line. I wonder if there's another me on board that other ship. I'd guess that the odds are less than for most people. And I wonder if there's another you."

Kathy started. She turned pale. "Nobody'd have reason to impersonate me!" she protested. But she was frightened. "Anyhow that—that couldn't be!"

Jack Bedell shrugged, but he smiled at her, reassuringly. They saw a waiter, but no one came to serve them. Presently other passengers came into the dining-room, talking indignantly of the affront of suspecting them of being fakes.

Strangers in uniform moved past the doorway of the dining-saloon. A pompous figure, the Minister of State, stood splendidly in their way. He addressed them as if they were voters, his voice rolling and sonorous and angry. He oratorically protested the outrage of doubting his identity. It would be resented! There would be retaliation! An apology was in order, and an immediate withdrawal of the order forbidding him to land . . .

The strangers walked around him and moved on. A bewildered man in ship's uniform led the way.

"They're going to the purser's office," said Bedell, nodding his head. "They'll take the passenger-list to compare with the other *Corianis'* list of people on board. Of course the local problem is that their president exists in two copies. That will upset the whole planetary government."

"You—seem to know what's going on," said Kathy, uneasily.

"I don't," Bedell told her. "But there's such a thing as a universe of discourse—an acceptance of the preposterous so you can arrive at sense. *If* it's true that there are doubles of almost everybody, alike even to fingerprints —why—such-and-such other things must be true, also. But not even in a universe of discourse would absolutely everybody on both ships be absolutely alike! There'd have to be some exceptions. . . . How long have you been the secretary of somebody who would naturally want you on this trade-treaty trip?"

She licked her lips. She was scared; the idea of another, independent version of herself, knowing everything she knew, capable of anything she could do, but not under her control . . .

"I've had my job three months," she said. "Before that . . ."

"The chances are good that you're unique," said Bedell, "if the universe of discourse I'm thinking of is valid."

The men in strange uniforms went back past the dining salon door. They were followed by the Speaker of the Senate of Maninea. He expostulated furiously. The men in the strange uniforms looked hunted and upset. They still had the ship's purser with them.

"I think," said Bedell, "that this is going to go pretty far. How'd you like to look out a port at this lunatic world which says we can't be ourselves because somebody else is us?"

He led the way down two levels to where nobody crowded the corridors. It was quite silent, here. Someone had turned off the thread-thin whisper of music which prevented ghastly silence on the ship while in flight. They went to the end of a corridor. Bedell cranked open the shutters of a port and they looked out.

They were in the *Corianis,* but the *Corianis* rested solidly aground two hundred yards away. The other ship was gigantic; it was solid. It was an absolutely perfect duplicate of the *Corianis* from which they looked. It was not the kind of object one could imagine as partaking of the impossible or the unreal. There was nothing ghostly about it; it was defiantly an actual thing.

Bedell looked down at the spaceport's surface.

"There," he observed with careful calmness, "there's the purser—from this ship. And there's the other of him, over there. There are two of him, just as the loudspeakers said."

The men in strange uniforms had reached the spaceport tarmac with the *Corianis'* purser in their midst. They now met another group of uniformed men with the *Corianis'* purser in their midst. The port from which

Bedell and Kathy looked down was a good fifty feet high, but they could see perfectly. The purser just emerged from the ship was identical to the man already on the spaceport ground. They were identical in height and weight and the fit of their uniforms. That was conceivable. But they moved alike; they made the same gestures. It was insanely like seeing mirror-images making independent motions. One felt the same shocked incredulity.

Kathy pointed a shaking finger. "There's Mr. Brunn! My boss! But he's here on the ship! If—if there's—if I'm down there too . . ."

She searched for her own self among the figures down below, shaking with terror lest she might succeed.

A ground-car rolled out past the spaceport buildings and came to a halt below. Bedell recognized the man who stepped out; he was the Planetary President. With him was the Kholarian Minister of State. Both of them happened—as Bedell knew very well—also to be on board the *Corianis* which had recently landed.

"Now I wonder," said Bedell meditatively, "if the President who got here first is going to try to face down the President who got here second! And if the Minister of State of Kholar is going to denounce his other self, who's foaming at the mouth at this instant on board this ship!"

Another ground-car arrived and disgorged dignified persons. The intention was clear; the head of the Maninean planetary government found himself accused of imposture. Somebody else claimed to be him. Lesser officials who had seen the claimant were uncertain and unsure. But the President knew who he was! With enormous dignity he came to confound the impostor who could bewilder his subordinates. Face-to-face, he was sure, there could be no doubt of who was who!

But Jack Bedell, staring from overhead, saw the confusion and then the terrific and undignified row which followed the discovery that it was hopeless—not only to know who was who, but which was which. Other ground-cars arrived, and the two identical Planetary Presidents of Maninea faced each other. They were backed by equal-

ly identical Ministers of State of Kholar, two identical Speakers of the Maninean Senate, two Chairmen of the Lower House Committee, and so on down to the utterly identical nurses—identical to fingerprints and eye-patterns—who tended the utterly identical children of identical assistant undersecretaries, and even to the identical undersecretaries' identical wives. And even the wives were identical to the very number and location of gray hairs in their heads caused by identical griefs caused by their identical husbands! Naturally, there was tumult.

It was a beautiful row, a stupendous one, and it settled nothing whatever. The governmental process of an entire planet clanked to a halt pending the solution of the problem posed by the *Corianis'* tardy or over-hasty arrival. The government of another planet would be thrown into confusion as soon as this news reached it.

"I think," said Bedell, gazing down, "I think they're going to have to try something else. They'll never be able to settle the matter on objective evidence. They've just tried to act on the theory that two people can't be exactly alike—but it appears that they can be, and are. Now they'll try to find some people who aren't identical and study them to find out why not. I suspect that we may be called on, Kathy."

Kathy's teeth chattered.

"I—didn't see myself down there," she said shakily. "I—I don't want to! I'd—I think I'd hate her."

Bedell looked surprised. Then his expression changed.

"Yes. I suppose one would. Hmmm . . . Simple, natural instincts like that will probably have a good deal to do with settling this business."

As they turned away from the port, loudspeakers clicked and everywhere over the ship the same voice was heard in innumerable echoings of the same words: *"Will the following passengers please go to the exit-port? Will the following passengers please go to the exit-port?"* There followed four names. One was Bedell's. One was Kathy's. Neither of them recognized the other two.

"This is good," said Bedell. "They hope to learn some-

thing from us because we came on the *Corianis* and we are nevertheless like everybody else on every other planet in the galaxy. We're peculiar. We are ourselves alone. We can feel proud."

Presently, in one of the spaceport offices a harried Maninean official looked at them with great though precarious self-control.

"Look here!" he said uneasily. "On both ships together there are just seven people who don't match up to the last pimple with somebody else. You're two of the seven. Can you explain why you aren't part of the business that is driving everybody crazy?"

Bedell found himself hesitating. Then he cursed himself for self-consciousness. He said, "I got on the *Corianis* at the last minute—by accident. I wasn't really supposed to be on the ship. I imagine you'd say my presence is accidental. That might explain it."

The official said drearily, "The ship record says you're a mathematical physicist. Is there anybody on Maninea who might know you personally?"

"I think so," said Bedell. "There was a convention of astrophysicists on Hume, some years ago. I read a paper there. Some men from your astrophysical institute here will probably remember me."

"We'll check that," said the official. He seemed to brood. "This is the devil of a mess! The planetary vice-president has issued an executive order, keeping authority in his own hands until it's decided who is the real president. Both—both men who seem to be President have agreed to it, though both of them are raging. The two Ministers of State from Kholar have agreed to hold up official conferences until things are straightened out. And we're sending a ship to Kholar with a report and records and memos from everybody on both ships, to see if they can solve it on Kholar. You aren't anybody's double. But do you want to send any message? Nobody claims to be you—or her."

Bedell frowned. "I think," he said thoughtfully, "that there'll be somebody back on Kholar who'll claim to be

me. He'll be registered at the Grampion Hotel in Kholar City. He'll be waiting for a ship that will be coming here. He missed the *Corianis*. I'd like to write him a note."

"You wouldn't," said the Maninean official sardonically, "you wouldn't let sleeping doubles lie?"

"No," said Bedell. "I know him rather well. If he isn't there, it will be informative. If he answers, it will be more helpful still. And I think I can promise that he'll stay on Kholar. He won't come here. I wouldn't. I don't think he will."

"It's nice that somebody believes he can arrange something helpful!" said the official bitterly. "I don't see a chance! Do you realize that every pair of doubles we've tested so far has had the same blood type and same RH factor and same immunity-antibodies in his blood at the same intensities? And they also have the same fingerprints and same teeth and same height and weight and metabolic readings? I'm getting so I talk to myself! If this keeps up I'll start answering back!"

"It could be worse," said Bedell, after consideration. "I don't think it likely, but there could be a third *Corianis*."

"Don't say it!" snapped the Maninean vehemently. "Don't say any more! I was relaxing, talking to a man from the *Corianis* that there's only one of! It felt good! Don't say any more!"

He turned to Kathy. "Young lady," he said. "I'd like you to talk to another girl from the other *Corianis*. She doesn't claim to be you, but she does claim to have the job of secretary to the same man. Will you see what you can find out about each other?"

"N-naturally," said Kathy.

The official pressed a button and said, "Ask her to come in, will you?"

He slumped back in his chair. Within seconds, a girl came in. She was nervous; she was jumpy. She looked relieved to see, in Kathy, somebody who didn't look in the least like herself.

"Miss Kossuth," said the official, "this is Miss Sanders. It seems that you've got something but not too much in common."

"Y-yes," said the girl from the first-arrived *Corianis.* "I'm Mr. Brunn's secretary. He's Assistant Undersecretary of Commerce."

"I'm Mr. Brunn's secretary, too," said Kathy. She moistened her lips. "Is his wife's name Amelie, and does he have three children—two boys and a girl?"

The girl from the first-arrived *Corianis* said uneasily, "Yes. This is crazy! Is your Mr. Brunn rather fat, and does he fiddle with his ear when he's dictating?"

"Yes!" said Kathy. She looked appalled. "Does your Mr. Brunn have a picture of a baseball team on his desk?"

"Yes!" said the other girl. "Alton High School. He played second base."

"So did my Mr. Brunn," said Kathy. Then she added, "I—I've seen you before. I—know you. I'm sure of it!"

The first-arrived girl said helplessly, "I don't remember you. But at least we aren't doubles!"

Kathy swallowed. "But I remember you. You had the job I've got. You'd resigned to get married, three months ago, and you showed me about the work I was to do. You were going to marry a boy named Al Loomis. You said he was a draftsman."

The first girl went ashen-white. "I m-married him? I—I . . . But I didn't! W-we had a quarrel and—broke up! . . . How did you know? I never saw you before! I never told you. . . How do you know all about my private affairs? How . . .

The other girl from the other *Corianis* began to cry. She ran out of the room.

There was silence. Kathy turned unhappily to Bedell. He said encouragingly, "That was fine, Kathy! It clears up several points. You did splendidly!"

The official stirred. He said without hope, "I'm glad somebody's pleased! If you've got a theory, don't tell me. Get it worked out and we'll have the Astrophysical In-

stitute boys look you over and then we'll have whoever should pass on what you think pass on it. I don't want to understand this business, because I don't want to believe it! But there's nobody claiming to be you, so far, so you can leave the *Corianis* if you choose to."

"No," said Bedell. "I think I'd better stay on the ship. This state of things should be unstable. I want to do some calculating from some books I have with me. . . But I would like to talk to the Astrophysics people."

"You sound like you think you know what's happened," the official said. "It's all right with me if you stay aboard your ship. We're trying to keep the two sets of people apart, anyhow. Do you know what happens when duplicates see each other?"

"I can guess," said Bedell, "but I'd rather not. Come along, Kathy. Let's get back to the ship."

VIII

The *Corianis* had vanished between Kholar and Maninea. After the fact was discovered, it took a mere few hours to get a space lifeboat out of atmosphere with a spectrotelescope on board to watch for the iron-atom cloud in emptiness which would be a plea for aid, and only two days and a few hours were needed to get the news back to Kholar. On the way back, the mail-ship which took the news may have passed within light-hours of the spot where the *Corianis* had collided with a celestial scrap-heap. But it was not equipped for search.

By the time the *Corianis* was four days overdue, a trampship took off from Maninea; it also was equipped with a spectrotelescope. It began, methodically, to make short hops in overdrive along the line the *Corianis* should have followed. Each time it came out of overdrive it made a search. It searched from three light-days from Maninea and six, and twelve, and so on. It did not really expect to pick up a distress-signal so early. An iron-atom cloud would be relatively small so soon after its presumed formation. But it would enlarge, and the fact that it would also thin out didn't matter.

That first hunting ship from Maninea reached Kholar. No news. It was joined by another ship which had come into port. The two ships spaced themselves some light-minutes apart and headed back for Maninea; they reached it without any discovery. Two other ships had arrived from other worlds in response to the shipping service's request. Four ships headed back for Kholar.

Empty space is dark. The firmament glitters with innumerable stars, of all the colors that light can be; but the total light is faint, and where there is no sun it is very, very lonely. Each of the ships making multi-billion-mile casts through emptiness seemed utterly solitary. A ship came out of overdrive to unstressed space. It located the sun Kholar. It focussed a spectrotelescope upon a five-degree square area of space with Kholar at its center. It turned on the scope. Only stars with strong absorption-lines in their spectra would appear in the scope-field. They were examined separately. If or when one of them showed the lines slightly widened, it would indicate that iron existed between the star and the ship. Then there must be a cloud of iron particles in space —a signal of distress.

A little more than halfway across, a ship from Ghalt—the last ship to join in the search—found the telltale widening of iron-spectrum lines in the light of Kholar itself. It aimed for the cloud and jumped for it. It overleaped. It went back. It found the cloud—and danger-signals clanged inside it. The iron-atom cloud was then two and a half million miles in diameter. The ship sought its center; it found debris floating in space. It measured the iron-vapor cloud and computed its mass. There was too much vaporized metal to have come from a signal-rocket's substance; there was not enough to say that the *Corianis* itself had broken down to atoms.

The ship began to examine all the debris its radars picked up. It found some rocky and many metallic masses; some were the size of houses. There was a dense cloud of still larger metal lumps. Its parts were in motion,

as if it had only recently been jolted by something enormous.

The first ship was joined by a second, which also had found the iron-cloud. Later a third ship drove up and joined the search.

They did not find the *Corianis*. They did find a mountain-sized mass of metal, on one of whose flanks there was a circular, hollow, glistening scar, as if some incredible blast of heat had burned or boiled away the metal there. Rough estimate suggested that the amount of metal boiled away at this spot might account for the metal-cloud.

It did. An analysis of the cloud's substance disclosed nickel in considerable quantity with the iron. A measurement of the cloud's expansion gave the time of its beginning to expand—its creation.

The iron-cloud did not come from the *Corianis'* hull or signal-rocket. It was not iron alone; it was a nickel-iron cloud. It was metal vaporized from a mass of metallic debris. It had been vaporized at the time the *Corianis* had passed through this part of emptiness. Here, then, was where the *Corianis* had vanished.

But there was no trace of the ship itself, though one or another of the three ships examined every particle of solid stuff within thousands of miles.

The search-ships, though, had done a remarkable job; they'd located the scene of a disaster in space. The ship involved could not be found—but to pinpoint even the place where a ship had been wrecked was more than had ever been accomplished before.

IX

The confusion on Maninea already made for jumpiness. When a mail-ship came in from Kholar and called down for landing-permission, panic began. But this was not a third *Corianis*; it was an ordinary small mail-ship. It brought new and confidential instructions for the diplomatic party from Kholar.

The skipper of the mail-ship landed. He saw the *Corianis,* then he saw her duplicate. He did not believe his eyes. He had diplomatic mail for the Minister of State for Kholar. Shaking his head, he asked questions. He learned that there were two Ministers of State for Kholar hereabouts. He did not know to which he should deliver the diplomatic pouch. He tried to find out from lesser officials—from Kholar. There were two Ministers of Commerce. There were two Chairman of the Lower House Committee on Extra-Planetary Affairs. There were two of everybody that had left Kholar. Everybody . . .

He learned of the gibbering mix-up that defied all possibility and all reason. He saw the armed guards placed to keep the two ships isolated from each other. He heard of the freak discovery of a criminal in the *Corianis'* crew. In the ordinary course of events this man—an oiler—would never have been detected; he had only to stay aboardship and nobody would pay any attention to him. But everybody on both *Corianis* had been fingerprinted. This murderer was identified by his fingerprints; the police wanted him badly.

But they didn't want two of them—which they had. He was taken from both ships and put in jail. The cells to which the two copies of one man were assigned happened to face each other. When a lawyer was appointed, he verified certain crucial items, and the crewmen in their cells howled with laughter.

Two men, obviously, could not be punished for a crime that only one had committed. So far as any conceivable test could determine, these two men were identical; they were the same man. But they could not both be punished; they could not even be kept in jail. They would have to be freed, because there was no way to assign guilt to one rather than the other; both were the criminal meriting punishment.

The upsetting fact was that they could now go out and commit any conceivable crime—and provided only one had committed it, and they contrived to mix them-

selves together so that one couldn't be picked out, the law could not touch them.

The mail-skipper went back to Kholar for instructions. He carried a painstaking account of the confusion on Maninea, and carefully-written documents by each person involved, claiming his identity and beseeching help to establish it past question. There was only one person whose letter was addressed to his own counterpart on Kholar; that was Jack Bedell. He wrote to a person of his own name in the Grampion Hotel; he was quite certain that he would receive informed and cheerful cooperation.

Two men from the Astrophysical Institute came to talk to Bedell on the *Corianis.* He was with Kathy when they arrived. The atmosphere in the ship was that of advanced neurosis, and Kathy could not bear the bright-eyed, indignant tension which led everybody to try to buttonhole everybody else and insist that they were who they had always been, and that their doubles were impostors and criminals. There is nothing more mortifying than to be uncertain who one is. And these people had faced other people who claimed their names and possessions and pasts, their personalities and their futures.

Kathy kept close to Bedell.

The talk with the astrophysicists, though, was technical to a degree that Kathy found impenetrable. The two spectacled men recognized Bedell. One of them remembered a conversation, on Hume three years before; they had no doubt of him. So they plunged into talk, and Kathy heard stray phrases. *"Obviously there could be no impact, but . . ." "The effect is of replication, of course."*— That was the shorter astrophysicist's contribution. Bedell demurred. *"Replication,"* he said carefully, *"implies the idea of folding. I don't think it's that. I think we have multiple reality with true simultaniety in the different sequences."*

Kathy could make nothing of it. She stopped listening, though relatively simple terms like "trans-chronal" and "alternative presents" and "tangential displacement" followed and sounded as if they might mean something.

She did notice with some surprise that presently they were talking absorbedly about the sacks of mail the two ships had brought with them.

The astrophysicists went away, still talking enthusiastically to each other. Bedell shrugged. "Maybe we'll work out something practical. They're going to try to get permission to read the mail."

"Why?" asked Kathy. She felt horribly stupid.

"We've agreed on a tentative hypothesis," he explained. "It seems that the mail, like the people, should be almost but not quite identical in the two ships. Some letters will be exactly alike, but some should differ a little."

This, also, did not register with Kathy.

"What's tangential displacement?" she asked. "I felt so stupid!"

"It's what they're going to look for in the letters," said Bedell. "If the postal authorities permit it, they'll send some of it to me."

The postal authorities did permit. A creditable reaction had begun among the persons on Maninea actually concerned with the problem the duplication of the *Corianis* had produced. At first, the sheer, stark impossibility of the facts made everybody's thinking chaotic. But the officials of the spaceport and the government developed a dogged, unhopeful, resolute point of view. This was no ordinary affair, but they would act as if it were. They would go through the motions of a normal investigation, using their brains as sanely as possible upon what had to be delusion. They were not sure that they would get anywhere; it did not seem that anybody could. But to act rationally about even a lunatic occurrence would be better than mere dithering or howling at the nearest of Maninea's two moons.

The head of the spaceport police interviewed the skipper of the *Corianis*—one *Corianis*. His answers made sense; if there hadn't been a second *Corianis* in port he'd have made an excellent impression. He seemed a truth-

ful and conscientious man. But then the same spaceport officer interviewed the second skipper.

"You graduated from the Merchant Space Academy on Ghalt?"

"Yes," said the skipper of the *Corianis*-with-the-burned-out overdrive.

"You were fourth officer on the *Ulysses?*"

"Yes."

"Third on the *Panurge* and second on the *Dhombula?*"

"Yes," said the skipper.

"You got your first command as recognition of your behavior in an emergency the *Dhombula* ran into on Astris IV?"

"No," said the skipper.

The spaceport officer looked at the record of the other talk. "It says here you did."

"I didn't," insisted the skipper. "I remember putting in to Astris IV while I was second on the *Dhombula,* but there wasn't any emergency."

The interviewer made a memo and observed, "You skippered the *Contessa,* the *Ellen Trent,* and the *Cassiopia* before you took over the *Corianis.*"

"No," said the skipper doggedly. "The *Cassiopia* was my first command. I went from her to the *Corianis.*"

The spaceport man chewed on his pencil. "This happens all the time!" he said distastefully. "The other skipper—the other you, you might say—did nearly everything you've done. But not quite! Each two people who are absolutely identical make nearly identical statements, but never completely identical ones. It can be checked whether you skippered the *Contessa* and the *Ellen Trent!* We can find out whether you're stating the facts. But when you're identical in every way but a part of your professional history, why do you differ on that? And even if we find out one of you is wrong—what then? You'll still be identical!"

The skipper looked at him numbly.

