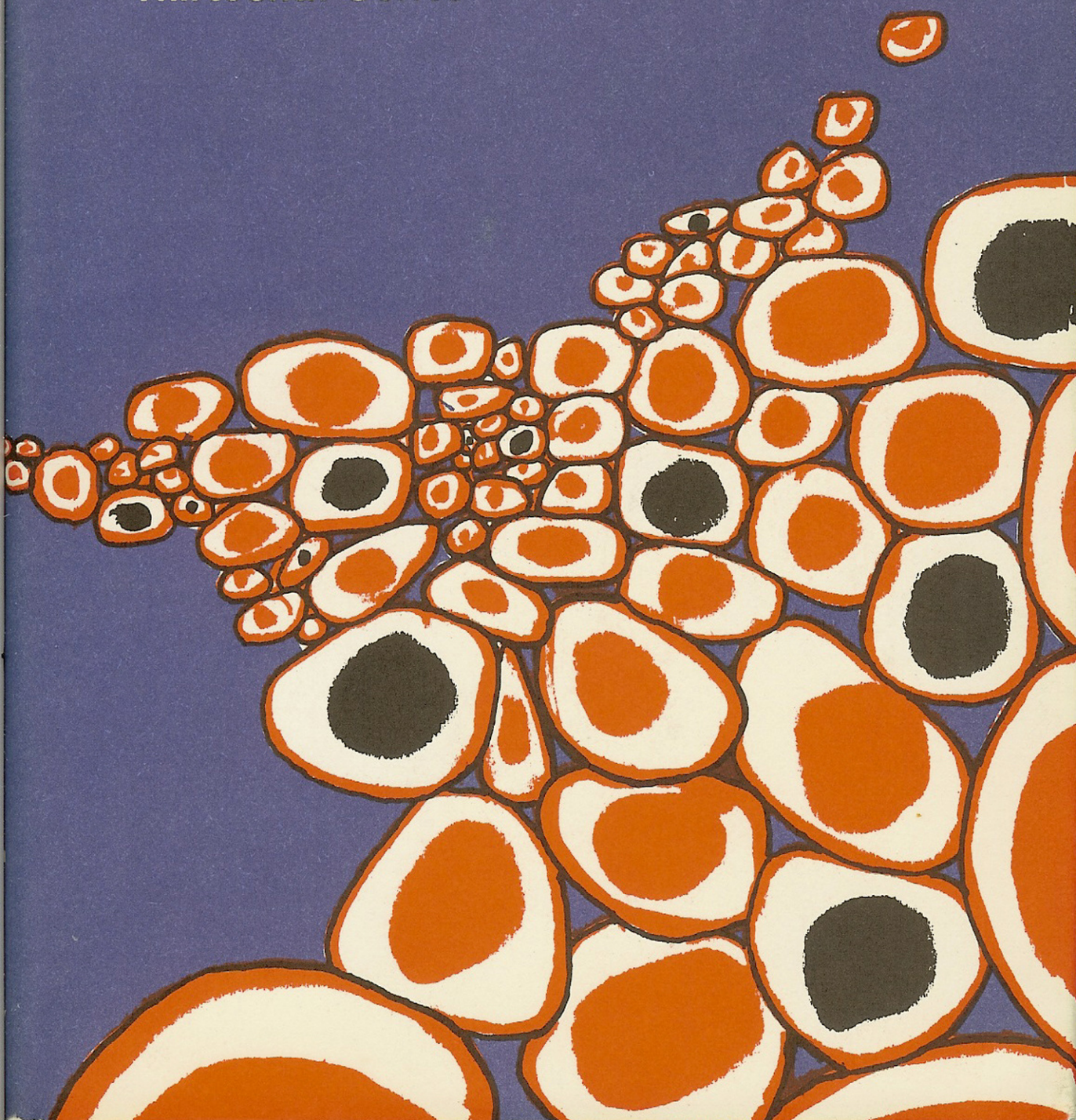
The best from FANTASY and SCIENCE FICTION

Edited by Avram Davidson

Thirteenth Series



THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

Thirteenth Series

THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, Thirteenth Series

THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, Twelfth Series

OR ALL THE SEAS WITH OYSTERS

CRIMES AND CHAOS

JOYLEG (*with Ward Moore*)

THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

Thirteenth Series

Edited by Avram Davidson

Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1964

All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 52–5510

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO

WARD MOORE,

ANTHONY BOUCHER,

ROBERT P. MILLS,

AND DAMON KNIGHT:

Uncommon friends.

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The writing of this Introduction has been avoidably delayed by our having taken up temporary residence at a small city of the State of Mexico in the friendly Republic of the same name. An unlikelier setting for writing about Science Fiction could not easily be found on short notice (which is all we're giving you: defeated, you may sit back now without further struggle and just read)—a narrow-gauge steam railroad whistles its way through burro-iferous streets which may, conceivably, have been paved during the Juarez Administration or the reign of Maximilian which interrupted it; and, over choo-choo train, donkeys, muddy lanes, sixteenth-century church, serape'd *Indios* and all, broods the great blue bulk of cloud-shrouded Popocatepetl. It is very pleasant here and I would issue a general invitation to come join or at least visit us, except that I am not crazy and don't want a bunch of tourists flocking in to Spoil the Natives and Raise the Prices. Stay at home, buy the book, buy The Magazine, we'll all be much better off; right?

The stories which you are about to read in this rich compendium represent the thirteenth year of The Magazine's publication and the second year of my own editorship. They have been two valuable and rewarding years to me, and I hope they have been ones in which standards and productions have not fallen much behind those of previous years. During this time I have begun to learn the editor's craft or art, and yet during this time I have had to continue to learn the writer's art or craft. They have, I hope, been two lenses to a clearer vision.

If you have read these Annuals before, you will be pleased to see again the names of old friends, such as Richard McKenna, Ron Goulart, Alfred Bester, Avram Davidson, Karen Anderson, Zenna Henderson, and J. G. Ballard. If, on the other hand, it is

your first venture into these Realms of Gold, their names may be as new to you, perhaps, as those of P. M. Hubbard, Don White, Jack Vance, Harry Harrison, Felix Marti-Ibañez, and Ray Nelson, whose stories are appearing for the first time on this plate of many victuals. At any rate, in the phrase made famous by one of our most popular chrestomathists, "Enjoy, enjoy!"

—Avram Davidson

We said of a writer in our first review for The Magazine, "Mr. ——— is not Montague Rhodes James—but then, who is?" The answer may well be, "P. M. Hubbard." It is not a case of reincarnation, for Mr. Hubbard was a grown man when the late Provost of Eton died; it is certainly not a case of imitation: the author of the poignant BOTANY BAY does not need imitate anyone—and, in fact, does not. It is simply that no one else writing in the long generation which has passed since James's death has until now equalled, or even come close to equalling, that mastery of the historical and the horrid which made the author of *Ghost Stories of An Antiquary* so justly famous. Mr. Hubbard, on request, writes of himself, "Born in England, 9.11.10. Brought up and educated in Channel Islands. Classical degree, Oxford. Newdigate Prize, 1933. Government service in India (Punjab) 1934 to 1947. Part of the steel frame—personal rule on horseback over hundreds of square miles—that sort of thing, including capital powers as a criminal judge. Home in 1947. (A month's home-leave in 13 years—the war got in the way.) Various administrative jobs, including, latterly, chief executive of a national manufacturers' organization. Started writing for PUNCH in 1950, and have since contributed hundreds of things, from Parliamentary reports to sentimental verse. Now for the second time trying to make a go of it as a whole-time writer. Anything from children's fiction to industrial reports. My first novel (a thriller of sorts) just accepted for publication this autumn. Married, three children, two grandchildren. Like making things with my hands, planting and tending trees, swimming, sailing. Have cottage in Cornwall. Expect to die early in 1965, but I may crawl away over the sea yet . . ." We trust and hope that Mr. Hubbard's prophecy in the first part of this last sentence will prove false; for illumination of the second part it will be necessary for readers to complete the reading of this story. This, we predict, will be impossible to avoid doing, once they have well begun this lovely and horrifying tale of the summer resident, the black ship, the white, white shipmaster, the thing in the hold which droned and wrought, and the golden brick . . .

THE GOLDEN BRICK
by P. M. Hubbard

PENHARROW IS ONE OF THOSE Cornish fishing villages that have long ceased to look anywhere but inland for their livelihood. The sea is still there, and the granite-walled harbour, and the granite cottages with roofs of local slate cemented into a solid sheet that is as impermeable and almost as heavy as lead flashing. There are boats in the harbour, and the boats go to sea, weather permitting, and some of them even bring in mackerel and lobsters for quick cash sales at holiday prices. But the money comes from up-country. London and Birmingham and Manchester make the money and bring it to Penharrow to spend. The Cornish are still a curiously simple people, considering the natural advantages heaven has given them. They have preserved their Duchy as much from a natural conservatism as from any commercial instinct; and they give their visitors good value for money because they are naturally hospitable, even on a cash basis. London and Birmingham and Manchester like getting value for their money, and so continue to bring it to Penharrow to spend. The thing is self-perpetuating so long as the Cornish don't lose their simplicity and over-reach themselves.

On the afternoon of Good Friday my family went on an expedition inland and left me to my own devices. I throw in the family, because this too is supposed to indicate stability and reliability, though in my experience marriage, like other restrictive practices, is a great breeding-ground of untruth. I had the dinghy out with the outboard, and was going to potter round into a neighbouring cove and, if the sun was hot enough, risk a quick swim. Given fine weather the Cornish air is as soft as silk at Easter, but the Gulf Stream doesn't come this way noticeably,

and the sea will defy any but the adventurous or masochistic for some months yet. Not being particularly either, I preferred to get somewhere where I could take my time over it and change my mind as often as I wanted before I committed myself. Hence the idea of pottering round into a neighbouring cove.

The ketch came round the headland just as I headed out of the harbour. She was motoring, of course, but the mainsail and mizzen were stowed along the booms and there was a jib on a roller. She looked thoroughly seaworthy. She was completely black, even the cabin-top, and must have been all of twenty tons. To say, now, that she looked sinister is almost certainly being wise after the event, but she didn't look like a yachting holiday. She looked workmanlike, lived-in and slightly evasive. Curiosity being the first rule of the amateur sailor, I headed towards her.

I was still some distance from her when I saw that she had lost way and all but stopped. A man climbed out of the cockpit, ran forward and let go an anchor just as the ebb tide took hold of her. She slipped back to the length of cable he gave her and sat there, tide-rode. She would still have plenty under her, even at full low. It was all very neat and efficient. I sat in the middle of the boat with the extension tiller in my hand and my bows well in the water. I know it is amusing to sit in the stern-sheets and wave your bows in the air, but it doesn't really pay, and I have got past the stage of wanting to be amusing in a boat, or anywhere else much for that matter. The man stood in the bows of the ketch and watched me coming towards him.

It was one of those curious mental encounters you get sometimes with a man you haven't spoken to. There was I heading straight for him and there was he standing watching me, with the green water slipping past him on either hand along the black topsides of his ship. If I altered course, I should be patently avoiding him. If I went on, I should have to go alongside and speak to him. I couldn't do anything else. I didn't want to do either.

He wore black to the neck, wrists and ankles, but all of him that showed was white. I don't mean merely that he was a white man in the racial sense. He was quite colourless, so that his eyes and even, as he tilted his head back, his nostrils showed dark,

like cavities in a white-washed wall. For a man that spent his time at sea this didn't seem right. My far sight is not as good as it was, but I got the impression of a thin face and close-cropped hair. I suddenly saw a way out. I could alter course and pass wide of him, but wave without speaking as I went.

I don't know how far I was from him. He smiled, and I held on my course. The smile split the white surface like a running crack. It wasn't an attractive smile, but it established personal contact as effectively as if he had hailed me. There was nothing for it now but speech. His face was getting clearer every moment, but this did not seem to improve it. I slipped the clutch of the outboard and sidled up to him on the ebb.

He had a slightly prissified voice. He leaned over and said, "Do you want to buy a golden brick?" I got hold of his anchor cable, so that the tide swung my bows gently against his. When I looked up, I found that he was staring straight down at me. I got the feeling that he hadn't taken his eyes off my face since he came round the headland. He was still smiling. He was, as I had thought, entirely white.

I said, "I tell you what. I'll swap it for some oil-shares. Fabulous new gusher no one's heard of yet. Or I've a Maharani's pearl necklace I want to get rid of. We ought to be able to think up something."

He did not smile any more or any less. He said, "Hold on a minute," and disappeared inboard. There must have been a forehatch. He didn't go back along the deck. Then he re-appeared over the side and handed me down a parcel. It was smaller than a brick, of course, but of the same general proportions, wrapped in brown paper and strongly tied with what looked like whipping twine. He said, "Got it? It's heavy."

It was heavy—so heavy I almost let it go, but I lowered it safely to the floor-boards between my feet and looked up at him again. He was not smiling so much now, but did not seem able to leave off entirely. He said, "Sell it for what it will fetch and give me half, will you? Don't bother about a receipt."

"Why don't you sell it yourself?" I said. My one wish now was

to cast off and lose sight of him, but I couldn't help asking the obvious question.

"Can't leave the ship, not just at present. But it's all right. I know I can trust you."

I did not find it possible to comment on this. I thought for a bit and said, "Where do you reckon I can sell a golden brick in Penharrow?"

"Nowhere. But Clanbridge will be all right. Try Clanbridge tomorrow. I'll be in again about this time on Monday."

"Can I get you anything from the shops? A packet of sugar or a tin of beans?"

"No. No, thank you. I only want the money. I've got everything else I want."

I thought about this for a moment. "Yes," I said, "I believe I'm with you there. I've got everything else I want, probably, bar the money."

"Good. That's all right, then. See you on Monday." His head disappeared and I let go the cable, fending myself off from the black sides of the ketch. Once clear, I dropped in the clutch and motored away down the ebb. I remembered afterwards that I hadn't noticed the name.

The cove was deserted all right and the afternoon sun struck straight down through the green water. I cut the engine and drifted in until the bows took the dense sand. It shelved so steeply here that the stern was still in a foot or more of water. I took off my shoes, rolled up my cotton slacks (it still wasn't weather for shorts) and stood up. Then I remembered the parcel and stooped to pick it up off the floor-boards. Once again the weight took me by surprise and put me off balance. The boat, pivoted on her bow, rocked violently and I let everything go and sat down heavily on the centre thwart.

The parcel fell clear of the stern and went to the bottom in one motion. That's really the best way I can describe it. Normally if you drop a parcel into water it hits the surface with a splash and either floats a moment until it settles, or at least checks and drifts down in slow time, especially in dense Atlantic water. This went straight to the sand, wrappings and all, as if the

water wasn't there. It sat on the bottom looking up at me, with the odd bubble drifting slowly up out of the folds in the paper.

I fished it out and carried it up the tiny beach. Then I sat down and picked at the seaman's knots in the soaked twine. I can never cut string if it is at all capable of being untied. The soggy paper rubbed off under my fingers and something gleamed through it. Then the knots gave and I unwrapped the thing. One doesn't handle gold much nowadays, more's the pity. Its loveliness has made it an economists' symbol and driven it underground into the vaults of the international monetary system. So I couldn't tell, and of course my whole mind was hell-bent on an alternative explanation. But the thing looked golden. It felt stone-cold and unbelievably dense.

It was nothing like brick-size by modern standards, though it might have made one of those small Roman bricks that the early English dug in quantity out of the ruins of Verulamium and built into the rose-red tower of St. Albans Abbey. It wasn't smooth by any means. The surface had a pronounced grain, as though it was wood. I seized on this almost in desperation. (My incredulity was fighting a last ditch rearguard action, and I didn't like it.) I thought it might be a wood-block, weighted and in some way or other given a gold skin. I had my swim, half anaesthetised by my mental preoccupation against the alarming cold of that placid sun-shot water. When I turned Penharrow Point, the ketch was nowhere to be seen.

I put the parcel in my bottom drawer and did not tell my wife about it. It wasn't a blonde I had collected in Penharrow Bay, and I could not bear to share my mental agitation with anyone. Later I got a loose hacksaw blade that I knew was in the boot of the car, retired to guaranteed privacy and sawed off a corner of the block. The steel went straight in and made almost no sound at all. It was golden right through the cut, but the grain was still there. I collected the dust on a piece of paper, screwed it into a ball and with magnificent nonchalance washed it down the water-closet.

Clanbridge is quite a town by West Country standards. I took

out the tiny yellow pyramid I had cut off the corner of the block and put it on the glass counter of a respectable jeweller's, above the engagement rings and the more expensive Swiss watches. I said, "Can you tell me what this is—I mean, what the metal is?" The dark, earnest young man had almost London clothes but a soft local voice. He screwed a glass in his eye and said, "It looks like gold. Did you think it was gold, then?"

"I wanted to make sure."

He called an older but equally earnest man out of the back of the shop. "Mr. Tremayne," he said, "the gentleman wants to know, is this gold?"

Mr. Tremayne gave me a penetrating once-over and took the pyramid back into some sort of workshop. He came back carrying it flat on the palm of his hand and looking at me with more reservations than ever.

"'Tis gold," he said. "Very pure gold indeed. Not jeweller's gold, you understand? Too soft, for one thing. And too expensive." He pushed the pyramid back at me and waited for my explanation.

I said, "What's it worth?" He told me its weight and current value. By our middle-class standards we could have lived on that pyramid for quite some time. He said, "There's salt on it. It's been in the sea, I reckon."

I nodded. I could see which way his mind was running. Cornwall has collected more wrecks in its time than almost any bit of coast in the world, and the treasure-ship and the Spanish galleon are always in the back of the Cornish mind, even now. I wondered whether this was in fact the explanation. The white man could have found something and be playing it cautiously, but it left a lot of questions unanswered.

I thanked Mr. Tremayne politely and went out without an explanation. It was cruel to leave him like that, but I had no alternative, being if anything in a worse case than he was. I wondered whether he would tell anybody, but it did not seem to matter either way.

I did a rough calculation on the weight and value of the whole brick and looked till I found a jeweller in Tregantle Street much

smaller and less respectable than Mr. Tremayne. The man was just right. He came out of his back room sideways and sidled along the counter looking at me across the bridge of his nose with his further eye. I lowered the brick carefully on to the counter, overstated its weight and asked him his price. He did not say anything except to challenge me on the weight. We weighed it on ordinary kitchen scales, and he breathed heavily through his nose the whole time. I agreed the weight, told him his first price was nonsense and accepted an offer equal to about two-thirds of the proper value. He didn't even have to go to the bank for the money. He had it all, dirty but current. I stuffed it into my coat pocket and left him breathing heavier than ever. He must have been the only person who gained anything out of the entire transaction.

On the Monday afternoon the tide was three hours higher, but I saw the black ketch anchored well out in the deep water beyond Penharrow Point. There was still no sea at all, but just enough breeze to sail the dinghy on. The sun was brilliant and almost hot. I reckon myself a competent inshore helmsman, though no navigator. The ebb sets strongly westward beyond the Point, and the airs were light. It took me half-an-hour's maneuvering, but I laid the dinghy neatly alongside the weather side of the ketch with no noise at all and no more of a bump than would wake the baby, if there happened to be one on board, which I did not think likely.

There wasn't in fact a sign of any life on board at all. The silence was complete except for the popple slapping very quietly under the counter. I was going to hail her, but it stuck in my throat. And I had no name to hail her by. She had no name on her anywhere. I ran the mainsail down and left the foresail to flap gently on loose sheets. I made fast to the ketch's mainstays, giving the dinghy a lot of painter, and pushed her off as I climbed on board. She drifted clear and sat there at the end of her painter. I didn't like to see the space of clear water between us. The black ship gave me the willies. It was all clean, fast and seamanlike, but there was no one about and something didn't smell right. The hatches were shut.

I was barefoot, but found myself on tiptoe as I made for the cockpit. It was only when I got there that I heard the noises, I suppose through the shut main hatch, though they sounded distant and shut away up forward. There was a droning sound, high-pitched and more or less continuous. I thought on the whole it was a human voice, but I wouldn't have sworn to human speech. I noticed with odd detachment that the hair was standing straight up at the back of my neck. I had read of this but never really visualised it. I felt extraordinarily sick. At intervals, overlying the drone like the chanter notes of a bagpipe, I recognised the high, precise voice of the white man, though I could not catch the words and it did not sound like English.

I took the currency notes out of my pocket and put them on the cockpit coaming, wedged under the neat coil of the starboard foresheet. I did not want any of them. I climbed out on deck and started to go forward. The forehatch opened suddenly, and the most appalling smell I have ever smelt drifted aft to me along the scrubbed, sun-bleached deck. I have been years in India and went through the war as an infantryman, but I could never have imagined anything like it. Apart from my physical nausea, my mind recoiled from it instinctively, as if from the ultimate evil.

The main hatch slammed open behind me, and I heard the white man in his prissy voice cursing in the cockpit. Then a head and shoulders came up out of the forehatch that should have come from nowhere but a grave, and shouldn't by rights have come out of that. It was, I suppose, a man. There were whisps of hair on the lower part of the face. It was entirely shrivelled. Apart from the cranium and frontal lobes, even the bone had collapsed, like a football bladder that has leaked slowly and crumpled in irregular patches.

The white man pushed me aside, so that I fell across the main boom, and ran forward with a long iron pin in his hand. He brandished it over the figure in the hatch. *"Redde baculum,"* he shouted. *"Redde baculum."* He held out his left hand, demanding something. The eyes that looked up at him were dark, bright and perfectly simian. There was a muffle of clothes, pat-

terned with coloured diagrams and smelling of the ultimate corruption, and behind them a hand like a lizard's hand clutched something white, like a conductor's baton.

The white man lifted the pin, and I caught his arm from behind and pulled him over backwards. We fell together on the deck, and I heard the hatch shut and found the air suddenly fit to breathe again. He wrenched himself away and jumped to his feet. He stood over the closed hatch, breathing like a man who has run for his life, and has not run far enough, but cannot run any more. There was sweat beaded all over his waxy face, and a plume of spittle at one corner of his white mouth. He found his voice, but it was weak and high-pitched.

"Damn you," he said, "damn you. Why did you want to interfere?"

I said, "You'd have brained him with that thing."

He shook his head. "You don't understand." I thought he was going to cry. "He's mine, don't you see?"

"He looks as if you'd had him too long," I said.

He said, quite simply, "We've had him four hundred years." We faced each other, the white man and I, across this preposterous statement, standing on the scrubbed deck with the sun striking down on us and the black ship rocking very gently to the popple that whispered under her counter. That was the only noise, that and his uneven breathing.

My reason rebelled as the horror died out of the sunlight. I said, "You haven't had anything four hundred years."

"My family," he said. "They brought him back from the Levant. They found what he could do. Everyone was trying then, but he could do it. We've had him ever since. But he's not to be trusted. You can see that. And he won't do the work. I've got to force him. He's getting old."

I thought of the collapsed skull and ape eyes. I said, "He is old. Can't you let him die in peace?"

"Die?" He almost screamed. He seemed exasperated. "Why should he die after we've kept him all these years?"

"Kept him prisoner," I said, "or why the ship?"

"The water," he said. "The water, don't you see? He's safe there. We can't keep him on shore."

I stood facing the white man in the Cornish sunlight, ready, quite seriously, to argue labour relations on behalf of an alchemist who, four hundred years before, had found the secret while the rest were inventing porcelain or gun-powder or Glauber Salts by mistake, and whose greatest offence now was to be alive at all. It did not seem wholly unreasonable.

The glare seemed to change and strike upwards from between us. I saw it was the sun reflecting back from the hatch-top, which gleamed suddenly golden and burned like a mirror. The white man saw it at the same moment and caught his breath noisily. Then he ran aft and jumped down into the cockpit, the iron pin still in his hand. For a moment there was silence, and then a horrible babel broke out in the fo'c'sle below me, bumping noises, and that animal drone again, and the white man cursing steadily in his high precise voice and a language I did not recognise. Then he screamed, a long wavering scream of pure terror, cut off in the middle as suddenly as if a spring valve had shut on the sound.

The silence came back and I was certain that the forehatch would open again and bring up that horror from below deck. I ran to the side and began tearing at the dinghy's painter. The knot, unpardonably, had pulled tight, and I broke a finger-nail. I knelt working at it. I think I sobbed at intervals. It was then I realised that the ship had stopped its gentle rocking and was settling down in the water. I looked at the paint below me, and as I looked the level green water slipped half-an-inch higher.

The knot came away suddenly, and I pulled the dinghy in, kneeling where I was. I almost fell into her and pushed off violently from the topsides that now stood no more than six inches above me. I put an oar in the sculling notch and sculled desperately for perhaps twenty yards. Then I stopped and looked round.

The ketch was going down vertically, in one smooth, unwavering movement, as though some monstrous force had her by the keel and was dragging her steadily under. The sun struck at

her along the water, and she gleamed all over. When the water was level with the deck, the forehatch opened and something dry rustled out and crouched there.

I remember once when I was a boy I threw a piece of rotten brick into a stream. It was porous and full of air, sucking in the water and settling slowly. As it went under, a spider emerged from a crevice in its top and sat rocking on the moving water, too light to break the tension that skinned its surface. Then it turned, looked about it and scuttled across the water to the bank.

The water, as I have said, is deep out beyond Penharrow Point, and the ketch's shining maintruck vanished without a sound into green swirling water which had already stopped bubbling. Nothing was left but a reddish-brown bundle which floated twirling on the surface of the sea. For half a minute I watched, waiting for it to sink. Then it gathered itself and crawled away, scrabbling with brown claws at the surface of a sea too cleanly to take it in.

I do not think I shall go to Penharrow again this summer. I shall find means to persuade the family that it is time we tried somewhere else. I should not care to sail or swim in those waters now, nor, when we go to Clanbridge, do I want to meet Mr. Tremayne or the sideways jeweller of Tregantle Street. I should be interested to know whether there are fresh rumours current of a treasure ship somewhere under the cliffs around Penharrow Bay. If anyone is sufficiently interested to start a search, I could show him a place off Penharrow Point which might be worth investigating, but the water is very deep there and the tides are strong. It is no job for the aqualung enthusiast, but a professional diver, properly equipped, might find, unless I am very much mistaken, a twenty-ton ketch in solid gold and somewhere aboard her a complete golden man with a long gold pin in his hand and his mouth open. So far as I am concerned, he can have the lot. Gold or no gold, I want nothing to do with them.

The story following is by the well-known travel authority and merry-andrew, Don White of London, author of "Eril, Ethel, Maude, Zelda, Kitty, Tulip and Vanessa and the Leprechaun" (you'll never see it here). Happy landings on a chocolate bar!

PEGGY AND PETER GO TO THE MOON

by Don White

"HURRY, PEGGY! HURRY, PETER!" said Nanny. "It is nearly time to go to the moon!"

Nanny helped Peter on with his new red mittens. "Is the moon really made of green cheese, Nanny?" He was only nineteen and a little backward, so Nanny only smiled.

"Here comes cook with the sandwiches," cried Peggy.

Cook's apple-dumpling face broke into a rare smile at the sight of the two excited children. "Ah, the loves," she said. "I've made your favourites. Red caviar for you, Miss Peggy. . . ."

"Oh, thank you, cook," Peggy turned to Nanny, "Nanny, Nanny, why can't cook come with us to the moon?"

"Ah, the little loves," said cook, then went on, "and for you, master Peter, a real treat. Curried Negombo *guni* shrimps. Isn't that a surprise? And Mary-Anne has made you both a thermos of hot Bonox and Rum."

At last they were all ready to go. How smart Peggy and Peter looked in their new red mittens, their new patent leather saddle shoes. Peggy was wearing her mink-collared gold lamé party frock, the one that she hadn't worn since Rosemary Jane's party celebrating the defection of her father to the Russians. Peter was wearing his new slim-styled raw silk Ivy League romper suit.

Peter was full of excited questions all the way to the secret Rocket Range in Kensington Gardens, but Nanny just boxed his ears, playfully.

A big sign on the barbed-wire gate of the Rocket Range said TOP SECRET—NO ENTRY. In a sentry box stood a stern looking guard.

Peter stood on the back seat of the Rolls Royce and saluted as they drove through, like a real soldier.

Peggy grew suddenly sad, and snuggled into the crook of Nanny's arm. "Oh, dear Nanny, how I shall miss you on the moon. When I grow up, I want to be just like you and wear black lace underwear from France and carry a pearl-handled Smith and Wesson .22 in my handbag."

The Rolls Royce pulled up silently in front of Professor Love's research laboratory. Professor Love was waiting at the door to meet them.

"Ah, here are my little Loves," he said, with a kiss for Peter, and a man-to-man handshake for Peggy.

"Are you coming to the moon with us, Daddy?" asked Peter.

He smiled at his only son. "Not this trip, Peterkins. Perhaps next time."

Nanny smiled, and said, "Now don't cry, Peggy. Sit quietly, like good children, while Daddy finalises the launching arrangements and I'll pour us all a brandy and soda."

"Mine with water, please, Nanny," said Peter, "soda makes my tummy gurgle," and they all laughed.

Professor Love returned to the room. "I think we're all ready to go now," he said, and led the procession onto the Secret Rocket Range.

"Oh, look at the rocket!" cried Peter, jumping up and down with excitement.

The Professor opened a door in the tail fin of the spaceship. "Today you will learn some of the secrets of the great void beyond the atmosphere of earth," he told them, earnestly. "Have they got clean hankies, Nanny?" He went on, "At the top of the steel ladder is a small cabin, with just room for you both. On the wall you will see a big red button, which you must press, and then the rocket will take you all the way to the moon." He pressed the two children to him. "Goodbye, my Loves," he said.

"Goodbye, Daddy," said Peter and Peggy. "Goodbye, Nanny!"

"Wait a minute," said Nanny. "Why, in the excitement you almost forgot your sandwiches."

They all laughed. Then with an extra special hug for Nanny, Peggy and Peter climbed the steel ladder into the rocket.

Professor Love clanged the metal door shut, and he hurried Nanny away from the danger of the blast-off.

Ten seconds later, the silver rocket lifted on a cushion of flame, hovered momentarily, and then shot upwards, into the sky, quicker than the eye could follow.

"Are you sure there is no air on the moon," said Nanny.

"Shut up, and kiss me quick," said the Professor. "There's no air at all. Now, one more kiss and let us hurry to Messrs. Bryce, Bryce, Bridges and Bryce, the lawyers."

"Are you sure the late Mrs. Love's trust fund for the children will now revert to us?"

"Stop fretting, Zelda, my dove. I'm as sure of it as I am sure of the fact that Peggy and Peter will never return from the moon, nor the late Mrs. Love from Mars. No, not ever."

An hour later, the Professor's Rolls Royce drew up outside the offices of Bryce, Bryce, Bridges and Bryce, the lawyers.

"Now you pop along and get your manicure and cold perm, and don't forget to meet me at the Savoy for cucumber sandwiches and tea. We'll just have time before the flight leaves to Rio de Janeiro."

"Oh, Professor," cried Zelda the ex-nanny, "what a wonderful life we'll have together, just you and I . . . at first! I mean, well, you do want children, don't you?"

"Of course," said the Professor.

Here is a moving and a beautiful story about a man who "walked beside the evening sea/and dreamed a dream that could not be," by England's J. G. Ballard. Also England's is the curious seventeenth-century prophet, Lodowicke Muggleton, who thought that Heaven was only six miles away, and wrote of "yesterday becoming his own tomorrow."

NOW WAKES THE SEA

by J. G. Ballard

AGAIN AT NIGHT MASON HEARD the sounds of the approaching sea, the muffled thunder of the long breakers rolling up the nearby streets. Roused from his sleep, he ran out into the moonlight, where the white-framed houses stood like sepulchres among the washed concrete courts. Two hundred yards away the waves plunged and boiled, sluicing in and out across the pavement. A million phosphorescent bubbles seethed through the picket fences, and the broken spray filled the air with the wine-sharp tang of brine.

Off-shore the deeper swells of the open sea surged across the roofs of the submerged houses, the white-caps cleft by the spurs of isolated chimneys. Leaping back as the cold foam stung his bare feet, Mason glanced uneasily at the house where his wife lay sleeping, estimating the sea's rate of progress. Each night it moved a few yards nearer, as the hissing black guillotine sliced across the empty lawns, riveting the fences with staccato bolts of spray.

For half an hour Mason watched the waves vault among the roof-tops. The luminous surf cast a pale nimbus on the clouds racing overhead on the dark wind, and covered his hands with a vivid waxy sheen.

At last the waves began to recede, and the deep roaring bowl of illuminated water withdrew down the emptying streets, dis-

gorging the lines of houses glistening in the moonlight. Mason ran forwards across the expiring bubbles, but the sea shrank away from him into the fading light, disappearing around the corners of the houses, sliding below the garage doors. He sprinted to the end of the road as a last fleeting glow was carried away across the sky beyond the spire of the church. Exhausted, Mason returned to his bed, the sound of the dying waves filling his head as he slept.

"I saw the sea again last night," he told his wife at breakfast.

Quietly, Miriam said: "Richard, the nearest sea is a thousand miles away." She watched her husband silently for a moment, her long pale fingers straying to the coil of black hair lying against her neck. "Go out into the drive and look. There's no sea."

"Darling, I *saw* it."

"Richard—!"

Mason stood up, with slow deliberation raised his palms. "Miriam, I felt the spray on my hands. The waves were breaking around my feet. I wasn't dreaming."

"You must have been." Miriam leaned against the door, as if trying to exclude the strange night-world of her husband which haunted the shadows in the bedroom. With her long raven hair framing her oval face, and the scarlet dressing gown open to reveal her slender neck and white breast, she reminded Mason of a Pre-Raphaelite heroine in an Arthurian pose. "Richard, you must see Dr. Clifton. It's beginning to frighten me."

Mason smiled, his eyes searching the distant roof-tops above the trees outside the window. "I shouldn't worry. What's happening is really very simple. At night I hear the sounds of a sea breaking down the streets, I go out and watch the waves in the moonlight, and then come back to bed." He paused, a faint flush of fatigue on his lean face. Tall and slimly built, Mason was still convalescing from the illness which had kept him at home for the previous six months. "It's curious, though," he resumed, "the water is remarkably luminous, and I should guess that its salinity is well above normal—"

"But Richard. . . ." Miriam looked around helplessly, her husband's calmness exhausting her. "The sea isn't *there*, it's only in your mind. No-one else can see it."

Mason nodded, hands lost in his pockets. "Perhaps no-one else has heard it yet."

Leaving the breakfast room, he went into his study. The couch on which he had slept during his illness still stood against the corner, his bookcase beside it. Mason sat down, taking a large fossil mollusc from a shelf. During the winter, when he had been confined to bed, the smooth trumpet-shaped conch, with its endless associations of ancient seas and drowned strands, had provided him with unlimited pleasure, a bottomless cornucopia of image and reverie. Cradling it reassuringly in his hands, as exquisite and ambiguous as a fragment of Greek sculpture found in a dry river-bed, he reflected that it seemed like a capsule of time, the condensation of another universe, and he could almost believe that the midnight sea which haunted his sleep had been released from the shell when he inadvertently scratched one of its helixes.

Miriam followed him into the room and briskly drew the curtains, as if aware that Mason was returning to the twilight world of his sick-bed and reading lamp. She took his shoulders in her hands.

"Richard, listen. Tonight, when you hear the waves, wake me and we'll go out together."

Gently, Mason disengaged himself. "Whether you see it or not is irrelevant, Miriam. The fact is that I see it."

Later, walking down the street, Mason reached the point where he had stood the previous night, watching the waves break and roll towards him. The sounds of placid domestic activity came from the houses he had seen submerged. The grass on the lawns was bleached by the July heat, and several sprays rotated in the bright sunlight, casting rainbows in the vivid air. Undisturbed since the rain-storms in the early spring, the long summer's dust lay between the palisades of the wooden fences and silted against the water hydrants.

The street, one of a dozen suburban boulevards on the perimeter of the town, ran north-west for some three hundred yards and then joined the open square of the neighbourhood shopping centre. Mason shielded his eyes and looked out at the clock tower of the library and the church spire, identifying the various protuberances which had projected from the steep swells of the open sea. All were in exactly the positions he remembered.

The road shelved slightly as it approached the shopping centre, and by a curious coincidence marked the margins of the beach which would have existed if the area had in fact been flooded. A mile or so from the town, this shallow ridge, which formed part of the rim of a large natural basin enclosing the alluvial plain below, culminated in a small chalk outcropping. Although it was partly hidden by the intervening houses, Mason now recognised it clearly as the promontory which had reared like a citadel above the sea. The deep swells had rolled against its flanks, sending up immense plumes of spray that fell back with almost hypnotic slowness upon the receding water. At night the promontory seemed larger and more gaunt, a huge uneroded bastion against the sea. One evening, Mason promised himself, he would go out to the promontory and let the waves wake him as he slept on the peak.

A car moved past slowly, the driver watching Mason curiously as he stood motionlessly in the middle of the pavement, head raised to the air. Not wishing to appear any more eccentric than he was already considered—the solitary, abstracted husband of the beautiful but childless Mrs. Mason (in addition he was honorary secretary of the local astronomical society, a notorious gathering of cranks and stargazers)—Mason turned into the avenue which ran along the ridge. As he approached the distant outcropping he glanced over the hedges for any signs of water-logged gardens or stranded cars. The houses here had been almost completely inundated by the flood water.

The first visions of the sea had come to Mason only three weeks earlier, but he was already convinced of its absolute validity. He recognised that after its nightly withdrawal the water

failed to leave any mark on the hundreds of houses it submerged, and he felt no alarm for the people who should have been drowned and who were presumably, as he watched the luminous waves break across the roof-tops, sleeping undisturbed in the sea's immense liquid locker. Despite this paradox, it was his complete conviction of the sea's reality that had made him admit to Miriam that he had woken one night to the sound of waves outside the window and gone out to find the sea rolling across the neighbourhood streets and houses. At first she had merely smiled at him, accepting this illustration of his strange private world. Then, three nights later, she had woken to the sounds of him latching the door on his return, bewildered by his pumping chest and tense perspiring face, his eyes lit by an uncanny light.

From then on she spent all day looking over her shoulder through the window for any signs of the sea. What worried her as much as the vision itself was Mason's complete calm in the face of this terrifying unconscious apocalypse.

Tired by his walk, Mason sat down on a low ornamental wall, screened from the surrounding houses by the rhododendron bushes. For a few minutes he played with the dust at his feet, stirring the hard white grains with a branch. Although formless and passive, the dust shared something of the same evocative qualities of the fossil mollusc, radiating a curious compacted light.

In front of him, the road curved and dipped, the incline carrying it away onto the fields below. The chalk shoulder, covered by a mantle of green turf, rose into the clear sky. A metal shack had been erected on the slope, and a small group of figures moved about the entrance of a mine shaft, adjusting a wooden hoist. Wishing that he had brought his wife's car, Mason watched the diminutive figures disappear one by one into the shaft.

The image of this elusive pantomime remained with him all day in the library, overlaying his memories of the dark waves rolling across the midnight streets.

What sustained Mason in the face of this encroaching nightmare was his conviction that others would soon also become aware of the sea.

When he went to bed that night he found Miriam sitting fully dressed in the armchair by the window, her face composed into an expression of calm determination.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"The sea. Don't worry, simply ignore me and go to sleep. I don't mind sitting here with the light out."

"Miriam. . . ." Wearily, Mason took one of her slender hands and tried to draw her from the chair. "Darling, what on earth will this achieve?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Mason sat down on the foot of the bed. For some reason, not wholly concerned with the wish to protect her, he wanted to keep his wife from the sea. "Miriam, don't you understand? I might not actually *see* it, in the literal sense. It might be . . ." he extemporised, ". . . an hallucination, or a dream."

Miriam shook her head, hands clasped on the arms of the chair. "I don't think it is. Anyway, I want to find out."

Mason lay back slowly on the bed. "I wonder whether you're approaching this the right way—"

Miriam sat forward. "Richard, you're taking it all so calmly, you accept this vision as if it were a strange headache. That's what frightens me. If you were really terrified by this sea I wouldn't worry, but . . ."

Half an hour later, after he had given up his attempt to dissuade Miriam from her vigil, he fell asleep in the darkened room, Miriam's slim face watching him from the shadows.

Waves murmured, outside the windows the distant swish of racing foam drew him from sleep, the deep muffled thunder of rollers and the sounds of deep water drummed at his ears. Mason climbed out of bed, and dressed quickly as the hiss of receding water sounded up the street. In the corner, under the glimmering

light reflected from the distant foam, Miriam lay asleep in the armchair, a bar of moonlight across her throat.

His bare feet soundless on the pavement, Mason ran towards the waves, stumbled across the wet glistening tideline as one of the breakers struck with a deep guttural roar. On his knees, Mason felt the cold brilliant water, seething with animalcula, spurt across his chest and shoulders, slacken and then withdraw, sucked like an immense gleaming floor into the mouth of the next breaker. His wet suit clinging to him like a drowned animal, Mason stared out across the dark sea. In the fleeting moonlight the white houses advancing into the water loomed like the palazzos of a spectral Venice, mausoleums on the causeways of some huge island necropolis. Only the church spire was still visible. The water rode in to its high tide, a further twenty yards down the street, the spray carried almost to the Masons' house.

Mason waited for an interval between two waves and then waded through the shallows to the avenue which wound towards the distant headland. By now the water had crossed the roadway, swilling over the dark lawns and slapping at the doorsteps.

Half a mile from the headland he heard the great surge and sigh of the deeper water. Out of breath, he leaned against a fence as the cold foam cut across his legs, pulling him with its undertow. Suddenly, illuminated by the racing clouds, he saw the tall pale figure of a woman standing above the sea on a stone parapet at the cliff's edge, her black robe lifting behind her in the wind, her long hair white in the moonlight. Far below her feet, the luminous waves leapt and vaulted like acrobats.

Mason ran along the pavement, momentarily losing sight of her as the road curved and the houses intervened. The water slackened, and he caught a last glimpse of the woman's ice-white profile through the opalescent spray. Turning, the tide began to ebb and fade, and with a last bubbling spasm the great sea shrank away between the emerging houses, draining the night of its light and motion.

As the last bubbles flickered and dissolved on the damp pavement, Mason searched the headland, but the strange numinous figure had gone. His damp clothes dried themselves as he walked

back through the empty streets, a last tang of brine carried away off the hedges on the midnight air.

The next morning he told Miriam: "It *was* a dream, after all. I think the sea has gone now. Anyway, I saw nothing last night."

"Thank heavens, Richard. Are you sure?"

"I'm fairly certain." Mason smiled encouragingly. "Thanks for keeping watch over me."

"I'll sit up tonight as well." She held up her hand to silence his protests. "I insist. I feel all right after last night, and I want to drive this thing away, once and for all." She frowned intently over the coffee cups. "It's strange, but once or twice I think I heard the sea too. It sounded very old and blind, like something waking again after millions of years."

On his way to the library, Mason made a detour towards the chalk outcropping, and parked the car where he had seen the moonlit figure of the white-haired woman watching the sea. The sunlight fell on the pale turf, illuminating the mouth of the mine-shaft, around which the same desultory activity was taking place.

For the next fifteen minutes Mason drove slowly in and out of the tree-lined avenues, peering over the hedges at the kitchen windows. Almost certainly she would live in one of the nearby houses, probably still be wearing her black robe beneath a house-coat.

Later, at the library, he recognised a car he had seen on the headland. The driver, an elderly tweed-suited man of academic manner, was examining the display cases of local geological finds.

"Who was that?" he asked Fellowes, the keeper of antiquities, as the car drove off. "I've seen him on the chalk cliffs."

"Professor Goodhart, one of the party of paleontologists. Apparently they've uncovered an interesting bone-bed." Fellowes gestured at the collection of femurs and jaw-bone fragments. "With luck we may get a few pieces from them."

Mason stared at the bones, aware of a sudden closing parallax within his mind.

Each night, as the sea emerged from the dark streets and the wave rolled further towards the Masons' home, he would wake beside his sleeping wife and go out into the surging air and wade through the deep water towards the headland. There he would see the white-haired woman on the cliff's edge, her high face raised above the roaring spray, a pale glimmering nimbus which rode like the moon among the fleeing clouds. But always he failed to reach her before the tide turned, and would kneel exhausted on the wet pavements as the last bubbles foamed and the drowned streets rose from the sinking waves.

Once a police patrol car found him in its headlights slumped against a gate-post in an open drive, and on another night he forgot to close the front door after himself when he returned. All through breakfast Miriam watched him with her old wariness, noticing the tell-tale shadows which encircled his eyes like manacles.

"Richard, I think you should stop going to the library. You look worn out. It isn't that sea dream again?"

Mason shook his head, forcing a tired smile from his face. "No, that's finished with. Perhaps I've been over-working."

Miriam held his hands. "Did you fall over yesterday?" She examined Mason's palms. "Darling, they're still *raw!* You must have grazed them only a few minutes ago. Can't you remember even?"

Abstracted, Mason invented some tale to satisfy her, then carried his coffee into the study and stared at the morning haze which lay across the roof-tops, a soft lake of opacity that followed the same contours as the midnight sea. The mist dissolved in the sunlight, and for a moment the diminishing reality of the normal world reasserted itself, filling him with a poignant nostalgia.

Without thinking, he reached out to the fossil conch on the bookshelf, but involuntarily his hand withdrew before touching it.

Miriam stood beside him. "Hateful thing," she commented. "Tell me, Richard, what do you think caused your dream?"

Mason shrugged. "Perhaps it was a sort of memory . . ." His wife's cool, elegant face was watching him intently. He wondered whether to tell Miriam of the waves which he still heard in his sleep, and of the white-haired woman on the cliff's edge who seemed to beckon to him. But like all women Miriam believed that there was room for only one enigma in her husband's life. By an inversion of logic he felt that his dependence on his wife's private income, and the loss of self-respect, gave him the right to withhold something of himself from her.

"Richard, what's the matter?"

In his mind the spray opened like an immense diaphanous fan and the enchantress of the waves turned towards him with her burning eyes.

Waist-high, the sea pounded across the lawns in a seething whirlpool. Mason pulled off his jacket and flung it away into the water, and then waded out into the street. Higher than ever before, the waves had at last reached his house, breaking over the doorstep, but Mason had forgotten his wife. His whole attention was fixed upon the headland, which was lashed by a continuous storm of spray, almost obscuring the figure standing on its crest.

As Mason pressed on, sometimes sinking to his chin, shoals of luminous algae swarmed in the water around him, their brilliant phosphorescence stinging his legs, and his eyes smarted in the harsh saline air. He reached the lower slopes of the headland almost exhausted, and fell to his knees.

High above, he could hear the spray singing as it cut through the coigns of the cliff's edge, the deep base of the breakers overlayed by the high treble of the keening air, entwining itself through the long white strands of the woman's hair like the chords of a harp.

Carried by the music, Mason climbed the flank of the headland, a thousand reflections of the moon dancing in the breaking sea. As he reached the crest, the fluttering of the long black robe

hid the woman's face, but he could see her tall erect carriage and slender hips. Suddenly, without any apparent motion of her limbs, she moved away along the parapet.

"Wait!"

His shout was lost on the surging air. Mason ran forwards, and the figure turned and stared back at him. Her white hair swirled around her face like a spume of silver steam and then parted to reveal an angular skull-like face with empty eyes and notched mouth. A hand, like a bundle of white sticks, clawed towards him, and the figure loomed through the whirling darkness like a gigantic bird.

Unaware whether the scream came from his own mouth or from this spectre, Mason stumbled back, before he could catch himself tripped over a wooden railing and in a cackle of chains and pulleys fell backwards into the shaft, the sounds of the sea booming above him in its hurtling darkness.

After listening intently to the policeman's description, Professor Goodhart shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, sergeant. We've been working on the bed all week, no-one's fallen down the shaft." One of the flimsy wooden rails was swinging loosely in the crisp air. "But thank you for warning me. I suppose we must build a heavier railing, if this fellow is wandering around in his sleep."

"I don't think he'll bother to come up here," the sergeant said. "It's quite a climb." As an afterthought he added: "Down at the library where he works they said you'd found a couple of skeletons in the shaft yesterday. I know it's only two days since he disappeared, but one of them couldn't possibly be his?" The sergeant shrugged. "If there was some natural acid, say . . ."

"Ingenious, sergeant, but I'm sorry to disappoint you." Professor Goodhart drove his heel into the chalky turf. "Pure calcium carbonate, about a mile thick, laid down during the Triassic Period 200 million years ago when there was a large inland sea here. The skeletons we found yesterday, a man's and a woman's, belong to two Cro-Magnon fisher people who lived on the shore just before it dried up. I wish I could oblige you with

a *corpus delicti,* though it's quite a problem to understand how these Cro-Magnon relics found their way into the bone-bed. This shaft wasn't sunk until about thirty years ago." He smiled at the policeman. "Still, that's my problem, not yours."

Returning to the police car, the sergeant shook his head. "Nothing." As they drove off he looked out at the endless stretch of placid suburban homes.

"Apparently there was an ancient sea here once. A million years ago. Who would believe it?" He picked a crumpled flannel jacket off the back seat. "That reminds me," he said, sniffing at the fabric. "I know what this coat of Mason's smells of—brine."

Among the pleasures and treasures of the past calendar year we include our discovery of Jack Vance. True, others discovered him before us, discovered him *to* us. We would not have it otherwise—bad enough it unaccountably took this long for us, good that others have been enjoying him whilst we remained in ignorance. The preference of a Mrs. Grania Davidson for California as the scene of her slightly delayed honeymoon enabled us to meet the pleasant Mr. Vance, pleasant wife and pleasant boy-child; and to obtain this story from him. Vances span the state in space and time: one great-great-grandfather arriving 11 years before the Gold Rush; Jack born in San Francisco, raised in the San Joaquin-Sacramento Delta, high-schooled in Los Angeles, attended U. of C.—picked fruit, hopped bells, canned, mined, constructed, rigged, fared at sea, played jazz band cornet—lives in an old house in the Oakland Hills, defies storms and tempests in building the famous houseboat with Frank Herbert and Poul Anderson . . . None of which explains the talent behind his writing. At its simplest, you have in this story the man who dwelt in Fairyland—minus any trace of saccharinity which that might imply—plus a sophistication and a polish hard to parallel. We would like to know more about *merrihews, sandestins,* and *magners,* creatures benign and malign, which Jack Vance merely mentions in passing. We would like to know more about the Egg of Innocence, which Harold Fair broke open, disturbing among the spiral towers. But it may be just as well that we do not. Jack Vance, he who is not content with magics merely white or black, says he is in favor of ". . . feasting and festivity, sailing, ceramics, books, Scotch, Bourbon, beer, gin and wine" and is against ". . . modern architecture, psychiatry, confusion, Picasso, Muzak, progressives and reactionaries, tobacco, sin and corruption." So be it.