"Haven't you any idea, however unlikely, to explain the—this mess?" demanded the official.

"I don't know what's happened," said the skipper in a dull voice, "unless I'm dead and in hell."

The spaceport man could have asked, "Why dead?" He might have gotten a suggestive answer. But instead, he asked, "Why hell?"

The skipper said heavily, "I've got a wife and kids. He says they're his. I know they're mine. I've seen him. I don't know how to prove he isn't me! But I know he's not!—Do you think I'm going to let him go back to my family, and my wife not able to know he isn't me, and my kids thinking he's their father? Will I let that happen?"

His hands clenched and unclenched. The spaceport official said very tiredly, "I give up, skipper.—Maybe you'll be interested to know that he said exactly what you just said, in nearly the same words and with apparently the same sincerity."

He waved a hand in dismissal, and then watched out the window of his office to make sure the skipper went back to his own ship and not the other. There'd been one deplorable incident. An aide to the Minister of Commerce had met his duplicate and his duplicate's wife while both were taking exercise between the two grounded ships, and there was very nearly a murder there and then. One of the two men had made the trip alone, his wife having sprained her ankle two days before the take-off. The other had brought his wife along. She'd tripped, but not quite sprained her ankle.

The man who'd come alone went into a murderous rage when he saw his wife with the other man. She was living with the other man on the other *Corianis!* Openly! She was his wife and the other man was himself. The man who'd traveled alone tried desperately to kill his duplicate—who as determinedly tried to destroy him. The wife screamed in horror because she could not tell which of the two was her husband.

But not all minor non-correspondences produced so much emotion as, in that case, the fact that one woman had sprained her ankle while her duplicate had not.

There was the mail. In some dozens of sacks from each *Corianis,* less than a score of letters were not twinned. In many cases the twin missives were exactly alike, down to the last and least and most unconsidered comma. In others, a word or an occasional phrase differed from one counterpart to the other. One personal letter, however, mentioned in one copy that a certain person had died, and in the other copy that he had made an unexpected recovery.

Kathy said desperately, "But it's all so—so impossible! Things like this . . . I feel as if we'd all gone insane! We, and the people in the other ship, and the people on Maninea who believe in the people of the other ship—everybody!"

Bedell nodded. "Yes. It's like walking up to a big mirror, and suddenly you find that there isn't any glass there, and the people can walk out of the mirror—or maybe we've walked into it. We don't know."

"But it's—impossible!"

"Hmmm . . ." said Bedell. "There was a time when people thought you couldn't talk to anybody a mile away, and people couldn't fly, and nobody could travel faster than light. All these things are still impossible. You still can't do them. But you can do things that have the same consequences. We use those other things as substitutes for things that can't happen. In a way, this apparently impossible state of things may be a substitute for something that couldn't happen."

"Such," demanded Kathy, "such as what?"

"Such as the wrecking of the *Corianis,"* he suggested. "Maybe all this has happened as the alternative to the *Corianis* exploded to vapor from some collision, with all of us floating around as gas-particles in space."

Kathy didn't believe it. Still Bedell acted more like a sane man than anybody else on the *Corianis.* The nervous strain inside the ship was nerve-racking.

X

When the two *Corianis* had been aground for two weeks, the situation took a very nasty turn. At first, the ordinary citizens of Maninea accepted the problem of the two ships as a sort of sporting event. They assumed that daring and clever crooks had planned a massive imposture, and that they'd been stymied by the appearance of the impersonatees. It seemed still more of a sporting event when the assumed frauds gallantly seemed to try to bluff it out; when they defied the police to unmask them. And when the police failed, the citizens of Maninea admired the impostors more than ever—but they were no longer certain which set of passengers were the frauds. So they waited for the scientists to make their tests and say, with confident certitude, that these persons were who they said they were, and those other persons were impostors.

But the scientists couldn't answer either.

That was a shock. It was a disappointment. It was frightening. For example, the news-broadcasters found a man who'd been a schoolmate of the Planetary President when both of them were ten years old. He hadn't spoken to the President since. He would remember things that nobody but the President and himself could possibly know about. He could tell! The newscasters also found a grandmother who—at seven—had made mud pies with the now Speaker of the Senate. Nobody could fool her!

The two unimportant persons spoke, respectively, to the two claimants to the Planetary President's identity, and to the two men who claimed to be Speaker of the Senate. They came from their interviews shaking and unable to decide. Both Planetary Presidents remembered everything from the age of ten. They reminded their pre-presidential playmates of things that the playmates had forgotten. The woman who'd made mud pies with the Speaker of the Senate was positive after she'd spoken to only one. He'd reminded her of the spanking she got for using the morning milk to manufacture mud-pie pan-

cakes. Only her old playmate knew about that! But the second copy of the Speaker of the Senate not only remembered it too, but described to her the funeral of a defunct mouse and the decoration of its grave. So he was her former playmate, too.

During the ships' third week aground the citizens of Maninea reacted violently. It seemed as if they suddenly realized that the natural order of things was defied, that something sneakingly suggestive of the supernatural was involved. When science could not reveal the mystery, the mystery might be beyond science. Rumors sprang up and flew about. Some were ominous; some were pure horror.

There was the rumor that devils out of hell had somehow escaped confinement and planned to move in among mankind and ultimately destroy it. Only a few people believed this.

There was the rumor that witches, by compact with the powers of evil, had become able to take forms other than their own. They would rule humanity; they would eventually enslave it. A larger number believed this.

The most popular of the rumors had a touch of scientific imagination in it. One *Corianis* and the beings on board it, said this rumor, had come from a remote and hidden world where there existed a race of monsters. They were non-human Things which could make even scientists believe them human. They could read human minds; they could take control of human bodies. They had come to Maninea to begin the extermination of humanity. And this rumor declared that the monsters could duplicate human bodies and that humans were being missed, about the space-port. Children had vanished; women had disappeared. The monsters who passed for men were anthropophagi. They devoured human flesh in orgies too horrible to be described, and then went out in the likeness of their victims to allure or seize on other victims.

Very many people accepted this idea and felt a growling, rumbling hatred for the two ships which could not

be explained except by some such tale as this. And the fact that this story spread and spread brought denials. There were women who had sons and daughters in government service; they'd made the trip to Kholar and returned, but in duplicate. Some of these women fiercely demanded to see their children. They'd know their flesh and blood!

But they didn't. A woman who'd had one son found that she had two. And she could not have two, but she did. Then there were women whose husbands were aboard the *Corianis*. They protested that they would know them! And they came to weep horribly because they could not know which of two burning-eyed, frantic men had been their husband before he went to Kholar.

Enmity to the *Corianis'* passengers became a thing to shudder over. Almost any man would agree that, in all probability, one of the two sets of human beings was human; but one was not. It was something more horrible than death, and it must be destroyed. If it could not be decided which was human and which was not—then, regretfully but remorselessly, all must die . . .

Kathy no longer made any attempt to mingle with the other passengers. She and Jack Bedell had been two retiring, diffident, self-conscious people who found talk with other people absurdly difficult. Now the confined shipload of diplomats and political appointees was so nerve-racked that Kathy felt aloof rather than retiring; she was defensive instead of shy. And Bedell's manner had taken on a tinge of authority. He'd started to work with the men of the Astrophysical Institute, testing materials from the two ships in extreme conditions to find out some basic difference. Very soon it was unwise for Bedell to try to go from the spaceport to the Institute and back. Shortly after, it became even dangerous for the people at the Institute to come on board the ship. So they worked together with a vision-screen connection in being. As other approaches to the mystery proved hopeless, the research of which Bedell was the driving force came to be the only hope for a truly scientific solution. In self-defense

he had to adopt a manner pushing aside hysterical passengers who'd have taken up all his time.

Then there came a day when a delegation from the ship-passengers waited on him. The Planetary President of Maninea headed it; he was accompanied by the Minister of State of Kholar, the Chairman of the Lower House Committee, the Speaker of the Senate, the Minister of Commerce, and others. It was a stately delegation, though now and again muscles twitched in what should have been composed features.

"Mr. Bedell!" said the Planetary President. "The municipal authorities tell me that some scientists believe you know what has caused the monstrous state of affairs in which we find ourselves."

"Together with the Astrophysical Institute," said Bedell mildly, "I've offered some suggestions. We're trying to get experimental evidence for certain ideas. There are a number of things that seem to support the opinion we hold. But it isn't yet proved."

There was a pause. The Planetary President said firmly, "Suppose you tell us, Mr. Bedell! Decisive action must be taken, and soon! Where did that other ship and its company of impostors come from?"

"Where did we come from?" asked Bedell matter-of-factly.

"No hocus-pocus!" rasped the Minister of Commerce. "We're in no mood to be trifled with! Answer the question!"

"There's some resemblance between the two ship's companies," insisted Bedell, "so the question's relevant. We come from Kholar. But more certainly we come from ten days ago and the marriage of our parents. We come from the voyages of the early explorers of space. We come from events more surely than from places. I'm here because by accident I got passage on the *Corianis*. You are here from a longer but certain series of events. Do you understand? If you want to know where the other ship comes from, I have to name events rather than places!"

"This is nonsense!" fumed the Minister of Commerce. "It's the fact . . ."

"Answer the question!" commanded the Planetary President, ominously. "Where did the impostors come from? How have they deceived the police? I warn you that there can be no more delay! These frauds must be unmasked, and at once . . ."

"The evidence—what there is—" said Bedell angrily, "points to this ship as the abnormal, and you as the impostors! It's very probable that this is the ship which doesn't belong here!"

Anger bubbled over. These were practical men who'd been unable to do anything practical. They were half-mad with nerve-strain and frustration and bewilderment. Every man of them faced the possibility that an impostor might take his name and place and identity, and acquire with them his destiny and all his achievements. It was intolerable even to fear such a thing. These men wanted an answer that would give them something violent and satisfying to do.

"Damned nonsense!" raged the Minister of Commerce. "We know what we've got to do. Let's get it over with!"

And Bedell suddenly roared at them. He astonished himself. But he was no longer the mild and diffident and self-conscious person that previous events had made of him. Recent events had made it necessary for him to act in a new fashion.

"Idiots!" he roared. "Idiots! Your doubles on the other *Corianis* think the same way you do! Half an hour ago—not having a me to annoy beforehand—they tried to rush the police between these two ships, to get inside here and every man kill his own counterpart! The police gassed them down! That's what you'll try! And the police will gas you down! Try to reach that other ship to do murder! Try it!"

He glared at them and stamped from the room. Kathy followed him. Outside, he turned to glare at her because he thought she was one of the delegation. But he nodded when he recognized her.

"I had to shout at them," he said morosely. "They aren't actually idiots. They're desperate. They're ready to kill to settle who they are, and who their families will welcome, and who their children will call father. Damn them! They've gotten so worked up that they're willing to commit suicide to get things back to normal! The men at the Astrophysical Institute have worked with me, and that's what has to be done. And there's no danger to it at all! But how can a man argue with men half-crazy with worry? Damn this business!"

XI

As a matter-of-fact precaution, the police of Maninea removed the signal-rockets from both *Corianis* during the forenoon of the next day. The signal-rockets carried fission bombs. The police also mounted guns that could be used if either *Corianis* took off without authority. The occupants of both ships visibly teetered on the edge of crackups. It was simple reason to disarm them as far as possible, after a mass attempt by the men of one ship to invade the other. The authorities of Maninea, withholding authority from the Planetary President because there were two of him, behaved with conspicuous sanity.

But sanity did not make matters easier for anybody. There were rumblings and mutterings everywhere. Science could not explain how duplicate ships and duplicate persons had come into being; so the man on the street either tried to think for himself—without much success—or else accepted the most dramatic explanation suggested by anybody else.

The most alarming suggestion was, of course, that protean, monstrous creatures from far-away worlds of horror, able to assume the forms of men, had come to Maninea to pass as humans and practise their grisly amusements with humans as victims and subjects.

An ill-advised humorist presented himself in a small city a hundred miles from the capital. As a practical joke, he pretended to have been a passenger on the *Corianis.*

To increase the effect of his jest, he was so unwise as to pretend an ill-concealed appetite for human flesh. To bring his practical joke to its peak, he put what appeared to be bloodstains on his linen where he could pretend to be unaware of them. He saw the horror and the terror he inspired. He was enormously amused. In fact, he was in a visiphone booth, hilariously telling a distant friend about the joke he'd played on the simple yokels, when he found them congregating about the booth.

He opened the door and, chortling, made terrifying noises.

They tore him to pieces.

A child was missed by its mother half a thousand miles from the spaceport. She screamed that the monsters from space had taken it. A mob formed and went surging here and there looking for somebody to kill. Fortunately, they found nobody.

A horror-broadcast impresario misguidedly took advantage of the public absorption in monsters. He produced a broadcast play dealing with the invasion of a planet by creatures which could take the forms of men, at will. The production simulated a newscast, but it was fiction. It was announced as such, and three times during its presentation the audience was reminded that it was make-believe. But the audience saw characters in the drama—of perfectly human aspect—let themselves relax and flow into horrible, shapeless slugs, which crawled over and devoured other members of the *dramatis personae*. It was not a good play, but its audience panicked because it had the form of a news broadcast. Citizens armed themselves desperately. They overwhelmed the police with demands for instruction and protection. Many sober-sided, civilized men fled with their families to the wilds.

And nobody seemed ashamed, afterwards. Two ships still rested at the spaceport. There were two duplicate sets of people. But this could not be, so one set could not be human. Therefore the other set . . .

A sullenness came over the population of Maninea.

There was not one single person who'd arrived on the *Corianis*—either of her—who had not returned to the ship. A few had left the first-arrived *Corianis* before the second appeared. They came back and asked to come on board. People looked at them with ominous eyes. Everywhere they went, conversations stopped; small mobs tended to gather before their houses. They weren't safe away from the ship they'd come on.

They weren't safe there.

Raging, rumbling, aimless congregations of people seemed to roam the streets of the capital city. Hours passed and night fell and they did not disperse. There were many people who were literally afraid to go to their own homes. They felt safe only when among many others. Now and again men gathered around someone who talked in a low tone. Presently there were orators with sweating, earnest faces, shouting about the monsters at the spaceport. Some of the people there were human—maybe. But there were others who were aliens, who weren't human, who passed as human . . . It was too bad if human people had to be killed to make sure that all the monsters died, but . . .

These things were reported to the two ships by the police. The police gathered strong forces at the spaceport. Jack Bedell worked feverishly, with a continuous vision-phone connection to the Astrophysical Institute. On a certain morning the Institute reported that identical metal plates from inside the two ships acted differently at blue-white temperature. One vanished on reaching an apparently critical heat.

Kathy took notes for Bedell, these days. She gathered that it proved that the situation of one of the two *Corianis* was inherently unstable. If it got the right kind of a nudge, it would shift to a stable condition. Kathy had no idea what a stable condition would be, but she was beginning to imagine a satisfactory state of things for herself.

Bedell depended on her. That stout and wistful Mr. Brunn, who was her official boss, took no interest in

anything but the liquids which enabled him to face fate and chance and destiny from a roseate haze. But Jack Bedell talked absorbedly to her in the rare moments when he was not working by remote control with the staff of the Astrophysical Institute.

On the second night after the delegation demanded an answer from him to prove the other ship's company impostors—three hours after dark—Bedell was restless.

"Everything seems stalled," he said irritably. "They're getting worried over at the Institute. They found a high-temperature difference in the hull-materials' reaction, but that's hardly a practical answer. And time's running out. There's contagious hysterical hatred of us building up. Something's got to happen!"

Kathy waited, watching his expression as he frowned.

"In one sense, our being here—and the other *Corianis* too—does nobody any harm. But they believe one set of us isn't human. They figure we can't be! They figure every duplicate may be—must be—something alien and horrible that's only pretending to be a man. So that hate."

"You and I—we aren't duplicates," said Kathy forlornly.

"We've duplicates back on Kholar," said Bedell. "By the way, I wrote to my duplicate to look your duplicate up. I told him he'll like you."

Kathy writhed internally. It was not pleasant to think of another self who knew all she knew and thought exactly as she did and could do anything she thought of. It was frightening, even six light-years away.

"I'm bothered about that hatred," said Bedell again. He paced jerkily up and down the room. "There've been mobs formed to storm the spaceport and kill us. The police headed them off. Trucks have been found loaded with explosives, hauled by men desperate enough to run them under the ships and set them off. But the police won't always be able to hold the mobs back. There'll come a time when they'll have to kill, to protect us. I doubt we're worth it."

"Couldn't we go somewhere else?" asked Kathy.

"Where? If they went off, we'd know where they went. We think alike. If we went off . . . No."

Kathy said unhappily, "But you talk as if they were—real! You talk as if the people on the other ship were as real as the people on this! As if they weren't—monsters or impostors."

He checked in his pacing to stare at her in astonishment.

"Haven't you realized? Don't you remember looking out of a port between worlds and seeing the stars, and great black masses floating about. Didn't you realize what they meant at least when you saw the other *Corianis?*"

Kathy shook her head. It occurred to her that Bedell would always talk about ideas—even to her—when there were much more satisfying things to talk about. She suddenly had a forlorn little daydream in which Jack Bedell would look at her with shining, adoring eyes, and they'd be close together and neither one say a word for a long time.

But she heard phrases ". . . In overdrive a ship skips from one place where it can't stay to another place where it can't stay either . . . much faster than light . . . But it can't skip into a place where there's something else . . . a meteor . . . Then . . ."

She looked at him dutifully and tried to understand.

". . . We ran into some debris that was rolling through space. We ran into a clump too big to be skipped. We couldn't skip beyond it, or to the right or left or up or down. But we had to skip! It wasn't possible for us to stay long enough to be destroyed by the collision! We had to skip somewhere. And we did!"

Kathy blinked. Her hands twisted, one inside the other.

"We skipped into another sequence of events. This sequence," said Bedell triumphantly—"I'm not talking about another place. It isn't places that count. It's events. We started out in a sequence in which I caught the *Corianis* and you had the job another girl gave up to get married.

We skipped to a sequence of events in which I hadn't caught the *Corianis* and you hadn't gotten the job. We made that skip when we ran into stuff in space."

The visiphone called. He swung to answer it. Kathy tried to figure out what he'd just said. Places didn't matter. Events did . . . Suddenly she caught her breath, realizing.

"Hell's broken loose," said Bedell grimly. "The Institute just called. Mobs were roaming around the city, and there weren't enough police to keep them apart. They joined up. They're coming out here to kill us."

"But . . ."

"We'll have to take off," said Bedell vexedly. "And just when our experimental results were so good! But we have to take the chance . . ."

He started for the door.

"Wh-what'll you do?" asked Kathy in alarm.

"Unfortunately I'm not a hero," said Bedell, "so I have to act like a scoundrel. Maybe I can persuade the skipper to commit suicide for all of us. That's the only chance we've got. But I don't really think it's very risky!"

XII

The control-room of the *Corianis* looked out upon the spaceport. It was night, but both of Maninea's moons floated overhead, and the other *Corianis* glittered in the pallid light. There were rows of cold-white sparks which were the lights at the spaceport's edges. Lights showed in the ports of the other ship. The skipper of the *Corianis* looked dully toward the sky-glow which was the reflection of the street-lamps of the capital city.

Bedell forced his way into the control-room. Kathy came close behind him. The skipper turned hopeless eyes toward them.

"I know!" said Bedell testily. "I know passengers aren't allowed in the control-room! But there's a mob headed out from the city. They've got explosives. They've got thermite. They've got sticks and stones and bombs,

and they're going to smash both ships and kill everybody in them—they think!"

The skipper said drearily: "They might as well."

"Don't be an idiot!" snapped Bedell. "You know I've been working with the Astrophysical Institute to get this thing straight! Our calculations are finished—just finished! I can tell you how to handle everything! Get set to lift off!"

The skipper said as slowly as before:

"The police are moving away. I saw 'em go. I was just thinking that with them gone I can lift the *Corianis* and smash that other ship. Maybe smash the *Corianis,* too, but at least that other skipper won't go to my family and have my children call him father."

Bedell growled, "He's planning exactly the same thing!" he snapped. "I'm the only factor-of-difference! Otherwise you'll think exactly alike! I'll call him! Where's the intership communicator?"

He found it. He called, impatiently. A suspicious, raging voice replied, it was the voice of the skipper, coming from the other space-craft. Bedell spoke crisply.

There was confusion by the control-room door. The Planetary President of Maninea pushed in. With him were other passengers.

"Captain!" said the President, with fine dignity. "There's a mob on the way here from the city. Either it has to be fought off by the police, costing lives, or this ship must take off to prevent senseless slaughter. As President of this planet, I order you to take off to space and go in orbit until this situation can be adjusted."

Bedell, talking into the intership phone, said harshly, "Yes. The President in this ship just gave the same order! Now listen! If we get out to space, and you destroy us there, there'll be no survivors from this ship. You want that! We want it the other way. But we both want this thing ended! We'll go up ten thousand miles and wait for you! Then we'll settle things!"

Kathy made an exclamation from where she gazed out a port of the control-room. There was a peculiar darkness

at the edge of the spaceport. The darkness flowed like water toward the two ships. The ground grew black where it spread.

It was people. It was a mob of humans, desperate beyond measure, frightened past mercy, swarming out to destroy the two ships which seemed to them the most horrible of dangers. There were few who had not heard the explanation Bedell had given Kathy only a little while since, but they had that hysterical terror of the abnormal which made their ancestors kill witches in the past ages. To them, the duplicate humans in the two ships seemed worse than witches. They were impossibilities—unless they were most malignant doom.

So the people of Maninea blackened the ground as they marched to destroy the spaceships. They blackened acres of ground, tens of acres. They were mad with fear and horror. They flowed on . . .

Bedell used a voice he hadn't known he owned. He rasped at the skipper in a tone of utter, unquestionable authority, "Prepare for take-off!"

The skipper moved convulsively. But he had intended to, anyhow.

"Straight up!" snapped Bedell. "Up to ten thousand miles! The other ship will follow!"

The skipper pressed a button. The *Corianis* lifted. Jack Bedell could not let anyone else issue orders, or the impetus of his leadership would be lost.

"Full vertical thrust!" he rasped. "You —" He pointed to the Planetary President. "Watch the other ship! It's following. Watch it!" He pointed a finger at the Minister of State for Kholar. "You! Clear that mob away from the door! We want no interference!"

The ship rose and rose. The sky had not been bright. It became black, with specks of stars in it. The vast bulk of the planet underneath lost all its features. The ship rose toward the shining moons. The rim of the planet became visible because it blotted out half the galaxy. Up and up and up . . .

The sun of Maninea came into view, and automatic shutters dimmed its blinding light.

"Watch for that other ship!" rasped Bedell. He had no authority, but he had a plan. The others knew only fury and despair. "Keep watching!"

The Planetary President said tensely "It's coming! It just rose into sunlight!"

"Off to one side!" snapped Bedell to the skipper. "Set up for overdrive! We're going to hit them from overdrive! There'll not be a particle of that ship left! Aim for it! Line it up! You'll not leave one man aboard it to take your place and your family and your destiny!"

The skipper's fingers fumbled. He leaned back.

"Into overdrive!" rasped Bedell. "Now!"

With a grimace of satisfied hatred, the skipper stabbed home the overdrive button.

The stars went out. Something arced horribly. There was the reek of burned insulation. The arcing ended. The stars came back.

The ship lay dead in space, with the dark mass of the night side of Maninea below and that planet's twin moons shining brightly above. The spare overdrive was burned out, now. But there was no other *Corianis.*

"Now," said Bedell in a wholly different tone, "now call down to the planet and ask for landing instructions."

There were babblings, but there was no other *Corianis.* Jack Bedell's orders had been followed, and the other ship was gone. In fact, Bedell was the only man in the control-room who had any clear ideas. The quartermaster made the call, somehow numbly. Because he was bereft of all opinions, he used the form all ships use when coming in from space, to ask for clearance for descent.

Now every man in the control room heard the astounded reply from below.

"Corianis? You're the Corianis? What the hell happened! You're written off as lost in space! Come on down! Your coordinates are—Wait a minute!" They heard the voice calling excitedly, away from the micro-

phone at the spaceport down below. *"The Corianis is coming in! She's not lost! She's coming in! She's coming in!"*

There was dead silence in the control-room. And Bedell said in an explanatory tone, with something like diffidence, "He's surprised to hear from us. Naturally! This is our original time-track. In this sequence of events, we've been missing in space for almost three weeks. Our being in the other sequence was an unstable condition. We got into it because we ran into a mass of rock and metal out in emptiness. We couldn't skip ahead or aside, but we couldn't stay in contact with it long enough to be destroyed. So we skipped out of that sequence of events. When we hit the other *Corianis,* just now, it was the same thing in reverse. We didn't belong in that sequence of events. So when we couldn't skip past or to any side of it—why—we came back to our own universe."

He paused, and said painstakingly, "It's very much like the old nursery rhyme, really. *'There was a man in our town and he was wondrous wise. He jumped into a bramble bush, and scratched out both his eyes. And when he found his eyes were out, with all his might and main, he jumped into another bush, and scratched them in again.'* I'm explaining to you because they'll have some trouble believing us."

XIII

He was quite right. On Maninea they didn't know anything about recent events. Rather, the recent events they knew about were quite different ones from those the passengers on the *Corianis* remembered. They were a different sequence.

But things adjusted. The Planetary President resumed his office, with no competition. The Minister of State for Kholar had the shakes for several days, and then dignifiedly suggested that the trade-treaty under discussion be completed. It was. And the aides and assistants and secretaries, and the wives and nurses and children, were

all congratulated for their success in reaching port after their disaster in space.

But Jack Bedell didn't want any of it. Nor did Kathy. Bedell wanted to work out, at the Astrophysical Institute on Maninea, the mathematics and the new information derivable from his experience. He was offered living-quarters there, for his convenience. He conferred with Kathy. They went off for a honeymoon in the Leaning Hills district, and then settled down at the Institute for the time being.

There was only one professional consequence for Bedell from the *Corianis* disaster. The Planetary President invited Bedell and Kathy to the Presidential palace, and gave him a medal—which he passed on to Kathy to wear if she felt like it. And then, while they were having luncheon, the President said, "Hm. We crashed into the other *Corianis* at full overdrive speed. We bounced back into our own time-line—our own sequence of events. But what happened to the other ship?"

"Nothing," said Bedell. "We didn't hit it. We bounced to keep from hitting it. So they undoubtedly decided that we had run away. And that would be proof that we were the impostors. So the real you—and—everybody is received without question in the best human society again, and everybody's satisfied."

"I—see," said the President doubtfully.

But he didn't. Nor did anybody else. The Minister of Commerce had a bad case of nerves for some time after. So did others. And it is history that after the trade-treaty was concluded, it was a very white-faced group which boarded a space-ship to go back to Kholar, and it is history that none of them ever made another space-journey.

But everything seemed to work out all right. Once, to be sure, Kathy brought up a subject Bedell hadn't mentioned.

"There was another you on Kholar," she said uneasily, "and you said there was another me. And you wrote to the other you and suggested that—that he try to get

acquainted with the other me. . . . Do you suppose he did?"

"Oh, I suppose so!" said Bedell abstractedly. "If I'd gotten a letter from him, saying something like that, I'd have looked up the girl."

Kathy grimaced. "What I'm pondering is—are they happy?"

"Why not?" asked Bedell in surprise. "Why shouldn't they be? They're the same as us, aren't they?" Then he said cautiously. "Mmmmm. We've been doing some computations at the Astrophysical Institute here, Kathy. We're pretty sure that what happened to the *Corianis* by accident can be accomplished on purpose. There are some of us who want to take a small ship and ram a minor asteroid in overdrive and see what other sequence of events we can run into. We'll be able to get back, of course!"

Kathy drew a deep breath. She began to speak. She'd been a very shy person; she'd found it difficult to talk to anybody. But it was surprising how many things she found to say, without hesitation or delay or embarrassment, in telling her husband what she thought about that proposal.

THE SERVANT PROBLEM

William Tenn

This was the day of complete control . . .

Garomma, the Servant of All, the World's Drudge, the Slavey of Civilization, placed delicately scented fingertips to his face, closed his eyes and allowed himself to luxuriate in the sensation of ultimate power, absolute power, power such as no human being had ever dared to dream of before this day.

Complete control. Complete . . .

Except for one man. One single ambitious maverick of a man. One very *useful* man. Should he be strangled at his desk this afternoon, that was the question, or should he be allowed a few more days, a few more weeks, of heavily supervised usefulness? His treason, his plots, were unquestionably coming to a head. Well, Garomma would decide that later. At leisure.

Meanwhile, in all other respects, with everyone else, there was control. Control not only of men's minds but of their glands as well. And those of their children.

And, if Moddo's estimates were correct, of their children's children.

"Yea," Garomma muttered to himself, suddenly remembering a fragment of the oral text his peasant father had taught him years ago, "yea, unto the seventh generation."

What ancient book, burned in some long-ago educa-

tional fire, had that text come from? he wondered. His father would not be able to tell him, nor would any of his father's friends and neighbors; they had all been wiped out after the Sixth District Peasant Uprising thirty years ago.

An uprising of a type that could never possibly occur again. Not with complete control.

Someone touched his knee gently, and his mind ceased its aimless foraging. Moddo, the Servant of Education, seated below him in the depths of the vehicle, gestured obsequiously at the transparent, missile-proof cupola that surrounded his leader down to the waist.

"The people," he stated in his peculiar half-stammer. "There. Outside."

Yes. They were rolling through the gates of the Hovel of Service and into the city proper. On both sides of the street and far into the furthest distance were shrieking crowds as black and dense and exuberant as ants on a piece of gray earthworm. Garomma, the Servant of All, could not be too obviously busy with his own thoughts; he was about to be viewed by those he served so mightily.

He crossed his arms upon his chest and bowed to right and left in the little dome that rose like a tower from the squat black conveyance. Bow right, bow left, and do it humbly. Right, left—and humbly, humbly. Remember, you are the Servant of All.

As the shrieks rose in volume, he caught a glimpse of Moddo nodding approval from beneath. Good old Moddo. This was his day of triumph as well. The achievement of complete control was most thoroughly and peculiarly the achievement of the Servant of Education. Yet Moddo sat in heavy-shadowed anonymity behind the driver with Garomma's personal bodyguards; sat and tasted his triumph only with his leader's tongue—as he had for more than twenty-five years now.

Fortunately for Moddo, such a taste was rich enough for his sytem. Unfortunately, there were others—one other at least—who required more . . .

Garomma bowed to right and left and, as he bowed,

looked curiously through the streaming webs of black-uniformed motorcycle police that surrounded his car. He looked at the people of Capital City, *his* people, his as everything and everyone on Earth was his. Jamming madly together on the sidewalks, they threw their arms wide as his car came abreast of them.

"Serve us, Garomma," they chanted. "Serve us! Serve us!"

He observed their contorted faces, the foam that appeared at the mouth-corners of many, the half-shut eyes and ecstatic expressions, the swaying men, the writhing women, the occasional individual who collapsed in an unnoticed climax of happiness. And he bowed. With his arms crossed upon his chest, he bowed. Right and left. Humbly.

Last week, when Moddo had requested his views on problems of ceremony and protocol relative to today's parade, the Servant of Education had commented smugly on the unusually high incidence of mob hysteria expected when his chief's face was seen. And Garomma had voiced a curiosity he'd been feeling for a long time.

"What goes on in their minds when they see me, Moddo? I know they worship and get exhilarated and all that. But what precisely do you fellows call the emotion when you talk about it in the labs and places such as the Education Center?"

The tall man slid his hand across his forehead in the gesture that long years had made thoroughly familiar to Garomma.

"They are experiencing a trigger release," he said slowly, staring over Garomma's shoulder as if he were working out the answer from the electronically pinpointed world map on the back wall. "All the tensions these people accumulate in their daily round of niggling little prohibitions and steady coercions, all the frustrations of 'don't do this and don't do this, do *that*' have been organized by the Service of Education to be released explosively the moment they see your picture or hear your voice."

"Trigger release. Hm! I've never thought of it quite *that* way."

Moddo held up a hand in rigid earnestness. "After all, you're the one man whose life is supposedly spent in an abject obedience beyond anything they've ever known. The man who holds the—the intricate strands of the world's coordination in his patient, unwearying fingers; the ultimate and hardest-worked employee; the—the scapegoat of the multitudes!"

Garomma had grinned at Moddo's scholarly eloquence. Now, however, as he observed his screaming folk from under submissive eyelids, he decided that the Servant of Education had been completely right.

On the Great Seal of the World State was it not written: *"All Men Must Serve Somebody, But Only Garomma Is the Servant of All"?*

Without him, they knew, and knew irrevocably, oceans would break through dikes and flood the land, infections would appear in men's bodies and grow rapidly into pestilences that could decimate whole districts, essential services would break down so that an entire city could die of thirst in a week, and local officials would oppress the people and engage in lunatic wars of massacre with each other. Without him, without Garomma working day and night to keep everything running smoothly, to keep the titanic forces of nature and civilization under control. They knew, because these things happened whenever "Garomma was tired of serving."

What were the unpleasant interludes of their lives to the implacable dreary—but, oh, so essential!—toil of his? Here, in this slight, serious-looking man bowing humbly right and left, right and left, was not only the divinity that made it possible for Man to exist comfortably on Earth, but also the crystallization of all the sub-races that ever enabled an exploited people to feel that things could be worse, that relative to the societal muck beneath them, they were, in spite of their sufferings, as lords and monarchs in comparison.

No wonder they stretched their arms frantically to him,

the Servant of All, the World's Drudge, the Slavey of Civilization, and screamed their triumphant demand with one breath, their fearful plea with the next: "Serve us, Garomma! Serve us, serve us, serve us!"

Didn't the docile sheep he had herded as a boy in the Sixth District mainland to the northwest, didn't the sheep also feel that he was their servant as he led them and drove them to better pastures and cooler streams, as he protected them from enemies and removed pebbles from their feet, all to the end that their smoking flesh would taste better on his father's table? But these so much more useful herds of two-legged, well-brained sheep were as thoroughly domesticated. And on the simple principle they'd absorbed that government was the servant of the people and the highest power in the government was the most abysmal servant.

His sheep. He smiled at them paternally, possessively, as his special vehicle rolled along the howling, face-filled mile between the Hovel of Service and the Educational Center. His sheep. And these policemen on motorcycles, these policemen on foot whose arms were locked against the straining crowds every step of the way, these were his sheepdogs. Another kind of domesticated animal.

That's all *he* had been, thirty-three years ago, when he'd landed on this island fresh from a rural Service of Security training school to take his first government job as a policeman in Capital City. A clumsy, over-excited sheepdog. One of the least important sheep-dogs of the previous regime's Servant of All.

But three years later, the peasant revolt in his own district had given him his chance. With his special knowledge of the issues involved as well as the identity of the real leaders, he'd been able to play an important role in crushing the rebellion. And then, his new and important place in the Service of Security had enabled him to meet promising youngsters in the other services — Moddo, particularly, the first and most useful human he had personally domesticated.

With Moddo's excellent administrative mind at his dis-

posal, he had become an expert at the gracious art of political throat-cutting, so that when his superior made his bid for the highest office in the world, Garomma had been in the best possible position to sell him out and become the new Servant of Security. And from that point, with Moddo puffing along in his wake and working out the minutiae of strategy, it had been a matter of a few years before he had been able to celebrate his own successful bid in the sizzling wreckage of the preceding administration's Hovel of Service.

But the lesson he had taught the occupants of that blasted, projectile-ridden place he had determined never to forget himself. He couldn't know how many Servants of Security before him had used their office to reach the mighty wooden stool of the Servant of All: after all, the history books, and all other books, were rewritten thoroughly at the beginning of every new regime; and the Oral Tradition, usually a good guide to the past if you could sift the facts out properly, was silent on this subject. It was obvious, however, that what he had done, another could do—that the Servant of Security was the logical, self-made heir to the Servant of All.

And the trouble was you couldn't do anything about the danger but be watchful.

He remembered when his father had called him away from childhood games and led him out to the hills to tend the sheep. How he had hated the lonesome, tiresome work! The old man had realized it and, for once, had softened sufficiently to attempt an explanation.

"You see, son, sheep are what they call domestic animals. So are dogs. Well, we can domesticate sheep and we can domesticate dogs to guard the sheep, but for a smart, wide-awake shepherd who'll know what to do when something real unusual comes up and will be able to tell us about it, well, for that we need a man."

"Gee, Pa," he had said, kicking disconsolately at the enormous shepherd's crook they'd given him, "then why don't you—whatdoyoucallit—*domesticate* a man?"

His father had chuckled and then stared out heavily

over the shaggy brow of the hill. "Well, there are people trying to do that, too, and they're getting better at it all the time. The only trouble, once you've got him domesticated, he isn't worth beans as a shepherd. He isn't sharp and excited once he's tamed. He isn't interested enough to be any use at all."

That was the problem in a nutshell, Garomma reflected. The Servant of Security, by the very nature of his duties, could not be a domesticated animal.

He had tried using sheepdogs at the head of Security; over and over again he had tried them. But they were always inadequate and had to be replaced by men. And —one year, three years, five years in office—men sooner or later struck for supreme power and had to be regretfully destroyed.

As the current Servant of Security was about to be destroyed. The only trouble—the man was so damned useful! You had to time these things perfectly to get the maximum length of service from the rare, imaginative individual who filled the post to perfection and yet cut him down the moment the danger outweighed the value. And since, with the right man, the danger existed from the very start, you had to watch the scale carefully, unremittingly . . .

Garomma sighed. This problem was the only annoyance in a world that had been virtually machined to give him pleasure. But it was, inevitably, a problem that was with him always, even in his dreams. Last night had been positively awful.

Moddo touched his knee again to remind him that he was on exhibition. He shook himself and smiled his gratitude. One had to remember that dreams were only dreams.

They had the crowds behind them now. Ahead, the great metal gate of the Educational Center swung slowly open and his car rumbled inside. As the motorcycle policemen swung off their two-wheelers with a smart sidewise flourish, the armed guards of the Service of Education in their crisp white tunics came to attention. Garom-

ma, helped nervously by Moddo, clambered out of the car just as the Center Band, backed by the Center Choir, swung into the roaring, thrilling credo of *Humanity's Hymn*:

Garomma works day and night,
Garomma's tasks are never light;
Garomma lives in drudgery,
For the sake of me, for the sake of thee . . .

After five verses, protocol having been satisfied, the band began *The Song of Education* and the Assistant Servant of Education, a poised, well-bred young man, came down the steps of the building. His arm-spread and "Serve us, Garomma," while perfunctory, was thoroughly correct. He stood to one side so that Garomma and Moddo could start up the steps and then swung in, straightbacked, behind them. The choir-master held the song on a high, worshipping note.

They walked through the great archway with its carved motto, *All Must Learn from the Servant of All,* and down the great central corridor of the immense building. The gray rags that Garomma and Moddo wore flapped about them. The walls were lined with minor employees chanting, "Serve us, Garomma. Serve us! Serve us! Serve us!"

Not quite the insane fervor of the street mobs, Garomma reflected, but entirely satisfactory paroxysms nonetheless. He bowed and stole a glance at Moddo beside him. He barely restrained a smile. The Servant of Education looked as nervous, as uncertain as ever. Poor Moddo! He was just not meant for such a high position. He carried his tall, husky body with all the *élan* of a tired berry-picker. He looked like anything but the most important official in the establishment.

And that was one of the things that made him indispensable. Moddo was just bright enough to know his own inadequacy. Without Garomma, he'd still be checking statistical abstracts for interesting discrepancies in some minor department of the Service of Education. He *knew* he wasn't strong enough to stand by himself. Nor was he sufficiently outgoing to make useful alliances. And so

Moddo, alone of all the Servants in the Cabinet, could be trusted completely.

In response to Moddo's diffident touch on his shoulder, he walked into the large room that had been so extravagantly prepared for him and climbed the little cloth-of-gold platform at one end. He sat down on the rough wooden stool at the top; a moment later, Moddo took the chair that was one step down, and the Assistant Servant of Education took the chair a further step below. The chief executives of the Educational Center, dressed in white tunics of the richest, most flowing cut, filed in slowly and stood before them. Garomma's personal bodyguards lined up in front of the platform.

And the ceremonies began. The ceremonies attendant upon complete control.

First, the oldest official in the Service of Education recited the appropriate passages from the Oral Tradition. How every year, in every regime, far back almost to prehistoric democratic times, a psychometric sampling had been taken of elementary school graduating classes all over the world to determine exactly how successful the children's political conditioning had been.

How every year there had been an overwhelming majority disclosed which believed the current ruler was the very pivot of human welfare, the mainspring of daily life, and a small minority—five per cent, seven per cent, three per cent—which had successfully resisted indoctrination and which, as adults, were to be carefully watched as potential sources of disaffection.

How with the ascension of Garomma and his Servant of Education, Moddo, twenty-five years ago, a new era of intensive mass-conditioning, based on much more ambitious goals, had begun.

The old man finished, bowed and moved back into the crowd. The Assistant Servant of Education rose and turned gracefully to face Garomma. He described these new goals which might be summed up in the phrase "complete control," as opposed to previous administrations' outdated satisfaction with 97% or 95% control, and

discussed the new extensive fear mechanisms and stepped-up psychometric spotchecks in the earlier grades—by which they were to be achieved. These techniques had all been worked out by Moddo—"under the never-failing inspiration and constant guidance of Garomma, the Servant of All"—and had, in a few years, resulted in a sampling which showed the number of independent juvenile minds to be less than one per cent. All others worshipped Garomma with every breath they took.

Thereafter, progress had been slower. They had absorbed the most brilliant children with the new conditioning process, but had hit the hard bedrock of the essential deviates, the psychological misfits whose personal maladjustments made it impossible for them to accept the prevailing attitudes of their social milieu, *whatever* these attitudes should happen to be. Over the years, techniques of conditioning had been painfully worked out which enabled even misfits to fit into society in the one respect of Garomma-worship and, over the years, the samplings indicated the negative doctrinal responses to be receding in the direction of zero: .016%, .007%, .0002%.

And *this* year. Well! The Assistant Servant of Education paused and took a deep breath. Five weeks ago, the Uniform Educational System of Earth had graduated a new crop of youngsters from the elementary schools. The customary planet-wide sampling had been taken on graduation day; collation and verification had just been completed. The results: negative response was zero to the very last decimal place! Control was complete.

Spontaneous applause broke out in the room, applause in which even Garomma joined. Then he leaned forward and placed his hand paternally, possessively on Moddo's head of unruly brown hair. At this unusual honor to their chief, the officials in the room cheered.

Under the noise, Garomma took the opportunity to ask Moddo, "What does the population in general know about this? What exactly are you telling them?"

Moddo turned his nervous, large-jawed face around. "Mostly just that it's a holiday. A lot of obscure stuff

about you achieving complete control of the human environment all to the end of human betterment. Barely enough so that they can know it's something you like and can rejoice with you."

"In their own slavery. I like that." Garomma tasted the sweet flavor of unlimited rulership for a long moment. Then the taste went sour and he remembered. "Moddo, I want to take care of the Servant of Security matter this afternoon. We'll go over it as soon as we start back."

The Servant of Education nodded. "I have a few thoughts. It's not so simple, you know. There's the problem of the successor."