GREEN MAGIC
by Jack Vance

HOWARD FAIR, LOOKING OVER the relics of his great uncle Gerald McIntyre, found a large ledger entitled:

WORKBOOK & JOURNAL
Open at Peril!

Fair read the journal with interest, although his own work went far beyond ideas treated only gingerly by Gerald McIntyre.

"The existence of disciplines concentric to the elementary magics must now be admitted without further controversy," wrote McIntyre. "Guided by a set of analogies from the white and black magics (to be detailed in due course), I have delineated the basic extension of purple magic, as well as its corollary, Dynamic Nomism."

Fair read on, remarking the careful charts, the projections and expansions, the transpolations and transformations by which Gerald McIntyre had conceived his systemology. So swiftly had the technical arts advanced that McIntyre's expositions, highly controversial sixty years before, now seemed pedantic and overly rigorous.

"Whereas benign creatures: angels, white sprites, merrihews, sandestins—are typical of the white cycle; whereas demons, magners, trolls and warlocks are evinced by black magic; so do the purple and green cycles sponsor their own particulars, but these are neither good nor evil, bearing, rather, the same relation to the black and white provinces that these latter do to our own basic realm."

Fair re-read the passage. The "green cycle?" Had Gerald McIntyre wandered into regions overlooked by modern workers?

He reviewed the journal in the light of this suspicion, and discovered additional hints and references. Especially provocative was a bit of scribbled marginalia: "More concerning my latest researches I may not state, having been promised an infinite reward for this forbearance."

The passage was dated a day before Gerald McIntyre's death, which had occurred on March 21, 1898, the first day of spring. McIntyre had enjoyed very little of his "infinite reward," whatever had been its nature . . . Fair returned to a consideration of the journal, which, in a sentence or two, had opened a chink on an entire new panorama. McIntyre provided no further illumination, and Fair set out to make a fuller investigation.

His first steps were routine. He performed two divinations, searched the standard indexes, concordances, handbooks and formularies, evoked a demon whom he had previously found knowledgeable: all without success. He found no direct reference to cycles beyond the purple; the demon refused even to speculate.

Fair was by no means discouraged; if anything, the intensity of his interest increased. He re-read the journal, with particular care to the justification for purple magic, reasoning that McIntyre, groping for a lore beyond the purple, might well have used the methods which had yielded results before. Applying stains and ultraviolet light to the pages, Fair made legible a number of notes McIntyre had jotted down, then erased.

Fair was immensely stimulated. The notes assured him that he was on the right track, and further indicated a number of blind alleys which Fair profited by avoiding. He applied himself so successfully that before the week was out he had evoked a sprite of the green cycle.

It appeared in the semblance of a man with green glass eyes and a thatch of young eucalyptus leaves in the place of hair. It greeted Fair with cool courtesy, would not seat itself, and ignored Fair's proffer of coffee.

After wandering around the apartment inspecting Fair's books and curios with an air of negligent amusement, it agreed to respond to Fair's questions.

Fair asked permission to use his tape-recorder, which the sprite

allowed, and Fair set the apparatus in motion. (When subsequently he replayed the interview, no sound could be heard.)

"What realms of magic lie beyond the green?" asked Fair.

"I can't give you an exact answer," replied the sprite, "because I don't know. There are at least two more, corresponding to the colors we call rawn and pallow, and very likely others."

Fair arranged the microphone where it would more directly intercept the voice of the sprite.

"What," he asked, "is the green cycle like? What is its physical semblance?"

The sprite paused to consider. Glistening mother-of-pearl films wandered across its face, reflecting the tinge of its thoughts. "I'm rather severely restricted by your use of the word 'physical.' And 'semblance' involves a subjective interpretation, which changes with the rise and fall of the seconds."

"By all means," Fair said hastily, "describe it in your own words."

"Well—we have four different regions, two of which floresce from the basic skeleton of the universe, and so subsede the others. The first of these is compressed and isthiated, but is notable for its wide pools of mottle which we use sometimes for deranging stations. We've transplanted club-mosses from Earth's Devonian and a few ice-fires from Perdition. They climb among the rods which we call devil-hair—" he went on for several minutes but the meaning almost entirely escaped Fair. And it seemed as if the question by which he had hoped to break the ice might run away with the entire interview. He introduced another idea.

"'Can we freely manipulate the physical extensions of Earth?'" The sprite seemed amused. "You refer, so I assume, to the various aspects of space, time, mass, energy, life, thought and recollection."

"Exactly."

The sprite raised its green corn-silk eyebrows. "I might as sensibly ask can you break an egg by striking it with a club? The response is on a similar level of seriousness."

Fair had expected a certain amount of condescension and im-

patience, and was not abashed. "How may I learn these techniques?"

"In the usual manner: through diligent study."

"Ah, indeed—but where could I study? Who would teach me?"

The sprite made an easy gesture, and whorls of green smoke trailed from his fingers to spin through the air. "I could arrange the matter, but since I bear you no particular animosity, I'll do nothing of the sort. And now, I must be gone."

"Where do you go?" Fair asked in wonder and longing. "May I go with you?"

The sprite, swirling a drape of bright green dust over its shoulders, shook his head. "You would be less than comfortable."

"Other men have explored the worlds of magic!"

"True: your uncle Gerald McIntyre, for instance."

"My uncle Gerald learned green magic?"

"To the limit of his capabilities. He found no pleasure in his learning. You would do well to profit by his experience and modify your ambitions." The sprite turned and walked away.

Fair watched it depart. The sprite receded in space and dimension, but never reached the wall of Fair's room. At a distance which might have been fifty yards, the sprite glanced back, as if to make sure that Fair was not following, then stepped off at another angle and disappeared.

Fair's first impulse was to take heed and limit his explorations. He was an adept in white magic, and had mastered the black art—occasionally he evoked a demon to liven a social gathering which otherwise threatened to become dull—but he had by no means illuminated every mystery of purple magic, which is the realm of Incarnate Symbols.

Howard Fair might have turned away from the green cycle except for three factors.

First was his physical appearance. He stood rather under medium height, with a swarthy face, sparse black hair, a gnarled nose, a small heavy mouth. He felt no great sensitivity about his appearance, but realized that it might be improved. In his mind's eye he pictured the personified ideal of himself: he was taller by six inches, his nose thin and keen, his skin cleared of its

muddy undertone. A striking figure, but still recognizable as Howard Fair. He wanted the love of women, but he wanted it without the interposition of his craft. Many times he had brought beautiful girls to his bed, lips wet and eyes shining; but purple magic had seduced them rather than Howard Fair, and he took limited satisfaction in such conquests.

Here was the first factor which drew Howard Fair back to the green lore; the second was his yearning for extended, perhaps eternal, life; the third was simple thirst for knowledge.

The fact of Gerald McIntyre's death, or dissolution, or disappearance—whatever had happened to him—was naturally a matter of concern. If he had won to a goal so precious, why had he died so quickly? Was the "infinite reward" so miraculous, so exquisite, that the mind failed under its possession? (If such were the case, the reward was hardly a reward.)

Fair could not restrain himself, and by degrees returned to a study of green magic. Rather than again invoke the sprite whose air of indulgent contempt he had found exasperating, he decided to seek knowledge by an indirect method, employing the most advanced concepts of technical and cabalistic science.

He obtained a portable television transmitter which he loaded into his panel truck along with a receiver. On a Monday night in early May, he drove to an abandoned graveyard far out in the wooded hills, and there, by the light of a waning moon, he buried the television camera in graveyard clay until only the lens protruded from the soil.

With a sharp alder twig he scratched on the ground a monstrous outline. The television lens served for one eye, a beer bottle pushed neck-first into the soil the other.

During the middle hours, while the moon died behind wisps of pale cloud, he carved a word on the dark forehead; then recited the activating incantation.

The ground rumbled and moaned, the golem heaved up to blot out the stars.

The glass eyes stared down at Fair, secure in his pentagon.

"Speak!" called out Fair. "*Enteresthes, Akmai Adonai Bidemgir! Elohim, pa rahulli! Enteresthes, HVOI!* Speak!"

"Return me to earth, return my clay to the quiet clay from whence you roused me."

"First you must serve."

The golem stumbled forward to crush Fair, but was halted by the pang of protective magic.

"Serve you I will, if serve you I must."

Fair stepped boldly forth from the pentagon, strung forty yards of green ribbon down the road in the shape of a narrow V. "Go forth into the realm of green magic," he told the monster. "The ribbons reach forty miles, walk to the end, turn about, return, and then fall back, return to the earth from which you rose."

The golem turned, shuffled into the V of green ribbon, shaking off clods of mold, jarring the ground with its ponderous tread.

Fair watched the squat shape dwindle, recede, yet never reach the angle of the magic V. He returned to his panel truck, tuned the television receiver to the golem's eye, and surveyed the fantastic vistas of the green realm.

Two elementals of the green realm met on a spun-silver landscape. They were Jaadian and Misthemar, and they fell to discussing the earthen monster which had stalked forty miles through the region known as Cil; which then, turning in its tracks, had retraced its steps, gradually increasing its pace until at the end it moved in a shambling rush, leaving a trail of clods on the fragile moth-wing mosaics.

"Events, events, events," Misthemar fretted, "they crowd the chute of time till the bounds bulge. Or then again, the course is as lean and spare as a stretched tendon . . . But in regard to this incursion . . ." He paused for a period of reflection, and silver clouds moved over his head and under his feet.

Jaadian remarked, "You are aware that I conversed with Howard Fair; he is so obsessed to escape the squalor of his world that he acts with recklessness."

"The man Gerald McIntyre was his uncle," mused Misthemar. "McIntyre besought, we yielded; as perhaps now we must yield to Howard Fair."

Jaadian uneasily opened his hand, shook off a spray of emerald fire. "Events press, both in and out. I find myself unable to act in this regard."

"I likewise do not care to be the agent of tragedy."

A Meaning came fluttering up from below: "A disturbance among the spiral towers! A caterpillar of glass and metal has come clanking; it has thrust electric eyes into the Portinone and broke open the Egg of Innocence. Howard Fair is the fault."

Jaadian and Misthemar consulted each other with wry disinclination. "Very well, both of us will go; such a duty needs two souls in support."

They impinged upon Earth and found Howard Fair in a wall booth at a cocktail bar. He looked up at the two strangers and one of them asked, "May we join you?"

Fair examined the two men. Both wore conservative suits and carried cashmere topcoats over their arms. Fair noticed that the left thumb-nail of each man glistened green.

Fair rose politely to his feet. "Will you sit down?"

The green sprites hung up their overcoats and slid into the booth. Fair looked from one to the other. He addressed Jaadian. "Aren't you he whom I interviewed several weeks ago?"

Jaadian assented. "You have not accepted my advice."

Fair shrugged. "You asked me to remain ignorant, to accept my stupidity and ineptitude."

"And why should you not?" asked Jaadian gently. "You are a primitive in a primitive realm; nevertheless not one man in a thousand can match your achievements."

Fair agreed, smiling faintly. "But knowledge creates a craving for further knowledge. Where is the harm in knowledge?"

Misthemar, the more mercurial of the sprites, spoke angrily. "Where is the harm? Consider your earthen monster! It befouled forty miles of delicacy, the record of ten million years. Consider your caterpillar! It trampled our pillars of carved milk, our dreaming towers, damaged the nerve-skeins which extrude and waft us our Meanings."

"I'm dreadfully sorry," said Fair. "I meant no destruction."

The sprites nodded. "But your apology conveys no guarantee of restraint."

Fair toyed with his glass. A waiter approached the table, addressed the two sprites. "Something for you two gentlemen?"

Jaadian ordered a glass of charged water, as did Misthemar. Fair called for another highball.

"What do you hope to gain from this activity?" inquired Misthemar. "Destructive forays teach you nothing!"

Fair agreed. "I have learned little. But I have seen miraculous sights. I am more than ever anxious to learn."

The green sprites glumly watched the bubbles rising in their glasses. Jaadian at last drew a deep sigh. "Perhaps we can obviate toil on your part and disturbance on ours. Explicitly, what gains or advantages do you hope to derive from green magic?"

Fair, smiling, leaned back into the red imitation-leather cushions. "I want many things. Extended life—mobility in time—comprehensive memory—augmented perception, with vision across the whole spectrum. I want physical charm and magnetism, the semblance of youth, muscular endurance . . . Then there are qualities more or less speculative, such as—"

Jaadian interrupted. "These qualities and characteristics we will confer upon you. In return you will undertake never again to disturb the green realm. You will evade centuries of toil; we will be spared the nuisance of your presence, and the inevitable tragedy."

"Tragedy?" inquired Fair in wonder. "Why tragedy?"

Jaadian spoke in a deep reverberating voice. "You are a man of Earth. Your goals are not our goals. Green magic makes you aware of our goals."

Fair thoughtfully sipped his highball. "I can't see that this is a disadvantage. I am willing to submit to the discipline of instruction. Surely a knowledge of green magic will not change me into a different entity?"

"No. And this is the basic tragedy!"

Misthemar spoke in exasperation. "We are forbidden to harm lesser creatures, and so you are fortunate; for to dissolve you into air would end all the annoyance."

Fair laughed. "I apologize again for making such a nuisance of myself. But surely you understand how important this is to me?"

Jaadian asked hopefully, "Then you agree to our offer?"

Fair shook his head. "How could I live, forever young, capable of extended learning, but limited to knowledge which I already see bounds to? I would be bored, restless, miserable."

"That well may be," said Jaadian. "But not so bored, restless and miserable as if you were learned in green magic."

Fair drew himself erect. "I must learn green magic. It is an opportunity which only a person both torpid and stupid could refuse."

Jaadian sighed. "In your place I would make the same response." The sprites rose to their feet. "Come then, we will teach you."

"Don't say we didn't warn you," said Misthemar.

Time passed. Sunset waned and twilight darkened. A man walked up the stairs, entered Howard Fair's apartment. He was tall, unobtrusively muscular. His face was sensitive, keen, humorous; his left thumb-nail glistened green.

Time is a function of vital processes. The people of Earth had perceived the motion of their clocks. On this understanding, two hours had elapsed since Howard Fair had followed the green sprites from the bar.

Howard Fair had perceived other criteria. For him the interval had been seven hundred years, during which he had lived in the green realm, learning to the utmost capacity of his brain.

He had occupied two years training his senses to the new conditions. Gradually he learned to walk in the six basic three-dimensional directions, and accustomed himself to the fourth-dimensional short-cuts. By easy stages the blinds over his eyes were removed, so that the dazzling over-human intricacy of the landscape never completely confounded him.

Another year was spent training him to the use of a code-language—an intermediate step between the vocalizations of Earth and the meaning-patterns of the green realm, where a hundred

symbol-flakes (each a flitting spot of delicate iridescence) might be displayed in a single swirl of import. During this time Howard Fair's eyes and brain were altered, to allow him the use of the many new colors, without which the meaning-flakes could not be recognized.

These were preliminary steps. For forty years he studied the flakes, of which there were almost a million. Another forty years was given to elementary permutations and shifts, and another forty to parallels, attenuation, diminishments and extensions; and during this time he was introduced to flake patterns, and certain of the more obvious displays.

Now he was able to study without recourse to the code-language, and his progress became more marked. Another twenty years found him able to recognize more complicated Meanings, and he was introduced to a more varied program. He floated over the field of moth-wing mosaics, which still showed the footprints of the golem. He sweated in embarrassment, the extent of his wicked willfulness now clear to him.

So passed the years. Howard Fair learned as much green magic as his brain could encompass.

He explored much of the green realm, finding so much beauty that he feared his brain might burst. He tasted, he heard, he felt, he sensed, and each one of his senses was a hundred times more discriminating than before. Nourishment came in a thousand different forms: from pink eggs which burst into a hot sweet gas, suffusing his entire body; from passing through a rain of stinging metal crystals; from simple contemplation of the proper symbol.

Homesickness for Earth waxed and waned. Sometimes it was insupportable and he was ready to forsake all he had learned and abandon his hopes for the future. At other times the magnificence of the green realm permeated him, and the thought of departure seemed like the threat of death itself.

By stages so gradual he never realized them he learned green magic.

But the new faculty gave him no pride: between his crude ineptitudes and the poetic elegance of the sprites remained a

tremendous gap—and he felt his innate inferiority much more keenly than he ever had in his old state. Worse, his most earnest efforts failed to improve his technique, and sometimes, observing the singing joy of an improvised manifestation by one of the sprites, and contrasting it to his own labored constructions, he felt futility and shame.

The longer he remained in the green realm, the stronger grew the sense of his own maladroitness, and he began to long for the easy environment of Earth, where each of his acts would not shout aloud of vulgarity and crassness. At times he would watch the sprites (in the gossamer forms natural to them) at play among the pearl-petals, or twining like quick flashes of music through the forest of pink spirals. The contrast between their verve and his brutish fumbling could not be borne and he would turn away. His self-respect dwindled with each passing hour, and instead of pride in his learning, he felt a sullen ache for what he was not and could never become. The first few hundred years he worked with the enthusiasm of ignorance, for the next few he was buoyed by hope. During the last part of his time, only dogged obstinacy kept him plodding through what now he knew for infantile exercises.

In one terrible bitter-sweet spasm, he gave up. He found Jaadian weaving tinkling fragments of various magics into a warp of shining long splines. With grave courtesy, Jaadian gave Fair his attention, and Fair laboriously set forth his meaning.

Jaadian returned a message. "I recognize your discomfort, and extend my sympathy. It is best that you now return to your native home."

He put aside his weaving and conveyed Fair down through the requisite vortices. Along the way they passed Misthemar. No flicker of meaning was expressed or exchanged, but Howard Fair thought to feel a tinge of faintly malicious amusement.

Howard Fair sat in his apartment. His perceptions, augmented and sharpened by his sojourn in the green realm, took note of the surroundings. Only two hours before, by the clocks of Earth, he had found them both restful and stimulating; now they were

neither. His books: superstition, spuriousness, earnest nonsense. His private journals and workbooks: a pathetic scrawl of infantilisms. Gravity tugged at his feet, held him rigid. The shoddy construction of the house, which heretofore he never had noticed, oppressed him. Everywhere he looked he saw slipshod disorder, primitive filth. The thought of the food he must now eat revolted him.

He went out on his little balcony which overlooked the street. The air was impregnated with organic smells. Across the street he could look into windows where his fellow humans lived in stupid squalor.

Fair smiled sadly. He had tried to prepare himself for these reactions, but now was surprised by their intensity. He returned into his apartment. He must accustom himself to the old environment. And after all there were compensations. The most desirable commodities of the world were now his to enjoy.

Howard Fair plunged into the enjoyment of these pleasures. He forced himself to drink quantities of expensive wines, brandies, liqueurs, even though they offended his palate. Hunger overcame his nausea, he forced himself to the consumption of what he thought of as fried animal tissue, the hypertrophied sexual organs of plants. He experimented with erotic sensations, but found that beautiful women no longer seemed different from the plain ones, and that he could barely steel himself to the untidy contacts. He bought libraries of erudite books, glanced through them with contempt. He tried to amuse himself with his old magics; they seemed ridiculous.

He forced himself to enjoy these pleasures for a month; then he fled the city and established a crystal bubble on a crag in the Andes. To nourish himself, he contrived a thick liquid, which, while by no means as exhilarating as the substances of the green realm, was innocent of organic contamination.

After a certain degree of improvisation and make-shift, he arranged his life to its minimum discomfort. The view was one of austere grandeur; not even the condors came to disturb him. He sat back to ponder the chain of events which had started with his

discovery of Gerald McIntyre's workbook. He frowned. Gerald McIntyre? He jumped to his feet, looked far off over the crags.

He found Gerald McIntyre at a wayside service station in the heart of the South Dakota prairie. McIntyre was sitting in an old wooden chair, tilted back against the peeling yellow paint of the service station, a straw hat shading his eyes from the sun.

He was a magnetically handsome man, blond of hair, brown of skin, with blue eyes whose gaze stung like the touch of icicle. His left thumb-nail glistened green.

Fair greeted him casually; the two men surveyed each other with wry curiosity.

"I see you have adapted yourself," said Howard Fair.

McIntyre shrugged. "As well as possible. I try to maintain a balance between solitude and the pressure of humanity." He looked into the bright blue sky where crows flapped and called. "For many years I lived in isolation. I began to detest the sound of my own breathing."

Along the highway came a glittering automobile, rococo as a hybrid goldfish. With the perceptions now available to them, Fair and McIntyre could see the driver to be red-faced and truculent, his companion a peevish woman in expensive clothes.

"There are other advantages to residence here," said McIntyre. "For instance, I am able to enrich the lives of passers-by with trifles of novel adventure." He made a small gesture; two dozen crows swooped down and flew beside the automobile. They settled on the fenders, strutted back and forth along the hood, fouled the windshield.

The automobile squealed to a halt, the driver jumped out, put the birds to flight. He threw an ineffectual rock, waved his arms in outrage, returned to his car, proceeded.

"A paltry affair," said McIntyre with a sigh. "The truth of the matter is that I am bored." He pursed his mouth and blew forth three bright puffs of smoke: first red, then yellow, then blazing blue. "I have arrived at the estate of foolishness, as you can see."

Fair surveyed his great-uncle with a trace of uneasiness. McIn-

tyre laughed. "No more pranks. I predict, however, that you will presently share my malaise."

"I share it already," said Fair. "Sometimes I wish I could abandon all my magic and return to my former innocence."

"I have toyed with the idea," McIntyre replied thoughtfully. "In fact I have made all the necessary arrangements. It is really a simple matter." He led Fair to a small room behind the station. Although the door was open, the interior showed a thick darkness.

McIntyre, standing well back, surveyed the darkness with a quizzical curl to his lip. "You need only enter. All your magic, all your recollections of the green realm will depart. You will be no wiser than the next man you meet. And with your knowledge will go your boredom, your melancholy, your dissatisfaction."

Fair contemplated the dark doorway. A single step would resolve his discomfort.

He glanced at McIntyre; the two surveyed each other with sardonic amusement. They returned to the front of the building.

"Sometimes I stand by the door and look into the darkness," said McIntyre. "Then I am reminded how dearly I cherish my boredom, and what a precious commodity is so much misery."

Fair made himself ready for departure. "I thank you for this new wisdom, which a hundred more years in the green realm would not have taught me. And now—for a time, at least—I go back to my crag in the Andes."

McIntyre tilted his chair against the wall of the service station. "And I—for a time, at least—will wait for the next passer-by."

"Goodby then, Uncle Gerald."

"Goodby, Howard."

Harry Harrison—husband of elf-small and pretty-witty Joan, father of Todd and Moira—may be described (accurately, if incompletely) as an owl-eyed pear-shaped cyclone with the humor of a super-sophisticated Puck, the bite of a rather misanthropic Gila Monster, and a heart of more than commonly pure gold. Furthermore, he is the only man we ever heard of who was ever struck by lightning on the Isle of Capri. Plucked from his high school graduation by an Army insensitive to *belles lettres,* H.H. was sent to serve as an aerial gunner in Texas "until World War II, with this small aid, was won." He next "spent eight years as a commercial artist, editor, publisher, freelance writer, operator of an art studio (called a *factory* in the trade) dedicated to grinding out comic books, and other loathsome jobs in and around NY magazines until with a shrill scream sold the air conditioner and all furniture and fled with wife and child to Mexico." After this semitropical interlude the Harrisons (plus second child) moved to England, then Italy, then Denmark, where—the Relation continues—they "Settled in nicely now thank you in 300 year old *bondegaard,* children in Danish schools, seeing many countries each summer and loving them all. Miss some things about NY, but mostly a good Pastrami sandwich with a new pickle. *Hilse!*" The author of THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT and DEATHWORLD here departs from his usual prose style and spins a fun—ny, fun—ny yarn about the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars. Any resemblance between it and the works of one C. S. F-r-st-r is impurely coincidental. All *hands fall to!* Prepare to be amused!

CAPTAIN HONARIO HARPPLAYER, R.N.

by Harry Harrison

Captain Honario Harpplayer was pacing the tiny quarterdeck of the *H.M.S. Redundant,* hands clasped behind his back, teeth clamped in impotent fury. Ahead of him the battered French fleet limped towards port, torn sails flapping and spars trailing overside in the water, splintered hulls agape where his

broadsides had gone thundering through their fragile wooden sides.

"Send two hands for'ard, if you please, Mr. Shrub," he said, "and have them throw water on the mainsail. Wet sails will add an eighth of a knot to our speed and we may overtake those cowardly frogs yet."

"B-but, sir," the stolid first mate Shrub stammered, quailing before the thought of disagreeing with his beloved captain. "If we take any more hands off the pumps we'll sink. We're holed in thirteen places below the waterline, and. . . ."

"Damn your eyes, sir! I issued an order, not a request for a debate. Do as you were told."

"Aye aye, sir," Shrub mumbled, humbled, knuckling a tear from one moist spaniel eye.

Water splashed onto the sails and the *Redundant* instantly sank lower in the water. Harpplayer clasped his hands behind his back and hated himself for this display of unwarranted temper towards the faithful Shrub. Yet he had to keep up this pose of strict disciplinarian before the crew, the sweepings and dregs of a thousand waterfronts, just as he had to wear a girdle to keep up his own front and a truss to keep up his hernia. He had to keep up a good front because he was the captain of this ship, the smallest ship in the blockading fleet to bear a post captain, yet still an important part of the fleet that lay like a strangling noose around Europe, locking in the mad tyrant Napoleon whose dreams of conquest could never extend to England whilst these tiny wooden ships stood in the way.

"Give us a prayer, cap'n, to speed us on our way to 'eaven cause we're sinkin'!" a voice called from the crowd of seamen at the pumps.

"I'll have that man's name, Mr. Dogleg," Harpplayer called to the midshipman, a mere child of seven or eight, who commanded the detail. "No rum for him for a week."

"Aye aye, sir," piped Mr. Dogleg, who was just learning to talk.

The ship was sinking, the fact was inescapable. Rats were running on deck, ignoring the cursing, stamping sailors, and

hurling themselves into the sea. Ahead the French fleet had reached the safety of the shore batteries on Cape Pietfieux and the gaping mouths of these guns were turned towards the *Redundant,* ready to spout fire and death when the fragile ship came within range.

"Be ready to drop sail, Mr. Shrub," Harpplayer said, then raised his voice so all the crew could hear. "Those cowardly Frenchies have run away and cheated us of a million pounds in prize money."

A growl went up from the crew who, next to a love for rum, loved the pounds, shilling and pence with which they could buy the rum. The growl was suddenly cut off in muffled howls of pain as the mainmast, weakened by the badly aimed French cannon, fell onto the mass of laboring men.

"No need to drop sail, Mr. Shrub, the slaves of our friend Boney have done it for us," Harpplayer said, forcing himself to make one of his rare jests so loved by the crew. He hated himself for the falseness of his feelings, ingratiating himself into the sympathies of these illiterate men by such means, but it was his duty to keep a taut ship. Besides, if he didn't make any jokes the men would hate him for the slave-driving, cold-blooded, chance-taking master that he was. They still hated him, of course, but they laughed while they did it.

They were laughing now as they cut away the tangle of rigging and dragged out the bodies to lay them in neat rows upon the deck. The ship sank lower in the water.

"Avast that body dragging," he ordered, "and man the pumps, or we'll have our dinners on the bottom of the sea."

The men laughed a ragged laugh again and hurried to their tasks.

They were easy to please, and Harpplayer envied them their simple lives. Even with the heavy work, bad water and an occasional touch of the cat, their existence was better than his tortured life on the lonely pinnacle of command. The decisions were all his to make, and to a man of his morbid and paranoic nature this made life a living hell. His officers, who all hated him, were incompetents. Even Shrub, faithful, long-suffering,

loyal Shrub, had his weakness: namely the fact that he had an I.Q. of about 60 which, combined with his low birth, meant he could never rise above the rank of rear-admiral.

While he considered the varied events of the day Harpplayer began his compulsive pacing on the tiny quarterdeck, and its other occupants huddled against the starboard side where they wouldn't be in his way. Four paces in one direction, turn, then three-and-a-half paces back with his knee bringing up with a shuddering crack against the port carronade. Yet Harpplayer did not feel this, his cardplayer's brain was whirling with thoughts, evaluating and weighing plans, rejecting those that held a modicum of sanity and only considering those that sounded too insane to be practical. No wonder he was called "Sapsucker Harpy" throughout the fleet and held in awe as a man who could always pull victory from the jaws of defeat, and always at an immense cost in lives. But that was war. You gave your commands and good men died, and that was what the press gangs on shore were for. It had been a long and trying day, yet he still would not permit himself to relax. Tension and the agony of apprehension had seized him in the relentless grip of a Cerberus ever since soon after dawn that morning when the lookout had announced the discovery of sails on the horizon. There had been only ten of them, Frenchy ships of the line, and before the morning fog had cleared the vengeful form of the *Redundant* had been upon them, like a wolf among the sheep. Broadside after broadside had roared out from the precisely serviced English guns, ten balls for every one that popped out of the French cannon, manned by cowardly sweepings of the eighth and ninth classes of 1812, grey-bearded patriarchs and diapered infants who only wished they were back in the familial vineyards instead of here, fighting for the Tyrant, facing up to the wrath of the death-dealing cannon of their island enemy, the tiny country left to fight alone against the might of an entire continent. It had been a relentless stern chase, and only the succor of the French port had prevented the destruction of the entire squadron. As it was, four of them lay among the conger eels on the bottom of the ocean and the remaining six would need a com-

plete refitting before they were fit to leave port and once more dare the retributive might of the ships that ringed their shores.

Harpplayer knew what he had to do.

"If you please, Mr. Shrub, have the hose rigged. I feel it is time for a bath."

A ragged cheer broke from the toiling sailors, since they knew what to expect. In the coldest northern waters or in the dead of winter Harpplayer insisted on this routine of the bath. The hoses were quickly attached to the laboring pumps and soon columns of icy water were jetting across the deck.

"In we go!" shouted Harpplayer, and stepped back well out of the way of any chance droplets, at the same time scratching with a long index finger at the skin of his side, unwashed since the previous summer. He smiled at the childish antics of Shrub and the other officers prancing nude in the water, and only signalled for the pumps to cease their work when all of the white skins had turned a nice cerulean.

There was a rumble, not unlike distant thunder yet sharper and louder, from the northern horizon. Harpplayer turned and for a long instant saw a streak of fire painted against the dark clouds, before it died from the sky, leaving only an after-image in his eyes. He shook his head to clear it, and blinked rapidly a few times. For an instant there he could have sworn that the streak of light had come down, instead of going up, but that was manifestly impossible. Too many late nights playing boston with his officers, no wonder his eyesight was going.

"What was that, Captain?" Lieutenant Shrub asked, his words scarcely audible through the chattering of his teeth.

"A signal rocket—or perhaps one of those new fangled Congreve war rockets. There's trouble over there and we're going to find out just what it is. Send the hands to the braces, if you please, fill the main-tops'l and lay her on the starboard tack."

"Can I put my pants on first?"

"No impertinence, sir, or I'll have you in irons!"

Shrub bellowed the orders through the speaking trumpet and all the hands laughed at his shaking naked legs. Yet in a few seconds the well trained crew, who not six days before had been

wenching and drinking ashore on civvy street, never dreaming that the wide-sweeping press gangs would round them up and send them to sea, leapt to the braces, hurled the broken spars and cordage overside, sealed the shot holes, buried the dead, drank their grog and still had enough energy left over for a few of their number to do a gay hornpipe. The ship heeled as she turned, water creamed under her bows and then she was on the new tack, reaching out from the shore, investigating this new occurrence, making her presence felt as the representative of the mightiest blockading fleet the world, at that time, had ever known.

"A ship ahead, sir," the masthead lookout called. "Two points off the starboard bow."

"Beat to quarters," Harpplayer ordered.

Through the heavy roll of the drum and the slap of the sailors' bare horny feet on the deck, the voice of the lookout could be barely heard.

"No sails nor spars, sir. She's about the size of our longboat."

"Belay that last order. And when that lookout comes off duty I want him to recite five hundred times, a boat is something that's picked up and put on a ship."

Pressed on by the freshing land breeze the *Redundant* closed rapidly on the boat until it could be made out clearly from the deck.

"No masts, no spars, no sails—what makes it move?" Lieutenant Shrub asked with gape-mouthed puzzlement.

"There is no point in speculation in advance, Mr. Shrub. This craft may be French or a neutral so I'll take no chances. Let us have the carronades loaded and run out. And I want the Marines in the futtock-shrowds, with their pieces on the half-cock, if you please. I want no one to fire until they receive my command, and I'll have anyone who does boiled in oil and served for breakfast."

"You are the card, sir!"

"Am I? Remember the cox'in who got his orders mixed yesterday?"

"Very gamey, sir, if I say so," Shrub said, picking a bit of gristle from between his teeth. "I'll issue the orders, sir."

The strange craft was like nothing Harpplayer had ever seen before. It advanced without visible motive power and he thought of hidden rowers with underwater oars, but they would have to be midgets to fit in the boat. It was decked over and appeared to be covered with a glass hutment of some kind. All in all a strange device, and certainly not French. The unwilling slaves of the Octopus in Paris would never master the precise techniques to construct a diadem of the sea such as this. No, this was from some alien land, perhaps from beyond China or the mysterious islands of the east. There was a man seated in the craft and he touched a lever that rolled back the top window. He stood then and waved to them. A concerted gasp ran through the watchers, for every eye in the ship was fastened on this strange occurrence.

"What is this, Mr. Shrub," Harpplayer shouted. "Are we at a fun fair or a Christmas pantomime? Discipline, sir!"

"B-but, sir," the faithful Shrub stammered, suddenly at a loss for words. "That man, sir—he's *green!*"

"I want none of your damn nonsense, sir," Harpplayer snapped irritably, annoyed as he always was when people babbled about their imagined "colors." Paintings, and sunsets and such tripe. Nonsense. The world was made up of healthy shades of grey and that was that. Some fool of a Harley Street quack had once mentioned an imaginary malady which he termed "color blindness" but had desisted with his tomfoolery when Harpplayer had mentioned the choice of seconds.

"Green, pink or purple, I don't care what shade of grey the fellow is. Throw him a line and have him up here where we can hear his story."

The line was dropped and after securing it to a ring on his boat the stranger touched a lever that closed the glass cabin once more, then climbed easily to the deck above.

"Green fur . . ." Shrub said, then clamped his mouth shut under Harpplayer's fierce glare.

"Enough of that, Mr. Shrub. He's a foreigner and we will treat him with respect, at least until we find out what class he is from. He is a bit hairy, I admit, but certain races in the north of the Nipponese Isles are that way, perhaps he comes from there.

I bid you welcome, sir," he said addressing the man. "I am Captain Honario Harpplayer, commander of His Majesty's ship, *Redundant.*"

"*Kwl-kkle-wrrl-kl . . . !*"

"Not French," Harpplayer muttered, "nor Latin nor Greek I warrant. Perhaps one of those barbaric Baltic tongues, I'll try him on German. *Ich rate Ihnen, Reiseschecks mitzunehmen?* Or an Italian dialect? *E proibito; però qui si vendono cartoline ricordo.*"

The stranger responded by springing up and down excitedly, then pointing to the sun, making circular motions around his head, pointing to the clouds, making falling motions with his hands, and shrilly shouting "*M'ku, m'ku!*"

"Feller's barmy," the Marine officer said, "and besides, he got too many fingers."

"I can count to seven without your help," Shrub told him angrily, "I think he's trying to tell us it's going to rain."

"He may be a meteorologist in his own land," Harpplayer said safely, "but here he is just another alien."

The officers nodded agreement, and this motion seemed to excite the stranger for he sprang forward shouting his unintelligible gibberish. The alert Marine guard caught him in the back of the head with the butt of his Tower musket and the hairy man fell to the deck.

"Tried to attack you, Captain," the Marine officer said. "Shall we keel-haul him, sir?"

"No, poor chap is a long way from home, may be worried. We must allow for the language barrier. Just read him the Articles of War and impress him into the service. We're short of hands after that last encounter."

"You are of a very forgiving nature, sir, and an example for us all. What shall we do with his ship?"

"I'll examine it. There may be some principle of operation here that would be of interest to Whitehall. Drop a ladder, I'll have a look myself."

After some fumbling Harpplayer found the lever that moved the glass cabin, and when it slid aside he dropped into the cock-

pit that it covered. A comfortable divan faced a board covered with a strange collection of handles, buttons and divers machines concealed beneath crystal covers. It was a perfect example of the decadence of the east, excessive decoration and ornamentation where a panel of good English oak would have done as well, and a simple pivoted bar to carry the instructions to the slaves that rowed the boat. Or perhaps there was an animal concealed behind the panel, he heard a deep roar when he touched a certain lever. This evidently signaled the galley slave—or animal—to begin his labors, since the little craft was now rushing through the water at a good pace. Spray was slapping into the cockpit so Harpplayer closed the cover, which was a good thing. Another button must have tilted a concealed rudder because the boat suddenly plunged its nose down and sank, the water rising up until it washed over the top of the glass. Luckily, the craft was stoutly made and did not leak, and another button caused the boat to surface again.

It was at that instant that Harpplayer had the idea. He sat as one paralyzed, while his rapid thoughts ran through the possibilities. Yes, it might work—it *would* work! He smacked his fist into his open palm and only then realized that the tiny craft had turned while he had been thinking and was about to ram into the *Redundant,* whose rail was lined with frightened-eyed faces. With a skillful touch he signaled the animal (or slave) to stop and there was only the slightest bump as the vessels touched.

"Mr. Shrub," he called.

"Sir?"

"I want a hammer, six nails, six kegs of gunpowder each with a two minute fuse and a looped rope attached, and a dark lantern."

"But, sir—what for?" For once the startled Shrub forgot himself enough to question his captain.

The plan had so cheered Harpplayer that he took no umbrage at this sudden familiarity. In fact he even smiled into his cuff, the expression hidden by the failing light.

"Why—six barrels because there are six ships," he said with unaccustomed coyness. "Now, carry on."

The gunner and his mates quickly completed their task and the barrels were lowered in a sling. They completely filled the tiny cockpit, barely leaving room for Harpplayer to sit. In fact there was no room for the hammer and he had to hold it between his teeth.

"Mither Thrub," he said indistinctly around the hammer, suddenly depressed as he realized that in a few moments he would be pitting his own frail body against the hordes of the usurper who cracked the whip over a continent of oppressed slaves. He quailed at his temerity at thus facing the Tyrant of Europe, then quailed before his own disgust at his frailty. The men must never know that he had these thoughts, that he was the weakest of them. "Mr. Shrub," he called again, and there was no sound of his feelings in his voice. "If I do not return by dawn you are in command of this ship and will make a full report. Good-by. In triplicate, mind."

"Oh, sir—" Shrub began, but his words were cut off as the glass cover sprang shut and the tiny craft hurled itself against all the power of a continent.

Afterwards Harpplayer was to laugh at his first weakness. Truly, the escapade was as simple as strolling down Fleet Street on a Sunday morning. The foreign ship sank beneath the surface and slipped past the batteries on Cape Pietfieux, that the English sailors called Cape Pitfix, and into the guarded waters of Cienfique. No guard noticed the slight roiling of the waters of the bay and no human eye saw the dim shape that surfaced next to the high wooden wall that was the hull of the French ship of the line. Two sharp blows of the hammer secured the first keg of gunpowder and a brief flash of light came from the dark lantern as the fuse was lit. Before the puzzled sentries on the deck above could reach the rail the mysterious visitor was gone, and they could not see the tell-tale fuse sputtering away, concealed by the barrel of death that it crept slowly toward. Five times Harpplayer repeated this simple, yet deadly, activity, and as he was driving the last nail there was a muffled explosion from the first ship. Hutment closed, he made his way from the harbor, and behind him six ships, the pride of the Tyrant's navy, burnt in pillars of

flame until all that was left was the charred hulls, settling to the ocean floor.

Captain Harpplayer opened the glass hutment when he was past the shore batteries, and looked back with satisfaction at the burning ships. He had done his duty and his small part towards ending this awful war that had devastated a continent and would, in the course of a few years, kill so many of the finest Frenchmen that the height of the entire French race would be reduced by an average of more than five inches. The last pyre died down and, feeling a twinge of regret, since they had been fine ships, though in fief to the Madman in Paris, he turned the bow of his craft towards the *Redundant*.

It was dawn when he reached the ship, and exhaustion tugged at him. He grabbed the ladder lowered for him and painfully climbed to the deck. The drums whirred and the sideboys saluted; the bos'uns' pipes trilled.

"Well done, sir, or well done," Shrub exclaimed, rushing forward to take his hand. "We could see them burning from here."

Behind them, in the water, there was a deep burbling, like the water running from the tub when the plug is pulled, and Harpplayer turned just in time to see the strange craft sinking into the sea and vanishing from sight.

"Damn silly of me," he muttered. "Forgot to close the hatch. Running quite a sea, must have washed in."

His ruminations were sharply cut through by a sudden scream. He turned just in time to see the hairy stranger run to the rail and stare, horrified, at the vanishing craft. Then the man, obviously bereaved, screamed horribly and tore great handfuls of hair from his head, a relatively easy task since he had so much. Then, before anyone could think to stop him, he had mounted to the rail and plunged headfirst into the sea. He sank like a rock, and either could not swim, or did not want to; he seemed strangely attached to his craft, since he did not return to the surface.

"Poor chap," Harpplayer said with the compassion of a sensitive man, "to be alone, and so far from home. Perhaps he is happier dead."

"Aye, perhaps," the stolid Shrub muttered, "but he had the makings of a good topman in him, sir. Could run right out on the spars he could, held on very well he did, what with those long toenails of his that bit right into the wood. Had another toe in his heel that helped him hold on."

"I'll ask you not to discuss the deformities of the dead. We'll list him in the report as Lost Overboard. What was his name?"

"Wouldn't tell us, sir, but we carry him in the books as Mr. Green."

"Fair enough. Though foreign-born, he would be proud to know that he died bearing a good English name." Then, curtly dismissing the faithful and stupid Shrub, Harpplayer resumed walking the quarterdeck, filled with the silent agony which was his and his alone, and would be until the guns of the Corsican Ogre were spiked forever.

It is appropriate that this Magazine, which has often occupied itself with fictional speculations concerning humanoids (future variety), should also devote space and attention to humanoids (extinct variety). Extinct, so far as we *know*, at any rate. Karen Anderson handles this for us here and now with a cunningly wrought relation about centaurs.

TREATY IN TARTESSOS

by Karen Anderson

IRATZABAL'S HOOFS WERE SHOD with bronze, as befitted a high chief, and heavy gold pins held the coils of bright sorrel hair on top of his head. In this morning's battle, of course, he had used wooden pins which were less likely to slip out. As tonight was a ceremonial occasion, he wore a coat of aurochs hide dyed blue with woad, buttoned and cinched with hammered gold.

He waved his spear high to show the green branches bound to its head as he entered the humans' camp. No one spoke, but a guard grunted around a mouthful of barley-cake and jerked his thumb toward the commander's tent.

Standing in his tent door, Kynthides eyed the centaur with disfavor, from his unbarbered hair to the particularly clumsy bandage on his off fetlock. He straightened self-consciously in his sea-purple cloak and pipeclayed linen tunic.

"Greetings, most noble Iratzabal," he said, bowing. "Will you enter my tent?"

The centaur returned the bow awkwardly. "Glad to, most noble Kynthides," he said. As he went in the man realized with a little surprise that the centaur emissary was only a couple of fingers' breadth taller than himself.

It was darker inside the tent than out, despite the luxury of three lamps burning at once. "I hope you've dined well? May I offer you anything?" Kynthides asked politely, with considerable

misgivings. The centaur probably wouldn't know what to do with a barley loaf, and as for wine—well, there wasn't a drop within five miles of camp. Or there had better not be.

"That's decent of you, but I'm full up," said Iratzabal. "The boys found a couple of dead . . . uh, buffalo, after the battle, and we had a fine barbecue."

Kynthides winced. Another yoke of draft oxen gone! Well, Corn Mother willing, the war would be settled soon. It might even be tonight. "Won't you, er . . . Sit? Lie down? Er, make yourself comfortable."

Iratzabal lowered himself to the ground with his feet under him, and Kynthides sank gratefully into a leather-backed chair. He had been afraid the discussion would be conducted standing up.

"I got to admit you gave us a good fight today, for all you're such lightweights," the centaur said. "You generally do. If we don't get things settled somehow, we could go on like this till we've wiped each other out."

"We realize that too," said the man. "I've been asked by the heads of every village in Tartessos, not to mention communities all the way back to Thrace, to make some reasonable settlement with you. Can you speak for centaurs in those areas?"

"More or less." He swished his tail across the bandaged fetlock, and flies scattered. "I run most of the territory from here up through Goikokoa Etchea—what men call Pyrene's Mountains—and across to the Inland Sea. Half a dozen tribes besides mine hunt through here, but they stand aside for *us*. We could lick any two of them with our eyes shut. Now, you take an outfit like the Acroceraunians—I don't run them, but they've heard of me, and I can tell them to knuckle under or face my boys *and* yours. But that shouldn't be necessary. I'm going to get them a good cut."

"Well, remember that if the communities don't like promises I make in their names, they won't honor them," said the man. He slid his fingers through the combed curls of his dark-brown beard and wished he could ignore the centaur's odor. The fellow smelled like a saddle-blanket. If he didn't want to wash, he could

at least use perfume. "First, we ought to consider the reasons for this war, and after that ways to settle the dispute."

"The way I see it," the centaur began, "is, you folks want to pin down the corners of a piece of country and sit on it. We don't understand ground belonging to somebody."

"It *began,*" Kynthides said stiffly, "with that riot at the wedding."

"That was just what set things off," said Iratzabal. "There'd been a lot of small trouble before then. I remember how I was running down a four-pointer through an oak wood one rainy day, with my nose full of the way things smell when they're wet and my mind on haunch of venison. The next thing I knew I was in a clearing planted with one of those eating grasses, twenty pounds of mud on each hoof and a pack of tame wolves worrying my hocks. I had to kill two or three of them before I got away, and by then there were men throwing spears and shouting 'Out! Out!' in what they thought was Eskuara."

"We have to keep watchdogs and arm the field hands, or we wouldn't have a stalk of grain standing at harvest time!"

"Take it easy. I was just telling you, the war isn't over a little thing like some drunks breaking up a wedding. Nor they wouldn't have, if the wine hadn't been where they could get at it. There's blame on both sides."

The man half rose at this, but caught himself. The idea was to stop the war, not set it off afresh. "At any rate, it seems we can't get along with each other. Men and centaurs don't mix well."

"We look at things different ways," said Iratzabal. "You see a piece of open country, and all you can think of is planting a crop on it. We think of deer grazing it, or rabbit and pheasant nesting. Field-planting ruins the game in a district."

"Can't you hunt away from farm districts?" asked Kynthides. "We have our families to support, little babies and old people. There are too many of us to let the crops go and live by hunting, even if there were as much game as the land could support."

"Where can we hunt?" shrugged the centaur. "Whenever we come through one of our regular districts, we find more valleys under plow than last time, more trees cut and the fields higher

up the slope. Even in Goikokoa Etchea, what's as much my tribe's home as a place can be, little fields are showing up." A swirl of lamp smoke veered toward him, and he sniffed it contemptuously. "Sheep fat! The herds I find aren't deer any more, they're sheep, with a boy pi-pipping away on a whistle—and dogs again."

"If you'd pick out your territory and stay on it, then no farmers would come in," said Kynthides. "It's contrary to our nature to leave land unused because somebody plans to hunt through it next autumn."

"But, big as Goikokoa Etchea is, it won't begin to feed us year round! We've got to have ten times as much, a hundred times if you're talking of Scythia and Illyria and all."

"I live in Thessaly myself," Kynthides pointed out. "I have to think of Illyria. What we men really want is to see all you centaurs completely out of Europe, resettled in Asia or the like. Couldn't you all move out of Sarmatia and the lands to the east? Nobody lives there. It's all empty steppes."

"Sarmatia! Maybe it looks empty to a farmer, but I've heard from the boys in Scythia. The place is filling up with Achaians, six feet tall, each with twenty horses big enough to eat either one of us for breakfast, and they can ride those horses all night and fight all day. By Jainco, I'm keeping away from them."

"Well, there's hardly anybody in Africa. Why don't you go there?" the man suggested.

"If there was any way of us all getting there—"

"Certainly there is! We have ships. It would take a couple of years to send you all, but—"

"*If* we could get there, we wouldn't like it at all. That's no kind of country for a centaur. Hot, dry, game few and far between—no thanks. But you're willing to ship us all to some other place?"

"Any place! That is, within reason. Name it."

"Just before war broke out in earnest, I got chummy with a lad who'd been on one of those exploring voyages you folks go in for. He said he'd been to a place that was full of game of all kinds, and even had the right kind of toadstools."

"Toadstools? To make poison with?" cried Kynthides, his

hand twitching toward the neatly bandaged spear-jab on his side.

"*Poison!*" Iratzabal ducked his head and laughed into his heavy sorrel beard. "That's a good one, poison from toadstools! No, to eat. Get a glow on at the Moon Dances—same way you people do with wine. Though I can't see why you use stuff that leaves you so sick the next day."

"Once you've learned your capacity, you needn't have a hangover," Kynthides said with a feeling of superiority. "But this place you're talking of—"

"Well, my pal said it wasn't much use to men, but centaurs would like it. Lots of mountains, all full of little tilted meadows, but no flat country to speak of. Not good to plow up and sow with barley or what-not. Why not turn that over to us, since you can't send any big colonies there anyway?"

"Wait a minute. Are you talking about Kypros' last expedition?"

"That's the one my pal sailed under," nodded Iratzabal.

"No, by the Corn Mother! How can I turn that place over to you? We've barely had a look at it ourselves! There may be tin and amber to rival Thule, or pearls, or sea-purple. We have simply no idea of what we'd be giving you."

"And there may be no riches at all. Did this guy Kypros say he'd seen any tin or pearls? If he did, he didn't tell a soul of his crew. And I'm telling you, if we don't go there we don't go anyplace. I can start the war again with two words."

The man sprang to his feet, white-lipped. "Then start the war again! We may not have been winning, but by the Mother, we weren't losing!"

Iratzabal heaved himself upright. "You can hold out as long as we give you pitched battles. But wait till we turn to raiding! You'll have fields trampled every night, and snipers chipping at you every day. You won't dare go within bowshot of the woods. We'll chivy your herds through your drops till they've run all their fat off and there's not a blade still standing. And you'll get no harvest in, above what you grab off the stem and eat running. How are the granaries, Kynthides? Will there be any seed corn left by spring?"

The man dropped into his chair and took his head in trembling hands. "You've got us where we hurt. We can't survive that kind of warfare. But how can I promise land that isn't mine? It belongs to Kypros' backers, if anyone."

"Pay them off in the grain that won't be spoiled. Fix up the details any way it suits you. I'm not trying to make it hard on you—we can kick through with a reasonable number of pelts and such to even the bargain."

He looked up. "All right, Iratzabal," he said wearily. "You can *have* Atlantis."

Some years ago the Staff of The Magazine received one of those shocks—rare and pleasurable—which comes from finding a treasure among the unsolicited MSS pouring in like the lavas which restlessly roll—the treasure in this case being entitled CASEY AGONISTES, by Richard McKenna. Richard McKenna is an Old Navy and an Old China Hand, a raconteur extraordinary, with eyebrows (red) bigger than most moustachioes, a gentleman, a scholar, and the husband of the gentle Eva. He writes briefly of himself now: "Born 9 May 1913 in Mountain Home, Idaho. Enlisted Navy 1931. First ten years in China. Retired as MMC in 1953 and came to Chapel Hill to attend UNC. Graduated 1956 with B.A. in Eng. Lit. Married day after I finished my last exam and began postgraduate work on how to live with female of species. Began writing 1957. This story written 1958, much worked on since. Have just finished China novel, THE SAND PEBBLES, for Harper's." The "China novel" has subsequently (a) won the Harper's Prize, (b) been selected for serialization in *The Saturday Evening Post,* (c) chosen by the Book of the Month Club, and (d) purchased for the movies! . . . Mr. McKenna here gives us a story of epic quality—a conflict of cultures comparable to that of Athens and Sparta, a struggle between men and men and between men and a life-form previously unknown to men, a struggle between one man and his own culture; and of one woman who—but we have said enough. "Home is the sailor/ Home from the sea/ And the hunter home from the hill," wrote Robert Louis Stevenson, in his own epitaph. It is not always Death, however, which beareth away the victory.

HUNTER, COME HOME

by Richard McKenna

On that planet the damned trees were immortal, the new guys said in disgust, so there was no wood for campfires and they had to burn pyrolene doused on raw stem fragments. Roy Craig crouched over the fire tending a bubbling venison stew

and caught himself wishing they might still use the electric galley inside their flyer. But the new guys were all red dots and they wanted flame in the open and of course they were right.

Four of them sat across the fire from Craig, talking loudly and loading explosive pellets. They wore blue field denims and had roached hair and a red dot tattooed on their foreheads. Bork Wilde, the new field chief, stood watching them. He was tall and bold featured, with roached black hair, and he had two red dots on his forehead. Craig's reddish hair was unroached and except for freckles his forehead was blank, because he had never taken the Mordin manhood test. For all his gangling young six-foot body, he felt like a boy among men. As the only blanky in a crew of red dots, he caught all the menial jobs now. It was not pleasant.

They were a six-man ringwalling crew and they were camped beside their flyer, a gray, high sided cargo job, a safe two miles downslope from a big ringwall. All around them the bare, fluted, silvery stems speared and branched fifty feet overhead and gave a watery cast to the twilight. Normally the stems and twigs would be covered with two-lobed phytozoon leaves of all sizes and color patterns. The men and their fire had excited the leaves and they had detached themselves, to hover in a pulsating rainbow cloud high enough to catch the sun above the silver tracery of the upper branches. They piped and twittered and shed a spicy perfume. Certain daring ones dipped low above the men. One of the pellet loaders, a little rat faced man named Cobb, hurled a flaming chunk up through them.

"Shut up, you flitterbugs!" he roared. "Let a man hear himself think!"

"Can you really think, Cobbo?" Whelan asked.

"If I think I think, then I'm thinking, ain't I?"

The men laughed. The red and white fibrous root tangle underfoot was slowly withdrawing, underground and to the sides, leaving bare soil around the fire. The new guys thought it was to escape the fire, but Craig remembered the roots had always done that when the old ringwall crew used to camp without fire. By morning the whole area around the flyer would be bare

soil. A brown, many-legged crawler an inch long pushed out of the exposed soil and scuttled after the retreating roots. Craig smiled at it and stirred the stew. A small green and red phyto leaf dropped from the cloud and settled on his knobby wrist. He let it nuzzle at him. Its thin, velvety wings waved slowly. A much thickened midrib made it a kind of body with no head or visible appendages. Craig turned his wrist over and wondered idly why the phyto did not fall off. It was a pretty little thing.

A patterned green and gold phyto with wings as large as dinnerplates settled on Wilde's shoulder. Wilde snatched it and tore its wings with thick fingers. It whimpered and fluttered. Craig winced.

"Stop it!" he said involuntarily and then, apologetically, "It can't hurt you, Mr. Wilde. It was just curious."

"Who pulled your trigger, Blanky?" Wilde asked lazily. "I wish these damned bloodsucking butterflies *could* know what I'm doing here."

He turned and kicked one of the weak, turgor-rigid stems and brought it crumpling down across the flyer. He threw the torn phyto after it and laughed, showing big horse teeth. Craig bit his lip.

"Chow's ready," he said. "Come and get it."

After cleanup it got dark, with only one moon in the sky, and the phytos furled their wings and went to sleep on the upper branches. The fire died away. The men rolled up in blankets and snored. Craig sat there. He saw Sidis come and stand looking out the doorway of the lighted main cabin. Sidis was the Belconti ecologist who had been boss of the old ringwall crew. He was along on this first trip with the new men only to break Wilde in as crew chief. He insisted on eating and sleeping inside the flyer, to the scorn of the Planet Mordin red dots. His forehead was blank as Craig's, but that was little comfort. Sidis was from Planet Belconti, where they had different customs.

For Mordinmen, courage was the supreme good. They were descendants of a lost Earth-colony that had lapsed to a stone age technology and fought its way back to gunpowder in ceaseless war against the fearsome Great Russel dinotheres who were

the dominant life-form on Planet Mordin before men came and for a long time after. For many generations young candidates for manhood went forth in a sworn band to kill a Great Russel with spears and arrows. When rifles came, they hunted him singly. The survivors wore the red dot of manhood and fathered the next generation. Then the civilized planets rediscovered Mordin. Knowledge flowed in. Population exploded. Suddenly there were not enough Great Russels left alive to meet the need. Craig's family had not been able to buy him a Great Russel hunt and he could not become a man.

I'll have my chance yet, Craig thought dourly.

Ten years before Craig's birth the Mordin Hunt Council found the phyto planet unclaimed and set out to convert it to one great dinothere hunting range. The Earth-type Mordin biota could neither eat nor displace the alien phytos. Mordin contracted with Belconti biologists to exterminate the native life, Mordin laborers served under Belconti biotechs. All were blankies; no red dots would serve under the effete Belcontis, many of whom were women. Using the killer plant *Thanasis*, the Belcontis cleared two large islands and restocked them with a Mordin biota. One they named Base Island and made their headquarters. On the other they installed a Great Russel dinothere. He flourished.

When I was little, they told me I'd kill my Great Russel on this planet, Craig thought. He clasped his arms around his knees. There was still only the one Great Russel on the whole planet.

Because for thirty years the continents refused to die. The phytos encysted *Thanasis* areas, adapted, recovered ground. Belconti genesmiths designed ever more deadly strains of *Thanasis*, pushing it to the safe upper limit of its recombination index. After decades of dubious battle *Thanasis* began clearly losing ground. The Belcontis said the attempt must be given up. But the phyto planet had become the symbol of future hope to curb present social unrest on Mordin. The Hunt Council would not give up the fight. Mordin red dots were sent to study biotechnics on Belconti. Then they came to the phyto planet to do the job themselves.

Craig was already there, finishing out a two-year labor contract. Working with other blankies under a Belconti boss, he had almost forgotten the pain of withheld manhood. He had extended his contract for two more years. Then, a month ago, the red dots had come in the Mordin relief ship, to relieve both Belconti biotechs and the Mordin field crews. The Belcontis would go home on their own relief ship in about a year. Craig was left the only blanky on the planet, except for the Belcontis, and they didn't count.

I'm already alone, he thought. He bowed his head on his knees and wished he could sleep. Someone touched his shoulder. He looked up to see Sidis beside him.

"Come inside, will you, Roy?" Sidis whispered. "I want to talk to you."

Craig sat down across from Sidis at the long table in the main cabin. Sidis was a slender, dark man with the gentle Belconti manners and a wry smile.

"I'm worried what you'll do these next two years," he said. "I don't like the way they order you around, that nasty little Cobb in particular. Why do you take it?"

"I have to because I'm a blanky."

"You can't help that. If it's one of your laws, it's not a fair law."

"It's fair because it's natural," Craig said. "I don't like not being a man, but that's just how it is."

"You are a man. You're twenty-four years old."

"I'm not a man until I feel like one," Craig said. "I can't feel like one until I kill my Great Russel."

"I'm afraid you'd still feel out of place," Sidis said. "I've watched you for two years and I think you have a certain quality your own planet has no use for. So I have a proposition." He glanced at the door, then back to Craig. "Declare yourself a Belconti citizen, Roy. We'll all sponsor you. I know Mil Ames will find you a job on the staff. You can go home to Belconti with us."

"Great Russel!" Craig said. "I couldn't never do that, Mr. Sidis."

"Why couldn't you? Do you want to go through life as Mordin blanky? Would you ever get a wife?"

"Maybe. Some woman the red dots passed over. She'd hate me, for her bad luck."

"And you call that fair?"

"It's fair because it's natural. It's natural for a woman to want an all-the-way man instead of a boy that just grew up."

"Not for Belconti women. How about it, Roy?"

Craig clasped his hands between his knees. He lowered his head and shook it slowly.

"No. No. I couldn't. My place is here, fighting for a time when no kid has to grow up cheated, like I been." He raised his head. "Besides, no Mordinman ever runs away from a fight."

Sidis smiled. "This fight is already lost."

"Not the way Mr. Wilde talks. In the labs at Base Camp they're going to use a trans-something, I hear."

"Translocator in the gene matrix," Sidis said. His face shadowed. "I guarantee they won't do it while Mil Ames runs the labs. After we go, they'll probably kill themselves in a year." He looked sharply at Craig. "I hadn't meant to tell you that, but it's one reason I hope you'll leave with us."

"How kill ourselves?"

"With an outlaw free-system."

Craig shook his head. Sidis looked thoughtful.

"Look, you know how the phyto stems are all rooted together underground like one huge plant," he said. "*Thanasis* pumps self-duplicating enzyme systems into them, trying to predigest the whole continent. In the labs we design those free-systems. They can digest a man, too, and that's what you get inoculated against each time we design a new one. We also design a specific control virus able to kill off each new strain of *Thanasis*. Well, then." He steepled his fingers. "With translocation, *Thanasis* can redesign its own free-systems in the field, you might say. It could come up with something impossible to immunize, something no control virus we know how to make could handle. Then it would kill us and rule the planet itself."

"That's what happened on Planet Froy, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's what you risk. And you can't win. So come to Belconti with us."

Craig stood up. "I almost wish you didn't tell me that, about the danger," he said. "Now I can't think about leaving."

Sidis leaned back and spread his fingers on the table. "Talk to Midori Blake before you say no for sure," he said. "I know she's fond of you, Roy. I thought you rather liked her."

"I do like to be around her," Craig said. "I liked it when you used to go there, 'stead of camping in the field. I wish we did now."

"I'll try to persuade Wilde. Think it over, will you?"

"I can't think," Craig said. "I don't know what I feel." He turned to the door. "I'm going out and walk and try to think."

"Goodnight, Roy." Sidis reached for a book.

The second moon was just rising. Craig walked through a jungle of ghostly silver stems. Phytos clinging to them piped sleepily, disturbed by his passage. I'm too ignorant to be a Belconti, he thought. He was nearing the ringwall. Stems grew more thickly, became harder, fused at last into a sloping, ninety-foot dam. Craig climbed halfway up and stopped. It was foolhardy to go higher without a protective suit. *Thanasis* was on the other side. Its free-systems diffused hundreds of feet, even in still air. The phyto stems were all rooted together like one big plant and *Thanasis* ate into it like a sickness. The stems formed ringwalls around stands of *Thanasis,* to stop its spread and force it to poison itself. Craig climbed a few feet higher.

Sure I'm big enough to whip Cobb, he thought. Whip any of them, except Mr. Wilde. But he knew that in a quarrel his knees would turn to water and his voice squeak off to nothing, because they were men and he was not.

"Just the same, I'm not a coward," he said aloud.

He climbed to the top. *Thanasis* stretched off in a sea of blackness beneath the moons. Just below he could see the outline of narrow, pointed leaves furred with stinging hairs and beaded with poison meant to be rainwashed into the roots of downslope prey. The ringwall impounded the poisoned water. This stand

of *Thanasis* was drowning in it and it was desperate. He saw the tendrils groping the flinty ringwall surface, hungry to release free-systems into enemy tissue and follow after to suck and absorb. They felt his warmth and waved feebly at him. This below him was the woody, climbing form. They said even waist-high shrubs could eat a man in a week.

I'm not afraid, Craig thought. He sat down and took off his boots and let his bare feet dangle above the *Thanasis*. Midori Blake and all the Belcontis would think this was crazy. They didn't understand about courage—all they had was brains. He liked them anyway, Midori most of all. He thought about her as he gazed off across the dark *Thanasis*. The whole continent would have to be like that, first. Then they'd kill off *Thanasis* with a control virus and plant grass and real trees and bring birds and animals and it would all be like Base and Russel Islands were now. Sidis was wrong. That trans-stuff would do it. He'd stay and help and earn the rest of the money he needed. He felt better, with his mind made up. Then he felt a gentle tug at his left ankle.

Fierce, sudden pain stabbed his ankle. He jerked his leg up. The tendril broke and came with it, still squirming and stinging. Craig whistled and swore as he scraped it off with a boot heel, careful not to let it touch his hands. Then he pulled on his right boot and hurried back to camp for treatment.

He carried his left boot, because he knew how fast his ankle would swell. He reached camp with his left leg one screaming ache. Sidis was still up. He neutralized the poison, gave Craig a sedative and made him turn into one of the bunks inside the flyer. He did not ask questions. He looked down at Craig with his wry smile.

"You Mordinmen," he said, and shook his head.

The Belcontis were always saying that.

In the morning Cobb sneered and Wilde was furious.

"If you're shooting for a week on the sick list, aim again," Wilde said. "I'll give you two days."

"He needs two weeks," Sidis said. "I'll do his work."

"I'll work," Craig said. "It don't hurt so much I can't work."

"Take today off," Wilde said, mollified.

"I'll work today," Craig said. "I'm all right."

It was a tortured day under the hot yellow sun, with his foot wrapped in sacks and stabbing pain up his spine with every step. Craig drove his power auger deep into basal ringwall tissue and the aromatic, red-purple sap gushed out and soaked his feet. Then he pushed in the explosive pellet, shouldered his rig and paced off the next position. Over and over he did it, like a machine, not stopping to eat his lunch, ignoring the phytos that clung to his neck and hands. He meant to finish his arc before the others, if it killed him. But when he finished and had time to think about it, his foot felt better than it had all day. He snapped a red cloth to his auger shaft and waved it high and the flyer slanted down to pick him up. Sidis was at the controls.

"You're the first to finish," he said. "I don't see why you're even alive. Go and lie down now."

"I'll take the controls," Craig said. "I feel good."

"I guess you're proving something," Sidis smiled. "All right."

He gave Craig the controls and went aft. Driving the flyer was one of the menial jobs that Craig liked. He liked being alone in the little control cabin, with its two seats and windows all around. He lifted to a thousand feet and glanced along the ringwall, curving out of sight in both directions. The pent sea of *Thanasis* was dark green by daylight. The phyto area outside the ringwall gleamed silvery, with an overplay of shifting colors, and it was very beautiful. Far and high in the north he saw a colored cloud among the fleecy ones. It was a mass of migratory phytos drifting in the wind. It was beautiful too.

"They're very fast at transferring substance to grow or repair the ringwalls," he heard Sidis telling Wilde back in the main cabin. "You'll notice the biomass downslope is less dense. When you release that poisoned water from inside the ringwall you get a shock effect and *Thanasis* follows up fast. But a new ringwall always forms."

"Next time through I'll blow fifty-mile arcs," Wilde said.

Craig slanted down to pick up Jordan. He was a stocky,

sandy-haired man about Craig's age. He scrambled aboard grinning.

"Beat us again, hey, Craig?" he said. "That took guts, boy! You're all right!"

"I got two years practice on you guys," Craig said.

The praise made him feel good. It was the first time Jordan had called him by name instead of "Blanky." He lifted the flyer again. Jordan sat down in the spare seat.

"How's the foot?" he asked.

"Pretty good. I might get my boot on, unlaced," Craig said.

"Don't try. I'll take camp chores tonight," Jordan said. "You rest that foot, Craig."

"There's Whelan signaling," Craig said.

He felt himself blushing with pleasure as he slanted down to pick up Whelan. Jordan went aft. When Rice and Cobb had been picked up, Craig hovered the flyer at two miles and Wilde pulsed off the explosive. Twenty miles of living ringwall tissue fountained in dust and flame. Phytos rising in terrified, chromatic clouds marked the rolling shock wave. Behind it the silvery plain darkened with the sheet flow of poisoned water.

"Hah! Go it, *Thanasis!*" Wilde shouted. "I swear to bullets, that's a pretty sight down there!" He sighed. "Well, that makes it a day, men. Sidis, where's a good place to camp?"

"We're only an hour from Burton Island," Sidis said. "I used to stop at the taxonomy station there every night, when we worked this area."

"Probably why you never got anywhere, too," Wilde said. "But I want a look at that island. The Huntsman's got plans for it."

He shouted orders up to Craig. Craig lifted to ten miles and headed southeast at full throttle. A purplish sea rolled above the silvery horizon. Far on the sea rim beaded islands climbed to view. It had been a good day, Craig thought. Jordan seemed to want to be friends. And now at long last he was going to see Midori Blake again.

He grounded the flyer on slagged earth near the familiar gray stone buildings on the eastern headland. The men got out and

George and Helen Toyama, smiling and gray-haired in lab smocks, came to welcome them. Craig's left boot was tight and it hurt, but he could wear it unlaced. Helen told him Midori was painting in the gorge. He limped down the gorge path, past Midori's small house and the Toyama home on the cliff edge at left. Midori and the Toyamas were the only people on Burton Island. The island was a phyto research sanctuary and it had never been touched by *Thanasis*. It was the only place other than Base Camp where humans lived permanently.

The gorge was Midori's special place. She painted it over and over, never satisfied. Craig knew it well, the quartz ledge, the cascading waterfall and pool, the phytos dancing in sunlight that the silvery stem forest changed to the quality of strong moonlight. Midori said it was the peculiar light that she could never capture. Craig liked watching her paint, most of all when she forgot him and sang to herself. She was clean and apart and beautiful and it was just good to be in the same world with her. Through the plash of the waterfall and the phyto piping Craig heard her singing before he came upon her, standing before her easel beside a quartz boulder. She heard him and turned and smiled warmly.

"Roy! I'm so glad to see you!" she said. "I was afraid you'd gone home after all."

She was small and dainty under her gray dress, with large black eyes and delicate features. Her dark hair snugged boyishly close to her head. Her voice had a natural, birdlike quality and she moved and gestured with the quick grace of a singing bird. Craig grinned happily.

"For a while I almost wished I did," he said. "Now I'm glad again I didn't." He limped toward her.

"Your foot!" she said. "Come over here and sit down." She tugged him to a seat on the boulder. "What happened?"

"Touch of *Thanasis*. It's nothing much."

"Take off your boot! You don't want pressure on it!"

She helped him take the boot off and ran cool fingertips over the red, swollen ankle. Then she sat beside him.

"I know it hurts you. How did it happen?"

"I was kind of unhappy," he said. "I went and sat on a ringwall and let my bare feet hang over."

"Foolish Roy. Why were you unhappy?"

"Oh . . . things." Several brilliant phytos settled on his bare ankle. He let them stay. "We got to sleep in the field now, 'stead of coming here. The new guys are all red dots. I'm just a nothing again and—"

"You mean they think they're better than you?"

"They are better, and that's what hurts. Killing a Great Russel is a kind of spirit thing, Midori." He scuffed his right foot. "I'll see the day when this planet has enough Great Russels so no kid has to grow up cheated."

"The phytos are not going to die," she said softly. "It's very clear now. We're defeated."

"You Belcontis are. Mordinmen never give up."

"*Thanasis* is defeated. Will you shoot phytos with rifles?"

"Please don't joke about rifles. We're going to use trans-something on *Thanasis*."

"Translocation? Oh, no!" She raised her fingers to her lips. "It can't be controlled for field use," she said. "They wouldn't dare!"

"Mordinmen dare anything," he said proudly. "These guys all studied on Belconti, they know how. That's another thing. . . ."

He scuffed his foot again. Phytos were on both their heads and shoulders now and all over his bared ankle. They twittered faintly.

"What, Roy?"

"They make me feel ignorant. Here I been ringwalling for two years, and they already know more about phytos than I do. I want you to tell me something about phytos that I can use to make the guys notice me. Like, can phytos feel?"

She held her hand to her cheek, silent for a moment.

"Phytos are strange and wonderful and I love them," she said softly. "They're mixed plant and animal. Life never split itself apart on this planet."

The flying phytozoons, she explained, functioned as leaves for the vegetative stems. But the stems, too, had internal temperature control. The continental network of great conduit roots

moved fluids anywhere in any quantity with valved peristalsis. A stem plus attached phytos made a kind of organism.

"But any phyto, Roy, can live with any stem, and they're forever shifting. Everything is part of everything," she said. "Our job here on Burton Island is to classify the phytos, and we just can't do it! They vary continuously along every dimension we choose, physical or chemical, and *kind* simply has no meaning." She sighed. "That's the most wonderful thing I know about them. Will that help you?"

"I don't get all that. That's what I mean, I'm ignorant," he said. "Tell me some one simple thing I can use to make the guys take notice of me."

"All right, tell them this," she said. "Phyto color patterns are plastid systems that synthesize different molecules. The way they can recombine parts to form new organisms, without waiting for evolution, gives them a humanly inconceivable biochemical range. Whatever new poison or free-system we design for *Thanasis,* somewhere by sheer chance they hit on a counter-substance. The knowledge spreads faster each time. That's why *Thanasis* is defeated."

"No! Don't keep saying that, Midori!" Craig protested. "This here translocation, now—"

"Not even that!" Her voice was sharp. "The phytos have unlimited translocation and any number of sexes. Collectively, I don't doubt they're the mightiest biochemical lab in the galaxy. They form a kind of biochemical intelligence, almost a mind, and it's learning faster than we are." She shook his arm with both her small hands. "Yes, tell them, make them understand," she said. "Human intelligence is defeated here. Now you will try human ferocity . . . oh, Roy. . . ."

"Say it," he said bitterly. "You Belcontis think all Mordinmen are stupid. You sound almost like you want us to lose."

She turned away and began cleaning her brushes. It was nearly dark and the phytos were going to rest on the stems overhead. Craig sat miserably silent, remembering the feel of her hands on his arm. Then she spoke. Her voice was soft again.

"I don't know. If you wanted homes and farms here . . . but

you want only the ritual deaths of man and dinothere. . . ."

"Maybe people's souls get put together different ways on different planets," Craig said. "I know there's a piece missing out of mine. I know what it is." He put his hand lightly on her shoulder. "Some holidays I fly down to Russel Island just to look at the Great Russel there, and then I know. I wish I could take you to see him. He'd make you understand."

"I understand. I just don't agree."

She swished and splashed brushes, but she didn't pull her shoulder away from his hand. Craig thought about what she had said.

"Why is it you never see a dead phyto? Why is it there ain't enough dead wood on a whole continent to make one camp fire?" he asked. "What eats 'em? What keeps 'em down?"

She laughed and turned back to him, making his arm slide across her shoulders. He barely let it touch her.

"They eat themselves internally. We call it resorption," she said. "They can grow themselves again in another place and form, as a ringwall, for instance. Roy, this planet has never known death or decay. Everything is resorbed and reconstituted. We try to kill it and it suffers but its—yes, its *mind*—can't form the idea of death. There's no way to *think* death biochemically."

"Oh bullets, Midori! Phytos can't think," he said. "I wonder, can they even feel?"

"Yes, they feel!" She rose to her feet, throwing off his arm. "Their piping is a cry of pain," she said. "Papa Toyama can remember when the planet was almost silent. Since he's been here, twenty years, their temperature has risen twelve degrees, their metabolic rate and speed of neural impulse doubled, chronaxy halved—"

Craig stood up too and raised his hands. "Hold your fire, Midori," he pleaded. "You know I don't know all them words. You're mad at me." It was too dark to see her face plainly.

"I think I'm just afraid," she said. "I'm afraid of what we've been doing that we don't know about."

"The piping always makes me feel sad, kind of," Craig said. "I never would hurt a phyto. But Great Russel, when you think

about whole continents hurting and crying, day and night for years—you scare me too, Midori."

She began packing her painting kit. Craig pulled on his boot. It laced up easily, without any pain.

"We'll go to my house. I'll make our supper," she said.

They had used to do that sometimes. Those were the best times. He took the kit and walked beside her, hardly limping at all. They started up the cliff path.

"Why did you stay on past your contract, if the work makes you sad?" she asked suddenly.

"Two more years and I'll have enough saved to buy me a Great Russel hunt back on Mordin," he said. "I guess you think that's a pretty silly reason."

"Not at all. I thought you might have an even sillier reason."

He fumbled for a remark, not understanding her sudden chill. Then Jordan's voice bawled from above.

"Craig! Ho Craig!"

"Craig aye!"

"Come a-running!" Jordan yelled. "Bork's raising hell cause you ain't loading pellets. I saved chow for you."

The rest of the field period was much better. Jordan took his turn on camp chores and joked Rice and Whelan into doing the same. Only Wilde and Cobb still called Craig "Blanky." Craig felt good about things. Jordan sat beside him in the control cabin as Craig brought the flyer home to Base Island. Russel Island loomed blue to the south and the Main Continent coast range toothed the eastern sea rim.

"Home again. Beer and the range, eh, Craig?" Jordan said. "We'll get in some hunting, maybe."

"Hope so," Craig said.

Base Island looked good. It was four thousand square miles of savanna and rolling hills with stands of young oak and beech. It teemed with game animals and birds transplanted from Mordin. On its northern tip buildings and fields made the rectilinear pattern of man. Sunlight gleamed on square miles of *Thanasis* greenhouses behind their ionic stockades. Base Island was a

promise of the planet's future, when *Thanasis* would have killed off the phytos and been killed in its turn and the wholesome life of Planet Mordin replaced them both. Base Island was home.

They were the first ringwalling team to come in. Wilde reported twelve hundred miles of ringwall destroyed, fifty percent better than the old Belconti average. Barim, the Chief Huntsman, congratulated them. He was a burly, deep-voiced man with roached gray hair and four red dots on his forehead. It was the first time Craig had ever shaken hands with a man who had killed four Great Russels. Barim rewarded the crew with a week on food hunting detail. Jordan teamed up with Craig. Craig shot twenty deer and twelve pigs and scores of game birds. His bag was better than Cobb's. Jordan joked at Cobb about it, and it made the sparrowy little man very angry.

The new men had brought a roaring, jovial atmosphere to Base Camp that Craig rather liked. He picked up camp gossip. Barim had ordered immediate production of translocator pollen. Mildred Ames, the Belconti Chief Biologist, had refused. But the labs were Mordin property. Barim ordered his own men to work on it. Miss Ames raised shrill hell. Barim barred all Belcontis from the labs. Miss Ames counterattacked, rapier against bludgeon, and got her staff back into the labs. They were to observe only, for science and the record. It had been very lively, Craig gathered.

Jealous, scared we'll show 'em up, the Mordin lab men laughed. And so we will, by the bones of Great Russel!

Craig saw Miss Ames several times around the labs. She was a tall, slender woman and now she looked pinch-mouthed and unhappy. She made Sidis a lab observer. He would not ringwall any more. Craig thought about what Midori had told him. He particularly liked that notion of resorption and waited for his chance to spring it at the mess table. It came one morning at breakfast. Wilde's crew shared a table with lab men in the raftered, stone-floored mess hall. It was always a clamor of voices and rattling mess gear. Craig sat between Cobb and Jordan and across from a squat, bald headed lab man named Joe Breen. Joe brought up the subject of ringwalls. Craig saw his chance.

"Them ringwalls, how they make 'em," he said. "They eat themselves and grow themselves again. It's called resorption."

"They're resorbing sons of guns, ain't they?" Joe said. "How do you like the way they mate?"

Wilde shouted from the head of the table. "That way's not for me!"

"What do they mean?"

Craig whispered it to Jordan. Cobb heard him.

"Blanky wants to know the facts of life," Cobb said loudly. "Who'll tell him?"

"Who but old Papa Bork?" Wilde shouted. "Here's what they do, Blanky. When a flitterbug gets that funny feeling it rounds up from one to a dozen others. They clump on a stem and get resorbed into one of them pinkish swellings you're all the time seeing. After a while it splits and a mess of crawlers falls out. Get it?"

They were all grinning. Craig blushed and shook his head.

"They crawl off and plant themselves and each one grows into a phytogenous stem," Jordan said. "For a year it buds off new phytos like mad. Then it turns into a vegetative stem."

"Hell, I seen plenty crawlers," Craig said. "I just didn't know they were seeds."

"Know how to tell the boy crawlers from the girl crawlers, Blanky?" Cobb asked. Joe Breen laughed.

"Lay off, Cobb," Jordan said. "You don't tell their sex, you count it," he told Craig. "They got one pair of legs for each parent."

"Hey, you know, that's good!" Wilde said. "Maybe a dozen sexes, each one tearing a piece off all the others in one operation. That's good, all right!"

"Once in a lifetime, it better be good," Joe said. "But Great Russel, talk about polyploidy and multihybrids—wish we could breed *Thanasis* that way."

"I'll breed my own way," Wilde said. "Just you give me the chance."

"These Belconti women think Mordinmen are crude," Joe said. "You'll just have to save it up for Mordin."

"There's a pretty little target lives alone on Burton Island," Wilde said.

"Yeah! Blanky knows her," Cobb said. "Can she be had, Blanky?"

"No!" Craig clamped his big hand around his coffee cup. "She's funny, quiet, keeps to herself a lot," he said. "But she's decent and good."

"Maybe Blanky never tried," Cobb said. He winked at Joe. "Sometimes all you have to do is ask them quiet ones."

"I'm the guy that'll ask, give me the chance!" Wilde shouted.

"Old Bork'll come at her with them two red dots a-shining and she'll fall back into loading position slick as gun oil," Joe said.

"Yeah, and he'll find out old One-dot Cobb done nipped in there ahead of him!" Cobb whooped.

The work horn blared. The men stood up in a clatter of scraping feet and chairs.

"You go on brewhouse duty until Monday," Wilde told Craig. "Then we start a new field job."

Craig wished they were back in the field already. He felt a sudden dislike of Base Camp.

The new job was dusting translocator pollen over the many North Continent areas where, seen from the air, silver streaking into dark green signaled phyto infiltration of old-strain *Thanasis*. The flowerless killers were wind pollinated, with the sexes on separate plants. Old ringwall scars made an overlapping pattern across half the continent, more often than not covered by silvery, iridescent stands of pure phyto growth were *Thanasis* had once ravaged. Wilde charted new ringwalls to be blown the next time out. It was hot, sweaty work in the black protective suits and helmets. They stayed contaminated and ate canned rations and forgot about campfires. After two weeks their pollen cargo was used up and they landed at Burton Island. They spent half a day decontaminating. As soon as he could, Craig broke away and hurried down the gorge path.

He found Midori by the pool. She had been bathing. Her yel-

low print dress molded damply to her rounded figure and her hair still dripped. What if I'd come a few minutes earlier, Craig could not help thinking. He remembered Cobb's raucous voice: sometimes all you have to do is ask them quiet ones. He shook his head. No. No.

"Hello, Midori," he said.

Small phytos, patterned curiously in gold and scarlet and green, clung to her bare arms and shoulders. She was glad to see him. She smiled sadly when he told her about spreading translocator pollen. A phyto settled on Craig's shoulder and he tried to change the subject.

"What makes 'em do that?" he asked. "The guys think they suck blood, but they never leave no mark on me."

"They take fluid samples, but so tiny you can't feel it."

He shook the phyto off his hand. "Do they really?"

"Tiny, tiny samples. They're curious about us."

"Just tasting of us, huh?" He frowned. "If they can eat us, how come us and pigs and dinotheres can't eat them?"

"Foolish Roy! They don't *eat* us!" She stamped a bare foot. "They want to understand us, but the only symbols they have are atoms and groups and radicals and so on." She laughed. "Sometimes I wonder what they do think of us. Maybe they think we're giant seeds. Maybe they think we're each a single, terribly complicated molecule." She brushed her lips against a small scarlet and silver phyto on her wrist and it shifted to her cheek. "This is just their way of trying to live with us," she said.

"Just the same, it's what we call eating."

"They eat only water and sunshine. They can't conceive of life that preys on life." She stamped her foot again. "Eating! Oh, Roy! It's more like a kiss!"

Craig wished he were a phyto, to touch her smooth arms and shoulders and her firm cheek. He inhaled deeply.

"I know a better kind of kiss," he said.

"Do you, Roy?" She dropped her eyes.

"Yes, I do," he said unsteadily. Needles prickled his sweating hands that felt as big as baskets. "Midori, I . . . someday I . . ."

"Yes, Roy?"

"Ho the camp!" roared a voice from up the path.

It was Wilde, striding along, grinning with his horse teeth.

"Pop Toyama's throwing us a party, come along," he said. He looked closely at Midori and whistled. "Hey there, pretty little Midori, you look good enough to eat," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Wilde." The small voice was cold.

On the way up the path Wilde told Midori, "I learned the *Tanko* dance on Belconti. I told Pop if he'd play, you and I'd dance it for him, after we eat."

"I don't feel at all like dancing," Midori said.

Wilde and Cobb flanked Midori at the dinner table and vied in paying rough court to her afterward in the small sitting room. Craig talked to Helen Toyama in a corner. She was a plump, placid woman and she pretended not to hear the rough hunting stories Jordan, Rice and Whelan were telling each other. Papa Toyama kept on his feet, pouring the hot wine. He looked thin and old and fragile. Craig kept his eye on Midori. Wilde was getting red faced and loud and he wouldn't keep his hands off Midori. He gulped bowl after bowl of wine. Suddenly he stood up.

"Hey, a toast!" he shouted. "On your feet, men! Guns up for pretty little Midori!"

They stood and drank. Wilde broke his bowl with his hands. He put one fragment in his pocket and handed another to Midori. She shook her head, refusing it. Wilde grinned.

"We'll see a lot of you folks, soon," he said. "Meant to tell you. Barim's moving you in to Base Camp. Our lab men will fly over next week to pick out what they can use of your gear."

Papa Toyama's lined, gentle face paled. "We have always understood that Burton Island would remain a sanctuary for the study of phytos," he said.

"It was never a Mordin understanding, Pop."

Toyama looked helplessly from Midori to Helen. "How much time have we to close out our projects?" he asked.

Wilde shrugged. "Say a month, if you need that long."

"We do, and more." Anger touched the old man's voice. "Why can't we at least stay here until the Belconti relief ship comes?"

"This has been our home for twenty years," Helen said softly.

"I'll ask the Huntsman to give you all the time he can," Wilde said more gently. "But as soon as he pulls a harvest of pure-line translocator seed out of the forcing chambers, he wants to seed this island. We figure to get a maximum effect in virgin territory."

Papa Toyama blinked and nodded. "More wine?" he asked, looking around the room.

When Wilde and Midori danced, Papa Toyama's music sounded strange to Craig. It sounded sad as the piping of phytos.

These translocator hybrids were sure deathific, the lab men chortled. Their free-systems had high thermal stability; that would get around the sneaky phyto trick of running a fever. Their recombination index was fantastic. There would be a time lag in gross effect, of course. Phyto infiltration of old-strain *Thanasis* areas was still accelerating. Belconti bastards should've started translocation years ago, the lab men grumbled. Scared, making their jobs last, wanted this planet for themselves. But wait. Just wait.

Craig and Jordan became good friends. One afternoon Craig sat waiting for Jordan at a table in the cavernous, smoky beer hall. On the rifle range an hour earlier he had fired three perfect Great Russel patterns and beaten Jordan by ten points. Barim had chanced by, slapped Craig's shoulder, and called him "stout rifle." Craig glowed at the memory. He saw Jordan coming with the payoff beer, threading between crowded, noisy tables and the fire pit where the pig carcass turned. Round face beaming, Jordan set four bottles on the rough plank table.

"Drink up, hunter!" he said. "Boy, today you earned it!"

Craig grinned back at him and took a long drink. "My brain was ice," he said. "It wasn't like me doing it."

Jordan drank and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "That's how it takes you when it's for real," he said. "You turn into one big rifle."

"What's it like, Jordan? What's it really like, then?"

"Nobody can ever say." Jordan looked upward into the smoke. "You don't eat for two days, they take you through the

hunt ceremonies, you get to feeling light headed and funny, like you don't have a name or a family any more. Then. . . ." His nostrils flared and he clenched his fists. "Then . . . well, for me . . . there was Great Russel coming at me, getting bigger and bigger . . . filling the whole world . . . just him and me in the world." Jordan's face paled and he closed his eyes. "That's the moment! Oh, oh oh, that's the moment!" He sighed, then looked solemnly at Craig. "I fired the pattern like it was somebody else, the way you just said. Three sided and I *felt* it hit wide, but I picked it up with a spare."

Craig's heart thudded. He leaned forward. "Were you scared then, even the least little bit?"

"You ain't scared then, because you're Great Russel himself." Jordan leaned forward too, whispering. "You feel your own shots hit you, Craig, and you know you can't never be scared again. It's like a holy dance you and Great Russel been practicing for a million years. After that, somewhere inside you, you never stop doing that dance until you die." Jordan sighed again, leaned back and reached for his bottle.

"I dream about it lots," Craig said. His hands were shaking. "I wake up scared and sweating. Well, anyway, I mailed my application to the Hunt College by the ship you came here on."

"You'll gun through, Craig. Did you hear the Huntsman call you 'stout rifle'?"

"Yeah, like from a long way off." Craig grinned happily.

"Move your fat rump, Jordan," a jovial voice shouted.

It was Joe Breen, the bald, squat lab man. He had six bottles clasped in his hairy arms. Sidis came behind him. Joe put down his bottles.

"This is Sidis, my Belconti seeing eye," he said.

"We know Sidis, he's an old ringwaller himself," Jordan said. "Hi, Sidis. You're getting fat."

"Hello, Jordan, Roy," Sidis said. "Don't see you around much."

He and Joe sat down. Joe uncapped bottles.

"We're in the field most all the time now," Craig said.

"You'll be out more, soon as we pull the pure-line translocator seed," Joe said. "We almost got it. Sidis has kittens every day."

"You grow 'em, we'll plant 'em, eh Craig?" Jordan said. "Sidis, why don't you get off Joe's neck and come ringwalling again?"

"Too much to learn here in the labs," Sidis said. "We're all going to make our reputations out of this, if Joe and his pals don't kill us before we can publish."

"Damn the labs; give me the field. Right, Craig?"

"Right. It's clean and good out with the phytos," Craig said. "This resorption they got, it does away with things being dirty and rotten and dead—"

"Well, arrow my guts!" Joe thumped down his bottle. "Beer must make you poetical, Blanky," he snorted. "What you really mean is, they eat their own dead and their own dung. Now make a poem out of that!"

Craig felt the familiar helpless anger. "With them everything is alive all the time without stopping," he said. "All you can say they eat is water and sunshine."

"They eat water and fart helium," Joe said. "I been reading some old reports. Some old-timer name of Toyama thought they could catalyze hydrogen fusion."

"They do. That's established," Sidis said. "They can grow at night and underground and in the winter. When you stop to think about it, they're pretty wonderful."

"Damn if you ain't a poet too," Joe said. "All you Belcontis are poets."

"We're not, but I wish we had more poets," Sidis said. "Roy, you haven't forgotten what I told you once?"

"I ain't a poet," Craig said. "I can't rhyme nothing."

"Craig's all right. Barim called him 'stout rifle' on the range this afternoon," Jordan said. He wanted to change the subject. "Joe, that old guy Toyama, he's still here. Out on Burton Island. We got orders to move him in to Base Camp on our next field trip."

"Great Russel, he must've been here twenty years!" Joe said. "How's he ever stood it?"

"Got his wife along," Jordan said. "Craig here is going on three years. He's standing it."

"He's turning into a damned poet," Joe said. "Blanky, you bet-

ter go home for sure on the next relief ship, while you're still a kind of a man."

Craig found Midori alone in her house. It looked bare. Her paintings lay strapped together beside crates of books and clothing. She smiled at him, but she looked tired and sad.

"It's hard, Roy. I don't want to leave here," she said. "I can't bear to think of what you're going to do to this island."

"I never think about what we do, except that it just has to be," he said. "Can I help you pack?"

"I'm finished. We've worked for days, packing. And now Barim won't give us transportation for our cases of specimens." She looked ready to cry. "Papa Toyama's heart is broken," she said.

Craig bit his lip. "Heck, we can carry fifty tons," he said. "We got the room. Why don't I ask Mr. Wilde to take 'em anyway?"

She grasped his arm and looked up at him. "Would you, Roy? I . . . don't want to ask him a favor. The cases are stacked outside the lab building."

Craig found his chance after supper at the Toyamas. Wilde left off paying court to Midori and carried his wine bowl outside. Craig followed and asked him. Wilde was looking up at the sky. Both moons rode high in a clear field of stars.

"What's in the cases, did you say?" Wilde asked.

"Specimens, slides and stuff. It's kind of like art to 'em."

"All ours now. I'm supposed to destroy it," Wilde said. "Oh, hell! All right, if you want to strong-back the stuff aboard." He chuckled. "I about got Midori talked into taking one last walk down to that pool of hers. I'll tell her you're loading the cases." He nudged Craig. "Might help, huh?"

When he had the eighty-odd cases stowed and lashed, Craig lifted the flyer to a hundred feet to test his trim. Through his side window he saw Wilde and Midori come out of the Toyama house and disappear together down the gorge path. Wilde had his arm across her shoulders. Craig grounded and went back, but he could not rejoin the party. For an hour he paced outside in

dull, aching anger. Then his crewmates came out, arguing noisily.

"Ho Craig! Where been, boy?" Jordan slapped his shoulder. "I just bet Cobb you could outgun him tomorrow, like you did me. We'll stick old Cobbo for the beer, eh, boy?"

"Like hell," Cobb said.

"Like shooting birds in a cage," Jordan said. "Come along, Craig. Get some sleep. You got to be right tomorrow."

"I ain't sleepy," Craig said.

"Bet old Bork's shooting himself a cage bird about now," Cobb said.

They all laughed except Craig.

On the trip to Base Camp next morning Craig, at the controls, heard Wilde singing hunt songs and making jokes back in the main cabin. He seemed to be still drunk. With high good humor he even helped his crew deliver the baggage to Belconti quarters. Craig had no chance to speak to Midori. He was not sure he wanted a chance. That afternoon Cobb out-gunned Craig badly. Jordan tried to console him, but Craig drank himself sodden. He woke the next morning to Jordan's insistent shaking.

"Wake up, damn it! We're going out again, right away!" Jordan said. "Don't let Bork catch you sleeping late. Something went wrong for him last night over in Belconti quarters, and he's mad as a split snake."

Still dizzy and sick four hours later, and wearing his black pro suit, Craig grounded the flyer again at Burton Island. They had a cargo of pure-line translocator seed. The men got out. Wilde wore a black frown.

"Jordan and Blanky, you seed that gorge path all the way to the waterfall," he ordered.

"I thought we picked high, sunny places," Jordan objected. "It's shady down there."

"Seed it, I told you!" Wilde bared his horse teeth. "Come on, Rice, Cobb, Whelan! Get going around these buildings!"

When they had finished the seeding, Jordan and Craig rested

briefly on the quartz boulder near the pool. For the first time, Craig let himself look around. Phytos danced piping above their heads. The stems marching up the steep slopes transmuted the golden sun glare to a strong, silvery moonlight. It sparkled on the quartz ledge and the cascading water.

"Say, it's pretty down here," Jordan said. "Kind of twangs your string, don't it? It'll make a nice hunting camp someday."

"Let's go up," Craig said. "They'll be waiting."

Lifting out of the field at sunset, Craig looked down at the deserted station from his side window. Midori's house looked small and forlorn and accusing.

At Base Camp six men died of a mutant free-system before the immunizer could be synthesized. An escaped control virus wiped out a translocator seed crop and Wilde's men got an unscheduled rest after months of driving work. The once roaring, jovial atmosphere of Base Camp had turned glum. The lab men muttered about Belconti sabotage. They drank a great deal, not happily.

On his first free day Craig checked out a sports flyer, found Midori in the Belconti quarters, and asked her to go riding. She came, wearing a white blouse and pearls and a blue and yellow flare skirt. She seemed sad, her small face half dreaming and her eyes unfocused. Craig forgot about being angry with her and wanted to cheer her. When he was a mile up and heading south, he tried.

"You look pretty in that dress, like a phyto," he said.

She smiled faintly. "My poor phytos. How I miss them," she said. "Where are we going, Roy?"

"Russel Island, down ahead there. I want you to see Great Russel."

"I want to see him," she said. A moment later she cried out and grasped his arm. "Look at that color in the sky! Over to the right!"

It was a patch of softly twinkling, shifting colors far off and high in the otherwise cloudless sky.

"Migratory phytos," he said. "We see 'em all the time."

"I know. Let's go up close. Please, Roy."

He arrowed the flyer toward the green-golden cloud. It resolved into millions of phytos, each with its opalescent hydrogen sac inflated and drifting northwest in the trade wind.

"They stain the air with beauty!" Midori cried. Her face was vividly awake and her eyes sparkled. "Go clear inside, please, Roy!"

She used to look like that when she was painting in the gorge, Craig remembered. It was the way he liked her best. He matched wind speed inside the cloud and at once lost all sense of motion. Vividly colored phytos obscured land, sea and sky. Craig felt lost and dizzy. He moved closer to Midori. She slid open her window to let in the piping and the spicy perfume.

"It's so beautiful I can't bear it," she said. "They have no eyes, Roy. We must know for them how beautiful they are."

She began piping and trilling in her clear voice. A phyto patterned in scarlet and green and silver dropped to her outstretched hand and she sang to it. It deflated its balloon and quivered velvety wings. Craig shifted uneasily.

"It acts almost like it knows you," he said.

"It knows I love it."

"Love? Something so different?" He frowned. "That ain't how I mean love."

She looked up. "How do you understand love?"

"Well, you want to protect people you love, fight for 'em, do things for 'em." He was blushing. "What could you do for a phyto?"

"Stop trying to exterminate them," she said softly.

"Don't start that again. I don't like to think about it either. But I know it just has to be."

"It will never be," she said. "I know. Look at all the different color patterns out there. Papa Toyama remembers when phytos were almost all green. They developed the new pigments and patterns to make counter-substances against *Thanasis.*" She lowered her voice. "Think of it, Roy. All the colors and patterns

are new ideas in this planet's strange, inconceivably powerful biochemical mind. This cloud is a message, from one part of it to another part of it. Doesn't it frighten you?"

"You scare me." He moved slightly away from her. "I didn't know they been changing like that."

"Who stays here long enough to notice? Who cares enough to look and see?" Her lips trembled. "But just think of the agony and the changings, through all the long years men have been trying to kill this planet. What if something . . . somehow . . . suddenly *understands?*"

Craig's neck-hair bristled. He moved further away. He felt weird and alone, without time or place or motion in that piping, perfumed phyto cloud-world. He couldn't face Midori's eyes.

"Damn it, this planet belongs to Great Russel!" he said harshly. "We'll win yet! At least they'll never take back Base or Russel Islands. Their seeds can't walk on water."

She kept her eyes on his, judging or pleading or questioning, he could not tell. He could not bear them. He dropped his own eyes.

"Shake that thing off your hand!" he ordered. "Close your window. I'm getting out of here!"

Half an hour later Craig hovered the flyer over the wholesome green grass and honest oak trees of Russel Island. He found Great Russel and held him in the magniviewer and they watched him catch and kill a buffalo. Midori gasped.

"Ten feet high at the shoulder. Four tons, and light on his feet as a cat," Craig said proudly. "That long, reddish hair is like wire. Them bluish bare spots are like armor plate."

"Aren't his great teeth enough to kill the cattle he eats?" she asked. "What enemies can he have, to need those terrible horns and claws?"

"His own kind. And us. Our boys will hunt him here, here on this planet, and become men. Our men will hunt him here, to heal their souls."

"You love him, don't you? Did you know you were a poet?"