"Yes. There's always that. Well, maybe in a few more years, if we can sustain this sampling and spread the techniques to the maladjusted elements in the older adult population, we'll be able to start dispensing with Security altogether."

"Maybe. Strongly set attitudes are much harder to adjust, though. And you'll always need a security system in the top ranks of officialdom. But I'll do the best—I'll do the best I can."

Garomma nodded and sat back, satisfied. Moddo would always do his best. And on a purely routine level, that was pretty good. He raised a hand negligently. The cheering and the applause stopped. Another Education executive came forward to describe the sampling method in detail. The ceremony went on.

This was the day of complete control . . .

Moddo, the Servant of Education, the Ragged Teacher of Mankind, rubbed his aching forehead with huge, well-manicured fingers and allowed himself to luxuriate in the sensation of ultimate power, absolute power, power such as no human being had even dared to dream of before this day.

Complete control. Complete . . .

There was the one remaining problem of the successor to the Servant of Security. Garomma would want a decision from him as soon as they started back to the

Hovel of Service; and he was nowhere near a decision. Either one of the two Assistant Servants of Security would be able to fill the job admirably, but that wasn't the question.

The question was which one of the two men would be most likely to maintain at high pitch in Garomma the fears that Moddo had conditioned him to feel over a period of thirty years?

That, so far as Moddo was concerned, was the whole function of the Servant of Security; to serve as primary punching bag for the Servant of All's fear-ridden subconscious until such time as the mental conflicts reached a periodic crisis. Then, by removing the man around whom they had been trained to revolve, the pressure would be temporarily eased.

It was a little like fishing, Moddo decided. You fed the fish extra line by killing off the Servant of Security, and then you reeled it in quietly, steadily, in the next few years by surreptitiously dropping hints about the manifest ambitions of his successor. Only you never wanted to land the fish. You merely wanted to keep it hooked and constantly under your control.

The Servant of Education smiled an inch or two behind his face, as he had trained himself to smile since early boyhood. Landing the fish? That would be the equivalent of becoming Servant of All himself. And what intelligent man could satisfy his lust for power with such an idiotic goal?

No, leave that to his colleagues, the ragged high officials in the Hovel of Service, forever scheming and plotting, making alliances and counter-alliances. The Servant of Industry, the Servant of Agriculture, the Servant of Science and the rest of those highly important fools.

To be the Servant of All meant being the target of plots, the very bull's eye of attention. An able man in this society must inevitably recognize that power—no matter how veiled or disguised—was the only valid aim in life. And the Servant of All—veiled and disguised

though he might be in a hundred humbling ways—was power incarnate.

No. Far better to be known as the nervous, uncertain underling whose knees shook beneath the weight of responsibilities far beyond his abilities. Hadn't he heard their contemptuous voices behind his back?

". . . Garomma's administrative toy . . ."

". . . Garomma's fool of a spiritual valet . . ."

". . . nothing but a footstool, a very ubiquitous footstool, mind you, but a footstool nonetheless on which rests Garomma's mighty heel . . ."

". . . poor, colorless, jittery slob . . ."

". . . when Garomma sneezes, Moddo sniffles . . ."

But from that menial, despised position, to be the real source of all policy, the maker and breaker of men, the *de facto* dictator of the human race . . .

He brought his hand up once more and smoothed at his forehead. The headache was getting worse. And the official celebration of complete control was likely to take another hour yet. He should be able to steal away for twenty or thirty minutes with Loob the Healer, without getting Garomma too upset. The Servant of All had to be handled with especial care at these crisis points. The jitters that had been induced in him were likely to become so overpowering that he might try to make a frantic decision for himself. And that possibility, while fantastically dim, must not be given a chance to develop. It was too dangerous.

For a moment, Moddo listened to the young man in front of them rattle on about modes and means, skew curves and correlation co-efficients, all the statistical jargon that concealed the brilliance of the psychological revolution that he, Moddo, had wrought. Yes, they would be there another hour yet.

Thirty-five years ago, while doing his thesis in the Central Service of Education Post-Graduate Training School, he had found a magnificent nugget in the accumulated

slag of several centuries of mass-conditioning statistics; the concept of *individual* application.

For a long while, he had found the concept incredibly difficult to close with: when all your training has been directed toward the efficient handling of human attitudes in terms of millions, the consideration of one man's attitudes and emotions is as slippery a proposition as an eel, freshly caught and moribundly energetic.

But after his thesis had been completed and accepted—the thesis on suggested techniques for the achievement of complete control which the previous administration had duly filed and forgotten—he had turned once more to the problem of individual conditioning.

And in the next few years, while working at his dull job in the Applied Statistics Bureau of the Service of Education, he had addressed himself to the task of refining the individual from the group, of reducing the major to the minor.

One thing became apparent. The younger your material, the easier your task—exactly as in mass-conditioning. But if you started with a child, it would be years before he would be able to operate effectively in the world on your behalf. And with a child you were faced with the constant counter-barrage of political conditioning which filled the early school years.

What was needed was a young man who already had a place of sorts in the government, but who, for some reason or other, had a good deal of unrealized—and *unconditioned*—potential. Preferably, also, somebody whose background had created a personality with fears and desires of a type which could serve as adequate steering handles.

Moddo began to work nights, going over the records of his office in search of that man. He had found two or three who looked good. That brilliant fellow in the Service of Transport, he reminisced, had seemed awfully interesting for a time. Then he had come across Garomma's papers.

And Garomma had been perfect. From the first. He was

a directorial type, he was likable, he was clever—and he was very receptive.

"I could learn an awful lot from you," he had told Moddo shyly at their first meeting. "This is such a big, complicated place—Capital Island. So much going on all the time. I get confused just thinking about it. But you were born here. You really seem to know your way around all the swamps and bogs and snakepits."

Due to sloppy work on the part of the Sixth District Conditioning Commissioner, Garomma's home neighborhood had developed a surprising number of quasi-independent minds on all levels of intelligence. Most of them tended to revolution, especially after a decade of near-famine crops and exorbitant taxation. But Garomma had been ambitious; he had turned against his peasant background and entered the lower echelons of the Service of Security.

This meant that when the Sixth District Peasant Uprising occurred, his usefulness in its immediate suppression had earned him a much higher place. More important, it had given him freedom from the surveillance and extra adult conditioning which a man of his suspicious family associations might normally have expected.

It also meant that, once Moddo had maneuvered an introduction and created a friendship, he had at his disposal not only a rising star but a personality that was superb in its plasticity.

A personality upon which he could laboriously create the impress of his own image.

First, there had been that wonderful business of Garomma's guilt about disobeying his father that had eventually led to his leaving the farm altogether—and later to his becoming an informer against his own family and neighbors. This guilt, which had resulted in fear and therefore hatred for everything associated with its original objects, was easy to redirect to the person of his superior, the Servant of Security, and make that the new father-image.

Later, when Garomma had become Servant of All,

he still retained—under Moddo's tireless ministrations—the same guilt and the same omnipresent fear of punishment toward whoever was the reigning Head of Security. Which was necessary if he was not to realize that his real master was the large man who sat at his right hand, constantly looking nervous and uncertain . . .

Then there had been education. And re-education. From the beginning, Moddo had realized the necessity of feeding Garomma's petty peasant arrogance and had abased himself before it. He gave the other man the impression that the subversive thoughts he was now acquiring were of his own creation, even leading him to believe that he was domesticating Moddo—curious how the fellow never escaped from his agricultural origins even in his metaphors!—instead of the other way around.

Because Moddo was now laying plans for a tremendous future, and he didn't want them upset some day by the cumulative resentment one may develop toward a master and teacher; on the contrary, he wanted the plans reinforced by the affection one feels toward a pet dog whose nuzzling dependence constantly feeds the ego and creates a more ferocious counter-dependence than the owner ever suspects.

The shock that Garomma had exhibited when he began to realize that the Servant of All was actually the Dictator of All! Moddo almost smiled with his lips at the memory. Well, after all, when his own parents had suggested the idea years ago in the course of a private sailing trip they took together pursuant to his father's duties as a minor official in the Service of Fisheries and Marine —hadn't he been so upset that he'd let go of the tiller and vomited over the side? Losing your religion is a hard thing at any age, but it gets much harder as you get older.

On the other hand, Moddo had lost not only his religion at the age of six, but also his parents. They had done too much loose talking to too many people under the incorrect assumption that the then Servant of Security was going to be lax forever.

He rubbed his knuckles into the side of his head. This headache was one of the worst he'd had in days! He needed fifteen minutes at least—surely he could get away for fifteen minutes—with Loob. The Healer would set him up for the rest of the day, which, on all appearances, was going to be a tiring one. And he had to get away from Garomma, anyway, long enough to come to a clear-headed, personal decision on who was to be the next Servant of Security.

Moddo, the Servant of Education, the Ragged Teacher of Mankind, took advantage of a pause between speakers to lean back and say to Garomma: "I have a few administrative matters to check here before we start back. May I be excused? It — it won't take more than about twenty or twenty-five minutes."

Garomma scowled imperiously straight ahead. "Can't they wait? This is your day as much as mine. I'd like to have you near me."

"I know that, Garomma, and I'm grateful for the need. But"—and now he touched the Servant of All's knee in supplication—"I beg of you to let me attend to them. They are very pressing. One of them has to do—it has to do indirectly with the Servant of Security and may help you decide whether you want to dispense with him at this particular time."

Garomma's face immediately lost its bleakness. "In that case, by all means. But get back before the ceremony is over. I want us to leave together."

The tall man nodded and rose. He turned to face his leader. "Serve us, Garomma," he said with outstretched arms. "Serve us, serve us, serve us." He backed out of the room, always facing the Servant of All.

Out in the corridor, he strode rapidly through the saluting Center of Education guards and into his private elevator. He pressed the third-floor button. And then, as the door swept shut and the car began to rise, he permitted himself a single, gentle, mouth-curling smile.

The trouble he had taken to pound that one concept into Garomma's thick head: the basic principle in mod-

ern scientific government is to keep the government so unobtrusive as to appear non-existent, to use the illusion of freedom as a kind of lubricant for slipping on invisible shackles—above all, to rule in the name of anything but rulership!

Garomma himself had phrased it in his own laborious fashion one day when, shortly after their great coup, they stood together—both still uncomfortable in the rags of greatness—and watched the construction of the new Hovel of Service in the charred place where the old one had stood for almost half a century. A huge, colorful, revolving sign on top of the unfinished building told the populace that FROM HERE WILL YOUR EVERY WANT AND NEED BE ATTENDED TO, FROM HERE WILL YOU BE SERVED MORE EFFICIENTLY AND PLEASANTLY THAN EVER BEFORE. Garomma had stared at the sign which was being flashed on the video receivers of the world—in the homes as well as in factories, offices, schools and compulsory communal gatherings—every hour on the hour.

"It's like my father used to say," he told Moddo at last with the peculiar heavy chuckle he used to identify a thought he felt was entirely original; "the right kind of salesman, if he talks long enough and hard enough, can convince a man that the thickest thorns feel as soft as roses. All he has to do is keep calling them roses, hey, Moddo?"

Moddo had nodded slowly, pretending to be overcome by the brilliance of the analysis and savoring its complexities for a few moments. Then, as always, merely appearing to be conducting an examination of the various latent possibilities in Garomma's ideas, he had proceeded to give the new Servant of All a further lesson.

He had underlined the necessity of avoiding all outward show of pomp and luxury, something the so-recently dead officials of the previous administration had tended to forget in the years before their fall. He had pointed out that the Servants of Mankind must constantly appear to be just that—the humble instruments of the larger mass will. Then anyone who acted contrary to Garomma's whim

would be punished, not for disobeying his ruler, but for acting against the overwhelming majority of the human race.

And he had suggested an innovation that had been in his mind for a long time; the occasional creation of disasters in regions that had been uninterruptedly loyal and obedient. This would accentuate the fact that the Servant of All was very human indeed, that his tasks were overwhelming and that he occasionally grew tired.

This would intensify the impression that the job of coordinating the world's goods and services had almost grown too complex to be handled successfully. It would spur the various Districts on to uncalled-for prodigies of frantic loyalty and self-regimentation, so that they at least would have the Servant of All's maximum attention.

"Of course," Garomma had agreed. "That's what I said. The whole point is not to let them know that you're running their lives and that they're helping you do it. You're getting the idea."

He was getting the idea! He, Moddo, who ever since his adolescence had been studying a concept that had originated centuries ago when mankind had begun to emerge from the primitive chaos of self-rule and personal decision into the organized social universe of modern times . . . *he* was getting the idea!

He had smirked gratefully. But he had continued applying to Garomma himself the techniques that he was teaching Garomma to apply to the mass of men as a whole. Year in, year out, seemingly absorbed in the immensities of the project he had undertaken on behalf of the Service of Education, he had actually left its planning in the hands of subordinates while he concentrated on Garomma.

And today, while superficially acquiring complete control over the minds of an entire generation of human beings, he had tasted for the first time complete control over Garomma. For the past five years, he had been attempting to crystallize his ascendancy in a form that was simpler to use than complicated need-mechanisms and statement-patterns.

Today, for the first time, the weary hours of delicate, stealthy conditioning had begun to work out perfectly. The hand-signal, the touch-stimulus that he had organized Garomma's mind to respond to, had resulted in the desired responses every single time!

As he walked down the third-floor corridor to Loob's modest office, he searched for an adequate expression. It was like, he decided, being able to turn a whole vast liner by one touch on the wheel. The wheel activated the steering engine, the steering engine pushed against the enormous weight of rudder, and the rudder's movements eventually forced the great ship to swing about and change its course.

No, he reflected, let Garomma have his glorious moments and open adulation, his secret palaces and multitudes of concubines. He, Moddo, would settle for the single, occasional touch . . . and complete control.

The anteroom to Loob's office was empty. He stood there impatiently for a moment, then called out: "Loob! Isn't anyone taking care of this place? I'm in a hurry!"

A plump little man with a tiny pointed beard on his chin came scurrying out of the other room. "My secretary—everyone had to go downstairs when the Servant of All entered—things are so disrupted—she hasn't returned yet. But I was careful," he went on, catching up to his own breath, "to cancel all my appointments with other patients while you were in the building. Please come in."

Moddo stretched himself out on the couch in the Healer's office. "I can only spare about—about fifteen minutes. I have a very important decision to make, and I have a headache that's gouging out my—my brains."

Loob's fingers circled Moddo's neck and began massaging the back of his head with a serene purposefulness. "I'll do what I can. Now try to relax. Relax. That's right. *Relax*. Doesn't this help?"

"A lot," Moddo sighed. He must find some way of working Loob into his personal entourage, to be with him whenever he had to travel with Garomma. The man

was *invaluable.* It would be wonderful to have him always available in person. Just a matter of conditioning Garomma to the thought. And now *that* could be handled with the same suggestion. "Do you mind if I just talk?" he inquired. "I don't feel very much—very much like free association."

Loob sat down in the heavily upholstered chair behind the desk. "Do whatever you want. If you care to, go into what's troubling you at the moment. All we can hope to do in fifteen minutes is help you relax."

Moddo began to talk.

This was the day of complete control . . .

Loob, the Healer of Minds, the Assistant to the Third Assistant Servant of Education, threaded his fingers through the small, triangular beard that was his professional badge and allowed himself to luxuriate in the sensation of ultimate power, absolute power, power such as no human being had ever dared to dream of before this day.

Complete control. Complete . . .

It would have been extremely satisfying to have handled the Servant of Security matter directly, but such pleasures would come in time. His technicians in the Bureau of Healing Research had almost solved the problem he had set them. Meanwhile he still had revenge and the enjoyment of unlimited dominion.

He listened to Moddo talking of his difficulties in a carefully guarded, non-specific fashion and held up a round fat hand to cover his grin. The man actually believed that after seven years of close therapeutic relationship, he could conceal such details from Loob!

But of course. He had to believe it. Loob had spent the first two years restructuring his entire psyche upon that belief, and then—and only then—had begun to effect transference on a total basis. While the emotions Moddo felt toward his parents in childhood were being duplicated relative to the Healer, Loob had begun to probe in the now unsuspicious mind. At first he hadn't believed

what the evidence suggested. Then, as he got to know the patient much better he became completely convinced and almost breathless at the scope of his windfall.

For more than twenty-five years, Garomma, as the Servant of All, had ruled the human race, and for longer than that, Moddo, as a sort of glorified personal secretary, had controlled Garomma in every important respect.

So, for the past five years, he, Loob, as psychotherapist and indispensable crutch to an uncertain, broken ego, had guided Moddo and thus reigned over the world, undisputed, unchallenged—and thoroughly unsuspected.

The man behind the man behind the throne. What could be safer than that?

Of course, it would be more efficient to fasten his therapeutic grip directly on Garomma. But that would bring him out in the open far too much. Being the Servant of All's personal mental physician would make him the object of jealous scrutiny by every scheming high-echelon cabal.

No, it was better to be the one who had custody of the custodian, especially when the custodian appeared to be the most insignificant man in all the Hovel of Service officialdom.

And then, some day, when his technicians had come up with the answer he required, he might dispose of the Servant of Education and control Garomma at firsthand, with the new method.

He listened with amusement to Moddo discussing the Servant of Security matter in terms of a hypothetical individual in his own department who was about to be replaced. The question was which one of two extremely able subordinates should be given his job?

Loob wondered if the patient had any idea how transparent his subterfuges were. No, they rarely did. This was a man whose upset mind had been so manipulated that its continued sanity depended on two factors: the overpowering need to consult Loob whenever anything even mildly delicate came up, and the belief that he

could be consulted without revealing the actual data of the situation.

When the voice on the couch had come to the end of its ragged, wandering summation, Loob took over. Smoothly, quietly, almost tonelessly, he reviewed what Moddo had said. On the surface, he was merely restating the concepts of his patient in a more coherent way. Actually, he was reformulating them so that, considering his personal problems and basic attitudes, the Servant of Education would have no alternative. He would have to select the younger of the two candidates, the one whose background had included the least opposition to the Healers Guild.

Not that it made very much difference. The important thing was the proof of complete control. That was implicit in having made Moddo convince Garomma of the necessity of getting rid of a Servant of Security at a time when the Servant of All faced no particular mental crisis. When, in fact, his euphoria was at its height.

But there was, admittedly, the additional pleasure in finally destroying the man who, years ago as Chief of the Forty-seventh District's Security, had been responsible for the execution of Loob's only brother. The double achievement was as delicious as one of those two-flavor tarts for which the Healer's birthplace was famous. He sighed reminiscently.

Moddo sat up on the couch. He pressed his large, spreading hands into the fabric on either side and stretched. "You'd be amazed how much help this one short session has been, Loob. The—the headache's gone, the—the confusion's gone. Just talking about it seems to clarify everything. I know exactly what I have to do now."

"Good," drawled Loob the Healer in a gentle, carefully detached voice.

"I'll try to get back tomorrow for a full hour. And I've been thinking of having you transferred to my personal staff, so that you can straighten out—straighten out the kinks at the time they occur. I haven't reached a decision on it yet, though."

Loob shrugged and escorted his patient to the door. "That's entirely up to you. However you feel I can help you most."

He watched the tall, husky man walking down the corridor to the elevator. *"I haven't reached a decision on it yet, though."* Well, he wouldn't—not until Loob did. Loob had put the idea into his mind six months ago, but had deferred having him take action on it. He wasn't sure that it would be a good idea to get even that close to the Servant of All as yet. And there was that wonderful little project in the Bureau of Healing Research which he still wanted to give maximum daily attention.

His secretary came in and went right to work at her typewriter. Loob decided to go downstairs and check on what had been done today. With all the fanfare attendant upon the Servant of All's arrival to celebrate complete control, the researchers' routine had no doubt been seriously interrupted. Still, the solution might come at any time. And he liked to examine their lines of investigation for potential fruitfulness: these technicians were blunderingly unimaginative!

As he walked down to the main floor, he wondered if Moddo, anywhere in the secret depths of his psyche, had any idea of how much he had come to depend on the Healer, how thoroughly he needed him. The fellow was such a tangle of anxiety and uncertainty—losing his parents as a child, the way he had, of course, had not helped too much, but his many repressions had been in existence even then. He had never even remotely suspected that the reason he wanted Garomma to be the ostensible leader was because he was afraid of taking personal responsibility for anything. That the fake personality he was proud of presenting to the world was his real personality, the difference being that he had learned to use his fears and timidity in a positive fashion. But only up to a point. Seven years ago, when he had looked up Loob ("a fast bit of psychotherapy for some minor problems I've been having"), he'd been on the point of complete

collapse. Loob had repaired the vast flapping structure on a temporary basis and given it slightly different functions. Functions for Loob.

He couldn't help wondering further if the ancients would have been able to do anything basic for Moddo. The ancients, according to the Oral Tradition at least, had developed, just before the beginning of the modern era, a psychotherapy that accomplished wonders of change and personal reorganization for the individual.

But to what end? No serious attempt to use the method for its obvious purpose, for the only purpose of any method . . . *power*. Loob shook his head. Those ancients had been so incredibly naive! And so much of their useful knowledge had been lost. Concepts like super-ego merely existed in the Oral Tradition of the Healers Guild as words; there was no clue as to their original meaning. They might be very useful today, properly applied.

On the other hand, were most of the members of his own modern Healers Guild across the wide sea, any less naive, including his father and the uncle who was now its reigning head? From the day when he had passed the Guild's final examinations and begun to grow the triangular beard of master status, Loob had seen that the ambitions of his fellow-members were ridiculously limited. Here, in this very city, where, according to legend, the Guild of the Healers of Minds had originated, each member asked no more of life than to use his laboriously learned skill at transference to acquire power over the lives of ten or fifteen wealthy patients.