She could not take her eyes off the screen. "He *is* beautiful, fierce and terrible, not what women call beauty."

"He's the planet-shaker, he is! It takes four perfect shots to bring him down," Craig said. "He jumps and roars like the world ending—oh, Midori, I'll have my day!"

"But you might be killed."

"The finest kind of death. In our lost colony days our old fathers fought him with bow and arrow," Craig said. "Even now, sometimes, we form a sworn band and fight him to the death with spears and arrows."

"I've read of sworn bands. I suppose you can't help how you feel."

"I don't want to help it! A sworn band is the greatest honor that can come to a man," he said. "But thanks for trying to understand."

"I want to understand. I want to, Roy. Is it that you can't believe in your own courage until you face Great Russel?"

"That's just what women can't ever understand." He faced the question in her eyes. "Girls can't help turning into women, but a man has to make himself," he said. "It's like I don't have my man's courage until I get it from Great Russel. There's chants and stuff with salt and fire . . . afterwards the boy eats pieces of the heart and . . . I shouldn't talk about that. You'll laugh."

"I feel more like crying." She kept her strange eyes on his. "There are different kinds of courage, Roy. You have more courage than you know. You must find your true courage in your own heart, not in Great Russel's."

"I can't." He looked away from her eyes. "I'm nothing inside me, until I face Great Russel."

"Take me home, Roy. I'm afraid I'm going to cry." She dropped her face to her folded hands. "I don't have much courage," she said.

They flew to Base Camp in silence. When Craig helped her down from the flyer, she was really crying. She bowed her head momentarily against his chest and the spicy phyto smell rose from her hair.

"Goodbye, Roy," she said.

He could barely hear her. Then she turned and ran.

Craig did not see her again. Wilde's crew spent all its time in the field, blowing ringwalls and planting translocator seed. Craig was glad to be away. The atmosphere of Base Camp had turned from glum to morose. Everywhere across North Continent new phyto growth in silver, green and scarlet spotted the dark green *Thanasis* areas. Other ringwall crews reported the same of South and Main Continents. Wilde's temper became savage; Cobb cursed bitterly at trifles; even happy-go-lucky Jordan stopped joking. Half asleep one night in field camp, Craig heard Wilde shouting incredulous questions at the communicator inside the flyer. He came out cursing to rouse the camp.

"Phytos are on Base Island! Stems popping up everywhere!"

"Great Russel in the sky!" Jordan jerked full awake. "How come?"

"Belconti bastards planted 'em, that's how!" Wilde said. "Barim's got 'em all arrested under camp law."

Cobb began cursing in a steady, monotonous voice.

"That . . . cracks . . . the gun-flint!" Jordan said.

"We'll kill 'em by hand," Wilde said grimly. "We'll sow the rest of our seed broadcast and go in to help."

Craig felt numb and unbelieving. Shortly after noon he grounded the flyer at Base Camp, in the foul area beyond the emergency rocket launching frame. Wilde cleaned up at once and went to see Barim, while his crew decontaminated the flyer. When they came through the irradiation tunnel in clean denims, Wilde was waiting.

"Blanky, come with me!" he barked.

Craig followed him into the gray stone building at the field edge. Wilde pushed him roughly through a door, said "Here he is, Huntsman," and closed the door again.

Rifles, bows and arrows decorated the stone walls. The burly Chief Huntsman, cold eyed under his roached gray hair and the four red dots, sat facing the door from behind a wooden desk. He motioned Craig to sit down in one of the row of wooden

chairs along the inner wall. Craig sat stiffly in the one nearest the door. His mouth was dry.

"Roy Craig, you are on your trial for life and honor under camp law," Barim said sternly. "Swear now to speak truth in the blood of Great Russel."

"I swear to speak truth in the blood of Great Russel."

Craig's voice sounded false to him. He began to sweat.

"What would you say of someone who deliberately betrayed our project to destroy the phytos?" Barim asked.

"He would be guilty of hunt treason, sir. An outlaw."

"Very well." Barim clasped his hands and leaned forward, his gray eyes hard on Craig's eyes. "What did you tell Bork Wilde was in those cases you flew from Burton Island to Base Island?"

Craig's stomach knotted. "Slides, specimens, science stuff, sir."

Barim questioned him closely about the cases. Craig tried desperately to speak truth without naming Midori. Barim forced her name from him, then questioned him on her attitudes. A terrible fear grew in Roy Craig. He kept his eyes on Barim's eyes and spoke a tortured kind of truth, but he would not attaint Midori. Finally Barim broke their locked gazes and slapped his desk.

"Are you in *love* with Midori Blake, boy?" he roared.

Craig dropped his glance. "I don't know, sir," he said. He thought miserably: how do you know when you're in love? "Well . . . I like to be around her . . . I never thought . . . I know we're good friends." He gulped. "I don't think so, sir," he said finally.

"Phyto seeds are loose on Base Island," Barim said. "Who planted them?"

"They can walk and plant themselves, sir." Craig's mouth was dry as powder. He avoided Barim's glance.

"Would Midori Blake be morally capable of bringing them here and releasing them?"

Craig's face twisted. "Morally . . . I'm not clear on the word, sir. . . ." Sweat dripped on his hands.

"I mean, would she have the guts to want to do it and to do it?"

Ice clamped Craig's heart. He looked Barim in the eye. "No, sir!" he said. "I won't never believe that about Midori!"

Barim smiled grimly and slapped his desk again. "Wilde!" he shouted. "Bring them in!"

Midori, in white blouse and black skirt, came in first. Her face was pale but composed, and she smiled faintly at Craig. Mildred Ames followed, slender and thin faced in white, then Wilde, scowling blackly. Wilde sat between Craig and Miss Ames, Midori on the end.

"Miss Blake, young Craig has clearly been your dupe, as you insist he has," Barim said. "Your confession ends your trial except for sentencing. Once more I beg of you to say why you have done this."

"You would not understand," Midori said. "Be content with what you know."

Her voice was low but firm. Craig felt sick with dismay.

"I can understand without condoning," Barim said. "For your own sake, I must know your motive. You may be insane."

"You know I'm sane. You know that."

"Yes," Barim's wide shoulders sagged. "Invent a motive, then." He seemed almost to plead. "Say you hate Mordin. Say you hate me."

"I hate no one. I'm sorry for you all."

"I'll give you a reason!" Miss Ames jumped to her feet, thin face flaming. "Your reckless, irresponsible use of translocation endangers us all! Accept defeat and go home!"

She helped Barim recover his composure. He smiled.

"Please sit down, Miss Ames," he said calmly. "In three months your relief ship will come to take you to safety. But we neither accept defeat nor fear death. We will require no tears of anyone."

Miss Ames sat down, her whole posture shouting defiance. Barim swung his eyes back to Midori. His face turned to iron.

"Miss Blake, you are guilty of hunt treason. You have betrayed your own kind in a fight with an alien life form," he said. "Unless you admit to some recognizably *human* motive, I must conclude that you abjure your own humanity."

Midori said nothing. Craig stole a glance at her. She sat erect but undefiant, small feet together, small hands folded in her lap. Barim slapped his desk and stood up.

"Very well. Under camp law I sentence you, Midori Blake, to outlawry from your kind. You are a woman and not of Mordin; therefore I will remit the full severity. You will be set down, lacking everything made with hands, on Russel Island. There you may still be nourished by the roots and berries of the Earth-type life you have wilfully betrayed. If you survive until the Belconti relief ship comes, you will be sent home on it." He burned his glance at her. "Have you anything to say before I cause your sentence to be executed?"

The four red dots blazed against the sudden pallor of the Huntsman's forehead. Something snapped in Craig. He leaped up, shouting into the hush.

"You can't do it, sir! She's little and weak! She doesn't know our ways—"

"Down! Shut up, you whimpering fool!" Wilde slapped and wrestled Craig to his seat again. "Silence!" Barim thundered. Wilde sat down, breathing hard. The room was hushed again.

"I understand your ways too well," Midori said. "Spare me your mercy. Put me down on Burton Island."

"Midori, no!" Miss Ames turned to her. "You'll starve. *Thanasis* will kill you!"

"You can't understand either, Mildred," Midori said. "Mr. Barim, will you grant my request?"

Barim leaned forward, resting on his hands. "It is so ordered," he said huskily. "Midori Blake, almost you make me know again the taste of fear." He straightened and turned to Wilde, his voice suddenly flat and impersonal. "Carry out the sentence, Wilde."

Wilde stood up and pulled Craig to his feet. "Get the crew to the flyer. Wear pro suits," he ordered. "*Run,* boy."

Craig stumbled out into the twilight.

Craig drove the flyer northwest from Base Camp at full throttle, overtaking the sun, making it day again. Silence ached in the main cabin behind him. He leaned away from it, as if to push

the flyer forward with his muscles. He was refusing to think at all. He knew it had to be and still he could not bear it. After an anguished forever he grounded the flyer roughly beside the deserted buildings on Burton Island. They got out, the men in black pro suits, Midori still in blouse and skirt. She stood apart quietly and looked toward her little house on the cliff edge. *Thanasis* thrust up dark green and knee high along all the paths.

"Break out ringwall kits. Blow all the buildings," Wilde ordered. "Blanky, you come with me."

At Midori's house Wilde ordered Craig to sink explosive pellets every three feet along the foundations. A single pellet would have been enough. Craig found his voice.

"The Huntsman didn't say do this, Mr. Wilde. Can't we at least leave her this house?"

"She won't need it. *Thanasis* will kill her before morning."

"Let her have it to die in, then. She loved this little house."

Wilde grinned without mirth, baring his big horse teeth.

"She's *outlaw,* Blanky. You know the law: nothing made with hands."

Craig bowed his head, teeth clamped. Wilde whistled tunelessly as Craig set the pellets. They returned to the flyer and Jordan reported the other buildings ready to blow. His round, jolly face was grim. Midori had not moved. Craig wanted to speak to her, say goodbye. He knew if he tried he would find no words but a howl. Her strange little smile seemed already to remove her to another world a million light-years from Roy Craig and his kind. Cobb looked at Midori. His rat face was eager.

"We'll detonate from the air," Wilde said. "The blast will kill anyone standing here."

"We're supposed to take off all her clothes first," Cobb said. "You know the law, Bork: nothing made with hands."

"That's right," Wilde said.

Midori took off her blouse. She looked straight at Wilde. Red mist clouded Craig's vision.

"Load the kits," Wilde said abruptly. "Into the flyer, all hands! *Jump,* you dogs!"

From his side window by the controls Craig saw Midori start down the gorge path. She walked as carelessly relaxed as if she were going down to paint. *Thanasis* brushed her bare legs and he thought he saw the angry red spring out. Craig felt the pain in his own skin. He lifted the flyer with a lurching roar and he did not look out when Wilde blew up the buildings.

Away from the sun, southwest toward Base Camp, wrapped in his own thought-vacant hell, Roy Craig raced to meet the night.

With flame, chemicals and grub hoes, the Mordinmen fought their losing battle for Base Island. Craig worked himself groggy with fatigue, to keep from thinking. The phyto stems radiated underground with incredible growth energy. They thrust up redoubly each new day like hydra heads. Newly budded phytos the size of thumbnails tinted the air of Base Island in gaily dancing swirls. Once Craig saw Joe Breen, the squat lab man, cursing and hopping like a frog while he slashed at dancing phytos with an axe. It seemed to express the situation.

Barim made his grim decisions to move camp to Russel Island and seed the home island with *Thanasis*. Craig was helping erect the new camp when he collapsed. He awoke in bed in a small, bare infirmary room at Base Camp. The Mordin doctor took blood samples and questioned him. Craig admitted to joint pains and nausea for several days past.

"I been half crazy, sir," he defended himself. "I didn't know I was sick."

"I've got twenty more do know it," the doctor grunted.

He went out, frowning. Craig slept, to flee in dream-terror from a woman's eyes. He half woke at intervals for medication and clinical tests, to sleep again and face repeatedly a Great Russel dinothere. It looked at him with a woman's inscrutable eyes. He roused into the morning of the second day to find another bed squeezed into the small room, by the window. Papa Toyama was in it. He smiled at Craig.

"Good morning, Roy," he said. "I would be happier to meet you in another place."

Many were down and at least ten had died, he told Craig.

The Belconti staff was back in the labs, working frantically to identify agent and vector. Craig felt hollow and his head ached. He did not much care. Dimly he saw Miss Ames in a white lab smock come around the foot of his bed to stand between him and Papa Toyama. She took the old man's hand.

"George, old friend, we've found it," she said.

"You do not smile, Mildred."

"I don't smile. All night I've been running a phase analysis of diffraction patterns," she said. "It's what we've feared—a spread of two full Ris units."

"So. Planet Froy again." Papa Toyama's voice was calm. "I would like to be with Helen again, for the little time we have."

"Surely," Miss Ames said. "I'll see to it."

Quick, heavy footsteps sounded outside. A voice broke in.

"Ah. Here you are, Miss Ames."

Barim, in leather hunting clothes, bulked in the door. Miss Ames turned to face him across Craig's bed.

"I'm told you found the virus," Barim said.

"Yes." Miss Ames smiled thinly.

"Well, what counter-measures? Twelve are dead. What can I do?"

"You might shoot at it with a rifle. It is a *Thanasis* free-system that has gotten two degrees of temporal freedom. Does that mean anything to you?"

His heavy jaw set like a trap. "No, but your manner does. It's the plague, isn't it?"

She nodded. "No suit can screen it. No cure is possible. We are all infected."

Barim chewed his lip and looked at her in silence. "For your sake now, I wish we'd never come here," he said at last. "I'll put our emergency rocket in orbit to broadcast a warning message. That will save your relief ship, when it comes, and Belconti can warn the sector." A half-smile softened his bluff, grim features. "Why don't you rub my nose in it? Say you told me so?"

"Need I?" Her chin came up. "I pity you Mordinmen. You must all die now without dignity, crying out for water and your mothers. How you will loathe that!"

"Does that console you?" Barim still smiled. "Not so, Miss Ames. All night I thought it might come to this. Even now men are forging arrow points. We'll form a sworn band and all die fighting Great Russel." His voice deepened and his eyes blazed. "We'll stagger who can, crawl who must, carry our helpless, and all die fighting like men!"

"Like savages! No! No!" Her hands flew up in shocked protest. "Forgive me for taunting you, Mr. Barim. I need your help, all of your men and transport, truly I do. Some of us may live, if we fight hard enough."

"How?" He growled it. "I thought on Planet Froy—"

"Our people on Planet Froy had only human resources. But here, I'm certain that somewhere already the phytos have synthesized the plague immunizer that seems forever impossible to human science." Her voice shook. "Please help us, Mr. Barim. If we can find it, isolate enough to learn its structure—"

"No." He cut her off bluntly. "Too long a gamble. One doesn't run squealing away from death, Miss Ames. My way is decent and sure."

Her chin came up and her voice sharpened. "How dare you condemn your own men unconsulted? They might prefer a fight for life."

"Hah! You don't know them!" Barim bent to shake Craig's shoulder with rough affection. "You, lad," he said. "You'll get up and walk with a sworn band, won't you?"

"No," Craig said.

He struggled off the pillow, propped shakily on his arms. Miss Ames smiled and patted his cheek.

"You'll stay and help us fight to live, won't you?" she said.

"No," Craig said.

"Think what you say, lad!" Barim said tautly. "Great Russel can die of plague, too. We owe him a clean death."

Craig sat bolt upright. He stared straight ahead.

"I foul the blood of Great Russel," he said slowly and clearly. "I foul it with dung. I foul it with carrion. I foul—"

Barim's fist knocked Craig to the pillow and split his lip. The Huntsman's face paled under his tan.

"You're mad, boy!" he whispered. "Not even in madness may you say those words!"

Craig struggled up again. "You're the crazy ones, not me," he said. He tongued his lip and blood dripped on his thin pajama coat. "I'll die an outlaw, that's how I'll die," he said. "An outlaw, on Burton Island." He met Barim's unbelieving eyes. "I foul the blood—"

"Silence!" Barim shouted. "Outlawry it is. I'll send a party for you, stranger."

He whirled and stamped out. Miss Ames followed him.

"You Mordinmen," she said, shaking her head.

Craig sat on the edge of his bed and pulled his sweat soaked pajamas straight. The room blurred and swam around him. Papa Toyama's smile was like a light.

"I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed. Please forgive us, Papa Toyama," Craig said. "All we know is to kill and kill and kill."

"We all do what we must," the old man said. "Death cancels all debts. It will be good to rest."

"Not my debts. I'll never rest again," Craig said. "All of a sudden I know—Great Russel, *how* I know!—I know I loved Midori Blake."

"She was a strange girl. Helen and I thought she loved you, in the old days on our island." Papa Toyama bowed his head. "But our lives are only chips in a waterfall. Goodbye, Roy."

Jordan, in a black pro suit, came shortly after. His face was bitter with contempt. He jerked his thumb at the door.

"On your feet, stranger! Get going!" he snapped.

In pajamas and barefooted, Craig followed him. From somewhere in the infirmary he heard a voice screaming. It sounded like Cobb. They walked across the landing field. Everything seemed under water. Men were rigging to fuel the emergency rocket. Craig sat apart from the others in the flyer. Cobb was missing. Wilde was flushed and shivering and his eyes glared with fever. Jordan took the controls. No one spoke. Craig dozed through colored dream-scraps while the flyer outran the sun. He woke when it grounded in early dawn on Burton Island.

He climbed down and stood swaying beside the flyer. *Thanasis* straggled across the rubble heaps and bulked waist high in the dim light along the paths. Phytos stirred on their stems and piped sleepily in the damp air. Craig's eyes searched for something, a memory, a presence, a completion and rest, he did not know what. He felt it very near him. Wilde came behind him, shoving. Craig moved away.

"Stranger!" Wilde called.

Craig turned. He looked into the fever glaring eyes above the grinning horse teeth. The teeth gaped.

"I foul the blood of Midori Blake. I foul it with dung. I—"

Strength from nowhere exploded into the bone and muscle of Roy Craig. He sprang and felt the teeth break under his knuckles. Wilde fell. The others scrambled down from the flyer.

"Blood right! Blood right!" Craig shouted.

"Blood right!" Wilde echoed.

Jordan held back Rice and Whelan. Strength flamed along Craig's nerves. Wilde rose, spitting blood, swinging big fists. Craig closed to meet him, berserk in fury. The world wheeled and tilted, shot with flashing colors, gasping with grunts and curses, but rock-steady in the center of things Wilde pressed the fight and Craig hurled it back on him. He felt the blows without pain, felt his ribs splinter, felt the good shock of his own blows all the way to his ankles. Bruising falls on the rough slag, feet stamping, arms grappling, hands tearing, breath sobbing, both men on knees clubbing with fists and forearms. The scene cleared and Craig saw through one eye Wilde crumpled and inert before him. He rose unsteadily. He felt weightless and clean inside.

"Blood right, stranger," Jordan said, grim faced and waiting.

"Let it go," Craig said.

He turned down the gorge path, ignoring his chest pains, crashing through the rank *Thanasis*. *Home!* going *home!* going *home!* a bell tolled in his head. He did not look back.

Thanasis grew more sparsely in the shaded gorge. Craig heard the waterfall and old memories cascaded upon him. He rounded to view of it and his knees buckled and he knelt beside

the boulder. She was very near him. He felt an overpowering sense of her presence. She was this place.

Dawn light shafted strongly into the gorge. It sparkled on the quartz ledge and made reflecting rainbows in the spray above the pool. Phytos lifted from ghost-silver stems to dance their own rainbow in the air. Something rose in Craig's throat and choked him. Tears blurred his good eye.

"Midori," he said. "Midori."

The feeling overwhelmed him. His heart was bursting. He could find no words. He raised his arms and battered face to the sky and cried out incoherently. Then a blackness swept away his intolerable pain.

Titanic stirrings. Windy rushings. Sharp violences swarming.

Fittings-together in darkness. A trillion times a trillion times a trillion patient searchings. Filtering broken lights, silver, green, golden, scarlet.

Bluntings. Smoothings. Transforming into otherness.

Flickering awareness, planet-vast and atom-tiny, no focus between. The proto-sensorium of a god yearning to know himself. Endless, patient agony in search of being.

Form and color outfolding in middle focus. Flashings of terrible joy and love unspeakable. It looked. Listened. Felt. Smelled. Tasted.

Crystalline polar wastes. Wine of sweet. Gold-glint of sun on blue water. Perfumed wind caress. Thorn of bitter. Rain patter. Silver-green sweep of hill. Storm roar and shaking. Sharp of salt. Sleeping mountains. Surf beat. Star patterns dusted on blackness. Clear of sour. Cool moons of night.

It knew and loved.

Ragged line of men gaunt under beard stubble. Green plain. High golden sun. Roar. Shaggy redness bounding. Bow twangs. Whispering arrow lights. Deep-chested shouts of men. Lances thrusting. Bodies ripped. Thrown. Horn-impaled, beating with fists. Great shape kneeling. Threshing. Streaming blood. Deep man-shouts dwindling to a silence.

It knew and sorrowed.

The woman bathing. Sunlight hair streaming. Grace beyond bearing. Beauty that was pain.

It shook terribly with love.

Rested readiness, whole and unblemished forever. The man newly-minted. Bursting excitement. HOME! coming HOME! coming HOME!

It woke into its world.

It was like waking up fresh and rested on the fine morning of a day when something glorious was going to happen. He was sitting up in a cavity at the base of a huge phyto stem. He brushed away papery shreds and saw the pool and heard the waterfall. With a glad cry, Midori came running. He stood up whole and strong to greet her.

"Midori! Midori, when you die . . . ?" He wanted to know a million things, but one came first. "Can I ever lose you again, now?"

"Never again."

She was smiling radiantly. They were both naked. He was not excited and not ashamed.

"We didn't die, Roy," she said. "We're just made new."

"The plague killed everybody."

"I know. But we didn't die."

"Tell me."

He listened like a child, believing without understanding. Somewhere in its infinite life-spectrum the planetary life had matched up a band for humans. "As if we were single giant molecules and it discovered our structural formula," she said. "That's how it thinks." They had been resorbed into the planetary biomass, cleansed of *Thanasis,* and reconstituted whole and without blemish. "We're immune to *Thanasis* now," she said. "We're made new, Roy."

The sunken red *Thanasis* scar was gone from his ankle. All of his other old scars were gone. He held her hands and looked on her beauty and believed her.

"We tried so long and hard to kill it," he said.

"It couldn't know that. To it death and decay are only vital

changings," she said, smiling wonderfully. "This life never split apart, Roy. In wholeness there is nothing but love."

"Love is making a wholeness," he said. "I know about love now."

He told her about his visions.

"I had them too. We were diffused into the planetary consciousness."

"Do we still eat and drink and sleep . . . and all?"

She laughed. "Foolish Roy! Of course we do!" She pulled at his hands. "Come. I'll show you."

Hand in hand they ran to the pool. The gravel hurt his feet. Beside the pool stems had fused ringwall fashion into a series of connecting rooms like hollow cones. He followed Midori through them. They were clean and dry and silvery with shadows. Outside again she pointed out brownish swellings on various stems. She tore one open, the covering like thin paper, to reveal pearly, plum-sized nodules closely packed in a cavity. She bit one nodule in two and held the other half to his lips.

"Try," she said.

He ate it. It was cool and crisp, with a delightful, unfamiliar flavor. He ate several more, looking at her in wonder.

"There are hundreds of these vesicles," she said. "No two of them ever taste the same. They're grown just for us."

He looked at her and around at the beauty of the gorge in strong, transmuted sunlight and he could not bear it. He closed his eyes and turned away from her.

"I can't. I can't, Midori," he said. "I ain't good enough for this."

"You are, Roy."

"You loved it before. But all I wanted was to kill it," he said. "Now it's done this for me." The feeling flooded him agonizingly. "I want to love it back and I can't. Not now. Not after. I just *can't,* Midori!"

"Roy. Listen to me." She was in front of him again, but he would not open his eyes. "This life emerged with infinite potentialities. It mastered its environment using only the tiniest part of them," she said. "It never split up, to fight itself and

evolve that way. So it lay dreaming. It might have dreamed forever."

"Only we came, you mean? With *Thanasis?*"

"Yes. We forced it to changes, genetic recombination, rises in temperatures and process speeds. Whatever happened at one point could be duplicated everywhere, because it is all one. One year to it is like millions of years of Earthly evolution. It raised itself to a new level of awareness."

He felt her hand on his arm. He would not open his eyes.

"Listen to me, Roy! We *wakened* it. It knows us and loves us for that."

"Loves us for *Thanasis!*"

"It loves *Thanasis,* too. It conquered *Thanasis* with love."

"And me. Tamed. A pet. A parasite. I *can't,* Midori!"

"Oh no! Roy, *please* understand! It thinks us now, biochemically. Like each littlest phyto, we are thoughts in that strange mind. I think we focus its awareness, somehow, serve it as a symbol system, a form-giver. . . ." She lowered her voice. He could feel her warmth and nearness. "We are its thoughts that also think themselves, the first it has ever had," she whispered. "It is a great and holy mystery, Roy. Only through us can it know its own beauty and wonder. It loves and needs us." She pressed against him. "Roy, *look* at me!"

He opened his eyes. She smiled pleadingly. He ran his hands down the smooth curve of her back and she shivered. He clasped her powerfully. It was all right.

"I can love it back, now," he said. "Through you, I love it."

"I give you back its love," she whispered into his shoulder.

Afterward, arms linked, dazed with their love, they walked down to the sea. They stood on sparkling sand and cool water splashed at their ankles.

"Roy, have you thought? We'll never be ill, never grow old. Never have to die."

He pressed his face into her hair. "Never is a long time."

"If we tire, we can be resorbed and diffuse through the planetary consciousness again. But that's not death."

"Our children can serve."

"And their children."

"It could do this for anybody now, couldn't it?" he asked her quietly.

"Yes. For any old or ill human who might come here," she said. "They could have youth and strength again forever."

"Yes." He looked up at the blue, arching sky. "But there's a rocket up there with a warning message, to scare them away. I wish. I wish they could know. . . ."

"That they are their own plague."

He patted her head to rest again on his shoulder.

"Someday they'll learn," he said.

Here is another one of the beautifully dryly-witty stories which are the trademark of Ron Goulart. This one says dry and witty things about exurban living, modern folk-art, Hollywood, marital happiness, a Strange Thing From The Sea . . . and Max Kearny, Psychic Investigator. You may never be able to believe in any of these things ever again.

McNAMARA'S FISH

by Ron Goulart

THE BEACH ON THE OTHER SIDE of the fence sloped down slowly to the quiet ocean. Max Kearny waited but no one came to warn him about trespassing. He braced himself with one hand against the redwood boards of the fence and took off his shoes and socks. He tied the laces together and hung the shoes around his neck.

The sand was warm, streaked with bright pebbles and broken seashells. Max walked down beyond the scrub topped dunes and then kept parallel with the ocean. A seagull came walking toward him, then angled away as though it were crossing a street to avoid him. The surf hissed in and then slid away and the clam holes popped all along the wet sand.

Standing in a windless cove between low sand hills was a painter's easel. An empty canvas chair fluttered gently in front of the easel and a wooden paint box sat open on the ground near it. Max crossed the sand and looked at the painting. The small canvas showed several men in red mackinaws doing something to rows of trees. Max leaned closer. The men were hanging up syrup buckets probably. In the background among the stick straight trees a horse and buggy was passing.

Max turned from the picture and lit a cigarette. He'd seen a whole wall of pictures like this yesterday in Hollywood at one of the newer art galleries. They were by somebody who signed her-

self Aunt Jenny and would cost you $1000 each. Aunt Jenny's favorite motif was sapbuckets, with an occasional snow storm thrown in.

"Hello, Max."

Max turned again. Standing next to the painting was Joan McNamara. She was a tall blonde girl, deeply tanned now, wearing white shorts and a blue denim shirt. "I saw an easel," Max said, "I thought maybe it was yours."

Joan frowned. "What made you think that?"

"You still are an artist, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. "It's good to see you, Max. What is it—two years?"

"Since you and Ken moved down here from San Francisco."

"You're still with the same agency and all up there?" Joan sat down in the canvas chair, angling it to face Max.

"Yeah. That's why I'm down here. To watch them tape some commercials I did the storyboards for." He dropped his shoes down on the sand. "You said you had a problem."

"I was so glad when you phoned us and said you were down for a week. You still do have your hobby?"

"The occult business," said Max. "Yes."

A gate slammed and then two people appeared, coming toward Max and Joan. One was a tall young man in white duck pants and a pullover cablestitch sweater. With him was an old woman in a flowered silk dress. Her hair was tinted pale blue and she wore an LA Dodgers baseball cap over it.

"Mrs. Willsey and Val," Joan said to them. "This is our friend, Max Kearney. He's an artist, too. Max, Mrs. Willsey and her son, Val Willsey."

Max shook hands with Val.

"Mother is Aunt Jenny," Val said, grinning at the half done painting.

"I've seen her work," said Max.

"Do you paint also?" asked Mrs. Willsey, taking the canvas chair Joan stood to give her.

"No," said Max. "I'm just an art director in an ad agency."

"Sold out?" said Val.

"We didn't have maple trees where I grew up," said Max.

"I didn't touch a brush until I was past forty three," said Mrs. Willsey. "That was more years ago than I'd care to have you guess. Now I do at least three canvases a week."

"Mother's having a one man show at the Alch Gallery on LaCienega next month."

"At first I simply copied colored photos from the magazines," said Mrs. Willsey. "Once I even copied the creation of the world from *Life* magazine. Now, of course, I utilize my own girlhood for subject matter. Paint what you know."

Joan caught Max's arm. "Max will be staying with Ken and me over the weekend. I imagine you'd like a drink or something, Max, after driving all the way from Hollywood to Osodoro Beach."

"Fine," said Max.

They said goodbye to Aunt Jenny and her son and started back across the beach toward the house Joan and Ken McNamara were living in.

"The place is awful, isn't it?" Joan said.

"No. But it's big as hell."

"At least it's not Moorish."

"It's whose house? Ken's dad's?"

"Ewen McNamara himself, yes. He's retired from the movie business and living in Arizona. He gave us the damn place more or less."

"What's Ken doing?"

Joan shrugged. "He doesn't have a job right now. I'm doing pretty well. Freelancing ad stuff and selling a painting now and then."

"I thought Ken had somebody to finance the boat."

"Boat?"

"You wrote he was going to prove Heyerdahl wrong and do something in the Pacific with a raft."

"Oh, yes. No, Ken decided not to. All the bomb tests out there and all. He thought he'd be arrested as a pacifist." Joan stopped and pointed at a driftwood log. "Let's sit there for a minute. I take it you didn't find Ken back at the house?"

"No. Nobody. I decided to look for you on the beach."

Joan sat on the log and stretched her legs straight out in front of her. "Now, Max, you've made a lifetime study of the supernatural."

"No," said Max, sitting beside her. "Only the past couple of years."

"Well, you know enough." She spread her fingers wide and slid her hands down her legs to her knees. Rocking slightly she said, "Living by the ocean has been quite a thing."

"You've picked up quite a tan."

"Ken, too. Wait till you see him. No, but, what I mean is that especially at night there's something about the ocean. You know. You've read all the stuff about the mysteries of the deep and the poems what's his name Arnold and John Masefield wrote."

"I like Popeye, too. Is what's bothering you the ocean?"

"You mustn't talk to Ken about this."

"Okay I guess."

"We have separate bedrooms now, you know."

"It wasn't in the papers."

"I mean we've been having all sorts of disagreements and such."

"I'm sorry."

"When Ken was doing the masks he got the idea he'd like to work nights and it developed into his using one of the spare bedrooms as a workshop and finally just sleeping there, too."

"Masks?"

"He met a fellow in Caliente who sold him two hundred masks, the kind they make down there, for fifty dollars. Ken had the idea he'd make lamps out of them. With sombreros for shades. The lightbulbs made them catch fire, though, and he gave it up."

"And the trouble?"

"He's having an affair with a mermaid."

Max stood up, dropping his shoes. "This isn't one of his projects? This is something he's actually doing?"

Joan said, "Yes, I'm afraid so." She put one hand over her eyes like a visor. "I thought maybe you could investigate."

"Like Peekaboo Pennington and get flash pictures?" Max knelt

in the sand. "What gave you these suspicions about a mermaid?"

"Well," said Joan. "About two months ago I became aware that Ken was slipping out at night. He didn't take the car and if anyone picked him up I'd hear that, too. He'd be gone sometimes for hours. When I'd get his clothes ready to wash I'd find sand in the cuffs and seaweed smears. I know he goes down to the beach in the middle of the night, Max."

"If he goes with you in the daytime couldn't that be how he gets the sand and stuff?"

"All right. I made a special point of checking. He wears warmer clothes at night and in the morning there's sand all over them."

"And how come it's got to be a mermaid he's meeting?"

"You know Ken's father had a lot of the things from his movie studio moved here when it closed down," Joan said. "In fact, we have all those out buildings full of stuff. But in the house there's the library. All kinds of obscure books that McNamara Studios had in their research department. A whole wall of books on the occult. I know Ken's been reading them lately. I found out which books he's been taking off the shelves. The books are all on the subject of mermaids."

"Whole books on mermaids?"

"And related subjects," said Joan. "He's involved with some sea woman."

"You've never tried to follow him? Or asked him about it?"

"I'm afraid to follow him," Joan said. "And asking him outright would only lead to a great debate."

"I didn't know you and Ken were," began Max.

"Growing apart? Since we moved in here it's been advancing. This place and Ken's not having a job. You're sure going to have a fun-filled weekend." Joan shook her head. "These past two months, though, Max, it's been different. The way Ken's acting. I know it's not just some other woman. It's a mermaid."

Max put his hands in his pockets and watched the seagulls skim along over the water.

"Max?"

"Yes?"

"If Ken asks say I came out here with you. Don't mention the Willseys unless you have to."

"I don't have to."

Joan smiled hopefully at him. "You'll figure everything out, Max. I know."

"Sure," Max said. He didn't smile back at her.

The tapestries that hung stiffly down between the shelves in the library were faded and cryptic.

"What?" Ken McNamara said to Max.

"I was wondering what battle the tapestries represent," Max said, casually moving near the shelf Joan had nodded at earlier.

"I don't know," said Ken. "Something that Tyrone Power fought in. They're all props from one of my dad's pictures."

Things fell over in the kitchen.

Ken put his drink on a gargoyle legged table and went to the doorway. "You okay out there, Joan?"

"Where'd you put the wine vinegar?" his wife called.

Ken hesitated. "We're all out," he called back finally.

Max lit a cigarette and looked up at the rows of occult books.

"Listen, Max," said Ken.

"Yeah?"

"Wait." Ken closed the cherub covered door. "You do detective work, don't you?"

"Only occult stuff. As a hobby."

"No hard-boiled things?"

"I beat a werewolf two falls out of three last fall."

"I mean the usual sleazy private op work."

"Divorce and motel?"

"Joan's having an affair," Ken said, walking by the row of German Renaissance beersteins on the mantle and tapping each one with his forefinger.

"Oh, so?" Max looked around for an ashtray.

"Use the mummy case over there," said Ken. "She sneaks out at night."

Max lifted the lid of the flat lying case that rested on a wrought iron stand near the fireplace. "The mummy does?" The case was

half filled with cigarette butts. He added his and dropped the lid.

"No, for Christ sake, Joan. She's slipping around. And you know where she goes?"

"Sleeping around is the phrase."

"Whatever. You know where she goes?"

"Down to the beach?"

"No. Over to visit this guy named Val Willsey. A beach boy type. Lives in the estate next door with his mother. I'm sure Joan's seeing him." He stopped and scowled at Max. "What's the matter with you anyway? This is serious."

Max lit a new cigarette. "What's the matter with you? Back in San Francisco you and Joan always looked like *House Beautiful*'s couple of the month."

"Do they have a couple of the month?"

"I'll check with media. Now what the hell is wrong?"

Ken sat down in a leather chair. "I don't know. The last year things have been going wrong. Since I lost the Orange Rupert concession."

"Orange Rupert?"

"The soft drink they sell along the highways in stands that look like oranges with a window in them. I had one two miles from here, on 101 just outside of Osodoro. But they took it away from me. I was showing a profit, too."

"Why?"

"The orange started to peel."

"Come on."

"The paint did. Kept coming off the damn thing. All the other damn Orange Rupert oranges were orange. Mine was rusty silver. It wouldn't stay orange."

Max took a book from a shelf. "Have you seen Joan over there with this Willsey guy?"

"No. I'm not a sneak, Max."

"But you've got a hunch, huh?"

"Right."

"*Mermaids And Other Creatures Encountered By A Norwe-*

gian Whaling Captain," Max said, reading the title of the weathered book. "You read any of these?"

Ken blinked. "No. No, I don't. That's more your kind of crap." He rose. "Now about Joan."

The door of the library swung open. "Well," said Joan, "there's no vinegar. But, such as it is, dinner's ready. Okay?"

"Sure," said Ken. "See if you recognize the dining room table, Max. They used it in a picture my dad made with Douglas Fairbanks."

Max put the mermaid book back on the shelf and followed Joan and Ken down the high shadowy corridor to the dining room.

Everything was white with moonlight. The untended shrubs, the vast unclipped lawns and the great unclassifiable McNamara house. Max was sitting in a clump of damp ferns with his hands cupped over the bright tip of his cigarette. Far down hill the ocean made low tumbling sounds.

The gabled part of the house roof had a clock steeple stuck on one of its peaks. The clock showed one AM. The darkness in among the shrubbery was dotted with frog calls and cricket chirps. Max felt his eyes start to close. He exhaled smoke and then took several deep breaths of the cold night air. He shook his head and widened his eyes. Finally he got himself almost awake again.

A dark figure appeared on the wide marble steps that wound down from the Dutch door at the side of the house. The figure moved off down the driveway, heading for the out buildings. It was Ken.

This didn't seem right. Max ground his cigarette into the dirt. He'd picked this side of the house to watch because it faced the ocean.

But Ken wasn't heading for the beach. Max followed, keeping off the driveway gravel as much as he could.

There were a half dozen dissimilar buildings on the grounds behind the main house. One looked like a Gothic cathedral built to the scale of a motel cottage. Another was a large two

story building that looked something like a Midwest bank. Between these two was an Arabian Nights sort of building, the size of a tract home. Ken went into this one. Max had the impression that Ken was carrying a package carefully in front of him.

Cutting down a flagstone path Max edged along the side of the Arabian structure. Flickering light showed at its horseshoe shaped windows.

Directly behind this building was one that resembled an airplane hangar. Piled in front of it was a tangled assortment of chairs. Max picked three that seemed still in fair shape, hoping they weren't some of McNamara's break-away furniture. In among a nest of Georgian dining room chairs Max found some spare table boards.

Back under the arched window he put a board between two chairs and put the third chair on top of the board. He climbed up on the whole thing.

A lantern and brass lamp were burning in the room below. The whole place was full of props from old McNamara's Eastern pictures. Piles of wrought iron doors and stacks of gilt trellises. Scatterings of peacock feathers and patterned silks, brass gongs and silver censers. In the center of all the confusion of worn out background pieces was an actual pool. It was large, its water a filmy green. Bordering it was real sand and jungle shrubbery. On a prop rock at the pool's edge was Ken, sitting with a salad bowl in his lap.

Ken dipped his hand into the bowl and brought out a handful of what seemed to be shrimp salad.

"I got the wine vinegar for it this time, LJ," Ken said.

"Mr. LJ is in conference," said a rasping voice. "He suggests you make an appointment."

"You're still on this kick LJ?"

"*Mr.* LJ."

"Anyway, I made an appointment this afternoon. Remember?"

"We'll consult our appointment pad."

Max strained to see what it was that was talking from the pool.

"I can't wait around here all night, LJ. Come off it."

"Do you good to cool your heels in the waiting room for a while. We can find no record of your appointment. What was the nature of your business with Mr. LJ?"

"You're supposed to fix things up between Joan and me."

"Full names please. Last name first and please print."

"How can I print when I'm talking?"

"Perhaps you'd like to take your business to one of our competitors?"

"I'll take the shrimp, too, if you don't shape up," said Ken. "What kind of water spirit are you if you can't even do any magic?"

There was a splashing at the darkest end of the pool and something swam toward Ken. "Who said I was a water spirit?" A fat blue fish nearly a foot and a half high pulled itself up on the rock with Ken. The pulling was easy because the fish had arms and legs. "You sure it's wine vinegar?"

"Yes."

LJ jabbed a blue hand into the salad bowl and began eating. "Not as good as a commissary, but it'll do."

"If you aren't a water spirit, what are you?"

"Mr. LJ is all you have to know."

"I've looked through all my dad's damned books on this sort of thing. And I can't quite pin you down."

"McNamara was strictly a shlep," said LJ, finishing the salad.

"And how come you're talking like this lately?"

"So why shouldn't I?" said LJ. "I've been all up and down the coast here."

"You didn't talk that way when I found you on the beach."

"So I should be consistent just to impress a third-rate creep like you."

"Okay, forget it, LJ," said Ken. "I know you have magic powers."

"How else did I get so far. Besides sheer guts, I owe the rest

to magic. Out in the ocean it's dog eat dog. You don't stay on top for three hundred years just on luck."

"Isn't one of your powers the ability to tell what's going on?"

"Sure. Like now I'm sitting here with you."

"In places other than here. You can tell me where Joan goes when she sneaks off."

"It's possible I could," said LJ, more or less sitting down and crossing his legs.

"And you could work some kind of spell to make her stop her affair."

"So why not."

"It's been over seven weeks since I brought you here. And the results haven't been much so far."

"I tell you, Ken baby, Rome wasn't built in a day. Not even by DeMille. So don't be anxious. We'll work us out something. Meanwhile, before you make an appointment for tomorrow you should locate some lobster for yours truly." The blue fish stood up and stretched its arms. "Excuse it, I've had a tough day."

"Lobster?"

"I can maybe see you tomorrow morning around eleven, Ken sweetie. See you around the lot." LJ dived back into the pool.

Max let himself silently down to the ground. He waited until the lights went out and he saw Ken cutting back toward the house. Then he put the chairs and boards back.

The front door of the house clicked quietly and Joan, with her hands tight in the pockets of a gray belted raincoat, came out into the night. Max stopped moving. He had been coming around from the out buildings and he halted now in a scattering of lemon trees.

Joan ran across the tangled grounds and vanished in among a blurred labyrinth of hedges at the far end of the place.

Dropping his cigarette butt into the Grecian urn near the sundial, Max followed Joan.

The hedges gave way finally to a spike topped iron fence. Up across a half acre or more of close cropped lawn sat the Willsey house. Max spotted Joan, a black silhouette bobbing, moving toward the house.

Max wiped his palms on his pants and got a grip on the black wrought iron bars. He got himself over, tearing only one cuff.

Joan went down an arbored path and into a Spanish style guest house. Its lights came on.

Max came up and looked in the window. Joan had taken off her coat and was putting on a smock. She had a canvas set up on an easel and, as Max watched, she started painting.

Max went away finally, puzzled. For some reason Joan was ghosting paintings for Aunt Jenny. She even had a real sap bucket up to use as a model.

Max bent a match folder open and snapped it between the pages of the thick book. He set it aside and opened another book. He had a hunch what LJ was and he hoped the occult books in the McNamara collection would provide him with more specifics.

The morning sun was bright at the library windows now and the chill of the room was lifting. There was a soft knock on the door and Joan came in. Her hair was tied back and she had on a blue robe. "Did you see her?"

"Who?" said Max, making another book mark.

"The mermaid," Joan said, sitting across from him.

The mantel clock struck eleven and a team of allegorical figures popped out. Max waited until they'd gone indoors again and then he said, "Are you working for the Willseys?"

"Who said that?"

"I saw you over there last night. Painting one of those god awful Aunt Jenny abortions."

"Your bloodhound instincts really ran wild. It's Ken you're supposed to watch."

"The sea air keyed me up. I got such a kick out of following him I decided to track you, too."

"There's nothing supernatural about what I'm doing," Joan said. The lace of her slip showed along the robe edge and she tracked its pattern with her finger. "I wanted to get some kind of money ahead. So we wouldn't have to depend on Ken's father.

Mrs. Willsey asked me to help her on one of her paintings. That was four or five months ago. Aunt Jenny likes the fun of painting. Laying it out and finishing it up tire her. I've painted at least part of all her things. Lately I ghost whole paintings."

"Then it's you who's responsible for the Aunt Jenny boom down here."

"Probably. Anyway I get 40% of everything I do. I opened an account in a bank in Santa Monica." Joan noticed her moving hand and stopped it. She dropped both hands in her lap. "But what did you find out about Ken?"

"Is he around?"

"No. He drove off early. He's not back yet. Didn't you trail him this morning?"

"I overslept," said Max. "There is something."

"Something?"

"A fish."

"Ken's having an affair with a fish?"

"No, he's trying to get advice from the fish."

Joan turned toward the window. "That's the car coming back. What fish? What sort of advice? He's not still worried about the lighthouse business? The company said they'd refund the deposit because you can't get to the island except by autogiro."

"Let's just limit it to this fish. No other projects."

"Is the fish in the ocean? Does Ken visit it there?"

"No. It's in that Arabian looking building out back. In the pool."

"What sort of fish is it, Max? A shark or something dangerous."

"A little blue fish with arms and legs. It talks and does magic."

Joan shook her head. "I don't understand. I've never heard of . . ." There was a great cloud of yellow smoke suddenly around Joan. Then a loud explosion.

"Joan." Max jumped for her chair.

The chair teetered and slammed over sideways. Joan was gone.

Max spun around. The room was empty, the door still closed.

Max opened it and ran out into the hall. The house was

quiet. Max went out the side door that led back to the out buildings.

Coming down the path toward him was Ken.

"Did you give the lobster to LJ?" Max said, pulling up.

"Had to drive all the way to Santa Monica for it but I—who told you about LJ?"

"Joan just vanished."

"Off with Val Willsey probably. Or maybe just shopping," said Ken. "I'm willing to admit she could be just shopping."

"She doesn't usually vanish in a puff of yellow smoke, does she?"

"No, she takes the Volkswagen. Max? You mean Joan's disappeared by magic?"

"Why not? You've been goading LJ into doing something. Apparently you've finally succeeded in bringing him into action."

Ken said, "This isn't the sort of solution I expected."

Someone said Yoo hoo.

"Max, I think I heard something strange."

"Yoo hoo," called a woman's voice.

"Is that some magic phrase, Max?"

"Sounds more like yodeling." Max turned.

Coming from the front of the house was Aunt Jenny. She waved her Dodgers cap at them. "Did Val happen to stop by here?" she called.

"See," said Ken. "It's an open secret."

"Is he missing?" asked Max.

"I'm beginning to think so," said the old woman as she joined them. "He vanished in a cloud of ugly smoke. That isn't like Val at all."

"LJ again," said Max.

"Beg pardon?"

"We'll tell Val you were asking after him," Max said. "I'm pretty sure he'll be back by this afternoon."

"Will there be any more smoke? We did settle out here to get away from the smog. If Val's going to take to coming and going in enormous gusts of smoke I don't think we'll have gained much."

"No more smoke," said Max, smiling and guiding Aunt Jenny around to the front of the house.

Ken followed. He waited until the old woman was into the hedges. Then he said, "Damn it. What's happening? Are Joan and Val shacked up in the fourth dimension someplace?"

"You can't get in without luggage," said Max. "Look, where did you find LJ?"

"That bastard. Here I butter him up for weeks and he does this." Ken hit his fist into his palm. "He washed in down at the beach a couple months ago. He seemed like an out of the ordinary sort of fish and I put him in the old pool. When it turned out he was probably magic I decided to get him to help out with Joan. I had to turn to somebody. With Joan having an affair."

"You should have tried Abigail Van Buren first," said Max. "And Joan isn't having an affair."

"What makes you say that?"

"I looked through some windows and peeked over some shrubs. She's ghosting Aunt Jenny pictures to make extra money."

"It could be I've screwed up some then."

"That's a possibility."

"I'll fix LJ, Max. I'll stand up to him and tell him to knock it off and tell me what's become of Joan." Ken stopped. "Max, she'll come back somehow, won't she?"

Max nodded. "She'll come back." He shook out a cigarette and lit it. "Did he talk like a Hollywood type when you found him?"

"No, that's only lately. In fact, he had some vague European accent when I found him."

"I think he's some kind of old world elemental spirit," said Max. "We have to have some weapon before we talk to him."

"A water spirit," said Ken. "I thought so, too. But none of the pictures in the reference books look like LJ."

"Maybe the guy who did the illustrations never saw one like LJ."

"That's right. Before television they went on hearsay a lot more than now."

"A spell to control a water elemental should work on LJ," said Max. "Even if he's only probably a second-string water spirit."

"There's a couple of good spells in one of the books."

"I know," said Max. "Let's see what we can work out."

They ran back into the house.

Ken looked over Max's shoulder into the kitchen sink. "We sprinkle him with that stuff and that's all?"

Max looked from the book of spells to the gray-green liquid in the sink. "According to this. It's not the top magic fluid, but it's the best we can do with household ingredients."

"How would a siphon be? A seltzer bottle to spray the junk at him with."

"You have one? I thought they only used those in comedies."

"That's where this one came from. A picture of my dad's." Ken went to the white doored cabinet at the kitchen end and felt inside. "That book is over three hundred years old. Suppose the spell is stale."

Max checked through the drawers and found a ladle and a funnel. "LJ is over three hundred years old, too. It should fit."

Ken put the bottle on the drain board and Max filled it with the fluid. "Don't spill any, Max."

"There's enough."

"I mean Joan'll get mad if we make a mess in her kitchen."

"There."

"If we get her back."

Max tightened the siphon on the bottle. "We should. Come on."

"Mr. LJ's in conference, sweetie," said the voice at the end of the pool.

"Tell him to get his ass down here," said Ken.

"So is this how you talk to somebody who has solved your

problems?" LJ swam to them and pulled himself up on the rock. "Who's the creep with you?"

Max squatted and said, "What did you do with Joan McNamara?"

"Leave your card with my secretary, chum. You I don't even know."

"The bottle," said Max.

Ken brought it out from behind his back. "Ready."