Loob had laughed at these sparse objectives. He had seen the obvious goal which his colleagues had been overlooking for years. The more powerful the individual whom you subjected to transference and in whom you created a complete dependence, the more power you, as his healer, enjoyed. The world's power center was on Capital Island across the great ocean to the east. And it was there that Loob determined to go.

It hadn't been easy. The strict rules of custom against changing your residence except on official business had

stood in his way for a decade. But once the wife of the Forty-seventh District's Communications Commissioner had become his patient, it got easier. When the commissioner had been called to Capital Island for promotion to the Second Assistant Servantship of Communication, Loob had gone with the family; he was now indispensable. Through them he had secured a minor job in the Service of Education. Through that job, practicing his profession on the side, he had achieved enough notice to come to the august attention of the Servant of Education himself.

He hadn't really expected to go this far. But a little luck, a great deal of skill and constant, unwinking alertness had made an irresistible combination. Forty-five minutes after Moddo had first stretched out on his couch, Loob had realized that he, with all of his smallness and plumpness and lack of distinction, was destined to rule the world.

Now the only question was what to do with that rule. With wealth and power unlimited.

Well, for one thing there was his little research project. That was very interesting, and it would serve, once it came to fruition, chiefly to consolidate and insure his power. There were dozens of little pleasures and properties that were now his, but their enjoyment tended to wear off with their acquisition. And finally there was knowledge.

Knowledge. Especially forbidden knowledge. He could now enjoy it with impunity. He could collate the various Oral Traditions into one intelligible whole and be the only man in the world who knew what had really happened in the past. He had already discovered, through the several teams of workers he had set at the task, such tidbits as the original name of his birthplace, lost years ago in a numbering system that had been created to destroy patriotic associations inimical to the world state. Long before it had been the Fifth City of the Forty-seventh District, he had learned, it had been Austria, the glorious capital of the proud Viennese Empire. And this island on which he stood had been Havanacuba, no doubt once a

great empire in its own right which had established hegemony over all other empires somewhere in the dim war-filled beginnings of modern times.

Well, these were highly personal satisfactions. He doubted very much if Garomma, for example, would be interested to know that he hailed, not from the Twentieth Agricultural Region of the Sixth District, but from a place called Canada, one of the fifty constituent republics of the ancient Northern United States of America. But he, Loob, was interested. Every additional bit of knowledge gave you additional power over your fellowmen, that some day, some way, would be usable.

Why, if Moddo had had any real knowledge of the transference techniques taught in the upper lodges of the Guild of the Healers of Minds, he might still be running the world himself! But no. It was inevitable that a Garomma should actually be no more than a creature, a thing, of Moddo. It was inevitable that a Moddo, given the peculiar forces that had formed him, should inexorably have had to come to Loob and pass under his control. It was also inevitable that Loob, with his specialized knowledge of what could be done with the human mind, should be the only independent man on Earth today. It was also very pleasant.

He wriggled a little bit, very satisfied with himself, gave his beard a final finger-comb, and pushed into the Bureau of Healing Research.

The chief of the bureau came up rapidly and bowed. "Nothing new to report today." He gestured at the tiny cubicles in which the technicians sat at old books or performed experiments on animals and criminally convicted humans. "It took them a while to get back to work, after the Servant of All arrived. Everyone was ordered out into the main corridor for regulation empathizing with Garomma."

"I know," Loob told him. "I don't expect much progress on a day like this. Just so you keep them at it. It's a big problem."

The other man shrugged enormously. "A problem which, as far as we can tell, has never been solved before. The ancient manuscripts we've discovered are all in terrible shape, of course. But those that mention hypnotism all agree that it can't occur under any of the three conditions you want: against the individual's will, contrary to his personal desires and best judgment, and maintaining him over a long period of time in the original state of subjection without need for new applications. I'm not saying it's impossible, but—"

"But it's very difficult. Well, you've had three and a half years to work on it, and you'll have as much more time as you need. *And* equipment. *And* personnel. Just ask. Meanwhile, I'll wander around and see how your men are doing. You needn't come with me. I like to ask my own questions."

The bureau chief bowed again and turned back to his desk in the rear of the room. Loob, the Healer of Minds, the Assistant to the Third Assistant Servant of Education, walked slowly from cubicle to cubicle, watching the work, asking questions, but mostly noting the personal quality of the psychological technician in each cubicle.

He was convinced that the right man could solve the problem. And it was just a matter of finding the right man and giving him maximum facilities. The right man would be clever enough and persistent enough to follow up the right lines of research, but too unimaginative to be appalled by a goal which had eluded the best minds for ages.

And once the problem was solved—then in one short interview with Garomma, he could place the Servant of All under his direct, personal control for the rest of his life and dispense with the complications of long therapeutic sessions with Moddo where he constantly had to suggest, and suggest in roundabout fashion, rather than give simple, clear and unambiguous orders. Once the problem was solved—

He came to the last cubicle. The pimply-faced young man who sat at the plain brown table studying a ripped

and damprotted volume didn't hear him come in. Loob studied him for a moment.

What frustrated, bleak lives these young technicians must lead! You could see it in the tightly set lines of their all-too-similar faces. Growing up in one of the most rigidly organized versions of the world state that a ruler had yet contrived, they didn't have a thought that was in any way their own, could not dream of tasting a joy that had not been officially allotted to them.

And yet this fellow was the brightest of the lot. If any one in the Bureau of Healing Research could develop the kind of perfect hypnotic technique Loob required, he could. Loob had been watching him with growing hope for a long time now.

"How is it coming, Sidothi?" he asked.

Sidothi looked up from his book.

"Shut the door," he said.

Loob shut the door.

This was the day of complete control . . .

Sidothi, the Laboratory Assistant, Psychological Technician Fifth Class, snapped his fingers in Loob's face and allowed himself to luxuriate in the sensation of ultimate power, absolute power, power such as no human being had even dared to dream of before this day.

Complete control. Complete . . .

Still sitting, he snapped his fingers again.

He said: "Report."

The familiar glazed look came into Loob's eyes. His body stiffened. His arms hung limply at his sides. In a steady, toneless voice he began to deliver his report.

Magnificent. The Servant of Security would be dead in a few hours and the man Sidothi liked would take his place. For an experiment in complete control, it had worked out to perfection. That was all it had been; an attempt to find out if—by creating a feeling of vengefulness in Loob for the sake of a non-existent brother—he could force the Healer to act on a level he always wanted to avoid; making Moddo do something that the

Servant of Education had no interest at all in doing. That was to prod Garomma into an action against the Servant of Security at a time when Garomma was in no particular mental crisis.

The experiment had worked perfectly. He'd pushed a little domino named Loob three days ago, and a whole series of other little dominoes had begun to fall one right after the other. Today, when the Servant of Security was strangled at his desk, the last one would have fallen.

Yes, control was absolutely complete.

Of course, there had been another, minor reason why he had elected to conduct this experiment in terms of the Servant of Security's life. He didn't like the man. He'd seen him drink a liqueur in public four years ago. Sidothi didn't believe the Servants of Mankind should do such things. They should lead clean, simple, abstemious lives; they should be an example to the rest of the human race.

He'd never seen the Assistant Servant of Security whom he had ordered Loob to have promoted, but he had heard that the fellow lived very narrowly, without luxury even in private. Sidothi liked that. That was the way it should be.

Loob came to the end of his report and stood waiting. Sidothi wondered whether he should order him to give up this bad, boastful idea of controlling Garomma directly. No, that wouldn't do: that attitude led into the mechanism of coming down to the Bureau of Healing Research every day to check on progress. While a simple order to come in daily would suffice, still Sidothi felt that until he had examined all aspects of his power and become thoroughly familiar with its use, it was wise to leave original personality mechanisms in place, so long as they didn't get in the way of anything important.

And that reminded him. There was an interest of Loob's which was sheer time-wasting. Now, when he was certain of absolute control, was a good time to get rid of it.

"You will drop this research into historical facts," he ordered. "You will use the time thus freed for further de-

tailed examination of Moddo's psychic weaknesses. And you will find that more interesting than studying the past. That is all."

He snapped his fingers in Loob's face, waited a moment, then snapped them again. The Healer of Minds took a deep breath, straightened and smiled.

"Well, keep at it," he said, encouragingly.

"Thank you, sir. I will," Sidothi assured him.

Loob opened the door of the cubicle and walked out, pompously, serenely. Sidothi stared after him. The idiotic assurance of the man—that once the process of complete control by hypnotic technique was discovered, it would be given to Loob!

Sidothi had begun to reach the answer three years ago. He had immediately covered up, letting his work take a superficially different line. Then, when he had the technique perfected, he'd used it on Loob himself. Naturally.

At first he'd been shocked, almost sickened, when he found out how Loob controlled Moddo, how Moddo controlled Garomma, the Servant of All. But after a while, he'd adjusted to the situation well enough. After all, ever since the primary grades, the only reality he and his contemporaries had accepted completely was the reality of power. Power in each class, in each club, in each and every gathering of human beings, was the only thing worth fighting for. And you chose an occupation not only because you were most fitted for it, but because it gave the greatest promise of power to a person of your particular interests and aptitudes.

But he'd never dreamed of, never imagined, this much power! Well, he had it. That was reality, and reality was to be respected above all else. Now the problem was what to do with his power.

And that was a very hard question to answer. But the answer would come in time. Meanwhile, there was the wonderful chance to make certain that everyone did his job right, that bad people were punished. He intended to stay in his menial job until the proper time came for pro-

motion. There was no need at the moment to have a big title. If Garomma could rule as the Servant of All, he could rule Garomma at third or fourth hand as a simple Psychological Technician Fifth Class.

But in what way exactly did he want to rule Garomma? What important things did he want to make Garomma do?

A bell rang. A voice called out of a loudspeaker set high in the wall. "Attention! attention, all personnel! The Servant of All will be leaving the Center in a few minutes. Everyone to the main corridor to beg for his continued service to mankind. Everyone—"

Sidothi joined the mob of technicians pouring out of the huge laboratory room. People were coming out of offices on both sides of them. He was swept up with a crowd constantly enlarging from the elevators and stairways to the main corridor where the Service of Education guards prodded them and jammed them against the walls.

He smiled. If they only knew whom they were pushing! Their ruler, who could have any one of them executed. The only man in the world who could do anything he wanted to do. *Anything.*

There was sudden swirling movement and a cheer at the far distant end of the corridor. Everyone began to shuffle about nervously, everyone tried to stand on tip-toe in order to see better. Even the guards began to breathe faster.

The Servant of All was coming.

The cries grew more numerous, more loud. People in front of them were heaving about madly. And suddenly Sidothi saw him!

His arms went up and out in a flashing paroxysm of muscles. Something tremendous and delighted seemed to press on his chest and his voice screamed, "Serve us, Garomma! Serve us! Serve us! Serve us!" He was suffused with heaving waves of love, love such as he never knew anywhere else, love for Garomma, love for Garomma's parents, love for Garomma's children, love for any-

thing and everything connected with Garomma. His body writhed, almost without coordination, delicious flames licked up his thighs and out from his armpits, he twisted and turned, danced and hopped, his very stomach seeming to strain against his diaphragm in an attempt to express its devotion. None of which was very strange, considering that these phenomena had been conditioned in him since early childhood . . .

"Serve us, Garomma!" he shrieked, bubbles of saliva growing out of one corner of his mouth. "Serve us! Serve us! Serve us!"

He fell forward, between two guards, and his outstretched fingertips touched a rustling flapping rag just as the Servant of All strode by. His mind abruptly roared off into the furthest, most hidden places of ecstasy. He fainted, still babbling. "*Serve* us, O Garomma."

When it was all over, his fellow-technicians helped him back to the Bureau of Healing Research. They looked at him with awe. It wasn't every day you managed to touch one of Garomma's rags. What it must do to a person!

It took Sidothi almost half an hour to recover.

THIS WAS THE DAY OF COMPLETE CONTROL.

RITE OF PASSAGE

Chad Oliver

I

The ship was named the *Juarez*.

Outside, all was well. A tiny white bubble of flame played about the stern jets and the *Juarez*, one hundred light-years distant from the planet Earth, picked its graceful way through the system of Carinae.

Inside, it was different. The *Juarez* was a death ship. Someone, somehow, on one of the outer planets, had taken a chance with a germ. Perhaps he had been in a hurry, perhaps he had forgotten, perhaps it was just one of those things.

It didn't really matter now.

The *Juarez* carried a crew of fifty-four. Six were still alive. Of the remaining six, three were clearly dying.

It was a long way home.

Martin Ashley wiped the cold sweat from the palms of his hands. He handed the doctor a glass of water. "Here you go, Doc," he said quietly.

Doc Slonsky managed to control his trembling long enough to hurl the water against the wall in a gesture of supreme contempt. "A dying man asks for a drink," he said acidly, "and you bring him water. I have told you, Martin—there is no time for jokes. Not any more." The trembling stopped and beads of colorless sweat popped out on his forehead. "Get me a drink."

Martin Ashley walked shakily across the dimly-lit room, picked his way between two silent, sheet-covered figures, and retrieved a half-empty bottle of bourbon from a table. It couldn't do any harm now, he knew. When they reached that stage, nothing made any difference. He went back to the doctor, poured out a glassful, and handed it to him. Slonsky downed it at one prodigious draft, shuddered from a new cause, and managed to prop himself up on one elbow.

"Bourbon," the little man said unhappily, "you'd give a dying man *bourbon.*"

"You're not dying, Doc," Martin told him, stuffing a pillow behind him for support. "You're indestructible."

"Garbage," the doctor said, dropping the glass on the floor and taking the bottle instead. "Many men have been indestructible—Caesar, Hannibal, Bluebeard. Where are they today? Dead, all dead." He took a long pull from the bottle.

"You'll pull through, Doc," Martin lied. "You're not the same as the others, you don't have quite the same thing, you see, and—"

"Martin."

The room was very quiet around them. *No one talks in a graveyard,* Martin thought coldly. *No one but the caretaker.*

Slonsky let his head fall back and Martin took the bottle out of his limp hand. Slonsky closed his eyes as though the effort of keeping them open was too much for him. "Martin," he said again, his voice very weak.

"Yes, Doc."

"Martin, Gallen has a prayer to pull through; he passed the crisis hours ago and is still alive. He has a chance. You seem to be immune; it is because you have lived an evil life, although that particular remedy didn't work in my case. The Chavez boy never came down either. That makes three of you, two for sure. You'd better get the rest of us out of the ship, Martin."

"Now, Doc—"

"Give me a drink, Martin."

Martin Ashley put the bottle in Slonsky's hand, but the hand didn't respond. It was very quiet. Doc Slonsky's eyes opened for the last time, unseeing, and Martin pulled the sheet up to cover his face.

He was alone again.

"Good luck, Doc," he said.

He walked slowly through the silent room, not thinking about anything. He had seen it happen too many times. He was numb. He took a drink out of the bottle himself, being long past the stage where sanitary precautions concerned him. If he didn't have it now, he wasn't going to get it, and maybe that was too bad. The bourbon burned a little in his stomach but failed to warm him. He set the bottle down on a convenient table and left it there.

He stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind him. He stood for a long minute, listening to the faint throbbing hum of the mindless atomics, and then he began to walk down the empty corridor, not sure where he was going, or why.

As he had so many times before when he was confused, or just lonesome, he wound up with Carol. He had carried her to her room a long time ago, when there still had been hope, and he went there now, needing a word, a look, anything.

He didn't get it.

Her blonde hair was lifeless on the pillow, and one slim arm hung down by the side of the bed, rocking slightly with the vibrations of the ship. She had no make-up on, as usual, and her blue eyes were closed. She was still breathing, faintly.

Martin Ashley looked at her for a long time. He remembered. Mostly, he remembered the long talks they had had, and the laughs, while most of the *Juarez* slept around them. Carol had been one of the navigators, and Martin had always thought of her as a potentially beautiful woman. She could have been beautiful, and more than that, but she didn't let herself be. She had lost her man, a long time ago, and Martin had never been able

to take his place. He had only kissed her once, and never tried again.

But they had had a closeness between them. They had understood one another, and they needed that. They had cheered each other up when they were low, and when they both felt good they had fun. They had both known that some day—

Well, some day wouldn't come, now. Maybe it never would have anyway, but they had both liked to think that it would.

There wasn't anything he could say to Carol. He left her where she was, because he couldn't watch, and went out again into the empty corridor.

Martin Ashley needed life. He needed to see a living thing, even a dog or a fish or a plant. The *Juarez* was like a tomb. It *was* a tomb.

He walked through the tunnels to the senior's cabin, listening to the click and echo of his heels on the metal floor. Long before he got there, he heard the sobbing that filled the corridor.

That would be Bob Chavez, the senior's son, he knew. Probably, it meant that old Alberto Chavez was dead. He smiled a little, sadly. Al Chavez had only been fifty-five, twenty years older than himself, but that was old for space. He caught himself wishing that Al could have pulled through, instead of his son. He didn't even dislike himself for the thought; he was past caring very much. It wasn't that Bob was no good, of course, but simply that he probably wasn't good enough.

He knocked on the door. "Come on out, Bob," he said.

The sobbing choked off, hurriedly. His knock wasn't answered.

"Come on, Bob," he said tonelessly. "We've got work to do."

The door opened finally. Robert Chavez was twenty-one years old and he was dark and handsome in the classic tradition. His eyes were red now, and Martin reflected idly that this was the first time he had ever seen him without his hair combed.

"Let me alone," the boy said. "Go away."

Martin felt sorry for him, as much as he could feel sorry for anyone today, but it obviously wouldn't do to leave Bob in there alone with his father. "We're all that's left, Bob," he said quietly, "unless you count Gallen. I know how you feel, but that won't help. We've got about twelve hours at the outside to orbit this ship and pick us a planet. I need your help."

"I don't give a damn, Mart," Chavez said. "I just don't give a damn."

He started to close the door, but Martin had his foot in it. "It isn't easy to grow up in a hurry," he said, "but you're going to have to do it. I'm going up to the control room, and I'll give you fifteen minutes. You take a look at your father and figure out what you ought to do. I'm shoving off, and whether you come along or not is your business."

He turned and walked away. *It would have to be Bob,* he thought. *It would have to be him, of all people.*

He walked toward the control room, smiling sourly. Fifty-one down and three to go.

They had set up a cot for Ernest Gallen in the control room, by his radio equipment, just in case. When Martin Ashley came in and sat down next to him, he opened his eyes and managed to hold up two fingers in an ironic V for Victory.

"Man," he said, "I'm still alive. How do you like that?"

"I like it fine, Ernie," Martin said. "How do you feel?"

"Like the worms wouldn't have me. I'm afraid I may live."

"You'd better."

"Who else we got, Mart?"

"The kid. Period."

Gallen sighed. "In that case," he said, "suppose you just pick up a gun and put a bullet through my brain, and I'll toddle along peacefully to the happy hunting ground. No point in prolonging the agony."

Martin Ashley looked at the man on the cot, sizing

up what he knew about him. Ernie Gallen was about forty, with a short and stocky build, blondish hair and brown eyes. He was moody, and inclined to be at his most cheerful when the going was the toughest. He was—or had been—the radio expert on the *Juarez*, and in other fields he tended toward the "common sense" approach to problems. He had a sense of humor. Ashley liked the man, which helped. Ernie might be a good man to have along, from a purely objective viewpoint, or he might not.

That would depend on what they ran into.

"Hell of a note," Gallen said, shifting his position on the cot. "Two guys left to run a spaceship in the middle of nowhere—an anthropologist and a radio bug. Add one kid who knows all the answers, and what have you got?"

"Not very much," Martin Ashley admitted. "Not enough, certainly."

The control room was silent around them, except for an occasional click or buzz from automatic equipment. The small noises served as a mechanical counterpoint to the not-sound of emptiness. The great viewer still flashed its images. The computer hummed with readiness. The dials presented their data with complete unconcern, and the lighted control bank was ready to go.

But the ship was dead. The heart and brain and spirit were not working. They were stretched out in rows, with sheets over their faces. They were cold. The ship was a corpse—fine on the outside, and all the organs still in place, but incapable of thought or action. It kept going, zombie-fashion, but it was not alive.

And the three who still lived? Martin Ashley smiled. An active thyroid gland—that was the kid. A larynx and a velum—that was Ernie. And himself?

A bit of spinal cord, maybe. And, no doubt, a dash of ego.

It wasn't going to be a very lively corpse.

"What can we do, Mart?"

"The radio is out, I suppose?"

Ernie Gallen shrugged as well as he could from a prone position. "There should be another ship from Earth out this way in another zillion hours or so," he said. "Conceivably, there might be an alien ship along about the same time. Until then, we can chat with the star-static. There's nothing coming in."

Martin Ashley grinned, deliberately keeping his mind from touching again on what had been his friends, stacked in neat white rows through the *Juarez*. His friends and Carol, who had been more than that. "The solution is obvious," he said. "We just sit down and wait for a mutation to turn us into supermen. From that point, presumably, the problem will be duck soup. Neat, eh?"

Ernie Gallen groaned.

"There's only one alternative, really," Ashley said slowly.

"That's one more than is visible from here," Ernie said. "Let's have it."

"Well, let's look at the facts. We're a hundred light-years from home, and the three of us simply do not constitute an adequate crew for the *Juarez*. If three men—even three specialists—could handle this crate, they'd have sent out three men in the first place, and not fifty-four. We may be able to pull off some very simple and elementary type of maneuver at low speed, but trying to operate this monster in overdrive would be suicide, but fast—and no pun intended. You with me so far?"

"No argument," agreed Gallen. "You spoke of an alternative—?"

"After a fashion. We agree that we can't move this ship out of the Carinae system; O.K. We seem to agree also on the ugly point that there's no practical chance of our being picked up before we're too senile to care. So what's left?"

Gallen essayed another shrug, and Ashley noted with alarm that the strain of talking was already beginning to wear Ernie down. When he spoke of three men, even that was something of an overstatement.

"Here's the way I see it, then," he said slowly. "We can either live out our lives on the *Juarez,* just sitting around staring at each other until we all flip our lids, or we can take the shuttle, pick us a planet, and go down and carve some sort of a life out for ourselves—or try to. Here's another little fact for our collection: I figure that if we don't swing the *Juarez* around within the next few hours, we'll be out of the system into deep space—and I don't know whether or not we can get it back again."

Ernie Gallen just looked at him, unspeaking.

"If we can find a planet we can live on—and the survey showed several possibilities in that direction—we can try to orbit the *Juarez* around it, and take the shuttle down. That way, we can always come back if things get too rough. We can rig up a broadcast beam from the ship, telling where we are and who we are, just in case another ship should blunder out this way. That's the only chance I see for us, Ernie. I don't know how you feel, but I've only got one life to live, according to the best information available, and I don't want to live it in this coffin. I want some grass under my feet, and some air over my head. I want a chance to be a human being, and not an animal floating around on a raft after the world's gone bang. Excuse the speech."

The control room was lost in emptiness, with furtive clicks and buzzes chattering in the immensity.

"What's down there, Mart?" Ernest Gallen asked finally.

Martin Ashley shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. No broadcast waves coming in that we've been able to pick up, and nothing on the energy detectors. That may mean that there's nothing there, or it may mean there's something around that hasn't reached a Stage Four technology, or it may mean that we'll be up against something so different we'll never understand it or live with it. Pick one."

Gallen smiled weakly. "You're not much of an ad man," he observed.

Martin Ashley waved a hand at the steel hollowness around them. "I know what's *here,*" he said quietly, "and that's enough data for me. I'm going. If you think your chances are better on the *Juarez,* you're probably right. But it's not for me, Ernie."

"Not for me either, Mart," Gallen said in a low voice. "You'll have to carry me out, though."

They were silent then, feeling the death all around them in the *Juarez.* The silence was broken with startling abruptness by a furtive sound from the control room door. Martin Ashley felt the hackles on the back of his neck crawl. He turned around, half expecting to see a walking corpse.

Bob Chavez stood in the doorway. His face was very pale, his eyes very bright. He was breathing hard and fast.

"They're all dead," he said in a high, taut voice. "All dead but us. What's going to happen to *us?"*

There was more silence.

"That," Martin Ashley said finally, "is a very good question."

II

It was four "days" later.

The shuttle from the *Juarez* blasted uneasily through the emptiness of space toward the blue-green globe that was the fourth planet in the system of Carinae. It was a tiny ship, designed for short ship-to-planet hops, and it was out of its depth now—a slender minnow from sun-drenched shallows, caught in the center of a dark sea, and going down and down and down—

Into what?

Martin Ashley, strapped in next to Ernie Gallen, kept his eyes on Bob Chavez at the controls. He did not look out at the sucking immensity that waited for them outside the plastiglass shield. But he *felt* it—a yellow, burning sun, a million stars, a vastness beyond imagination. It was a measurement of the infinite and it cut man down to size. It was a mirror that reflected back to every man a true and merciless image of himself.

Looking out into space from a small ship was not a popular experience.

"Try the beam, Ernie," he said. "It's too quiet in here, jets or no jets."

Ernie nodded. He was still weak, but he was stronger than he had been, and his brown eyes were clear. "You just like to hear yourself talk, Mart," he said. He cut in the shuttle's radio.

Martin Ashley's voice came in out of space.

It was perma-recorded, coming from the transmitter of the empty *Juarez*. The *Juarez* was orbited about the fourth planet now, traveling in a long, silent elipse through the emptiness that had been her home. There was no life on the dark *Juarez*, and the only sound on the ship came from Ashley's steady flow of words into the unknown:

"THIS IS THE *JUAREZ*, SURVEY SHIP FROM EARTH, SEPTEMBER TWENTY, TWO THOUSAND AND SIXTY-SEVEN. UNKNOWN DISEASE HAS KILLED FIFTY-ONE OF CREW OF FIFTY-FOUR. THREE REMAINING MEN HAVE TAKEN SHUTTLE TO FOURTH PLANET, SYSTEM OF CARINAE. CONDITIONS THERE UNKNOWN. WILL MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH SHUTTLE RADIO. SURVIVORS ARE ERNEST GALLEN, RADIOMAN; ROBERT CHAVEZ, APPRENTICE PILOT; MARTIN ASHLEY, ANTHROPOLOGIST. MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL AND TO ALL A GOOD NIGHT. THIS IS THE *JUAREZ*, SURVEY SHIP FROM EARTH, SEPTEMBER TWENTY, TWO THOUSAND AND SIXTY-SEVEN. UNKNOWN DISEASE—"

Martin Ashley closed his eyes, remembering.

He remembered ejecting fifty-one bodies into space.

He remembered a nightmare of orbiting the massive *Juarez*.

He remembered Carol.

He remembered Earth—one hundred light-years away.

"That's enough," he said. "Turn it off."

They were alone again, alone with the muted scream of the jets and the whispers from an endless sea.

Ahead of them, waiting, was Carinae IV. Only a name

to them now, a name and a sphere of blue and green—a whole world, utterly unknown.

And three men who would have to call it home.

Bob Chavez, his face set and pale, pulled the shuttle out when they were five miles from the surface. He jockeyed the little ship down gingerly to a self-correcting altitude of one mile. The ship hissed through the atmosphere of Carinae IV, losing speed.

The portable survey equipment from the *Juarez* was in action, but they all looked down.

They saw great wooded tracts, soft brown under the yellow sun. They saw lush green fields, rolling away in search of the horizon. They saw emerald lakes and sparkling streams that spider-webbed across the land.

And then there were blue-black mountain ranges, their peaks dusted with cloud, that the shuttle had to rise over sharply in order to pass. And a gray desert, cut with dry canyons and fluid with driven sand. And a band of thick green—

And then the sea. An enormous sea, translucent green and flecked with white spray from long, chopping waves. A sea that seemed to go on forever, empty except for periodic outcroppings of coral islands, lightly sprinkled with green. A sea that stretched on and on, tossing fitfully, until it lost itself in darkness.

The shuttle flashed on into the night side, its scream shattering the stillness of the deserted air. The three men sat quietly, listening to the portable survey equipment clicking and buzzing as it picked up and integrated data from scanner beams and thermal radiations and movement indices, correlating them into rough ecological frameworks.

Martin Ashley had already seen enough to confirm the preliminary distance survey made by the *Juarez* when they had first entered the Carinae system.

There were no cities, no large concentrations of any sort, on Carinae IV. There was no detectable industry.

There was no radio, no power, no technology that could register on the sensitive detectors.

But they had all seen one thing that the distance survey had missed. One thing that made all the difference.

Men.

The planet was occupied.

The shuttle stayed in the air, circling the planet. It whistled into the sunrise and hissed on toward high noon.

Martin Ashley lit up his pipe and worked his way through the survey data, adding to it from his own observations and training. His green eyes were bloodshot now, and he was going on sheer nervous energy. He was tired, but there was a question he had to answer. He read the question in the eyes of his two companions:

What kind of a world is it, this new home of ours?

He took a deep breath and clamped his pipe more firmly in his teeth. He looked down at the world slipping by under the shuttle, jungle growth now, and felt vaguely amused at his own presumption in trying to sum up a whole planet in a few well-chosen words. Planets could be tricky enough in themselves, and when they were inhabited by human beings it was a rash observer indeed who would predict dogmatically what they were like.

Human beings had a curious tendency to remain unpredictable, despite all the survey equipment and charts and figures and analyzers. Quite possibly, Martin Ashley had long ago decided, that was why they were human beings.

He took a stab at it, though. That was his job.

"It looks pretty good," he said slowly, "if we handle ourselves right when we land. But I've got to warn you about something, and you'll have to remember it if you want to stay alive down there—all I can tell you about right now is what this planet *looks like on the surface.* You've both kicked around on survey ships long enough to know that surface indications can be *very* misleading. There's an example I want you to paste inside your skull somewhere; imagine yourself to be some alien observer

that has come to Earth. Say you land on a beach, and there you see some old joker padding about in his shorts and getting sunburned. Let's say that this old joker is one of the greats, taking a day off. You name him—Aristotle, Shakespeare, Einstein, Retokïn. All you see is an old red man in his shorts. Maybe he looks stupid and senile. How are you going to evaluate this man, just by watching him soak up the sun? Your first impression may be very, very wrong—and if you treat our hypothetical bigwig as an ignorant lout, you may very well wake up dead in the morning."

He blew a smoke ring at the shuttle control panel and tried to judge what effect his words were having. Hard to tell. It was so easy to make a false move in a contact situation that sometimes fantastic precautions had to be taken. And if they guessed wrong on Carinae IV, there wouldn't be any *Juarez* to get them out alive.

It was strictly up to them.

"O.K.," he said. "You've been watching too, and I don't know that I can add very much to what you've seen. On the surface, and as far as the survey equipment can analyze, there is nothing technologically complex down there. The atmosphere and general planet-type are fine and dandy, of course, or we wouldn't have come here from the *Juarez*. The planet is definitely inhabited, and evidently inhabited by human beings. As far as I can see, the people here are pretty well scattered over the planet —you could see them in the forests and on the plains and even out on those coral islands in that one big ocean. There's one very curious thing, and I don't quite know what to make of it yet; all the people I saw appear to have a relatively uniform material culture. I didn't see a single group practicing really advanced agriculture, but on the other hand I didn't see a single group without cleared crops of some sort. If the data's been analyzed correctly, those crops all seem to be of the same general type, with specialized local varieties for differing environmental conditions. That may be very significant, or it may be

just a fluke of planetary ecology—but it's worth bearing in mind. All the groups I saw appear to practice a mixed economy—some agriculture, some hunting and fishing and gathering. The largest group we picked up contained about one hundred individuals—no really large concentrations of population. House types look crude but adequate. No energy weapons at all, so I assume these people utilize either a spear or a bow, depending on how far they've gotten. That's about it, the way I see it. A rather primitive level of cultural development, as far as I can tell from here, and only one puzzling feature—the culture seems amazingly uniform all over the planet. That's really astonishing, considering that they appear to have little or no means of long-distance communication. I can't explain it. Any ideas?"

Ernie Gallen shrugged. "That's not my department, Mart," he said. "Maybe they're all in a rut."

"Telepaths?" suggested Bob Chavez.

Martin Ashley shrugged, puffing on his pipe. "Let's hope not," he said. "Learning a telepathic language is the toughest job there is, especially when *you* don't happen to work that way."

"It does sort of simplify things in a way—the uniform culture, I mean," Gallen suggested. "At least there's no problem of picking the right group to set down in. They're all the same; we can just flip a coin."

"Don't forget Mr. Einstein on the beach," cautioned Ashley. He was genuinely worried, but it would serve no useful purpose to upset the others now. "But Ernie's right—I guess we might as well set her down. The preliminary survey from the *Juarez* showed one other possibility in this system, remember—Carinae V. But I sure don't feel like trying *that* hop in this scooter unless we have to. I vote we go down."

Ernie Gallen nodded. "Same here," he said.

"I'll make it unanimous then," Bob Chavez agreed. A spark of interest burned in his dark eyes—the first sign of animation he had shown since his father's death. "It's really something, isn't it?" he asked with wonder in his

voice. "Just think of all we know, all we've been through, that they haven't even started to think about yet down there! A whole world waiting for us, a whole new world to build up for us—and maybe for our children."

"Lord knows it could use some developing," agreed Ernie Gallen.

Martin Ashley smiled, hiding the sick feeling that turned his stomach to ice. "Beggars can't be too particular," he said. "Take her down, Bob."

The scream of the jets muted into a roaring mutter and the shuttle from the *Juarez* started down.

The shuttle had landed.

They could not, of course, open up the port until the air was carefully analyzed—not for basic constituents, which they already knew were O.K., but for possible disease contamination. Just because *some* human beings could live on Carinae IV didn't mean that *they* could, without long-developed immunities.

The dead *Juarez* was eloquent testimony to this basic fact.

They could see, however, and they could hear. They saw a rich green field of grass all around them, stretching away into the west as far as the eye could see, and merging in the east with the soft browns and yellows and greens of a spacious forest. They heard the strange silence of land left alone—a vibrant silence compounded of a myriad of tiny sounds, of wind whispers and furtive chirpings and distant cries of unknown animals.

Carinae IV had a "day" of twenty-two Earth hours, and now the yellow sun was setting on the far horizon, settling gingerly like an elastic ball among the peaks of a blue-black mountain range. Long shadows marched silently through the sea of grass.

The air analyzers hummed gently, and evening came to Carinae IV. Even here, Martin Ashley thought, so far from home, the night still came. How many times had the night fallen on this world, and what dramas of love and hate had played themselves out on the grass fields

that swayed unconcernedly around the alien shuttle from Earth? How many times would *he* see the night fall here —and what would the days be like that separated the nights?

This world looked peaceful, contented. A man could do a lot worse, he thought, and *had* done a lot worse. But how could you tell?

A volcano was pleasant enough—until it erupted. And this world was far from Earth, had never even *heard* of Earth.

Its standards would be different.

"Well, we can't go out until morning," Ernie said, sensing the thoughts that were in all their minds. "Let's hit the sack and worry about it when the time comes."

He tested the radio, and the message came in at once: "SHUTTLE TO FOURTH PLANET, SYSTEM OF CARINAE. CONDITIONS THERE UNKNOWN. WILL MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH SHUTTLE RADIO. SURVIVORS ARE ERNEST GALLEN, RADIOMAN; ROBERT CHAVEZ, APPRENTICE PILOT; MARTIN ASHLEY, ANTHROPOLOGIST. MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL AND TO ALL—"

He switched it off. "A good night," he finished. "Tell the bugler to take it easy in the morning; I got sensitive ears."

"Good night," said Bob Chavez, lost in thought and awed again at the enormity of the thing that had happened to them.

"Good night," said Martin Ashley. He was very tired and trying not to hope too much. He did not sleep for a long time, listening to the night sounds outside and the rustling of the breeze in the long grass.

He slept, finally, but it was a restless, uneasy sleep—the sleep of a man who knows that he is not alone.

And high overhead, an almost invisible speck of light lost in the silver glow of the solitary moon of Carinae IV, the empty *Juarez* floated in a slow circle among the stars.

III

In the morning, the natives were there.

There were three of them, standing patiently in the tall grass. They were dressed in short, togalike garments that left the arms and legs free. Two of them carried bows, and the third was armed with a metallic club of some sort. They acted neither threateningly nor fearfully.

They simply waited.

Martin Ashley looked them over carefully from the security of the shuttle, taking in the situation with a practiced eye. Bob Chavez was still new to this type of experience, and his pale face was flushed with excitement. Ernie Gallen sized them up without enthusiasm; to him, they looked pretty much like primitive peoples he had seen on any one of a dozen occupied planets.

"Hail, fellow citizens and newfound brothers," Ernie said, determined to make the best of a situation that in no way appealed to him. "We want to be pals, so kindly point them things the other way."

"They don't look so bad, do they, Mart?" Bob asked.

"Not from here," Martin Ashley agreed.

"The view from the inside of a stewpot is less flattering," Ernie Gallen observed. "But this is your department, Mart. What do you make of them?"

Martin Ashley smiled. There were three human beings, standing in the high grass fifty yards from the ship. He had never seen them before and knew practically nothing about them. Human beings were ticklish things to evaluate, even if you knew them well. What did he make of Ernie Gallen and Bob Chavez? He wasn't sure, and they were *inside* the ship.

But never mind all that, doctor. Just give us the capsule diagnosis, and if you're wrong . . . well, better luck next time. If there is a next time.

He said: "There are only three of them, and unless my eyes are getting too old to tell the difference one of them looks like a woman. See—the one with the club or

whatever that thing is? I could be mistaken, but they hardly look like a war party. They don't seem angry, and they don't seem afraid. Probably we're something completely outside their experience, but I'm just assuming that. Unfortunately, I'm not Sherlock Holmes. I can't look at the color of the clay on their heels and tell you their philosophy of life. There's only one way to find out, unfortunately."

Ernie Gallen cocked an eyebrow at him.

"I'll just have to go out and see," Martin Ashley said. "The air analyzers say O.K., and we'll have to do it sooner or later."

"I'll go with you," Bob Chavez offered at once.

Ashley warmed a little at that; maybe he had misjudged the kid. "Thanks, but that won't do," he said. "You stay here with Ernie and keep me covered. Remember: don't shoot unless I signal I'm in trouble. And if they get me first, just get out of here and try again some place else.

"Good luck," Ernie Gallen said.

Martin Ashley nodded and stepped into the open air lock. He closed the inner door behind him; it wasn't necessary except for the fact that the outer door would not operate with the inner door open. He spun the heavy wheel and the outer door clicked open.

He took a deep breath and stepped out into the morning air.

The tall grass of the field was still wet with dew and the world was still chilled by the night. The sun, climbing rapidly now, was pale and just beginning to feel warm on his back.

He walked steadily, watching the three natives. He felt little emotion now; this was a job he had done many times, on many worlds. He was not visibly armed, but he had a gun inside his shirt. He didn't want to use it, and wouldn't use it if he could help it. But he had used it before, and would again if it were necessary. He smiled wryly.

You didn't have to go to school to learn about survival.

The three natives watched him come, unmoving. As he came closer, he saw that one of them was unmistakably a woman. The natives had an odd pink skin color, almost the shade of salmon, that looked like a perpetual sunburn. They were handsome people, by any standards, and they looked him straight in the eye.

Ashley walked slowly. It was a long fifty yards. He kept his face utterly expressionless. He was very careful not to smile. There were no such things as "universal" gestures. On one planet a smile meant friendship, while on another it might be a bitter insult. Expressionless features were *almost* always a sign of neutrality, since that was the resting position of the face. It was the safest bet there was.

When he was about seven yards from them, Ashley stopped. He did nothing. He simply stood there, his hands empty at his side. He made no sound. He waited for *them* to make the first move.

They eyed him without fear—without even curiosity, as far as he could tell. A long sixty seconds passed. Then one of the men smiled, making Ashley feel a little silly, and put his bow on the ground. The other man promptly followed his example, and the woman put down her metallic club.

Taking no chances, Ashley took out his gun and placed it on the pile with the other weapons. The others smiled approval.

The first man said something to him slowly and softly. *Testing?* Ashley could not, of course, understand a word. He replied in English: "I know that we can't understand each other yet, but I hope that understanding may come." He smiled a little and added, "It had *better* come—and soon."

The native appeared satisfied. He pointed toward the east, where the forest trees loomed up like a wall beyond the grass, made the shape of a hut in the air, and then pointed at Ashley. The meaning was clear enough—Ash-

ley was welcome to come to the village if he so desired.

Ashley did some pointing of his own, to indicate that he wanted to go back to the ship first. The natives understood instantly. *They're not stupid,* Ashley thought, *and that's for sure.*

Ashley went back to the shuttle and told Bob and Ernie where he was going. He told them to give him four days and then clear out if he didn't make it back. He shook hands with both of them and rejoined the three natives.

They picked up their weapons and Ashley picked up his, and no one bothered about them again. The first native led the way through the damp grass, with Ashley second and the other man and the woman following behind. The natives talked quietly among themselves and seemed perfectly at ease.

Martin Ashley felt the sun getting hotter on his back and tried to tell himself that the *wrongness* he felt was only nerves.

But he knew better.

Once contact had been made, the rest slipped easily into routine—for a while. Ashley had to constantly remind himself that this time it was *different.* There was no *Juarez* to report back to, no paper to write up about a people whose lives had intersected his for a brief few weeks and then been lost again among the stars.

This time it was for keeps.

This time the people were *his* people.

But routine is an insidious thing; it dulls the mind and lulls the senses with the comfort of the familiar. Martin Ashley liked his work, and did it with pride, but it was hard now to remember that it was more than a job.

It was life itself.

He got to know the village very well during the next month, while he was learning the native language as he had learned so many others in his life. There were sixteen structures in the village—fourteen rectangular log family houses built around a central plaza, a large ceremonial building in the center of the plaza, and a partially under-

ground storage chamber for agricultural produce. Eighty people lived in the village, neatly divided into five old men, five old women, fifty persons in the young-to-middle-aged bracket, and twenty children.

The natives were friendly and helpful, and Ashley had gone back for Chavez and Gallen on the third day. They had built themselves a small log hut on the edge of the village, and they spent most of their time wandering around and waiting impatiently for Ashley to tell them what the score was. They both seemed pleased with what they saw, and they both were beginning to think that Ashley was taking everything a shade too seriously. After all, here they were in a peaceful and rather pleasant village, with plenty to eat and time on their hands. Here they were, and here they would probably stay. They had ideas and they wanted to get started on them. They were not selfish men, as men go, but they were human. They felt that they had forgotten more than the people around them had ever learned, and they wanted to help them out. Why, these natives had not even discovered the wheel—and they had landed on the planet with atomic power!

The future was wide open before them.

But they waited.

And while they slept, a puzzled Martin Ashley worked far into the night—juggling columns of figures that wouldn't add up.

The native who taught Ashley the rudiments of the language was named Rondol. He was a specialist in the native social structure, obviously a shaman among other things. Apparently, he had other capabilities as well. He was a brash man, a bit pompous, shrewd, and a good teacher. It early became clear that he was teaching Ashley a simplified form of the language of his people—scaling it down for ready comprehension.

That was unprecedented.