"Bribes won't help you," said LJ. "Anyway I fixed up your problem swell for you, honey. This clown, Val Willsey, will never get his hands on your little lady now. Believe you me."

"Tell us what you did with them," said Max. "Or we'll use some of this anti-elemental spray on you."

"So who's an elemental?" LJ laughed. "Why are you boys so stewed up. I fixed things good. That's what you wanted."

"You didn't fix things good at all," said Ken. "You made the same stupid mistakes I did about Joan. It was Max here who . . ."

"Max, that's a nice name," said LJ. "If he noses around too much in my affairs I'll fix him, too. Him I'll cast as cupid with a dolphin if he don't watch it."

"We don't want to hurt you," said Max.

"So how could you?" LJ put his hands behind his scaly blue back and paced. Then he closed one eye and turned. Pointing at Max he said, "You I'll fix right now."

Ken sprayed the fluid at LJ. "Damn you."

"How typical," said LJ, toppling over. He fell and lay still with his legs up stiff in the air.

"It works," said Ken.

"Works great." Max watched LJ.

LJ popped and disintegrated into blue dust. "I had to use the stuff to save you, Max. It worked too good."

Max stood up, watching the spot where LJ had been. "In all the props and stuff that're stored here is there much statuary?"

"Sure," said Ken. "In the big warehouse back of here. All sorts of birdbaths and fountains and lawn statues. Greek stuff and so

on." He put the bottle down. "Hey. And that's where a lot of my dad's old files and clippings and letters are stored."

"Could LJ get in there?"

"The pipes from here run back to the warehouse," said Ken. "That's probably where he picked up his Hollywood material."

"Let's take a look," said Max. "He threatened to turn me into a decorative piece for a fountain. Maybe he did the same with Joan."

Ken found her. "Hey, Max. Over here."

Joan and Val Willsey were on a pedestal, turned to stone. "Very funny," said Max.

"This used to be a satyr chasing a nymph."

"And never getting his hands on her," said Max. "LJ was a whimsical guy." Max looked at the rows of stone figures.

"It just occurred to me," said Ken. "I was so happy finding Joan I forgot. LJ's destroyed and Joan is turned to stone. How do we break this spell?"

Max walked once around the two figures and then leaned back against a stone Venus. "Try kissing her. That works sometimes."

"What about Val."

"Try Joan first."

Ken pulled a stool over and reached up. He leaned out and kissed the statue Joan. "Once enough?" he asked.

"Once enough for what?" said Joan, stepping down off the pedestal. "Ken, what's happened?" She glanced at the stone Val Willsey. "Is that Val?"

Ken hesitated. "Kiss him."

"The statue?"

"Go ahead."

Joan did. It brought Val back. "What an odd thing to have happen over breakfast," he said. "Excuse me. Mother's probably having eight kinds of fit." He nodded at them and hurried away.

"I guess I misunderstood you," said Ken.

"Me, too, with you," said Joan.

Ken looked at Max. "I bet lots of people would be interested

in that spray we made to use on LJ. There are probably other elementals around."

"LJ?" Joan asked.

"Tell you back at the house," Ken said, taking her hand. "Coming, Max?"

"In a minute. You go ahead."

"Thanks, Max," said Joan as she and Ken walked out of the warehouse.

Max lit a cigarette. He watched the stone Venus over his shoulder. Not a bad looking girl.

When he finished the cigarette Max walked down the row of statues and out into the daylight.

Dr. Felix Marti-Ibañez comes from Spain, and was at one time its Undersecretary of Public Health and Social Services. He has lived in the United States since 1939. Formerly Professor and Chairman of the Department of the History of Medicine at the New York Medical College, Flower and Fifth Avenue Hospitals, Dr. Marti-Ibañez is the owner and editor of *MD* Medical Newsmagazine; and a totally-unsolicited testimonial from a Midwestern physician to us describes his editorials as "sparkling." This is his second story for F&SF; like its predecessor, it deals with South America, that sister-continent about which most of us know so shamefully little. But, whereas his previous tale was about the light and laughter of Brazil, in South America's east, his current account is of the light and shadow of Peru, land of the Incas and the west. It has been conjectured that *Peru* was none other than *Ophir,* whence Solomon fetched so much gold that "silver was accounted as nothing"—and certainly it was the Conquistadors' greed for gold which brought Atahualpa, penultimate Inca, to his death, despite the incredible amounts of it he supplied them. Little gold is left in the earth of Peru but the gold of its sun is infinite. Dr. Ibañez's story has much the quality of legend; if it is not based on one, it may well become one.

NIÑA SOL

by Felix Marti-Ibañez

PERHAPS IT WAS THE SUN, perhaps the bleat of a goat, but that day I woke up earlier than usual. Through the open window the cool breeze brought me a message of autumn scents. I clambered out of bed and noticed with great joy that the *puna*—that dreaded mountain sickness—had finally tired of grinding my weary bones. After three weeks of fighting the altitude, I was still intact. Now I could think without effort, move without my joints creaking, and breathe without experiencing a forge in each lung. Even my heart was once again a forgotten organ quietly doing its clock work in its crimson chamber.

I looked out of the window hoping to see a bird, but I saw only the *puna,* all gray and gold—gray the earth and grass, gold the fine air—and the solemn llamas grazing in the distance. The llama, the only animal to which dirt lends dignity! The pale sky was like an invisible presence. I first sniffed the air as if it were a Lachrima Christi and then breathed it deeply, finished dressing, and finally betook myself to the dining room downstairs.

It was not only the restless spirit of the writer but also love for solitude that had brought me to the inn called Paradero de la Perricholi. While in Lima I had longed all the time for the Peru of the lofty mountains. For the Spanish conquerors Peru was Lima, a bejeweled town, the City of Kings, with its fabulous treasures; for me Peru was still a legend high up near the clouds, it was the *puna,* cosmic and abrupt, and the wandering llama, and the sky like polished metal.

That accounts for my itinerary: a few days in Lima, just enough to fall in love with the beautiful city, small, perfumed and voluptuous like a *señora criolla,* then on to Juliaca and Cuzco, and thence by mule to the top of the Ara, a steep hill the very name of which held the promise of a legend. There I found the Paradero, a large house built of stone the color of green olives, with a vast hall that was at once hearth, dining room, and storage room for seeds, harnesses and fodder. Near the fire, which was never allowed to die out, sat two very old women, with as many colored skirts as an onion has layers, and a man—father? brother?—even older than they. A brooding cat and a dog that looked as if he had been silent for years lay sprawled at their feet. The smell of feed, leather, nuts and old wine hovered forever in the air, and a pearly mist rose from a pot, eternally kept on the fire as in a pagan ritual, and mixed with the mumblings—whinings or prayers—of the old women.

This was what I wanted: silence, solitude, time frozen into days without yesterday or tomorrow. Thousands of feet below was the other Peru with its great cities and its silver mountains; here drawing me like a magnet, there was only the *puna,* a mysterious titanic prairie of grass and rock where I could roam and

dream and let the solitude soothe my nerves, tense and taut like violin strings from being so much fingered by the big cities.

It was with annoyance therefore that I saw another guest sitting at the table, lustily attacking a sizable piece of roast meat. He was on the threshold of the thirties, with a heavy head of hair the color of ripe corn and childlike eyes that sparkled like aquamarines. His clothes were simple, a mountaineer's outfit, like mine. Near him there was a wooden box all spotted with paint of many colors, a roll of canvas, and brushes.

He greeted me with a wide smile and his fork, on which a boiled potato was impaled. His voice was as warm and friendly as the fragrant steam escaping from the huge blackened coffeepot.

"Welcome! Pardon my greediness, but I arrived very late last night and could get no dinner. This meat is excellent and the coffee smells divine. Won't you sit down with me? There is enough for two. I have invaded your retreat, but I shall disturb you little. I shall be outdoors all day, painting. The yellows of this landscape are marvelous. What delicious potatoes! My name is Jorge Mendoza. Please call me Jorge. Some day my signature at the bottom of a Peruvian landscape will be worth a great deal of money."

He spoke quickly while devouring the contents of his plate. His electric ebullience introduced such an incongruous note in the somber, silent room that I had to smile. I introduced myself and assured him that, since he was going to paint and I was going to write, he would have no reason to fear either competition or intrusions from me. By the time we had finished our fourth cup of coffee we were chatting like old friends, and after a barrage of courteous protestations as to who should have the last potato, we finally divided it in two.

"What attracts a painter to this part of the country?" I asked him.

"Light," he answered emphatically. "The mystery of light fascinates me as it did Rembrandt, if I may be a little presumptuous. I have traveled all over South America and never have I seen anywhere such light as that of the Peruvian *puna*. Actually the

light here is all the same color, yellow, but yellow in all shades. The grass is gray yellow, the llamas dark yellow, the sun a burning yellow, even the sky is a faded yellow. I want to paint that, a symphony of yellows, a canticle to the glorious yellow light of this glorious land that it may bring joy to the weary people who live in gray gloomy towns."

"It should be a fascinating challenge to transfer to canvas the mysterious quality of the *puna,*" I said, a little wary of his enthusiasm. "In my own way I intend to—"

"Yes," he interrupted me abruptly, following the thread of his own thoughts, "the secret of the *puna* is not silence or solitude. That is part of it, of course. But the real secret is the light. And I am going to capture it with this," and he kicked his box of paints.

We took leave of each other with a handshake, but his d'Artagnan attitude to fight alone the entire realm of the *puna* irritated me. When I went outside, I saw him walking in the distance, his hair a bright yellow against the faded sky.

The narrow plateau around the Paradero was covered with gray grass, some stunted trees and massive rocks. A gentle slope led to a wide esplanade where flocks of llamas grazed. From here one went down to another wide step, and then another and another, until the steplike projections reached the deep, distant valley, where houses pressed together as if they had been poured from the heights in one heavy splash. One's gaze could reach very far, where the land, dressed in green with brown and other spots, rose and fell and then rose again to majestic heights where it received a crown of snow. There was the odor of damp grass, the bleating of goats, and always the faint tolling of bells from the valley mingled with the soft sighs of the breezes from the peaks.

The day passed lazily and quietly. I strolled around, meditated, read and made notes. At noon I had lunch alone at the Paradero, served by one of the melancholy old women. After a short siesta, I was again engulfed by the silence of the afternoon, which though profound was not oppressive. When I was about to go in to dinner, I heard a shout and suddenly saw the young painter

emerge from behind a rock. He was out of breath and looked exhausted, but he still burned with the fire of enthusiasm.

"What a country! What light!" he greeted me, flourishing a brush just as he had brandished his fork in the morning. "I have walked miles and miles. I even forgot to eat. Color, color, color everywhere, always the same and always different."

"The *puna* reminds me of the sea," I ventured coldly, for his rebuff of that morning still rankled in my bosom. "It is infinite and it can be cruel or kind, depending on the time of day."

"That is true," he granted, wiping off his sweat with a handkerchief as big as a sheet. "The land here seems to move like the sea, according to the light of every hour of the day. It's the light that does it. Such glorious light!"

He pressed my arm with his hot hand.

"Let me show you something." He quickly unrolled two canvases and showed them to me with the same gesture of pride with which Chinese merchants must have displayed their gorgeous silks before Suleiman the Magnificent.

There was not much to them. They were sketches, almost identical, of a lot of grass with some llamas grazing and a low sky thick with clouds the color of chromium oxide.

"What do you think?" he asked proudly.

"Well, not bad."

"Not bad!" He was really astonished.

"Frankly, I have seen better."

He stared at me and then at the canvases, and finally he rolled them up with a gesture of despair.

"You are right. There's something missing. The light. The light. It escapes me. I can't mix the right colors. The customary method is inadequate. One would have to paint this light as Fra Angelico painted heaven—on one's knees."

Seizing my arm he led me back to the house, and the welcome of the dog and the smell of the stew on the fire soon made me forget the anxieties of the painter.

I did not see him again for several days. He always left before I got up and returned after I had retired. As there was no electric light, I fell into the habit of going to bed early, following the

custom of the proprietors of the inn. I never asked about him and they told me nothing. I would hear him arrive before I fell asleep, and, listening to the noise of dishes, I imagined him devouring the supper they left him by the fire. Then he would shut himself in his room next to mine and I would hear him mumbling and ripping paper until I fell asleep.

The days passed sweet and solemn. I read all my books, I filled several notebooks with meticulous scribblings. I began to think of going back to Lima, and finally I set a date for my return.

One night, unable to sleep, I lit my candle and sat down to write some letters. I had been writing only a few minutes when I heard the painter arrive. Contrary to his habit, he came upstairs immediately. His boots made the corridor shake. When he reached my door he stopped and knocked. I opened the door.

"What luck to find you up! I saw the light in your room and could not resist the temptation of having a chat with you. May I sit down?"

I found him disturbingly changed. He looked thin, almost emaciated, and there was a feverish look in his eyes. I closed the door. The room, quiet and peaceful before he came in, suddenly seemed to vibrate with the nervousness emanating from all his pores.

"I'm happy to see you," I said, pouring two glasses of sherry, which shimmered like two patches of sun in the flickering light of the candle. "You must be working very hard. I haven't seen a trace of you round the house in the past few days."

He drank the sherry in one gulp. Above the feeble flame of the candle, which shed more shadows than light in the room, his reddened eyes gleamed strangely. In his glass a drop of the golden liquid glittered like a pirate's doubloon.

"What do you think of this?" he said suddenly, unrolling a canvas. I looked at it for a moment and then at him. In his eyes I saw an ironical sparkle.

"You think it's a lot of nonsense and that I'm crazy, don't you?"

I was about to reply that he had guessed my thoughts, but his feverish aspect held me back.

"I wouldn't say that," I answered cautiously. "In any case, it's quite different from anything I have ever seen."

The canvas was covered with patches of yellow of so vivid a hue that they cast a glow in the semi-darkness of the room. At first I thought they were only random strokes of the brush, but as I studied the canvas further I thought I detected amid the yellow blotches vague shadows and contours. Perhaps it was only my imagination, but in those childish-looking blobs of vivid yellow I thought I perceived strangely disquieting figures and profiles. Suddenly, without any warning, he rolled up the canvas.

"You are very diplomatic," he said sarcastically. "Of course, you don't understand. How can you?"

"You forget," I replied, rather piqued, "I'm only a writer with a superficial feeling for painting."

"Of course, of course." In the dancing shadows cast by the leaping flame of the candle, his face looked as if it had escaped from one of Goya's *Caprichos*. "But that is no excuse for not recognizing the marvelous when it's facing you."

I shrugged my shoulders and poured two more glasses of sherry, determined not to be angry but also not to tolerate any more impertinence.

"Let's drink to your paintings," I suggested sarcastically.

"Let's drink to *her*," he said with vehemence.

My glass stopped in mid-air.

"Her?"

"The *Niña Sol*, the girl who inspired this picture," he answered, and again he gulped down his drink.

"And just what does the picture represent?" I inquired.

"The light of the *puna*."

I drank my wine in silence.

"It's an incredible story," Jorge said. "You probably will not believe me, but I must tell it to someone. Some day you will tell it and no one will believe you either. But I have seen her, I have spoken to her, I shall see her tomorrow and every day. No, I am not drunk, or perhaps I am—with light. Listen. . . ."

The story issued from his lips slowly, hesitantly, as if it were a great effort to tell it. Jorge had come to the *puna* determined to

capture the light on his palette. For days he tried again and again to paint what he saw, but his brushes could only capture the form of things, not their light. He wanted the sun of the *puna* to be the protagonist of his pictures, as the air is in *Las Meninas* of Velázquez and the light in Rembrandt's paintings. His hobnailed boots had trod all the mountain paths, leaving behind, scattered all over, torn pieces of canvas bright with colors. Every day he climbed new hills always searching for light and more light. Until one afternoon . . .

". . . I had been walking all day in no special direction," said Jorge. "Both my feet and my thoughts were going round in circles. I went down a steep slope to the bottom of a narrow valley wedged between two high walls of rock. On all sides there was gray grass under a sun so luminous that because it was all light it gave no warmth. If only I could mix the sun on my palette and dip my brushes in it, I kept thinking. I walked the length of the narrow dell and came to a natural rock staircase that went up the opposite slope. I started the ascent. Halfway up I stopped. The side wall was perforated, forming a window in the rock through which I could see a path winding down to another little valley. On the other side of the valley there was a small hill and atop the hill a little house. And then, I saw her.

"The hill was like any other hill around here except for its brilliant yellow color, so brilliant that it glittered like burnished metal. Grass the color of new gold covered it completely. On top of the hill there was a small platform to which one climbed along a pathway covered with yellow pebbles. In the middle of the platform stood the little house with walls and roof of bright yellow straw. Yellow-hued flowers swayed in the breeze all around the house. In the midst of this blazing yellow paradise, silent and motionless, stood the girl.

"At first I thought she was a statue. My eyes were so blinded by the sun, which reverberated on the hill and on the house as on a mirror, that I barely saw her silhouette. But after a while, with my hands shading my eyes, I was able to see her quite clearly. She was almost a child, dressed in a sleeveless waist and a short skirt which glistened as if made of gold. At first I thought she

was wearing a helmet on her head, but then I realized that it was her blond hair on which the sun broke into myriad luminous sparks. But what left me spellbound was her skin. I cannot give you even a remote idea of the color of her arms, her bare legs, her face. They were of the same golden shade as the paradise that surrounded her, but with a gossamer quality, a transparency, an iridescence, that was not of this earth. It was as if she were standing on a blazing throne of gold and she herself was made of such fiery gold as mortal eyes are not meant to look at and retain their sight.

"When she saw me, she waved an arm. Her loose hair buttered in the wind like a flaming banner. She showed no surprise; indeed, her greeting was the cheerful welcome accorded to an expected guest. The wings of the wind brought me the merry twinkling of her laughter.

"I remained sitting astride the stone window, unable to move, breathing with difficulty. I cannot explain what I felt. My whole being urged me to go to the girl, but my body refused to move. My eyes would have never withstood the blazing light the hill exhaled under the sun.

"I must have sat there for hours, watching her face turned toward the sun, her eyes wide open. Had she not waved to me, I would have thought her blind, so completely undisturbed were her eyes by the sun.

"When the sun went down she rose and simultaneously a flock of yellow birds, up to then invisible but whose singing had been audible all the time, took flight. For an instant she stood surrounded by dozens of yellow flapping wings like a flame surrounded by eager butterflies. She then looked at me, waved her hand in farewell and disappeared into the house.

"Only then was I able to move. Half blinded, my entire body burning from the sun, I fled from the place. Instinct must have brought me here. It was night when I arrived.

"The next day and the day after that and still another day I returned to the opening in the rock. And every day the same thing happened. Although at night, throughout the endless hours of insomnia, I swore to myself that the next day I would go up the

golden hill and talk to the Sun Girl, as soon as I reached the window in the rock I was again overcome by the same strange paralysis."

The painter mechanically picked up his glass. On the wall his lifted hand projected a monstrous shadow like that of a bat. Through the window the cool night air brought a breath of sanity and reality. The candle flickered wildly and our shadows danced a saraband on the walls. The painter's eyes were burning coals in his shaded face.

"On the fourth day," he continued, "as soon as I reached the opening I realized that something was different. The girl, this time wearing a cape, sat on the grass weaving a wicker basket. The hill, the house, the flowers, everything was the same. Nevertheless, something had changed. The sun was as brilliant as ever, yet I did not feel the strange sensation that on the previous days had transfixed me to the window. And before I realized it I was running down the other side of the stone window, crossing the narrow valley, and, with my heart beating wildly, climbing the little path lined with yellow pebbles.

"When I reached the top of the hill, the girl, smiling, motioned me to sit on the grass a few steps from where she herself was seated. Her fingers swiftly and with great skill kept on braiding the wicker. Birds sang softly all around us. I stared enraptured at her lovely face. Droplets of sun had fallen in her eyes and her skin had a golden luminescence.

" 'You seem surprised,' she finally said in a musical Spanish.

" 'I believe I'm dreaming,' I answered in my faltering Spanish.

" 'Why?' she laughed. 'I am flesh and blood and there is nothing strange about your presence here. I was expecting you.'

" 'You were expecting me?'

" 'Of course. You looked at me from afar long enough. It was time you made up your mind to come. But I was to blame. Only today did I realize what held you back and I remedied it.'

"She ignored the astonishment on my face.

" 'You are very sunburnt,' she remarked.

" 'It does not matter now that I am here. I don't know why, but I'm glad I came.'

"'I know why you came. You're looking for light and you came to it.' She pointed to my paintbox. 'Show me your pictures.'

"I unrolled one of my canvases and showed it to her. She looked at it from where she was seated.

"'Just what do you want to paint?' she asked.

"'I don't know. This land, the colors—they fascinate me.'

"Her laughter ran down my spine like a rivulet of silver.

"'The colors! There is no color on the *puna*. Only light.'

"'Everything here is yellow, all shades of yellow and gold,' I protested.

"'Everything here is sunlight,' she corrected. 'You think it's yellow because that has always been the color of the sun for painters. But there are no colors here. The house, the birds, the flowers, I myself—we all are soaked in light. Everything here is sun. This is Peru, the land of the sun, and the *puna* is the closest to the sun. That is why you came here. Without knowing it, you have been following the sun, just as birds fly thousands of miles also following the sun. You began seeking color for your paintings and you ended seeking the sun.'

"'I would gladly give my life if I could paint the light of the sun.'

"'Why don't you try?'

"'I have tried but I failed. The color escapes me. If one cannot even look at the sun, how can one paint it?'

"'I shall help you,' she said with a mocking little laugh. 'I know nothing about painting but I have trod many times the path of light.'

"Leaning toward me, she took my paintbox and pressed it against her breast as if it were a doll. She then gave it back to me.

"'You shall now paint the light, and to say the light is to say the sun.'"

Jorge pointed to the canvas he had shown me.

"This is what I have been painting ever since. It means nothing to you, but I know that I am far on the road to capturing on my palette the light of the sun."

"Do you know who this girl is?" I asked in a skeptical tone.

"I don't know. I asked her once. She laughed and answered,

'Does one ask a rock or a mountain what it is? Does one ask the grass or the light? I am as the *puna,* as the condor, the llama and the alpaca, as the pumpkin and the casave—we are all children of the Sun. Pachacama gave life to the Sun and the Sun gave life to me, the *Niña Sol.* My brothers and sisters, the Quechaun *ayllúa,* worshipped the Sun, and later the Incas had a court of virgins, Vestals of the Sun. For many centuries my people lived under the laws of the Sun. What glorious times those were! They danced the *kashua,* and on their clothes, on their metals, even in their liquor, there was a drop of sun.

"'After the great massacre—even the Sun was dyed vermillion —after the bearded men that came with sword and cross from across the sea had impaled on their pikes the heads of the last Incas, the City of Kings was born in the valley, but the Sun was lost. Only this hill remains, by the will of the first god, Pachacama, and from it one day the lost empire will be born again.'"

"The girl is mad!" I cried out, knocking down in my excitement my glass of sherry. "Can't you see? She is playing the heroine in a tale of fantasy."

Jorge's face turned deadly pale. "At first," he answered, "I too, thought the same thing, but these canvases— Can't you see? There is light in them! Oh, I'm sure you're wrong. I know you're wrong. When I'm with her I feel as if I am in another world. When I set foot on the hill where she lives something happens— how shall I explain it to you? Time does not exist there, it disappears in a strange relativity, it becomes fused with the clouds, with the sun. Please, try to understand."

He nervously pulled out of his pocket an old silver watch.

"See this watch? Today, when I was with her, I took it out to look at the time. She asked me what it was and when I told her she didn't know what a watch was. She asked me to let her look at it and I placed it on the grass near her, for she never allows me to come too near her. She took it and examined it and finally put it back on the grass and said, 'How strange! You measure time with *that* and yet you called my ancestors savages.'

"There was a sharp note of anger in her voice. Your face, mine,

gets red when flushed. Hers turned into a mask of incandescent gold.

" 'You presume to capture time in that absurd little box!' she exclaimed. 'Don't you know yet that time is reckoned not by duration but by intensity? One instant of happiness or of pain lasts longer than ten years of indifference.'

"Pointing to the sun, she said with deep fervor, 'There is the measure of time. According to you, my age should be marked off by that silly little instrument. What madness! Does the sun have an age? Throw away your little metal box and with it your fear of time!' "

With a cry of anguish, Jorge tossed the watch on the table.

"Why am I telling you all this? You can't possibly understand. Can't you see that I am not the same man you met only a few days ago? The Sun Girl has changed my whole life. But you probably don't even believe me. Why have I told you all this?"

"Shall I tell you why?" I answered. "Because you know that that poor girl is mad, that she's playing the part of the Ophelia of the *puna,* that she's no more a fragment of sun than you or I."

What happened then still makes me shiver. The dying candle flickered wildly with a hissing noise and then went out, leaving the room in total darkness. I got up to fetch another candle when Jorge, grabbing my arm, cried out, "Look! The watch! On the table!"

I had already seen it and wide-eyed I stared at it. In the darkness, the watch was an incandescent ball of such radiance that my eyes could not bear to look at it for long. It was no longer a watch; it was a tiny sun.

Jorge snatched the watch from the table and brought it close to his face. Above the brilliance the object exuded he looked at me with wild eyes.

"Now do you believe me?" he shouted. "Now do you believe in her? She held this watch in her hands for one moment only and look at it now! It's a sun, a miniature sun!"

"I am sure that we can explain this rationally," I replied in a tremulous voice. "Give me the watch."

I took it in my hands with some fear, but the watch was cold to

the touch. The radiation of light was uniform on both crystal and silver. The light was yellowish, like that of the sun on an autumn day. I rubbed it against my jacket and then against my hands, but it produced no phosphorescence, which eliminated the explanation that had occurred to me.

Jorge was now standing close to me and I could feel the intense heat exuded by his body.

"She said to me," he whispered, "that she carried within her the sun of centuries, that she was all light—*la Niña Sol,* she called herself. Now I understand. When I showed her my picture—" He stopped abruptly and then cried, "My pictures, she touched them, she touched my box of paints—"

He seized the roll of canvases from the table and quickly unrolled them. The same thing happened again. The canvases glowed with masses of light, a radiant light, big round blobs of it, as if the canvases were soaked in sun. I passed my hand over them but felt nothing, nor did the light adhere to my skin.

Jorge burst out into wild laughter, rolled up the pictures, and, still laughing, left the room, the roll under his arm and the watch in his hand. I remained facing the closed door, surrounded by darkness, watching through the cracks in the door a patch of bright light slowly move away until it vanished completely.

The next morning I woke up after a short restless sleep preceded by long hours of tossing. The smell of coffee was a reassuring sign of reality. Jorge's door was ajar and I could see that the young painter had already left.

I ate my breakfast with little appetite, and spent the day walking back and forth around the inn, wondering all the time where the hill of the Sun Girl might be. In daylight, the events of the night before seemed like a dream.

Impatiently I saw night come down. Seated by the fire, the old women whispered to each other. I asked questions. No one knew of the hill of the sun nor of any other dwelling in the neighborhood, but, then, they admitted that for years they had not been beyond the esplanade on which their llamas grazed.

I retired to my room and opened a book, which I made no attempt to read. I was waiting for the painter. It was not until

much later that I heard a noise on the floor below. I ran down the stairs. Jorge was seated by the fire, his eyes staring at the glowing embers. When he saw me he greeted me with a vague nod of the head and continued gazing at the fire.

"What happened today?" I asked, sitting down next to him.

Jorge was so self-absorbed that I had to repeat my question.

"I'm leaving tonight," he replied, kicking a burnt log, which fell apart shooting forth a shower of sparkling stars.

"Where are you going? To Lima?"

He turned to me and the sight of his face made me gasp. Gone was the deranged look of the night before, gone were the lines of emaciation, the hunted expression, the anguish, the undefined doubts. His face was now radiant with peace. It was sweet and serene. It was the face of one who had received divine grace.

"I'm going with her," he said quietly. "We shall be together forever, and I shall have what no other painter ever had. I shall have light."

There was no maniac exaltation in his voice. I tried to introduce a note of reality into our strange dialogue.

"Did you tell the Sun Girl what happened last night with the watch and the paintings?"

Jorge smiled a smile of pity, as if he were far above the picayune problems that worried me.

"Yes, I told her," he answered with a voice of condescension. "'If we dip an object in paint,' she said, 'does it not come out the color of the paint?' To anything she touches she gives her own light."

"But how is it," I asked, making an effort to speak of this fantastic thing calmly, "that during the day your Sun Girl does not shine like the sun?"

"Because her light is scattered in the atmosphere as that of the sun itself," he replied. "But," he added impatiently, "I'm not concerned about these petty problems that trouble you so much. I'm not looking for tricks. I am a painter who all his life has looked for light and now has found it. I have come for my things and I shall then go to her immediately. I shall live forever on the hill of light with the Sun Girl. Together we shall complete

each other. She has in her flesh and soul the solar light that once was religion and law to her race. God has granted me what Rembrandt only adumbrated. He has granted me light. If you," he added almost in a whisper, "had held in your hands, as I did today, the hands of the Sun Girl, if, as I did, you had felt like Parsifal holding the Holy Grail, you would understand why I must return to her."

He got up with a gesture of finality that forbade further talk and walked toward the stairs. When he reached the stairs I uttered a cry. In the darkness of the staircase, which laid beyond the circle of light cast by the fire, both his hands glowed with a bright yellow light. I saw them—two stars of golden fire with ten flaming ends—suspended in mid-air as he raised them close to his face to examine them.

"Does it frighten you?" he said quietly. "I told you I held her hands in mine. Tomorrow my whole body will shine with the same light as hers."

A moment later I heard him moving in his room on the floor above. I sat by the fire, biting on my dead pipe. The logs in the hearth snapped and crackled and the brooding cat stared at me with severe eyes. I tried to marshal in my mind everything the painter had told me, seeking in vain a few straws of reality with which to solve the mystery. Heavy shoes tramping down the stairs interrupted my thoughts. Jorge came down, his knapsack on his shoulder, a handful of brushes protruding like arrows from the quiver of a wandering archer.

"May I go with you part of the way?" I asked him when he held out his hand.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I won't mind it if you promise not to preach."

"Have no fear," I promised, opening the door of the house.

We walked a long time in silence. The night was cold and remote like a Nordic bride. The stars were but a spangling dust scattered on the dark flue of the sky. The *puna* was in deep sleep. The only noise was made by our boots crushing the damp grass, which shone like polished metal under the pale moon, and the wind, which panted like a tired alpaca.

"Jorge," I finally said, "all this must have a logical explanation."

"Everything in life," he retorted mockingly, "has two explanations: the materialistic—call it scientific if you wish—which is neither complete nor true, and the poetic, which gets to the innermost truth of things. Freud never knew as much about dreams as Poe, nor doctors as much about love as Byron. I only know that my dream has come true. I don't have to burden it with explanations."

"Couldn't it be," I proceeded, ignoring his words, "that this hill of light of yours contains an unknown radioactive mineral? As time went by, everything on that hill—rocks, flowers, birds—took on the light of that mineral. Even a human being, after years of being charged, like an electric battery, with radioactivity, might have absorbed the light and might communicate it. If this is so, there may be no danger for the girl, but there might be for anyone who came in sudden close contact with her."

He stopped abruptly. "That's all very fantastic," he interrupted me angrily.

"It is not fantastic. You may be in danger. Look at your hands. She touched them only a moment and look how they glow. Tomorrow they may become numb and the next day they may fall off, burned by that satanic force that now illuminates them. Have you thought of what might happen to you when you come close to the Sun Girl, when you touch her, when you embrace her?"

"Be quiet!" he shouted. I paid no attention to him.

"Has it occurred to you that the arms of the Sun Girl, or whoever the devil she is, might make you burn horribly to death?"

I thought he would attack me, so furious did he look, but suddenly his face relaxed and when he spoke his voice was again quiet.

"Think what you like," he said. "I only know that I have found the source of light and to it I must go though I perish. A woman of light! The only survivor of the extinct Vestals of the Sun. She will give light even to my heart. Even if her embrace were followed by death, can you imagine a more glorious death for a painter? To love the Sun Girl, to embrace her body of light, to

drink sunshine from her lips! To die in the embrace of the Sun, to have light within one—that is not death. That is life!"

Only then did I realize that we were standing before the opening in the barrier of rock described by Jorge. He held out his hand and I pressed it silently. The moon, stiff with cold, put on a shawl of clouds, engulfing us in partial darkness. The silence was hushed and solemn like that of an empty cradle. Suddenly Jorge gripped my arm with painful violence.

"Look! Over there!" he cried hoarsely.

Opposite us, on the hill looming darkly on the other side of the passage, a statue of light had suddenly appeared. There was nothing frightening about it. Slender and feminine, with flesh a shimmering gold, it was like a block of sun hewn into the glorious figure of a woman.

"She's going away!" Jorge cried. "She's going away!"

The girl with a slow step disappeared down the other side of the hill. Jorge, shouting after her, plunged through the darkness. I heard him scrambling wildly down to the bottom of the passage and, hesitating no longer, I followed.

I shall never forget that nightmarish race in the dark, scrambling from rock to rock, stumbling down, tearing my clothes and my flesh on the jagged stones. On my hands and knees, still lagging behind Jorge, whom I could hear calling the Sun Girl in the distance, I crossed the bottom of the passage and gropingly sought the way to the top of the hill. In the dark shadows I suddenly saw the path lined with pebbles gleaming with a faint yellow light leading to the golden doll's house above. Panting, I reached the top of the hill. Jorge stood motionless on the edge of the platform, staring down at the vast black chasm.

"Jorge," I called, running toward him across a carpet of flowers that glistened like golden crystal.

When I reached his side, he looked at me with eyes filled with despair.

"She's gone, down there," he said in a sobful voice. "She, too, must have been afraid, afraid to harm me, to consume me in her light. She didn't know that I would gladly give my life to embrace

the light of her flesh, to kiss the sun from her lips. But I shall follow her—to the end of the earth, if need be. Look."

He pointed to the ground and I cried out in amazement. Wherever the Sun Girl's feet had trod, they had left footprints as small as those of a child but resplendent in their golden light.

"If I fail to find her before daybreak," Jorge added, "I shall wait until night returns, again and again. I shall not rest until I find her. For I do not want life without her. Good-by, my friend. In the nights to come, until we meet, I shall be wandering after her."

And he disappeared down the trail of glowing footsteps.

"Debonnaire" is our word for Alfred Bester the man: trimly-bearded, ornately-waistcoated, wit, gent., columnist for ROGUE and HOLIDAY. "Absorbing" is our word for Alfred Bester the author: deep, rich, and all too few have his stories here been. Now, in his first appearance in The Magazine since his retirement as its stimulating and controversial Books Editor, he manages to deal in a different way with a theme we honestly believed had been dealt to death. Welcome back, Mr. Bester, with your *reductio ad absurdum* account of an Adam who delved not and an Eve who did not spin; it's a pleasure.

THEY DON'T MAKE LIFE LIKE THEY USED TO

by Alfred Bester

THE GIRL DRIVING THE JEEP was very fair and very Nordic. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a pony tail, but it was so long that it was more a mare's tail. She wore sandals, a pair of soiled bluejeans, and nothing else. She was nicely tanned. As she turned the jeep off Fifth Avenue and drove bouncing up the steps of the library, her bosom danced enchantingly.

She parked in front of the library entrance, stepped out, and was about to enter when her attention was attracted by something across the street. She peered, hesitated, then glanced down at her jeans and made a face. She pulled the pants off and hurled them at the pigeons eternally cooing and courting on the library steps. As they clattered up in fright, she ran down to Fifth Avenue, crossed, and stopped before a shop window. There was a plum colored wool dress on display. It had a high waist, a full skirt, and not too many moth holes. The price was $79.90.

The girl rummaged through old cars skewed on the avenue until she found a loose fender. She smashed the plate glass shop door, carefully stepped across the splinters, entered, and sorted through the dusty dress racks. She was a big girl and had trouble fitting herself. Finally she abandoned the plum colored wool and

compromised on a dark tartan, size 12, $120 reduced to $99.90. She located a salesbook and pencil, blew the dust off, and carefully wrote: *I.O.U. $99.90. Linda Nielsen.*

She returned to the library and went through the main doors which had taken her a week to batter in with a sledge hammer. She ran across the great hall, filthied with five years of droppings from the pigeons roosting there. As she ran, she clapped her arms over her head to shield her hair from stray shots. She climbed the stairs to the third floor and entered the Print Room. As always, she signed the register: *Date-June 20, 1981. Name-Linda Nielsen. Address-Central Park Model Boat Pond. Business or Firm-Last Man On Earth.*

She had had a long debate with herself about *Business or Firm* the first time she broke into the library. Strictly speaking, she was the last woman on earth, but she had felt that if she wrote that it would seem chauvinistic; and "Last Person On Earth" sounded silly, like calling a drink a beverage.

She pulled portfolios out of racks and leafed through them. She knew exactly what she wanted; something warm with blue accents to fit a twenty by thirty frame for her bedroom. In a priceless collection of Hiroshige prints she found a lovely landscape. She filled out a slip, placed it carefully on the librarian's desk, and left with the print.

Downstairs, she stopped off in the main circulation room, signed the register, went to the back shelves and selected two Italian grammars and an Italian dictionary. Then she backtracked through the main hall, went out to the jeep, and placed the books and print on the front seat alongside her companion, an exquisite Dresden China doll. She picked up a list that read:

Jap. print
Italian
20 × 30 pict. fr.
Lobster bisque
Brass polish
Detergent
Furn. polish
Wet mop

She crossed off the first two items, replaced the list on the dashboard, got into the jeep and bounced down the library steps. She drove up Fifth Avenue, threading her way through crumbling wreckage. As she was passing the ruins of St. Patrick's Cathedral at 50th Street, a man appeared from nowhere.

He stepped out of the rubble and, without looking left or right, started crossing the avenue just in front of her. She exclaimed, banged on the horn which remained mute, and braked so sharply that the jeep slewed and slammed into the remains of a No. 3 bus. The man let out a squawk, jumped ten feet, and then stood frozen, staring at her.

"You crazy jay-walker," she yelled. "Why don't you look where you're going? D'you think you own the whole city?"

He stared and stammered. He was a big man, with thick, grizzled hair, a red beard, and weathered skin. He was wearing army fatigues, heavy ski boots, and had a bursting knapsack and blanket roll on his back. He carried a battered shotgun, and his pockets were crammed with odds and ends. He looked like a prospector.

"My God," he whispered in a rusty voice. "Somebody at last. I knew it. I always knew I'd find someone." Then, as he noticed her long, fair hair, his face fell. "But a woman," he muttered. "Just my goddam lousy luck."

"What are you, some kind of nut?" she demanded. "Don't you know better than to cross against the lights?"

He looked around in bewilderment. "What lights?"

"So all right, there aren't any lights, but couldn't you look where you were going?"

"I'm sorry, lady. To tell the truth, I wasn't expecting any traffic."

"Just plain common sense," she grumbled, backing the jeep off the bus.

"Hey lady, wait a minute."

"Yes?"

"Listen, you know anything about TV? Electronics, how they say . . ."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"No, this is straight. Honest."

She snorted and tried to continue driving up Fifth Avenue, but he wouldn't get out of the way.

"Please, lady," he persisted. "I got a reason for asking. Do you know?"

"No."

"Damn! I never get a break. Lady, excuse me, no offense, but you got any guys in this town?"

"There's nobody but me. I'm the last man on earth."

"That's funny. I always thought I was."

"So all right, I'm the last woman on earth."

He shook his head. "There's got to be other people; there just has to. Stands to reason. South, maybe you think? I'm down from New Haven, and I figured if I headed where the climate was like warmer, there'd be some guys I could ask something."

"Ask what?"

"Aw, a woman wouldn't understand. No offense."

"Well, if you want to head south you're going the wrong way."

"That's south, ain't it?" he asked, pointing down Fifth Avenue.

"Yes, but you'll just come to a dead end. Manhattan's an island. What you have to do is go uptown and cross the George Washington bridge to Jersey."

"Uptown? Which way is that?"

"Go straight up Fifth to Cathedral Parkway, then over to the west side and up Riverside. You can't miss it."

He looked at her helplessly.

"Stranger in town?"

He nodded.

"Oh, all right," she said. "Hop in. I'll give you a lift."

She transferred the books and the china doll to the back seat, and he squeezed in alongside her. As she started the jeep she looked down at his worn ski boots.

"Hiking?"

"Yeah."

"Why don't you drive? You can get a car working, and there's plenty of gas and oil."

"I don't know how to drive," he said despondently. "It's the story of my life."

He heaved a sigh, and that made his knapsack jolt massively against her shoulder. She examined him out of the corner of her eye. He had a powerful chest, a long, thick back, and strong legs. His hands were big and hard, and his neck was corded with muscles. She thought for a moment, then nodded to herself and stopped the jeep.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Won't it go?"

"What's your name?"

"Mayo. Jim Mayo."

"I'm Linda Nielsen."

"Yeah. Nice meeting you. Why don't it go?"

"Jim, I've got a proposition for you."

"Oh?" He looked at her doubtfully. "I'll be glad to listen, lady —I mean Linda, but I ought to tell you, I got something on my mind that's going to keep me pretty busy for a long t . . ." His voice trailed off as he turned away from her intense gaze.

"Jim, if you'll do something for me, I'll do something for you."

"Like what, for instance?"

"Well, I get terribly lonesome, nights. It isn't so bad during the day, there's always a lot of chores to keep you busy, but at night it's just awful."

"Yeah, I know," he muttered.

"I've got to do something about it."

"But how do I come into this?" he asked nervously.

"Why don't you stay in New York for a while? If you do, I'll teach you how to drive, and find you a car so you don't have to hike south."

"Say, that's an idea. Is it hard, driving?"

"I could teach you in a couple of days."

"I don't learn things so quick."

"All right, a couple of weeks, but think of how much time you'll save in the long run."

"Gee," he said, "that sounds great." Then he turned away again. "But what do I have to do for you?"

Her face lit up with excitement. "Jim, I want you to help me move a piano."

"A piano? What piano?"

"A rosewood grand from Steinway's on 57th Street. I'm dying to have it in my place. The living room is just crying for it."

"Oh, you mean you're furnishing, huh?"

"Yes, but I want to play after dinner, too. You can't listen to records all the time. I've got it all planned; books on how to play, and books on how to tune a piano . . . I've been able to figure everything except how to move the piano in."

"Yeah, but . . . But there's apartments all over this town with pianos in them," he objected. "There must be hundreds, at least. Stands to reason. Why don't you live in one of them?"

"Never! I love my place. I've spent five years decorating it, and it's beautiful. Besides, there's the problem of water."

He nodded. "Water's always a headache. How do you handle it?"

"I'm living in the house in Central Park where they used to keep the model yachts. It faces the boat pond. It's a darling place, and I've got it all fixed up. We could get the piano in together, Jim. It wouldn't be hard."

"Well, I don't know, Lena . . ."

"Linda."

"Excuse me. Linda. I—"

"You look strong enough. What'd you do, before?"

"I used to be a pro rassler."

"There! I knew you were strong."

"Oh, I'm not a rassler any more. I become a bartender and went into the restaurant business. I opened 'The Body Slam' up in New Haven. Maybe you heard of it?"

"I'm sorry."

"It was sort of famous with the sports crowd. What'd you do before?"

"I was a researcher for BBDO."

"What's that?"

"An advertising agency," she explained impatiently. "We can talk about that later, if you'll stick around. And I'll teach you

how to drive, and we can move in the piano, and there're a few other things that I—but that can wait. Afterwards you can drive south."

"Gee, Linda, I don't know . . ."

She took Mayo's hands. "Come on, Jim, be a sport. You can stay with me. I'm a wonderful cook, and I've got a lovely guest room . . ."

"What for? I mean, thinking you was the last man on earth."

"That's a silly question. A proper house has to have a guest room. You'll love my place. I turned the lawns into a farm and gardens, and you can swim in the pond, and we'll get you a new Jag . . . I know where there's a beauty up on blocks."

"I think I'd rather have a Caddy."

"You can have anything you like. So what do you say, Jim? Is it a deal?"

"All right, Linda," he muttered reluctantly. "You've a deal."

It was indeed a lovely house with its pagoda roof of copper weathered to verdigris green, fieldstone walls, and deep recessed windows. The oval pond before it glittered blue in the soft June sunlight, and Mallard ducks paddled and quacked busily. The sloping lawns that formed a bowl around the pond were terraced and cultivated. The house faced west, and Central Park stretched out beyond like an unkempt estate.

Mayo looked at the pond wistfully. "It ought to have boats sailing on it," he said.

"The house was full of them when I moved in," Linda said.

"I always wanted a model boat when I was a kid. Once I even—" Mayo broke off. A penetrating pounding sounded somewhere; an irregular sequence of heavy knocks that sounded like the dint of stones under water. It stopped as suddenly as it had begun. "What was that?" Mayo asked.

Linda shrugged. "I don't know for sure. I think it's the city falling apart. You'll see buildings coming down every now and then. You get used to it." Her enthusiasm rekindled. "Now come inside. I want to show you everything."

She was bursting with pride and overflowing with decorating

details that bewildered Mayo, but he was impressed by her Victorian living room, *Empire* bedroom, and Country Kitchen with a working kerosene cooking stove. The Colonial guest room, with four-poster bed, hooked rug, and Tole lamps, worried him.

"This is kind of girlie-girlie, huh?"

"Naturally. I'm a girl."

"Yeah. Sure. I mean . . ." Mayo looked around doubtfully. "Well, a guy is used to stuff that ain't so delicate. No offense."

"Don't worry, that bed's strong enough. Now remember, Jim, no feet on the spread, and remove it at night. If your shoes are dirty, take them off before you come in. I got that rug from the museum and I don't want it messed up. Have you got a change of clothes?"

"Only what I got on."

"We'll have to get you new things tomorrow. What you're wearing is so filthy it's not worth laundering."

"Listen," he said desperately, "I think maybe I better camp out in the park."

"Why on earth?"

"Well, I'm like more used to it than houses. But you don't have to worry, Linda. I'll be around in case you need me."

"Why should I need you?"

"All you have to do is holler."

"Nonsense," Linda said firmly. "You're my guest and you're staying here. Now get cleaned up; I'm going to start dinner. Oh damn! I forgot to pick up the lobster bisque."

She gave him a dinner cleverly contrived from canned goods, and served on exquisite Fornisetti china with Swedish silver flatware. It was a typical girl's meal, and Mayo was still hungry when it was finished, but too polite to mention it. He was too tired to fabricate an excuse to go out and forage for something substantial. He lurched off to bed, remembering to remove his shoes, but forgetting all about the spread.

He was awakened next morning by a loud honking and clatter of wings. He rolled out of bed and went to the windows just in time to see the Mallards dispossessed from the pond by what appeared to be a red balloon. When he got his eyes working prop-

erly, he saw that it was a bathing cap. He wandered out to the pond, stretching and groaning. Linda yelled cheerfully and swam toward him. She heaved herself up out of the pond onto the curbing. The bathing cap was all that she wore. Mayo backed away from the splash and spatter.

"Good morning," Linda said. "Sleep well?"

"Good morning," Mayo said. "I don't know. The bed put kinks in my back. Gee, that water must be cold. You're all gooseflesh."

"No, it's marvelous." She pulled off the cap and shook her hair down. "Where's that towel? Oh, here. Go on in, Jim. You'll feel wonderful."

"I don't like it when it's cold."

"Don't be a sissy."

A crack of thunder split the quiet morning. Mayo looked up at the clear sky in astonishment. "What the hell was that?" he exclaimed.

"Watch," Linda ordered.

"It sounded like a sonic boom."

"There!" she cried, pointing west. "See?"

One of the westside skyscrapers crumbled majestically, sinking into itself like a collapsible cup, and raining masses of cornice and brick. The flayed girders twisted and contorted. Moments later they could hear the roar of the collapse.

"Man, that's a sight," Mayo muttered in awe.

"The decline and fall of the Empire City. You get used to it. Now take a dip, Jim. I'll get you a towel."

She ran into the house. He dropped his shorts and took off his socks, but was still standing on the curb, unhappily dipping his toe into the water when she returned with a huge bath towel.

"It's awful cold, Linda," he complained.

"Didn't you take cold showers when you were a wrestler?"

"Not me. Boiling hot."

"Jim, if you just stand there, you'll never go in. Look at you, you're starting to shiver. Is that a tattoo around your waist?"

"What? Oh, yeah. It's a python, in five colors. It goes all the way around. See?" He revolved proudly. "Got it when I was

with the Marines in Saigon back in '64. It's a Oriental-type python. Elegant, huh?"

"Did it hurt?"

"To tell the truth, no. Some guys try to make out like it's Chinese torture to get tattooed, but they're just showin' off. It more itches than anything else."

"You were a marine in '64?"

"That's right."

"How old were you?"

"Twenty."

"You're thirty-seven now?"

"Thirty-six going on thirty-seven."

"Then you're prematurely gray?"

"I guess so."

She contemplated him thoughtfully. "I tell you what, if you do go in, don't get your head wet."

She ran back into the house. Mayo, ashamed of his vacillation, forced himself to jump feet first into the pond. He was standing, chest deep, splashing his face and shoulders with water when Linda returned. She carried a stool, a pair of scissors, and a comb.

"Doesn't it feel wonderful?" she called.

"No."

She laughed. "Well, come out. I'm going to give you a haircut."

He climbed out of the pond, dried himself, and obediently sat on the stool while she cut his hair. "The beard, too," Linda insisted. "I want to see what you really look like." She trimmed him close enough for shaving, inspected him, and nodded with satisfaction. "Handsome. Very handsome in that crew cut."

"Aw, go on," he blushed.

"There's a bucket of hot water on the stove. Go and shave. Don't bother to dress. We're going to get you new clothes after breakfast, and then . . . The Piano."

"I couldn't walk around the streets naked," he said, shocked.

"Don't be silly. Who's to see? Now hurry."

They drove down to Abercrombie & Fitch on Madison and

45th Street, Mayo wrapped modestly in his towel. Linda told him she'd been a customer for years, and showed him the pile of sales slips she had accumulated. Mayo examined them curiously while she took his measurements and went off in search of clothes. He was almost indignant when she returned with her arms ladened.

"Jim, I've got some lovely elk moccasins, and a Safari suit, and wool socks, and Shipboard shirts, and—"

"Listen," he interrupted, "do you know what your whole tab comes to? Nearly fourteen hundred dollars."

"Really? Put on the shorts first. They're drip-dry."

"You must have been out of your mind, Linda. What'd you want all that junk for?"

"Are the socks big enough? What junk? I needed everything."

"Yeah? Like . . ." He shuffled the signed sales slips. "Like One Underwater Viewer With Plexiglass Lens, $9.95? What for?"

"So I could see to clean the bottom of the pond."

"What about this Stainless Steel Service For Four, $39.50?"

"For when I'm lazy and don't feel like heating water. You can wash stainless steel in cold water." She admired him. "Oh, Jim, come look in the mirror. You're real romantic, like the big game hunter in that Hemingway story."

He shook his head. "I don't see how you're ever going to get out of hock. You got to watch your spending, Linda. Maybe we better forget about that piano, huh?"

"Never," Linda said adamantly. "I don't care how much it costs. A piano is a lifetime investment, and it's worth it."

She was frantic with excitement as they drove uptown to the Steinway showroom, and helpful and underfoot by turns. After a long afternoon of muscle-cracking and critical engineering involving makeshift gantries and an agonizing dolly-haul up Fifth Avenue, they had the piano in place in Linda's living room. Mayo gave it one last shake to make sure it was firmly on its legs, and then sank down, exhausted. "Je-zuz!" he groaned. "Hiking south would've been easier."

"Jim!" Linda ran to him and threw herself on him with a fer-

vent hug. "Jim, you're an angel. You're wonderful. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay." He grunted. "Get off me, Linda. I can't breathe."

"I just can't thank you enough. I've been dreaming about this for ages. I don't know what I can do to repay you. Anything you want, just name it."

"Aw," he said, "you already cut my hair."

"I'm serious."

"Ain't you teaching me how to drive?"

"Of course. As quickly as possible. That's the least I can do." Linda backed to a chair and sat down, her eyes fixed on the piano.

"Don't make such a fuss over nothing," he said, climbing to his feet. He sat down before the keyboard, shot an embarrassed grin at her over his shoulder, then reached out and began stumbling through *The Minuet in G*.

Linda gasped and sat bolt upright. "You play," she whispered.

"Naw. I took piano when I was a kid."

"But you remember."

"A little bit."

"Can you read music?"

"I used to."

"Could you teach me?"

"I guess so; it's kind of hard. Hey, here's another piece I had to take." He began mutilating *The Rustle Of Spring*. What with the piano out of tune and his mistakes, it was ghastly.

"Beautiful," Linda breathed. "Just beautiful!" She stared at his back while an expression of decision and determination stole across her face. She arose, slowly crossed to Mayo, and put her hands on his shoulders.

He glanced up. "Something?" he asked.

"Nothing," she answered. "You practice the piano. I'll get dinner."

But she was so concentrated and preoccupied for the rest of the evening that she made Mayo nervous. He stole off to bed early.

It wasn't until three o'clock the following afternoon that they

finally got a car working, and it wasn't a Caddy, it was a Chevy; a hard top because Mayo didn't like the idea of being exposed to the weather in a convertible. They drove out of the 10th Avenue garage and back to the east side where Linda felt more at home. She confessed that the boundaries of her world were from Fifth Avenue to Third, and from 42nd Street to 86th. She was uncomfortable outside this pale.

She turned the wheel over to Mayo and let him creep up and down Fifth and Madison, practicing starts and stops. He sideswiped five wrecks, stalled eleven times, and reversed through a store front which, fortunately, was devoid of glass. He was trembling with nervousness.

"It's real hard," he complained.

"It's just a question of practice," she reassured him. "Don't worry. I promise you'll be an expert if it takes us a month."

"A whole month!"

"You said you were a slow learner, didn't you? Don't blame me. Stop here a minute."

He jolted the Chevy to a halt. Linda got out.

"Wait for me."

"What's up?"

"A surprise."

She ran into a shop and was gone for half an hour. When she reappeared she was wearing a pencil-thin black sheath, pearls, and high heeled opera pumps. She had twisted her hair into a coronet. Mayo regarded her with amazement as she got into the car.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"Part of the surprise. Turn east on 52nd Street."

He labored, started the car, and drove east. "Why'd you get all dressed up in an evening gown?"

"It's a cocktail dress."

"What for?"

"So I'll be dressed for where we're going. Watch out, Jim!" Linda wrenched the wheel and sheered off the stern of a shattered sanitation truck. "I'm taking you to a famous restaurant."

"To eat?"

"No, silly, for drinks. You're my visiting fireman, and I have to entertain you. That's it on the left. See if you can park somewhere."

He parked abominably. As they got out of the car, Mayo stopped and began to sniff curiously.

"Smell that?" he asked.

"Smell what?"

"That sort of sweet smell."

"It's my perfume."

"No, it's something in the air, kind of sweet and chokey. I know that smell from somewhere, but I can't remember."

"Never mind. Come inside." She led him into the restaurant. "You ought to be wearing a tie," she whispered, "but maybe we can get away with it."

Mayo was not impressed by the restaurant decor, but was fascinated by the portraits of celebrities hung in the bar. He spent rapt minutes burning his fingers with matches, gazing at Mel Allen, Red Barber, Casey Stengel, Frank Gifford and Rocky Marciano. When Linda finally came back from the kitchen with a lighted candle, he turned to her eagerly.

"You ever see any of them TV stars in here?" he asked.

"I suppose so. How about a drink?"

"Sure. Sure. But I want to talk more about them TV stars."

He escorted her to a bar stool, blew the dust off, and helped her up most gallantly. Then he vaulted over the bar, whipped out his handkerchief, and polished the mahogany professionally. "This is my specialty," he grinned. He assumed the impersonally friendly attitude of the bartender. "Evening, M'am. Nice night. What's your pleasure?"

"God, I had a rough day in the shop! Dry Martini on the rocks. Better make it a double."

"Certainly, M'am. Twist or olive?"

"Onion."

"Double dry Gibson on the rocks. Right." Mayo searched behind the bar and finally produced whisky, gin, and several bottles of soda, as yet only partially evaporated through their sealed

caps. "Afraid we're fresh out of Martinis, M'am. What's your second pleasure?"

"Oh, I like that. Scotch, please."

"This soda'll be flat," he warned, "and there's no ice."

"Never mind."

He rinsed a glass with soda and poured her a drink.

"Thank you. Have one on me, bartender. What's your name?"

"They call me Jim, M'am. No thanks. Never drink on duty."

"Then come off duty and join me."

"Never drink off duty, M'am."

"You can call me Linda."

"Thank you, Miss Linda."

"Are you serious about never drinking, Jim?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Happy Days."

"And Long Nights."

"I like that, too. Is it your own?"

"Gee, I don't know. It's sort of the usual bartender's routine, a specially with guys. You know? Suggestive. No offense."

"None taken."

"Bees!" Mayo burst out.

Linda was startled. "Bees what?"

"That smell. Like inside bee hives."

"Oh? I wouldn't know," she said indifferently. "I'll have another, please."

"Coming right up. Now listen, about them TV celebrities, you actually saw them here? In person?"

"Why, of course. Happy Days, Jim."

"May they all be Saturdays."

Linda pondered. "Why Saturdays?"

"Day off."

"Oh."

"Which TV stars did you see?"

"You name 'em, I saw 'em." She laughed. "You remind me of the kid next door. I always had to tell him the celebrities I'd seen. One day I told him I saw Jean Arthur in here, and he said, 'With his horse?' "

Mayo couldn't see the point, but was wounded nevertheless. Just as Linda was about to soothe his feelings, the bar began a gentle quivering, and at the same time a faint subterranean rumbling commenced. It came from a distance, seemed to approach slowly, and then faded away. The vibration stopped. Mayo stared at Linda.

"Je-zus! You think maybe this building's going to go?"

She shook her head. "No. When they go, it's always with that boom. You know what that sounded like? The Lexington Avenue subway."

"The subway?"

"Uh-huh. The local train."

"That's crazy. How could the subway be running?"

"I didn't say it *was*. I said it *sounded* like. I'll have another, please."

"We need more soda." Mayo explored and reappeared with bottles and a large menu. He was pale. "You better take it easy, Linda," he said. "You know what they're charging per drink? $1.75. Look."

"To hell with expense. Let's live a little. Make it a double, bartender. You know something, Jim? If you stayed in town I could show you where all your heroes lived. Thank you. Happy Days. I could take you up to BBDO and show you their tapes and films. How about that? Stars like . . . like Red . . . Who?"

"Barber."

"Red Barber, and Rocky Gifford, and Rocky Casey, and Rocky, the Flying Squirrel."

"You're putting me on," Mayo said, offended again.

"Me, sir? Putting you on?" Linda said with dignity. "Why would I do a thing like that? Just trying to be pleasant. Just trying to give you a good time. My mother told me, Linda, she told me, just remember this about a man, wear what he wants and say what he likes, is what she told me. You want this dress?" she demanded.

"I like it, if that's what you mean."

"Know what I paid for it? Ninety-nine fifty."

"What? A hundred dollars for a skinny black thing like that?"

"It is not a skinny black thing like that. It is a basic black cocktail frock. And I paid twenty dollars for the pearls. Simulated," she explained. "And sixty for the opera pumps. And forty for the perfume. Two hundred and twenty dollars to give you a good time. You having a good time?"

"Sure."

"Want to smell me?"

"I already."

"Bartender, give me another."

"Afraid I can't serve you, M'am."

"Why not?"

"You've had enough already."

"I have not had enough already," Linda said indignantly. "Where's your manners?" She grabbed the whisky bottle. "Come on, let's have a few drinks and talk up a storm about TV stars. Happy Days. I could take you up to BBDO and show you their tapes and films. How about that?"

"You already asked me."

"You didn't answer. I could show you movies, too. You like movies? I hate 'em, but I can't knock 'em any more. Movies saved my life when the big bang came."

"How was that?"

"This is a secret, understand? Just between you and me. If any other agency ever found out . . ." Linda looked around and then lowered her voice. "BBDO located this big cache of silent films. Lost films, see? Nobody knew the prints were around. Make a great TV series. So they sent me to this abandoned mine in Jersey to take inventory."

"In a mine?"

"That's right. Happy Days."

"Why were the movies in a mine?"

"Old prints. Acetate. Catch fire. Also rot. Have to be stored like wine. That's why. So took two of my assistants with me to spend weekend down there, checking."

"You stayed in the mine a whole weekend?"

"Uh-huh. Three girls. Friday to Monday. That was the plan. Thought it would be a fun deal. Happy Days. So. Where was I?

Oh. So, took lights, blankets, linen, plenty of picnic, the full schemeer, and went to work. I remember exact moment when blast came. Was looking for third reel of an UFA film, *Gekronter Blumenorden an der Pegnitz.* Had reel one, two, four, five, six. No three. Bang! Happy Days."

"Jesus. Then what?"

"My girls panicked. Couldn't keep 'em down there. Never saw them again. But I knew. I knew. Stretched that picnic forever. Then starved even longer. Finally came up, and for what? For who? Whom?" She began to weep. "For nobody. Nobody left. Nothing." She took Mayo's hands. "Why won't you stay?"

"Stay? Where?"

"Here."

"I am staying."

"I mean for a long time. Why not? Haven't I got lovely home? And there's all New York for supplies. And farm for flowers and vegetables. We could keep cows and chickens. Go fishing. Drive cars. Go to museums. Art galleries. Entertain . . ."

"You're doing all that right now. You don't need me."

"But I do. I do."

"For what?"

"For piano lessons."

After a long pause he said, "You're drunk."

"Not wounded, sire, but dead."

She lay her head on the bar, beamed up at him roguishly, and then closed her eyes. An instant later, Mayo knew she had passed out. He compressed his lips. Then he climbed out of the bar, computed the tab, and left fifteen dollars under the whisky bottle.

He took Linda's shoulder and shook her gently. She collapsed into his arms, and her hair came tumbling down. He blew out the candle, picked Linda up, and carried her to the Chevy. Then, with anguished concentration, he drove through the dark to the boat pond. It took him forty minutes.

He carried Linda into her bedroom and sat her down on the bed which was decorated with an elaborate arrangement of dolls.

Immediately she rolled over and curled up with a doll in her arms, crooning to it. Mayo lit a lamp and tried to prop her upright. She went over again, giggling.

"Linda," he said, "you got to get that dress off."

"Mf."

"You can't sleep in it. It cost a hundred dollars."

"Nine'nine-fif'y."

"Now come on, honey."

"Fm."

He rolled his eyes in exasperation, and then undressed her, carefully hanging up the basic black cocktail frock, and standing the sixty dollar pumps in a corner. He could not manage the clasp of the pearls (simulated) so he put her to bed still wearing them. Lying on the pale blue sheets, nude except for the necklace, she looked like a Nordic odalisque.

"Did you muss my dolls?" she mumbled.

"No. They're all around you."

"Thas right. Never sleep without them." She reached out and petted them lovingly. "Happy Days. Long Nights," she murmured.

"Women!" Mayo snorted. He extinguished the lamp and tramped out, slamming the door behind him.

Next morning Mayo was again awakened by the clatter of dispossessed ducks. The red balloon was sailing on the surface of the pond, bright in the warm June sunshine. Mayo wished it was a model boat instead of the kind of girl who got drunk in bars. He stalked out and jumped into the water as far from Linda as possible. He was sluicing his chest when something seized his ankle and nipped him. He let out a yell, and was confronted by Linda's beaming face bursting out of the water before him.

"Good morning," she laughed.

"Very funny," he muttered.

"You look mad this morning."

He grunted.

"And I don't blame you. I did an awful thing last night. I didn't give you any dinner, and I want to apologize."

"I wasn't thinking about dinner," he said with baleful dignity.

"No? Then what on earth are you mad about?"

"I can't stand women who get drunk."

"Who was drunk?"

"You."

"I was not," she said indignantly.

"No? Who had to be undressed and put to bed like a kid?"

"Who was too dumb to take off my pearls?" she countered. "They broke and I slept on pebbles all night. I'm covered with black and blue marks. Look. Here and here and—"

"Linda," he interrupted sternly, "I'm just a plain guy from New Haven. I got no use for spoiled girls who run up charge accounts and all the time decorate theirselves and hang around society-type saloons getting loaded."

"If you don't like my company why do you stay?"

"I'm going," he said. He climbed out and began drying himself. "I'm starting south this morning."

"Enjoy your hike."

"I'm driving."

"What? A kiddie-kar?"

"The Chevy."

"Jim, you're not serious?" She climbed out of the pond, looking alarmed. "You really don't know how to drive yet."

"No? Didn't I drive you home falling down drunk last night?"

"You'll get into awful trouble."

"Nothing I can't get out of. Anyway, I can't hang around here forever. You're a party girl; you just want to play. I got serious things on my mind. I got to go south and find guys who know about TV."

"Jim, you've got me wrong. I'm not like that at all. Why, look at the way I fixed up my house. Could I have done that if I'd been going to parties all the time?"

"You done a nice job," he admitted.

"Please don't leave today. You're not ready yet."

"Aw, you just want me to hang around and teach you music."

"Who said that?"

"You did. Last night."

She frowned, pulled off her cap, then picked up her towel and began drying herself. At last she said, "Jim, I'll be honest with you. Sure, I want you to stay a while. I won't deny it. But I wouldn't want you around permanently. After all, what have we got in common?"

"You're so damn uptown," he growled.

"No, no, it's nothing like that. It's simply that you're a guy and I'm a girl, and we've got nothing to offer each other. We're different. We've got different tastes and interests. Fact?"

"Absolutely."

"But you're not ready to leave yet. So I tell you what; we'll spend the whole morning practicing driving, and then we'll have some fun. What would you like to do? Go window-shopping? Buy more clothes in the department stores? Visit the Modern Museum? Have a picnic?"

His face brightened. "Gee, you know something? I was never to a picnic in my whole life. Once I was bartender at a clambake, but that's not the same thing; not like when you're a kid."

She was delighted. "Then we'll have a real kid-type picnic."

And she brought her dolls. She carried them in her arms while Mayo toted the picnic basket to the Alice In Wonderland monument. The statue perplexed Mayo, who had never heard of Lewis Carroll. While Linda seated her pets and unpacked the picnic, she gave Mayo a summary of the story, and described how the bronze heads of Alice, the Mad Hatter, and the March Hare had been polished bright by the swarms of kids playing King of the Mountain.

"Funny, I never heard of that story," he said.

"I don't think you had much of a childhood, Jim."

"Why would you say a—" He stopped, cocked his head, and listened intently.

"What's the matter?" Linda asked.

"You hear that Blue Jay?"

"No."

"Listen. He's making a funny sound; like steel."

"Steel?"

"Yeah. Like . . . Like swords in a duel."

"You're kidding."

"No. Honest."

"But birds sing; they don't make noises."

"Not always. Blue Jays imitate noises a lot. Starlings, too. And parrots. Now why would he be imitating a sword fight? Where'd he hear it?"

"You're a real country boy, aren't you, Jim? Bees and Blue Jays and Starlings and all that. . ."

"I guess so. I was going to ask; why would you say a thing like that, me not having any childhood?"

"Oh, things like not knowing Alice, and never going on a picnic, and always wanting a model yacht." Linda opened a dark bottle. "Like to try some wine?"

"You better go easy," he warned.

"Now stop it, Jim. I'm not a drunk."

"Did you or didn't you get smashed last night?"

She capitulated. "All right, I did; but only because it was my first drink in years."

He was pleased by her surrender. "Sure. Sure. That figures."

"So? Join me?"

"What the hell, why not?" He grinned. "Let's live a little. Say, this is one swingin' picnic, and I like the plates, too. Where'd you get them?"

"Abercrombie & Fitch," Linda said, deadpan. "Stainless Steel Service For Four, $39.50. Skoal. I sure goofed, didn't I, kicking up all that fuss? Here's looking at you."

"Here's looking right back."

They drank and continued eating in warm silence, smiling companionably at each other. Linda removed her Madras silk shirt in order to tan in the blazing afternoon sun, and Mayo politely hung it up on a branch. Suddenly Linda asked, "Why didn't you have a childhood, Jim?"

"Gee, I don't know." He thought it over. "I guess because my mother died when I was a kid. And something else, too; I had to work a lot."

"Why?"

"My father was a schoolteacher. You know how they get paid."

"Oh, so that's why you're anti-egghead."

"I am?"

"Of course. No offense."

"Maybe I am," he conceded. "It sure was a letdown for my old man, me playing fullback in high school, and him wanting like an Einstein in the house."

"Was football fun?"

"Not like playing games. Football's a business. Hey, remember when we were kids how we used to chose up sides? *Ibbety, bibbety, zibbety, zab?*"

"We used to say, Eenie, meenie, miney, mo."

"Remember: *April Fool, go to school, tell your teacher you're a fool?*"

"I love coffee, I love tea, I love the boys, and the boys love me."

"I bet they did at that," Mayo said solemnly.

"Not me."

"Why not?"

"I was always too big."

He was astonished. "But you're not big," he assured her. "You're just the right size. Perfect. And really built. I noticed when we moved the piano in. You got muscle, for a girl. A specially in the legs, and that's where it counts."

She blushed. "Stop it, Jim."

"No. Honest."

"More wine?"

"Thanks. You have some, too."

"All right."

A crack of thunder split the sky with its sonic boom, and was followed by the roar of collapsing masonry.

"There goes another skyscraper," Linda said. "What were we talking about?"

"Games," Mayo said promptly. "Excuse me for talking with my mouth full."

"Oh yes. Jim, did you play *Drop The Handkerchief* up in New Haven?" Linda sang. *"A tisket, a tasket, a green and yellow basket, I sent a letter to my love, and on the way I dropped it . . ."*

"Gee," he said, much impressed. "You sing real good."

"Oh, go on!"

"Yes you do. You got a swell voice. Now don't argue with me. Keep quiet a minute. I got to figure something out." He thought intently for a long time, finishing his wine and absently accepting another glass. Finally he delivered himself of a decision. "You got to learn music."

"You know I'm dying to, Jim."

"So I'm going to stay a while and teach you; as much as I know. Now hold it! Hold it!" he added hastily, cutting off her excitement. "I'm not going to stay in your house. I want a place of my own."

"Of course, Jim. Anything you say."

"And I'm still headed south."

"I'll teach you to drive, Jim. I'll keep my word."

"And no strings, Linda."

"Of course not. What kind of strings?"

"You know. Like the last minute you all of a sudden got a Looey Cans couch you want me to move in."

"Louis Quinze!" Linda's jaw dropped. "Wherever did you learn that?"

"Not in the Marines, that's for sure."

They laughed, clinked glasses, and finished their wine. Suddenly Mayo leaped up, pulled Linda's hair, and ran to the Wonderland monument. In an instant he had climbed to the top of Alice's head.

"I'm King of the Mountain," he shouted, looking around in imperial survey. "I'm King of the—" He cut himself off and stared down behind the statue.

"Jim, what's the matter?"

Without a word, Mayo climbed down and strode to a pile of debris half hidden inside overgrown forsythia bushes. He knelt and began turning over the wreckage with gentle hands. Linda ran to him.

"Jim, what's wrong?"

"These used to be model boats," he muttered.

"That's right. My God, is that all? I thought you were sick, or something."

"How come they're here?"

"Why, I dumped them, of course."

"You?"

"Yes. I told you. I had to clear out the boat house when I moved in. That was ages ago."

"You did this?"

"Yes. I—"

"You're a murderer," he growled. He stood up and glared at her. "You're a killer. You're like all women, you got no heart and soul. To do a thing like this!"

He turned and stalked toward the boat pond. Linda followed him, completely bewildered.

"Jim, I don't understand. Why are you so mad?"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"But I had to have house-room. You wouldn't expect me to live with a lot of model boats."

"Just forget everything I said. I'm going to pack and go south, I wouldn't stay with you if you was the last person on earth."

Linda gathered herself and suddenly darted ahead of Mayo. When he tramped into the boathouse, she was standing before the door of the guest room. She held up a heavy iron key.

"I found it," she panted. "Your door's locked."

"Gimmie that key, Linda."

"No."

He stepped toward her, but she faced him defiantly and stood her ground.

"Go ahead," she challenged. "Hit me."

He stopped. "Aw, I wouldn't pick on anybody that wasn't my own size."

They continued to face each other, at a complete impasse.

"I don't need my gear," Mayo muttered at last. "I can get more stuff somewheres."

"Oh, go ahead and pack," Linda answered. She tossed him the key and stood aside. Then Mayo discovered there was no lock in the bedroom door. He opened the door, looked inside, closed it,

and looked at Linda. She kept her face straight but began to sputter. He grinned. Then they both burst out laughing.

"Gee," Mayo said, "you sure made a monkey out of me. I'd hate to play poker against you."

"You're a pretty good bluffer yourself, Jim. I was scared to death you were going to knock me down."

"You ought to know I wouldn't hurt nobody."

"I guess I do. Now, let's sit down and talk this over sensibly."

"Aw, forget it, Linda. I kind of lost my head over them boats, and I—"

"I don't mean the boats; I mean going south. Every time you get mad you start south again. Why?"

"I told you, to find guys who know about TV."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"I can try. Why don't you explain what you're after; specifically? Maybe I can help you."

"You can't do nothing for me; you're a girl."

"We have our uses. At least I can listen. You can trust me, Jim. Aren't we chums? Tell me about it."

Well, when the blast come (Mayo said) I was up in the Berkshires with Gil Watkins. Gil was my buddy, a real nice guy and a real bright guy. He took two years from M.I.T. before he quit college. He was like chief engineer or something at WNHA, the TV station in New Haven. Gil had a million hobbies. One of them was spee—speel—I can't remember. It meant exploring caves.

So anyway we were up in this flume in the Berkshires, spending the weekend inside, exploring and trying to map everything and figure out where the underground river come from. We brought food and stuff along, and bed rolls. The compass we were using went crazy for like twenty minutes, and that should have give us a clue, but Gil talked about magnetic ores and stuff. Only when we come out Sunday night, I tell you it was pretty scarey. Gil knew right off what happened.

"By Christ, Jim," he said, "they up and done it like everybody

always knew they would. They've blew and gassed and poisoned and radiated themselves straight to hell, and we're going back to that goddam cave until it all blows over."

So me and Gil went back and rationed the food and stayed as long as we could. Finally we come out again and drove back to New Haven. It was dead like all the rest. Gil put together some radio stuff and tried to pick up broadcasts. Nothing. Then we packed some canned goods and drove all around; Bridgeport, Waterbury, Hartford, Springfield, Providence, New London . . . a big circle. Nobody. Nothing. So we come back to New Haven and settled down, and it was a pretty good life.

Daytime, we'd get in supplies and stuff, and tinker with the house to keep it working right. Nights, after supper, Gil would go off to WNHA around seven o'clock and start the station. He was running it on the emergency generators. I'd go down to "The Body Slam," open it up, sweep it out, and then start the bar TV set. Gil fixed me a generator for it to run on.

It was a lot of fun watching the shows Gil was broadcasting. He'd start with the news and weather, which he always got wrong. All he had was some Farmer's Almanacs and a sort of antique barometer that looked like that clock you got there on the wall. I don't think it worked so good, or maybe Gil never took weather at M.I.T. Then he'd broadcast the evening show.

I had my shotgun in the bar in case of holdups. Anytime I saw something that bugged me, I just up with the gun and let loose at the set. Then I'd take it and throw it out the front door, and put another one in its place. I must have had hundreds waiting in the back. I spent two days a week just collecting reserves.

Midnight, Gil would turn off WNHA, I'd lock up the restaurant, and we'd meet home for coffee. Gil would ask how many sets I shot, and laugh when I told him. He said I was the most accurate TV poll ever invented. I'd ask him about what shows were coming up next week, and argue with him about . . . oh . . . about like what movies or football games WNHA was scheduling. I didn't like Westerns much, and I hated them high-minded panel discussions.

But the luck had to turn lousy; it's the story of my life. After a

couple of years I found out I was down to my last set, and then I was in trouble. This night Gil run one of them icky commercials where this smart-alex woman saves a marriage with the right laundry soap. Naturally I reached for my gun, and only the last minute remembered not to shoot. Then he run an awful movie about a misunderstood composer, and the same thing happened. When we met back at the house, I was all shook up.

"What's the matter?" Gil asked.

I told him.

"I thought you liked watching the shows," he said.

"Only when I could shoot 'em."

"You poor bastard," he laughed, "you're a captive audience now."

"Gil, could you maybe change the programs, seeing the spot I'm in?"

"Be reasonable, Jim. WNHA has to broadcast variety. We operate on the cafeteria basis; something for everybody. If you don't like a show, why don't you switch channels?"

"Now that's silly. You know damn well we only got one channel in New Haven."

"Then turn your set off."

"I can't turn the bar set off, it's part of the entertainment. I'd lose my whole clientele. Gil, do you *have* to show them awful movies, like that army musical last night, singing and dancing and kissing on top of Sherman tanks, for Je-zus sake!"

"The women love uniform pictures."

"And those commercials; women always sneering at somebody's girdle, and fairies smoking cigarettes, and—"

"Aw," Gil said, "write a letter to the station."

So I did, and a week later I got an answer. It said: *Dear Mr. Mayo, we are very glad to learn that you are a regular viewer of WNHA, and thank you for your interest in our programing. We hope you will continue to enjoy our broadcasts. Sincerely yours, Gilbert O. Watkins, Station Manager.* There was a couple of tickets for an interview show enclosed. I showed the letter to Gil, and he just shrugged.

"You see what you're up against, Jim," he said. "They don't

care about what you like or don't like. All they want to know is are you watching."

I tell you, the next couple of months were hell for me. I couldn't keep the set turned off, and I couldn't watch it without reaching for my gun a dozen times a night. It took all my will power to keep from pulling the trigger. I got so nervous and jumpy that I knew I had to do something about it before I went off my rocker. So one night I brought the gun home and shot Gil.

Next day I felt a lot better, and when I went down to "The Body Slam" at seven o'clock to clean up, I was whistling kind of cheerful. I swept out the restaurant, polished the bar, and then turned on the TV to get the news and weather. You wouldn't believe it, but the set was busted. I couldn't get a picture. I couldn't even get a sound. My last set, busted.

So you see, that's why I have to head south (Mayo explained). I got to locate a TV repairman.

There was a long pause after Mayo finished his story. Linda examined him keenly, trying to conceal the gleam in her eye. At last she asked with studied carelessness, "Where did he get the barometer?"

"Who? What?"

"Your friend, Gil. His antique barometer. Where did he get it?"

"Gee, I don't know. Antiquing was another one of his hobbies."

"And it looked like that clock?"

"Just like it."

"French?"

"I couldn't say."

"Bronze?"

"I guess so. Like your clock. Is that bronze?"

"Yes. Shaped like a sunburst?"

"No, just like yours."

"That's a sunburst. The same size?"

"Exactly."

"Where was it?"

"Didn't I tell you? In our house."

"Where's the house?"

"On Grant Street."

"What number?"

"Three fifteen. Say, what is all this?"

"Nothing, Jim. Just curious. No offense. Now I think I'd better get our picnic things."

"You wouldn't mind if I took a walk by myself?"

She cocked an eye at him. "Don't try driving alone. Garage mechanics are scarcer than TV repairmen."

He grinned and disappeared; but after dinner the true purpose of his disappearance was revealed when he produced a sheaf of sheet music, placed it on the piano rack, and led Linda to the piano bench. She was delighted and touched.

"Jim, you angel! Wherever did you find it?"

"In the apartment house across the street. Fourth floor, rear. Name of Horowitz. They got a lot of records, too. Boy, I can tell you it was pretty spooky snooping around in the dark with only matches. You know something funny, the whole top of the house is full of glop."

"Glop?"

"Yeah. Sort of white jelly, only it's hard. Like clear concrete. Now look, see this note? It's C. Middle C. It stands for this white key here. We better sit together. Move over . . ."

The lesson continued for two hours of painful concentration, and left them both so exhausted that they tottered to their rooms with only perfunctory goodnights.

"Jim," Linda called.

"Yeah?" he yawned.

"Would you like one of my dolls for your bed?"

"Gee, no. Thanks a lot, Linda, but guys really ain't interested in dolls."

"I suppose not. Never mind. Tomorrow I'll have something for you that really interests guys."

Mayo was awakened next morning by a rap on his door. He heaved up in bed and tried to open his eyes.

"Yeah? Who is it?" he called.

"It's me. Linda. May I come in?"

He glanced around hastily. The room was neat. The hooked rug was clean. The precious candlewick bedspread was neatly folded on top of the dresser.

"Okay. Come on in."

Linda entered, wearing a crisp seersucker dress. She sat down on the edge of the four-poster and gave Mayo a friendly pat. "Good morning," she said. "Now listen. I'll have to leave you alone for a few hours, I've got things to do. There's breakfast on the table, but I'll be back in time for lunch. All right?"

"Sure."

"You won't be lonesome?"

"Where you going?"

"Tell you when I get back." She reached out and touseled his head. "Be a good boy and don't get into mischief. Oh, one other thing. Don't go into my bedroom."

"Why should I?"

"Just don't anyway."

She smiled and was gone. Moments later, Mayo heard the jeep start and drive off. He got up at once, went into Linda's bedroom, and looked around. The room was neat, as ever. The bed was made, and her pet dolls were lovingly arranged on the coverlet. Then he saw it.

"Gee," he breathed.

It was a model of a full-rigged clipper ship. The spars and rigging were intact, but the hull was peeling, and the sails were shredded. It stood before Linda's closet, and alongside it was her sewing basket. She had already cut out a fresh set of white linen sails. Mayo knelt down before the model and touched it tenderly.

"I'll paint her black with a gold line around her," he murmured, "and I'll name her the *Linda N.*"

He was so deeply moved that he hardly touched his breakfast. He bathed, dressed, took his shotgun and a handful of shells, and went out to wander through the park. He circled south,

passed the playing fields, the decaying carousel, and the crumbling skating rink, and at last left the park and loafed down Seventh Avenue.

He turned east on 50th Street and spent a long time trying to decipher the tattered posters advertising the last performance at Radio City Music Hall. Then he turned south again. He was jolted to a halt by the sudden clash of steel. It sounded like giant sword blades in a titanic duel. A small herd of stunted horses burst out of a side street, terrified by the clangor. Their shoeless hooves thudded bluntly on the shattered pavement. The sound of steel stopped.

"That's where that Blue Jay got it from," Mayo muttered. "But what the hell is it?"

He drifted eastward to investigate, but forgot the mystery when he came to the diamond center. He was dazzled by the blue-white stones glittering in the showcases. The door of one jewel mart had sagged open, and Mayo tiptoed in. When he emerged it was with a strand of genuine matched pearls which had cost him an I.O.U. worth a year's rent on "The Body Slam."

His tour took him to Madison Avenue where he found himself before Abercrombie & Fitch. He went in to explore and came at last to the gun racks. There he lost all sense of time, and when he recovered his senses he was walking up Fifth Avenue toward the boat pond. An Italian Cosmi automatic rifle was cradled in his arms, guilt was in his heart, and a saleslip in the store read: *I.O.U. 1 Cosmi Rifle, $750.00. 6 Boxes Ammo. $18.00. James Mayo.*

It was past three o'clock when he got back to the boathouse. He eased in, trying to appear casual, hoping the extra gun he was carrying would go unnoticed. Linda was sitting on the piano bench with her back to him.

"Hi," Mayo said nervously. "Sorry I'm late. I . . . I brought you a present. They're real." He pulled the pearls from his pocket and held them out. Then he saw she was crying.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

She didn't answer.

"You wasn't scared I'd run out on you? I mean, well, all my gear is here. The car, too. You only had to look."

She turned. "I hate you!" she cried.

He dropped the pearls and recoiled, startled by her vehemence. "What's the matter?"

"You're a lousy, rotten liar!"

"Who? Me?"

"I drove up to New Haven this morning." Her voice trembled with passion. "There's no house standing on Grant Street. It's all wiped out. There's no Station WNHA. The whole building's gone."

"No."

"Yes. And I went to your restaurant. There's no pile of TV sets out in the street. There's only one set, over the bar. It's rusted to pieces. The rest of the restaurant is a pig sty. You were living there all the time. Alone. There was only one bed in back."

"Lies! All lies!"

"Why would I lie about a thing like that?"

"You never shot any Gil Watkins."

"I sure did. Both barrels. He had it coming."

"And you haven't got any TV set to repair."

"Yes I do."

"And even if it is repaired, there's no station to broadcast."

"Talk sense," he said angrily. "Why would I shoot Gil if there wasn't any broadcast."

"If he's dead, how can he broadcast?"

"See? And you just now said I didn't shoot him."

"Oh, you're mad! You're insane!" she sobbed. "You just described that barometer because you happened to be looking at my clock. And I believed your crazy lies. I had my heart set on a barometer to match my clock. I've been looking for years." She ran to the wall arrangement and hammered her fist alongside the clock. "It belongs right here. Here. But you lied, you lunatic. There never was a barometer."

"If there's a lunatic around here, it's you," he shouted. "You're so crazy to get this house decorated that nothing's real for you any more."

She ran across the room, snatched up his old shotgun and pointed it at him. "You get out of here. Right this minute. Get out or I'll kill you. I never want to see you again."

The shotgun kicked off in her hands, knocking her backwards, and spraying shot over Mayo's head into a corner bracket. China shattered and clattered down. Linda's face went white.

"Jim! My God, are you all right? I didn't mean to . . . It just went off . . ."

He stepped forward, too furious to speak. Then, as he raised his hand to cuff her, the sound of distant reports came, BLAM-BLAM-BLAM. Mayo froze.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Linda nodded.

"That wasn't any accident. It was a signal."

Mayo grabbed the shotgun, ran outside, and fired the second barrel into the air. There was a pause. Then again came the distant explosions in a stately triplet, BLAM-BLAM-BLAM. They had an odd sucking sound, as though they were implosions rather than explosions. Far up the park, a canopy of frightened birds mounted into the sky.

"There's somebody," Mayo exulted. "By God, I told you I'd find somebody. Come on."

They ran north, Mayo digging into his pockets for more shells to reload and signal again.

"I got to thank you for taking that shot at me, Linda."

"I didn't shoot at you," she protested. "It was an accident."

"The luckiest accident in the world. They could be passing through and never know about us. But what the hell kind of guns are they using? I never heard no shots like that before, and I heard 'em all. Wait a minute."

On the little piazza before the Wonderland monument, Mayo halted and raised the shotgun to fire. Then he slowly lowered it. He took a deep breath. In a harsh voice he said, "Turn around. We're going back to the house." He pulled her around and faced her south.

Linda stared at him. In an instant he had become transformed from a gentle teddy bear into a panther.

"Jim, what's wrong?"

"I'm scared," he growled. "I'm goddam scared, and I don't want you to be, too." The triple salvo sounded again. "Don't pay any attention," he ordered. "We're going back to the house. Come on!"

She refused to move. "But why? Why?"

"We don't want any part of them. Take my word for it."

"How do you know? You've got to tell me."

"Christ! You won't let it alone until you find out, huh? All right. You want the explanation for that bee smell, and them buildings falling down, and all the rest?" He turned Linda around with a hand on her neck, and directed her gaze at the Wonderland monument. "Go ahead. Look."

A consummate craftsman had removed the heads of Alice, the Mad Hatter, and the March Hare, and replaced them with towering Mantis heads, all sabre mandibles, antennae, and faceted eyes. They were of a burnished steel, and gleamed with unspeakable ferocity. Linda let out a sick whimper and sagged against Mayo. The triple report signaled once more.

Mayo caught Linda, heaved her over his shoulder, and loped back toward the pond. She recovered consciousness in a moment and began to moan. "Shut up," he growled. "Whining won't help." He set her on her feet before the boathouse. She was shaking but trying to control herself. "Did this place have shutters when you moved in? Where are they?"

"Stacked." She had to squeeze the words out. "Behind the trellis."

"I'll put 'em up. You fill buckets with water and stash 'em in the kitchen. Go!"

"Is it going to be a siege?"

"We'll talk later. Go!"

She filled buckets, and then helped Mayo jam the last of the shutters into the window embrasures. "All right, inside," he ordered. They went into the house and shut and barred the door. Faint shafts of the late afternoon sun filtered through the louvers of the shutters. Mayo began unpacking the cartridges for the Cosmi rifle. "You got any kind of gun?"

"A .22 revolver somewhere."

"Ammo?"

"I think so."

"Get it ready."

"Is it going to be a siege?" she repeated.

"I don't know. I don't know who they are, or what they are, or where they come from. All I know is, we got to be prepared for the worst."

The distant implosions sounded. Mayo looked up alertly, listening. Linda could make him out in the dimness now. His face looked carved. His chest gleamed with sweat. He exuded the musky odor of caged lions. Linda had an overpowering impulse to touch him. Mayo loaded the rifle, stood it alongside the shotgun, and began padding from shutter to shutter, peering out vigilantly, waiting with massive patience.

"Will they find us?" Linda asked.

"Maybe."

"Could they be friendly?"

"Maybe."

"Those heads looked so horrible."

"Yeah."

"Jim, I'm scared. I've never been so scared in my life."

"I don't blame you."

"How long before we know?"

"An hour, if they're friendly; two or three, if they're not."

"W-Why longer?"

"If they're looking for trouble, they'll be more cautious. Stop following me around."

"Jim, what do you really think?"

"About what?"

"Our chances."

"You really want to know?"

"Please."

"We're dead."

She began to sob. He shook her savagely. "Stop that. Go get your gun ready."

She lurched across the living room, noticed the pearls Mayo

had dropped, and picked them up. She was so dazed that she put them on automatically. Then she went into her darkened bedroom and pulled Mayo's model yacht away from the closet door. She located the .22 in a hatbox on the closet floor, and removed it along with a small carton of cartridges.

She realized that a dress was unsuited to this emergency. She got a turtleneck sweater, jodhpurs, and boots from the closet. Then she stripped naked to change. Just as she raised her arms to unclasp the pearls, Mayo entered, paced to the shuttered south window, and peered out. When he turned back from the window, he saw her.

He stopped short. She couldn't move. Their eyes locked, and she began to tremble, trying to conceal herself with her arms. He stepped forward, stumbled on the model yacht, and kicked it out of the way. The next instant he had taken possession of her body, and the pearls went flying, too. As she pulled him down on the bed, fiercely tearing the shirt from his back, her pet dolls also went into the discard heap along with the yacht, the pearls, and the rest of the world.

If "style" (that highly mysterious increment of the writer) truly revealed the spirit and stamp of the man, then Avram Davidson (who usually has these spaces to himself) would have to be a diverse and mysterious man. Which, of course, he is. Take, for example, the story below, concerning the terrible affair of Dame Phillipa Garreck, the man with the false nose, and Motilal Smith, the unspeakably evil Eurasian—words which make a strange sound on paper . . . E.L.F.

WHAT STRANGE STARS AND SKIES

by Avram Davidson

THE TERRIBLE AFFAIR of Dame Phillipa Garreck, which struck horror in all who knew of her noble life and mysterious disappearance, arose in large measure from inordinate confidence in her fellow-creatures—particularly such of them as she might, from time to time, in those nocturnal wanderings which so alarmed her family and friends, encounter in circumstances more than commonly distressed. This great-hearted and misfortunate woman would be, we may be sure, the first to deplore any lessening of philanthropy, any diminution of charity or even of charitable feeling, resultant from her own dreadfully sudden and all but inexplicable fate; yet, one feels, such a result is inevitable. I am not aware that Dame Phillipa ever made use of any heraldic devices or mottoes, but, had she done so, "Do what is right, come what may," would have been eminently appropriate.

It is not any especial sense of competency on my part which has caused me to resolve that a record of the matter should and must be made. Miss Mothermer, Dame Phillipa's faithful secretary-companion, to say nothing of her cousin, Lord FitzMorris Banstock, would each—under ordinary circumstances—be far more capable than I of delineating the events in question. But the circumstances, of course, are as far from being "ordinary" as they can possibly be. Miss Mothermer has for the past six months

next Monday fortnight been in seclusion at Doctor Hardesty's establishment near Sutton Ho; and, whilst I can state quite certainly the falsehood of the rumour that her affairs have been placed in charge of the Master in Lunacy, nevertheless, Doctor Hardesty is adamant that the few visitors she is permitted to receive must make no reference whatsoever to the affair of last Guy Fawkes Day, the man with the false nose, or the unspeakably evil Eurasian, Motilal Smith. As for Lord FitzMorris Banstock, though I am aware that he has the heart of a lion and nerves of steel, his extreme shyness (in no small measure the result of his unfortunate physical condition) must advertize to all who know him the unlikelihood of his undertaking the task.

It falls to me, therefore, and no one else, to proceed forthwith in setting down the chronicle of those untoward and unhappy events.

Visitors to Argyll Court, which abuts onto Primrose Alley (one of that maze of noisome passages off the Commercial Road which the zeal and conscience of the London County Council cannot much longer suffer to remain untouched), visitors to Argyll Court will have noticed the large signboard affixed to the left-hand door as one enters. Reading, "If The Lord Will, His Word Shall Be Preached Here Each Lord's Day At Seven O'Clock In The Evening. All Welcome," it gives notice of the Sabbath activities of Major Bohun, whose weekdays are devoted to his sacred labors with The Strict Antinomian Tram-Car and Omnibus Tract Society (the name of which appears on a small brass plate under the sign). Had the major been present that Fifth of November, a different story it would be which I have to tell; but he had gone to attend at an Anti-Papistical sermon and prayer-meeting holden to mark the day at the Putney Tabernacle.

The foetid reek of the Court, which has overwhelmed more than one less delicately bred than Dame Phillipa, bears—besides the effluvia of unwashed beds and bodies emanating from the so-called Seaman's Lodging-House of Evan-bach Llewellyn, the rotting refuse of the back part of a cookshop of the lowest sort, bad drains, and the putrid odors of Sampson Stone's wool-pullery

—the tainted breath of the filthy Thames itself, whose clotted waters ebb and flow not far off.

On many an evening when the lowering sun burned dully in the dirty sky and the soiled swans squatted like pigs in the mud-banks of London River, the tall figure of Dame Phillipa would turn (for the time being) from the waterfront, and make her way towards the quickening traffic of the Commercial Road and Goodman Fields; proceeding through Salem Yard, Fenugreek Close, Primrose Alley, and Argyll Court. The fashionable and sweet-smelling ladies of the West End, as well as their wretched and garishly bedaubed fallen sisters, smelling of cheap "scent" and sweetened gin, just at this hour beginning those peregrinations of the East End's mean and squalid streets for which those less tender than Dame Phillipa might think them dead to all shame; were wearing, with fashion's licence, their skirts higher than they had ever been before: but Dame Phillipa (though she never criticized the choice of others) still wore hers long, and sometimes with one hand she would lift them an inch or two to avoid the foul pavements—though she never drew back from contact, neither an inch nor an instant, with any human being, however filthy or diseased.

Sometimes Miss Mothermer's bird-like little figure was with her friend and employer, perhaps assuming for the moment the burden of the famous Army kit-bag; sometimes—and such times Dame Phillipa walked more slowly—Lord FitzMorris Banstock accompanied her; but usually only quite late at night, and along the less-frequented thoroughfares, where such people whom they were likely to meet were too preoccupied with their own unhappy concerns, or too brutalized and too calloused, to stare at the muscular but misshapen peer for more than a second or two.

The kit-bag had been the gift of Piggott, batman to Dame Phillipa's brother, the late Lt.-Colonel Sir Chiddiock Garreck, when she had sent him out to the Transvaal in hopes that that Province's warmer and dryer air would be kindlier to his gas-ruined lungs than the filthy fogs and sweats of England. The kit-bag usually contained, to my own knowledge, on an average evening, the following:

Five to ten pounds in coins, as well as several ten-shilling notes folded quite small. Two sets of singlets and drawers, two shirts, and two pair of stockings: none of them new, but all clean and mended. A dozen slices of bread and butter, wrapped in packets of three. Ten or twenty copies of a pamphlet-sized edition of the Gospel of St. John in various languages. A brittania-metal pint flask of a good French brandy. A quantity of hard-cooked eggs and an equal supply of salt and pepper in small screws of paper. Four handkerchiefs. First-aid equipment. Two reels of cotton, with needles. A packet of mixed toffees. The Book of Common Prayer. Fifteen packets of five Woodbine cigarettes, into each of which she had thrust six wooden matches. One pocket-mirror. A complete change of infant's clothing. Several small cakes of soap. Several pocket-combs. A pair of scissors.

And three picture-postcards of the Royal Family.

All this arranged with maximum efficiency in minimum space, but not packed so tightly that Dame Phillipa's fingers could not instantly produce the requisite article. It will be observed that she was prepared to deal with a wide variety of occasions.

Tragic, infinitely tragic though it is, not even a person of Dame Phillipa's great experience among what a late American author termed, not infelicitously, The People of the Abyss, could have been prepared either to expect or to deal on this occasion with such persons as the man wearing the false nose on the hideously—the unspeakably evil Eurasian, Motilal Smith.

The countenance of Motilal Smith, once observed, is not one likely ever to be forgotten, and proves a singular and disturbing exception to the rule that Eurasians are generally of a comely appearance; it being broad and frog-like in its flatness, protruberance of the eyes (which are green and wet-looking), reverse U-shaped mouth, and its multiplicity of warts or wart-like swellings. Most striking of all, however, is the air of slyness, malevolence, of hostility both overt and covert, towards everything which is kindly and decent and, in a word, human.

Motilal Smith has since his first appearance in the United Kingdom been the subject of unremitting police attention, and

for some time now has gained the sinister distinction of being mentioned more often in the Annual Report of the League of Nations Commission on the Traffic in Women and Children than any other resident of London. He has often been arrested and detained on suspicion, but the impossibility of bringing witnesses to testify against him has invariably resulted in his release. Evidences of his nefarious commerce have come from places so far distant as the Province of Santa Cruz in the Republic of Bolivia and the Native Indian States of Patiala and Cooch Behar, as well as two of the Trucial Sheikhdoms, the Free City of Danzig, and Deaf Smith County in the Commonwealth of Texas; none of which, it must be regretted, is admissible in proceedings at the Old Bailey. As he is a British subject by birth, he can be neither deported nor denied admission on his return from frequent trips abroad. He is known to be always ready to purchase, he is entirely eclectic as to the nature of the merchandise, and he pays well and he pays in gold.

It is necessary only to add that, offered any obstacle, affront, or rebuff, he is unremitting in his hostility, which combines the industry of the West with the patience of the East. Smith occupies both sides of the semi-detached villa in Maida Vale of which he owns the freehold; its interior is crammed with opulent furnishings from all round the world, and stinks of stale beer, spilt gin, incense, curry, raw fish, the foul breaths and bodies of those he deals with, and of chips fried in ghee.

His long, lank, and clotted hair is covered in scented grease, and on his fingers are rings of rubies, diamonds, pearls and other precious stones worth with their settings a prince's ransom. Add only the famous Negrohead opal worn in his stained silk four-in-hand (and for which Second Officer Smollett of the *Cutty Sark* is said to have strangled Mrs. Pigler), and there you have the creature Motilal Smith in all his repulsive essence.

The night of that Fifth of November found the unfortunates among whom this great lady pursued her noble work no more inclined than in other years to celebrate the delivery from Gunpowder Plot of King James VI and I and his English Parliament.

Here and there, to be sure, in the glare of the gin-palaces of the main thoroughfares, a group of grimy and tattered children had gotten up an even more unsavory Guy; for them Dame Phillipa had provided herself with a large supply of pennies. But that night as on most other nights there was little enough evidence of innocent gayety.