"I will teach you the rest when you are ready for it,"

Rondol said to him, with a faintly superior air. "To understand, one must start at the beginning."

"Drop dead, brother," Martin Ashley said—to himself. He wasn't getting enough sleep, and he was annoyed at his own inability to comprehend the culture in which he found himself.

On the surface, it wasn't too complicated. The natives called themselves the Nern, which simply meant "human beings." It was quite common for primitive peoples to name themselves in that manner, and the implication was usually obvious—no one else could be a human being, since they were not in the tribe.

It was not, Ashley reflected, a characteristic wholly restricted to primitives.

The Nern, as Ashley had already seen from the shuttle, had a simple mixed economy. They grew a single crop, a sweet tuber not unlike a potato, which they planted with digging sticks and harvested when their supply ran low. They shot several game animals with bows, mostly deerlike creatures that grazed on the great grass plains. They did some fishing in nearby streams, and they gathered a variety of fruits and vegetables that grew wild in the forest.

The Nern were monogamous, and lived in small family units. But they were very conscious of kinship ties, and the little village was divided into halves, or moieties. Each moiety was a unit in the social organization, and they worked together as a reciprocal whole. Marriage always took place between members of opposite moieties.

Nothing unusual there.

There were no clans, although the moieties had some clan characteristics. Sexes, as far as Ashley could tell, had equal rights. There was a "chief" of sorts, a charming man named Catan, but such authority as there was seemed vested in a council of elders—the ten oldest men and women. There was one shaman, Rondol, who was primarily concerned with healing and the supernatural.

Nothing unusual there.

There seemed to be a great emphasis on mythology, or even philosophy. There were many rituals, in which the whole village participated. There was the yearly cycle of ceremonies, a virtual universal among human beings. Some called them Christmas and Armistice Day and the Fourth of July, others rain dances and harvest sings and sacrifices to the sun.

Nothing unusual there.

One night, Rondol stood with Ashley in the central plaza. A cool breeze whispered in off the grass fields and sighed through the forest trees. A few orange fires crackled and hissed softly in front of the log huts of the village.

Rondol pointed up into the night, out into the infinite. "You say you came from the stars, Martin," he said.

"Yes," said Ashley. "From the stars, from Earth."

Rondol smiled. "What you call stars we call campfires in the sky," he said. "Up there are our ancestors and the never-born. The stars are our brothers." He looked closely at Ashley. "We call them our star-brothers. Are not the stars our brothers?"

The wind murmured in from the fields of grass.

Nothing unusual there?

Martin Ashley looked up, and out.

When they had been in the village two months, they were asked to leave.

For a long time, the social life of the Nern had been "pointing" toward a single event—the initiation of two boys and two girls into adult life. As did many other peoples, the Nern symbolized crisis periods in life with rituals and ceremonies. These were the rites of passage—passage into life when you were born, passage into adulthood when childhood was done, passage into marriage, and the final passage of all when life had run its course.

Now, four Nern were ready to take their place in adult society. It would take them four days of fasting and endurance and instruction from the tribal elders. It was a precious thing in their lives.

And outsiders might offend the gods.

The Nern were very polite about it. They went out of their way to assure the men from Earth that they would be welcome again after the ceremonies. They were profuse and sincere in their apologies.

But there was no doubt that they meant business.

Ashley and Gallen and Chavez went back to the shuttle, silent and alone among the tall grass. There was nothing else they could do.

They waited.

On the fourth night, the last night of the ceremonies, they crept back through the grass to the forest to have a look. They moved quietly and spoke in whispers.

A drum throbbed hypnotically through the evening hush, and they could see the orange warmth of the fires in the village. A chant sobbed out on the moonlight, plaintive and sad and far away. The forest held its breath, absorbing the sounds of life.

Martin Ashley was lonely. He had always been a lonely man. He questioned instead of accepted, and that is a road that all men walk alone. Perhaps all men are lonely, and Ashley hid it as well as any. But Ashley was acutely aware of his loneliness, and now that Carol was gone, and with her the *Juarez* that had been his only home—

He shook himself. *Getting morbid,* he thought. *Mustn't do.*

But he was looking in at life, warm life in a village one hundred light-years from Earth. And he was isolated, cut off from it. He didn't *belong.* Perhaps he could never belong.

He knew, and he was not ashamed, that he would have given his soul to be in that village now, in with the drums and the songs and the firelight.

Not as a student. Just as Martin Ashley.

"They're a funny bunch," Ernie Gallen said. "Beating on those drums just like it was really something. Boy, we really picked us a dilly for home sweet home."

Bob Chavez was feeling romantic. "It's pretty, really," he said. "Kind of simple and unspoiled. But what's in it

for us? We've got to show these people we mean something, got to show them a few things, carve out a place for ourselves. We're being too careful. After all—"

Yes, thought Martin Ashley. *After all, after all.*

It was then that he found it.

He picked it up off the ground.

He looked at it. A white tube, four inches long. Machine-made. While he held it between his thumb and forefinger it glowed redly at its tip. A tiny wisp of smoke curled upward into the night.

"A cigarette," he said slowly. "And better than any on Earth."

The others stared at him.

"Looks like we're not the only visitors this planet has had lately," he said. "Unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Ernie Gallen. "Unless *what?"*

Martin Ashley stood in the moonlight under the trees. "I don't know," he said. "I just don't know."

He listened to the lonely chant carried on the night wind and watched the orange fires glowing from far away.

Martin Ashley felt a dawning fear—and a rising excitement.

IV

It was raining—a slow, steady rain that pattered through the trees, dripping from limb to limb, and gurgled down in a miniature river from the gabled roof of the log house.

Martin Ashley stood in the doorway, looking out. The rain was a humming sheet of silver and gray, covering the world but not hiding it. The tall, straight trees accepted the rain patiently, without much interest. The trees were very much like Earthly pines, with dripping needles and cones. They even smelled like pines, with that wet heavy fragrance that could weave synthetic memories for those unfortunates who had none of their own. Glistening village pathways wandered off among the houses, and laughing children played in the mud. The

washed air was so clean it invigorated the lungs like a tonic.

Perhaps this, too, is worth something.

Martin Ashley liked the rain.

They had been with the Nern for ten weeks. Bob Chavez sat on a wooden stool in the middle of the room, quiet and depressed. Ernie Gallen, short and stocky and with his blondish hair in his eyes, paced the floor nervously. They were beginning to feel it now, Ashley knew. The isolation, the Earth forever denied them. It wasn't an unreal picnic any longer. They felt cut off from everything that had ever mattered to them. From copters in the sun, silken women, dark hushed bars with music in the air—

The rain came down—soft, familiar rain. It was the same rain. Ashley had heard it so often—how many times? He had sworn at it while he fished, damned it at Yankee Stadium, listened to its lullaby on the tent canvas before he slept. Yes, the rain was the same.

"Look," said Ernie finally, stopping his pacing. "We're all in this thing together, right?"

"Sure, Ernie," Martin Ashley said, knowing what was coming.

"Then what say we can all the cryptic references to unsolved primitive mysteries, Martin. We don't have to take orders from you, you know. We've sat on our tails for nearly three months, and still no dope from you on how to proceed. Call me crude, Martin—I want a woman and a decent house and a chance to make something out of this flea-bitten place."

There was tension in the cabin, then; the ugliness of personalities that couldn't harmonize.

"I don't recall giving any orders, Ernie," Ashley said. "Just advice. Whether you care to take it or not is strictly up to you."

"Ernie's right though, Mart," Bob Chavez spoke up. His voice was tired. "If we're going to play this game, we've got to know the rules."

Martin Ashley shrugged. *Rules? There were no rules*

out here. Space was long and space was deep. Here were only brains and feelings and wind in the night. "No secrets," he said. "I just don't have much to tell."

"Tell it anyway," Ernie suggested.

Ashley took his time cleaning his pipe with a pocket knife. He loaded it with his own private blend of bourbon-soaked tobacco, which no self-respecting smoker would touch with insulated tongs, and lit it with that most efficient pipe-lighter of all, a big wooden stick match. He chose his words carefully, knowing that he wouldn't be believed.

"In a nutshell," he said slowly, "I think the Nern are very much more advanced than we are. I think that if we step out of line we're going to get our fingers burned."

Harder now, the rain beat down outside, and heavy thunder rolled in from the distant hills.

The others stared at him.

Ernie Gallen jerked his thumb at the huts in the rain. "Them? More advanced than *we* are? Without even the wheel? You're nuts, Martin, just plain nuts."

"Thank you," Martin Ashley said.

Ernie hesitated. "I'm sorry," he offered finally. "Didn't mean it that way. We're all in this together."

"Sure," Ashley said.

"There *is* the cigarette," Bob Chavez said wearily. His face was pale. "I don't understand that, not at all."

Martin Ashley waved his hand. "Forget the cigarette for now. I've thought that one over. There isn't any technology to speak of on this planet, unless it's hidden in a cave or something, and that's plain garbage. That cigarette came from some place else, which raises an interesting problem or three. But let it go for now. I wasn't referring to the cigarette."

"What then?" demanded Ernie irritably. "How could you possibly—?"

Martin Ashley sucked on his pipe. *Where are the words? There are no words. It is like the small boy who*

asks, "Daddy, tell me about the stars and things. And hurry—I've got to go play."

"I can't explain it all to you," he said, "any more than you can make me an expert radio technician in ten minutes. But I'll try. I warn you that a lot of this is going to sound considerably more subjective than it actually is, but you'll just have to listen and decide for yourselves."

"Just don't throw it too far over our heads," Ernie said with only a trace of sarcasm. "We'll try to catch it."

"Look at it this way," Ashley began. "It's easy to count and identify the various items in a culture—a totem pole here, a spear there, a feather cape somewhere else. It isn't even hard to pick out elements of social organization—here a clan, there the couvade, back yonder a parallel cousin taboo. Unfortunately, however, all that isn't too important. It doesn't tell you much that you need to know if you're going to understand a culture. What counts is *how these things are put together.* Cultures are not just collections of random ideas and spear points, you see. They are dynamic, integrated *systems*—blueprints for living."

"You mean like patterns?"

Martin Ashley had been expecting that one. "Think of it that way if it helps," he said. He blew a fat, wobbling smoke ring out into the rain. "The point is this: all the ingredients are here, and they all seem simple, if a trifle idealized. But how do they hang together? What is the organizing principle? How does the thing *work?"*

"You tell me," encouraged Ernie.

"I don't know, and I'll be the first to say so. I can't get to first base with these people. But I'll tell you this—this isn't any primitive culture, and the Nern are not a primitive people. It all *looks* primitive, but it isn't. Remember our friend Einstein in his shorts, getting sunburned on the beach. Maybe you've heard of convergent evolution—two lines of development that follow entirely different paths but come out looking alike on the sur-

face? Well, pal, this is it, and we are right in the big fat middle of it."

Ashley could sense the skepticism in the room.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "I'm not through yet. I want to give you two facts to roll around inside your skulls." He smiled pleasantly. "First, consider the contact situation. We came zooming down out of the blue in a spaceship, went right over their village, and parked out there in the grass field. A few hours later, and out come three Nern to say hello. They aren't afraid of us, and what's more they obviously aren't even very *interested* in us. As for the ship, they hardly give it a glance. Old stuff, do you see? Standard operating procedure. Another day, another spaceship. But at the same time their culture shows absolutely no traces of anything taken over from a 'higher' culture—no steel knives, no rifles, no plows, no fancy pants, no junk jewelry, no *nothing.* That's something to chew on a while, gentlemen. Nothing spectacular, nothing that hits you in the eye, no signpost with a big *MYSTERY HERE!* painted on it in letters ten feet high—but how do *you* explain it?"

Nobody explained it.

"O.K. Second, there's the little matter of the Nern language. For purposes of communication, they taught me—and I tried to teach you—a simplified jargon, on about the *this is a book—the book is brown* level. All very well—the complexity of a language tells you very little about the complexity of a culture. But the kicker is that the jargon isn't their language! They actually have an extremely intriguing linguistic set-up that I'm just now beginning to get the drift of. Basically, they've got about ten different verb classes—and the type of verb you use indicates your authority for making the statement you make. That is, it tells whether your information comes from first-hand knowledge, or from a reliable authority, or from hearsay, or what-have-you. Neat, eh? This sort of thing has popped up before, of course—there was an American Indian language called Wintu that was set up along much the same lines. But the important

thing is that they *edited* their language when they taught it to me—they revised it down to my level to make it easy for me. That just plain doesn't happen. Explanation, please?"

He puffed smoke in a blue cloud at the ceiling.

Bob Chavez was silent and shifted uncertainly on his wooden stool. His eyes had a tired, distant look about them. The eyes bothered Ashley, vaguely. Where had he seen eyes like that before?

Ernie said, "So what? So they're unusual. So they elude your keen scientific mind. They're still savages, Martin, and all your books won't change that. As for the cigarette, I say cross that bridge when we come to it—if we come to it."

Ashley smiled. "O.K., Ernie. Just close your eyes and maybe it will all go away. You asked for my opinion and you got it. I may be wrong—I've been wrong before. You go play Og, Son of Fire." He pointed, out into the wet village streets. "Go on out and tell them all about the wheel."

Silence then, for a long time.

"Let's don't argue any more," Bob Chavez said suddenly, in a voice that was fuzzy with weariness. "I . . . I don't feel so good."

Martin Ashley put down his pipe in alarm and stepped over to the kid. He looked at him, remembering now. He felt the kid's forehead. It was icy cold. Even as his hand rested there, the heat flowed back again and the chill became a fever.

"Get to bed, Bob," he said slowly.

Martin Ashley and Ernie Gallen stared wordlessly at each other in the gray light. There was no need to speak, and nothing to say. They both remembered the *Juarez*.

Outside, the rain came hammering down in dull gray sheets.

Six hours later and it was night. The driving rain had once more become a drizzle.

Bob Chavez, obviously, was dying. He was uncon-

scious now, and did not stir on his bed. His face was alternately too pale and flushed red with blood.

The disease had struck again. They had found the planet safe as far as they could tell, and that probably meant that they had carried the disease with them from the *Juarez*. It had waited, dormant, biding its time.

And now—

And now it had come back, in a little cabin on a new world. Bob was very sick, which was bad enough, but that wasn't all. Martin Ashley and Ernie Gallen had exchanged no words, but they both knew. Each man could already feel the symptoms in himself. Gallen had had the disease once, and Ashley had watched fifty-one people die of it.

He remembered: *Fifty-one down and three to go.*

"It's faster this time," Ernie said, breaking the long silence. "A lot faster." He sat down on his bed and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief.

The rain pattered gently on the roof, eternal and unconcerned.

Martin Ashley licked his lips that were suddenly dry and parched. He felt his blood pounding through his veins, heavy and sluggish and sick. He listened to Bob Chavez, breathing in short, harsh gasps in the darkness. So quickly, then, did death come in and win all arguments—

The night was slow and very long.

An hour passed. Without a word, Martin Ashley went over and picked up Bob Chavez in his arms.

"What are you doing?"

"Going for a walk."

"In the rain?"

"I'm taking the kid to see a doctor." His brain was spinning now, and it was hard to hold on to it.

Ernie Gallen surged weakly to his feet. "You crazy fool—to that witch doctor?"

"He got his M.D. at Johns Hopkins," Ashley said, feeling giddy.

"You're crazy! I won't let you do it."

"He can only die, Ernie."

"I won't let you!"

Martin Ashley smiled slowly. His mind, suddenly, was crystal clear. Calmly, he put the kid back on the bed. "Ernie," he said, "If we don't get out of this, I want you to remember one thing: you give me a pain."

He moved in fast, on dancing feet. He swung just once, his fist coming up in a long arc almost from the floor. It had every ounce of Ashley's strength behind it, and it landed with a crunch on the point of Gallen's jaw.

Ashley didn't even look at him. He picked Bob Chavez up again and staggered out into the drizzle and the darkness. The kid was terrifically heavy, like a lead sack in his arms. His feet slipped and sloshed in the mud and his hair plastered itself down over his eyes.

The fever was getting him now. He was burning up. Insanely, he wondered why the drops of rain on his forehead didn't boil away into steam. He couldn't think clearly and his feet got all tangled up when he tried to walk.

He fell twice, and the mud felt cool.

Where was the *Juarez* now, he wondered, out there beyond the rain? He thought he could hear it "THIS IS THE *JUAREZ*, SURVEY SHIP FROM EARTH, SEPTEMBER TWENTY, TWO THOUSAND AND SIXTY-SEVEN. UNKNOWN DISEASE HAS KILLED FIFTY-ONE OF FIFTY-FOUR. THREE REMAINING MEN HAVE TAKEN SHUTTLE TO FOURTH PLANET, SYSTEM OF CARINAE. CONDITIONS THERE UNKNOWN—"

He began to laugh. He heard himself, and stopped.

He saw the dark structure before him and fell through the door of Rondol's cabin. He twisted as he fell, breaking the kid's fall with his body.

"Sick," he said from a thick, oily blackness. "Sick. Needs a doctor—"

From somewhere, from nowhere, strong hands touched his shoulder, and he knew nothing more. There was only the rain, the warm and soothing rain, forever.

V

Martin Ashley woke up.

The sky was over his head and it was a brilliant, astonishing blue. He lay very still, not trying to move, just looking at it, drinking it in. The air around him was warm and clean and filled with the sharp sweetness of pine.

He was well. He knew that instantly; no trace of disease was left in his body. Very vaguely, he seemed to remember long chants and singing and herbs in his mouth. But all of that was long ago, and now there was only the blue sky, and the lazy delight in just being alive.

He glanced to one side, and there was Bob Chavez. Like himself, he was lying on a bed of leaves, covered with a light blanket. His face was clear, his eyes unclouded, and he was smiling weakly.

"Tell 'em about the wheel," Bob Chavez whispered.

Ashley smiled back at him. He tried to think, but the effort didn't seem worth the trouble. He relaxed and let the soft air wash over him as he drowsed.

"Feeling better?" asked a voice out of a great distance.

He opened his eyes again. It was evening. Rondol was crouching by his side. The shaman had lost much of his earlier brashness, and now seemed almost gentle.

"Much better," he said sleepily. "Thank you, Rondol."

Rondol frowned. "The other one," he said, "The one who was always so certain about things—"

"Ernie?"

"Yes. He would not let me help him. I went to him as soon as I found the nature of your trouble. We started to sing him well, to call on the good forces to assist him, but he cursed us and demanded that we leave." Rondol shrugged. "We left. He is dead. We have disposed of the body."

Dead. Fifty-four had boarded the JUAREZ, and now two were left.

Martin Ashley was still foggy with sleep. Undoubtedly,

he thought, he had been drugged. Rondol's voice drifted down to him from a great and misty height.

"Soon now you will leave us, Martin. We have studied you enough; we would not endanger your lives further and have you think badly of us."

Studied us? Studied US?

He tried to think, but he was too tired. It was good just to lie quietly, listening to the wind and the sounds of the coming night. He slept.

It was morning when he opened his eyes again—a bright, clear morning that hurt his eyes. And the morning was filled with sound—a thundering, splitting *crack* that swept down from the skies and reverberated through the hard-packed village streets. He caught a glimpse of it, silver in the sun, flashing high above the trees in a deceleration orbit.

A spaceship.

And a big one.

The ship stood on her tail and came down. Martin Ashley watched it lose altitude, hanging in the air like a skilled swimmer treading water, until the tall pinelike trees hid it from view.

A whining hum continued for a long minute, and then the silence came again, even louder in his ears. The world rushed in to fill the emptiness, with whispers of wind and trickles of water rushing over rocks and murmurs of village life.

The ship had landed—obviously out in the grass field, near the empty shuttle from the *Juarez*.

Rondol helped Ashley to his feet, and kept a hand on his shoulder to steady him. Catan himself, the "chief" of the Nern, assisted Bob Chavez. A girl, whose name was Lirad, led the way out of the village and down the pathway under the trees.

Still a little confused and uncertain about what was happening, Martin Ashley turned once, back to the village of the Nern, to bid it a silent farewell. At his side, Rondol seemed about to speak, but said nothing.

Unbelievably, they were leaving. *Going where? Going where?*

They walked along under the pines until the forest ended and the field of tall grass was before them. There in the sun rested the mighty spaceship that he had seen as a silver speck in the air, and beyond it lay the shuttle that had carried them to Carinae IV. The shuttle was dwarfed into insignificance by the towering giant that dominated the field.

The three Nern eyed the great ship with neither envy nor curiosity. Ashley watched them closely. There was, he decided, a certain affection in their eyes, but that was all. *As a man might look back on the well-remembered toys of yesterday's childhood.*

"They are more of our star-brothers," Catan said quietly. "Do not fear them. They will take you to your homes."

Martin Ashley started. Everything was happening so fast that he could not organize his thoughts. He had given up the Earth as forever beyond his reach, and now suddenly Catan spoke of home. Ashley felt conflicting emotions chase themselves through his brain, and he tried desperately to say something—something for which he knew no words, in any language. He felt that he had caught a glimpse, a mere suggestion, of something fine —and now it was to be taken from him, and he was free to go home.

He said nothing, because he did not know how. Bob Chavez, too, was silent at his side.

"We will miss you, Martin," Rondol said. "You are a good man."

And then the girl, Lirad, was before him. She was not beautiful by ordinary standards, but her dark hair framed the most sensitive face that Ashley had ever seen—sensitive and at the same time firm with strength and humor. Why had he never noticed her before? Gently, she touched his shoulder with her hand. She looked deep into his eyes, smiled faintly, and said nothing.

So few words, so little time remaining now. But Ash-

ley knew that something had passed between himself and the Nern, something new, something that was his if he could just reach out and grasp it.

Too late.