There are multitudes, literally multitudes, in this vast labyrinth of London for whom the normal institutions of a human society seem barely to exist. There are physicians in the East End, hospitals, and dispensaries; yet numbers past counting will suffer injury and disease and creep off to die like brutes in their dim corners, or, if they are fortunate, by brute strength survive. There are public baths in every borough, and facilities for washing clothes, yet many never touch water to their skins, and wear their rags unchanged till they rot. Babes are born without benefit of any human witness to the event save their own wretched mothers, though a word to the great hospital in Whitechapel Road will bring midwife and physician without charge. And while eating-places abound, from quite decent restaurants down to the dirty holes-in-the-walls offering tuppenny cups of tea and sixpenny papers of breaded smelts and greasy chips, and while private and public charity arrangements guarantee that no one need quite die of hunger who will ask to be fed, no day goes by without its toll from famine of those who—having their hoards of copper and silver—are disabled by their madness from spending either tuppence or shilling; or who find it much, much easier to die like dogs in their secluded kennels than come forward and declare their needs.

As the pigeons in Trafalgar Square have learned when and where the old man with the bag of breadcrumbs will appear, as the ownerless cats near Billingsgate can tell what time and in what place to scavenge for the scraps of fish the dustman misses, as the rats in the sewers beneath Smithfield Market know without error the manner in which "they seek their meat from G d"; just so, from this stinking alley and from that crumbling tenement, here from underneath a dripping archway and there from a disused warehouse, slinking and creeping and peering fearfully

and furtively and sidling with their ragged backs pressed against ragged walls, there appeared by one and by one the cast-offs—one must call them "humans", for what other name is theirs?—the self-exiled, the utterly incapable, to take in their quick reptilian grasp the things Dame Phillipa had for them. She knew, knew by instinct and knew by practice, which ones would benefit by a shilling and which by half-a-crown; she knew those to whom money was of no more use than cowry-shells but who would relish the meat of a hard-cooked egg and the savor of the tiny scrap of seasoning which went with it; knew those who would be hopelessly baffled by the labor of cracking the shell but who could manage to rip the paper off a packet of bread and butter (huddled and crouched in the rank, familiar darkness of their burrows, tearing the soft food with their toothless gums); knew those who would fight, squealing or wordlessly, fight like cornered stoats rather than surrender a single one of the unspeakably filthy rags into which their unspeakably filthy bodies were sewn; and those who would strip by some forgotten water-tap and wash themselves and put on clean things—but only if provided them, having no longer in many cases the ability to procure either soap or singlets for themselves. She also knew who could be coaxed another foot or two up the path to self-respect by the tempting bait of mirror and comb, the subtle appeal such things made to the ravaged remnants of pride. And she knew when even a handful of toffee or a small picture of the charismatic King and Queen could brighten a dim corner or an eroded mind.

And often (though not always) with her on this humble and saintly mission went her faithful secretary-companion, Miss Mothermer, though by herself Miss Mothermer would have died a thousand dreadful deaths in such places; and sometimes Dame Phillipa was accompanied by her unhappy and unfortunate cousin, Lord FitzMorris Banstock, though usually he shunned the company of any but his few, familiar servants.

On this particular night, Mawhinney, his chauffeur-footman, had been obliged by a Guy Fawkes bonfire and its attendant

crowd to drive the heavily curtained Rolls motor-car by a different and less familiar route; hence he arrived later at the usual place of rendezvous: Miss Mothermer and Dame Phillipa, tall figure and tiny one, picture-hat and toque, had come by and, as was the unspoken understanding, had not tarried. So many considerations affected the presence or absence of Lord Fitz-Morris Banstock: was he engaged in a conversation particularly interesting by means of his amateur wireless radio equipment, was he in more pain than a certain degree, was he in less pain than a certain degree, was the moon too bright—for one or more of these reasons the star-curs't noble lord might not come despite his having said he might.

The obedient Mawhinney did not turn his head as his master slowly and awkwardly crept from the vehicle, inch by inch over the black silk upholstery. Nor, well-trained, did he suggest leaving the car in a garage and coming with his master. He waited a few moments after the door closed, then he drove straightaway back to Banstock House, where he stayed for precisely three hours, turning the Tarot cards over and over again with old Gules, the butler, and Mrs. Ox, the cook. On this Fifth of November night they observed that the Priestess, the Fool, and the Hanged Man turned up with more than their common frequency; and were much exercised to conjecture what, if anything, this might portend: and for whom.

And at the conclusion of three hours he put on his cap and coat and drove back to the place set.

Besides those nameless (and all but formless) figures from the silent world, of whom I had spoken above, there were others who awaited and welcomed Dame Phillipa's presence; and among them were women with names like Flossie and Jewel and Our Rose, Clarabel and Princess Mick and Jenny the Hen, Two-Bob Betty and Opaline and Queeny-Kate. She spoke to every one of them, gave them (if they required it, or thought they might: or if Dame Phillipa thought they might) the money needed to make up the sum demanded by their "friends" or "protectors"; money for rent or food or what it might be, if they had passed the stage where their earnings could possibly be

enough to concern the swine who had earlier lived on them. She tended to their cuts and bruises the poor wretches received in the way of business, and which they were too ashamed to bring before the very proper nurses and the young, lightheartedly cruel, interns.

Sometimes she interceded for them with the police, and sometimes she summoned the police to their assistance; her manner of doing this was to direct Miss Mothermer to blow upon the police whistle she wore upon a lanyard, Dame Phillipa not liking the vibration this made upon her own lips.

Those to whom Dame Phillipa may have seemed but a tall, gaunt eccentric woman, given to wearing old-fashioned dresses, and hats which ill became her, would do well to recollect that she was among the very first to be honored with the title of *dame;* and that His Majesty's Government did not take this step exclusively in recognition of her career prior to her retirement as an educationist, or of her work, through entirely legal methods, on behalf of the Women's Suffrage Movement.

It was close to midnight when the two ladies arrived in Primrose Alley and Dame Phillipa rapped lightly with her walking-stick upon the window of a woman in whose maternity she had interested herself: actually persuading the young woman, who was not over-bright, to accept medical attention, eat something resembling proper food, and have the child christened in the nearby and unfortunately ill-attended Church of St. Gustave Widdershins. She rapped a second time—loud enough (she hoped) to wake the mother, but not loud enough to wake the child. As it happened it was the father she woke, a young man who circulated among three or four women in a sort of tandem polygamy; and who informed the lady that the baby had been sent to its mother's people in Westham, and who begged her, not altogether disdainfully, for sweet Christ's sake to bugger off and let him get back to sleep again.

Dame Phillipa left him to his feculent slumbers in absolute but resigned certainty that this time next year she would again be called upon to swaddle, victual, and renounce by proxy the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, on behalf of another squalling

token of his vigour—unless the young woman should perhaps miscarry, as she had done twice before, or carry out her own suggestion of dropping the child in the river, by accident, like.

It was as she turned from the window, then, that Dame Phillipa first clearly observed the man wearing the false nose—as she thought, because of the Guy Fawkes festivities; though it appears Miss Mothermer instantly suspected that he did so by way of disguise—although she had been aware, without giving consideration to the matter, that there had been footsteps behind her. All inquiries as to this man's identity or motive have failed, but the singularity of his appearance is such that, unless he has been secretly conveyed out of the Kingdom, he cannot long continue to evade the vigilance of the police.

Thinking nothing further of the matter, as we may assume, Dame Phillipa and her companion continued their way into Argyll Court. The sound of voices, and the odor of hot gin and lemon, both proceeding from a bow window greatly resembling in carving and overhang the forecastle of an ancient sailing-ship, directed her attention to the gasjet which burned redly in the close air, illuminating the sign of the seaman's lodging-house. In times gone by, Evan-bach Llewellyn had been a notorious crimp. Board regulations, closely attended to, had almost put a stop to this, as far as vessels of British register were concerned. It was widely said, however, and widely believed, that the masters of foreign vessels putting into London with cargoes of coffee, copra, palm oil, fuel oil, hardwood and pulpwood; and finding members of their crew swallowed up by The Smoke, often appealed to the giant Silurian (he sang bass in the choir of Capel Cymrig) for replacements: and did not appeal in vain. Protests entered by surprised seamen, whose heads cleared of chloral in the Bay of Biscay, when they found themselves on board of strange vessels whose language they often did not recognize, let alone speak, would in the general course of things prove quite bootless.

As Dame Phillipa's attention was distracted to the window, two men, who must have been huddled silently at the other side of the court, came suddenly towards the two ladies, reeling and

cursing, striking fiercely at one another, and giving off the fumes of that poisonous mixture of methylated spirits and cheap port wine commonly called *red biddy*. The ladies took a few steps in confusion, not knowing precisely what course to take, nor having much time to consider it: they could not go forward, because of the two men fighting, and it seemed that when they attempted to walk to the side, the bruisers were there, cutting off their way, too.

Dame Phillipa therefore turned quickly, leading Miss Mothermer in the same direction, but stopped short, as, out of Primrose Alley, whence they had just issued, darted the man who had been wearing the false nose. He made a curious sound as he did so; if he spoke words is not certain; what *is* certain is that he had plucked the false pasteboard from his face—it was hideously pockmarked—and that the flesh underneath was a mere convoluted hollow, like some gross navel, but nothing like a human nose.

Miss Mothermer gave a stifled cry, and drew back, but Dame Phillipa, though certainly no less startled, placed a reassuring hand on her companion's arm, and courteously awaited what this unfortunate might have to say or to ask. He beckoned, he gestured, he mewled and gibbered. Murmuring to Miss Mothermer that he evidently stood in need of some assistance, and that they were bound to endeavour to find what it was, Dame Phillipa stepped forward to follow him. For an instant only Miss Mothermer hesitated—but the two larrikins menaced from behind, and she was too fearful for herself and for Dame Phillipa to allow her to go on alone; perforce she followed. She followed into a door which stood open as if waiting.

If her testimony (and if one may give so succinct a name to confused and diffused ramblings noted down by Doctor Hardesty over a period of several months) may be relied on, the door lay but a few paces into Primrose Alley. The facts, however, are that no such door exists. The upper part of the Alley contains the tenements officially designated as Gubbinses' Buildings and called, commonly, "the Jakes": entrance is through a covered archway twenty feet long which divides into two shallow flights

of steps from each of which a hallway leads to the individual apartments. It was in one of these, the window and not the door of which faced the Alley, that the young parents of Dame Phillipa Garreck's godchild were lodging. The lower part of the Alley on the same side is occupied by the blind bulk of the back of the old flour warehouse. The opposite side is lined with the infamous Archways, wherein there are no doors at all. There are, it is true, two doors of sorts in the warehouse itself, but one is bricked up and the other is both rusted shut and locked from the inside. A search of the premises *via* the main gate failed to show any signs that it had been opened in recent years—or, indeed, that it could have been.

It was at shortly after one o'clock on the morning of the sixth of November that Lord FitzMorris Banstock, toiling painfully through Thirza Street in the direction of Devenport Passage, received (or perhaps I should say, became aware of) an impression that he should retrace his steps and then head north. There is no need to suggest telepathy and certainly none to mention the supranormal in conjunction with this impression: Miss Mothermer was most probably blowing the police-whistle, blowing it with lips which trembled in terror, and so weak and feeble was the sound produced that no police constable had heard it. On the conscious level of his mind Lord FitzMorris did not hear it, either. But there are sensual perceptions of which the normal senses are not aware, and it was these, which there can be no doubt that he (perhaps in compensation, perhaps sharpened by suffering; perhaps both) possesses to an unusual degree, which heard the sound and translated it. He obeyed the impulse, walking as fast as he could, and as he walked he was aware of the usual noises and movements in the darkness—rustlings and shufflings and whispers, breathings and mutterings—which betokened the presence of various of Dame Phillipa Garreck's charges. It seemed to him that they were of a different frequency, as he put it to himself, accustomed to think in wireless radio terms, this night. That they were uncommonly uneasy. It seemed to him that he could sense their terror.

And as he turned the corner into Salem Yard he saw some-

thing glitter, he saw something flash, and he knew in that instant that it was the famous Negrohead opal, which he had seen that one time before when his lady cousin occasioned the assistance of the Metropolitan Police to rescue the girl Bessie Lovejoy, then in process of being purchased for the ill-famed Khowadja of Al-Khebur by the ineffably evil Motilal Smith.

It glittered and flashed in the cold and the darkness, and then it was gone.

Fenugreek Close is long and narrow and ill-lit, its western and longest extremity (where the Lascar, Bin-Ali, perished with the cold on the night of St. Sylvester) being a *cul-de-sac* inhabited—when it is inhabited at all—by Oriental seamen who club together and rent the premises whilst they await a ship. But there were none such that night. It was there, pressed against the blank and filthy wall, pressing feebly as if her wren-like little body might obtain entry and safety and sanctuary, sobbing in almost incoherent terror, that Lord FitzMorris Banstock found the crouching form of Miss Mothermer. The police-whistle was subsequently discovered by the infamous Archways, and Miss Mothermer has insisted that, although she would have sounded it, she did not, for (she says) she could not find it; although she remembers Dame Phillipa pressing it into her hand. On this point she is quite vehement, yet one is no more apt to credit it than her statement about the open door towards which they were led by the man without a nose: for if Miss Mothermer did not blow upon the whistle, who did?

The noble and misfortunate lord did not waste breath inquiring of his cousin's companion if she were all right, it being patent that she was not. He demanded, instead, what had become of Dame Phillipa; and upon hearing the name Miss Mothermer became first quite hysterical and then unconscious. Lord FitzMorris lifted her up and carried her to the place of rendezvous where, exactly on time, Mawhinney, his chauffeur-footman, had just arrived with the Rolls motor-car. They drove immediately to Banstock House where she was given brandy and put to bed by Mrs. Ox, the cook, whilst Lord FitzMorris summoned the police.

An alarum had already been given, or, at any rate, an alarum of sorts. One of the wretchedly miserable folk to whose succor Dame Phillipa devoted so much of her time, having somehow learned that she was in danger, had informed Police-Sergeant L. Robinson to this effect. This man's name is not known. He is, or at any event was, called by the curious nickname of "Tea and Two Slices", these being the only words which he was usually heard to utter, and then only in a sort of whisper when ordering the only items he was known to buy. His age, background, residence, and present whereabouts are equally unknown. He had apparently an absolute horror of well-lighted and much-frequented places and an utter terror of policemen, one cannot tell why, and it may be hard to imagine what agonies and efforts it must have cost him to make his way to the police-station and inform Sergeant Robinson that he must go at once and "help the lady." Unfortunately and for unknown reasons, he chose to make his way to the police-station in Whitechapel instead of to the nearer one in Shadewell. His testimony would be of the utmost importance, but it cannot now be obtained, for, after giving the alarum, he scurried forth into the night again and has not been seen since.

The matter is otherwise with the testimony of the seaman, Greenbriar. It is available, it is copious, it fits in with that of Miss Mothermer, it is unfortunate that it is quite unbelievable. Unbelievable, that is, unless one is willing to cast aside every conceivable limit of credulity and to accept that on the night of Guy Fawkes Day in that year of our sovereign lord King George V the great and ancient city of London was the scene of a visitation more horrible than any in its previous history.

Albert Edward Greenbriar, Able-Bodied Seaman, is thirty-one years of age, and except for two occasions on which he was fined, respectively, £2 and £2.10, for being drunk and disorderly, he has never been in any trouble with the authorities. On the first of November he landed at St. Katherine Docks aboard the merchant vessel *Salem Tower,* from the Straits Settlements with a cargo of rubber, copra, and tinned pine-apples. Neither

the *Salem Tower* nor Greenbriar had been in the United Kingdom for the space of eleven months, and, consequently, when paid off, he was in possession of a considerable sum of money. In the course of one week he had, with the assistance of several women who are probably prostitutes, dissipated the entire sum. On discovering this the women, who share a communal flat in Poplar, asked him to leave.

It was Greenbriar's intention to obtain another ship, but in this endeavour he was unsuccessful. He managed to obtain a loan of half-a-crown from a casual acquaintance and spent the night at a bed-and-breakfast place in Ropemakers Fields, Limehouse. The following evening, footsore and hungry and, save for a single sixpence, penniless, he found himself in the Commercial Road, where he entered a cookshop whose signboard announced that good tea, bread, smelts and chips, were obtainable for that sum. Obtainable they were, good they were not, but he was in no position to object. Having finished, he inquired the way to the convenience, and there retired. On emerging he observed that he was next to the back door which opened onto Argyll Court, although he did not know that was its name, and on looking out he espied a sign.

The sign is still there; in white calligraphy of a fine Spencerian sort upon a black background it reads, *Seamen's Lodging House/ Good Beds/ E. Llewellyn, Prop.*

Albert Edward Greenbriar entered, rang the bell for the governor, and, upon the instant, saw a panel open in the wall, through which a face looked at him. It was the face of a gigantic cherub, white and dimpled and bland, surmounted by a pall of curly hair; in short, it was the face of Evan-bach Llewellyn. Greenbriar in a few words stated his situation and offered to give over his seaman's papers as a surety until such time as he might obtain a ship, in return for bed and board. The governor thrust forth a huge, pale hand, took the documents, slid shut the panel, and presently appeared to beckon Greenbriar down a corridor, at the end of which was a dimly lit dormitory. He gave him a thin blanket which was all in all not quite so filthy as it might have been, informed him that gaming and novel-reading

were not permitted on the premises, invited him to take any bed he chose, and forthwith withdrew.

Greenbriar found an empty pallet, under the head of which he placed his shoes, not so much as a pillow as a precaution, drew the cover about him and fell instantly asleep. He was awakened several times by the entry of other men, some of whom appeared to have been flung rather than escorted into the room, and once he was awakened by the sound of the proprietor playing upon a small patent organ a hymn of his own composition on the subject of the Priesthood of Melchisedec. Greenbriar gazed at the tiny blue tip of the night-light as it burned tremulously in the twisted jet and on the odd and grotesque shadows cast upon the stained and damp-streaked walls by the tossings and turnings of the lodgers, and listened to the no less odd nor grotesque noises made by them. It was only by the start he gave upon being awakened that he realized that he had gone to sleep again.

Who awakened him he did not know, but, although the light was no brighter, there was a stir in the dormitory and men were getting to their feet and he heard the word "scoff" repeated several times. He dashed water on his face and moved with the others into what was evidently the main kitchen of the establishment. To his surprise he observed that the clock there read eleven o'clock. It was too dark to be morning. Evidently he had slept only a few hours or he had slept round the clock and a bit more. It seemed an odd hour for victuals but he was beginning to conceive the idea that this was an odd place.

Broiled bloaters, fried sausage, potatoes, cabbage and sprouts were being turned out of pots and pans and dumped higgledy-piggledy onto cracked and not over-clean plates; and tea was steaming in coarse crockery cups. No one ventured to eat or drink, however, until Evan-bach Llewellyn had pronounced a grace in the Cymric tongue and immediately after the Amen imparted a piece of information, videlicet that he had a ship for them. It was a good ship, too, he said; they would all be very pleased with it; it was not one of their dirty old English tubs but a fine modern vessel: he urged them all to eat hearty of the scoff, or victuals, so that no time need be lost in getting aboard,

and he then produced a large bottle of gin and proceeded to pour a generous portion into each cup, with many assurances that it was free and would come out of his own commission.

No sooner had he given the signal, with a wave of his pale and dimpled paw, than the men fell to like so many ravening wolves, cramming the hot food into their mouths and gulping down the gin and lemon tea. Greenbriar concedes that the ailment was savory, and, finding himself hungrier than he had thought, took but a hasty swallow of the drink before addressing himself at length to the solids. A furtive movement at his elbow caused him to cease, abruptly. The man to his right, a hulking fellow with red hair and an exceedingly dirty face, was emptying a mug and looking at him out of the corner of his eye. It took but a second to ascertain that the wretched fellow had all but drained his own supply and then switched cups and was now doing away with Greenbriar's, who contented himself with stealing a link of the man's sausage whilst the latter was elaborately gazing elsewhere. Steeling himself to meet this man's resentment, he was dumbfounded to observe the fellow fall upon his face into the mashed potatoes and sprouts on his plate.

Within a matter of seconds, almost as if it were one of the contagious seizures which takes hold at times of the unfortunate patients of an institution for the epileptic—within a matter of seconds, then, all the others at the table sank down into unconsciousness, and Greenbriar, following suit, knew no more.

He awoke to a scene of more than Gothick horror.

He lay with his head against the silent form of another man, another one he could feel the weight of on his legs, and others lay like dead men all about. They were not dead, he knew, for he could hear them breathing. The room where they lay was walled and floored and roofed in stone and at regular intervals were carvings in *bas*-relief of a strange and totally unfamiliar sort. Paraffin lamps were set into niches here and there. There was a humming noise whose origin was not visible to him. Very slowly, so as not to attract attention (for he could hear voices), Greenbriar turned his head. As he did so he felt that there was

a rope tied round his neck, and a sudden and quite involuntary convulsive movement which he gave upon this discovery disclosed to him that his hands were similarly bound. Thus urged on to even greater caution, the man took quite a long time in shifting his position so as to obtain some intelligence of his surroundings. If what he had seen before was strange and uneasy enough, what he saw now was sufficient to deprive him for the moment of the use of his limbs altogether.

Off to one side, bound and linked arms to arms and necks to necks like a prostrate caffle of slaves, and to all appearance also unconscious, were the bodies of a number of women; how many, he could not say, but evidently less than the number of the men. This, however, and however shocking even to the sensibilities of a seafarer, this was nothing—

Directly in front of his gaze, which was at an angle, and seated upon a sort of altar, was a figure as it were out of eastern clime: red-bronze in color, hideous of visage, and with six arms. Bowing low before it was a man, who addressed it in placatory tones and with many fawning gestures.

No other thought occurred to the British sailor at that moment but that he was in some sort of clandestine Hindoo temple and that he and all his other companions would presently be sacrificed before this idol; not being aware that such is not the nature of character of the Hindoo religion which contains, despite numerous errors and not a few gross importunities, many sublime and lofty thoughts. But be that as it may; the red-bronze-colored figure proceeded to move its limbs, the torso stirred, the entire body leaned forward. The figure spoke, and as it spoke, it seized the man with four of its limbs and struck him with the other two. Then it dropped him. As he scrambled to his feet his face was turned so that the sailor could see it, and he saw that it had no nose.

Greenbriar must once again have passed into unconsciousness. When again he awoke the altar was empty, and he could not see the "idol", but he could hear its voice. It was speaking in anger, and as one used to command. Another voice began when this one (deep, hollow, dreadful) had ceased; the new

voice was a thin one, and it took a moment for him to realize that, despite its curious snuffling quality, it was speaking a sort of English. Two other voices replied to it, also in English; one was that of Evan-bach Llewellyn, the other one he did not know. By his description of both speech and speaker, for in a moment the latter moved into view, it is apparent that this was no other than the inhuman and unconscionable Eurasian, Motilal Smith.

Something, it seemed, was "not enough." There was an insufficiency of . . . something. This it was which occasioned the wrath of the person or creature with the six arms. And he was also in great concern because of a shortage of time. All four—the creature with six arms, the man without a nose, Smith and Llewellyn—kept moving about. Presently there was the scrape of wood and then a thud and then the wet and dirty odor of the River. The thought occurred to Greenbriar that they might be thrown into the Thames, which was then at high tide; he reflected that (in common with a great many seamen) he had never learned to swim; and then, for a third time, he fainted.

When he awoke he could hear someone singing the Doxology, and he thought—so he says—that he had died and was now in Heaven. One glance as he opened his eyes was enough to undeceive him. He lay where he had before and everything was as it was before, save that there were two people present who he is certain were not there before, and by his description of them they were clearly Dame Phillipa Garreck and her secretary-companion, Miss Mothermer.

Miss Mothermer was crouched down with her hands over her eyes, whether in prayer or terror or not inconceivably both, he could not say. Dame Phillipa, however, was otherwise engaged, for she moved from insensate figure to insensate figure and the light gleamed upon the scissors with which she was severing their bonds. She spoke to each, shook them, but was able to elicit no response. At this, Greenbriar regained his voice and entreated her help. She proceeded to cut the ropes which bound him, and left off her singing of the Doxology to enquire of him if he had any knowledge as to why they were all of them being detained, and what was intended to be done with them. He was assuring

her that he did not know, when a door opened and Miss Mothermer began to scream.

That a fight ensued is certain. Greenbriar was badly cut about and Miss Mothermer received bruises which were a long time in vanishing, though in this I refer only to bruises of the flesh; those of the spirit are still, alas, with her. But he can provide us with few details of the conflict. Certain, it is, that he escaped; equally certain, so did Miss Mothermer. Dame Phillipa plainly did not. Greenbriar was discovered at about half-past one of the morning wandering in a daze in the vicinity of the Mile End Road by a very conscientious alien named Grebowski or Grebowsky, who summoned medical attention and the police. Little or no attention would or could have been paid to Greenbriar's account, had it not been for his description of the two ladies. His relation, dovetailing as it did with that of Miss Mothermer, left the police no choice but to cause a search to be made of the area of Argyll Court, in one corner of which a false nose was found.

Acting on the information received and under authority of a warrant, Superintendent Sneath, together with a police-sergeant and a number of constables, entered Llewellyn's premises, which they found completely deserted. Soundings of the walls and floors indicated the presence of passageways and rooms which could have had no place in a properly-conducted establishment licenced under the Common Lodging-houses Act, and these were broken into. A cap belonging to Greenbriar was found in one of these corridors, as was part of the lanyard of Dame Phillipa's police-whistle. There was a perfect maze or rabbit-warren of them, and, on the lowest level, there was discovered that chamber, the existence of which was previously publicly unknown, and which Professor Singleton of the University of London has pronounced to be a genuine Mithrarium of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, or perhaps, Nerva; and which was used by the unscrupulous Llewellyn for the illicit portion of his professional activity. It would have been here that the captives were assembled, if Greenbriar's account is to be believed. What is, as a first premise, obvious, is that it cannot possibly be believed.

That Lord FitzMorris Banstock has chosen to believe it is, I am constrained to say, a greater testimony to the powers of his imagination than to any inherently credible elements in the story. The man Greenbriar now forms part of the staff of Banstock House; this is entirely the affair of Lord FitzMorris himself, and requires no comment on my own part, nor shall it obtain any. It may, however, be just as well to include some opinions and observations which are the fruits of Lord FitzMorris's very understandingly deep concern in this tragic and intensely puzzling affair.

He has collected a number of reports of some sort of aquatic disturbance moving downstream from London River early in the morning of the sixth November just about the time of the turning of the tide. To this he compares a report of the Astronomer Royal's concerning an arc of light which appeared off the Nore immediately subsequent. These have led him to the opinion that a craft of unknown origin and nature moved underwater from London to the sea and then rose not only above the surface of the water but into the air itself. This craft or vessel was captained by the creature with the six arms, and the man without a nose would have been an inferior officer aboard of her. Somehow this vessel became short of personnel and applied to Evan-bach Llewellyn to make up the shortage by crimping or shanghaiing the requisite Number. For reasons which cannot be known and concerning which I, for one, would rather not speculate, several women were also required (Lord FitzMorris is of the opinion that they were required only for such duties as members of their sex commonly fulfill in the mercantile navies of various foreign nations, such as service in the steward's branch). This being out of Llewellyn's line of business, an appeal was made by him to the notorious and wicked Eurasian, Motilal Smith, who is known to have left his headquarters in the semi-detached villa in Maida Vale on the Fifth of November, whither he never returned.

Lord FitzMorris suggests two possible provenances for this curious and hypothetical vessel. Suppose, he suggests, the being with the six arms to have been the original of the many East

Indian and Buddhist myths depicting such creatures. It is likely, then, that the ship or submarine-aëroplane emanated from the vast and unexplored regions in the mountains which ring round the northern plateau of Thibet, the inhabitants of which have for centuries been rumoured to possess knowledge far surpassing ours, and which they jealously guard from the mundane world. The other possibility is even less likely, and is reminiscent, I fear, far more of the romances associated with the pen of Mr. Herbert G. Wells, a journalist of radical tendencies, than with proper scientific attitudes. Do not the discoveries of Professor Schiaparelli, establishing that there are canals upon the planet Mars, demonstrate that the inhabitants thereof must be given to agricultural pursuits? In which case, how unlikely that they should engage themselves in filibustering or black birding expeditions to, of all conceivable places, the civilized capital city of the British Empire!

Lord FitzMorris thinks that this theoretical craft of his must have carried off the unscrupulous Evan Llewellyn in order to make up the tally of captives; how much more likely it is that this wicked man has merely fled to escape detection, prosecution, and punishment—perhaps to the mountains of wild Wales, where the King's writ runs scarcely more than it does in the mountains of Thibet.

Concerning the present whereabouts of Motilal Smith, we are on firmer ground. That he intended to devise harm to Dame Phillipa, who had on far more than one occasion interfered with him in his nefarious traffickings, we need not doubt. The close search of Superintendent Sneath of the premises on and about Argyll Court, Primrose Alley, Fenugreek Close and Salem Yard uncovered a sodden mass of human clay lying part in and part out of a pool of muck far under the notorious Archways. It was the drowned body of Motilal Smith himself; both from the evidence of his own powerful physique and the presence of many footprints thereabouts, it is clear that a number of persons were required, and were found, to force him into that fatal submersion. The friends—silent though they are to the world, dumb by virtue of their affliction and suffering—

the friends of Dame Phillipa Garreck, the so-called and by no means ill-named People of the Abyss, whom she so constantly and so assiduously attended upon, had avenged their one friend and sole protector. It must now, one fears, go ill with them. The body of this unspeakably evil man, as well as his entire and vast estate (except the famous Negrohead opal, which was never found), was at once claimed by his half-brother, Mr. Krishna Bannerjee. The body was removed to Benares, and there subjected to that incomplete process of combustion at the burning ghauts peculiar to the Hindoo persuasion; and has long since become the prey of the wandering crocodiles which scavenge perpetually up and down the sacred waters of the River Gunga.

As I commence my last words for the present on the subject of this entire tragic affair I must confess myself baffled. Inacceptable as Lord FitzMorris's theories are, there are really no others that I can offer in their place. All is uncertainty. All that is, save my conviction that Dame Phillipa's noble and humanitarian labors still continue, no matter under what strange stars and skies.

Beneath the sunny surface of Mr. Ray Nelson's personality lies an abiding suspicion of many features of our society, the product of several thousand years of human civilization; and this suspicion finds expression in his stories. "I think we are property," observed the late Charles Fort, and to George Nada came this same revelation when— Lovers of good old-fashioned horror stories will relish this good new-fashioned one. You may never trust your television again.

EIGHT O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

by Ray Nelson

AT THE END OF THE SHOW the hynotist told his subjects, "Awake."

Something unusual happened.

One of the subjects awoke all the way. This had never happened before. His name was George Nada and he blinked out at the sea of faces in the theatre, at first unaware of anything out of the ordinary. Then he noticed, spotted here and there in the crowd, the non-human faces, the faces of the Fascinators. They had been there all along, of course, but only George was really awake, so only George recognized them for what they were. He understood everything in a flash, including the fact that if he were to give any outward sign, the Fascinators would instantly command him to return to his former state, and he would obey.

He left the theatre, pushing out into the neon night, carefully avoiding giving any indication that he saw the green, reptilian flesh or the multiple yellow eyes of the rulers of earth. One of them asked him, "Got a light buddy?" George gave him a light, then moved on.

At intervals along the street George saw the posters hanging with photographs of the Fascinators' multiple eyes and various commands printed under them, such as, "Work eight hours, play eight hours, sleep eight hours," and "Marry and Repro-

duce." A TV set in the window of a store caught George's eye, but he looked away in the nick of time. When he didn't look at the Fascinator in the screen, he could resist the command, "Stay tuned to this station."

George lived alone in a little sleeping room, and as soon as he got home, the first thing he did was to disconnect the TV set. In other rooms he could hear the TV sets of his neighbors, though. Most of the time the voices were human, but now and then he heard the arrogant, strangely bird-like croaks of the aliens. "Obey the government," said one croak. "We are the government," said another. "We are your friends, you'd do anything for a friend, wouldn't you?"

"Obey!"

"Work!"

Suddenly the phone rang.

George picked it up. It was one of the Fascinators.

"Hello," it squawked. "This is your control, Chief of Police Robinson. You are an old man, George Nada. Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, your heart will stop. Please repeat."

"I am an old man," said George. "Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, my heart will stop."

The control hung up.

"No, it won't," whispered George. He wondered why they wanted him dead. Did they suspect that he was awake? Probably. Someone might have spotted him, noticed that he didn't respond the way the others did. If George were alive at one minute after eight tomorrow morning, then they would be sure.

"No use waiting here for the end," he thought.

He went out again. The posters, the TV, the occasional commands from passing aliens did not seem to have absolute power over him, though he still felt strongly tempted to obey, to see these things the way his master wanted him to see them. He passed an alley and stopped. One of the aliens was alone there, pissing against the wall. George walked up to him.

"Move on," grunted the thing, focusing his deadly eyes on George.

George felt his grasp on awareness waver. For a moment the

reptilian head dissolved into the face of a lovable old drunk. Of course the drunk would be lovable. George picked up a brick and smashed it down on the old drunk's head with all his strength. For a moment the image blurred, then the bluegreen blood oozed out of the face and the lizard fell, twitching and writhing. After a moment it was dead.

George dragged the body into the shadows and searched it. There was a tiny radio in its pocket and a curiously shaped knife and fork in another. The tiny radio said something in an incomprehensible language. George put it down beside the body, but kept the eating utensils.

"I can't possibly escape," thought George. "Why fight them?"

But maybe he could.

What if he could awaken others? That might be worth a try.

He walked twelve blocks to the apartment of his girl friend, Lil, and knocked on her door. She came to the door in her bathrobe.

"I want you to wake up," he said.

"I'm awake," she said. "Come on in."

He went in. The TV was playing. He turned it off.

"No," he said. "I mean really wake up." She looked at him without comprehension, so he snapped his fingers and shouted, "*Wake up!* The masters command that you wake up!"

"Are you off your rocker, George?" she asked suspiciously. "You sure are acting funny." He slapped her face. "Cut that out!" she cried. "What the hell are you up to anyway?"

"Nothing," said George, defeated. "I was just kidding around."

"Slapping my face wasn't just kidding around!" she cried.

There was a knock at the door.

George opened it.

It was one of the aliens.

"Can't you keep the noise down to a dull roar?" it said.

The eyes and reptilian flesh faded a little and George saw the flickering image of a fat middle-aged man in shirtsleeves. It was still a man when George slashed its throat with the eating knife, but it was an alien before it hit the floor. He dragged it into the apartment and kicked the door shut.

"What do you see there?" he asked Lil, pointing to the many-eyed snake thing on the floor.

"Mister . . . Mister Coney," she whispered, her eyes wide with horror. "You . . . just killed him, like it was nothing at all."

"Don't scream," warned George, advancing on her.

"I won't, George. I swear I won't, only please, for the love of God, put down that knife." She backed away until she had her shoulder blades pressed to the wall.

George saw that it was no use.

"I'm going to tie you up," said George. "First tell me which room Mister Coney lived in."

"The first door on your left as you go toward the stairs," she said. "Georgie . . . Georgie. Don't torture me. If you're going to kill me, do it clean. Please, Georgie, please."

He tied her up with bedsheets and gagged her, then searched the body of the Fascinator. There was another one of the little radios that talked a foreign language, another set of eating utensils, and nothing else.

George went next door.

When he knocked, one of the snake-things answered, "Who is it?"

"Friend of Mister Coney. I wanna see him," said George.

"He went out for a second, but he'll be right back." The door opened a crack, and four yellow eyes peeped out. "You wanna come in and wait?"

"Okay," said George, not looking at the eyes.

"You alone here?" he asked, as it closed the door, its back to George.

"Yeah, why?"

He slit its throat from behind, then searched the apartment.

He found human bones and skulls, a half-eaten hand.

He found tanks with huge fat slugs floating in them.

"The children," he thought, and killed them all.

There were guns too, of a sort he had never seen before. He discharged one by accident, but fortunately it was noiseless. It seemed to fire little poisoned darts.

He pocketed the gun and as many boxes of darts as he could

and went back to Lil's place. When she saw him she writhed in helpless terror.

"Relax, honey," he said, opening her purse, "I just want to borrow your car keys."

He took the keys and went downstairs to the street.

Her car was still parked in the same general area in which she always parked it. He recognized it by the dent in the right fender. He got in, started it, and began driving aimlessly. He drove for hours, thinking—desperately searching for some way out. He turned on the car radio to see if he could get some music, but there was nothing but news and it was all about him, George Nada, the homicidal maniac. The announcer was one of the masters, but he sounded a little scared. Why should he be? What could one man do?

George wasn't surprised when he saw the road block, and he turned off on a side street before he reached it. No little trip to the country for you, Georgie boy, he thought to himself.

They had just discovered what he had done back at Lil's place, so they would probably be looking for Lil's car. He parked it in an alley and took the subway. There were no aliens on the subway, for some reason. Maybe they were too good for such things, or maybe it was just because it was so late at night.

When one finally did get on, George got off.

He went up to the street and went into a bar. One of the Fascinators was on the TV, saying over and over again, "We are your friends. We are your friends. We are your friends." The stupid lizard sounded scared. Why? What could one man do against all of them?

George ordered a beer, then it suddenly struck him that the Fascinator on the TV no longer seemed to have any power over him. He looked at it again and thought, "It has to believe it can master me to do it. The slightest hint of fear on its part and the power to hypnotize is lost." They flashed George's picture on the TV screen and George retreated to the phone booth. He called his control, the Chief of Police.

"Hello, Robinson?" he asked.

"Speaking."

"This is George Nada. I've figured out how to wake people up."

"What? George, hang on. Where are you?" Robinson sounded almost hysterical.

He hung up and paid and left the bar. They would probably trace his call.

He caught another subway and went downtown.

It was dawn when he entered the building housing the biggest of the city's TV studios. He consulted the building directory and then went up in the elevator. The cop in front of the studio entrance recognized him. "Why, you're Nada!" he gasped.

George didn't like to shoot him with the poison dart gun, but he had to.

He had to kill several more before he got into the studio itself, including all the engineers on duty. There were a lot of police sirens outside, excited shouts, and running footsteps on the stairs. The alien was sitting before the TV camera saying, "We are your friends. We are your friends," and didn't see George come in. When George shot him with the needle gun he simply stopped in mid-sentence and sat there, dead. George stood near him and said, imitating the alien croak, "Wake up. Wake up. See us as we are and kill us!"

It was George's voice the city heard that morning, but it was the Fascinator's image, and the city did awake for the very first time and the war began.

George did not live to see the victory that finally came. He died of a heart attack at exactly eight o'clock.

This, the latest of The People stories, was written to tell me, as well as many of the fans of The People, what happened to the Home. After all, that's really where the story of The People began.

Those of you who are familiar with the Bible will have discovered long ago that the names of the stories, and the quotations contained in them, follow loosely the wandering of the Children of Israel from the Flood to the crossing of the Jordan. This, then is *Deluge* which is the disaster that wiped out The People's world and landed them on Ararat.

I've been asked by some readers if The People exist. No. They're strictly fiction. I wish they were real. If all people were like The People, wouldn't it be a wonderful world? Maybe someday we will be The People. Miracles happen. The People stories are for fun. They are the Cinderella dreams, the I-must-be-adopted-because-I'm-different dreams, the If-Only dreams of all of us. I like the magic that needs no wand, no muttered incantations. After all, mankind was supposed to have dominion over all the world. Maybe this is the way things would work if we really did have that dominion.

—Zenna Henderson

I was born in Tucson, Arizona, and, after years of wandering around, I am back here again. I am a school teacher and teach mostly the lower grades—the children between five and seven years old. That is the logical explanation of why most of my stories are about school or school teachers. Most of my life has been spent in Arizona, though in lots of places in the state. Before I finished the eighth grade I had gone to twelve different schools. I've taught in about as many, too. During the Second World War, I taught at one of the Relocation camps in the desert where the Japanese people from the west coast were held. In 1955, I went to France to teach at one of the American Air Force Bases north of Paris. While I was in Europe—two years—I had a chance to visit almost all the countries there. I enjoyed it very much and hope I can get back again—to visit —not to work.

When I returned from Europe, I spent a year teaching at a sanitorium for tubercular children on Long Island Sound in Connecticut. Then I returned to Arizona. I suppose there is where I will stay—but you can't always tell.

Besides writing, I like to dance, knit, cook, travel, bowl, study languages—you should see me trying to write German script and learn the Russian alphabet!—work in the garden and watch full moons through billowing thunder clouds. —Z.H.

DELUGE

by Zenna Henderson

. . . and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth.
GEN. 7:17

"THE CHILDREN ARE UP ALREADY, Eva-lee?" asked David, lounging back in his chair after his first long, satisfying swallow from his morning cup.

"Foolish question, David, on Gathering Day," I laughed. "They've been up since before it was light. Have you forgotten how you used to feel?"

"Of course not." My son cradled his cup in his two hands to warm it, and watched idly until steam plumed up fragrantly. "I just forgot—oh, momentarily, I assure you—that it was Gathering Day. So far it hasn't felt much like *failova* weather."

"No, it hasn't," I answered, puckering my forehead thoughtfully. "It has felt—odd—this year. The green isn't as—Oh, good morning, 'Chell," to my daughter-of-love, "I suppose the little imps waked you first thing?"

"At least half an hour before that," yawned 'Chell. "I suppose I used to do it myself. But just wait—they'll have their yawning time when they're parents."

"Mother! Mother! Father! Gramma!"

The door slapped open and the children avalanched in, all talking shrilly at once until David waved his cup at them, and lifted one eyebrow. 'Chell laughed at the sudden silence.

"That's better," she said. "What's all the uproar?"

The children looked at one another and the five-year-old Eve was nudged to the fore, but, as usual, David started talking. "We were out gathering *panthus* leaves to make our Gathering baskets, and all at once—" He paused and nudged Eve again, "You tell, Eve. After all, it's you—"

"Oh, no!" cried 'Chell. "Not my last baby! Not already!"

"Look," said Eve solemnly. "Look at me."

She stood tiptoe and wavered a little, her arms outstretched for balance, and then she lifted slowly and carefully up into her mother's arms.

We all laughed and applauded and even 'Chell, after blotting her surprised tears on Eve's dark curls, laughed with us.

"Bless-a-baby!" she said, hugging her tight. "Lifting all alone already—and on Gathering Day, too! It's not everyone who can have Gathering Day for her Happy Day!" Then she sobered and pressed the solemn ceremonial kiss on each cheek. "Lift in delight all your life, Eve!" she said.

Eve matched her parents' solemnity as her father softly completed the ritual. "By the Presence and the Name and the Power, lift to good and the Glory until your Calling." And we all joined in making the Sign.

"I speak for her next," I said, holding out my arms. "Think you can lift to Gramma, Eve?"

"Well," Eve considered the gap between her and me—the chair, the breakfast table—all the obstacles before my waiting arms. And then she smiled. "Look at me," she said. "Here I come, Gramma."

She lifted carefully above the table, over-arching so high that the crisp girl-frill around the waist of her close-fitting briefs brushed the ceiling. Then she was safe in my arms.

"That's better than I did," called Simon through the laughter that followed. "I landed right in the *flahmen* jam!"

"So you did, son," laughed David, ruffling Simon's coppery-red hair forward. "A full dish of it.

"Now that that's taken care of, let's get organized. Are you all Gathering together?"

"No." Lytha, our teener, flushed faintly. "I—we—our party will be mostly—well—" She paused and checked her blush, shaking her dark hair back from her face. "Timmy and I are going with Beckie and Andy. We're going to the Mountain."

"Well!" David's brow lifted in mock consternation. "Mother, did you know our daughter was two-ing?"

"Not really, Father!" cried Lytha hastily, unable to resist the bait though she knew he was teasing. "Four-ing, it is, really."

"*Adonday veeah!*" he sighed in gigantic relief. "Only half the worry it might be!" He smiled at her. "Enjoy," he said, "but it ages me so much so fast that a daughter of mine is two—oh, pardon, four-ing already."

"The rest of us are going together," said Davie. "We're going to the Tangle-meadows. The *failova* were thick there last year. Bet we three get more than Lytha and her two-ing foursome! They'll be looking mostly for *flahmen* anyway!" with the enormous scorn of the almost-teen for the activities of the Teens.

"Could be," said Davie. "But after all, your sole purpose this Gathering Day is merely to Gather."

"I notice you don't turn up your nose at the *flahmen* after they're made into jam," said Lytha. "And you just wait, smarty, until the time comes—and it will," her cheeks pinked up a little, "when you find yourself wanting to share a *flahmen* with some gaggly giggle of a girl!"

"*Flahmen!*" muttered Davie. "Girls!"

"They're both mighty sweet, son," laughed David. "You wait and see."

Ten minutes later, 'Chell and David and I stood at the window watching the children leave. Lytha, after nervously putting on and taking off, arranging and rearranging her Gathering Day garlands at least a dozen times, was swept up by a giggling group that zoomed in a trio and went out a quartet and disappeared in long, low lifts across the pasture-land towards the heavily wooded Mountain.

Davie tried to gather Eve up as in the past, but she stubbornly refused to be trailed, but kept insisting, "I can lift now! Let me do it. I'm big!"

Davie rolled exasperated eyes and then grinned and the three started off for Tangle-meadows in short hopping little lifts, with Eve always just beginning to lift as they landed or just landing as they lifted, her small Gathering basket bobbing along with her. Before they disappeared, however, she was trailing from Davie's free hand and the lifts were smoothing out long and longer. My

thoughts went with them as I remembered the years I had Gathered the lovely luminous flowers that popped into existence in a single night, leafless, almost stemless, as though formed like dew, or falling like concentrated moonlight. No one knows now how the custom of loves sharing a *flahmen* came into being, but it's firmly entrenched in the traditions of The People. To share that luminous loveliness, petal by petal, one for me and one for you and all for us—

"How pleasant that Gathering Day brings back our loves," I sighed dreamily as I stood in the kitchen and snapped my fingers for the breakfast dishes to come to me. "People that might otherwise be completely forgotten, come back so vividly every year—"

"Yes," said 'Chell, watching the tablecloth swish out the window, huddling the crumbs together to dump them in the feather-pen in back of the house. "And it's a good anniversary-marker. Most of us meet our loves at the Gathering Festival—or discover them there." She took the returning cloth and folded it away. "I never dreamed when I used to fuss with David over mudpies and playhouses that one Gathering Day he'd blossom into my love."

"*Me* blossom?" David peered around the door jamb. "Have you forgotten how you looked, pre-blossom? Knobby knees, straggly hair, toothless grin—!"

"David, put me down!" 'Chell struggled as she felt herself being lifted to press against the ceiling. "We're too old for such nonsense!"

"Get yourself down, then, Old One," he said from the other room. "If I'm too old for nonsense, I'm too old to platt you."

"Never mind, funny fellow," she said, "I'll do it myself." Her down-reaching hand strained toward the window and she managed to gather a handful of the early morning sun. Quickly she platted herself to the floor and tiptoed off into the other room, eyes aglint with mischief, finger hushing to her lips.

I smiled as I heard David's outcry and 'Chell's delighted laugh, but I felt my smile slant down into sadness. I leaned my arms on the windowsill and looked lovingly at all the dear familiarity around me. Before Thann's Calling, we had known so many

happy hours in the meadows and skies and waters of this loved part of the Home.

"And he is still here," I thought comfortably. "The grass still bends to his feet, the leaves still part to his passing, the waters still ripple to his touch and my heart still cradles his name.

"Oh, Thann, Thann!" I wouldn't let tears form in my eyes. I smiled. "I wonder what kind of a grampa you'd have made!" I leaned my forehead on my folded arms briefly, then turned to busy myself with the straightening of the rooms for the day. I was somewhat diverted from routine by finding six mismated sandals stacked, for some unfathomable reason, above the middle of Simon's bed, the top one, inches above the rest, bobbing in the breeze from the open window.

The oddness we had felt about the day turned out to be more than a passing uneasiness and we adults were hardly surprised when the children came straggling back hours before they usually did.

We hailed them from afar, lifting out to them expecting to help with their burdens of brightness, but the children didn't answer our hails. They plodded on towards the house, dragging slow feet in the abundant grass.

"What do you suppose has happened?" breathed 'Chell. "Surely not Eve—"

"*Adonday veeah!*" murmured David, his eyes intent on the children. "Something's wrong, but I see Eve."

"Hi, young ones," he called cheerfully. "How's the crop this year?"

The children stopped, huddled together, almost fearfully.

"Look." Davie pushed his basket at them. Four misshapen *failova* glowed dully in the basket. No flickering, glittering brightness. No flushing and paling of petals. No crisp, edible sweetness of blossom. Only a dull glow, a sullen winking, an unappetizing crumbling.

"That's all," said Davie, his voice choking. "That's all we could find!" He was scared and outraged—outraged that his world dared to be different from what he had expected—had counted on.

Eve cried, "No, no! I have one. Look!" Her single flower was a hard-clenched *flahmen* bud with only a smudge of light at the tip.

"No *failova?*" 'Chell took Davie's proffered basket. "No *flahmen?* But they always bloom on Gathering Day. Maybe the buds—"

"No buds," said Simon, his face painfully white under the brightness of his hair. I glanced at him quickly. He seldom ever got upset over anything. What was there about this puzzling development that was stirring him so?

"David!" 'Chell's face turned worriedly to him. "What's wrong? There have always been *failova!*"

"I know," said David, fingering Eve's bud and watching it crumble in his fingers. "Maybe it's only in the meadows. Maybe there's plenty in the hills."

"No," I said. "Look."

Far off towards the hills we could see the Teeners coming, slowly, clustered together, *panthus* baskets trailing.

"No *failova,*" said Lytha as they neared us. She turned her basket up, her face troubled. "No *failova* and no *flahmen.* Not a flicker on all the hills where they were so thick last year. Oh, Father, why not? It's as if the sun hadn't come up! Something's wrong."

"Nothing catastrophic, Lytha." David comforted her with a smile. "We'll bring up the matter at the next meeting of the Old Ones. Someone will have the answer. It is unusual, you know." (Unheard of, he should have said.) "We'll find out then." He boosted Eve to his shoulder. "Come on, young ones, the world hasn't ended. It's still Gathering Day! I'll race you to the house. First one there gets six *koomatka* to eat all by himself! One, two, three—"

Off shot the shrieking, shouting children, Eve's little heels pummelling David's chest in her excitement. The Teeners followed for a short way and then slanted off on some project of their own, waving goodby to 'Chell and me. We women followed slowly to the house, neither speaking.