Two men, crisp and uniformed and efficient, came out of the ship, exchanged friendly greetings with the Nern, and took charge of the two men from Earth. Carefully, they led them through the field of grass and up into the ship that towered into the heavens.

The sun was gone, and the village, and the pines. Now, again, there were the metals and the machines and the hummings and buzzings and clickings. And the alert faces, the ordered activities, the jokes and the skills of men in uniforms.

"Welcome aboard, gentlemen," said the captain, speaking to them in the language of the Nern. "Make yourselves at home."

The cushioned take-off and the smoothly compensating gravity pull told Martin Ashley that here was a ship that made the old *Juarez* look like a crude experiment, a toy for the Fourth of July.

"Tell *them* about the wheel!" enthused Bob Chavez, his face alive with pleasure.

Martin Ashley smiled back, still trying to organize his thoughts. It had all happened so quickly—

He knew only that he was in space again, and the Nern were gone.

One "day" later they landed on Carinae V.

They stepped out into an enormous concrete spaceport, the biggest that either of them had ever seen, with green gardens on top of the walls and the towers of a white and gleaming city sparkling in the sun beyond.

"This, I believe, was the planet that had no technology," Bob Chavez said wryly. "Looks like our initial survey made a slight miscalculation."

"They did indicate two planets that seemed ecologically O.K., if you'll remember," Ashley pointed out. "But they

seem to have gotten their decimal point in the wrong place. In fact, they didn't even *have* a decimal point."

It was all very swift and very courteous. A smooth, fast copter picked them up and flashed into the city, depositing them on a tower roof. A silent elevator plunged them down into the depths of the building and let them out on the twenty-fifth floor. The door opened directly into a large office—cool and tasteful, with remarkable paintings on the walls and a window that looked out on a roof garden that was a riot of color.

A man got up quickly from behind a desk and came toward them, hand outstretched in true Earth-fashion. He was a big man, well over six feet tall and weighing an easy two hundred pounds, with unruly brown hair, sloppy clothes, and open, friendly eyes.

"Very happy to have you with us," he boomed in flawless English, his big voice filling the big room. "Very happy indeed! Smoke? Drink?" He laughed, and his laugh was as big as he was. "Sit down."

Martin Ashley sat. He was still a little weak, and beginning to feel painfully like a small and rather stupid child. The big man's personality was like a blow in the face, but Ashley liked the man on sight. To cover his nervousness, he fished out his pipe, took his time loading it, and lit it with a stick match.

"My name is Shek," the big man said. He shook out a cigarette, and one mystery was solved. It was identical to the one that Ashley had found that night so long ago, outside the village of the Nern. It puffed into a spark as Shek held it in his fingers, and he promptly hung it miraculously in one corner of his mouth and went on talking. "Name sounds moronic I know, but Martin Ashley is a howl too, or would be if you were me."

Shek paced the floor, puffing up clouds of smoke which the air conditioner valiantly tried to blow out the window. He had plenty of room to pace in, and he needed it. "Look here," Shek said, "I know what you guys must be thinking, so let's get the questions out of the way so we can enjoy ourselves." He jabbed a big finger at Martin

Ashley. "Matter of fact, you already know the answers, if you'll just get up on your hind legs and dredge 'em up."

Ashley smiled dubiously and concentrated on his pipe.

"I'll show you," Shek said. *"I'll* ask the questions. One, How come you didn't pick us up on the *Juarez* survey?"

Ashley hesitated. "You're screened, I guess," he said.

"Of course! Only possible answer. See—you know more than you thought you knew already. Long story, and probably very dull to you, but the upshot of it is that we prefer to contact others instead of having strangers barge in on us all the time." He slammed his fist into his hand with a resounding whack. "You've no idea the creeps there are blatting around in space, present company excluded of course. Why, would you believe it, one crummy outfit came down here before we had the screen set up and tried to *colonize* the joint!"

He boomed his big laugh again, and Martin Ashley felt a bit uncomfortable. That shot had come just a trifle too close to home.

"Yes, sir," Shek hurricaned on, shooting off words like strings of firecrackers. "Next question: How did we know where you were, and when to pick you up?"

"Well, you could have picked up the message from the *Juarez,"* suggested Bob Chavez.

"Or the Nern got in touch with you somehow," Ashley added. He was feeling a little better and essayed a smoke ring that wobbled across the room and out the window.

"Nice smoke ring!" complimented Shek. He blew one himself and beamed proudly. "Both of your answers are right, of course. We picked up the message from the *Juarez* right away, and we knew you'd be O.K. if you didn't pull anything stupid. Then Rondol gave us a buzz."

"How?" asked Ashley, beginning to feel dumb again.

"Usual way," Shek laughed, still pacing up and down, trailing smoke. "We do a little . . . ummm . . . trading

with Rondol and the boys, you see, and we have to contact them occasionally. So there's a good transmitter down there—Rondol's is in the club house in the middle of the plaza; I don't guess you got in there."

Ashley shook his head.

"You're doing fine," Shek assured them. "Next question: How about my English? Good, huh?" He grinned boyishly.

"It's not only good, it's fantastic," agreed Ashley. "I guess you got it from Rondol, but I didn't even know *he* was learning my language while he was teaching me his."

Shek inhaled another cigarette. "Sure. Smart cookie, Rondol! He sort of picks things up, you see. Best doctor in the system, too. You gentlemen were lucky."

"We know."

"Well," boomed Shek, "so much for the inevitable questions. I told you that you knew all the answers before we started!"

Knew all the answers? I hardly knew the questions!

"Here's the deal," Shek told them. His idiomatic English was so absolutely flawless that it was hard to believe that it was not his native tongue. And he had learned it in a few short months. Martin Ashley was almost beyond amazement. If Shek had suddenly sprouted wheels and roared off down the hallway, he probably wouldn't have flickered an eyelid. "We've got a ship going to Centauri the day after tomorrow," Shek said. "We've made it a point so far to avoid Earth shipping, but that's your ride home. We'll leave you there and you'll be picked up in a matter of a few days, I would imagine. Lot of traffic out that way."

"Home," said Bob Chavez slowly. "I'm really going home."

Martin Ashley smoked his pipe and said nothing.

The interview, if such it could properly be called, wore on until long afternoon shadows began to filter down into the vast canyons between the white towers. Martin Ash-

ley felt himself gradually relaxing. The big man was a comfortable sort to be around; he was one of the few men of his type that Ashley had known who was neither a phony nor an ass; Shek really *was* frank and good-natured, and it was a stupid man indeed who failed to catch the glint of sharp intelligence in his eyes.

Martin Ashley relaxed—and that meant that he could think again. It wasn't a brooding kind of thought that made him perpetually occupied with Big Problems, which were usually far more ridiculous than many of the "little" problems that all people faced just in the course of growing up and staying alive, but rather a keen curiosity that operated almost on a subconscious level, periodically stepping forward to demand his attention. He had been asking questions ever since he learned how to talk, and for better or for worse it was far too late to stop now.

"It's so astonishing," Bob Chavez was saying, shaking his head. "All this, I mean. A few hours ago we were in the middle of nowhere, cut off forever from home and people like ourselves, and now here we are—in this fabulous city, comfortable, and with a ticket for home in our pockets."

Martin Ashley changed the subject; they had, he figured, about wrung that one dry. "How long have you been in contact with the Nern?" he asked slowly.

Shek smiled. "It's been a long, long time," he said. "Not just the Nern, but all the other peoples on Carinae Four. We've been in contact for thousands of years. You might say that we sort of grew up together."

Ashley eyed Shek and asked the question that he had been framing for the past fifteen minutes. It wasn't worded as a question, but he knew that Shek would catch its import. "You have been remarkably restrained and wise," he suggested, "in not interfering with their culture. I could see no signs at all that you had tried to make it over in your model, and it must have been a powerful temptation—so close to you, and such a large

potential market. Your hands-off policy is practically unique for a culture as highly developed as this one."

Shek laughed his big booming laugh and stuck another cigarette into one corner of his mouth. "Ashley," he said, "you know better than that. The fact is that *they* have been remarkably decent to let us go on our own way as best we could." He shook his head. "Believe me, it would be utterly fantastic for us even to consider fooling around with the Nern culture—that's a fast short-cut to oblivion." He stabbed his finger at Ashley. "We're not trying to *teach* them anything—we're trying to learn!"

Martin Ashley smiled with a certain inner satisfaction.

He had known the answer to that question in advance, too.

VI

It was the next evening, and the lifting of the ship for far Centauri was only fifteen hours away.

Martin Ashley had left Bob Chavez at the spaceport and had more or less invited himself out to Shek's country home. It hadn't been very difficult, actually, since the two men had taken an immediate liking to each other.

It was a charming home, set in a landscaped square of grass and flowers. Shek's wife was just the opposite of her husband, at least on the surface—she was cool, poised, and unobtrusive. The couple had two small children, both girls, who proceeded to chase each other around the living room until they were made to go stand in the corner by their mother. Ashley was vastly amused by the punishment meted out to them—it seemed that methods of disciplining children didn't change very much even across the gulf of light-years.

Only Shek could speak English, of course, so Ashley had to let smiles and nods do his talking for him. He had a tall cool drink in his hand, which Shek had made with more care than Ashley ever expended on his own drinks, and he experienced a curious duality of feeling that he

had known many times before. At once, he was both an outsider and a family friend. He liked it here, and felt that he was liked in return, but somehow he didn't fit. He was honest with himself about it: he envied Shek his life, and yet he knew that he could never live that way.

"Shek," he said finally, "there's some information I've got to have, and I've come to you to get it. I've very little time left now, and I want you to help me fit some pieces together."

"I'll try," Shek agreed readily. The big man was more subdued in his home than he was in his office, and his thoughtful side was much more in evidence. "Shoot."

Martin Ashley sipped his drink, which was delicious. "Ever since I left the *Juarez* and headed down for Carinae Four," he said, "I've been sniffing around like an ape at a power generator. I knew there was something utterly out of the ordinary about that planet from the very first, but that's no answer—it's just a problem. I saw right away that the Nern were not so simple as they seemed, and I tried to act always on the assumption that they were not primitive, no matter how they looked on the outside. I knew I was right, and you confirmed that for me yesterday when you told us, in effect, that they were way ahead of you, just as you are way ahead of us—"

Shek raised his head, objecting. "Let's just say different," he said. "Or more complex along certain lines. This business of being 'advanced' is a pretty subjective thing, in my opinion."

"Correction noted," agreed Ashley readily. "But we won't try to solve *that* particular problem tonight. But here's the point, Shek: I know what the Nern are *not* and I have for a long time. But I don't know a blessed thing about what they *are*." He paused. "Shek, I've got to know. Don't ask me why."

Shek eyed him carefully. "I guess you do, at that," he said. "Of course, I can't pretend to tell you the inside story because *I* don't know it all, either. I can give you the general picture, that's all."

"That'll be plenty," Ashley assured him.

"O.K., Martin. Here, let me fill up your glass again. This will take a little time."

Martin Ashley leaned forward, hoping that he did not look as excited as he felt.

This was the story Shek told, while the evening shadows marched in steady shadow files on into night.

Man, wherever he is found, is a strange and much misunderstood animal. It was not so much man's famous "better brain" that made the difference, although he had that, too. Rather, it was his ability to symbolize and thus to be a carrier of culture. The growing totality of culture was passed on from generation to generation, and individuals were born into functioning systems that they themselves had done little or nothing to bring into being.

Each new person did not think up for himself the ideas of cooking food or playing football or using electricity—he just did them "naturally," because "everybody did it that way."

"Now, culture is a learned process, which must be taught and absorbed, which is why human children are "helpless" for so long and why they must spend almost half of their lives going to school in one form or another.

As cultures developed, a knotty question appeared: *What happens when the culture is so complicated that one person can't possibly learn it all?*

Technological processes snowballed whenever they were set in motion, and when technology changed so did the rest of culture. Cultures ballooned—from cave-dwellers to villages to mammoth cities, from stories told around campfires to libraries filled with so many books that it took a special staff just to keep track of them all.

There *was* too much to learn. What was the solution?

One way out, the way unconsciously selected by Earth and by the people of Carinae V, was to learn a small core of culture and then specialize with increasing minuteness in a technical field. The results were sometimes painful: scientists who neither knew nor cared about the

effects of what they did in their labs, soldiers who fought without knowing why, governments that legislated in mental darkness, writers who wrote glibly about problems which they were incompetent to understand. Men learned and learned and worked and worked and piled up more and more for the next generation to wrestle with—and for what?

For fun, and for an old-age pension that they never learned how to enjoy.

There was another solution, and the Nern had taken it long ago. *They edited their culture down to essentials, and learned to live in it.*

The very concept of editing a culture assumed an awareness of what culture was—a learned process, the result of arbitrary history, and not an instinctive "right way to do things," as opposed to all other ways, which were wrong. Getting this idea across to a population was the biggest hurdle to be faced, and when it was done the rest was relatively easy. The Nern handled their indoctrination in what appeared to be a rite of passage, an initiation ceremony for children. It was, indeed, an initiation—the children had been brought up to cherish the ideals and beliefs of their culture, and now they were told and shown that these ways of living were arbitrary and could be changed. This did *not* mean that they were no longer to value them—but only that they must be critical of what they valued, and capable of rational evaluation.

There was another problem, or rather two problems. What *was* essential, and essential for what?

The Nern took as their goal the value of survival with maximum integration, cohesiveness of function, individual fulfillment, constant challenge, and peace. It was no Utopia, of course—this was a real culture, with real human beings in it, with real hopes and fears and sorrows.

They were not helpless, not even after they had decided against a machine culture multiplied forever. They really *knew* culture, which was man's most distinctive possession. They were masters of the culture process—

they knew what seeds to sow in other cultures to produce almost any desired result. They knew the pivotal points of cultures—they could, at a distance, through psychology and hypnosis and adroit cultural appeals, turn an enemy into an ally or tear it apart with civil war.

They had found the true "uncharted corridors of the mind," and they had explored them thoroughly.

On the surface, as Ashley had observed, there was a surprisingly uniform planetary culture, with a mixed economy and only the simplest sort of tools. There were shamans and rituals and moiety-type social organizations. There was an elaborate series of myths about the star-brothers, with their campfires in the sky.

But underneath it was different. *Very* different. Under the surface of that "uniform" planetary culture was tremendous cultural diversity. Each group was unique in the way the elements were put together, in the dominant values by which the culture lived. The hunting and gathering and fishing and limited agriculture served to tie the people to their land, and make them appreciate it, in the absence of a market economy. They had found machines to be useful, and certainly not "bad," but they had found that machines carried a price tag which they could not afford.

One solution to a specialized system was to build robots; another was to eliminate the useless jobs entirely. Their crops were non-tedious in nature, requiring very little time and yielding a large return. At the same time, when you ate a meal you knew where it came from and did not take it for granted. The shamans were genuine doctors; they combined advanced psychosomatic medicine with "herbs" similar to natural wonder drugs and sound surgical techniques, and they kept the chants and the singing so as to avoid divorcing science and religion. The rituals restated the values of the culture, and were regarded as both good fun and as efficient structuring devices for the society. The attitude toward them was

not unlike that found in America toward Santa Claus—something which only the children believed in literally, but which all the adults could appreciate and participate in. Their dual division of society was a nicely integrated system that provided a framework for sports and games and dancing contests, and their preferred marriage systems were quite workable forms of social insurance. Their language was designed to emphasize cultural tolerance and objectivity. And who could be pressed for time, when it was all the same day, repeating itself forever?

It was not a perfect system, and they knew it. It changed all the time, and its people were human enough to foul things up now and then. But it was a try, a way of doing things, and whether it was better or worse than other ways depended pretty much on how the observer felt about such things.

The Nern had substituted philosophy and songs and dancing for books, and their philosophy was only simple on the surface. The stars were their brothers, because they had sensed a genuine unity of all life everywhere; it was all related because it was all the same process, and to the Nern that was kinship.

And there was the sun, and the trees, and the sounds of happy people. Perhaps, in a way, that was the best of all. The population was small, only some four million people on the whole planet, but they did not place their value in numbers.

"That's what I know about the Nern," Shek finished, putting down his cigarette which promptly went out. "And now it's very late. Come along, Martin, and spend the night with us. I'll drop you off at the spaceport in the morning."

"Very kind of you, Shek," Ashley said. "Thanks."

He had a room on the second floor, a room with a window open to the cool night air. He lay awake for a long time that night, looking out at the stars, the star-brothers, the ancestral dead and the never-born, sitting around their campfires in the sky—

It was dawn when he slept.

The great gray ship that was bound for far Centauri, one hundred light-years away, pointed her slim snout at the noonday sun and waited.

Martin Ashley had had two tough decisions to make, and he had made them both. He stood with Bob Chavez at the lock elevator, waiting for it to go up and into the ship. The ship towered over his head, a metal giant, pointing.

Quite suddenly, the Earth seemed very near.

"Good-by, Bob," he said, holding out his hand.

Bob Chavez shook it firmly, and he made no attempt to argue with Ashley about the decision that he had made. *Funny what a few months will do to a boy,* Ashley thought. *Bob has become a man.*

He would miss him.

"Best of luck, Mart," Chavez said. "Sorry I was such a brat at first."

"You were good company," Martin Ashley said. "Perhaps one day we'll meet again."

"Perhaps. I hope so. I'll tell Earth you said hello."

A light flashed and the elevator lifted. Bob Chavez was gone.

Old Alberto Chavez would be proud of his son now, but he would never know. Martin Ashley smiled a little. *Fifty-three down and one to go.*

He turned and walked away from the great gray ship, the sun in his eyes. He was very much alone. He walked as fast as he could, and he did not look back.

One week later, Martin Ashley was in space again.

The big ship from Carinae V had maneuvered with rare skill to pace the empty hulk of the *Juarez,* still circling in its endless satellite orbit about the planet of the Nern.

In a wonderfully light and flexible spacesuit, Martin Ashley pushed himself across to the ship that had been his home. Shek went with him, and they went through the emergency lock together.

There were now enough lights on in the *Juarez* so that they could see, but somehow they just made the gloom worse. There is nothing more depressing than a dead ship, and the *Juarez* was dead. There was nothing left now but one mechanical voice, and ghost memories of the dead and the darkness prowled through the hollow rooms and passageways.

In the silent control room, Ashley flicked on a ship amplifier. The message still came, endlessly repeating from the recording, sending Ashley's own words of a lifetime ago drifting into space:

"THIS IS THE *JUAREZ*, SURVEY SHIP FROM EARTH, SEPTEMBER TWENTY, TWO THOUSAND AND SIXTY-SEVEN . . . SHUTTLE TO FOURTH PLANET, SYSTEM OF CARINAE . . . WILL MAINTAIN CONTACT . . . SURVIVORS ARE ERNEST GALLEN, RADIOMAN; ROBERT CHAVEZ, APPRENTICE PILOT; MARTIN ASHLEY, ANTHROPOLOGIST. MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ALL . . . THIS IS THE *JUAREZ*."

Martin Ashley canceled the message and turned off the transmitter. There was no need for it now, with Ernie dead and Bob Chavez on his way back home.

The last voice of the *Juarez* was stilled, and neither Martin Ashley nor Shek broke the silence.

They turned out all the lights and went back to their waiting ship.

The ship flashed on—toward Carinae IV.

"In a way, I envy you, Mart," Shek said, "but it's not for me."

"It's funny," Ashley told him, "but that's just what I thought at your house."

"I'll be down to see you, sometime. Sometime soon."

"I'll be waiting."

And the great ship landed—in a sea of grass, beside a tiny shuttle that stood alone, an alien statue in the fields of night. Martin Ashley stepped outside, into the darkness, and moments later the ship from Carinae V lifted away into the great sea of space with a whine and a roar.

Martin Ashley trembled. For all of his life, he had been

a man in search of something without a name. The search had taken him into schools and across the light-years, and once, with Carol, he had almost found it. And now, after so long—

He was too old and had lived too deeply to believe that he had found it at last. Perhaps men never found it, and that was the secret that kept them going. But there was a chance now.

A chance.

The ship was gone, and there was the silence again, the silence of night and of land left alone.

Martin Ashley shivered.

He knew that the others were watching.

They came out of the shadows where they had been waiting for him—Rondol, Catan and the woman, Lirad. Lirad smiled and took his hand.

"Welcome, my son," Catan said. "We have been expecting you."

Hesitantly, Martin Ashley said, "I think I know about Bob. You . . . sent . . . him back to Earth, didn't you?"

Rondol nodded. "Your people are young and very aggressive," he said. "They found us once, and will again. We planted only a very small seed in your young friend —a seed that will flower just enough so that your people will be willing to listen and co-operate when next they come our way. You or your sons can talk to them, and we can be friends instead of enemies. Your friend wanted to go home anyway, you know; we did not harm him."

"I let him go," Ashley said slowly. "And myself? I must know that. I know that you will not lie to me."

"We did nothing to you, Martin," Rondol told him. "You were one of us from the beginning; you have always been one of us. Your decision was one of free will, at least inasmuch as any man ever has free will."

"Let's go, then," Martin Ashley said. "I'm ready."

He heard it before he saw it, as they walked along the pathway beneath the pines. Drums, and chanting voices

in the night. And then he saw them waiting—the orange fires burning in the village of the Nern.

He had seen it all before, a long time ago, with Ernie and Bob, hidden in this same forest.

The rite of passage, the initiation ceremony during which the child passed into adulthood.

This time, he knew, it was for him.

He held Lirad's hand, tightly.

With a greater humility than he had ever known, and with a pride that burned like fire within him, he walked forward, toward the drums and the singing and the people who were waiting to take him in.

He looked up once. There they were, untold millions of them, his star-brothers, the old ones and the never-born, sparkling in the sky.

They smiled, understanding.

He walked on, shoulders squared, into the village.

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