I wasn't surprised to find Simon waiting for me in my room.

He sat huddled on my bed, his hands clasping and unclasping and trembling a fine, quick trembling deeper than muscles and tendons. His face was so white it was almost luminous and the skiff of golden freckles across the bridge of his nose looked metallic.

"Simon?" I touched him briefly on his hair that was so like Thann's had been.

"Gramma." His breath caught in a half hiccough. He cleared his throat carefully as though any sudden movement would break something fragile. "Gramma," he whispered. "I can See!"

"See!" I sat down beside him because my knees suddenly evaporated. "Oh, Simon! You don't mean—"

"Yes, I do, Gramma." He rubbed his hands across his eyes. "We had just found the first *failova* and wondering what was wrong with it when everything kinda went away and I was—somewhere—Seeing!" He looked up, terrified. "It's my Gift!"

I gathered the suddenly wildly sobbing child into my arms and held him tightly until his terror spent itself and I felt his withdrawal. I let him go and watched his wet, flushed face dry and peal back to normal.

"Oh, Gramma," he said, "I don't want a Gift yet. I'm only ten. David hasn't found his Gift and he's twelve already. I don't *want* a Gift—especially this one—" he closed his eyes and shuddered. "Oh, Gramma, what I've seen already! Even the Happy scares me because it's still in the Presence!"

"It's not given to many," I said, at a loss how to comfort him. "Why, Simon, it would take a long journey back to our Befores to find one in our family who was permitted to See. It is an honor—to be able to put aside the curtain of time—"

"I don't *want* to!" Simon's eyes brimmed again. "I don't think it's a bit of fun. Do I have to?"

"Do you have to breathe?" I asked him. "You could stop if you wanted to, but your body would die. You can refuse your Gift, but part of you would die—the part of you the Power honors —your place in the Presence—your syllable of the Name." All this he knew from first consciousness, but I could feel him taking comfort from my words. "Do you realize The People have had

no one to See for them since—since—why, clear back to the Peace! And now you are it! Oh, Simon, I am so proud of you!" I laughed at my own upsurge of emotion. "Oh, Simon! May I touch my thrice honored Grandson?"

With a wordless cry, he flung himself into my arms and we clung tightly, tightly, before his deep renouncing withdrawal. He looked at me then and slowly dropped his arms from around my neck, separation in every movement. I could see growing in the topaz tawniness of his eyes, his new set-apartness. It made me realize anew how close the Presence is to us always and how much nearer Simon was than any of us. Also, naked and trembling in my heart was the recollection that never did The People have one to See for them unless there lay ahead portentous things to See.

Both of us shuttered our eyes and looked away, Simon to veil the eyes that so nearly looked on the Presence, I, lest I be blinded by the Glory reflected in his face.

"Which reminds me," I said in a resolutely everyday voice, "I will now listen to explanations as to why those six sandals were left on, over, and among your bed this morning."

"Well," he said with a tremulous grin. "The red ones are too short—" He turned stricken, realizing eyes to me. "I won't ever be able to tell anyone anything anymore unless the Power wills it!" he cried. Then he grinned again, "And the green ones need the latchets renewed—"

A week later the usual meeting was called and David and I—we were among the Old Ones of our Group—slid into our robes. I felt a pang as I smoothed the shimmering fabric over my hips, pressing pleats in with my thumb and finger to adjust for lost weight. The last time I had worn it was the Festival the year Thann was Called. Since then I hadn't wanted to attend the routine Group meetings—not without Thann. I hadn't realized that I was losing weight.

'Chell clung to David. "I wish now that I were an Old One, too," she said. "I've got a nameless worry in the pit of my stomach heavy enough to anchor me for life. Hurry home, you two!"

I looked back as we lifted just before the turn-off. I smiled to see the warm lights begin to well up in the windows. Then my smile died. I felt, too, across my heart the shadow that made 'Chell feel it was Lighting Time before the stars had broken through the last of the day.

The blow—when it came—was almost physical, so much so that I pressed my hands to my chest, my breath coming hard, trying too late to brace against the shock. David's sustaining hand was on my arm but I felt the tremor in it, too. Around me I felt my incredulity and disbelief shared by the other Old Ones of the Group.

The Oldest spread his hands as he was deluged by a flood of half formed questions. "It has been Seen. Already our Home has been altered so far that the *failova* and *flahmen* can't come to blossom. As we accepted the fact that there were no *failova* and *flahmen* this year, so we must accept the fact that there will be no more Home for us."

In the silence that quivered after his words, I could feel the further stricken sag of heartbeats around me and suddenly my own heart slowed until I wondered if the Power was stilling it now—now—in the midst of this confused fear and bewilderment.

"Then we are all Called?" I couldn't recognize the choked voice that put the question. "How long before the Power summons us?"

"*We* are not Called," said the Oldest. "Only the Home is Called. We—go."

"Go!" The thought careened from one to another.

"Yes," said the Oldest. "Away from the Home. Out."

Life apart from the Home? I slumped. It was too much to be taken in all at once. Then I remembered. Simon! Oh, poor Simon! If he were Seeing clearly already—but of course he was. He was the one who had told the Oldest! No wonder he was terrified! *Simon* I said to the Oldest subvocally. *Yes* answered the Oldest. *Do not communicate to the others. He scarcely can bear the burden now. To have it known would multiply it past his bearing. Keep his secret—completely.*

I came back to the awkward, bewildered whirlpool of thoughts around me.

"But," stammered someone, speaking what everyone was thinking, "can The People *live* away from the Home? Wouldn't we die like uprooted plants?"

"We can live," said the Oldest. "This we know, as we know that the Home can no longer be our biding place."

"What's wrong? What's happening?" It was Neil—Timmy's father.

"We don't know." The Oldest was shamed. "We have forgotten too much since the Peace to be able to state the mechanics of what is happening, but one of us Sees us go and the Home destroyed, so soon that we have no time to go back to the reasons."

Since we were all joined in our conference mind which is partially subvocal, all our protests and arguments and cries were quickly emitted and resolved, leaving us awkwardly trying to plan something of which we had no knowledge of our own.

"If we are to go," I said, feeling a small spurt of excitement inside my shock, "we'll have to make again. Make a tool. No, that's not the word. We have tools still. Man does with tools. No, it's a—a machine we'll have to make. Machines do to man. We haven't been possed by machines—"

"For generations," said David. "Not since—" he paused to let our family's stream of history pour through his mind. "Since Eva-lee's thrice great grandfather's time."

"Nevertheless," said the Oldest. "We must make ships." His tongue was hesitant on the long unused word. "I have been in communication with the other Oldest Ones around the Home. Our Group must make six of them."

"How can we?" asked Neil. "We have no plans. We don't know such things any more. We have forgotten almost all of it. But I do know that to break free from the Home would take a pushing something that all of us together couldn't supply."

"We will have the—the fuel," said the Oldest. "When the time comes. My Befores knew the fuel. We would not need it if only our motivers had developed their Gift fully, but as they did not—

"We must each of us search the Before stream of our lives and find the details that we require in this hour of need. By the Presence, the Name and the Power, let us remember."

The evening sped away almost in silence as each mind opened and became receptive to the flow of racial memory that lay within. All of us partook in a general way of that stream that stemmed almost from the dawn of the Home. In particular, each family had some specialized area of the memory in greater degree than the others. From time to time came a sigh or a cry prefacing, "My Befores knew of the metals," or "Mine of the instruments"—the words were unfamiliar—"The instruments of pressure and temperature."

"Mine," I discovered with a glow—and a sigh—"the final putting together of the shells of ships."

"Yes," nodded David, "and also, from my father's Befores, the settings of the—the—the settings that guide the ship."

"Navigation," said Neil's deep voice. "My Befores knew of the making of the navigation machines yours knew how to set."

"And all," I said, "all of this going back to nursery school would have been unnecessary if we hadn't rested so comfortably so long on the achievements of our Befores!" I felt the indignant withdrawal of some of those about me, but the acquiescence of most of them.

When the evening ended, each of us Old Ones carried not only the burden of the doom of the Home, but a part of the past that, in the Quiet Place of each home, must, with the help of the Power, be probed and probed again, until—

"Until—," the Oldest stood suddenly, clutching the table as though he just realized the enormity of what he was saying. "Until we have the means of leaving the Home—before it becomes a band of dust between the stars—"

Simon and Lytha were waiting up with 'Chell when David and I returned. At the sight of our faces, Simon slipped into the bedroom and woke Davie and the two crept quietly back into the room. Simon's thought reached out ahead of him. *Did he tell?* And mine went out reassuringly. *No. And he won't.*

In spite of—or perhaps because of—the excitement that had been building up in me all evening, I felt suddenly drained and weak. I sat down, gropingly, in a chair and pressed my hands to my face. "You tell them, David," I said, fighting an odd vertigo.

David shivered and swallowed hard. "There were no *failova* because the Home is being broken up. By next Gathering Day there will be no Home. It is being destroyed. We can't even say why. We have forgotten too much and there isn't time to seek out the information now, but long before next Gathering Day, we will be gone—out."

'Chell's breath caught audibly. "No Home!" she said, her eyes widening and darkening. "No Home? Oh, David, don't joke. Don't try to scare—"

"It's true." My voice had steadied now. "It has been Seen. We must build ships and seek asylum among the stars." My heart gave a perverse jump of excitement. "The Home will no longer exist. We will be homeless exiles."

"But The People away from the Home!" 'Chell's face puckered, close to tears. "How can we live anywhere else? We are a part of the Home as much as the Home is a part of us. We can't just amputate—"

"Father!" Lytha's voice was a little too loud. She said again, "Father, are all of us going together in the same ship?"

"No," said David. "Each Group by itself." Lytha relaxed visibly. "Our Group is to have six ships," he added.

Lytha's hands tightened. "Who is to go in which ship?"

"It hasn't been decided yet," said David, provoked. "How can you worry about a detail like that when the Home, *the Home* will soon be gone!"

"It's important," said Lytha, flushing. "Timmy and I—"

"Oh," said David. "I'm sorry, Lytha. I didn't know. The matter will have to be decided when the time comes."

It didn't take long for the resiliency of childhood to overcome the shock of the knowledge born on Gathering Day. Young laughter rang as brightly through the hills and meadows as always. But David and 'Chell clung closer to one another, sharing

the heavy burden of leave-taking, as did all the adults of the Home. At times I, too, felt wildly, hopefully, that this was all a bad dream to be awakened from. But other times I had the feeling that this *was* an awakening. This was the dawn after a long twilight—a long twilight of slanting sun and relaxing shadows. Other times I felt so detached from the whole situation that wonder welled up in me to see the sudden tears, the sudden clutching of familiar things, that had become a sort of pattern among us as realization came and went. And then, there were frightening times when I felt weakness flowing into me like a river—a river that washed all the Home away on a voiceless wave. I was almost becoming more engrossed in the puzzle of me than in the puzzle of the dying Home—and I didn't like it.

David and I went often to Meeting, working with the rest of the Group on the preliminary plans for the ships. One night he leaned across the table to the Oldest and asked, "How do we know how much food will be needed to sustain us until we find asylum?"

The Oldest looked steadily back at him. "We *don't* know," he said. "We don't know that we will ever find asylum."

"Don't know?" David's eyes were blank with astonishment.

"No," said the Oldest. "We found no other habitable worlds before the Peace. We have no idea how far we will have to go or if we shall any of us live to see another Home. Each Group is to be assigned to a different sector of the sky. On Crossing Day, we say goodby—possibly forever—to all the other Groups. It may be that only one ship will plant the seeds of The People upon a new world. It may be that we will all be Called before a new Home is found."

"Then," said David. "Why don't we stay here and take our Calling with the Home?"

"Because the Power has said to go. We are given time to go back to the machines. The Power is swinging the gateway to the stars open to us. We must take the gift and do what we can with it. We have no right to deprive our children of any of the years they might have left to them."

After David relayed the message to 'Chell, she clenched both

her fists tight up against her anguished heart and cried, "We can't! Oh, David! We can't! We can't leave the Home for—for—nowhere! Oh, David!" And she clung to him, wetting his shoulder with her tears.

"We can do what we must do," he said. "All of The People are sharing this sorrow so none of us must make the burden any heavier for the others. The children learn their courage from us, 'Chell. Be a good teacher." He rocked her close-pressed head, his hand patting her tumbled hair, his troubled eyes seeking mine.

"Mother—" David began—Eva-lee was for gaiety and casual every-day.

"Mother, it seems to me that the Presence is pushing us out of the Home deliberately and crumpling it like an empty eggshell so we can't creep back into it. We have sprouted too few feathers on our wings since the Peace. I think we're being pushed off the branch to make us fly. This egg has been too comfortable." He laughed a little as he held 'Chell away from him and dried her cheeks with the palms of his hands. "I'm afraid I've made quite an omelette of my egg analogy, but can you think of anything really new that we have learned about Creation in your time or mine?"

"Well," I said, searching my mind, pleased immeasurably to hear my own thoughts on the lips of my son. "No, I can honestly say I can't think of one new thing."

"So if you were Called to the Presence right now and were asked, 'What do you know of My Creation?' all you could say would be 'I know all that my Befores knew—my immediate Befores, that is—I mean, my father—'" David opened his hands and poured out emptiness. "Oh, Mother! What we have forgotten! And how content we have been with so little!"

"But some other way!" 'Chell cried. "This is so—so drastic and cruel!"

"All baby birds shiver," said David, clasping her cold hands. "Sprout a pin feather, 'Chell!"

And then the planning arrived at the point where work could begin. The sandal shops were empty. The doors were closed in

the fabric centers and the ceramic work rooms. The sunlight crept unshadowed again and again across the other workshops and weeds began tentative invasions of the garden plots.

Far out in the surrounding hills, those of The People who knew how, hovered in the sky, rolling back slowly by the heavy green cover of the mountainsides, to lay bare the metal-rich underearth. Then the Old Ones, making solemn mass visits from Group to Group, quietly concentrated above the bared hills and drew forth from the very bones of the Home, the bright, bubbling streams of metal, drew them forth until they flowed liquidly down the slopes to the work places—the launching sites. And the rush and the clamor and the noise of the hurried multitudes broke the silence of the hills of the Home and sent tremors through all our windows—and through our shaken souls.

I often stood at the windows of our house, watching the sky-pointing monsters of metal slowly coming to form. From afar they had a severe sort of beauty that eased my heart of the hurt their having-to-be caused. But it was exciting! Oh, it was beautifully exciting! Sometimes I wondered what we thought about and what we did before we started all this surge out into space. On the days that I put in my helping hours on the lifting into place of the strange different parts that had been fashioned by other Old Ones, from memories of the Before, the upsurge of power and the feeling of being one part of such a gigantic undertaking. I marveled that we had forgotten without even realizing it, the warmth and strength of working together. Oh, The People are together even more than the leaves on a tree or the scales on a *dolfeo,* but *working* together? I knew this was my first experience with its pleasant strength. My lungs seemed to breathe deeper. My reach was longer, my grasp stronger. Odd, unfinished feelings welled up inside me and I wanted to *do.* Perhaps this was the itching of my new pin-feathers. And then, sometimes when I reached an exultation that almost lifted me off my feet, would come the weakness, the sagging, the sudden desire for tears and withdrawal. I worried a little that there might come a time when I wouldn't be able to conceal it from the others.

The Crossing had become a new, engrossing game for the

children. At night, shivering in the unseasonable weather, cool, but not cold enough to shield, they would sit looking up at the glory-frosted sky and pick out the star they wanted for a new Home, though they knew that none they could see would actually be it. Eve always chose the brightest pulsating one in the heavens and claimed it as hers. Davie chose one that burned steadily but faintly straight up above them. But when Lytha was asked, she turned the question aside and I knew that any star with Timmy would be Home to Lytha.

Simon usually sat by himself, a little withdrawn from the rest, his eyes quiet on the brightness overhead.

"What star is yours, Simon?" I asked one evening, feeling intrusive but knowing the guard he had for any words he should not speak.

"None," he said, his voice heavy with maturity. "No star for me."

"You mean you'll wait and see?" I asked.

"No," said Simon. "There won't be one for me."

My heart sank. "Simon, you haven't been Called, have you?"

"No," said Simon. "Not yet. I will see a new Home, but I will be Called from its sky."

"Oh, Simon," I cried softly, trying to find a comfort for him. "How wonderful to be able to See a new Home!"

"Not much else left to See," said Simon. "Not that has words." And I saw a flare of Otherside touch his eyes. "But Gramma, you should see the Home when the last moment comes! That's one of the things I have no words for."

"But we will have a new Home, then," I said, going dizzily back to a subject I hoped I could comprehend. "You said—"

"I can't See beyond my Calling," said Simon. "I will See a new Home. I will be Called from its strange sky. I can't See what is for The People there. Maybe they'll all be Called with me. For me there's flame and brightness and pain—then the Presence. That's all I know.

"But, Gramma—" his voice had returned to that of a normal ten-year-old, "Lytha's feeling awful bad. Help her."

The children were laughing and frolicking in the thin blanket of snow that whitened the hills and meadows, their clear, untroubled laughter echoing through the windows to me and 'Chell who, with close-pressed lips, was opening the winter chests that had been closed so short a time ago. 'Chell fingered the bead stitching on the toes of one little ankle-high boot.

"What will we need in the new Home, Eva-lee?" she asked despairingly.

"We have no way of knowing," I said. "We have no idea of what kind of Home we'll find." *If any, if any, if any,* our unspoken thoughts throbbed together.

"I've been thinking about that," said 'Chell. "What will it be like? Will we be able to lift, or will we be bound to the ground? Will we be able to live as we do now or will we have to go back to machines and the kind of times that went with our machines? Will we still be one People or be separated mind and soul?" Her hands clenched on a bright sweater and a tear slid down her cheek. "Oh, Eva-lee, maybe we won't even be able to feel the Presence there!"

"You know better than that!" I chided. "The Presence is with us always, even if we have to go to the ends of the Universe. Since we can't know now what the new Home will be like, let's not waste our tears on it." I shook out a gaily-patterned quilted skirt. "Who knows?" I laughed, "maybe it will be a water world and we'll become fish. Or a fire world and we the flames!"

"We can't adjust quite that much!" protested 'Chell, smiling moistly as she dried her face on the sweater. "But it is a comfort to know we can change some to match our environment."

I reached for another skirt and paused, hand outstretched. "'Chell," I said, taken by a sudden idea. "What if the new Home is already inhabited? What if life is already there!"

"Why then, so much the better," said 'Chell. "Friends, help, places to live—"

"They might not accept us," I said.

"But refugees—homeless!" protested 'Chell. "If any in need came to the Home—"

"Even if they were different?"

"In the Presence, all are the same," said 'Chell.

"But remember," my knuckles whitened on the skirt. "Only remember far enough back and you will find the Days of Difference before the Peace."

And 'Chell remembered. She turned her stricken face to me. "You mean there might be no welcome for us if we do find a new Home?"

"If we could treat our own that way, how might others treat strangers?" I asked, shaking out the scarlet skirt. "But, please the Power, it will not be so. We can only pray."

It turned out that we had little need to worry about what kind of clothing or anything else to take with us. We would have to go practically possessionless—there was room for only the irreducible minimum of personal effects. There was considerable of an uproar and many loud lamentations when Eve found out that she could not take all of her play-People with her, and, when confronted by the necessity of making a choice—one, single one of her play-People, she threw them all in a tumbled heap in the corner of her room, shrieking that she would take none at all. A sharp smack of David's hand on her bare thighs for her tantrum, and a couple of enveloping hugs for her comfort and she sniffed up her tears and straightened out her play-People into a staggering, tumbling row across the floor. It took her three days to make her final selection. She chose the one she had named the Listener.

"She's not a him and he's not a her," she had explained. "This play-People is to listen."

"To what?" teased Davie.

"To anything I have to tell and can't tell anyone," said Eve with great dignity. "You don't even have to verb'lize to Listener. All you have to do is to touch and Listener knows what you feel and it tells you why it doesn't feel good and the bad goes away."

"Well, ask the Listener how to make the bad grammar go away," laughed Davie. "You've got your sentences all mixed up."

"Listener knows what I mean and so do you!" retorted Eve.

So when Eve made her choice and stood hugging Listener and looking with big solemn eyes at the rest of her play-People, Davie suggested casually, "Why don't you go bury the rest of

them? They're the same as Called now and we don't leave cast-asides around."

And from then until the last day, Eve was happy burying and digging up her play-People, always finding better, more advantageous, or prettier places to make her miniature casting-place.

Lytha sought me out one evening as I leaned over the stone wall around the feather-pen, listening to the go-to-bed contented cluckings and cooings. She leaned with me on the rough grey stones and, snapping an iridescent feather to her hand, smoothed her fingers back and forth along it wordlessly. We both listened idly to Eve and Davie. We could hear them talking together somewhere in the depths of the *koomatka* bushes beyond the feather-pen.

"What's going to happen to the Home after we're gone?" asked Eve idly.

"Oh, it's going to shake and crack wide open and fire and lava will come out and everything will fall apart and burn up," said Davie, no more emotionally than Eve.

"Ooo!" said Eve, caught in the imagination, "then what will happen to my play-People? Won't they be all right under here? No one can see them."

"Oh, they'll be set on fire and go up in a blaze of glory," said Davie.

"A blaze of glory!" Eve drew a long happy sigh. "In a blaze of glory! Inna blaza glory! Oh, Davie! I'd like to see it! Can I, Davie? Can I?"

"Silly *toola!*" said Davie. "If you were here to see it, *you'd* go up in a blaze of glory, too!" And he lifted up from the *koomatka* bushes, the time for his chores with the animals hot on his heels.

"Inna blaza glory! Inna blaza glory!" sang Eve happily. "All the play-People inna blaza glory!" Her voice faded to a tuneless hum as she left, too.

"Gramma," said Lytha, "is it really true?"

"Is what really true?" I asked.

"That the Home won't be any more and that we will be gone."

"Why yes, Lytha, why do you doubt it?"

"Because—because—" she gestured with the feather at the wall.

"Look, it's all so solid—the stones set each to the other so solidly —so—so *always-looking*. How can it all come apart?"

"You know from your first consciousness that nothing This-side is forever," I said. "Nothing at all except Love. And even that gets so tangled up in the things of This-side that when your love is Called—" The memory of Thann was a heavy burning inside me—"Oh, Lytha! To look into the face of your love and know that Something has come apart and that never again This-side will you find him whole!"

And then I knew I had said the wrong thing. I saw Lytha's too-young eyes looking in dilated horror at the sight of her love—her not-quite-yet love, being pulled apart by this same whatever that was pulling the Home apart. I turned the subject.

"I want to go to the Lake for a goodby," I said. "Would you like to go with me?"

"No, thank you, Gramma." Hers was a docile, little girl voice —oh surely much too young to be troubled about loves as yet! "We Teeners are going to watch the new metal-melting across the hills. It's fascinating. I'd like to be able to do things like that."

"You can—you could have—" I said, "if we had trained our youth as we should have."

"Maybe I'll learn," said Lytha, her eyes intent on the feather. She sighed deeply and dissolved the feather into a faint puff of blue smoke. "Maybe I'll learn." And I knew her mind was not on metal-melting.

She turned away and then back again. "Gramma, The Love—" she stopped. I could feel her groping for words. "The Love is forever, isn't it."

"Yes," I said, watching the strange purple sunset deepen.

"Love This-side is part of The Love, isn't it?"

"A candle lighted from the sun," I said.

"But the candle will go out!" she cried. "Oh, Gramma! The candle will go out in the winds of the Crossing!" She turned her face from me and whispered, "Especially if it never quite got lighted."

"There are other candles," I murmured, knowing how like a lie it must sound to her.

"But never the same!" She snatched herself away from my side. "It isn't fair! It isn't fair!" and she streaked away across the frost-scorched meadow.

And as she left, I caught a delightful, laughing picture of two youngsters racing across a little lake, reeling and spinning as the waves under their feet lifted and swirled, wrapping white lace around their slender brown ankles. Everything was blue and silver and laughter and fun. I was caught up in the wonder and pleasure until I suddenly realized that it wasn't my memory at all. Thann and I had another little lake we loved more. I had seen someone else's Happy Place that would dissolve like mine with the Home. Poor Lytha.

The crooked sun was melting the latest snow the day all of us Old Ones met beside the towering shells of the ships. Each Old One was wrapped against the chilly wind. No personal shields today. The need for power was greater for the task ahead than for comfort. Above us, the huge bright curved squares of metal, clasped each to each with the old joinings, composed the shining length of each ship. Almost I could have cried to see the scarred earth beneath them—the trampledness that would never green again, the scars that would never heal. I blinked up the brightness of the nearest ship, up to the milky sky, and blinked away from its strangeness.

"The time is short," said the Oldest. "A week."

"A week." The sigh went through the group.

"Tonight the ship loads must be decided upon. Tomorrow the inside machines must be finished. The next day, the fuel." The Oldest shivered and wrapped himself in his scarlet mantle. "The fuel that we put so completely out of our minds after the Peace. Its potential for evil was more than its service to us. But it is there. It is still there." He shivered again and turned to me.

"Tell us again," he said. "We must complete the shells." And I told them again, without words, only with the shaping of thought to thought. Then the company of Old Ones lifted slowly above

the first ship, clasping hands in a circle like a group of dancing children and, leaning forward into the circle, thought the thought I had shaped for them.

For a long time there was only the thin fluting of the cold wind past the point of the ship and then the whole shell of metal quivered and dulled and became fluid. For the span of three heartbeats it remained so and then it hardened again, complete, smooth, seamless, one cohesive whole from tip to base, broken only by the round ports at intervals along its length.

In succession the other five ships were made whole, but the intervals between the ships grew longer and greyer as the strength drained from us, and, before we were finished, the sun had gone behind a cloud and we were all shadows leaning above shadows, fluttering like shadows.

The weakness caught me as we finished the last one. David received me as I drifted down, helpless and folded on myself. He laid me on the brittle grass and sat panting beside me, his head drooping. I lay as though I had become fluid and knew that something more than the fatigue of the task we had just finished had drained me. "But I *have* to be strong!" I said desperately, knowing weakness had no destiny among the stars. I stared up at the grey sky while a tear drew a cold finger from the corner of my eye to my ear.

"We're just not used to using the Power," said David softly.

"I know, I know," I said, knowing that he did not know. I closed my eyes and felt the whisper of falling snow upon my face, each palm-sized flake melting into a tear.

Lytha stared from me to David, her eyes wide and incredulous. "But you *knew,* Father! I told you! I told you Gathering Night!"

"I'm sorry, Lytha," said David. "There was no other way to do it. Ships fell by lot and Timmy's family and ours will be in different ships."

"Then let me go to his ship or let him come to mine!" she cried, her cheeks flushing and paling.

"Families must remain together," I said, my heart breaking for

her. "Each ship leaves the Home with the assumption that it is alone. If you went in the other ship, we might never all be together again."

"But Timmy and I—we might someday be a family! We might—" Lytha's voice broke. She pressed the backs of her hands against her cheeks and paused. Then she went on quietly. "I would go with Timmy, even so."

'Chell and David exchanged distressed glances. "There's not room for even one of you to change your place. The loads are computed, the arrangements finished," I said, feeling as though I were slapping Lytha again and again.

"And besides," said 'Chell, taking Lytha's hands. "It isn't as though you and Timmy were loves. You have only started two-ing. Oh, Lytha, it was such a short time ago that you had your Happy Day. Don't rush so into growing up!"

"And if I told you Timmy is my love!" cried Lytha.

"Can you tell us so in truth, Lytha?" said 'Chell, "and say that Timmy feels that you are his love?"

Lytha's eyes dropped. "Not for sure," she whispered. "But in time—" She threw back her head impetuously, light swirling across her dark hair. "It isn't fair! We haven't had time!" she cried. "Why did all this have to happen now? Why not later? Or sooner?" She faltered, "Before we started two-ing! If we have to part now, we might never know—or live our lives without a love because he is really—I am—" She turned and ran from the room, her face hidden.

I sighed and eased myself up from her chair. "I'm old, David," I said. "I ache with age. Things like this weary me beyond any resting."

It was sometime after midnight the next night that I felt Neil call to me. The urgency of his call hurried me into my robe and out of the door, quietly, not to rouse the house.

"Eva-lee." His greeting hands on my shoulders were cold through my robe and the unfamiliar chilly wind whipped my hems around my bare ankles. "Is Lytha home?"

"Lytha?" The unexpectedness of the question snatched the last web of sleepiness out of my mind. "Of course. Why?"

"I don't think she is," said Neil. "Timmy's gone with all our camping gear and I think she's gone with him."

My mind flashed back into the house, Questing. Before my hurried feet could get there, I knew Lytha was gone. But I had to touch the undented pillow and lift the smooth spread before I could convince myself. Back in the garden that flickered black and gold as swollen clouds raced across the distorted full moon, Neil and I exchanged concerned looks.

"Where could they have gone?" he asked. "Poor kids. I've already Quested the whole neighborhood and I sent Rosh up to the hillplace to get something—he thought. He brought it back but said nothing about the kids."

I could see the tightening of the muscles in his jaws as he tilted his chin in the old familiar way, peering at me in the moonlight.

"Did Timmy say anything to you about—about anything?" I stumbled.

"Nothing—the only thing that could remotely—well, you know both of them were upset about being in different ships and Timmy—well, he got all worked up and said he didn't believe anything was going to happen to the Home, that it was only a late Spring and he thought we were silly to go rushing off into Space—"

"Lytha's words Timmyized," I said. "We've got to find them."

"Carla's frantic." Neil shuffled his feet and put his hands into his pockets, hunching his shoulders as the wind freshened. "If only we had *some* idea. If we don't find them tonight we'll have to alert the Group tomorrow. Timmy'd never live down the humiliation—"

"I know—'Touch a teener—touch a tender spot.'" I quoted absently, my mind chewing on something long forgotten or hardly noticed. "Clearance," I murmured. And Neil closed his mouth on whatever he was going to say as I waited patiently for the vague drifting and isolated flashes in my mind to reproduce the thought I sought.

—Like white lace around their bare brown ankles—

"I have it," I said. "At least I have an idea. Go tell Carla. I've gone for them. Tell her not to worry."

"Blessings," said Neil, his hands quick and heavy on my shoulders. "You and Thann have always been our cloak against the wind, our hand up the hill—" And he was gone towards Tanglemeadows and Carla.

You and Thann—you and Thann. I was lifting through the darkness, my personal shield activated against the acceleration of my going. Even Neil forgets sometimes that Thann is gone on ahead, I thought, my heart lifting to the memory of Thann's aliveness. And suddenly the night was full of Thann—of Thann and me—laughing in the skies, climbing the hills, dreaming in the moonlight. Four-ing with Carla and Neil. Two-ing after Gathering Day. The bitter-sweet memories came so fast that I almost crashed into the piney sighings of a hillside. I lifted above it barely in time. One treetop drew its uppermost twig across the curling of the bare sole of my foot.

Maybe Timmy's right! I thought suddenly. Maybe Simon and the Oldest are all wrong. How can I possibly leave the Home with Thann still here—waiting. Then I shook myself, quite literally, somersaulting briskly in mid-air. Foolish thoughts, trying to cram Thann back into the limitations of an existence he had out-grown!

I slanted down into the cup of the hills towards the tiny lake I had recognized from Lytha's thought. This troubled night it had no glitter or gleam. Its waves were much too turbulent for walking or dancing or even for daring. I landed on a pale strip of sand at its edge and shivered as a wave dissolved the sand under my feet into a shaken quiver and then withdrew to let it solidify again.

"Lytha!" I called softly, Questing ahead of my words. "Lytha!" There was no response in the windfilled darkness. I lifted to the next pale crescent of sand, feeling like a driven cloud myself. "Lytha! Lytha!" Calling on the family band so it would be perceptible to her alone and Timmy wouldn't have to know until she told him. "Lytha!"

"Gramma!" Astonishment had squeezed out the answer. "Gramma!" The indignation was twice as heavy to make up for the first involuntary response.

"May I come to you?" I asked, taking refuge from my own emotion in ritual questions that would leave Lytha at least the shreds of her pride. There was no immediate reply. "May I come to you?" I repeated.

"You may come." Her thoughts were remote and cold as she guided me in to the curve of hillside and beach.

She and Timmy were snug and secure and very unhappily restless in the small camp cubicle. They had even found some Glowers somewhere. Most of them had died of the lack of summer, but this small cluster clung with their fragile-looking legs to the roof of the cubicle and shed a warm golden light over the small area. My heart contracted with pity and my eyes stung a little as I saw how like a child's playhouse they had set up the cubicle, complete with the two sleeping mats carefully the cubicle's small width apart with a curtain hiding them from each other.

They had risen ceremoniously as I entered, their faces carefully respectful to an Old One—no Gramma-look in the face of either. I folded up on the floor and they sat again, their hands clasping each other for comfort.

"There is scarcely time left for an outing," I said casually, holding up one finger to the Glowers. One loosed itself and glided down to clasp its wiry feet around my finger. Its glowing paled and flared and hid any of our betraying expressions. Under my idle talk I could feel the cry of the two youngsters—wanting some way in honor to get out of this impasse. Could I find the way or would they stubbornly have to—

"We have our lives before us." Timmy's voice was carefully expressionless.

"A brief span if it's to be on the Home," I said. "We must be out before the week ends."

"We do not choose to believe that." Lytha's voice trembled a little.

"I respect your belief," I said formally, "but fear you have insufficient evidence to support it."

"Even so," her voice was just short of a sob. "Even so, however short, we will have it together—"

"Yes, without your mothers or fathers or any of us," I said placidly, "and then finally, soon, without the Home. Still it has its points. It isn't given to everyone to be—in—at the death of a world. It's a shame that you'll have no one to tell it to. That's the best part of anything, you know, telling it—sharing it."

Lytha's face crumpled and she turned it away from me.

"And if the Home doesn't die," I went on. "That will truly be a joke on us. We won't even get to laugh about it because we won't be able to come back, being so many days gone, not knowing. So you will have the whole Home to yourself. Just think! A whole Home! A new world to begin all over again—alone—" I saw the two kids' hands convulse together and Timmy's throat worked painfully. So did mine. I knew the aching of having to start a new world over—alone. After Thann was Called. "But such space! An emptiness from horizon to horizon—from pole to pole—from you two! Nobody else anywhere—anywhere. *If* the Home doesn't die—"

Lytha's slender shoulders were shaking now, and they both turned their suddenly so-young faces to me. I nearly staggered under the avalanche of their crying-out—all without a word. They poured out all their longing and uncertainty and protest and rebellion. Only the young could build up such a burden and have the strength to bear it. Finally Timmy came to words.

"We only want a chance. Is that too much to ask? Why should this happen, now, to us?"

"Who are we," I asked sternly, "to presume to ask *why* of the Power? For all our lives we have been taking happiness and comfort and delight and never asking *why*, but now that sorrow and separation, pain and discomfort are coming to us from the same Power, we are crying *why*. We have taken unthinkingly all that has been given to us unasked, but now that we must take sorrow for a while, you want to refuse to take, like silly babies whose milk is cold!"

I caught a wave of desolation and lostness from the two and hurried on. "But don't think the Power has forgotten you. You are as completely enwrapped now as you ever were. Can't you trust your love—or your possible love to the Power that suggested love to you in the first place? I promise you, I *promise* you, that no matter where you go, together or apart if the Power leaves you life, you will find love. And even if it turns out that you do not find it together, you'll never forget these first magical steps you have taken together towards your own true loves."

I let laughter into my voice. "Things change! Remember, Lytha, it wasn't so long ago that Timmy was a—if you'll pardon the expression—'gangle-legged, clumsy *poodah'* that you'd rather be caught dead than ganging with, let alone two-ing!"

"And he was, too!" Lytha's voice had a hiccough in it, but a half smile, too.

"You were no vision of delight, yourself," said Timmy, "I never saw such stringy hair—"

"It was *supposed* to look like that—"

Their wrangling was a breath of fresh air after the unnatural, uncomfortable emotional binge they had been on.

"It's quite possible that you two might change—" I stopped abruptly. "Wait!" I said. "Listen!"

"To what?" Lytha's face was puzzled. How could I tell her I heard Simon crying, "Gramma! Gramma!" Simon at home, in bed, miles and miles—

"Out, quick!" I scrambled up from the floor. "Oh, hurry!" Panic was welling up inside me. The two snatched up their small personal bundles as I pushed them, bewildered and protesting ahead of me out into the inky blackness of the violent night. For a long, terrified moment I stood peering up into the darkness, trying to see, trying to hear, trying to interpret! Then I screamed, "Lift! Lift!" and, snatching at them both, I launched us upward, away from the edge of the lake. The clouds snatched back from the moon and its light poured down onto the convulsed lake. There was a crack like the loudest of thunder—a grinding, twisting sound—the roar and surge of mighty waters and the lake-bed below us broke cleanly from one hill to another,

pulling itself apart and tilting to pour all its moon-bright waters down into the darkness of the gigantic split in the earth. And the moon was glittering only on the shining mud left behind in the lake bottom. With a frantic speed that seemed so slow I enveloped the children and shot with them as far up and away as I could before the ear-splitting roar of returning steam threw us even farther. We reeled drunkenly away, and away, until we stumbled across the top of a hill. We clung to each other in terror as the mighty plume of steam rose and rose and split the clouds and still rose, rolling white and awesome. Then, as casually as a shutting door, the lake-bed tilted back and closed itself. In the silence that followed, I fancied I could hear the hot rain beginning to fall to fill the emptiness of the lake again—a pool of rain no larger than my hand in a lake bottom.

"Oh, poor Home," whispered Lytha, "poor hurting Home! It's dying!" And then, on the family band, Lytha whispered to me, *Timmy's my love, for sure, Gramma and I am his, but we're willing to let the Power hold our love for us, until your promise is kept.*

I gathered the two to me and I guess we all wept a little, but we had no words to exchange, no platitudes, only the promise, the acquiescence, the trust—and the sorrow.

We went home. Neil met us just beyond our feather-pen and received Timmy with a quiet thankfulness and they went home together. Lytha and I went first into our household's Quiet Place and then to our patient beds.

I stood with the other Old Ones high on the cliff above the narrow valley, staring down with them at the raw heap of stones and earth that scarred the smooth valley floor. All eyes were intent on the excavation and every mind so much with the Oldest as he toiled out of sight, that our concentrations were almost visible flames above each head.

I heard myself gasp with the others as the Oldest slowly emerged, his clumsy heavy shielding hampering his lifting. The brisk mountain breeze whined as it whipped past suddenly activated personal shields as we reacted automatically to possible

danger even though our shields were tissue paper to tornadoes against this unseen death should it be loosed. The Oldest stepped back from the hole until the sheer rock face stopped him. Slowly a stirring began in the shadowy depths and then the heavy square that shielded the thumb-sized block within, lifted into the light. It trembled and turned and set itself into the heavy metal box prepared for it. The lid clicked shut. By the time six boxes were filled, I felt the old—or rather, the painfully new—weariness seize me and I clung to David's arm. He patted my hand, but his eyes were wide with dreaming and I forced myself upright. "I don't like me any more," I thought. "Why do I do things like this? Where has *my* enthusiasm and wonder gone? I am truly old and yet—" I wiped the cold beads of sweat from my upper lip and, lifting with the others, hovered over the canyon, preparatory to conveying the six boxes to the six shells of ships that they were to sting into life.

It was the last day. The sun was shining with a brilliance it hadn't known in weeks. The winds that wandered down from the hills were warm and sweet. The earth beneath us that had so recently learned to tremble and shift, was quietly solid for a small while. Everything about the Home was suddenly so dear that it seemed a delirious dream that death was less than a week away for it. Maybe it was only some pre-adolescent, unpatterned behavior—. But one look at Simon convinced me. His eyes were aching with things he had had to See. His face was hard under the soft contours of childhood and his hands trembled as he clasped them. I hugged him with my heart and he smiled a thank you and relaxed a little.

'Chell and I set the house to rights and filled the vases with fresh water and scarlet leaves because there were no flowers. David opened the corral gate and watched the beasts walk slowly out into the tarnished meadows. He threw wide the door of the feather-pen and watched the ruffle of feathers, the inquiring peering, the hesitant walk into freedom. He smiled as the master of the pen strutted vocally before the flock. Then Eve gathered

up the four eggs that lay rosy and new in the nests and carried them into the house to put them in the green egg dish.

The family stood quietly together. "Go say goodby," said David. "Each of you say goodby to the Home."

And everyone went, each by himself, to his favorite spot. Even Eve burrowed herself out of sight in the *Kommatka* bush where the leaves locked above her head and made a tiny Eve-sized green twilight. I could hear her soft croon, "Inna blaza glory, play-People! Inna blaza glory!"

I sighed to see Lytha's straight-as-an-arrow flight towards Timmy's home. Already Timmy was coming. I turned away with a pang. Supposing even after the lake they—no, I comforted myself. They trust the Power—

How could I go to any one place I wondered, standing by the window of my room. All of the Home was too dear to leave. When I went I would truly be leaving Thann—all the paths he walked with me, the grass that bent to his step, the trees that shaded him in summer, the very ground that held his cast-aside. I slid to my knees and pressed my cheek against the side of the window frame. "Thann, Thann!" I whispered. "Be with me. Go with me since I must go. Be my strength!" And clasping my hands tight, I pressed my thumbs hard against my crying mouth.

We all gathered again, solemn and tear-stained. Lytha was still frowning and swallowing to hold back her sobs. Simon looked at her, his eyes big and golden, but he said nothing and turned away. 'Chell left the room quietly and, before she returned, the soft sound of music swelled from the walls. We all made the Sign and prayed the Parting prayers, for truly we were dying to this world. The whole house, the whole of the Home was a Quiet Place today and each of us without words laid the anguishing of this day of parting before the Presence and received comfort and strength.

Then each of us took up his share of personal belongings and was ready to go. We left the house, the music reaching after us as we went. I felt a part of me die when we could no longer hear the melody.

We joined the neighboring families on the path to the ships

and there were murmurs and gestures and even an occasional excited laugh. No one seemed to want to lift. Our feet savored every step of this last walk on the Home. No one lifted, that is, except Eve, who was still intrigued by her new accomplishment. Her short little hops amused everyone and, by the time she had picked herself out of the dust three times and had been disentangled from the branches of overhanging trees twice and finally firmly set in place on David's shoulder, there were smiles and tender laughter and the road lightened even though clouds were banking again.

I stood at the foot of the long lift to the door of the ship and stared upward. People brushing past me were only whisperings and passing shadows.

"How can they?" I thought despairingly out of the surge of weakness that left me clinging to the wall. "How can they do it? Leaving the Home so casually!" Then a warm hand crept into mine and I looked down into Simon's eyes. "Come on, Gramma," he said. "It'll be all right."

"I—I—" I looked around me helplessly, then, kneeling swiftly, I took up a handful of dirt—a handful of the Home—and, holding it tightly, I lifted up the long slant with Simon.

Inside the ship we put our things away in their allotted spaces and Simon tugged me out into the corridor and into a room banked with dials and switches and all the vast array of incomprehensibles that we had all called into being for this terrible moment. No one was in the room except the two of us. Simon walked briskly to a chair in front of a panel and sat down.

"It's all set," he said, "for the sector of the sky they gave us, but it's wrong." Before I could stop him, his hands moved over the panels, shifting, adjusting, changing.

"Oh, Simon!" I whispered, "you mustn't!"

"I must," said Simon. "Now it's set for the sky I See."

"But they'll notice and change them all back," I trembled.

"No," said Simon. "It's such a small change that they won't notice it. And we will be where we have to be when we have to be." I left the Home. I felt it fade away and become as faint as a dream. I said goodby to it so completely that it startled me to

catch a glimpse of a mountain top through one of the ports as we hurried back to our allotted spaces. Suddenly my heart was light and lifting, so much so that my feet didn't even touch the floor as we hurried. Oh, how wonderful! What beautiful excitement! What adventures ahead! I felt as though I were spiraling up into a bright Glory that outshone the sun—

Then, as suddenly, came the weakness. My very bones dissolved in me and collapsed me down on my couch. Darkness rolled across me and breathing was a task that took all my weakness to keep going. I felt vaguely the tightening of the restraining straps around me and the clasp of Simon's hand around my clenched fist.

"Half an hour," the Oldest murmured.

"Half an hour," The People echoed, amplifying the murmur. I felt myself slipping into the corporate band of communication, feeling with the rest of the Group the incredible length and heartbreaking shortness of the time.

Then I lost the world again. I was encased in blackness. I was suspended, waiting, hardly even wondering.

And then it came—The Call.

How unmistakable! I was Called back into the Presence! My hours were totaled. It was all finished. This-side was a preoccupation that concerned me no longer. My face must have lighted as Thann's had. All the struggle, all the sorrow, all the separation —finished. Now would come the three or four days during which I must prepare, dispose of my possessions, say my goodbys— Goodbys? I struggled up against the restraining straps. But we were leaving! In less than half an hour I would have no quiet, cool bed to lay me down upon when I left my body, no fragrant grass to have pulled up over my cast-aside, no solemn sweet remembrance by my family in the next Festival for those Called during the year!

Simon I called him subvocally. *You know!* I cried. *What shall I do? I See you staying.* His answer came placidly.

Staying? Oh how quickly I caught the picture! How quickly my own words came back to me, coldly white against the darkness of my confusion. *Such space and emptiness from horizon to*

horizon, from pole to pole, from skytop to ground. And only me. Nobody else anywhere, anywhere!

Stay here all alone? I asked Simon. But he wasn't Seeing me any more. Already I was alone. I felt the frightened tears start and then I heard Lytha's trusting voice—*until your promise is kept.* All my fear dissolved. All my panic and fright blazed up suddenly in a repeat of the Call.

"Listen!" I cried, my voice high and excited, my heart surging joyously. "Listen!"

"Oh, David! Oh, 'Chell! I've been Called! Don't you hear it? Don't you hear it!"

"Oh, Mother, no! No! You must be mistaken!" David loosed himself and bent over me.

"No," whispered 'Chell. "I feel it. She is Called."

"Now I can stay," I said, fumbling at the straps. "Help me David, help me."

"But you're not summoned right now!" cried David. "Father knew four days before he was received into the Presence. We can't leave you alone in a doomed, empty world!"

"An empty world!" I stood up quickly, holding to David to steady myself. "Oh, David! A world full of all dearness and nearness and remembering! And doomed? It will be a week yet. I will be received before then. Let me out! Oh, let me out!"

"Stay with us, Mother!" cried David, taking both my hands in his. "We need you. We can't let you go. All the tumult and upheaval that's to start so soon for the Home—"

"How do we know what tumult and upheaval you will be going through in the Crossing?" I asked. "But beyond whatever comes there's a chance of a new life waiting for you. But for me—. What of four days from now? What would you do with my cast-aside? What could you do but push it out into the black nothingness. Let it be with the Home. Let it at least become dust among familiar dust!" I felt as excited as a Teener. "Oh, David! To be with Thann again!"

I turned to Lytha and quickly unfastened her belt. "There'll be room for one more in this ship," I said.

For a long moment, we looked into each other's eyes and then,

almost swifter than thought, Lytha was up and running for the big door. My thoughts went ahead of her and before Lytha's feet lifted out into the open air, all the Old Ones in the ship knew what had happened and their thoughts went out. Before Lytha was halfway up the little hills that separated ship from ship, Timmy surged into sight and gathered her close as they swung back around towards our ship.

Minutes ran out of the half hour like icy beads from a broken string, but finally I was slanting down from the ship, my cheeks wet with my own tears and those of my family. Clearly above the clang of the closing door I heard Simon's call, *Goodby, Gramma! I told you it'd be all right. See—you—soon!*

Hurry, hurry, hurry, whispered my feet as I ran. *Hurry hurry hurry* whispered the wind as I lifted away from the towering ships. *Now now now* whispered my heart as I turned back from a safe distance, my skirts whipped by the rising wind, my hair lashing across my face.

The six slender ships pointing at the sky were like silver needles against the rolling black clouds. Suddenly there were only five—then four—then three. Before I could blink the tears from my eyes, the rest were gone, and the ground where they had stood flowed back on itself and crackled with cooling.

The fingers of the music drew me back into the house. I breathed deeply of the dear familiar odors. I straightened a branch of the scarlet leaves that had slipped awry in the blue vase. I steadied myself against a sudden shifting under my feet and my shield activated as hail spattered briefly through the window. I looked out, filled with a great peace, to the swell of browning hills, to the upward reach of snow-whitened mountains, to the brilliant huddled clumps of trees sowing their leaves on the icy wind. "My Home!" I whispered, folding my heart around it all, knowing what my terror and lostness would have been had I stayed behind without the Call.

Then, conscious of the ache of my clenched hand, I opened it slowly and let the caked, finger-ridged bit of dirt fall to the ground outside the window.

With a sigh, I went out to the kitchen and counted the four rosy eggs in the green dish. I fingered the stove into flame and, lifting one of the eggs, cracked it briskly against the side of the pan.

That night there were no stars, but the heavy rolls of clouds were lighted with fitful lightnings and somewhere far over the horizon the molten heart of a mountain range was crimson and orange against the night. I lay on my bed letting the weakness wash over me, a tide that would soon bear me away. The soul is a lonely voyager at any time, but the knowledge that I was the last person in a dying world was like a weight crushing me. I was struggling against the feeling when I caught a clear, distinct call—

"Gramma!"

"Simon!" My lips moved to his name.

"We're all fine, Gramma, and I just Saw Eve with two children of her own, so they *will* make it to a new Home."

"Oh, Simon! I'm so glad you told me!" I clutched my bed as it rocked and twisted. I heard stones falling from the garden wall, then one wall of my room dissolved into dust that glowed redly before it settled.

"Things are a little untidy here," I said. "I must get out another blanket. It's a little drafty, too."

"You'll be all right, Gramma." Simon's thought came warmly. "Will you wait for me when you get Otherside?"

"If I can," I promised.

"Good night, Gramma," said Simon.

"Good night, Simon." I cradled my face on my dusty pillow. "Good night."